



**BURIED  
SECRETS**

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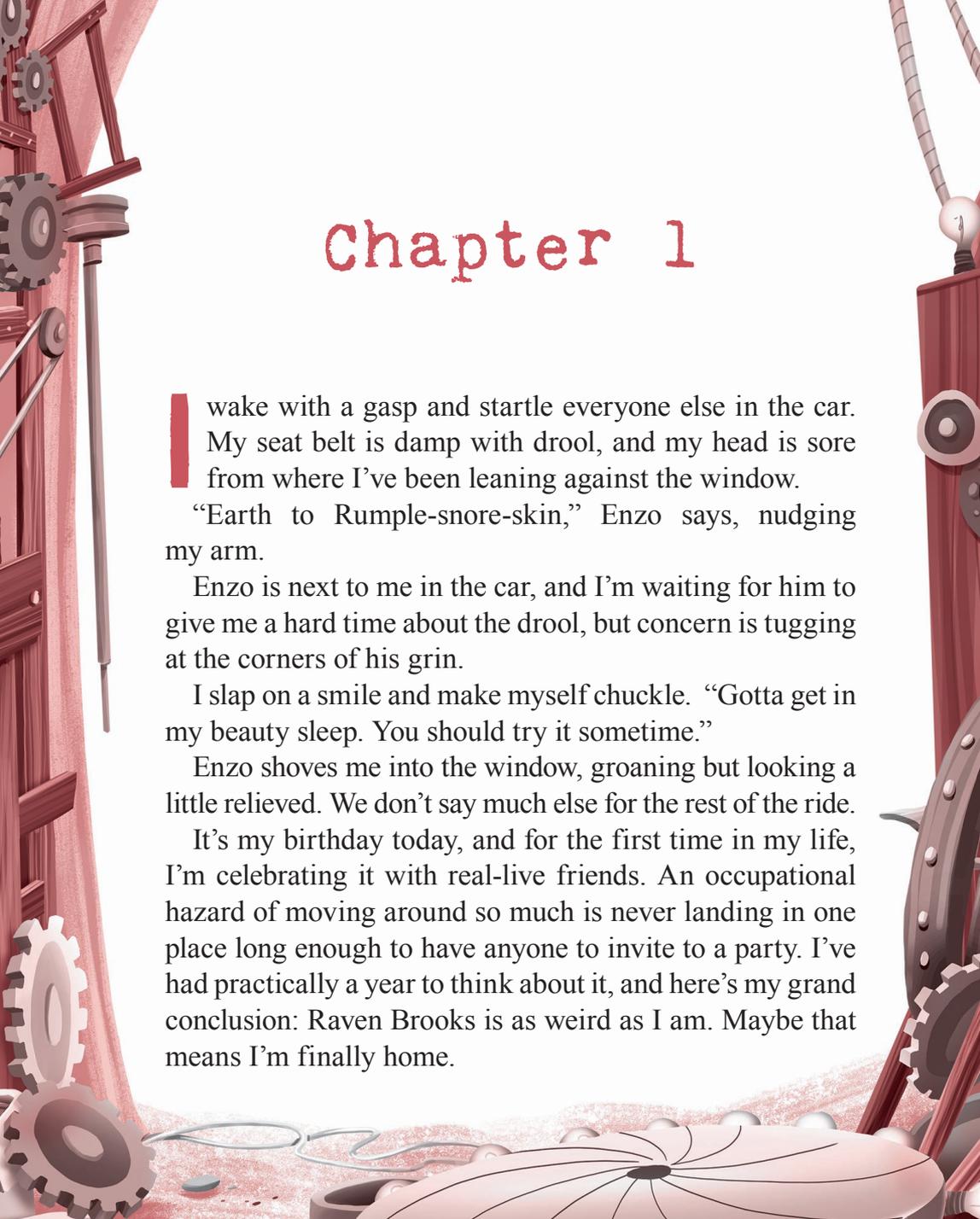
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ISBN 978-1-338-34859-0

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1      19 20 21 22 23  
Printed in China      145

This edition, first printing 2019  
Book design by Cheung Tai



# Chapter 1

I wake with a gasp and startle everyone else in the car. My seat belt is damp with drool, and my head is sore from where I've been leaning against the window.

