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**81 Minute Books Presents**

*Dead Pages Bookstore*

**Written by Ron Knight**

“Dead Pages Bookstore is also a cursed card game. Can you escape without being overcome with madness?”



## Chapter 1



The Midway Mall in Elyria seems like it had been dead longer than Riley Calder had been alive.

All the storefronts were covered in black or boarded. The pizza place now had a faded cartoon chef in the window. The tanning salon with its neon sign still hanging crooked, the word *GLOW* missing its O.

*GLW*

And the narrow unit at the end, the one that used to be a nail salon, was nothing but plywood and dust.

Riley had driven past the mall for years and even been inside when there was just *Bath & Bodyworks*. However, the mall was basically empty and forgotten.

Tonight though, part of the mall building was lit on the outside.

The light came from the far-right, bleeding through cracked glass. Warm. Yellow. The kind of light that suggested someone was awake inside. The kind that suggested they were open for business.

Riley slowed the car and pulled deep into the abandoned parking lot.

She checked the address on her phone to see if a store had suddenly opened in this empty mall.

She couldn't find anything. No announcements on the Facebook page or Elyria's Front Porch page.

The sign above the door had the smell of fresh paint, which for some reason Riley could smell from her car.



HER FIRST THOUGHT WAS that she was tired enough to hallucinate. Her second thought was that she'd finally gone full cliché, chasing urban legends in Elyria after midnight.

She turned the engine off and exited the car, gazing at the storefront. The night air smelled like wet asphalt along with a mixture of something sweet and rotten as if flowers were blooming out of season.

Mixed with all that was the strong smell of fresh paint.

The light from the shop window spilled across the cracked pavement in a long, pale rectangle. Dust drifted from the open glass doorway, slow and deliberate.

Riley took a step forward, looked around the empty parking lot, then continued to the glass doorway and walked inside.

Shelves were crowded by the window, stacked with books whose spines were too dark to read from where she stood. No music. No voices. No sound at all except a faint creaking that reminded her of wood settling in an old house.

Someone brushed past her.

A woman in a gray hoodie, her head down, walking fast. She smelled like cigarettes and cold rain. She didn't look at Riley. Didn't even hesitate before slipping through the open door and into the parking lot.

"Hey," Riley shouted. "Are they closed?"

No response.

A bell above the door chimed once. The ring lasted a bit too long.

Riley took a deep breath, eyes sweeping the bookstore. She stepped closer to the threshold. Inside the shop it felt wrong in a way she couldn't articulate.

The shelves were too close together. The ceiling too high for the size of the building. The air too still as if the space was holding its breath.

"Hello?" she called. Her voice sounded thin in the dark room.

Riley thought about the research that had brought her here. Then she received a late-night email from a burner account. A single line of text:

*"If you're looking for where they go, check Midway Mall after midnight."*

She thought about her younger sister, Piper, and her empty apartment. The half-packed boxes. The way the landlord had shrugged when Riley asked if she'd noticed anything strange.

"People leave," the landlord said. "Sometimes they don't tell anyone."

The temperature dropped immediately. Not cold, just absent from warmth. The smell changed as well. Old paper. Dust. A faint coppery tang.

The door closed behind her. It sounded like a lock sliding into place.

Riley turned back toward the door.

The bell chimed again. The linger of the chime remained for a long moment.

Then she adjusted her eyes. The door hadn't closed.

Still glass.

Still open.

But the parking lot was gone.

In its place stood another aisle of books.

And somewhere deep in the stacks, something shifted as if the shelves themselves were adjusting to make room for her.



## Chapter 2



The aisle didn't end where it should have been.

Riley walked past one shelf. Then another.

The spines were a blur of dark cloth and peeling leather, titles so faintly they could only be read if she stood close. The farther she went, the more the air thickened, heavy with the smell of dust and something resembling the odor of stale or rotten coffee.

Riley stopped walking.

*The shelves kept moving.*

*Breathing.*

*They crept closer.*

Not fast. Not enough to trigger panic. Just enough that when she turned to look behind, the space she'd come from was narrower.

"Okay," Riley said to the empty aisle. "That's how it's going to be?" It was a joke to help her calm down, but not really funny. The space between the breathing aisles was definitely smaller now. "Anyone here?"

Riley's voice came back to her wrong. Softer. As if the words had been absorbed before they could echo.

There was a desk sat at the end of the aisle. It was simple wood, scarred with gouges and dark stains that looked like ink

until you gazed at them for too long. A single lamp glowed on its surface, casting a cone of yellow light.

Someone stood behind the desk.

The figure was tall in a way that didn't match the proportions of the room. Not impossibly tall. Just...incorrect.

The edges of its shape wavered, like heat off asphalt. Riley couldn't make out a face. Every time she tried, his eyes slid away, catching the shadow where features should have been.

"Welcome to Dead Pages Bookstore," the figure said.

The voice didn't come from its mouth. It came from the space behind Riley's eyes, a pressure that made her temples throb.

"Are you open?" Riley asked. Her brain needed something normal to hold onto because it felt like it was drifting away. "Your door was—"

"Open," the figure replied. "For those who need us."

Riley swallowed. "I'm just looking. I mean that I'm browsing."

The thing behind the desk tilted its head. The motion made the shadows around it ripple.

"We don't take money."

The lamp flickered. For a moment the shelves nearest the desk seemed to lean closer as if listening.

Riley was legit terrified now. "I don't understand. What do you take?"

