

Chapter 1

Lights behind my eyes.
My head. My head.
...

I'm gonna puke.

“Whoa! It’s okay, Aaron, it’s okay. We’ll clean you up, just lie back down.”

A guy in a pair of green scrubs is looking at the floor like he doesn’t know what to do. His hands are outstretched at his side.

“Dr. Malcolm, is everything—oh . . .”

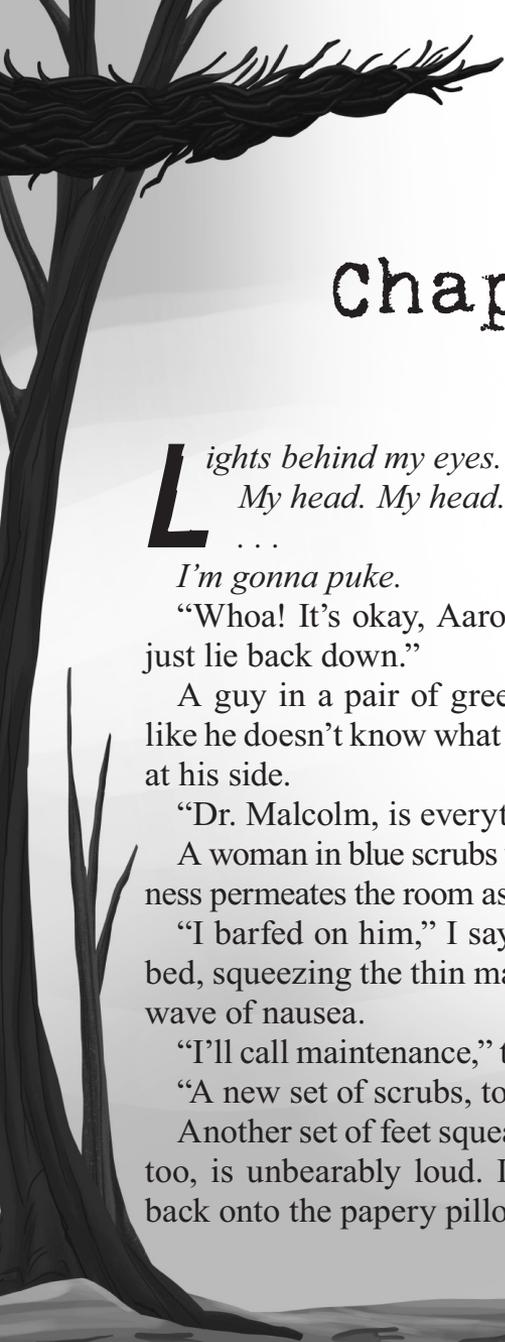
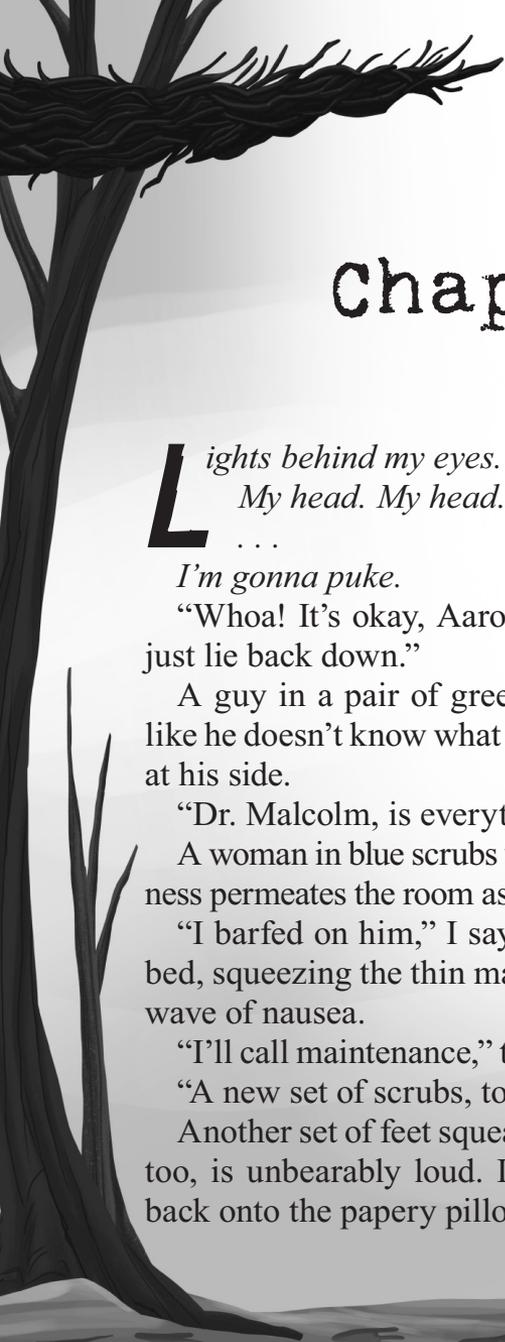
A woman in blue scrubs walks in and gets quiet. Her quietness permeates the room as if begging to be acknowledged.

