







**BRAVE  
OLLIE  
POSSUM**

*WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY*

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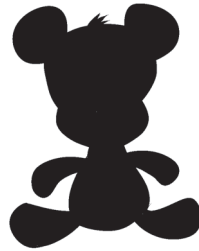
For Lily & Ezra





## CHAPTER ONE

# A TINY BED



“THERE IS NOTHING to be afraid of. You’re too old for this!” Ollie Mackerelli told himself, huddled beneath a pile of teddy bears. He was too old for teddy bears. Too old to be lying awake, scared of monsters in his bed. His parents were asleep just down the hall. All he wanted was to run into their room shouting *MONSTER!* But he was too old for that, too. No self-respecting almost-ten-year-old would do something so embarrassing.

He promised himself he would not scream. So far he was keeping his promise, but the longer he lay there staring at the ceiling all covered in popcorn and shadows, the more the darkness seemed like something much more awful than a mere absence of light. It felt like a living thing, large and hungry, surrounding him, trying to swallow him up.

His ears rang and his eyes twitched as little night noises sounded from the woods behind his house and interrupted the unsettling silence. Scratching. Chirping. The whistle of the wind.

Then something louder.

*BUH-KLUMP!*

The sound came from the roof. It was loud, heavy, horrible, and—he assured himself—nothing to fear. Regardless, the desire to scramble into the bedroom of his snoozing parents and scream, “There’s a monster on the roof!” grew more fierce.

But he knew what they would tell him. They’d say it was probably a raccoon and that he should get back to sleep.

*KLOMP!*

“What kind of raccoon makes sounds like that?” Ollie whispered to himself. It sounded like a mutant raccoon whose DNA was spliced with a five-hundred-pound wrestler’s and who was now doing atomic elbow drops on the roof.

But Ollie knew what it really was. It was the same Monster who had been peeking in his bedroom window every night for the last week, fogging up the glass with its giant, snot-bubbling nostrils.

The creature, Ollie’s mother would say, was a product of his imagination. His fear of this new town, all the changes, were turning into vivid hallucinations.

So Ollie decided he would force himself to believe it must be a raccoon. A raccoon that his mind was turning into a monster. He would not allow himself any further debate. It was an absurdly massive raccoon, all fat from eating tossed-out spaghetti. The Mackerellis had more tossed-out spaghetti than most people do, because on the ground floor of their house was the family business: an Italian restaurant. Ollie’s dad always made enough spaghetti to feed the number of customers he hoped would show up, rather than the few who actually did.

*KREEEEEEK!*



There it was again! It was right outside this time. The incredibly fat, very strong raccoon-wrestler was on the ledge. A thin pane of glass and a few spiderwebs were the only things separating Ollie from the nasty, crooked-toothed, man-eating . . . harmless raccoon.

He could see its big veiny ears, twitchy, glistening nostrils, tiny, white eyes, and jagged teeth, like pieces of a shattered dinner plate dripping with steaming slobber. That is, he could have seen those things if he hadn't had his eyelids pressed shut so hard they could crack a walnut. He reminded himself again that it was just a raccoon, saying it over and over until the word *raccoon* sounded like a silly, made up word, like something out of a Dr. Seuss book.

Ollie took a deep breath and, just to prove to himself there was nothing there, opened his eyes.

It was staring right at him. Ollie choked, then belted out a scream so loud that locals would recall the noise as evidence for the existence of Bigfoot.

The Monster left a foggy blot where the nostrils had exhaled. It was gone. *That was not a raccoon.*



Down the hall, Mr. Mackerelli had been startled so badly by the shriek that he kicked out of his sleep like a mule getting tazed, cracking the tiny bed's headboard with his head and the footboard with his foot. On the other side of the bed, Ollie's mother ripped off her eye cover and rushed into the boy's room like an emergency room nurse.

She held him, squeezed him, and sang an Italian hymn. Then she fed him warm milk with honey, prayed with him, and tucked him in with too many teddy bears to count—as if stuffed beasts with soulless button eyes could make him feel any less alone.

But Ollie continued to tremble and cry for her when she left the room. He went on and on.

Lying in their bedroom, Mr. Mackerelli groaned. "He's too old. Please, he'll be ten soon! When I was ten I was slaughtering pigs for my papa."

"Ollie's not you, and you are not your father," Mrs. Mackerelli said in a warm but firm tone. She began to get out of bed.

"Please, just let him brave it out for once," the man said. His wife was already walking out of the bedroom.

She tugged the boy out of his pile of bears and took him back down the hall, letting him squeeze into the ridiculously tiny bed, sandwiched between his mom and dad.

Ollie's cold feet made Mr. Mackerelli jolt a second time. He toppled out of bed and hit the floor like a sack of onions, nearly smashing Willoughby in the process.

Willoughby was a very loyal and manly golden retriever. At least that's what Ollie thought. He knew it might be odd to call a dog manly, but he also knew it was true enough that a man could be dogly. Ollie's dad—the man on the floor—acted very dogly as he barked angry words at his son and wife.