"Earth to Rumble-snore-skin," Enzo says, nudging my arm.

Enzo is next to me in the car, and I'm waiting for him to give me a hard time about the drool, but concern is tugging at the corners of his grin.

I slap on a smile and make myself chuckle. "Gotta get in my beauty sleep. You should try it sometime."

Enzo shoves me into the window, groaning but looking a little relieved. We don't say much else for the rest of the ride.

It's my birthday today, and for the first time in my life, I'm celebrating it with real-live friends. An occupational hazard of moving around so much is never landing in one place long enough to have anyone to invite to a party. I've had practically a year to think about it, and here's my grand conclusion: Raven Brooks is as weird as I am. Maybe that means I'm finally home.

We pull into the massive parking lot, and all of us pile out of the car, cracking our backs and groaning about the nearly three-hour car ride. I don't remember whose idea Spree Land was, but since it's my birth we're celebrating, I sense that the blame lies squarely with me.

"Not bad. We all managed to stay together for the whole trip. Think we had ourselves a real old-fashioned convoy!" Dad says, the only one not completely zonked from the trip.

"Jay, for the eightieth time, we're not getting a CB radio," Mom says, hauling the cake and gifts out of the car and distributing them among the rest of us to carry.

"I'm just saying, the open road is lonely," Dad says, pouting a little.

"Well, your inner long-haul trucker will just have to get used to the sound of his doting wife from here on out," Mom says, smooshing his face and giving him a kiss on his cheek while we stumble toward the ticket booth, our legs still adjusting to standing. I make a mental note to refurbish a CB radio from my stash for Dad.

Everyone's parents have come—Mr. and Mrs. Bales, Mr. Esposito, Mom and Dad. Trinity hangs back by her parents and gives me a warm smile, and I don't know how, but she must know I need it. I've been trying, but this winter was a lot to get over. Between the run-ins with Mr. Peterson, the involvement with police, and the evidence (well, what *should* have been evidence), the grown-ups

have all agreed that the best thing to do is for the kids to simply move on.

Move on. It's that simple. Like passing a car accident on the side of the road. It was awful for someone else, and now it's time to focus on the traffic ahead. I look over at Maritza, who's had to go through this twice now—once with Lucy, and once with Mya. Was that why she looked so resigned? Was that why she wasn't screaming that, no matter how many searches we did on the weekends or Missing posters we put up, we *know* who was involved, all while the adults are sitting here doing nothing?

Mom and Dad even started taking me to see a therapist, a fun fact they've opted to keep from everyone else. They say it's to safeguard my privacy, but there's this tiny part of me that wonders who exactly they're protecting. Mom's still waiting on that funding from EarthPro, and Dad's only just smoothed things over with Mr. Esposito at the paper. I'm sure the last thing they want is everyone knowing their kid is a paranoid delinquent.

Oh, sorry. I'm a *highly sensitive adolescent prone to anxiety and heightened obsessive tendencies*, according to "Dr. Fern." I can never remember his name, so I just think of him as the guy with the office that smells like banana peels who sits next to this giant plastic fern tree. So that's his name now. Dr. Fern.

And the Fern is not completely wrong. I'm *highly*

# MISSING

IF SEEN, CONTACT POLICE AT 1-555-555-3726



## MYA PETERSON

Age 11, 4'9", 72 lbs.  
Freckles, red hair,  
often worn in pigtails.  
Last seen playing outside  
in a residential area of  
Pleasant Hills, Minnesota.  
May attempt travel to  
Raven Brooks, Missouri,  
where family is located.



## AARON PETERSON

Age 13, 5'5", 120 lbs.  
Light brown hair.  
Last seen with sister,  
playing outside in a  
residential area of  
Pleasant Hills, Minnesota.  
May attempt travel to  
Raven Brooks, Missouri,  
where family is located.

