

CHAPTER 1



AN INSIDIOUS MOMNAPPING

The vice principal had candy on her desk.

I always stared at the candy. I don't know why. Maybe it was because I knew I'd never get any. Mom says some things are like watching a train wreck, because they're so horrible we can't look away. That candy was like a train wreck. It was always lollipops. It's like Vice Principal Jackson knew those were my favorite and put them there just to torture me.

I wouldn't put it past her.

"What am I going to do with you, Trevor Tate?" She said. She always sounded chokey and stuffed up, like she wanted to sneeze out marshmallows.

I glanced at her, then back at the candy. I shrugged. "I don't know. What do you usually do with me?"

"Look at me, Mister Tate."

I did. Her puckery face wasn't as train-wrecky as the candy, but it was close.

“What?”

“Your mother says you are a wonderful child. I’m sure she’s right, but for the life of me I can’t understand why you feel the need to try my patience every week.”

I shrugged. “It’s a game I play. What can I say?”

Her brown eyes narrowed. “Somehow I doubt Arthur Kamps enjoys your game very much.”

“Arthur Kamps is a jerk,” I said without thinking.

I say a lot of stuff without thinking. Sometimes it gets me into trouble, but this time I was already in trouble so it didn’t really matter.

Much.

Tearvey sat back and crossed her arms over her chest. “I don’t expect all of my students to get along, Trevor. You may dislike Arthur all you want. But as I have told you numerous times, we do not allow bullying at Lewis Elementary.”

“I’m not a bully,” I said, trying not to get mad. It was hard. I hate being called a bully more than almost anything.

“You punched poor Arthur in the mouth,” Jackson said. “That is what we call bullying.”

For once I held back the reply that first came to my head. That’s because it would have been something like ‘he started it’, and stuff like that never worked with the Vice Principal, even if it *was* true.

“Well? What do you have to say for yourself?” she asked.

I tried to think of something to say that would make her understand, but I realized it was pointless. So what if I’d heard Arthur picking on Amanda Byer at recess? So what if her crying had made me so mad I felt hot all over? So what if, when he laughed at her, my anger became impossible to control?

So what if the only way I could think of to make him stop was to punch his stupid jerk-face?

I wasn't the bully. Arthur was. But if I said that, Jackson would just ask me why I didn't tell the recess teacher and let her handle it. Again. And I wouldn't be able to convince her that my brain stopped working when I got mad.

Again.

So I just shrugged.

Jackson nodded like I'd said something brilliant, then opened her desk drawer. "So. No excuses this time? Good. I'll call that progress." She took out a pink pad of paper and started writing on it. "Still, I think a week-long suspension will serve to teach you the lesson that my talks have obviously failed at."

I took the paper from her hand without a word. It was probably pointless to remind her that this was my third suspension anyway.



"Mom's going to murder you. You know that, right?" Tabitha said as we walked home together through the late autumn leaves.

I sighed without looking at her. "I know. Get off my case, okay?"

"Sure," she said. "Sorry."

Unlike most people, my twin sister knows when to leave me alone. It's like she can feel my temper getting worse as easily as I can. She's great at calming me down, too. Nobody else can do that. And Tab never gets mad. She's never even been in a fight.

Of course she's never had to. Nobody at school would dare hurt *my* sister.

Mom says Tab's my Glory and I'm her Guts. I think that means we're like a yin-yang, that black and white symbol they use in the old Kung-Fu movies. On the outside we're almost exactly alike, with our kinda-curlyish brown hair, blue eyes and tons of freckles. But on the inside we're as different as pencils and oatmeal. If I'm a devil, Tab's an angel. Course, she's not perfect either. For one, she's a know-it-all. I'd be totally happy if she never again told me how creeptastic spiders are good for the environment, or that light sabers are a scientific impossibility.

I don't care. I still want one.

I played with the suspension notice in my pocket as we walked into the kitchen. While Tab went to the fridge to grab her after-school snack, I looked at the attic door with growing dread.

Most of the time we weren't supposed to disturb Mom until she came downstairs to make dinner, but I wanted to tell her the bad news before she got a call from the school. Sure, I was already toast, but if the school got to her before I had a chance to even try and explain, I would be *burnt* toast.

"Staring at it won't make it open," Tab said from behind me.

I groaned. "Mom *is* going to kill me. Or maybe just turn me into a toad or something."

Tab laughed. "Don't be dumb. Mom's a scientist, not a witch. Scientists don't turn people into toads."

I glanced at her. "They could. You never know."

