



THERE WAS A RHYTHM IN MY FISTS.

Pop pop

It told a story.

Pop pop

Everybody thought they knew the story. They'd seen it before. *He'll get over it. It's a phase. Give him space.* But they only knew fragments. They didn't want to hear the rest. . . .

Oh, you do?

Hmm.

Well, what if I told you that I went to war over my dead best friend's glowing journal? Or that I battled monsters big and small, with powers I didn't know I had, with gods I didn't know existed. Would you believe me?

Nah, you wouldn't. You got your own problems. You don't wanna hear about my struggles. Right?

Oh, you do? Well, I gotta warn you, it's a wild ride, so buckle up, champ.

Let me give you some truth, and I hope it returns back to me.

“Tristan! They're here.”

Pop

Mom's shout interrupted my groove. I stopped pummeling the small punching bag Dad had installed in my room and loosened the straps on my boxing gloves with my teeth. The gloves fell on the bed, and I dropped down next to them. Eddie's journal sat on my tiny desk in the opposite corner. Still glowing. Still unopened since his mother had given it to me after the funeral two weeks ago.

My room was so small I could've reached out and grabbed the leather book, but that would mean dealing with it, and who deals with their problems by choice?

Pfff. Not me.

“Tristan Strong!” my dad yelled from down the hall.

I hated that name.

It made me appear to be something I'm not. My name should've been Tristan Coward, or Tristan Failure, or Tristan Fake. Maybe Tristan How-Could-You-Lose-Your-First-Boxing-Match.

Anything but Tristan Strong.

Mom's footsteps echoed through our tiny apartment, and then soft knocking sounded on my door. "Tristan, baby, did you hear me?"

I cleared my throat. "Yeah, I'm coming."

The door opened and Mom peeked in. She was still wearing the TEAM STRONG T-shirt from last night. I don't think any of us had gotten much sleep after we came back from my first bout. I stayed up nursing my pride, the only thing I really injured. My little fan club—Dad, Mom, and my grandparents on Dad's side—had tried to cheer me up, but I could see the disappointment written on everyone's faces, so I pretended to go to bed while they held whispered discussions into the wee hours of the morning. And now it was dawn, time to get this show on the road.

Mom's eyes took in the organized chaos of my room and crinkled when they landed on me. She crossed the floor in two steps—avoiding yesterday's untouched dinner in the process—and sat down on the mattress. "It's only for a month," she said, not even playacting that she didn't know what was wrong.

"I know."

"It'll be good for you to get away."

"I know."

She rubbed my head, then pulled me into a hug. "The grief counselor said it would be good to get a change of scenery."

Some fresh air, work around the farm. Who knows, maybe you'll find out you were meant to work the land."

I shrugged. The only thing I was sure of was that I wasn't meant to be a boxer, despite what Dad and Granddad thought.

I pulled free of Mom's hug, stood, grabbed my duffel bag, and headed out to start my month of exile.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Mom asked.

I turned and she held Eddie's journal out to me. Her hand and wrist were bathed in the emerald-green glow that was coming from the cover. But, like everyone else I'd shown the journal to, she didn't notice any strange light.

Mom mistook my confused frown for apprehension as she slipped the book into my bag. "He wanted you to have it, Tristan. I know it's tough, but . . . try to read it when you can, okay?"

I didn't trust myself to speak, so I nodded and headed to the front door.

The decision to ship me to Granddad and Nana Strong's farm down in Alabama had been made without my input. Typical. My parents had talked about it a few times before, but after Eddie's death, and my third school fight in the final two weeks before summer break, well, I guess the time was right.

At least I'd held my own in those school fights. Unlike in the ring last night.

It was just my luck that my grandfather had been there to witness my humiliation.

“You outweighed that other kid by seven pounds!” Granddad had said after the match, in his growling rasp of a voice. “Set the family name back by a decade.”

That’s me—Tristan Disappointment.

Son of Alvin “Wreckin’ Ball” Strong, the best middle-weight boxer to come out of Chicago in nearly twenty years. I had Dad’s height and Granddad’s chin, and boxing was supposed to run in my veins. I’d worn Granddad’s old trunks, and Dad had worked my corner. The Strong legacy was expected to take another leap forward during my first match.

Instead, it got knocked flat on its butt. Twice.

“You’ll get him next time” was all Dad said, but I could tell he was let down.

