

Chapter One

Somewhere, in the not-so-distant past...

It was a cool fall evening, the clicking sound of two pairs of shoes echoed through the dimly lit streets. One pair, chasing the other. In the lead was Ben. A curly, red headed young man with a portly build. He was dressed in old, weathered clothes, with a scraggly fall jacket and scuffed brown shoes. Running as fast as his legs could carry him, Ben made his way through the dark, moonlit streets of a sleepy little town he thought was safe just moments ago. Chasing Ben was someone, or better yet, something he thought would never find him. Something rotten; something villainous. An evil man, who desperately wanted the box Ben was carrying under his arm.

With each stride, Ben's warm breath burst through the cool, fall air like a trail of white smoke from a steam locomotive. The chase continued through the center of town, past the bakery, clock shop, post office, and down to the end of the street, into the local park. It was a park with lots of trees, bushes, benches, and statues—a good place for Ben to find a hiding spot. He looked left, then right, then left again, scanning the park for the perfect place to hide. Beyond the small hill, and past the two maple trees, was a large cluster of bushes. Ben hurried over the hill, past the maples, and stumbled awkwardly forward—tripping over his own two feet and into the shrubs, with his hands extended outward in order to protect his face from getting scratched up by the gnarled branches. Click-click, crack, thump. Ben's body came to an abrupt halt as it met the firm, cold ground. At last, if only for a moment, he had a chance to catch his breath, with small twigs and leaves from the shrubbery entwined throughout his curly, red hair.

Ben spotted his pursuer coming around the brick pillars near the park entrance, just as he was getting to his feet. He put his

hands on his knees, still trying to catch his breath, wondering how did they find me? Did the red hair give me away? Who could have told them where I was hiding? Were there spies in the town? Why is this happening to me? These, and many more thoughts, continued to race through his mind, over and over again. He broke out of the bushes and pressed on through the park, staying merely seconds ahead of the vicious man who was closely following him through the night shadows—no more than a stone's throw away. "Must keep going," Ben mumbled to himself, his body tiring more and more with each stride. His legs, now at the end of their usefulness, could carry him no farther. Ben stopped in the middle of the dimly lit road, near the corner of the candy store and clock shop. He gazed back into the shadows, out of breath, with fear in his heart.

"I can hear you breathing, Ben," said the evil man, with a low, gravelly voice, from just beyond the light of the moonlit street. "I'll take the box now, please, if you would be so kind as to...hand it over." The very sound of his slow, deliberate voice sent chills through Ben's tired body.

"And why do you think I would ever do that?" asked Ben, his lips quivering, hands and body shaking from the cool night air.

"Well, Ben, because quite honestly, it's the only choice you have. You have nowhere left to go."

"There's always more than one choice in a situation like this," Ben replied.

"Well, maybe you're right. Perhaps you do have choices, as in, you could choose to quietly hand over the box resting securely under your arm. Or, you could refuse to do so and suffer the consequences of your poor decision." A pale, thin hand with dirt-filled fingernails slowly appeared from beyond the night shadows—open and ready to receive the box Ben held so dearly in his possession.

Ben acknowledged the greedy hand, slowly gazed downward at the box, returned back to the out-reached hand, then directed his eyes upward toward the darkness, beyond the ghastly hand. Yearning to see the face behind the voice.

"Well, sir, Ben said in a confident tone of voice, you have overlooked a third, and probably the most important, choice that stands before us."

The air became quiet and still. Only the chirping of crickets and the hoot of an owl from the nearby woods could be heard. Then...dead silence.

“And what would that be, Ben?” The gravelly and impatient voice beyond the shadows asked, as an evil face slowly emerged from the darkness, beyond the moonlight. It was that of a middle-aged, poorly groomed man. His skin was pale, with a sickly blue cast, and carved in detail with deep, cavernous wrinkles that ran around his eyes, drooling mouth, and forehead—no doubt from years of frowning due to anger and frustration. Layered on top of the wrinkles were smudges and smears of dirt and filth. It was hard to tell one from the other. The whites of his eyes glowed brightly in contrast to his filthy face. As Ben looked closer, he noticed the man’s eyes were two different colors. The left was brown and the right blue. Both were filled with the look of a crazed soul that had nothing to lose, except possibly the old wrinkled newsboy hat that sat atop his head. From underneath the hat grew frizzled strands of dark, tangled hair that appeared to have not been washed for quite some time. And as he spit and spat out his words with a sinister smile, his stained, yellow teeth shown from behind a set of crusty, chapped lips.

