

ONE

AS FAR AS DILTON DOILEY was concerned, if he was going to die tonight, then a graveyard was as good a place to do it as any other. It was after eleven already, and the streets of Riverdale were swamped in a velvet-thick fog that blotted out the full moon. His breath hitched, and he hugged himself a little tighter, wishing someone could save him from the awful choice he had to make . . . but he was utterly alone.

Dilton had two bleak options before him: stick to the less creepy sidewalks for the much longer and more roundabout way back home, or take a shortcut through the darkness of the old cemetery and make it there before curfew. He prided himself on not being a superstitious person, so he was glad there was no one else present to witness his embarrassing moment of indecision.

“This is ridiculous,” Dilton huffed to himself, staring at

the cemetery's bent and rusted gate, annoyed by his own attack of nerves. "Get a grip, Doiley! There's nothing scary about a graveyard." Hearing the words out loud was supposed to comfort him, but the way his voice shook wasn't terribly inspiring. "It's basically a park. Nothing in there can hurt you. But if you aren't home in ten minutes, you *will* be dead."

Swallowing hard, Dilton grabbed the gate and forced it open, a high-pitched squeal from one of the aging hinges sending an icy finger up his spine. With an apprehensive breath, he took one last look around, streetlamps pouring dim, golden light into the dense mist that rolled through this stretch of town. There wasn't a soul in sight—which, frankly, should also have been comforting. Instead, it was somehow only more unnerving. *Stupid Reggie*. This was all his fault.

The Riverdale High Astronomy Club—of which Dilton was the president—met once a week after school and organized the occasional outing or special event for its members. For instance, two months ago they'd visited the observatory in nearby Midville, and ever since then the group's plans for tonight had been all they could talk about. A spectacular meteor shower had been predicted, coinciding with the first night of the full moon, and the thought of what their telescopes might reveal had been so thrilling it had almost driven Dilton to try his hand at poetry. *Almost*.

And then the weather reports had started getting worse and worse—storm systems and cloud cover, and finally this dreadful fog, and, in anguish, Dilton had at last been forced to concede that the club would see nothing—that this once-in-a-lifetime event would pass them all by, hidden behind a thick screen of vapor.

Somewhere up there right now, past the impenetrable heaviness of the fog, stars were dancing across the vault of the night sky. Meanwhile, down here, Dilton was about to go prowling between the headstones of a musty, shadowy graveyard, because Reggie Mantle—who'd joined Astronomy Club only because he wanted to beef up the extracurriculars on his college applications—had refused to trust the forecasts. He'd insisted that the group go ahead with the meeting anyway. And Dilton, because he was the president and had a duty to attend every official outing, had been forced to stay out late for the most pointless evening in history.

"It's just a park," he reminded himself nervously as the gate clanged shut behind him and he walked farther away from the gilded glow of the streetlights. "A park with hills and grass and . . . corpses."

His fingers shook as he activated his cell phone's flashlight function, nearly dropping the device into the wet grass at his feet. The mist was so thick that in less than a minute he had

completely lost sight of the street behind him, the cemetery path sloping down a gentle hillside as the first crumbling headstones reared into view. Dilton shook out the tension in his shoulders, trying to clear his head. Being afraid of a cemetery was stupid; he was a man of science, and he naturally rejected the preposterous notion of anything as silly as ghosts or zombies. There was simply no good reason to view this patch of grass as any scarier or more dangerous than the sidewalk.

Even so, he muttered reassuring facts and figures under his breath as he hurried ahead, moving faster than was probably smart, ducking the wing of a gloomy granite angel that materialized suddenly in the shifting mists. He lived in one of the safest cities in the country, he reminded himself. Violent crime was at an all-time low. Statistically speaking, a person was actually more likely to die falling out of bed than they were to even be *mugged* in Riverdale.

All of these facts were true, and yet his heart still beat like a riveter's hammer when he heard an owl hooting in the gloom, the flying predator's cry eerie and mournful among the weathered graves. Licking his lips, Dilton held his phone higher and walked even faster, his shoes sliding hazardously over the moistened earth. He'd taken this shortcut before. There was nothing to be afraid of. "*The only thing we have to fear is fear itself,*" *Franklin D. Roosevelt had once said.* That's all

superstition amounted to—nonsense that only appeared to have a basis in reality, because your fear gave it power. That owl was probably the most dangerous thing in this cemetery.

Probably.

Swallowing hard, Dilton rifled his brain for more comforting statistics, this time about animal attacks. There hadn't been a fatal one inside the city limits in at least a century. *Then again*, he thought to himself, *maybe that's exactly what the last unlucky victim was thinking to himself a hundred years ago*. But it was only the previous month that a group of campers about twenty miles outside of town were set upon and slaughtered in the night by what authorities had described as “probably a pack of dogs or wolves.”

Dilton shivered in reflexive horror just thinking about it. As far as he knew, wolves weren't endemic to the area. He wasn't sure he'd ever heard of so much as a sighting of one. But surely the sheriff's department would have based this conclusion on some sort of corroborating evidence—paw prints or shed hairs at the scene, bite marks and condition of the bodies . . . It must have been gruesome. *But it had happened well outside of town.*

The light from his phone cast a shimmering halo around him, the dirt trail narrow and slick where it made another descent, and he almost lost his footing again. The fog was cold and clingy against his skin, and when he tumbled into a

time-blackened headstone that had tilted off its axis, leaning into the path, he let out a yelp of fright that was swallowed by the close, damp air.