And that hurt almost as much as getting punched.

An early summer heat wave greeted me with a blast of humidity as I left the apartment building with my backpack over my shoulder and my duffel bag in hand. Thick gray clouds huddled in the distance, and I added that to the list of totally not ominous things. Glowing journal? Yep. Storm on the horizon? You betcha.

Dad and Granddad stood at the curb while Nana (no one ever called her Grandma, not if you wanted to eat) knitted

in the car. Dad towered over his father, but you could see the family resemblance. Deep brown skin like mine, a wide jaw, and a proud stance. I got my hair from Mom's side of the family, thankfully, because both Strong men had identical bald spots peeking through their short afros.

"Get him in the fields, put him to work," Granddad was saying. "That'll put some fire in his belly."

Dad shrugged and said nothing. To be fair, no one did much talking when Granddad was around. That old man could yak a mile a minute.

Nana saw me coming down the stairs, dropped her knitting, and rushed out of the car. "There he is! How you doin' today, baby? Are you sore from last night?"

She gave me a hug that muffled any answer, then shooed Granddad to the side. "Get the boy's bag, Walter. Alvin," she said, addressing my father, "we've got to hit the road before that thunderstorm hits."

Granddad looked me up and down. "Is that all you kids ever wear?"

I glanced down. Black Chuck Taylors with gray untied laces. Loose khaki cargo shorts, and an even looser gray hoodie. That hoodie went with me everywhere—it had a picture of a flexed bicep on the back in faded black ink. Call me sentimental, but it's what I always wore when Eddie and I were hanging out. He called it the Tristan Strong uniform of choice, perfect for all occasions.

So yeah, I wear it a lot.

Nana shushed him and pulled me into another hug. “Don’t listen to him, Tristan. I can’t wait to have you back with us on the farm. You were so little last time, but them chickens you used to chase still haven’t forgotten you! I packed a lunch and even rustled up a new story or two for the ride. . . .”

And so, just like that, with a clap on the shoulder from Dad and a hug from Mom, I was someone else’s problem for a month. Good-bye, Chicago, and all your glorious cable TV, internet, and cell phone service. I hardly knew ye.

One thing became very clear during the twelve-hour car ride to Alabama—I was never going to do this again.

Never ever.

Sitting in an enclosed space with Granddad was like wiping your tears with sandpaper. Painful—excruciating, even—and you wondered why you ever thought it was a good idea.

Oh, think I’m playing?

Ten minutes into the trip: “When I was your age, I had a full-time job and I’d already fought in two title fights.”

Three hours in: “Oh, you’re hungry again? Did you bring some stopping-for-snacks money?”

Six hours in: “Man, I shouldn’t have ate those leftover beans for breakfast.”

Eight hours in: “Can’t believe I drove all this way to see a Strong boy fight so soft. That’s your grandmother’s side of

the family. Ain't no Strong ever look like that in the ring. Why, I remember . . .”

Anyway, you get it.

By the time we crossed the Alabama state line, I was ready to claw my way into the trunk. I don't know how Nana could just sit there and hum and knit for most of a day, but that's what she did. The Cadillac rumbled down a two-lane highway, kicking up trails of dust and exhaust, a dented rocket ship blasting through time in reverse from the future to a land that Wi-Fi forgot.

I'd put my earbuds in somewhere back in Kentucky, but the battery on my phone had long since run out. I just kept them in so no one would bother me. Nana kept knitting in the passenger seat, and Granddad tapped a finger on the steering wheel, humming along to a song only he could hear. Things seemed more or less calm, except for one thing:

Eddie's journal sat on the seat next to me.

Now, I could've sworn I'd stuffed the book under the clothes in my duffel bag. Which Granddad had put in the trunk. And yet here it was, waiting on me to do something I'd put off since the funeral. The late afternoon sun, occasionally peeking out from behind the storm clouds, made the journal look normal, ordinary. But every so often I'd shade the cover with my hands and peek at it while holding my breath. Yep, still glowing.

Why not open it, you might ask, and see what's inside?

Well, believe me, it wasn't that simple. Before Eddie's death, the cover of his brown leather journal had always been blank. Now a weird symbol appeared to be stitched into it, like a sun with rays that stretched out to infinity, or a flower with long petals. The same symbol was embossed on a carved wooden charm that dangled from a cord attached to the journal's spine. I'd seen the tassel before—Eddie had used it to mark his spot, or to flick me in the back of the head—but the charm was new.

