

**PARANORMALS**  

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**DARKNESS REIGNS**

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**PARANORMALS**  

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**DARKNESS REIGNS**

a Novel by  
CHRISTOPHER ANDREWS

BOOK THREE IN THE *PARANORMALS* SERIES

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Paranormals: Darkness Reigns

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2020 has been quite the year, for all of us,  
and I'm especially grateful to the two who  
have weathered these long months with me:

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*Yvonne Isaak-Andrews*

And our wonderful daughter,  
*Arianna Kristina Andrews*

I love you both, so very much.

**TWO YEARS AGO**

## THE GLADIUS

John Davison leaped. The muscles in his legs screamed in protest, but he had no choice; if he didn't hit the target, this was all for nothing. He stretched his arms out over his head, his hands ready to slam the—

None of it mattered. At the last instant, his opponent appeared from nowhere, soaring through the air with far more grace than John had ever possessed, or ever would. His opponent, who had always been able to run faster, jump higher, fight harder ...

*Oh, lay off it, John*, he chided himself, even as the ball was taken from him. *Be an adult. You should be used to this by now.*

Yes, he knew he should. But he still felt that familiar sting as Steve Davison, his baby brother, not only took the basketball from him, but managed to spin around and make his *own* slam-dunk without the need to return to earth for a second jump.

“Oh-ho, man!” their cousin Dan bellowed, punctuated by that annoying laugh of his. “John, man, doesn't that just ...” He tried to go on, tried to retread the well-worn joke about how John's younger brother got all of the athletic genes in the family. But then the Davison brothers came back down, Steve light as a feather while John tripped over his own feet and hit the gym's basketball court floor so hard that he slid a few feet ... and that was just too much comedy for Dan to handle, and the little asshole lost it.

“You okay, John?” Steve asked, offering his older brother a helpful hand.

And that was exactly why John didn't truly mind looking like a fool by comparison. Because in the end, Steve had never once tried to show John up, never tried to make him feel bad about his inherent clumsiness. Steve's grace stemmed from superior natural prowess, but also from a shit-ton of hard work, years upon years of his youth spent on gymnastic mats and in kickboxing rings. And when John inevitably stumbled and fell whenever he tried to chew gum and walk at the same time, Steve was the first one by his

side, to help him back to his feet.

Smiling, John swept his sweaty, blond hair out of his hazel eyes and accepted Steve's assistance. "Thought I had you there. Can't remember the last time I made a basket with you guarding."

Steve pulled him to his feet, then shrugged. "I just got lucky." His matching hazel eyes gleamed as he jerked his head toward Dan, who was still doubled over with obnoxious laughter. "Don't mind dickhead over there."

"Never do." John collected the basketball, considered tossing a *Think fast!* right at Dan's face, then sighed and passed the ball to his brother instead. "Just do me a favor and give—"

"Oh!" Dan blurted, his laughter evaporating in an instant as his eyes widened. He pointed up and over their heads toward the large windows high above the court. "Look, look, look!"

John and Steve followed his wild gaze, peering up into the late-afternoon sky. Far overhead, an object soared westward, leaving a long condensation trail behind it.

The brothers exchanged a bewildered glance before Steve commented, "Um ... yeah?"

"Is that ...?" Dan joined them, gaping, his eyes filled with wonder. "Is that a paranormal?"

It was John's turn to feel a rush of hilarity; unlike his cousin, however, he did his best to swallow the laughter. "Dan," he said, in as neutral a tone as he could manage, "that's a rocket."

Dan's youthful glow faded; he squinted, staring hard at the object. "No, no, it's ... are you sure?"

"Come on, Dan," Steve said with a barely-suppressed chuckle, trying to emulate his brother's taking the high road. "You've never seen a rocket launch before?"

"I ... I mean, yeah, sure, I just ..." Dan's wonder was gone, embarrassment surging to take its place. "I just thought, maybe, you know..."

"It's probably another communications satellite going up," John observed. "They send them up sometimes when the weather is good like today." Then, in a token effort to make Dan feel better, he suggested, "But, you know, it might be *related* to the paranormals. With the PCA regional headquarters so close, they might be launching it to, you know, help track rogues."

"Oh," Dan mumbled one last time, then he turned from the window,

took the basketball from Steve, and dribbled away from his cousins without making eye contact.