As the diabolical man’s outreached hand edged closer, Ben began to slowly move backwards, away from a fate he did not care to know. The man continued to move closer, his upper body now visible. Ben took another step back. Then, a second later, a pair of skinny legs in old pants appeared. Ben took yet another step back, carefully making sure not to trip on any unforeseen objects. He could now see the man’s entire body—highlighted by the pale light of the moon. His frame was tall and stick-like, with a pot belly, overgrown feet, and an old brown suit that matched the tattered hat. The stranger’s body was a perfect match to his hideous face. But who was he and why did he want the box so badly? And how does he know my name? Ben thought to himself.

“Hey there, Ben.”

The two men immediately turned their attention to the woods, both staring as hard as they possibly could, trying to make out exactly where and who the voice was coming from. It appeared to be coming from high up the trees.

It only took Ben and his enemy a brief moment to realize the voice coming from the woods could not possibly be human, as no person would be crazy enough to climb high up in a tree during the middle of the night.

Before the two could think any further, from out of the woods, atop the tallest tree, a brilliantly feathered white owl came swooping down, emerging from beyond the shadow. Highlighted by the moonlight, and effortlessly gliding through the air in miraculous fashion, the unexpected visitor came to rest atop a nearby lamp post, exposing his identity to the astonishment of Ben and his adversary. Both stood frozen like statues, wide-eyed and slack jawed. The talking white owl had indeed caught them off guard.

“Well, aren’t you going to say something to me, Ben?” The owl asked.

The two men continued to stare. Still motionless. Still speechless.

The owl spoke again. “You do remember who I am, don’t you?”

At that moment, the owl’s spoken words ignited Ben’s thoughts, as a tidal wave of memories roared through his mind. “That’s it!” he said with excitement in his voice. “Alexios, is...is that you? How...how is that possible? You’re...you’re an animated character. Well, an animated character that never made it past the concept phase. And you’re talking to me? Here? Now? I...I don’t understand?”

Alexios was an older owl who, in his prime, was quite a specimen to behold. With white and silvery gray feathers, worn talons, and tired yellow eyes, he no longer carried the air of intimidation that once surrounded his presence, especially now that he also wore a pair of black-rimmed glasses to aid his vision. And though the owl had grown older, he had become much wiser, more cunning, and was still very capable of carrying out his duties. After all, he was Alexios, defender of the Kingdom Crystals.

“Well, of course I’m talking to you, Ben. I’ve been a part of your life for quite some time. Why, let me think. If my memory serves me right, I believe we first crossed paths when my sketch lines were being created at Disney Studios. You were

just a young lad, sweeping floors in the animation building on weekday evenings after school. On one particular evening, you were cleaning the floor in one of the animator's offices, and there I was, sitting on the drawing board, sketched lines and all. Why, you practically drooled all over me, you did."

Ben scratched his head as he frowned in confusion.

"C'mon lad, surely you remember that night?"

Ben continued to scratch his head, perplexed and still trying to figure out how an animated character could be speaking to him. Here. Now. In fact, he'd become so sidetracked with his thoughts that he had completely forgotten about the villainous man, whose shifty hands were getting closer and closer to snatch away the box that rested securely under Ben's left arm.

"Uh...well. Oh, wait. Now I remember. I was cleaning Mr. Johnson's office and I noticed the sketches of you, scattered all over his desk. I think he was working on facial expression and body movement studies of your character."

"Exactly, my young squire."

"There was one sketch in particular that caught my attention. You were winking. At what, I'm not exactly sure."

"Yes, that's right. I was winking at you, Ben."

"You were?"

"Yes. Is there anything else you can remember from that sketch?"

"Uh...I don't think..."

"Well, let me refresh your memory, young lad."

Frustrated, Ben jumped in to cut off the lecturing owl. "Why do you keep referring to me as young?" Ben was getting a little annoyed with the owl's patronizing references. "I'm a grown man, I am. A young man. But a man none the less."

"Well, lad. Compared to me, you are young. Very young. Why, I'm more than twice your age, and twice as wise, too." The angered owl's eyes became extremely large, and his chest puffed out as he gave Ben a scolding look—similar to what a teacher would give a student for misbehaving.