And, even more weirdly, the trinket pulsed with green light, too. I'd been staring at that book every day for minutes on end, but the glow always stopped me from opening it.

I mean, I knew what was in there anyway. The stories Eddie had jotted down in his goofy, blocky handwriting, from his own silly creations to the fables Nana used to tell us when we were younger, when she'd come up to visit. John Henry, Anansi the Spider, Brer Rabbit's adventures—I'd read them all. Our end-of-semester English project was supposed to be a giant collection of stories from our childhood. Eddie was doing the writing, and I was going to give the oral presentation. Then the accident happened. The counselor Mom took me to every Wednesday had said I should try to finish the writing part, even though school was now over for the year, as a part of healing and other stuff.

(Before you say something slick you might regret, Mr. Richardson is pretty cool for a counselor, you get me? We

play *Madden* while we talk, which means I can focus on running up the score on his raggedy Eagles squad and not on being embarrassed about answering questions. It helps . . . some. If it gets too tough, he knows when to back off, too. So you can keep your *Sensitive* and *Man up* comments to yourself. Chumps.)

To avoid thinking about the haunted journal, I watched the weather outside the car window. The clouds had never let up, even once we were in the Deep South. They just switched from hurling lightning bolts at us to hurling fat drops of rain that splattered across the windshield like bugs. Everything everywhere was miserable, and that pretty much summed up my life at the moment.

I took off the earbuds and sighed. Nana heard and turned around in her seat to look at me.

“You hungry, sweetie?” she asked.

“No, not really.”

“No, *ma’am*.” Granddad’s deep voice rolled back from the driver’s seat. “You answer ‘No, ma’am’ to your grandmother, understand?”

“Yeah.”

Granddad looked at me in the rearview mirror.

“I mean, yes, sir.”

He held my eyes a moment longer, then went back to looking at the road.

“Well,” Nana continued, turning around and picking up

her knitting, “despite what your granddad said earlier”—she gave him a glare—“let me know when you are. Your mama told me you ain’t been eating much, and we’re gonna fix that. And don’t you have some writing to do? That’s what your counselor wants you to focus on.”

“Boy don’t need no counselor,” Granddad rumbled. “He needs to work. Ain’t no time for moping when horses need feeding and fences need mending.”

“Walter!” Nana scolded. “He needs to—”

“I know what he needs—”

I shook my head and stopped paying attention. After spending a day in the car with them, I’d realized that this was what they did. They argued, they laughed, they sang, they argued again, and they knitted. Well, Nana knitted. But they were two sides of the same old coin.

With Granddad, everything was about work. Work, work, work.

Bored? Here’s some work.

Finished working? Here’s more work.

Need someone to talk to? Obviously, that meant you didn’t work hard enough, so you know what? Have a little bit more work.

Nana, on the other hand, sang and hummed when she wasn’t talking, which almost never happened, because she always had a new story to share. “Do you know why the owl can’t sleep?” she’d say, and off the story would go, and you’d

sit there and listen, just being polite at first, but by the end, you'd be on the edge of your seat.

I smiled. Eddie had loved listening to my grandmother. When she'd come to visit earlier this year, he'd practically followed her around, his journal in hand.

Speaking of which . . .

My left hand rested on top of it in the seat next to me, and I traced the symbol stitched into the front cover.

"What's that, sweetie?"

I looked up to see Nana peeking back over the seat.

"Hm? I mean, uh, yes . . . ma'am?"

Granddad nodded, and I let out a sigh of relief.

Nana smiled. "Is that for your writing?"

I hesitated. "Yes, ma'am." I held up the book so she could see it, and her eyes widened at the symbol on the cover.

"Where'd you get that?" she asked. Granddad turned to see what she was looking at, but Nana flapped a hand at him. "Watch the road, Walter."

"From Eddie . . ." I began, then paused. "I mean, his mom gave it to me. It is . . . was for us. For our school project. Why? What's wrong?"

Could she see it? Could she tell that the book was glowing, even in the daylight?

Nana pursed her lips. "That symbol. I just haven't seen it in a long time."

“You know what it is?”