She just gave me a look and bit into her cookie.

It'll be like ripping off a band-aid, I told myself as I reached out to open the door.

I got onto the first step and craned my neck, but I couldn't see past the sharp turn a few stairs up.

Do it fast. Like ripping off a band-aid.

I took a deep breath and dashed up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

“Hey, Mom,” I said as I rounded the corner at the top. “I know you said not to bug you when—.”

I stopped dead at the top of the stairs in shock.

Mom’s usually spotless lab was a huge mess. The thick wooden workbench was covered in ripped-up strips of paper, shredded books, cracked pens, and twisted pieces of the metal beaker stand that normally stood there. All over the floor, broken beakers spilled out mysterious, colorful liquids, wetting more busted science equipment and making the place smell like a rabid raccoon had farted, thrown up, and died there. Worst of all, Mom’s prize microscope – the one she had worked years to afford – lay smashed and broken in a blue-green puddle of some kind of smoking liquid.

I saw all of that pretty fast, because my eyes were drawn almost right away to the back corner of the lab. There, an impossible wall of light flickered and rippled, like water over yellow flashlight beams. That was weird enough, but even crazier was the nightmare thing coming out of it – a huge coppery tentacle covered in sharp suction cup-looking barbs like broken bottles. It slithered around the floor, scraping slowly over the mess like it was searching for something.

I hoped it wasn’t me.

There was a soft movement to my right. I glanced over to see a shadow kneeling next to the watery doorway. The light behind made it too dark to see very well, but I would recognize that ponytail anywhere, with glasses perched on top like a double set of eyes, and a scarf – always a different color – wrapped around her forehead to keep her brown bangs out of her face while she worked.

“Mom?” I whispered, taking a step towards her.

Her shadowed hand went up. “Get back! He’s found us!”

At the sound of her voice the tentacle whipped back, sweeping under my feet and knocking me to the floor. I didn't even have a chance to pull myself up before it wrapped itself around Mom's waist and yanked her back. Her scream was cut off as the thing pulled her through the door of light.

And then she was gone.

I don't remember when or how, but I managed to pull myself up again. Then I just stood there like my feet were frozen to the floor, staring at the oval of light, my mind completely blank from shock.

I was still there when Tab ran up the stairs behind me, followed by our fourteen-year-old sister Emily.

"I heard a scream," Emily said.

"What happened?" Tab asked at the same time.

Their voices sounded foggy, like they were coming through piles of blankets. I managed to shake my head, but I still couldn't talk.

As Emily pushed her way past me, the yellow glow in the back corner started to dim. Then with a low hum, the doorway began to fall slowly backwards as the watery stuff drained out, disappearing through a pipe at the bottom of the...

... bathtub?

I closed my eyes and tried to shake the crazy out of my head. I hadn't seen that. No way. And sure enough, when I looked again the old tub Mom used in her lab was empty, resting on its four clawfeet as if it had been there - just like that - for years. There was no sign of the impossible glowy bathwater that it had held only moments before, or the wicked metal tentacle.

Or Mom.

As my mind raced with different crazy-person diagnoses I might give myself, I heard Mom's ringtone. I blinked around at the ruined lab until my eyes landed on a

flashing white light in the shadows under the tub. I rushed over – skirting the spilled liquids and broken glass – and knelt down to reach for her phone.

I had just curled my fingers around it when I felt a massive sting on the top of my hand.

“OW!” I jumped back, landing on my butt in green goo. At the same time, a tiny robotic voice spoke from the shadows under the tub.

DNA confirmed.

“DNA... what?” I whispered, staring stupidly at my hand where a small drop of blood had formed.

“Ohhh man. What did you do *this* time, Trevor?” Emily said.

“Forget being turned into a frog,” Tab said. “Mom’s going to skin you alive for this.”

That’s when my brain-ice finally broke into a million pieces.

“But... but... *I* didn’t do this!” I said. “Mom-just-got-momnapped-by-some-crazy-scary-metal-octopus-that-came-out-of-this-bathtub-but-the-tub-wasn’t-like-this-it-was-full-of-weird-glowy-water-stuff-and-standing-on-its-end-and –”

“What are you *talking* about?” Emily said.

“I don’t know!” I said, honestly. “I just... I mean... but Mom... she...” Suddenly I remembered the robotic voice. “Wait!” I turned back to the tub. “Hello? Are you there?”

“I *did* see the glowing,” Tab said as my sisters joined me by the tub. “You did too, Em.”