A nocturnal argument ensued between the two parents about what was good for a boy. *Why can't he get over it? Why don't we get*

*him to a doctor? Why can't we get a bigger bed? Why can't we have nice things? Why are we always fighting? Why did we ever move to this ridiculously tiny town in the woods?*

The questions carried on until all topics and parents available had been exhausted.

Eyes open, Ollie lay smooshed between his two parental pillars as they each began to snore their distinct and familiar snores. He was silently asking God at what point a kid becomes brave. He was tired of being afraid. Why are some children more scared than others?

He wanted so badly to believe his parents were right when they said there was nothing to be afraid of. But repeating this to himself never helped. Like the word *raccoon*, the more he said it, the sillier it sounded. Nothing to be afraid of? *Nothing?* Was he making this all up on purpose? What if there *was* something to be afraid of? What if they were wrong?

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of more scratching on the roof. Ollie pressed into his mother and father, his eyes pried open by fear.



## CHAPTER TWO

# A CROOKED CARD



AS THE GROGGY CHEF clumped down the stairs to start another weary day of pasta making, Ollie sat on the edge of the bed and ran his fingers through Willoughby's golden fur. He wondered why he had allowed himself to make another night miserable for his parents. Willoughby rested his chin on the boy. The tender-hearted dog was the only member of the family who didn't seem concerned with trying to change him.

Ollie wanted to do something today that would make his papa proud. He didn't know how to overcome his fears, but he had one thing up his sleeve that might impress the man: He had perfected his own special lasagna recipe. Despite the chef not taking the time to teach him, Ollie had watched the lasagna process countless times, studied the recipes, and snuck into the kitchen in the evenings to practice. Today he would show his dad what he could do.

He hurried down the stairs to begin preparations, but his mother stopped him.

“Son, if you want to get your father’s attention, do not cook lasagna for breakfast,” she advised. “Who eats lasagna for breakfast? Make it later, after he is tired, and the day is near its end. If you try to get his attention at the wrong time, it could only make things worse.” She patted him on the head and smiled. Ollie’s mother had mastered the art of dancing around his moody father like a gold-medal figure skater.

So Ollie waited. The clock, a wood carving of an obnoxiously jolly chef, ticked and tocked, its dimples getting more annoying with every shift of its plastic eyes. He waited through morning prep, lunch rush (which was not much of a rush at all), and dinner (also not a huge turnout). Ollie watched his dad go without a single break from six in the morning to seven at night, working as if every move he made was the last pull of an oar that would keep his ship afloat.



Finally, Mrs. Mackerelli gave her son the nod. He stepped into the kitchen, where Mr. Mackerelli was chopping onions, and began quietly working.

“What’s this?” Mr. Mackerelli asked abruptly.

Ollie winced.

His mother spoke for him. “Just a little project. Don’t worry. He’ll stay out of your way.”

“Dear, if we have another customer—”

“Then he’ll get out of your way.” She put her hand on the man. He sighed and continued dicing.

Ollie took a deep breath. The restaurant was empty. They would close at nine. Only half an hour left, and he was home free.

He had just finished making the noodles from scratch, garnering lots of praise from his mother, though still not a comment from his dad, when he heard—

*BUH-KLUMP!*

He nearly spilled marinara everywhere.

Willoughby jumped to his paws and barked at top volume. Mr. Mackerelli shushed the dog and looked toward the sound, two stories up but loud enough to shake the ceiling. He was about to comment when suddenly there came another sound.

*DING!*

It was the bell on the entryway door in the dining room. Mr. Mackerelli’s eyes lit up. “A customer! Quiet down, Willoughby. Don’t scare them off!”

Ollie’s heart sank. They never had customers this late. Why, tonight of all nights, did one need to come in now and ruin everything?

“Clear this away, I will need room to cook!” the chef said, waving his hands at Ollie’s work without giving it a glance. There was more joy in his voice than Ollie had heard all day. The boy slowly pulled

out the garbage can on wheels, preparing to toss the whole thing into the trash. A lump formed in his throat.

Then Willoughby went into another flurry of wild barks and darted right into the dining room, abandoning his designated doggy corner and every rule in the doggy rulebook. Mr. Mackerelli chased after him, shouting.

As they ran into the dining room, the door opened. The last-minute customer barely fit through the doorway. She looked like an ogre stuffed inside the skin of an old, obese woman clad in bright polyester. Her skinny arms stuck out of her bulbous body like sticks in a snowman. She wore pointy sunglasses and had big, shriveled red lips. Her face dripped with thick, white paint, and a tall, pink beehive wig sat perched on her head.

She seated herself at a two-person table right next to an impressionistic painting of a meatball ascending to heaven. The chair nearly disappeared beneath her rhino-sized rump. Willoughby charged at her, barking like he smelled a rat.

“Willoughby! You know better,” Mr. Mackerelli shouted. The usually obedient dog winced back with a look of guilt. He was directed back into the kitchen by an angry, outstretched finger.

Ollie, startled by the dog’s outburst, sat and stroked his fur. Willoughby growled in a low rumble as if keeping quiet was impossible.

Mr. Mackerelli promptly came to the patron’s table with his chef’s hat fluffed and handlebar mustache waxed and curled to perfection. He handed her a menu and spoke with desperate hospitality.

