

LUNACY'S CORE excerpt

From Chapter 9: The Core of Lies

By T.D. Edwards

As we got closer to Ronda's house, Jakil grew antsy. At the last red-light, he leaned over, fumbling with the glove-compartment in front of the passenger's seat. "Get that for me, Kor. The little black box inside." I handed it to him, but just as he opened it, the light turned green. He handed the box back to me. "Check it out."

I opened it and looked at the piece of jewelry inside. A necklace. A very expensive-looking necklace. Carefully removing it, I felt the weight of the solid gold chain in my hands. A transparent crystal dangled from it. I brought it to eye-level, noticing what looked like an animal face engraved at its core. The crystal felt warm in my hand, causing an odd tingling sensation to run through my fingers.

"What does it look like to you?" asked Jakil.

"I'm not sure." The longer I stared, the more pronounced the face inside became. It was angular with pointed teeth exposed from its mouth. The creature had piercing eyes that seemed to be made of tiny sparkling diamonds. I'd never seen anything like it. "Some kind of wolf?" I guessed.

"Really? A wolf? Not a lion?"

I looked again, trying to distinguish feline features, but it looked more canine to me.

"Uhm—maybe, I guess...I don't know. Where'd you get it from? Didn't they tell you what it was?"

"Well...I sort of found it..."

"...And you kept it?"

"Well...I just saw it. So yeah, I picked it up. What was I supposed to do? That's like finding money on the ground and leaving it. Finder's keeper, right?"

Feeling uncomfortable, I returned the necklace back to the box and replaced the lid. “Well, what did you keep it for? It’s a woman’s necklace.”

“Because I figured it would make a nice gift. Sort of as a pre-prom present, you know? It’s got Ronda’s zodiac sign in it. It’s a lion for Leo.”

I huffed. The necklace’s engraving didn’t look at all like a lion to me; I strongly suspected Jakil made up that detail for his own benefit. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Kor, it’s not like I stole it... You think I stole it or something?”

“What if somebody reports it missing?”

“Oh, come on. How likely is that?” I thought there was a chance, but I refrained from saying so. Jakil continued. “I just found it, all right? What do you want me to do? Drop it outside somewhere so somebody else can take it?”

“Whatever. Do what you want.”

“You are way too sensitive, man. Lighten up! It’ll be fine. Ronda will love it. If she asks, tell her I bought it and it was real expensive.”

“A little *too* expensive, don’t you think?”

Jakil smirked. “I work. Who’s to say I didn’t save up the money for it? Truthfully, I’d love to get her something nice. I actually owe her a lot. She helped me in more ways than I think she even knows. That’s why if I give her this necklace, maybe I’ll—” He stopped abruptly and cleared his throat. “Never mind.”

I was struck with a pang of annoyance, mixed in with something else I didn’t exactly want to identify. I kept my mouth shut, mainly because there was no way to tactfully tell Jakil that giving such an extravagant gift was a sure sign that he was taking his feelings for his high school sweetheart too seriously, no matter what he expected in return.

I fought to keep the scowl off my face in case he happened to look at me. I then tried to put myself in his shoes—wondering if I would ever care about a girl enough to want to impress her with expensive jewelry. It was hard to imagine at the moment.

Jakil parked in front of Ronda's house. He put the necklace in his jacket pocket and then winked at me. I bit the insides of my cheeks to help me keep my mouth closed.

We got out the car and headed up the porch. Jakil rang the doorbell and moments later, Ronda answered. Her hair was pinned up sloppily and she wore pajamas consisting of a tank-top, loose plaid pants, and Tweety Bird socks. The fact that she made sloppy look cute annoyed me for some reason.

She raised an eyebrow. "And what's the reason for this unexpected visit?" she asked, stepping aside to let us in. "Is there a Saturday morning study session that I don't know about?"

Jakil pulled her toward him, wrapping his arms around her waist. "No. I just thought you might want to get your weekend started with the pleasure of seeing my face."

"How thoughtful of you. And you brought Kory along too, huh?"

Jakil shrugged. "Well, I figured he needed a good start to his weekend too."

I flinched, accidentally biting the inside of my cheeks a little too hardly.

The patter of running footsteps sounded down the stairs from within the house. "Jakil!" Ashley screeched, running and jumping into his arms.

Laughing, he lifted her up and swung her around in circles. "Munchkin! What's up?"

"Kory!" she yelled once Jakil set her back on her feet. To my surprise, she hugged me too.