“Maybe?” Emily said. “I mean, I don’t know *what* I saw. But –”

Hello, Trevor Tate, the robotic voice said from under the tub. *I have a message for you.*

Emily squeaked out a surprised scream and ran back to the stairs.

Tab knelt beside me. "What was that?"

"I don't know." I showed her my hand. "But whatever it was, it stung me good."

As Tab leaned in to look closer, a huge, nasty bug with a billion legs scurried out of the shadows under the tub and ran straight at us.

Tab screamed and fell backwards onto HER butt next to me, while I kicked crazily at the thing. Too fast for me, it scurried right between my legs and jumped onto Tab's hand. She screamed again and swatted it off into the corner, but not before it dug a scorpion-like tail into her skin.

"OW!" She slapped the back of her hand against her mouth and stared in horror at the now upside-down centipede-scorpion thing.

DNA Confirmed, the robotic voice said as the bug righted itself. *Hello, Tabitha Tate. I have a message for you.*

"I thought the message was for me," I said.

Tab dropped her hand, though her eyes didn't leave the bug for a second. "Maybe it's for both of us?"

The bug didn't bother to answer. Instead, it curled up so that its head met its butt and only a few of its many legs stayed on the floor, like a big, fringed bug ring. Then it started glowing with a pukey yellow light, and a beam shot out of its center, landing against the far wall like an old-time projector.

The staticky film it played showed a man whose face was mostly hidden by a metallic half mask that covered his nose and mouth, and dark goggles over his eyes. His hair was short and light colored, and he wore a big shiny hoop earring high up on one ear.

"Hello Guts and Glory," he said in a tinny, old-timey voice. "I'm Dr. Fixit, and I have come to help you fulfill your destiny."

CHAPTER 2



NIL

"You two are very special to me," he continued. "That is why I have spent such a long, long time searching for you."

"You have?" I said.

"Before you can become my champions of honor and justice, you must be put to a series of tests to prove yourselves worthy."

Champions? I thought, getting really excited. *Honor and justice?* YES PLEASE!

"What tests?" I said out loud. "I'm ready!"

Tab smacked my arm. "Stop interrupting!"

"I don't think he can hear you anyway," Emily said, joining us again from the stairs. "It looks like a movie."

"This is my command to you both," Dr. Fixit said. "Follow your mother to Nil. From there I will guide you until you have found her. You children like games, correct? Well call this a treasure hunt, with your mother as the treasure. Or hide and seek. It will be fun! But games have rules, and my game is no different. You must not break the rules or very bad things will happen. Here are the rules: do not talk to the wrong side, and do not stray from the path."

The projector snapped off with a click and the bug... well... died.

I think.

It curled up like it was dead, anyway. I wasn't about to check.

"Okay, so that was weird," Emily said.

"I think Mom would call that an understatement," Tab said. She looked down at the bug. "It's not moving anymore."

"It's probably all used up now," Emily said. "I think it's some kind of machine. No real bug could do that." She turned to me. "Trev, you said you saw where they took Mom?"

I nodded but my eyes were still glued to the wall where the movie had been. My mind kept playing Dr. Fixit's words over and over again.

Champions of honor and justice.

"Trevor!" Emily snapped. "Where. Did. He. Take. Mom?"

I blinked and looked at her. "I... uh..." I pointed at the tub. "Through there?"

Emily glanced at it with a snort. "What, did he make her teeny-tiny and run her down the drain?"

"You saw the light," Tab reminded her. "I think it was coming from there, actually."

I walked over to the tub and knelt down to look underneath. "There's got to be a way to make it do that again. Then we can go to... where did Dr. Fixit say he took Mom?"

"Nil," Tab said. She picked up one of Mom's papers from the floor and made a face as she studied it. "For some reason I don't like that word."

"It means nothing," Emily said.

"Well, most names don't really mean anything," I said. "Right?"

"No," Emily said. "I mean like the *word* nil. It means 'nothing'."

"Weird name for a place," Tab said. She shuddered and dropped the lab note in an orange puddle. "Now I *really* don't like it."

"Anything on that paper about how this thing works?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "Just a bunch of scribbles about bone structure."

"Maybe there's a switch or something over here." I started to push myself through the pipes between the tub and the wall. "I think I can fit..."

"Shouldn't we be calling the cops?" Emily said. "I mean, this seems a little dangerous—"

Just then, my elbow knocked a loose pipe aside and the tub suddenly shuddered. I jumped back as it started to raise up again, tipping on its end like a really deep full-length mirror. Then, the bathtub started to fill with water backwards, from the drainage pipe instead of the faucet. A tiny waterfall ran down along the upraised base towards the rim...