The figure's presence pressed in around her. Not physically. Internally. Memories fluttered at the edges of her mind. Piper's laugh, the smell of their childhood home, the weight of a notebook in Riley's hand when she wrote short stories.

"We take what it costs you," the voice said. "Piece-by-piece."

Riley let out a nervous laugh. "That's not how stores work." She had no idea what she was saying.

"No," the figure agreed. "That's how we work."

Riley's eyes swept the area, looking for a quick escape. She brought her attention on the figure. "Are you the store's owner?"

"I'm The Curator." The voice this time was sharp and quickly sucked into the breathing shelves.

A book slid free off a nearby shelf and fell hard to the floor, toppling until it rested at her feet as if waiting. Its cover was blank. No title. No author. The pages inside whispered against each other, a sound like dry leaves skittering across pavement.

"This is the book you came for," the voice said.

Riley shook her head. "I didn't come for a specific book."

The Curator leaned forward. Shadows that made up its shape deepened, thickened, as if the light itself were being pulled into it.

"You did," The Curator said. "You don't want to think about this book."

Riley's mind continued to fog. Dust from the shelves began to spread. "I just want to look around. Is that okay?"

The shelves cracked and shifted ever so slightly.

"Of course," The Curator said. "Take your time. But be careful what you touch. Some stories remember their readers."

Riley stepped back, putting distance between her and the book at her feet. As she turned, she caught a glimpse of a turquoise glow on the floor that formed into a circle.

*Be careful what you touch.*

A hooded figure appeared in the circle, reached out and pulled, causing Riley's chest to jerk forward. She twisted loose, stumbled into a bookshelf, then hurried away down the aisle.

Behind her, The Curator spoke, “Are you ready to pay?”

Riley spun and looked.

The desk was empty.

The lamp flickered off.

The feeling of her being watched didn't fade.



## Chapter 3



Riley found the first customer in the aisle marked *Historic Cults*.

The sign hung crooked above the shelf, its letters carved into a plank of wood that looked older than the mall.

A man stood with his back to Riley, flipping through a thin, dust-gray book. He was maybe mid-forties, wearing a suit that had gone shiny at the elbows like he'd slept in it too many times.

"You shouldn't touch that," Riley said.

The man startled, the book slipping, but he quickly caught it with the tips of his fingers.

"Sorry," the man said. "Didn't see you there."

"You okay?" Riley asked.

The man nodded too quickly. "Yeah. Yeah. I just found what I was looking for."

"What was that?"

The man frowned. "I...don't remember."

Riley felt a prickle of unease. "You don't remember what you were looking for?"

"No," the man said, now smiling in a way that didn't reach his eyes. "But it's fine. The Curator helped me. Very helpful."

A shadow passed over the man's face like a cloud crossing the sun. His eyes glanced at the end of the aisle where the light from the desk lamp suddenly pulsed.

"When did you get here?" Riley asked, nervous about the answer.

The man laughed. "They said they don't take money."

"That's not what I asked."

"They don't take money!" he screamed. He went back into a trance, mumbling "*Piece-by-piece. Piece-by-piece.*"

Riley didn't know what to do. Was this how she was going to turn out? Overcome with madness?

The man's smile faltered. He pressed a hand to his temple. "I'm...I'm missing something," he said. "I know I am. It's right there." He snapped his fingers in front of his face as if the memory might materialize in the air between them.

Riley watched the man's gaze drift. The shelves around them seemed to lean closer, their spines creaking softly.

"Do you remember why you came in?" Riley asked.

The man opened his mouth. Closed it. His brow furrowed deeper. "I was supposed to meet someone," he said finally. "No. That's not right. I was looking for—"

His voice trailed off. He stared down at his hands, turning them over as if seeing them for the first time.

"My wife," he said, now looking at Riley. "I was supposed to meet my wife but went to the wrong place. She worries if I'm late." The relief in his voice was sharp with a hint of being terrified.

"You were supposed to meet your wife after midnight?" Riley asked.

The man reached into his pocket. His fingers came up empty. "That's strange," he muttered. "I always keep my phone right here." He looked at Riley. "Was my wife cheating on me? Was she out late?"

Riley's pulse quickened. "Stay calm."

His smile faded completely.

"I don't have a phone," he said, confusion bleeding into fear. "Why don't I have a phone? What is my wife doing?"

*Piece-by-piece...*

The air shifted.

A soft pressure pressed in around them like the room leaning closer to listen. Riley didn't have to turn to know that The Curator was nearby.

"Some prices are paid in pieces," The Curator said. "Small at first. To see if you notice."

The man flinched. "Who said that?"

Riley stepped between the man and the end of the aisle. "You need to leave. Now."

"Yes," The Curator agreed gently. "You do."

The man took a step toward the aisle's end. Then another. His body faltered as if the floor beneath him had softened.

"Which way is the door?" he asked.

Riley turned, intending to point back the way he'd come.

There was no doorway behind them.

Only more shelves.

"I can't find the door," the man said. Panic crept into his voice. "I was just...it was right there." His head spun back and forth. "Where my wife? What has she done! I was supposed to meet her! Why did I come in here?"

*Piece-by-piece...*

The shelves creaked in a section with a sign above, *Witches & Tarot*, twisted on its nail, the letters darkening as if the wood itself were bruising.

“You’ve already paid,” The Curator said. “You just don’t remember what you bought.”

The man’s eyes met Riley’s, wide and pleading. “Please,” he said. “Can you tell me where to go?”