*sensitive* to the fact that, despite a binder full of evidence, the police are still happy to believe that Mr. Peterson is simply an odd dude and his kids just ran away from their aunt's house for no good reason. I've got this *heightened paranoia* because the maniac across the street,

aside from singing creepy nursery rhymes while chopping meat *alone* in his creepy house, knows that I'm onto him, enough to gather said *binder full of evidence* and give it to the police. And I'm *prone to anxiety* over the evidence I might've missed, all while watching the Missing posters of Aaron and Mya fade to nothing because it's just easier to "move on."

Yep. I must be crazy. Meanwhile, Mr. Peterson still lives across the street, hammering away for months now, power-drilling into Aliens-know-what, playing completely normal carnival music in the middle of the night.

"Okay, so cake first, right?" Mom says, breathless by the time we get to the Party Pavilion of Spree Land, which is more or less a covered patio area with overhead fans and picnic tables.

“I think we’re gonna have to,” says Mr. Bales. “It’s likely to melt otherwise.”

We rush through the singing and the candles, and I find that smile I used in the car, and I try—I *really* try—to be happy about the day. We’re at an amusement park that hasn’t been burned down and abandoned. To my knowledge, no one has died here. And, sure, Mr. Peterson had a hand in building this park just like he had a hand in building about a billion other parks outside of Raven Brooks, but that doesn’t mean his imprint on this place has to taint the day.

Mom slices the cake and gives Dad two plates.

“You’re just going to try to sneak an extra slice anyway,” Mom says. “Might as well skip the dramatics.”

“Which is why you are a goddess,” he says, putting his chin on her shoulder before taking a corner chair.

Just as we’re lifting our respective forks, Mr. Esposito clears his throat and nods to my parents.

“I think we’re forgetting something,” he says, and my parents scurry to find two more chairs to place at the end of the table, ruffling the plastic tablecloth as they hurry around.

“Right,” Dad says, getting the explanation over with as quickly as possible. “Miguel had a, um, an idea that might pay homage to some people who might be . . .”

He looks to my mom to find the right words, but she looks as helpless as Dad does.

“To remember that, erm . . .”

“To remind us that two friends are here in spirit,” Mr. Esposito says, and now I get it.

Maritza looks at me, and if my face is the same color red as hers, then we’re both trying to decide if we’re embarrassed or furious.

There in spirit. As in *not* in real life. Because it’s time to move on. For real this time.

Trinity and Enzo look at each other and then look at Maritza and me, and then at their laps because to look at the parents now would be to betray our anger over them deciding how we should be feeling.

We let the parents chat while the four of us eat in silence, then sprint out the door to the shouts of “Meet back here in two hours!”

As soon as we’re out of earshot, Enzo chimes in.

“He was trying to help,” he says about his dad.

“That wasn’t helping,” Maritza says, looking at the ground. She doesn’t sound angry so much as tired.

“It’s like they want to pretend nothing’s happened,” I say, getting more frustrated by the second.

Trinity puts her arm around Maritza’s shoulders and holds her other hand up to me.

“I know,” she says. “They’re never going to feel the way

we feel, because they can never experience what we've experienced. But . . . you guys, they kinda have a point."

I'm preparing to battle with Trinity, but then Maritza says something surprising.

"I hate this feeling," she says, and maybe it's the sun's reflection, but I think her eyes might be watery. "I hate feeling angry all the time. Or worried. Or—helpless. I just want to miss her. That's all I want to feel."

Then I can't think of a thing to say, because what she's saying feels true. Maybe it is that simple. Maybe we just need to miss them without all the other stuff.

Maybe I really have been looking for trouble.

It turns out rides are a great way to spend the day, because after melting cake and fumbling parents, *not* talking was actually the best remedy. Screaming felt so much better.

By the end of the fourth hour, we decide we have time for one more ride.

"So, choose wisely," Trinity says, eyeing us all carefully to fully reflect the seriousness of this decision.

"Cobra Kingdom or Scream School," Enzo says, pointing to the map. "Those are my votes."

"Scream School all the way," says Trinity.