“Welcome to Mackerelli’s. We are pleased to serve you. Today’s special is the garlic, bacon, and sixteen-cheese lasagna.” He lifted a pen and pad of paper. “May I start you with something to drink?”

She exhaled. It suddenly smelled as if someone had opened a jar of dead flies. Mr. Mackerelli’s mustache twitched, but his smile remained locked in place.





The guest rubbed her greasy chin as she studied the menu. Her sweaty clown face looked like it was melting off; she had caked on enough makeup to sauce a pizza. Mr. Mackerelli noticed white drops landing on the carpet. He gritted his teeth, hoping it wouldn't be too hard to clean. She wiped her hand on her blouse, then turned the page.

Finally, she spoke in a squeaky, raspy voice, "Not a lot of customers for a Friday." The man nodded. She continued, "You must really struggle-wuggle."

He raised an eyebrow. The woman spoke as unnaturally as she looked. "Yes, it has been hard," he said. His pen remained poised. It had been harder than he had time or desire to explain.

"That just breaks my little-dittle heart. Such yummy-lummy foodzies too." She spoke with the inflection one might use to comfort a baby. The result was not comforting.

"So, just water to drink?" he asked. It seemed the longer he stood there, the more he could feel her bad breath settling on him like a rotten mist.

"It must be even harder," she said, "with that little boy of yours." She peered at the chef over the rims of her pointed shades, revealing pale, yellow eyes.

Mr. Mackerelli stepped back. "You have heard my son's cries. I apologize," he said in a quiet voice. "He is a . . . troubled boy." He finally lowered the pen. The curls of his mustache seemed to lose some of their spring. He could no longer hold a smile.

"No, no. We were all kiddly-widdlies once. Nightmares and boogey-woogey men, vivid little imaginations scaring the heebies and the jebies out of us. Living out here by the big, dark woodsies where people go out and get lost and never founded. I know they scared me when I was a little kiddzy," she said, laughing with a strained authenticity. It was as if speaking of herself as a child secretly caused her pain.

The chef rubbed the back of his neck. “No, not like my son. I have never seen a child so overcome with fear. Ever since we moved here, all day and night he screams and cries, and it only gets worse. We are known better by his nightly screams than my signature dish.”

She reached out a long-fingered hand and touched his arm. “Well, the little kiddy can’t go on like that, he’ll destroy you, the miserable thing. It must break your heart.” She was laying on the baby talk thicker as she spoke, “You look so sleepy-weepy. I bet you get so tired that sometimes you fall asleep right in the lasagna. No thanks to little . . . What was the boy’s name?” She leaned in to hear the answer.

“Ollie. His name is Ollie,” Mr. Mackerelli said quietly, backing out of the conversation with a blank stare and a nod. “I will get you a water.” He turned away, now more uncomfortable with how correct she was than how bad she smelled. His son *was* miserable, and it did break his heart. And, it was true, he had fallen asleep in the lasagna a few times.

He returned to the kitchen. Ollie, instead of putting everything away, had resolved to get his project done as quickly as possible. As the chef walked past, Ollie winced, expecting to be told to get out. But instead, Mr. Mackerelli leaned against the counter, took a few deep breaths and fidgeted with the ends of his mustache. He looked deep in thought.

“Is there anything I can do to help, Papa?” Ollie asked.

Mr. Mackerelli looked at the boy for a moment before answering. Then he poured water into a glass and handed it to him. “Bring the customer this glass of water, please. Be polite.”

“Yes, Papa.”

Ollie pushed the swinging door open with the glass in hand. Due to Willoughby’s reaction to the guest, he felt fear swelling in him as he pushed through. But the boy only found an empty chair.

“Papa?” he called out. “There is no one here.”

Upon seeing the empty table, Mr. Mackerelli put his head in his hands, calling out to no one, “No! Don’t leave! Please stay! Eat! I will throw in a free cannoli!”

The chef slumped over onto the table, all the fight out of him. Another lost customer. Another day most of the food he’d prepared would be thrown out. Another day closer to closing down.

Then he saw, sitting on the abandoned table, a crooked paper card. It read,

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Mr. Mackerelli saw a trail of melted makeup drops leading out the door. He followed the path of white spots outside. They ended just beyond the entrance, not even reaching the parking lot.

It was as if the enormous woman had lifted off into the night sky.







## CHAPTER THREE

# THIRTEEN STEPS IN THE DARK



OLLIE HAD CAUGHT a lucky break. Thanks to his father's misfortune of losing the last customer of the night, he could finish his lasagna. He had rolled the noodles, mixed the sauce, shredded the cheese, and sauteed the meat.

The boy set his assembled lasagna on the counter, putting it on display, but trying not to act too proud of himself. He sprinkled a bit of parsely on top of the creamy layer of flavor-infused cheese. It looked so cushiony and perfect that, if it were a bed, he could sleep in it for days.

"Three customers all day, unless you count the lady who left before she even got water," muttered the chef.

"Didn't Kessler come in today?" Mrs. Mackerelli asked. "He comes in at 11:30 every day without fail."

"Kessler hasn't been in for three days. Another deserter, just