“Well...” She glanced at Granddad, who’d tuned us out as soon as we started talking about writing. “It’s the spider’s web, an old African symbol for creativity and wisdom. It shows how tangled and complicated life can be. But with a little imaginative thinking, we can solve most of our problems and those of others.”

“Do you notice anything else about the journal?” I asked her.

Nana laughed, a bright, joyous sound that infected anyone listening. “Is this a test?”

“No, ma’am.”

“I don’t see nothing but procrastination. Go ’head and give it a try.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I frowned. So Nana could see the symbol, this spiderweb, but not that it was glowing. Well, that didn’t make me feel any better.

Granddad smacked the steering wheel. “Y’all need to stop filling his head with that mess about symbols. He needs to stay in the real world, think about what he did wrong last night. The boy need to focus! Boxing ain’t gonna just happen—you got to train your body and your mind.”

“Granddad, I don’t want—”

“I don’t want to hear it. You’re not a kid anymore. You’re a Strong, and—”

“Walter,” Nana interrupted, “don’t be so hard on the boy.”

“He needs some toughening up—y’all being too soft on him!”

“Now look—” Nana started whisper-lecturing Granddad, who shook his head and grumbled beneath his breath.

I slid down in my seat and tried to block out the argument. I let my thumb trace the cover of the journal, and before my brain could tell me not to, I yanked it into my lap and flipped to a random page. So what if it glowed? It was still a book, and reading it would be better than listening to any more of Granddad’s insults disguised as life lessons. Or reliving that bus accident.

I mean, really, what could go wrong?



2

THE BOTTLE TREES

TWO FIGURES CROUCHED NEAR THE BASE OF A GIANT OAK TREE.

Huge knotted roots sprawled in the center of twisting, creeping shadows. The first figure—a large Black man with arms of mahogany, fists like rocks, and shoulders broader than mountains—went down on one knee in the soft, damp earth. He rested his hand on a smooth log beside him.

“You sure this is necessary, BR?” His voice rumbled like a thousand trains all heading to the same place.

The second figure—a rabbit as big as a kindergartener—twitched nervously and snapped, “Of course I’m sure, John! Hurry up! We need to get this over with.” Something clanked in the distance and the rabbit jumped. “Now!”

“Okay, BR, okay,” John said. He straightened up . . . and up . . . and up, until his silhouette seemed larger than the old tree. “But you need to lend this ole tool some power. I can’t do it alone.”

“Whatever, just get on with it!”

John picked up the log, except it . . . wasn't a log. It was a handle—the smooth shaft of a massive hammer. Carvings were etched up and down the wood, and it hummed as giant hands found familiar grooves.

John. With a hammer. No way. . . . I knew that name. Those *characters*. John Henry, and BR . . . BR . . . *Brer Rabbit*? But—

Brer Rabbit put his paws on the huge iron head of the hammer and began to speak in a low tone. His whispers swirled and grew until they sounded like shouts and drumming and stomping feet. The hammer's head—a thick metal block marred with pits and scrapes—began to glow with blazing, red-hot light, and John pressed it against a tangle of roots.

A yawning black hole opened in the ground at the base of the tree.

John bent over and picked a small object off the ground. I couldn't make out what it was. “Go,” he said to it, setting it gently into the hole. “Go now and find it. Find it. FIND IT!”

Click click click

I yanked my hands off the journal with a gasp. Sweat poured down my face, and I was pressed against the back seat of the Cadillac as we motored along. The storm clouds had finally dissolved, and the sun was almost at the horizon, its orange and red rays pouring through the window.

What was that? A dream? Had I fallen asleep while reading?

Then why had it felt so real? And why was the journal closed on the seat next to me?

“You okay, baby?” Nana asked without turning around.

Click click click

Her knitting needles moved furiously. Was it my imagination or was she sweating, too?

“Tristan?”

Click click click

But the pressure of that . . . whatever it was still sat on my chest and locked my mouth. It felt hot and cramped and smothering in the car, like I'd been tucked in with a giant itchy wool blanket, and suddenly I couldn't breathe. I somehow managed to lurch over to the door and open the window to try to get some fresh air.

“Tristan!”

“Boy, put that window up!” Granddad barked from the front. “Lettin' all the dust get in here. Is you out your mind?”

One breath. Two breaths.

“TRISTAN!”