“I barfed on him,” I say and hang on to the edge of the bed, squeezing the thin mattress and fighting back another wave of nausea.

“I’ll call maintenance,” the nurse says and exits the room.

“A new set of scrubs, too,” Dr. Malcolm calls after her.

Another set of feet squeak down the hall, and that sound, too, is unbearably loud. I squeeze my eyes shut and fall back onto the papery pillow behind me.



“Did he wake up? I thought I heard his—”

I recognize Dad’s voice immediately, and I have no idea why, but the second he walks into the room, I start to cry. I’m suddenly four years old and terrified and confused, and only my dad can save me. I barely open my eyes. I shake with little silent sobs, and my head is killing me, but his arms are around my neck and he’s pressing my head against him and he’s shushing me like he used to when I’d have a nightmare.

This isn’t a nightmare, though. I don’t know what it is, but there’s no question I’m awake.

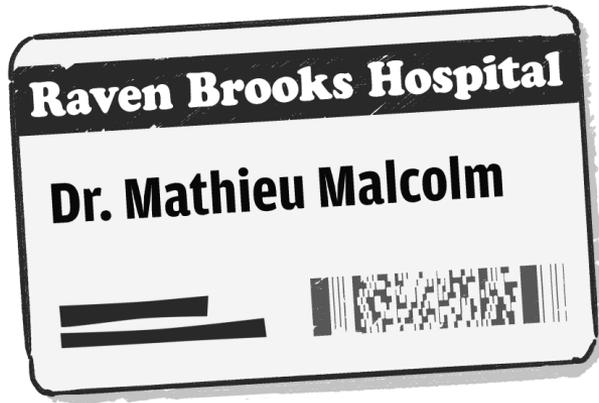
I hear a set of wheels roll into the room, then the slap of a mop as it does its job, then the nurse as she hands the doctor a new set of clothes, then the doctor excusing himself while the nurse gently takes my arm, takes my blood pressure, takes my temperature, takes some blood with a needle, and takes her leave.

The entire time, my dad doesn’t say a word; he simply shushes me, even after I’ve stopped crying. He keeps my head against him, cradled by his meaty forearm. He keeps his hand cupping my skull gently.

“Ah yes, all right, then,” says the doctor when he comes back. Only then does my dad release me, and I let myself fall back to the pillow.

“Head injuries are rough,” the doctor says, shaking his head slowly. “Hi, Aaron. I’m Dr. Malcolm.”

Malcolm like my second-grade teacher. I think I can remember that.



I feel my dad tense next to me. “Is he going to—?”

The doctor holds up his hands and tamps them down, pressing the worry away. “We’ve run all the tests, and so far, everything checks out. Aaron’s going to make a full recovery. He just had a nasty fall.”

A nasty fall.

If my brain didn’t feel like it was clanging around in my head like a gong, maybe I’d be able to remember falling. From what? To where? My memory is a black hole.

Dad, on the other hand, appears to be up to speed, asking questions before I can form a complete thought.

“When can we take him home?” he asks.

“Assuming all checks out, tomorrow should be fine,” Dr. Malcolm says.

It isn’t long before the doctor and my dad are asking and answering questions, speaking in low voices that still hurt

my head. All I can do is concentrate on the steady drip of the faucet coming from the sink in the bathroom by my bed. Its rhythmic drop into the drain echoes against my eyelids, and I try to use it as a way to meditate the pain away, but something about the patter of that drip is too familiar—too unnerving—to calm me.

