

BENDY™

THE LOST ONES



BY ADRIENNE KRESS

SCHOLASTIC INC.

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PROLOGUE: WALLY



Late nights were my favorite time of day. I liked the empty halls, the darkness, no people running about like chickens with their heads cut off. *It's just a job*, I'd think to myself. *Why do they have to get so worked up over a job?* I liked how my footsteps echoed but I also liked putting on a record or turning on the radio and letting the music play while I emptied trash cans and mopped the floors. Sometimes

I'd do a little dance with the mop. Mop dances are fun. I ain't no Fred Astaire, but then again, he ain't no Wally Franks.

Now that's not to say that there weren't strange things about working late, but if ol' Wally knows one thing, he knows that folks like having their little secrets. Makes 'em feel special. Never understood that myself. What you see is what you get with me.

There were secrets here in Joey Drew Studios. I ain't no fool. But I also ain't no detective.

So I just keep on my own business. Even when the new renovation started, when they'd bought up the theater next door. Even when the pipes had begun making strange noises all hours. Sometimes almost like some creature moaning away somewhere. It was all never mind for me. Made life interesting, new halls to keep up all swell like, new offices, and, sure, new sounds too.

Took more time to clean though, and my muscles did ache more and more these days. The missus always said we should retire down to Florida already, but I wasn't ready yet. Not yet.

"Let me explain this one last time to you thick-headed lunks. I don't want to see one darn scratch on this thing when we get there. Got it?"

"Yes, sir, of course, sir."

I overheard conversations all the time in this job. Not just by being around a corner, or in the other room. No, folks sometimes seemed to forget I could hear in the first place; they'd just talk or argue with me standing right there doing my job.

Ol' Wally didn't mind. Folks did what they did. Just like I did what I did.

So normally I wouldn't have thought too much of any of it, but this time was a bit different. This was, well, I could have sworn that I was listening to the booming frustration of one Thomas Connor. And I could have sworn the fellow had been recently fired. Maybe I was wrong though. Wouldn't be the first time, as the missus always points out.

"Don't 'yes, sir' me. Just do your job!"

And sure enough, it was him, or at least his chest, as I crashed right into him turning the corner.

"What the . . ." Thomas backed off, sputtering.

"Sorry about that, Thomas," I said, casually brushing myself off. Bumping into folks happened sometimes.

"Wally, you're here late," replied Thomas, glancing over his shoulder and not really making eye contact. I rarely got eye contact from folks. I didn't mind it. I didn't want to get in the way. My job was to make the way easier, not harder after all.

"Not really," I replied. Didn't much think he'd want conversation but he didn't walk away so I did my best. Come up with a question, then, Wally. That ain't a hard thing to do. "You're back on the payroll then?"

"What?" asked Thomas. The man seemed distracted.

"Your job, got your job back? Mister Drew hired you again?"

"Well, he had no choice," replied Thomas, still thinking about something else. He laughed then. "We both had no choice."

I nodded. I didn't understand what he meant. After all, we all have choices. But folks like when you nod. Sets them at ease.

Thomas turned then and began to walk off into the dark blackness of the hallway. Now I always liked the dark, felt like a cozy blanket to wrap myself in even though I knew others found it scary and such. Never understood that either. Ain't nothing in the dark that isn't there in the light.

Most of the time.

"You moving that machine then?" I asked Thomas's back. I'd just remembered about that now, and felt like asking.

The man stopped walking. He was silhouetted by the last light dangling overhead before everything got drowned in darkness. His shoulders rose, fists clenched. Now there was a man with some anger in him, I observed. Yup, some mighty fine anger.

"Machine?"

"That large machine, the one that makes a mess of ink everywhere." Didn't mind cleaning up, but boy oh boy was it annoying to clean up a messy spill and then it's back again half an hour later.

Thomas didn't turn around. He stood there silent. I figured I should probably stay silent too. I was curious about the answer. I didn't always need one. I didn't always care for one. But I knew when someone needed to answer a question, even if it was more for himself than for the person asking it. Thomas Connor needed to answer this question.

"Yup, we're moving it," he finally said.

“Good,” I replied. “Don’t know how that thing works, but ever since it arrived there’s been ink everywhere. Seems like it’s being dragged along the floors by folks. The pipes are also just out of control, leaks and noises, and I’ve been having a devil of a time fixing the darn things. You know, I don’t even understand why this machine exists at all, no one’s bothered to tell ol’ Wally anything—”

“Yes, well, we’re moving it so you’ll be happy then,” interrupted Thomas curtly.

That made no sense to me. “Well, it’s not about my being happy . . .”

“It’s done, Wally. It’s done.”

Now ol’ Wally was no fool. There were times you knew someone needed to answer a question and then there were times you knew that the person had answered the question and that was all they were going to say. All that they needed to say.

“Well . . . good then,” I said. I touched the tip of my cap. I liked doing that. Wally’s salute.

Thomas kept on standing under that one light. I could see the muscles under his shirt tense and relax and tense again. He released his fists and moved his fingers, a bit like he was making sure they still worked or something.

Yes, sir, that man definitely had anger in him.

Definitely.

Then he took a step forward and disappeared into the dark.

That’s the way it is here at night. Into the light for a

moment and then back into the dark. Saving money on electricity, I guessed. Saving money was a priority these days at Joey Drew Studios. I'd been told to keep my rags until they fell apart in my hands. I was good at taking orders, I appreciated them. I'd seen artists reach into their own garbage bins and pull out tossed pieces of paper to draw on the reverse side. I'd seen lunches brought from home. I'd seen pay stubs with lower and lower amounts and empty desks.

I'd seen it all.

I'd seen everything.

Oh yes, ol' Wally sees everything. Including the machine. Including what made the ink on the floors. What dragged it far down the hallways and along the walls.

You didn't think ol' Wally had seen it?

Ol' Wally sees it all.

I went into a small tidy office and picked up the half-full bin. I tossed the garbage into the bag, and paused at the little light on the desk. I leaned over and clicked it off. Saving electricity and all that. Then I went back out into the hallway. And kept going about my business.

Into the light for one moment, then into the dark.

Never much understood why folks were scared of it.

Ain't nothing in the shadows that isn't there in the light.

Except, of course, when there is.

And when there is, I'm outta here!