

Chapter 1

It wasn't the smell of decay that woke Shawn up. Nor was it the constant rocking motion that caused him to hit his knee on the door. He had already been up when he noticed these small annoyances.

An eerie quiet encompassed his body. Could someone be awoken by silence? Usually, when he slept, he tossed and turned. He'd tried three different mattresses in the past year alone. But last night, Shawn didn't even remember falling asleep. What he *did* remember was the size of his bed. He shouldn't be hitting his knee on anything. He sat straight up, knowing he wasn't in his bed.

He was right. The comfort of his grandmother's scratchy quilt was nowhere near him, and Shawn slept with it no matter how hot it was. Squinting, he surveyed his surroundings as his eyes adjusted. Across from him was a black leather bench that mirrored the seat underneath him. If he held his hands out, he could feel the stained wood walls. The whole enclosed compartment was tiny: about five feet by five feet.

The only other thing in the compartment seemed to be a door to his left. He could just make out the handle, which must have been what he bruised his knee on. Where was he?

Shawn wasn't supposed to be here; he was sure of it. He needed to think. Earlier, a sudden lurch in the compartment had almost caused Shawn to fall out of his seat. Whatever he was in, it was moving.

"What the..." he whispered. He struggled to recall the last thing he did. He'd been to the movies. Had sat through a God-awful turkey meatball dinner with his parents. But each time he got closer to what happened the day before, a wall came down in his mind.

Hair on the back of his neck came alive with the sudden flow of air.

"Ah, you're awake, are ya?" The voice came from behind.

Shawn jumped to the other side of the compartment, throwing himself against the wood. From this side, he could make out a tiny square hole where his head had been.

"What are you, mute, kid? Or can you move your tongue to make words?" The voice crackled.

As Shawn had no idea where he was or how he got there, he wasn't exactly keen on talking to some random voice coming through a hole in the wall.

"Name is Roddick. You got a name, kid?"

At least Shawn now had a name to tell the police when they apprehended his kidnapper. Well, Shawn wasn't in the mood for talking. He needed to get out of the damn box. He reached for the door and tried the handle. It moved about halfway before the lock engaged, stopping any further attempts. Great. Not only did he not know where he was, but he was trapped.

"They always try the door, eh Gracie? Never can just sit back and relax now, can they?"

Shawn was going to hurl. A normal start to his day was apparently out of the question. At least Shawn learned that Roddick wasn't acting alone. His silent partner must take joy out of hearing Shawn squirm, because she remained tightlipped.

"Who the hell are you people?!" He yelled, unsure of where the bout of confidence came from. Hell, he might as well attempt to weasel information out of them. "Where am I?"

"Damn, mate. Don't need to shout. And I told you, the name is Roddick." He chuckled. "As to where you are, that might be a little harder to explain, but don't worry we're almost to the gate."

Confusion seemed to be the theme for today. "What are you talking about? Why am I locked in here? What freaking gate?" People say their minds move a hundred miles per hour in intense situations, but Shawn's brain felt like a turtle moving across a sewer of sludge. There was so much new random information being thrown at him that he wasn't sure what to grab onto.

Ignoring his questions, Roddick continued, "Ah, don't worry, kid. I see it now. You see it, Gracie?"

Why couldn't Shawn have just woken up passed out on a sidewalk or something? That would make more sense than whatever this was. "Maybe you want to help fill in a couple of gaps for me, uh, Gracie?"

“Ahhhhahaah, Gracie, he thinks *you* are going to talk to him.” He giggled. “You certainly got a lot of questions, don’t you, kid? What *is* your name by the way? Can’t just call you ‘kid’ the whole time.”

“Shawn. My name is Shawn.” Figuring he was already trapped here; a name wouldn’t do any damage. He felt a weird sense of calmness as he said it. Was that crazy? He was trapped, but at least his name was something he was confident about. “Now that we’re on a first-name basis, Roddick, mind explaining why I’m not currently in my own bed?” Frustration leaked out of his voice.

The compartment jolted, and Shawn had to brace himself on the seat to avoid falling off. Looking up at the wall across from him, he saw that the hole in the wall had closed. Great. The guy wouldn’t shut up, and as soon as Shawn opened his mouth, the conversation stopped.

With a sudden click, the wooden door to his right opened, and there stood a man who Shawn could only assume to be Roddick. “Well, Mister Turner, we seem to have arrived.”