... where it stopped.

It was like an invisible force-field held the water back. Not even a drop spilled onto the floor. As it got deeper, the water began to glow yellow.

"Okayyyy," Emily said as we watched the tub fill. "Now what?"

I reached my hand towards the “water” and dipped my fingers in. It was warm, just like a bath. Only normal baths don’t glow. It wasn’t clear like normal, either. Under the glow I could make out a swirly darkness, like deep ocean waves. Curious, I moved my hand further in. It went up to my wrist. My elbow. My shoulder. Still, my fingers touched nothing.

“Now... I guess we go through?” I said.

We looked at each-other, and I was sure my sisters were thinking a lot of the same things as me: *What if it really is water and we drown? What if it leads us underground somewhere without any light? What if it leads to outer space?*

But it didn’t matter in the end *where* the portal went. Mom was there somewhere, and we had to get her back.

No matter what.

“You’d better follow me or I’ll be really mad,” I said. Then, trying not to think too hard about it, I held my breath and stepped into the tub.



I was blind.

That was bad.

But I could breathe, so I wasn’t underwater. That was good.

But I was also falling. Fast. That was bad.

Then I realized there was something under me. Something slippery. I wasn’t falling after all.

I was *sliding!*

Down, down, down in pitch blackness, I slid. At first it was terrifying, but it lasted so long that by the time I saw an orangey-yellow light glowing below me, I'd actually started getting kinda bored.

The light got brighter and brighter, and then I was out, landing on a pile of dusty old rags.

At least they were soft.

I was still sneezing and rubbing my eyes when Emily landed on top of me, her knees jabbing me in the back like double harpoons.

"Ow! Get *off*!"

I wiggled out from under her just as Tab fell on top of us both, throwing up even more dust. I had to practically rub my pupils off and sneeze out the Sahara before I could finally stand up on the rag pile and look around.

So. This was Nil.

We were inside a building that seemed to go on forever. Its walls and ceiling arched overhead like half of an enormous toilet paper roll. Huge brown-edged holes spotted the metal surface all over. Through them I could see a stormy orange sky outside, heavy with low, bruise-colored clouds.

"Well. That's... different," Tab said.

"I'd say more like cruddy," I said. "The place looks like it was burned away with acid rain."

"Wait," Emily said. "Why aren't we underwater?"

I looked at Tab. She looked at me. We shrugged.

"I don't think that was actually water in the bathtub," Tab said. "I mean, when was the last time you took a bath and ended up in another world?"

“But Trevor said some tentacle thing took Mom,” Emily said. “Things with tentacles live in the ocean, right?”

“It was made of metal and glass,” I said. “I don’t think it was actually alive.”

Emily grimaced. “This is all way too weird.”

“I don’t know about that,” Tab said, pointing behind us. “I mean, *that’s* pretty cool.”

I turned around to look. “Holy *wow!* You can say that again!”

Like an enormous copper boa constrictor, the biggest spiral slide I ever saw rose to the ceiling far above our heads. It was made of rusty pipes, twisted and knotted so badly that I couldn’t even see where it started. But the end was easy enough to spot. It was right over our heads, and looked like a huge outdoor faucet.

“Well,” I said when my voice came back. “That explains the sliding.”

Tab nodded dumbly.

“Mom must have made it,” Emily said. “I guess her portal came out a little higher up than she expected.”

“Who says Mom made the portal?” I asked.

Emily gave me her don’t-be-dumb look. “It was in HER lab, genius. Who *else* would have?”

Tab squinted one eye and puckered up her mouth, making what she calls her Holmes face, as in Sherlock. She says doing that helps her think. I just think it looks doofy.

“I wonder how the big tentacle monster you described got through the slide without hurting it?” she said after a moment.

I shrugged. “Maybe that’s all it is? A huge, long tentacle? That would fit.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Emily said.

“And any of this *does?*” I said.

Emily opened her mouth to answer, but she was interrupted by a weird tittering noise.

We froze.

“Uh...” Tab whispered. “That sounds kinda... buggy.”

I scanned the rusty shadows. “Yeah,” I whispered, “but it’s way too loud. Any bug that made a noise like that would have to be—”

“AHHHHHHH!” Tab screamed, pointing a trembling hand at one of the low holes in the wall. Massive antenna felt around the edge, followed by a giant black bug head with sharp, wicked looking mandibles. Its shiny black eyes flashed as it stared straight at us.

“...enormous,” I finished with a croak.