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Chapter One

IN WHICH Nick and Jules Get Their Heads Examined

Nicholas Vargas had imagined a panoply of terrible punishments his dad might impose after he'd stayed out all night with Jules and Laurie. He'd imagined being grounded forever. He'd imagined all future video games and game systems confiscated. He'd

imagined being yelled at every day for the next six months.

The actual punishment was much worse. His dad blamed himself for everything.

“This counselor will help us work things out,” Charlene said. She was driving, her hands gripping the wheel too tightly. Nick squirmed next to Jules and Laurie in the backseat. Even though Charlene was wearing sunglasses, Nick could tell her eyes were red and puffy.

His dad also blamed Charlene. The two of them had fought so much that they were basically not speaking. Now they only argued through dark looks and

passive-aggressive comments delivered to the air.

The car pulled into the driveway of a small yellow house, where garage doors had been changed out for a wall of windows. Nick could see crystals stuck to the glass, making rainbows dance across the asphalt. It didn’t look like a doctor’s office at all.

“This person has a degree?” his dad said, making the statement into a question. He appeared to be addressing the windshield.

The inside wasn’t much more reassuring. The counselor’s office was actually in the

converted garage. Soothing instrumental music played in the background. The counselor herself had lots of long silver hair and a few braids secured with silver spirals. She wore jeans. She introduced herself as Teresa Gunnar and told them all to call her by her first name.

Three big white couches sat opposite a single chair, where Nick guessed Teresa was supposed to sit. On the coffee table rested a box of tissues and a pitcher of water with cucumber slices floating among the ice cubes.

Jules flopped on a couch.

“Let’s get started,” Teresa

said. “We’re going to try and maintain positive spiritual energy as we communicate with one another.”

They sat down. Nick tried to tune everything out. It was mostly Charlene talking about how his dad hadn’t prepared the kids for her and Laurie moving in. Which was true. About how he never talked with them about their grief over their mother’s death. Also true. But it didn’t matter if those things were true; Nick hated her for saying them.

Looking at the cucumbers bobbing in the water, Nick thought of giants walking along

the bottom of the ocean after a slowing, singing boat. He thought of the pages Jared had clutched in his hand, papers that showed there were some kind of wriggly black things worse than giants coming. Jared, the real hero, who would have done the right thing instead of making everything worse. Nick had thought that getting rid of the giants was impossible. Then he'd done it. He'd been really proud of himself too. And, of course, it turned out he shouldn't have gotten rid of them at all.

Which was exactly why he'd started not bothering with

anything in the first place—because trying really hard just made you feel terrible when it turned out that all that trying wasn't enough.

"Nick. What are you thinking about?" Teresa asked. "Remember, we're trying to cultivate positive energy and communication."

"Nothing," Nick said, carefully avoiding looking at any of them.

Teresa tapped her pencil against the back of her hand as the silence stretched. "How did you feel about your father remarrying? And what about you, Jules? I'd like to hear from

both of you.”

“I feel okay,” Jules said with a shrug of his shoulders. “Charlene’s nice. And Laurie’s cool.”

“I didn’t like that I had to give up my room,” said Nick. He felt like blaming someone for something.

Jules kicked Nick’s foot.

“What?” Nick said. “I didn’t!”

“Well, *I* didn’t mean to take it,” Laurie said.

“You didn’t care,” said Nick.

Jules sighed. “Just until the new house got finished. It was no big deal. Nick’s exaggerating.”

“So you were angry with your

father?” the counselor asked.

“No,” Nick said. “I don’t know.”

“Do you think he’s trying to replace your mother?”

Nick looked over at Charlene and Laurie. “I think Dad’s trying to be happy.”

“But not trying to make you happy?”

Nick shook his head. “I didn’t say that.”

She wrote something on the pad in front of her. “Did you express any of your concerns to your father?”

Nick shrugged.

“That’s my fault,” said their dad. “I guess with my

background—my parents didn't talk things over with me. They were the parents and I just did what they said. That's how things were."

"Dad—," Jules started.

Their father cut him off. "No. I should have talked to you both. I should have seen that you weren't ready for so much change. I know it's my fault that you were acting out—staying out all night, stealing my car. You're good kids. You're not like that."

Nick looked down. "It had nothing to do—"

"Laurie—I know she's a troubled girl." He glanced over

at her and shook his head. “I’m sorry—it’s just—”

Tears glistened in Laurie’s eyes.

“What?” Nick said, turning to his dad. “No, that’s not true—”

“Laurie is *not* troubled,” Charlene said. She looked at all three of them through narrowed eyes. “Before you start throwing around blame, let me remind you that your seventeen-year-old son kept my very young daughter out all night. What kind of teenager takes little kids out—”

“Have you heard the way your daughter talks? You keep indulging her fantasies of faeries and magic, and what she

needs is to be more grounded in the here and now! I know for a fact that they were intently discussing one of her stories that night—”

“So if your kids are so *grounded in the here and now*, how could her story make them do anything—”

“We didn’t mean for this to happen.” Nick’s voice came out louder than he expected.

