

A misty forest path with a silhouette of a man in the distance. The scene is atmospheric, with soft light filtering through the trees and a foggy background. The path is covered in fallen leaves and small puddles. The overall mood is mysterious and somber.

THE CRYMAN

D. KRAUSS

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Warning, this novel contains graphically violent and potentially frightening imagery, situations and language. Be advised that this content could be upsetting to younger or sensitive readers. While this book was written with young adult readers in mind, use best discretion when determining if this book is appropriate for younger readers.

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Chapter 1

"That's one small step for man..."

Aaron held his breath.

"...and one giant leap for mankind."

Aaron exhaled with sheer joy, sheer ecstasy, and some puzzlement. What's the difference between man and mankind?

Who cares! They're on the moon!

He leaped from the floor – in one surprisingly coordinated movement –and danced before the smoky images of Neil Armstrong's oddly canted leg (made so by the angle of the landing gear camera) feeling around the solid gray surface. "Oh, my God!" Aaron crowed. "We're on the moon! We're on the moon!"

A simultaneous "Don't you blaspheme!" from Mom and "Get the HELL OUDDA DA WAY, boy!" from Dad followed by an immediate, "So what? It's just the moon!" from Kathy. Nothing from Darrell, who was, inexplicably, asleep. Little twerp.

"Just the moon?" Aaron gaped at Kathy's petulant little moué as he, wisely, danced the hell oudda Dad's way. "Just the moon?" expressed again as he danced out of the living room, through the kitchen, and out of the door, Dad's, "Boy! You get your butt back in here!" having no effect, no effect.

Because this was a night of pure magic. No, pure science. And triumph.

And fog. Steamy fog at that, here in the middle-of-nowhere, swamp-laden, pine-tree'd hotter-than-heck werewolf-haven, deep deep south Alabama.

The mist gathered at the usual spots around the house, camouflaging zombies and vampires and Frankensteins as they stole closer, eyes bright with hunger, but Aaron, invulnerable because science was ward and cloaked him like Dr. Strange's Robe of Levitation... well, that was magic, but the principle remained the same. The backyard pole light reflected off the fog into his eyes, ruining his night vision, but that didn't matter, either, because up there, all white and clean and wonderful...

...the moon.

Our moon. America's moon.

Aaron danced up to the telescope, the one Dad had bought

from Sears and Roebuck for Aaron's birthday a year ago, surprise, because Dad thought it a toy and all toys were for babies. "Why don't you want a football or a basketball or somethin' like that?"

Because, Dad, if you really, really wanted to see the most unathletic kid in Alabama — heck, the country — at his most babyish, Dad, then just watch me try to dribble a basketball while running down Damascus Elementary School's warped floorboard court. That's how I earned the nickname, "Spaz."

But Aaron wasn't a spaz with the telescope.

Aaron centered the spotter scope dead in the middle of the moon, set the screws down, and took a preliminary glance through the lens. The blast of white light blew his eye apart and he blinked, stepping back to rub out the afterimages. Be nice to have a moon filter, or a more professional scope, but asking Dad for either was pointless. On this subject, he and Dad agreed — Aaron's telescope was a toy. But a useful one.

Aaron braced and went back to the lens. Gently, now, take your time. His eyes teared but he held steady and... there. There.

The moon. My moon.

Craters and rays and seas whirled, and at any other time, Aaron would be entranced, risking permanent blindness while trying to memorize details, but he wasn't looking for the usual stuff tonight. Oh no. He focused on the Sea of Tranquility and knew, just knew, if he looked hard enough, he'd see it.

The Lunar Command Module. The Eagle.

Aaron squinted, holding his breath. Had to be there, had to be. The only man-made item on the moon... well, okay, there was the Orbiter, but that should be on the other side, out of view, and some Soviet stuff, but he wasn't about to waste his time with Commie crap. So, concentrate.

The image swam and he blinked, and then his eyes swam, so he blinked again, and things wavered and blurred, but he stayed with it, and there. There! Clarity. He held his breath, staring at the deep gray surface, looking for a reflection, anything, even a flash from the orbiting Command Module...

"AaaAuh!"

Gasping, Aaron shot straight up, knocking the scope off target. He stared hard at the fog-shrouded edge of the woods. What the heck was that?

Silence, and that made him even more nervous. This place, this barely livable swamp, was full of strange, degenerated creatures (like his 8th-grade class, giggle) that called and crowed and cackled in weird, unearthly pitches twenty-four hours a day,

raising Aaron's neck hairs. But he'd never heard anything like THAT sound before. And worse, all the other calls and crows and cackles had stopped. Dead.