Jakil rubbed his chin. "Uh huh. I knew it. I knew if I left you over here, you'd move in on my girls." Ronda and Ashley laughed. Jakil rounded on them. "I need the two of you to get dressed. We're going out."

“Going where?” Ronda asked. But Jakil walked off to the kitchen to raid the refrigerator.

She turned to me.

“Uhm...We went to visit Mrs. Travolsky—”

“Oh, that’s right! How is she?”

“She’s fine. I mean, well...she’s as good as can be expected after...She’s not unconscious anymore. She’s alert and talking, but just still kind of banged up.”

“She’s going to be okay though, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So she’s coming back to school?”

“Well—it’s going to be a while. Her leg is broken. Anyway—her daughter is at a birthday party and she needs someone to pick her up because her husband has to go to a meeting. So Jakil and I were going to pick her up and take her to her grandma’s house. It’s a long ride, so we thought maybe you and Ashley might want to come and keep Sari company.”

“Oh, okay.”

Jakil returned from the kitchen, eating a bowl of cereal with pieces of glazed donut chopped up inside of it. “You are so weird,” Ronda said.

Jakil shrugged, stuffing a spoonful of his donut-cereal concoction into his mouth. “Ashley! Go wash up! Brush your teeth!” Ronda called out to her sister.

“Now you,” Jakil put an arm around Ronda’s shoulder, “I need you for a second.”

“Excuse me?”

He set down his cereal-donut bowl and pulled her toward the back of the house with him.

“Come on. I have something for you.”

“What in the world—?”

“Hush, no questions.”

“I know you didn’t just hush me—”

Bickering, Jakil and Ronda disappeared around the corner, leaving me alone in the living room.

I thought it was a dream when I felt small hands on my arm shaking me until I opened my eyes and saw Ashley. Apparently, while waiting on the couch, I’d dozed off watching the *Rugrats* episodes she had left on.

“Come on, Kor!” Jakil called from somewhere nearby.

Stifling a yawn, I turned off the television, rose from the couch, and headed back to the front of the house. When I got there, I spotted the necklace around Ronda’s neck. “Go start the car, J,” she said. “I’ll be right there. I left my house keys upstairs.”

“Okay.” Jakil headed for the door with Ashley skipping beside him.

I stretched, stiff from falling asleep in an upright position.

“Psssst!” In the kitchen, Ronda beckoned me toward her, fingering the necklace sparkling around her neck. I approached slowly, stopping a foot away from her. But she closed the distance between us and leaned toward my ear, a breezy floral scent drifting from her hair. My skin prickled from her nearness. “Were you with Jakil when he got this?”

Wondering why she was whispering in my ear when we were already alone, it took me a second to realize she was talking about the necklace. Panicked, I shook my head and took a step back, but Ronda grabbed my arm. “Well, did he tell you anything about it?” she persisted, her eyes never leaving mine.

“No...I mean, uhm—he just showed it to me on the way over here. Said it was for you, that’s all.”

“Is it really as expensive as it looks?”

I pressed my arms into my sides. “Uhm...No. I don’t think so. I uhm...I don’t know.” Her nearness hindered my ability to lie, but I didn’t want to rat Jakil out. I cleared my throat and took another step back. “It’s the thought that counts though. He was really excited to give it to you.” I paused, hoping I’d done enough damage-control. I stared off to the side at a pumpkin that I didn’t remember seeing earlier in the week.

Ronda finally let go of my arm, though I still keenly felt her touch. “All right. Just wondering, that’s all. Jakil didn’t always hang out with the best crowd, so I was worried for a second. It’s not like he makes that much money working a few hours a week at that café.”

“Oh.” I silently prayed the necklace wouldn’t get reported missing anytime soon. But Jakil was right—the chances of that happening were probably slim. Hopefully.

Ronda smiled. “Well, let’s go.”

I gladly rushed out the door while Ronda scribbled a note for her mother explaining where she and Ashley were going.

“Finally. Was wondering if you two were planning on coming along,” said Jakil once Ronda reached the car shortly after me. He glanced at me through the rearview mirror. I fumbled to put on my seatbelt.

Ronda leaned over and kissed Jakil’s cheek before putting on her own seat belt. “Couldn’t find the keys.”

“So Kory had to find them for you?” Jakil asked with an eyebrow raised.

“No. He had to use the bathroom.”

I stared out the window, trying to ignore Jakil’s gaze at me through the rearview mirror.