Granddad twisted around, but it was Nana who placed a hand on my knee, and suddenly the pressure was gone. I reluctantly shut the window, then took a deep breath. The feelings of something pressing down on me had faded to a lurking presence. I could handle that, though it made my

neck itch. Nana removed her hand but kept peering at me, a worried look on her face.

“You okay, baby?”

I nodded.

“Answer your grandmother when she—”

“Hush, Walter,” Nana scolded. “Mind the road.”

I shook my head. “Just . . . got a little carsick, I think.”

Nana watched me as if she suspected that wasn’t true, but she didn’t pry any further. “Why don’t you try to take a nap, dear. Only another hour or so and then we’ll be at the farm, and you and Granddad have some work to do before supper.” She turned back around, but, just for a second, I could’ve sworn her eyes glanced at the journal.

Click click click

Nana continued knitting, and I looked at the journal on the other end of the seat. After a moment’s hesitation, I reached over and shaded it with my hands, already knowing what would happen but checking anyway.

The journal pulsed quicker and stronger, with a bright green glow.

Sometime later, Granddad slowed down and turned onto a bumpy gravel road that climbed up a long hill. “We’re here,” he said.

I jerked out of a daze. I slipped Eddie’s journal into my

backpack, then stretched and looked warily out the window. Everything looked . . . well, it looked like the country.

Yay.

“We are? Where?” I asked.

“Home, sweetie,” Nana said, packing up her knitting and turning to smile at me again. “Just in time for me to get dinner started.”

“Still about an hour left of sun,” Granddad said. “Can at least get part of that old fence fixed.”

The car chugged to the top of the hill, and I sat up as the Strong family farm sprawled out to the horizon. A patchwork quilt of green and brown fields surrounded a huge barn and a slightly smaller house. Rows of corn stood at attention as the Cadillac ambled past, like a chariot returning with the land’s king and queen. And Nana and Granddad did seem to sit up straighter as we got closer to the house. Even I could feel it, a tug from something that had been in my family for generations. This was our duchy, our territory. The Strong domain.

My nose pressed against the window, breath fogging the glass, I spotted a stand of trees at the far corner of the farm. They were old, like a section of forest that time had forgotten. Their twisted, giant trunks were bunched together like some sort of crowd . . . or guards. As I stared at them, the pressure on my chest came back—the feeling from before. Someone . . . or *something* was out there searching.

Searching for *me*.

A flash between the branches caught my eye as we drove past.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“What’s what, sweetie?”

“In those trees over there. Something’s shining.”

Granddad shook his head. “More foolishness, that’s what it is.”

“Hush, Walter,” Nana said. “That’s just the Bottle Tree forest, baby.”

“The what?” What sort of trees were those—and there was another one! Something flashed again, like light on a mirror or glass.

“Bottle Trees. Oh now, would you look at that? I skipped a stitch. What was I saying? Oh, the Bottle Trees. I could’ve sworn I’ve talked up one wall and down the other about this before.” She turned around in her seat. “Slaves carried the practice over with them from Africa as a way to capture and dispose of any haints wandering around.”

“Haints?” I pressed my nose against the glass and squinted.

“Evil spirits, baby. Lord knows, plenty of those ramblin’ about, what with . . . Well, anyway, don’t you worry about it none,” Nana continued. “I don’t want you messing around over there. Them old trees aren’t for playing on. You liable to hurt yourself.”

“Need to cut ‘em down,” Granddad grumbled, but Nana just shooed the words away with her hand.

“Hush, Walter. Now look, Tristan, over there...” She started playing tour guide as we drove up to the house, and I settled back, unable to shake the tingling feeling that something weird was going on.

“Grab that end, boy, and lift. Lift! Stop half-steppin’ and put your back into it.”

I heaved at the end of a log as Granddad and I slid it into the empty top slot of a pole. We dropped it into place, and I sagged against the repaired fence with a sigh. We’d been working for the last hour, racing the sun to get this section of fence fixed, and I was exhausted. I hadn’t even had a chance to drop off my bags. I picked up my backpack, and Eddie’s journal nearly fell out of the open compartment. I could’ve sworn I’d closed the zipper...

Granddad watched me put it away and shook his head. He mopped his forehead with an old rag he kept tucked in the back pocket of his overalls, then put it away and rolled his sleeves down.

“You need to leave that writing nonsense alone, boy. Ain’t gonna get you nowhere but confused.”

I didn’t say anything.