It didn’t take long for Shawn’s eyes to adjust to the dark world outside the door. It was as if someone had thrown a switch in his brain; in a matter of seconds, Shawn had a clear picture of the man in front of him.

The man stood across from him, looking like he’d come from an 1800s wedding. His blood-red tie seemed like it would stain his pearl dress shirt underneath. He even wore a jet-black vest to go along with his tailcoat, which wouldn’t be complete without a top hat. The only thing he was missing to complete the tuxedo was a monocle.

“Before you hit me with more of the many bubbling questions boiling inside of your brain, why don’t we wait for Mac?” The man offered his hand. Based on the way he talked, Shawn had assumed Roddick to be older, possibly even in his 80s, but the man who stood in front of him was in his early 40s at best.

Brushing off the gesture, Shawn stepped out on his own; he wasn’t going to accept help from the man who’d trapped him in a box.

Shawn smelled the leaves before he noticed the trees surrounding him. Even in the dark, Shawn could make out the branches clotted with pumpkin-orange leaves. The forest seemed to take root everywhere he looked, with maple trees suddenly obscuring views in any direction he turned. Only one area was clear of the forest’s clutches. Below Shawn’s feet was a cobblestone path leading from the direction they traveled to the gate.

Turning back around, Shawn came face to face with a long snout. Before he knew it, Shawn felt the cobblestone make an imprint on his butt. Shaking his head, he almost wanted to laugh at the ridiculous scene he found himself in. In front of him stood an ash-gray-coated stallion. Two horses were pulling the carriage that he’d emerged from. An actual freaking carriage. Shawn worried that he’d stepped into another dimension. Either that or this guy had an itching to dress up.

Both horses held their heads straight, their blinders helping them resist any movement. Not that they needed them. When he was startled and yelling, they didn’t even bat an eye. Shawn hated horses ever since he’d fallen off one during a family vacation. He’d cried about his sore ankle for ten minutes before his mother convinced him to get back on.

“Ah, I see you’ve met Gracie!” Roddick came over and patted her on the snout and winked at Shawn. “She and Timothy keep me in good company, ya know.”

Shawn just stared at him. The wink threw Shawn off. What kind of kidnapper was he? “Mr. Roddick—”

“Nope. Just Roddick. ‘Mr.’ was my pops. He always taught me to show respect though.”

“Right... Okay, Roddick, can you now tell me where I am?”

“Not my job, Mr. Shawn,” he said with a bow, making sure to take his top hat off so it didn’t fall.

Did someone slip him drugs last night? Shawn went up to the gate and gripped the rusted bars until his blood flow was almost cut off. Two stone ostriches sat perched on fire-scorched brick posts that framed the gate. On top of the entrance sat an iron-moon-shaped circle of swirls. The interweaving design stretched

from post to post. Almost like a child had painstakingly traced swirls in different directions, only deciding at the end to sign their initials—evident by the gold “WA” saddled in the middle of the gate topper.

Leaning his head against the bars, he let his skin absorb the cool from the black metal as he tried to think clearly. Twenty-four hours ago, something had happened which caused him to wake up with basically no recollection of anything. Amnesia? Dream? Kidnapping? Any of these options could be the solution.

Turning around, he let his hand settle against the rough patch of brickwork. “Hey, Roddick?”

“Yes, Mr. Turner?” Roddick said without turning from his horses.

“Why don’t I remember how I got here?” Be blunt. That’s what his dad always said. One shouldn’t beat around the bush. It was worth a shot to keep pestering the man. Shawn thought about running, but he wasn’t intimidated by Roddick. Plus, he had no idea where he’d go.

Roddick continued stroking the silver mane of Gracie, or possibly Timothy—Shawn wasn’t sure. “Ah, Mr. Turner, before we get into that, let me ask you a question.”

“Are you joking?”

“Humor me.” A large neigh erupted from Gracie with each pet from her master. “Hmm, well a young’un of your age should have a heartbeat of what?”

Sixty to a hundred for resting, Shawn thought, digging up the information he’d buried from health class. He shook his head, trying to shake off the grogginess. “What’s the point of asking that? You need to tell me what’s going on.”

“And what is yours currently?” Roddick asked, as he continued to oblige the horse.

This time Shawn didn’t need the grip of the gate to stop the blood flow in his body, because not only did Shawn not know where he was; he had no heartbeat.