“No one’s mad at you,” his dad snapped. “This isn’t your fault.”

But Nick knew it was his fault. He hadn’t been happy about Charlene’s moving in. He hadn’t liked Laurie at first. And now, even when it was

obvious that Laurie was getting blamed for stuff that wasn't her fault, he wasn't saying the right things to fix it.

"We think . . . ," their dad said, and looked over at Charlene. "We think that maybe it would be best for you kids if we separate for a while."

"You can't," Laurie said.

"Dad," Jules said, "Nick and I—we told you we were sorry."

"We've already decided, Jules," Charlene said. "We decided before we came here today. That hotel is a cramped space. It's only making everything worse. We're committed to trying to work

things out, but I think we all need a little breathing room."

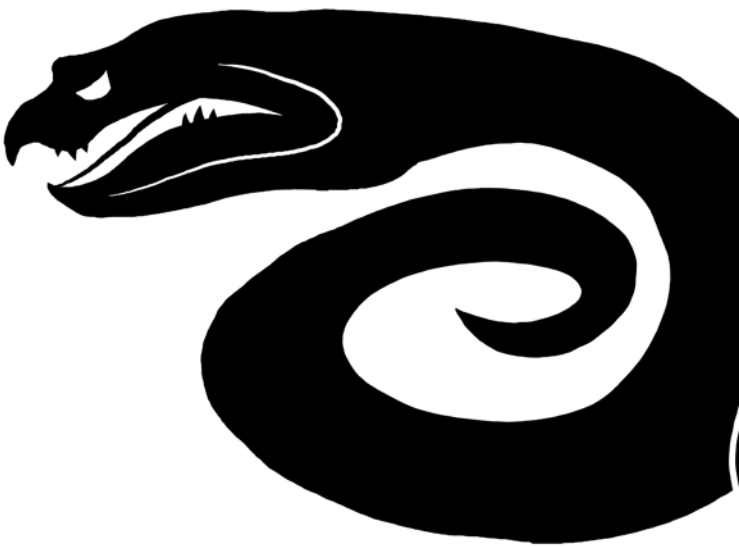
"Us guys are going to move into a trailer on the build site," their dad said. "We think this is the best thing for everyone."

Nick scooted forward on the couch. "Charlene and Laurie don't have to move out—you guys don't have to move out. We're never going to do anything like that ever again. We totally promise."

"It's done," their dad said. "We're going to give ourselves some time apart. I am considering the matter closed until then, understand? This

isn’t any of your faults. It’s between me and Charlene.”

Nick remembered how angry he’d been when Charlene had moved into the house and Laurie had taken his room. He remembered wishing over and over that she’d just go home. He’d made fun of Laurie for believing that things like wishes could come true, but right then Nick had a terrible feeling that she might be right.



Nick looked out the car window at the ocean as they passed over the bridge, this time in his dad’s car with all their stuff

loaded into the trunk. Boulders remained visible out in the water, like small islands. They looked perfectly normal dotting the horizon until you realized they weren't there a week ago. Until you realized that they were sleeping giants.

On the other side of the bridge, the car veered suddenly to the right, causing Nick's head to bang against the window and then knocking him against the door.

"Why'd you swerve?" he asked.

His dad pulled over onto the shoulder of the road. He was breathing hard. "A sinkhole. Really bad one." He opened the

door and stepped out of the car shakily.

Jules pulled his wagon off the road behind them and hopped out.

The sinkhole was a crater in the ground, almost perfectly circular and the size of an overturned truck. Ridges of asphalt ran along the slope that dipped down to a hole. And that pit went so far down that all Nick could see was blackness. He felt a growing sense of dread.

Other cars were edging sharply around it. A few people had stopped to take pictures.

Nick looked over at Jules, who was reaching down to pick

up a chunk of road. “Do you think this is it?” he whispered.

Ever since Jared, Simon, and Mallory Grace had shown up with the papers in hand, they’d all known it was only a matter of time before the creatures appeared. They’d taken turns patrolling the beach, looking for evidence. This was definitely evidence.

“Something displaced—pushed out—the dirt underneath,” said their father, pressing numbers into his phone. “Probably water. It happens a lot in Florida. That’s why we need the land we build on to be so

carefully surveyed. Imagine what happens if a sinkhole forms under a house.”

Nick could easily imagine. Too easily.

“Yeah, we’re over on Route 1 and there’s a big sinkhole,” their dad said into the phone. “Oh, really? Huh.”

He listened for a few more moments, nodding grimly, then hung up.

“Who was that?” Jules asked as they walked back to their cars.

“I know a guy at city hall,” their dad said. “He hadn’t heard about this one, but there have been a few others just

today.”

“A few?” Nick asked.

“Yeah,” said their father. “Only locally, but they’re spreading.”

As his dad’s car started to roll forward, Nick looked back, and for a moment he thought he saw something worming around the edges of the crater, like fingers reaching for a better grip or snakes slithering to the surface.