Like it's echoing through a long, dank chamber.

Through a tunnel.

It all comes back in a wave—the tunnel leading from the weather station, the broken lantern that should have been in my grandparents' old office, the bloody smear across the wallet holding Mr. Gershowitz's ID.

Panic seizes me before I can catch it, and for just a moment I can't feel the blinding pain behind my eyes. I launch to a sitting position on the bed, grasping hold of my dad's arm and startling him out of his conversation with the doctor.

“Did you find it? The lantern in the tunnel? I fell through the wall, but I didn't mean to, and all of a sudden, I was running, or I think I was, it was just so dark, and I think there was someone else in there with me and . . . Dad, did you find his wallet? Mr. Gershowitz's wallet?”

“Aaron, calm down,” Dad says quietly, prying my hand from his arm, but I can't stop myself. The questions are spilling out of me, and I urgently need them all answered.

“But did you find it?”

“Aaron,” Dad hisses, his eyes widening as he discreetly turns his back to the doctor, covering me with his shadow. “I think you must be *imagining things*.”

His eyes are wide and his teeth are clamped shut, and I know that for some reason he wants me to shut up and nod my head, but I just *can't*.

“Hang on, did you say Gershowitz? As in *Ike* Gershowitz, that missing security guard?” Dr. Malcolm says from behind my dad.

Now both of them are casting their long shadows over my bed.

“Aaron, I think maybe you’re just confused,” Dad says, leaning a little closer to me. Any second now, I’m going to be vaporized. He faces Dr. Malcolm. “The fall from that tree was quite high.”

I nod back.

“Yeah,” I say. Dad’s laser eyes lose some of their burn.

He turns to Dr. Malcolm. “My son’s little friend—well, his father—works for the *Banner*. Every gruesome headline gets talked about. You know the stuff: robberies, disappearances, there’s no censorship there . . . I’m sure Mr. Gershowitz’s headline is the last thing he remembers,” Dad says, shaking his head.

Dr. Malcolm seems only partly convinced. The crease between his brows deepens as he looks from my dad to me and back to my dad.

“Is it normal for him to be inventing memories like

this?” Dad asks, and just like that, he almost has me thinking he’s genuinely concerned about my sanity.

Dr. Malcolm considers this. “Well, it’s not unheard of. The brain is mysterious. So much we still don’t know about it. Head injuries are different for everyone.”

“Then he’s going to be okay?”

Dr. Malcolm’s face softens at Dad’s concern. “Mr. Peterson, your son will be just fine. He needs some rest and more monitoring. I’ll give you two a little space, but then it’s time to say good night.”

Dad nods cooperatively and shakes Dr. Malcolm’s hand. The doctor gives my foot a gentle pat over the covers before leaving us alone.

Dad turns so fast, it’s like he’s on a hinge.

“Now, what’s this about *tunnels*?”

There are very few things I know for certain right now. I know that my name is Aaron Peterson. I know that I’ve lived in Raven Brooks—quite possibly the weirdest town on Earth—for about six months, and we wouldn’t live here at all except that we had to leave Germany in a hurry, and Dad’s parents conveniently left him their house in their will. I am positive that I don’t know the whole story about why we had to leave Germany, and most of me is afraid to know. And I am 100 percent certain that the tunnels running under the weather station where my grandparents used to work is merely one squirming, slimy worm in a whole can I’ve managed to open.

More than anything, I am crystal clear on this one fact: Now is *not* the time to spill the entire can. Now is the time to squeeze the lid back on. Shut it tight. Pretend I don't even know there's a lid or a can in the first place.

"Tunnels? Who said anything about . . . ahhhh, my head," I say, pushing my palm to my forehead and squinting against the pain. "What were you guys saying about a fall?"

I don't dare open my eyes to see if it's working. I wait for the silence to subside. To my relief, it does.

"You fell out of a tree," Dad says, his voice softening to the concern he expressed when he first rushed into the room.

"A tree?"

Dad chuckles. "Surprised? Me, too. You were never much of a climber."

I let myself laugh a little, too, wondering if he knows I'm playing dumb.

"I don't understand . . . What was I doing? . . . Where was . . . ?"

"In the woods, during the Unveiling Ceremony," Dad says, his face darkening a little.