Riley searched the man’s face for something familiar. A hint of who he’d been before he walked into this place. There was nothing to grab onto. The man was becoming a blank page.

“I don’t know,” Riley said, and hated herself for how true it was.

The man took another step. Then another. The shelves parted. A pale woman in black ragged clothes, yellow eyes, and thin scaly fingers snatched the man by the face and pulled him between the shelves.

Riley lunged forward to grab his hand.

The shelves closed. The man and the Pale Woman were gone. The shelves began to breathe softly.

*Creaking.*

Riley stood among the books, the echo of the man’s fear reaching her heart. The Curator’s presence lingered at the edge, patient and heavy in the air like an invisible fog.

“Now you understand,” The Curator said. “We don’t take everything at once.”

Riley backed away, heart hammering.

Her eyes shifting in every direction.

Dusty books.

Vintage books.

Spell books.

Visions of bloody rituals.

Entities filled this horrid place.

Riley slowed her breathing, blinking her eyes until they stopped shifting. Her heart squeezed to a rhythmic beat.

*Am I going mad?*



## Chapter 4



Riley walked as if the floor was about to give way. Three aisles over she discovered an section labeled, *Children's Horror*.

*Children's Horror???*

A sickly green EXIT sign to the left barely hung with glass that was cracked in a spiderweb pattern. It flickered like it was struggling to stay awake.

Relief hit her so hard that her knees almost buckled.

Riley took two steps towards the EXIT.

The floor stretched.

Not visually. Not in any way that she could understand. Her feet sank into the distance between her and the door like the space itself had thickened.

Shelves on either side of Riley leaned inward, their spines whispering against one another, a sound like dry leaves being crushed.

"No," Riley muttered. "Keep going..."

She forced herself to move faster, trudging with each struggling step.

*Piece-by-Piece...*

A bell chimed and lingered as if floating by on a balloon.

The bell from the front door.

It chimed again.

Then again.

Each chime echoed as if the sound were bouncing off walls far beyond the room.

Riley broke into a run weaving through aisles but somehow always able to see the green EXIT sign.

She stopped, chest heaving. The EXIT sign flickered again and for just a moment the word changed.

**EXIST**

Then it blinked with the sickly green, casting a glow on the walls.

Riley shook her head.

*Head.*

*Head.*

Riley realized her head was still shaking back and forth. She needed to keep it together. She needed to fill her mind with something.

Better thoughts.

Wisdom.

No wait. Knowledge! Yes, Riley needed to fill her head with knowledge to keep from being overcome with madness.

Riley turned away from the EXIT and headed down the nearest section with a sign above that read, *Paranormal Research*. The books here were thinner, their pages yellowed and soft at the edges like they'd been handled too much by too many people with desperate fingers.

One book lay open on the floor.

She knew better than to touch it.

Yet Riley knelt to the dusty floor.

The page showed a sketch of the storefront. The crooked bell. Cracked glass. The flickering EXIT sign. A crude drawing like something copied from memory. Beneath it in careful handwriting were the words: *This is where I got stuck and went insane with madness.*

Riley swallowed and turned the page.

The next drawing showed the interior of the shop. The aisles too long. The shelves too close. A small figure stood between them, faceless. The caption read: *They moved the door.*

“Who wrote this?” Riley whispered.

The Curator’s voice drifted from somewhere above the shelves. “Someone who tried to leave.”

The temperature dropped. Riley’s breath fogged faintly in front of her face.

“Where are they now?” Riley asked.

There was a pause. Long enough to feel deliberate.

“Catalogued,” The Curator said.

The word landed heavy.

Riley stood, backing away from the book. She turned to see a rusty filing cabinet labeled, Employment Records.

The shelves shifted. The aisle narrowed, the space between the bookcases closing in by inches. Riley’s shoulders brushed the spines on either side. The titles blurred as she squeezed forward, reaching the rusted filing cabinet.

Riley pulled the cabinet open. The drawer squealed as metal rubbed and the drawer broke, stuck in a slanted position. With the tips of her fingers, she looked through the files, attempting to read the faded writing.

*Knowledge.*

*I need more knowledge or I’ll go mad.*

Inside a file she discovered a glossy photo of a young woman about her age, on her knees, gouging her eyes out in front of a blind old man sitting in a chair, dressed sharply in a suit and tie.

Another file had a glossy photo of an older woman wearing a librarian lanyard. Her face was being squeezed by a woman with bone colored skin and long hair that reached the floor.

In yet another file, a college-aged boy was surrounded by a white glow of smoke and hundreds of books, swirling around him and pulling on his skin.

Suddenly a young girl about ten years old hurried by Riley, screaming as she stumbled through each section and aisle, fading into the darkness.

*Knowledge*, Riley thought to herself. *Keep your wits intact.*

She discovered a black book with a faded yellow cat and yellow writing titled, *Secrets Beyond the Wailing*.

Riley opened to a random page, reading while the air became warm as something drifted by her and the screams from that young girl came back into existence.

*(Chapter 1, Secrets Beyond the Wailing)*

The wind carried whispers, not of comfort, but of the Wailing. It was a place where the veil thinned and secrets bled into our world.

Mr. Hemlock, the village storyteller, warned us never to venture beyond its edge, never to listen too closely to the cries that emanated from within. But curiosity, like a creeping vine, always finds a way.

It started as a dare, fueled by youthful bravado and the need to prove ourselves. Five of us, emboldened by the recklessness of youth, decided to cross the Wailing's boundary.