“What you got to write about, anyway? Video games? TV?”

All that city life got you boys soft. I would've had your dad out here at the break of dawn. How you think he got them heavyweight shoulders? Strongs work, boy."

I squeezed the straps of the backpack until they cut into my palms, but I still didn't say anything.

He spat out the twig he was chewing. "Hmph. Go on, then, and run that extra wire back to the barn. Then clean up for dinner. Hurry up, now—your grandmother's waiting."

I grabbed the spool of wire and stalked down the trail toward the barn. I heard Granddad grumbling to himself, and I tried to ignore it. No matter what I did or where I went, someone always wanted to tell me what I was doing wrong and what I should do different.

You're pretty big, Tristan. Go play football.

Stop reading comic books, Tristan, and go read a real book.

Stop...

I looked up, suddenly aware that the world had gone quiet. I mean, nothing made a sound. No birds, no squirrels, no rustling leaves—even the wind held its breath.

The old stand of trees loomed in front of me.

How long had I been walking? How had I found myself here?

The shadows on the ground deepened and stretched toward me. Thick vines around the trunks seemed to curl like fingers beckoning me closer. They felt desperate, needy. The trees grew larger and larger, and it took me a second to realize that it was because I was walking toward them.

FIND IT.

The words boomed and crashed in my head, a thunderstorm of a command, and I froze. They were the same words, the same voice, from my dream in the car. That *had* been a dream, right?

I had reached the edge of the trees. A breeze gusted softly from the dark center of the forest, almost like a breath. It smelled . . . old. Earthy. Like whatever was in there hadn't been disturbed in years. I didn't want to be the first new intruder.

And yet . . .

I took a step forward.

"Tristan? Tristaaaan?" Nana's voice broke whatever spell had fallen over me, and I shook my head to clear the cobwebs. My right foot hovered in the air, inches away from entering the shadows. I slowly placed it on the ground, then retreated a few steps. I squinted into the trees. Something was in there, and it wanted me. I could feel it.

"Tristan, dinnertime!" Nana's voice floated out of the sky, riding the breeze in the way only an elder's voice could.

I backed up farther, then turned and ran through the cornfield to the farmhouse.

No way are you going in those woods, I told myself. *No way.*

I was wrong.



WHEN THE ATTACK CAME, I WAS HALF-ASLEEP.

The car trip, the weird dream-that-wasn't-a-dream, working on the farm . . . By the time I went to bed, my eyelids felt like they weighed a ton. Still, I couldn't quite get to sleep.

It wasn't the darkness, though I wasn't used to nighttime in Alabama. I was used to the almost-night of Chicago—with the glow of streetlights and the flicker of neon signs outside my window.

Here, the complete lack of light made everything seem . . . different. A flashlight lay on top of the blankets next to me. Not that I'm scared of the dark, you get me, but in case I had to use the bathroom or get a drink of water.

Man, what I wouldn't have given for a couple of streetlights.

It wasn't the silence, though it was also way too quiet. Instead of the comforting sounds of cars and trucks and sirens and people talking on the street, I heard cornstalks

rustling in the wind. The window wouldn't close all the way because of the warped wooden frame, and that was good and bad. Good because I didn't feel so pressed in, so enclosed, but bad because of the crickets.

Maaaaan, those crickets. Talk about annoying. How could anything so small make that much noise? It was like a million of them surrounded my window and were screaming the lyrics to the most annoying song you could think of.

Yep, that one you're thinking of right now.

Sucks, doesn't it?

And yet it wasn't the darkness, or the strange sounds, or the unfamiliar house that was keeping me up. The pressure I'd felt on my chest in the car was back, waiting for me to relax. I knew that as soon as I did, it would seize me like an opponent in the ring, clinching my head between its gloves and waiting for the right moment to let go and hit me with that perfect punch. I could feel it. As soon as—

Thump

The noise had come from across the room, by the window, like something falling to the floor.

Instantly, I sat up, straining to see in the dark.

Now, if I were back in Chicago, I'd just stuff a pillow over my head to block out the noise, figuring it was a neighbor. Our walls were so thin in that apartment, you could sneeze and people two floors down would say *Bless you!*

But this definitely wasn't Chicago. So, when something

went bump, I paid attention. Especially because I was already on edge. Double especially because the sound was followed by sticky, mucky, stepped-on-a-piece-of-tape footsteps.