Right. Because I was supposed to meet my family there after the imaginary project I was working on with Trinity beforehand.

My face flushes hot. "Sorry," I say, and I'm not sure if I'm apologizing for lying, or for not being there for his big

moment, or for ruining the big moment when apparently I came crashing to the ground after inexplicably climbing a tree.

Dad clears his throat. I pretend that means “I forgive you.”

Only after I look down at my hands in shame do I see the little dirt crescents underneath my fingernails. A long splinter embedded deep into my palm has turned the flesh around it pink.

In one crushing glance, the entire memory comes flooding back.

I'm running through the tunnels. But someone else is running, too. Chasing me.

No, not chasing me. I'm chasing them.

The footsteps grow louder as I close the gap between us. I crash through the tunnel, taking turns blindly as I push my fear aside. There's something in my hand, something smooth and flat and folded. It's Mr. Gershowitz's wallet.

Panting, I stop to listen for the footsteps and find them farther ahead now. I sprint to catch up and, slowly, a sweet, familiar smell begins to fill the air. All of a sudden, I'm pushing through a heavy metal door and ducking under pipes and vats and tripping over cables. A safety bulletin posted to the wall flaps beside me as I rush past it, but I register the Golden Apple Corporation logo even in the dark of the basement. Yes, that's it—I'm underneath the Golden Apple factory.

Next thing I know, I'm standing in the doorway leading out of the basement and into the forest.

I look down again at my hands. Tucked inside the wallet is Mr. Gershowitz's blood-stained ID.

"Come back!" I try to yell to the person I'm chasing, but my throat is parched and hoarse. It's Mr. Gershowitz. I remember now.

I run after him, ducking past branches and dodging sharp twigs. The woods no longer look familiar; panic begins to take hold again as I venture deeper and deeper into the thick overgrowth.

With my lungs burning and my legs beginning to shake, I'm just about to give up when I hear the crack of a branch so close by. I thought I was chasing Mr. Gershowitz, but now that I'm nearly upon him, I start to wonder if it's really him I've been chasing.

There's a disturbance in the leaves no more than thirty feet from the tree I'm hiding behind.

I have to look. I've come all this way, and now I have to look.

I try to swallow away my panic, but that only fills my stomach with air. Inch by inch, I creep my head around the thick trunk of the tree.

I stop swallowing air and suddenly forget how to breathe. If I didn't know better, I'd say it isn't breathing, either. It's so still, it could be a statue. But this thing is no statue.

I cover my head to protect my eyes from flying debris.

The crows come next, seemingly thousands of them, screeching their way across the purple sky like a dark jet stream, bringing chaos to the air. By the time they pass, I can't hear the voices over the speakers anymore. I can't hear anything.

I peer around the tree, but it's gone. The only evidence anything had been there at all is a broken branch from the tree above.

In that tree above is a nest that's somehow big enough for a human.

I'm climbing the tree before I know what I'm doing. I'm climbing, even though it's a horrible idea. I'm climbing faster than I've ever climbed in my entire life. I'm climbing, even though I am not nearly coordinated or strong enough to lift myself through the high branches and into the nest that until now has been little more than fable.

This is it, I think. This is where I'll find some answers.

Then, without even a creak as a warning, the branch under my left foot gives way. I manage one undignified scream before the world goes dark.

"Aaron?"

Dad is crouched beside the bed now, a deep crease folding his forehead in half. He almost looks . . . no, he *does* look worried.

"It's . . . it's just been a hard day, I guess," I say.

Dad nods but doesn't unfold his brow. It's one of those moments when the real Dad is here, the one who used to

show me his blueprints before anyone else, even Mom, telling me not to tell Mya or she'd get jealous. The dad who tells me I'm capable of great things.

This is the Dad I used to be able to tell everything to. He would listen, even though he'd get that scary angry face. He'd hear me all the way out before grounding me, and even then, I'd know it would just be to keep me safe.

I don't tell him, though. I don't know why, but something about that day in the tunnels—the creature in the forest and Mr. Gershowitz's wallet and all the rest—tells me to keep it to myself, at least for now. At least until my head clears.

“Go to sleep,” Dad says. “I'll stay until you do.”

He does stay. I know because just as I fade into the blissful