Elara, Liam, Maya, Finn, and myself, Wren. We met under the shroud of a moonless night, the air thick with anticipation and dread.

The Wailing itself was a valley, choked with mist that writhed like tormented spirits. The air grew colder as we descended, the silence broken only by the mournful, ethereal wail that gave the place its name. It was a sound that burrowed into your skin, a symphony of sorrow and regret.

We pressed on, deeper into the valley until we stumbled upon a clearing. In the center stood an ancient monument etched with symbols none of us recognized. As Liam reached out to touch it the Wailing intensified, the ground trembled, and the obelisk pulsed with an eerie light.

Suddenly, visions flooded our minds. Flashes of a forgotten civilization, their rise and fall, their forbidden knowledge, and the cataclysm that led to their demise. The monument was a key, a gateway to their memories and their secrets.

But the visions weren't passive. They were...invasive. They showed us the true nature of the Wailing. It's a prison for something ancient and malevolent, something that wanted to be free. Touching the monument had weakened its bonds.

Panic seized us. We turned to flee, but the valley had changed. The mist had solidified into grasping tendrils, the ground buckled beneath our feet, and the Wailing became a deafening roar.

We were trapped.

One by one, the entity began to prey on our deepest fears, manifesting them into tangible horrors. Finn was swallowed by the earth, Maya was ensnared by the mist, and Elara was driven mad by whispers only she could hear.

Liam and I fought our way back to the edge of the valley, our minds reeling, our bodies battered.

We crossed the boundary, collapsing on the other side, gasping for breath, our sanity hanging by a thread. We had survived, but at a terrible cost. The Wailing had shown us its secrets, and those secrets would forever haunt us.

We never spoke of what happened in the Wailing. We carried the burden of our knowledge in silence; forever bound by the horrors we had witnessed.

The village remained blissfully ignorant, their lives undisturbed. But we knew the truth. The Wailing was not just a place of sorrow; it was a prison and we had inadvertently rattled its cage.

The secrets beyond the Wailing were best left undisturbed, for some doors are better left unopened.

*Author's Note for Chapter 1:* This story explored a venture into the unknown and the price of uncovering secrets that are perhaps better left buried. The protagonists faced not only external dangers but also internal struggles of fear, guilt, and the burden of forbidden knowledge.

Riley closed the book, feeling her nerves ease and her heart rest. The chaos around her for the moment had subsided.

With a gentle, controlled motion, Riley placed the book back on the shelf. She stumbled backwards, but quickly regained her balance, realizing that a shelf was pressed against her shoulder blades.

The books felt warm as if a soft hand was touching her.

Across the room the aisle creaked. Shelves leaned closer, the space narrowing to a corridor of paper and dust and breath.

Riley shut her eyes, thinking of the books she had just read.

*Knowledge.*

*The Wailing.*

*Venture into the unknown.*

When she opened her eyes, the aisle was wide again.

This was the key. Knowledge over Madness.

Others had entered the Dead Pages Bookstore, perhaps from different locations, attempting to escape but had become insane with madness the more they tried.

Shelves stretched in both directions, their spines quietly rearranging themselves into new categories.

Riley's body twitched. Somewhere in the distance a bell chimed.

*Once.*

*Twice...*

Riley realized every time the bell chimed, another "Reader" entered the Dead Pages Bookstore. If it only chimed once, then someone had escaped.

She never heard it chime just once.

Riley decided that she was going to be more than a Reader.

Riley was now becoming a Paranormal Tracker.



## Chapter 5



Riley had been moving through sections and aisles, then suddenly arrived at the front desk with The Curator standing tall.

The desk was empty with the lamp humming softly over a stack of vintage books. The Curator leaned forward and folded his hands over the books.

“You’ve been wandering,” The Curator said.

Riley stopped a few feet away. The air around the desk felt heavier, like standing too close to a deep body of water.

“You moved the front door,” Riley said.

“I moved your expectation of the door.”

“That’s the same thing.”

The Curator tilted its head. “Only if you believe doors are fixed.”

Riley glanced at the bell. It hung motionless. For the first time since she entered the bookstore, it didn’t ring.

She brought her attention back on The Curator. “What do you want?”

“To finish your story.”

“I didn’t start a story,” Riley said. “Also, I’m not good at riddles.”

The Curator's suggestion of a smile pressed faintly into its not-quite-face. "All great stories are like solving a riddle."

The Curator slid a book across the desk towards Riley. It stopped just short of her fingers.

The cover was white. No title. No author. The leather looked worn in the way things only look when they've been held too often by too many different hands.

"Open it," the Curator said.

"No."

"That wasn't a request."

The pages rustled.

Riley gazed at the book, pulse thudding in her ears. "What is it?"

"A draft," The Curator said. "Yours."

Riley shook her head. She felt her recent knowledge beginning to slip and madness creeping into her ears like a slow-moving bug. She needed to walk away. "I'm not sure what's happening, but I'm not going to just lose my mind and become trapped her forever."

"Really?"

The word scraped into her ear as if fighting against the bug of madness.

"Read the first page," The Curator said. "You've already lived it."

Against her better judgment Riley reached out and placed her fingers on the book.

It was warm.

A bead of sweat ran down her face.

She blinked several times then opened the book to the first page. It showed a familiar scene: a cramped apartment kitchen,

the light over the sink flickering, a half-finished cup of coffee gone cold on the counter.