Intent, Aaron peered past the pole light. Nothing. The fog swirled, occasionally revealing a patch of that weird Spanish moss hanging from the trees here and there. Aaron caught his breath because Spanish moss was alive. It was. On moonlit nights, it flowed off the trees and wound about the yard like a gray boa constrictor, looking for children to smother. How many times had he heard its brittle fingers scraping at the den window while he tried to sleep?

On moonlit nights...

The terror fell on him like an avalanche, freezing his breath, locking his legs to the ground. He was sure — *sure!* — that gray tendrils crept along the ground seeking to cocoon his body, then drag him into the woods and suspend him from a tree branch, and slowly drain him of fluids. A little whimper escaped him.

Snap!

Aaron should have collapsed in sheer fright, but terror held him rigid. Something walked along the edge of the woods behind the chicken coop! Barely able to breathe, he stared hard at the darkness.

A fox?

Had to be, and Aaron almost did fall, this time from sheer relief. Of course. It was looking for a chicken dinner. A somewhat clumsy fox at that, breaking branches here and there.

Hmm.

Foxes weren't generally so obvious. Was it rabid? Aaron chilled anew.

An odor wafted about him. Aaron sniffed, trying to identify it, and wrinkled his nose in disgust. Repellent, like old leather left wet in a closet for a couple of years: mold and age and dank, with an underlying tang of dried sweat and manure. Good Lord (sorry, Mom), what's this fox been doing – living in an abandoned sewer?

The smell expanded, filling Aaron's nostrils to the point of dizziness, as the creature approached... Oh no. Holding his nose, Aaron peered hard at the woods behind the coop, trying to spot it...

The night moved.

A giant black shadow crept along the trees, massive, dark upon dark, and dripping malevolence. Aaron's heart stopped. Paralyzed, helpless, in the thrall of the ogre or troll stalking him under the bright, exposing moon: a monster with the gaze of a basilisk, about to stride across the yard, remove Aaron's head, and

suck out his innards through his newly exposed neck hole.

As if it heard his thoughts, the thing stopped on the edge of the woods, cocked its tree-shadowed head to one side, and smiled.

A trick of moonlight caught perfectly the red-encrusted, filed parasymphyseal spikes that substituted for teeth. Reminded him of a shark, but an evil, gloating, lustful one, the joy of murdering Aaron clear on its face. So frightened was he, Aaron couldn't even wet his pants. He was about to die, and rather horribly, here, in his own backyard, eaten by a nightmare while Neil Armstrong cavorted on the moon above—

"Boy!"

Dad's yell cut through the night, breaking the spell like a battle between two dark wizards. Aaron sagged as if cut from binding ropes and fell to his knees, immediately yanked to his feet by his shirt lapels. "Now just what in the HELL are you doing out here?" Dad, roaring in his face, another monster.

"I... ah!" Aaron was split between two tasks, keeping Dad from murdering him and trying to point at the monster in the woods so Dad could get his shotgun and murder it, instead. Or at least try to. Aaron wasn't sure if something so evil could be killed with mortal weapons.

"You WHAT?" Dad hauled him off his feet one-handed, straight into the air, further proof that Dad was the strongest man in the world. As if the disciplines he administered with the short Mexican bullwhip he'd bought during one family trip to El Paso weren't enough proof.

The rebellious part of Aaron was profoundly annoyed by this. A monster bore down on them and Dad was more concerned about some private violation of his ever-changing rules of decorum? Like, really, what's the problem here? It's a night of Magic and Science, and Aaron's in his own backyard bothering no one, participating in a world event in his own small way, and there's no school because it's summer and nothing really he had to do tomorrow, so what the hell is the problem?

Oh, and Dad, there's a monster bearing down on us.

"Dad!" Aaron managed the whole word, despite being choked to death, "Look!" and he managed a frantic hand point at where the monster was.

Was.

Gone. Just gone.

"What?" Dad, suspicious but still dangling Aaron, followed the point because he never ignored a warning. Must be those years he spent in France as a scout for Patton. But there was nothing

there for Dad to see.

"A monster!" Aaron choked around Dad's vise hand, "There was a monster by the chicken coop." Too late, Aaron realized that, without supporting evidence, this wouldn't be well received.

It wasn't.

"A mon..." Dad paused just long enough to gather strength and, mini-seconds later, Aaron flew through the air and crashed into the side of the washhouse, catching the foot of the tripod on the way and spilling the telescope. He hoped that sound of breaking glass wasn't a lens.

"I'll monster you!" Dad roared, reached down, and, this time, flung Aaron towards the house. "Get your ass inside, boy!"

As he scrambled up the steps, Aaron was oddly grateful for Dad's rage. One monster had vanquished the other.