I stared around the room. There wasn't much furniture—a dresser with my backpack (Eddie's journal still zipped up tight inside), a coatrack, and a chair with my clothes from the day on it. Still, nighttime eeriness turned the shadows of ordinary objects into something twice as creepy. Fingers stretched out of empty space. Shapes combined into creatures that crept toward the bed.

"Who's there?" I whispered.

Nobody answered. The crickets yelled their chorus outside and the wind cackled in the dry cornstalks. But those were normal farm sounds, right?

I don't know what I expected. I took a deep breath and rubbed my eyes. This was silly.

"Stop being a baby, Tristan," I said, embarrassed. "There's nothing here."

Something scraped along the floor, and I swear I heard a voice whisper, "Where is it, where is it, where is it?"

My heart skipped a beat, and I scrambled to the foot of the bed with the flashlight clutched in both of my shaking hands. I clicked it on, but nothing happened.

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon," I muttered, slapping it against the palm of my hand. The switch was stuck. "Why doesn't anything work around here?"

Click

The beam flickered on after the fifth or sixth try. “Finally!”

I swept the cone of light around, looking for anything remotely creepy, relaxing a bit each time something strange became familiar. The fingers turned back into a coatrack. The creeping monsters turned back into the chair covered in clothes. The doll baby in the middle of the floor—

—rotated its head when the flashlight beam hit it.

I froze.

The doll looked homemade, like someone had carved it out of wood, painted it a dark molasses brown that hadn’t quite dried yet, drawn two black dots for eyes, and glued curly black wool on its head in two afro-puffs. It stood still in the light, almost a foot high, and the two of us stared at each other.

“Okay,” I said, then licked my lips. The flashlight turned off again. “Okay. This . . . is not weird. Right? There’s nothing weird about—”

“Who you calling weird?”

I looked around, confused, as I tried to locate the owner of that voice. It sounded strange and high-pitched, like when you breathe in helium from a balloon and your voice gets squeaky.

“Oh, so you don’t see Gum Baby now? She invisible now?”

It came from down low. The flashlight came on just in time to catch the doll starting to walk across the floor toward

me. Each of her footsteps made a sound like Velcro strips separating.

It—she?—stomped closer, glaring and pointing. “Where is it? You’d better tell Gum Baby, and fast.”

Gum Baby? No way.

I’d heard that name before. Not the little doll from the stories . . . ? It couldn’t be!

In the Anansi tales, Gum Baby was a doll Anansi used to trap an African fairy while he was on a quest. But in the story, the doll remained silent and wore leaves for clothes. This one, on the other hand, had on a black turtleneck and black pants, but her tiny feet were bare. And what were those stains she was tracking across the floor?

“Hey, Gum Baby’s talking to you, big boy.” The doll marched across the floor, the serious expression on her face ruined by the plopping sound each of her footsteps made.

“Don’t make Gum Baby climb up there.”

Plop plop plop

“Is Gum Baby talking to a brick wall?”

Plop plop plop

“Oh, you’re asking for it now.”

Plop plop plop

She was up the side of the bed and leaving dark stains on the blankets by the time I finally shook myself out of the daze and extended the flashlight like a weapon. “Who—who are you?” I whispered.

The ten-inch-tall doll glared at me, climbed atop my foot, and struck a pose. Both chubby arms spread wide, one foot planted on my big toe, she laughed in her tiny voice.

“Ha-ha-haaaa! You want to know who Gum Baby is? Gum Baby is the reason you sleep with the door locked. Gum Baby is the reason the sun runs away across the sky. Gum Baby is your nightmare, and people whisper her name and tremble around the world. Aha-ha-ha-haaaa!”

“*Shh!*” I said, waving both arms in warning. “You’re gonna wake up my grandparents.”

Gum Baby cocked her head and looked at me like I’d just slapped her.

“Did you . . .” she began. “Did you just shush Gum Baby? Didn’t you hear the introduction? Being a nightmare and all that, and you locking your door? Did . . . did that not make sense?”

“No, it made sense, it’s just—”

“Should Gum Baby clarify?”

“No, it’s fine, I just don’t want—”

“Oh good. In that case, GUM BABY WILL GO UPSIDE YOUR HEAD IF YOU EVER THINK ABOUT SHUSHING HER AGAIN!”