It was her apartment. The morning before she left for the bookstore.

*Wait! Have I been here for more than a day?*

Riley now felt as if she'd been wandering the Dead Pages Bookstore for many days, maybe even for a week, but that was impossible.

Riley looked at the page, seeing words match her thoughts from that morning. The irritation. Then the email arrived and a quiet relief overcame her that she had something to do.

Visit a bookstore at the abandoned mall in Elyria.

Riley snapped the book shut. "How do you have this?"

"You gave it to us," The Curator said. "Not intentionally. Most people don't."

"What do you want?" Riley asked. "Just tell me!"

The Curator leaned back, hands unfolded. The lamp flickered, shadows stretching long across the desk.

"A revision."

Riley's stomach dropped. "A revision of what?"

"Your ending."

The Curator reached forward and opened the book again. The pages near the back were blank. The paper there was thicker, waiting for ink.

"You can leave," The Curator said. "You can find the door. I can make it stay where you expect it to be."

Riley's breath squeezed down her windpipe. "What do you want in return?"

The Curator's voice softened. "I get to keep what you've already lost."

The words settled in her chest like cold ash.

“I don’t know what that means,” Riley said, feeling another bead of sweat drizzle past her cheek.

“Small pieces of you have become part of your story in this bookstore, one aisle at a time, once section at a time.” The Curator moved its head to the side, causing the sound of a loud crack in the neck. “You’re being catalogued.”

Riley thought of the old man that she saw earlier and the book he was reading. His thoughts were scattered.

*No. His thoughts were being removed.*

Then he was snatched by an entity, pulled between the breathing shelves.

“What happens if I say no?” she asked, stalling for time.

The Curator gently closed the book. “Then you will continue to wander until there’s nothing left and madness engulfs you like the darkest of night and everyone on the outside will forget you forever.” The Curator paused. “Including your younger sister, Piper.”

The bell above the door chimed, but somewhere far away, causing Riley’s arms to freeze with chills.

The bell rang again, lingering.

Then it rang again.

Riley lowered her eyes and gazed at the book.

“If I agree,” she said slowly, bringing her eyes back on The Curator. “What do I become?”

The Curator seemed to consider an answer. “You become a story that belongs to us, but you get to choose the last line.”

Riley shook her head back and forth, attempting to knock the madness away. She needed to find a book and read.

*Knowledge.*

Riley opened her eyes as a river of sweat squirmed by. She turned her head, seeing the 10-year-old girl from earlier. She was pale now, wearing a black dress with a white collar. Three spikes protruded from her long, black hair.

Riley shook her head again, turned in the opposite direction and reached for the shelf, blindly grabbing a book.

She opened it and began reading...

*Based on true events...*

*Description:* Four teenagers have been selected to investigate paranormal situations around the country that involve teens, then report their story to *Paranormal Teen Magazine*.

*Jesse:* Freshman, Honor Role in Science, Quidditch Club, Rubik's Cube Club.

*Skylar:* Sophomore, Honor Role in History, Disco Club, Yearbook Committee, President of Photography Club.

*Brooke:* Junior, Honor Role in Writing, Journalist for School Newsletter, Yearbook Committee, Award Winning Journalist for *Paranormal Teen Magazine*. Unofficially the leader of T.I.P.S.

*Titan:* 19-year-old senior in high school that failed two grades. He's 6 foot 4 and weighs 274 pounds. (By the way, his real name is Titan.)

*Milo:* 46-year-old Millionaire, Owner of *Paranormal Teen Magazine*, Founder of T.I.P.S.

Riley closed the book and looked at the title. *T.I.P.S. (Teens Investigating Paranormal Situations)*. She knew that the founder of T.I.P.S. was now hiring Paranormal Investigators to take photographs and film inside the Dead Pages Bookstore.

How did she grab this random book? Was it a sign?

Riley turned and saw that The Curator was gone. She put the book on the shelf and headed to the empty desk.



## Chapter 6



Riley sat at the desk.

The book lay open before her. Its pages were blank except for the first few lines which she had already lived. Every detail she touched seemed to shimmer faintly, like the ink was still deciding whether it belonged there.

Riley looked up and noticed The Curator watching from the corner of the aisle without a hint of movement. Its presence alone pressed the air down on Riley's shoulders.

"You could leave," Riley said to The Curator, then focusing back on the book. "You creep me out."

The Curator's voice slithered across the room. "Change it and the story adjusts. Change too much and you adjust as well."

Riley sighed and lifted a pencil from the desk. It felt heavier than it should as if it contained more than graphite. For some reason she somehow knew that the pencil contained memories, decisions, and echoes of lives that never were.

She wrote two lines on the blank page:

*I don't know where my sister Piper is at the moment. Her apartment was empty and there was no sign of where she went.*

The words didn't feel permanent, shimmering like heat waves off asphalt. Then the pencil lifted itself slightly as if nudging her.

*The pencil didn't nudge me. Keep it together!*

"Do you wish to finish?" The Curator asked.

Riley hesitated. She thought of the old man she met earlier. His memory had been eaten by the store. Obviously, the bookstore had paranormal evidence, and she became trapped in its power.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know what it costs to finish."

*What the hell was she saying? Get up! Find a way out!!!*

The Curator tilted its head. "You already know. You just pretend otherwise."

Riley exhaled and wrote another line:

*I will not forget me or my sister, even if the shelves rearrange themselves around me.*

The air shifted. The shelves creaked, leaning just slightly as if acknowledging the defiance.

