

Chapter 2

The Old Crate

CLICK. On went Cody's pocket flashlight. He couldn't risk slipping on a puddle in the presence of a savage beast.

There wasn't a second to lose. He tiptoed past a labyrinth of woodland trees, keeping an eye out for any monster in hiding. It could have been anything: a mutant wolf, a giant mosquito, or even a ten-foot sleeping paralysis demon. Thankfully, at this point in his life, most of the monsters he had seen were mundane enough to be mistaken for vicious animals. Of course, being alone with a vicious animal in a forest at night was already terrifying enough. With every step he inched forward in the drizzling rain, his heartbeat increased.

Cody spun his back, fearing he had lost track of the trailway he derailed from. He held his breath while examining the trees. There was still no sight of a monster. Unfortunately now, every bush branch and tree twig felt like a beast claw brushing against his legs. The light from his flashlight began to jitter against the tightly packed woods. Its constant movement, casted spotlight on something strange for a split second. The glimpse was too sudden to tell. He flung his light. It confirmed his suspicion. Two enormous scrape marks decorate a narrow trunk. The tree itself was an old aspen, nearly uprooted from what seemed to be a brutal force. It could've been the wind, or it could've been a monster big enough to knock down a tree.

Actually, come to think of it... fighting a monster at night is a really stupid idea. I'm just gonna go home.

Cody thought to himself while slowing his pace down.

He turned and then suddenly stepped on a giant snake's tail.

"AHHHHH!"

Cody leapt and sprinted as fast as he could. His flashlight spazzed in every direction. And then BAM!

He ran headfirst into a thick tree branch and landed flat on his back. He tried to get back up and run again, but his panicked mind just made him run straight into the same tree. This time, he stayed down for a good minute. When his vision cleared again, he noticed his flashlight shining at the snake he had stepped on. It was as thick as a birch tree, and it appeared to be as long as a garden hose. Most interesting of all? It didn't move. The creature was dead as a doorknob.

Is he dead?

Cody cautiously crept up to the still reptile, waiting to see if it made a move as subtle as a vibration. However, no, it stayed immobile. By the time he had crept to a dangerously close range, he realized that the giant snake had been sliced into many pieces like a sushi roll.

"What?" Cody then slapped his hand over his mouth, preventing it from making another sound.

Whoever took out this creature, monster or animal, it could probably take out the world's strongest human. I'm truly out of my depth here.

Cody turned once more and calmly walked back to the trailway. It was out of sight but thankfully not too far away. All of a sudden, his foot went down. He didn't trip, but he did feel a heavy thud, like his foot landed on a wooden platform. Shining his light down, Cody saw before him a rotted, wooden trapdoor half-covered in loose dirt.

Cody stared down at this wood panel. His mind raced to over a dozen possibilities of what could've been inside. It reminded him of Pandora, the woman who opened a mysterious box out of burning curiosity which led to all the evils of the world being unleashed unto the world. For Cody, he expected the worst thing underneath would've been a dead body from a 20th century mafia gang. Upon thinking about the mafia, he realized a more positive outcome, it could've been buried money from an old mafia heist! Cody flung open the trapdoor, ready for anything.

What a disappointment! It was practically empty. At first, Cody thought he was lucky for the crate to be unlocked. Unfortunately, the only things inside were a couple empty bottles and some recycled chess pieces. The only non-trash item inside was a metal plate with the company's insignia, and it was nailed to the bottom. He slammed it back shut and kicked around some leaves and dirt to fully cover it. This crate likely belonged to someone, and he feared whoever would stumble upon it next would not be so charitable to leave it be -- even if everything inside was worthless.

The sun had officially set. When Cody reached to grab his flashlight, he noticed an orange shine on the handle. Suddenly, the air felt very warm. Amidst the cold rain, he heard a low growl coming from the trees. Looking up, his heart nearly skipped a beat. Crouching on the tree was a Minotaur with a flaming head. It had a gold nose-ring and hairy fists with brass knuckles. Its stonecold eyes glowed from the reflections of the red hot flames from his head and horns.

This beast was as still as a statue, staring at an even more still Cody. When he took a step to the right, its eyes followed. The bull beast then unfurled its fists, revealing claws as sharp as bear trap spikes. Foam then seethed out of its mouth, and it started charging.

Time to run.

Cody hopped over a giant puddle and landed on the lumberland hometrail. That path led straight to the Colorado River.

If it's a fiery monster, it won't go near the water-- but wait! Penny lives at the end of the trail.

Silly Cody couldn't risk being seen in his crush's neighborhood street the NIGHT after he asked her out. He immediately turned the other direction, hoping he could also throw the bull beast off course. The tactic almost worked. The beast may have been strong and fast, but it could still change direction faster than a celebrity musician could change spouses.

The bull leapt straight at him, hurling past 30 feet in 3 seconds. Cody dodged and ducked face down to the slippery mud. Filth now covered his favorite shirt. He could feel the unnerving heat from the flaming bull as it flew over him. The bull caught its fall on a tree and launched itself from the trunk towards Cody. The whole tree fell down. Cody could feel the earth vibrate as he sprinted to the main trail. All of a sudden, the bull beast landed in front of him. He tried to stop, but the mud wouldn't let him. With not a second to lose, he skidded to the right and narrowly missed the beast from clawing his head off.