Gum Baby scrambled across my lap and flailed at my chest with both sticky hands.

“Let another shush come out of that mouth. Let it! It’ll be the last shush your shush-maker will shushify!”

“Okay, okay!” I batted away the irritating blows, ducking and dodging more of that sticky stuff. “Stop it, that tickles, and you’re getting . . . stuff all over the bed.”

Gum Baby wrestled with my shirt one more time, then stood on my lap, both hands on her hips. I wiped a glob of goop off my cheek and made a face. What were Granddad and Nana gonna say about the mess in the morning?

“That’s better. Now, where is it?” Gum Baby folded her tiny arms across her chest.

“Where’s what?”

“Don’t play dumber. You know what.”

“No, I— Look, I don’t know who you are. . . . Well, I think you’re . . . but that wouldn’t make sense, those were just stories, and . . . Can you just tell me why you’re here?”

I meant why was she alive and not just a fable, but Gum Baby misunderstood. She glared at me for a second. “Gum Baby’s on a mission, Bumbletongue. Where is the sign? Gum Baby knows it’s glowing around here somewhere.”

I tried to form words, to come up with some sort of answer to her questions, but the whole situation was too unreal. It was like I was being interrogated by a twelve-dollar toy from the bargain bin. Eddie would never have believed this. In fact, this was just the sort of story Eddie would—

Wait a minute.

Glowing around here . . .

Could it be?

My eyes flicked to the backpack on the dresser—only for a second, but Gum Baby saw, and an evil smirk crossed her face. Quick as a flash, she flung more goop in my face.

“Think fast!”

“Gah!” I yelped.

While I pawed the stuff out of my eyes, the blankets shifted and I felt her run to the end of the bed and leap off. By the time I could pry my eyes open, the stupid little thing was nowhere to be seen. A line of dark globs led to the dresser. I kicked off the blankets and ran over, looking around wildly.

The backpack—with Eddie’s journal—was gone.

I spun around and aimed the flashlight at the floor. Gum Baby had disappeared. I looked under the bed—nothing.

Then I heard sticky footsteps sneaking to the wall behind me.

I twisted around just in time to see Gum Baby leap out the window, fleeing into the night with my pack, green light escaping from the slightly open zipper.

“Get back here!” I whisper-shouted as I ran to the window.

Gum Baby sprinted on her stubby little legs along the dirt path outside, around the Cadillac, and up the hill leading to the cornfield. Seconds later, I couldn’t spot her anymore.

I slowly sank to the floor, hugged my knees to my chest, and closed my eyes.

What had just happened? This was a nightmare. That was it—my dream in the car must’ve never ended. This couldn’t

be real. I couldn't have lost the only thing I had to remind me of Eddie. And to a sticky toy at that!

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

My hands shook, and I pressed my palms against the floor to keep them still—right into a puddle of something soft and sticky.

What *was* that stuff? Honey?

Strands of whatever it was stretched and folded like taffy as I rubbed it between my fingers. It smelled sweet, but not exactly like honey. Something familiar, though. More of it dotted the floor, and I looked at the wall behind me. Sure enough, little dark splotches went all the way to the windowsill.

A trail!

I clenched my fists, then looked at the corner of the dresser where the backpack had been. That journal held Eddie's humor, his silly jokes, his stories, his dreams. It was everything.

Maybe there was a chance I could get it back.

I grabbed the flashlight, tugged on my hoodie and cargo shorts, and stepped into my sneakers. The window creaked as I eased it up, and the smell of horses and other farm odors hit me, right before the wind issued a warning.

Stay in bed.

I ignored it.

I squeezed through the window and dropped to the porch.

For a moment I hesitated. The darkness, the whispering wind, the rustling cornstalks—they all tried to change my mind.

Go back inside.

This ain't for you.

No telling what might happen to a city boy around here this time of night.

I was about to cave in to the fear and go hide in my bed, when the flashlight beam landed on a small patch of sticky residue on the edge of the wraparound porch. And then one on the grass a few feet away. And another. And another.

I gripped the flashlight so hard it hurt. The wind whistled louder, rattling the corn, but I gritted my teeth and shook my head. “You don’t scare me. I’m getting that journal back. Strongs keep punching, you get me?”

I felt silly saying it, but Dad’s mantra gave me courage. Before I could think twice, I plunged off the porch and into the night.