"You can leave," The Curator said softly. "But your story will remain open."

Riley slammed the book closed. It weighed heavier now, like a life not fully lived.

She stood and walked toward a section called *Psychological Sci-Fi*. The Curator's presence pressed closer. Riley could feel the evil in the back of her mind, taking shape.

"Do you want to know where your sister is?" The Curator asked.

Riley stopped and turned. "You don't me or my sister. Stop playing mind games."

“You can have her,” The Curator said, “but only as long as you remain part of the story.”

Riley’s eyes darted in every direction. Each aisle felt a little closer. She brought her glare on The Curator. “What do you mean I can *have* my sister?”

The next few seconds were a blur. The Curator swept the blank book off the desk, swung and somehow was right next to Riley, slamming her cheek with the book. A sting of hot pain shot through her mouth and down her throat.

When Riley was able to focus, The Curator was near the desk and the blank book rested there as if it never moved.

The front door chimed softly.

Then again. Lingering.

It rang once more. A slow, steady ringing.

Riley rubbed her burning cheek, then felt a wave of vomit spring up through her throat but it never came out.

A rain of sweat drizzled down her face as she attempted to catch her breath. She realized that it wasn’t vomit in her throat.

It was the evil dust from the bookstore.



## Chapter 7



The book lay open on the desk like a living thing.

Riley's gripped the pencil opened the book to a blank page near the back.

*Wait. How did she get back at the desk?*

The bookstore dust in her throat slid to her stomach while the weight of the bookstore pressed against her head, easing into her mind.

*Madness was winning the battle.*

Riley envisioned the Dead Pages Bookstore appearing in city after city, taking over an empty location, opening at Midnight and attracting fools that dare enter, swallowed by shelves and shadows.

"You're quiet," The Curator said, knocking Riley out of her trance. She was still holding the pencil and gazing down at the blank page.

"What's happening to me?" her voice drifted to the aisles, absorbed by the books.

"You know," The Curator replied. "Pieces of you are leaving. Your ending now belongs to someone who hasn't entered this bookstore."

Riley forced her head to turn. It was like trying to move with a vice, clamped around her skull. She focused on a book that was face-out on the shelf. The cover was gorgeous with a sea green and soft yellow. She squinted, trying to read the title.

*Hidden Coral.*

Riley closed her eyes, attempting to think of what the first line would be.

The title, *Hidden Coral*, made it seem like a romantic thriller. She spoke the first the first line of the story, “*Let me tell you my secret. I love the water and I love you.*”

*Knowledge overcomes Madness.*

Riley shook off the pressure on her head and gazed at the glow of the lamp on the desk. She looked at the book, rested open. Her hand felt sore as if she'd been writing. The pencil was now next to the book.

Riley looked down, seeing her own handwriting.

*Wait. No. It wasn't her handwriting.*

*It was Piper's!*

Riley began reading.

“I'll remember my sister Riley's laugh and how adventurous she was. I like to think that her being gone, she's off to a new adventure. It's the only thing keeping me from hurting.”

Riley's breathing became heavy. She shifted her head, but once again it felt as if someone had both their hands clamped to each side, forcing her to read.

“Riley always searched for the truth. I'll continue that search until the day I discover how she died.”

The words burned. Not on paper, but inside her.

Inside her brain.

*Madness.*

Riley realized the longer someone is in the Dead Pages Bookstore, you slip away, piece-by-piece as if someone was chopping away until there was nothing remaining except the horrid taste of dust.

*Her story will be catalogued.*

Riley will roam these aisles, section by section, waiting for the next victim to enter so she could destroy their life...

*Piece-by-piece.*

“You can still leave,” The Curator said. “Just write someone else’s story in the book. Write about someone you know in exchange for your soul.”

This was an impossible choice. Bring someone here so she could leave.

That’s when Riley realized how she was brought here in the first place. An encrypted email.

Someone wrote in the blank book, exchanging their life for Riley’s so that they could escape out the door with the bell chiming above.

Riley looked over at the beautiful book.

*Sea green.*

*Soft yellow.*

*Let me tell you my secret. I love the water and I love you.*

Riley had a girlfriend once; dated her in high school. Billie Crow. Everyone made fun of her last name, but Riley thought it was unique. Anything unique, Riley loved.

They had planned on spending the rest of their lives together, but Riley loved searching for a story, whether it was horror, paranormal, or simply *unique*. Billie went to college and studied sports medicine. She found someone else to date and Riley never heard from Billie again.

Overcome with rage, Riley gripped the pencil and wrote in the book, *Billie Cr-*

She stopped. "No!"

*Piece-by-piece.*

Riley was yanked from the chair and thrown to the dusty, rancid floor. She attempted to crawl but was pushed as if a gust knocked her over, slamming her in the *Psychological Sci-Fi* section.

*Piece-by-piece...*

Riley looked up, seeing a man in the aisle, head down while holding a book with one hand. He had a long coat, dark pants, and thick shoes or boots.

Riley forced herself up, stumbling towards the man. She focused on the book. It was the one from the desk. The blank book with words from her sister, talking at Riley's funeral.

"Give that to me!" Riley screamed.

The man gently closed the book and raised his head but didn't look at Riley. She stumbled forward again, feeling like the floor had shifted or became slanted. The aisle's breathing.

Sewn into the man's coat near the bottom were two words.

*The Collector.*

Riley reached her hand out. "Please...give me that book."