"AHHH!" Cody shouted, anticipating that move to result in his death.

He was grateful to be back on dryer ground, but all this did was make navigation easier for the minotaur.

Cody jerked to the right and b-lined back into the muddy forest. The bull roared. Flames engulfed its stocky arms and sharp claws. It flew through the air like a cannonball, aiming its body straight at Cody, but he narrowly dodged the claws. His left arm wasn't so fortunate. One of the bull's heated brass knuckles grazed it. His luck was bound to run out soon. He needed a plan.

That's when he saw it, a construction site by the gas station!

That's it!

Cody, jumped and dove down a mudslide. It drenched all his clothes in filth, especially his white sweater.

"RAAAAARRGGH!" cried the Minotaur. This time, its full body went in flames.

Cody pushed himself down the slope further. The construction zone was so close. The stamping of the beast's hooves were getting louder. Cody made another leap once he reached the end of the slope. He looked up and saw the flaming bull diving straight at him like a demon comet.

There's no way that dodging was gonna work a fourth time, but he had no choice. His heart was about to stop, and his face was about to be sliced off. Before death could seize him for good, Cody shined his flashlight at the bull's red eyes. Its head averted out of Cody's sight, and the clever boy leapt out of the way one last time. This time, the bull could not stop its momentum. Its burning legs slipped on the mud. The bull pounced and landed onto the foundation of the construction zone, but it halted in place. The concrete was still wet. It tried to claw its way out, but it only sank faster. Its fires started extinguishing.

Lying down in the cold night rain, Cody gasped out a laugh. He had survived an actual monster! His heart was still beating a million times a second, and he could barely stand back up. As he crawled over to the pit, he saw his plan had worked. The minotaur had been officially stopped by slippery mud and wet cement. It threw its head around, roaring in pain. The beast's arm and legs had been fully submerged in cement, and all he could do now was wail in the rain. Cody almost felt bad for the monster. And then upon realizing the wet cement foundation was deeper than just a few feet, he began to panic. He had doomed this beast to sink to his death.

Cody rushed over to grab a long branch by a pine tree, thinking he could pull the bull out of the pit. But before he could drag it over, a familiar hand grabbed a hold and tugged it back. Stepping out from the shadows of the pine was Max, a stern man who looked like a grad school dropout. He had a well-groomed chin strap beard, a backwards trucker hat, and a lumberjack axe. He was dressed accordingly in regards to his tool in hand.

"Dad! What are you doing here?" Cody said in a panic.

"Looking out for you apparently." said Max, catching a glance at the crying bull.

"I defeated it." said Cody with a half-inch smile.

"No, you nearly destroyed a construction site. Why were you out in the woods to begin with?"
"I heard a noise in the woods, and I thought-"

"Did it sound like someone was in danger?" said Max, briskly marching towards Cody.

"N-no." Cody stepped back. "But the monster could've hurt people."

Max stopped and somberly examined the sinking beast. He squatted down slightly to look Cody in the eyes, and tenderly placed his hand on his shoulder.

"Listen, I'm happy you're safe, kiddo. And I don't want you to think taking initiative is wrong. However, that monster could've hurt you more than anyone. They CAN'T physically interact with normal folks, but they can do whatever they want with people like us"

Cody shivered in place. He could feel tears swelling up. "I'm sorry. I really didn't mean to make you worry."

"Don't be sorry to me." said Max as he stood up to his full height and walked over to the wet cement. "Be sorry for him."

Cody followed after him. Together, they watched the beast go down. "Is he gonna die?"

"No, Cody. Beasts like him don't breathe the way we do. That concrete is gonna dry up, and he's gonna wake up to himself slowly suffocating in a stone prison. He won't be able to move. He

won't be able to cry for help. He'll spend years stuck and buried alive before he's able to draw his last breath."

The bull looked Cody in the eyes. He wanted to believe that this animal felt remorse just like he did. "I didn't mean to. It was me or him. I swear."

"I know, kid."

Max patted Cody's shoulder before setting off toward a pile of wood planks. He laid one down right in front of the animal.

"Come on buddy, make your way up the plank."

The creature didn't move at all. His kicking and flailing had stopped long ago, like he had already given up on trying to survive.

"How're we gonna pull him out with the plank?" said Cody.

"We can't. The equipment's off, and neither of us are strong enough to pull a 2 ton creature out of thick concrete. He's accepted his defeat." said Max.

He placed his hand on the bull's snout, gently caressing the poor monster's dampened head. The animal hummed tranquilly in place. The concrete was now up his neck. Cody choked back tears, watching helplessly from the mudslide. He had known Max all his life, and he had seen him make countless hard choices. Yet, now in the face of a stranger animal, he didn't know what his father was gonna do. He felt just as frozen in place as the bull.

Max moved to the edge of the foundation, getting as close as he could. Upon stretching his hand, he was able to gently place it on the bull's snout. The once woeful animal let out a soft exhale.

Max whispered to him. "You're a strong one, aren't ya? It must be scary to not be able to fight your way out of something. I bet you've had to do that your whole life, but it's gonna be okay."

"Dad, please! Don't do this. There's gotta be a way we could save him."

Max looked back at his son. "There is. And I'm doing it now."

Cody turned away as his father raised the axe over the beast's head.