He was still breathing hard a moment later when his cry was unexpectedly answered.

From somewhere not too far off, a high, hollow note rose in the darkness, threading through the tombstones and stealing all the oxygen out of the atmosphere. There was another predator calling out in the lonely, abandoned graveyard that night . . . and this one was much bigger than an owl.

It couldn't be what it sounded like—it *shouldn't* be; the statistics were all against it. But as the bone-chilling howl soared, dipped, and then silenced, every hair on Dilton's body stood up straight. *It was a wolf.*

"Don't panic, Dilton," he whimpered to himself, nearly choking on his own tongue as he backed away between the graves, an icy band of moisture forming at his temples. "When you panic, your brain stops functioning, and you really need your brain to function right now!"

His shoulder bumped into something hard and unforgiving—a statue, materializing from the swimming shadows—and he let out another yelp. The sound of it was like a door slamming in the still, vacant cemetery, and this time sweat rolled freely down the length of Dilton's back. His chest was constricting, and his eyes frantically raked the fog.

Had the wolf heard him? How close was it? He tried to recall more statistics about how wolves hunted and whether they were scared of humans, but nothing came up. He was already panicking. And recognizing that he was panicking only made him panic more.

Spinning on his heel, he broke into a run, all of his thoughts scattering like roaches from the light. He tripped over a child's headstone, barely missed colliding with a bench, and made it about ten feet before another statue jumped out of the darkness and he slammed straight into it. Stars exploded behind his eyes, his cell phone flying loose as he tumbled to the ground, and for a nauseating moment, the graveyard spun.

He was just pushing himself up when he heard a nearby sound—the thump of something landing on soft earth, the crush of fallen leaves underfoot—and his breath caught fast in his throat. His glasses were cracked, the world a strange, schismatic blur of black fog barely kissed by the moon . . . but two bilious yellow lights gleamed in the dark before him, maybe ten yards away, the new sound of heavy, wet breaths rubbing hideously against the night.

Dilton's vision sparkled, his fear cresting as the thick muzzle and pointed ears of a canine formed around the two impossibly glowing eyes. It was a miracle that he didn't pee his pants.

This was no ordinary wolf. Aside from its brilliant, burning glare, the creature was massive, its shoulders rippling with muscle beneath a charcoal-and-silver pelt—its paws almost as big as human hands where they flattened the damp grass. The animal snapped its jaws, a string of drool spilling between yellowed fangs that had to be at least three inches long.

“No no no, *please no!*” Dilton’s voice rose an octave as he scrambled backward over mud, leaves, and loose stones, adrenaline pumping through him until his blood hurt with it. His brain emptied itself completely as he lurched to his feet, wheeled around, and sprinted into the darkness, leaving the path behind.

He had no idea where he was anymore, or where he even thought he was going. There was no way he could outrun a wolf—certainly not one of that size. But he just moved faster, colliding with tree stumps and headstones, tripping over roots and divots in the uneven ground. He was sobbing so hard he couldn’t have seen clearly even if the cemetery weren’t choked with a stew of mist and slithering shadows. At every turn, with every footfall, he expected to feel paws slamming between his shoulder blades, monstrous teeth sinking into the back of his neck.

When he staggered past a decaying monument and slammed into a wall of granite blocks, he was sure his time

was up, but somehow the wolf hadn't caught him yet, and as he stumbled his way along the stone facing, he came to a carved pillar that marked a corner. Limping around it, he discovered that he had run right into a mausoleum—stark and imposing, its partly open wooden doors guarded by an iron grate, the plinth above the entrance engraved in huge block letters: JONES.

He'd never seen it before and had no clue what part of the graveyard he was in now. The wolf was surely playing with him, letting him get just far enough ahead to keep things interesting, but long before he could ever find his way out of the cemetery he'd be cut down—*eaten*, like those campers. Statistics wouldn't save him now.

But if he couldn't *outrun* the wolf, maybe he could hide.

The gate squealed when he threw it open and again when he yanked it shut behind him, slamming the latch in place. The doors were substantially built, and their hinges were stiff, but he managed to heave them closed as well, fumbling for a lock that wasn't there, before simply throwing his weight against the wood panels and sinking slowly to the floor with his eyes shut tight in prayer. His chest heaved with sobs, and his arm shook as he wiped a trail of snot from his upper lip . . . but he was still alive. Several inches of solid wood and iron stood between him and the beast outside now, and he could stay here all night if that's what it took. Eventually the



animal would get bored—eventually it would move on and hunt for easier prey.

A laugh tickled his lungs, and Dilton Doiley let it out in spite of himself—in spite of the very close brush he'd had with death. The mausoleum was dank and pitch-black, stinking of mildew, but he didn't care. Sweat pasting his hair to his scalp, he sucked in a great big lungful of air.

And as the thundering of his heartbeat finally faded in his ears, he heard it—the sound of heavy, wet breaths filling the close darkness inside the mausoleum. *He wasn't alone.*

Dilton's eyes sprang open, his chest seizing, but there was no light to see by; the stone chamber was a black void reeking of dust and mold . . . and wet fur. A pathetic mewl of distress escaped the narrow confines of the boy's stiffened lips.

"*Diltonnnnn . . .*" The voice was guttural and inhuman, the sound scraping against the granite walls—and the bilious yellow light of two glowing eyes flared to life in the depthless shadows. The air thickened with the hot, gamy stench of a predator's breath, and Dilton opened his mouth to scream.

He barely even managed to make a sound before the creature lunged forward, burying its teeth in his throat.