The Collector slid the book into his large outer pocket and began walking away from her, turned at the end of the aisle and disappeared.

Riley's hand was still reached out. "Please...give me-"

Her body was thrown into the shelves, grabbed by the books, and sucked into darkness.

"You understand now," The Collector said.

The lamp flickered. The aisles shifted slightly.

The bell chimed.

Then chimed again.

Followed by once last chime...



## Chapter 8



The Dead Pages Bookstore was quiet. Riley crawled on the floor, hearing the chime in the distance. She stood and almost collapsed from dizziness.

A sign hung by a set of stairs going up. She stepped forward until she could read the sign, choking up dust but nothing coming out.

*Basement Archives.*

She coughed some more, attempting to see in the darkness, smelling like rotten vanilla, stale almonds, and earthly decay.

The air was thick yet thin.

She could see but couldn't see.

Nothing was right. Everything was wrong.

*Who wrote my name in the blank book? Who invited me here?*

*Knowledge overcomes Madness.*

Riley strained her mind to remember the encrypted email.

*If you're looking for where they go, check Midway Mall after midnight.*

Was it that simple? Was it enough to gain her attention? To drive at midnight to an abandoned mall, looking for...

Riley shook her head. What was she looking for? A paranormal adventure? No.

She was looking for *they*.

Which brought her to the mall after midnight, to the Dead Pages Bookstore, and now she was trapped.

“No!” Riley shouted, followed by a dry cough of dust that never came up. It rested in her throat.

*In her soul.*

*I'm a Paranormal Tracker. I live for the undead!*

Riley turned and grabbed a book. It was faded light blue with pink hearts called, *Dating Sucks*. Riley forced a grin, opened the book and began reading.

She placed the book back and hurried forward until it felt like the room was about to spin. She grabbed another book. *Magic Nightmares*.

With determination, Riley began reading. The book wasn't so bad. It was more fantasy than horror.

She placed the book on the shelf and began walking, getting closer to the stairs.

*The Tower and the Tide* was the next book she read.

*The Truth Untold*.

*Bloom of Ather*.

Riley took a picture of each book with her phone, then made it to the stairs and ran up at full speed, feeling a renewed sense of clarity and energy.

The aisles and sections squeezed a bit.

*Breathing*.

Riley turned right, then left, fighting her way through the bookstore, finding herself in a section called, *Underground Slashers*. She quickly moved forward, discovering a section called *Staff Picks*.

The bell chimed.

Riley followed the lingering sound, darting down several aisles.

The bell rang again, then again.

She turned, seeing the front desk with the blank book, The Curator behind the desk, and the front door with the chime. Standing there was a woman and two men, all dressed in black, holding cameras.

*Ghost Hunters.*

“Get out!” Riley yelled. “Go!”

Instead of running the Ghost Hunters began filming.

Riley grabbed a Spell Book off the nearest shelf, found a page and began reading out loud.

“By thread and word, by will and flame,

I call the power; I speak the name.

What’s done in harm, now bound shall be,

By earth, by air, by fire, by sea.”

Thick chains appeared by Riley, dangling in the air. Near the door a gust of wind knocked the three Ghost Hunters over. Hands reached out from the shelves and grabbed them by the legs, dragging them in.

The Curator opened the white, blank book. “Piece-by-piece, you will live in the shelves!”

Riley continued reading.

“No ill may pass, no shadow bend,

The vow I cast, the bond I send.

By moon’s soft light and sun’s bright ray,

This binding holds and it’s on the way!”

The thick chains flew across the room, smacked into the desk and wrapped around The Curator, squeezing tight. The Curator let out a horrific screech like a pig being roasted alive.

Riley found the book and pencil which had been knocked onto the floor. She placed both on the desk, opened the book and began writing...

*The Curator was held by chains when Riley used a Binding Spell. The chains dragged The Curator into the shelves and consumed it by darkness.*

Riley slammed the book shut.

The Curator squirmed in the chains, but the grip tightened as the warden of the Dead Pages Bookstore was dragged down an aisle.

“Smile,” Riley said, holding up her phone, taking pictures.

The Curator was pulled into the bookshelves and consumed by the books.

Riley shoved the phone in her pocket and raced down the aisle, searching for the front door, darting through each section, feeling her strength and her mind beginning to once again fade.

Suddenly there it was...the glass door. On the other side she could see the parking lot of the mall. Riley ran forward and practically dove out the door to make sure she would make it through.

The bell above the door chimed once. The EXIT sign flickered.

Riley tumbled to the cold asphalt. She looked back, seeing the mall, but not the Dead Pages Bookstore. Her eyes shifted left, right, up and down.

The sun peaked on the horizon.

She stood, seeing her car in the exact spot that she left it before entering the bookstore.

A gentle, cool wind kissed her face. The sun continued to rise.

She made it out.



## Chapter 9



Riley met Milo, the owner of *Paranormal Magazine* and the founder of T.I.P.S. at the Erie Island Coffee Co. She pulled out her phone and showed Milo the pictures that she captured in the Dead Pages Bookstore.

He held the phone, looked at each picture without reaction or expression, then looked at them again and handed the phone back to Riley.

“I’ll pay you \$2,000 for all the pics,” he said, pulling out his phone. “Do you take Venmo?”

Riley couldn’t believe he didn’t ask more about the Dead Pages Bookstore and what she experienced inside. “Venmo is fine, but don’t you want to know what I went through in there?”