Ben felt an overwhelming sense of embarrassment suddenly come over him. His face, flushed of any color. "Oh...yeah...right. I forgot. I'm quite...I'm quite sorry for interrupting. Please continue. Yes, please continue."

Urrrrrr-urrrrr-urrrrr-m-ahemm. Alexios cleared his throat. “Well, then. Now. Where was I? Oh, yes. As I was saying, Ben, not only was I winking at you, I was also pointing to the old red box that was sitting on the shelf behind you.

The villainous man they’d forgotten about now stood right next to Ben, his shifty hands, rolling over and over one another, with nervous excitement, his patience becoming increasingly worn by the second.

Ben was ecstatic. “That’s right, Alexios. Mr. Johnson told me about...”

“ENOUGH of this nonsense.” The evil man had reached the limit of his patience. His body began to bounce up and down off the ground in shivering convulsions, as if he had been electrocuted. His face turned bright red, his eyes ready to explode out of his head. If he were a cartoon, there would have been steam blowing out of his ears.

The sudden outburst startled Ben, which caused his arm to jerk and allowed the box to break free of his control. As the box spun through the air, a mad scramble of flailing bodily limbs, hands in faces, fingers in ears, and squashed toes ensued. Both men were caught in an unrehearsed, awkwardly funny battle for possession of the mysterious red box.

“Give it to me, Ben.”

“Never. It doesn’t belong to you.”

“Yes, it does. Give it to me now.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

As the battle continued, the box gained altitude, spinning end-over-end between the two crazed men, like a jump ball in a basketball game. Simultaneously, Ben and his adversary leaped into the air to gain control of the box as it continued to spin in suspended animation.

All the while, Alexios was eagerly watching, eyes bulging, wings flapping, pacing back and forth on top of the lamp post, as he tried to figure out what to do. His patience could not take any more of this foolishness. But what was the solution? The great white owl leaped from the post, his wings flapping hard, as he dropped toward the ground, gaining speed as he began to soar high up into the air and disappearing into the silvery blue shadows of the night sky.

Ben and his rival were so wrapped up with their obsession for the box that neither noticed Alexios had flown off into the night air.

And then, clunk. The two men met head-to-head. Their arms and legs became limp as each fell back toward the ground in opposite directions. The box began its rapid descent from above the two fallen bodies, which were both moving slowly in an effort to recover from the collision.

Swoooooosh! Alexios swept in from the sky above like a blurred streak of silver and white, grabbing the box by its twine ribbon. His talons held on tightly as he climbed higher and higher, carrying the box to a nearby tree at the edge of the forest, and far out of reach of the aggravated man with yellow teeth who had come so close to obtaining the mysterious object.

“Hurry Ben, we have little time to waste!” Alexios called out.

The sound of Alexios’ voice helped Ben regain his orientation. He took a quick glance at his disoriented nemesis, who was still on the ground shaking and rubbing his head from the collision. “I’m coming!” Ben shouted back, as he quickly jumped to his feet and took off running rapidly toward the woods. The young man never looked back, fearing that he might see his enemy chasing closely behind. This fear fueled Ben’s energy, as he ran faster and faster, until he was no more than a faint wisp of shadow, melting into the dark silhouette of the woods.

“I’ll get you for this, Ben!” Shouted the angered man whose head continued to spin as he sat in disgust, realizing there was no chance to catch the little red-headed fellow now. And more importantly, no chance to get his hands on the red box he had come for. The Dark Thorns would not be happy to hear the news.

Beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-beep. THWAT. The snooze button on the clock was swatted by a very tired, young hand.

“Charlie. Time to get up. C’mon. Up and at ’em. You gotta get going, or you’ll be late.”

Charlie, about as fast as a frozen snail, rolled over, scratched his head, and yawned. Then he sat up with a look of confusion in his eyes. He wasn’t exactly sure if the screaming he had

just heard was from the angry man in his dream, or from the shrieking sound of his mother's voice, resonating through the dimly lit hallway beyond the crack of his bedroom door. Either way, his brain was still only partially awake, thanks to a restless night of sleep—obviously due to the three large holiday chocolates he had eaten the night before. As his mother once told him, loading up on sugar before bedtime can bring on crazy dreams and prevent someone from sleeping well. Regardless, she continued to shout from the bottom of the stairway, trying to get her boys moving for another wonderful and glorious day of school.