“Nah,” Milo said. “I just need the pictures.”

It was then that Riley realized that Milo had other people that had gone in that evil bookstore as Paranormal Trackers, taken pictures, and given information on what was inside. He just needed pictures at this point, which is more powerful than someone’s testimonial.

Riley emailed Milo the images. She sipped her coffee, waiting for the money which Milo sent a few seconds after he received the pics.

He studied her. "Are you okay? I've heard it's no picnic in there."

"Yeah, it's just..." Riley paused. She pushed her empty cup to the side. "Someone put my name in some book that belonged to Dead Pages. I then received an encrypted email. The person who did it..." Riley paused again. "Well, he or she traded their soul for mine."

"Interesting," Milo said, still without expression. "I'm assuming you want to know who did that to you."

"Of course."

Milo drank down the rest of his coffee, then compiled his response. "If you had to guess, who would have done that to you? It would have to be someone you know."

"No idea," Riley said with a sigh.

"Who was the last person you saw before receiving that email and going into the Dead Pages Bookstore?"

Riley remembered that she was at Piper's apartment, only to find that Piper had packed her things and took off without telling anyone.

"I was going to see my sister but..." Riley's heart skipped a beat. "The landlord at my sister's place! That was the last person I spoke with. She was short with me when I asked what happened to Piper."

Milo stood. "Let's go pay that landlord a visit."

Riley drove while Milo followed in his car. They arrived at the apartment complex and went directly to the landlord's apartment which doubled as her office. Riley knocked on the door with Milo standing behind her.

The landlord answered. "You again? I told you that I don't know where your sister is. She's gone. Deal with it."

Riley kept her emotions under control. "Have you ever been to the Dead Pages Bookstore?"

The landlord's face went pale. "No."

Milo leaned in from behind and whispered, "She's lying."

Riley locked her eyes on this bitch. "I'm sorry. I never asked your name."

"Ms. Cooper," the landlord said, shifting her eyes to look at Milo.

Riley waited for Ms. Cooper to bring her gaze back to her. "Do your tenants have an emergency contact?"

"Of course," Ms. Cooper said.

Riley raised an eyebrow. "Is my name on that contact list for my sister?"

Ms. Cooper slammed the door shut.

Milo laughed. "Well, that was the most obvious admission of guilt that I've ever seen."

Riley shook her head, wanting to break down the door and beat the crap out of Ms. Cooper. "She needed a name and wrote down mine." Riley turned and looked at Milo. "But how did Ms. Cooper get into the Dead Pages Bookstore in the first place? Who invited her?"

That's when a realization came crashing down.

*My sister...*

Milo gently took Riley by the arm. "Come on. Let's go."

Riley said goodbye to Milo and watched him drive away. She thought about her sister, inside the Dead Pages Bookstore, fighting for her life. Piper wrote down a name she hated which was her landlord, Ms. Cooper. When Piper escaped, she packed her things and took off.

Someone had written Piper in a book; Piper wrote Ms. Cooper in the book; Ms. Cooper wrote Riley's name in the book, and Riley wrote The Curator in the book.

She wished someone would have thought about writing an entity instead of someone else, which would have broken the chain. Despite that, there were plenty of other people inside the Dead Pages Bookstore which meant an endless number of people were tricked to coming inside.

Also, there were Ghost Hunters looking at abandoned buildings, empty spaces, and possible locations where the Dead Pages Bookstore would appear at midnight.

In addition, Milo was paying Paranormal Trackers to take pictures inside the bookstore.

It angered Riley that no one really knew the danger until they went inside. They thought it was a fun, interesting adventure.

The opposite was true.

Riley's phone rang. "Hello?"

"Hey, it's Milo. I found your sister."

Riley's heart banged against her chest. "Where is she?"

"Piper just sent me pictures of inside the Dead Pages Bookstore. I told her that you were looking for her. She was hesitant at first, but she said she'll be at 428 Cleveland Street in Elyria at midnight tonight. It used to be a haunted store, but the location is empty now. She believes that's where the Dead Pages Bookstore will appear next."

Riley gripped the phone. "Why there? And why doesn't she just call me?"

Milo didn't respond right away. "Piper doesn't want you to talk her out of going back inside again."

“Go back inside! She’s going back into the Dead Pages Bookstore again?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so. She’s being paid as a Paranormal Tracker.”

Riley took a breath to calm her nerves. “Milo, I’m sorry for yelling.”

“No worries.” He paused. “Riley, if you and Piper do go back inside, remember that being a Paranormal Tracker isn’t just about taking pictures. There’s something much more important.”

“Yeah,” Riley said. “We need to get out before we’re consumed with madness.”

“Yes. Be well.”

Milo hung up.

Riley loosened the grip on her phone. Her eyes wandered, gazing at nothing why she envisioned all the evil inside that paranormal bookstore. If Piper was going to be a Paranormal Tracker and enter the Dead Pages Bookstore, then Riley will be there to walk inside with her.

Riley whispered to herself, “See you tonight, Piper.”





Did you love *Dead Pages Bookstore*? Then you should read *Revenge of Halloween*<sup>1</sup> by Ron Knight!



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## About the Author

Ron Knight is the founder of *Ron Knight Entertainment* which includes *81 Minute Books*, *Vortex 9 Films*, *Rose Water Games* and *Middle Room Haunted Store*.

Ron Knight is also the author of over 100 books.

Read more at <https://www.ronknightentertainment.biz>.