John looked to Steve, who shrugged, his expression saying, *Dan's always been able to dish it out but not take it, right?*

True, but still, the paranormals had been around for about five years now, so ... what in the world would prompt such spontaneous exuberance from their cousin?

John was tempted, very tempted, to comment aloud, *But if it were a paranormal, wouldn't that be ... magical?* But he had been down this road more than once. Neither Dan nor Steve (nor anyone else in his family) wanted to hear his theories, again, about the paranormals proving the existence of real magic.

### **PCA**

When they were playing basketball, John had been annoyed with Dan. But as John prepared for bed that night, he was *angry* at his cousin. And at his Aunt Carol.

He had wondered why Dan had gotten so excited about the possibility of seeing a paranormal flying through the sky. Sure, he understood in general — not long ago, one did not see a man soaring through the air unless watching a movie about a guy with a big red “S” on his chest. But for better or worse, this was the new world they lived in, and Dan had seemed a little over-the-top about it ... and now John knew why.

Dan was going back to college this semester and would be majoring in Pre-Law, with an emphasis on Paranormal Rights. But he hadn't bothered to mention this to John or Steve, not even after his little display on the basketball court. No, that honor had gone to dear Aunt Carol, who held nothing back as she gushed about it during that evening's family dinner.

That itself wasn't so bad. She was excited for her son, and proud of Dan's gallant new major (which was a far cry from his original major of Getting High All Freshman Year). That was her right as his mother, obviously.

But it was that look she gave to her sister, John and Steve's mother. That look of cloying sympathy, followed by that flick of her eyes toward Steve. And what really pissed John off was not just that he had seen it, but he knew that Steve had as well.

Rather than diving right into college straight from high school, Steve had chosen to take a year off ... which had turned into two, and maybe even

three. Their parents had been understanding and supportive (maybe *semi*-supportive in their mom's case) at first, but that had been wearing thin as the next semester drew closer and Steve made no move to enroll. John had talked to Steve about it, and knew that the problem was his brother's lack of direction, of any real passion beyond his athletic pursuits; but when he suggested that perhaps Steve could pursue, say, a Bachelor of Science in Athletic Training, his brother balked at the idea.

John himself would soon be a Senior in his current major, Literature ... in theory, that was. That was another factor that was making him feel awkward and uncomfortable, which contributed toward his anger at Carol and Dan on the whole subject of college: John might not be returning next semester, because he didn't know if he could afford it.

It wasn't a literal question of finances, per se; his parents were graciously paying his tuition, so long as he maintained a respectable grade-point average. But when they find out *why* the latest deposit into his account, which had been earmarked for the coming semester's tuition, had already been spent ...

Pulling on his pajama bottoms, John sat bare-chested on the edge of his bed, leaned to the side, and pulled the cloth-wrapped book from behind his nightstand. Carefully, gingerly, John unfolded the velvet from around his precious prize, then unbuckled the straps on the leather-bound tome. He gazed upon the aged book once more, and his muscles somehow relaxed — the anger at his aunt and cousin fading into the background — even as his breath quickened and his heartbeat stepped up a notch.

No title emboldened the cover of this book; this was not that sort of opus. This, to the best of John's knowledge, from the scope of his meticulous researching and questing, was a book of *real* magic. If the former owner had truly known what it was she had possessed, she would never have parted with it. Or would have asked for millions of dollars, rather than the thousands she received from John.

John Davison had loved "magic" all his life, but had only believed in *real* magic since he was sixteen years old, shortly before the Night of the White Flash.

He was still in Kindergarten when he saw his first stage magician, an old David Copperfield TV special that his parents (much to their later chagrin) had thought he might enjoy. John had been enthralled, his jaw hanging limp as he watched the showman perform illusion after illusion.

But that's all they were: Skillful *illusions*. John knew that — he was not a "gullible" boy; far from it. From that day forward, he watched every

magic special he could rent, buy, or view on television. He became a royal buzzkill for anyone watching with him, especially Steve, as he meticulously analyzed, broke down, and explained how the illusion had been performed. He couldn't know if he were correct one-hundred percent of the time; it wasn't as though he had access to most of these people, could never fully verify his theories. But he was certain that he could feasibly pull them off via his own proposed methods, and for quite a while, he wanted to be an illusionist, a "magician," when he grew up.

And then, one day, he saw an act that changed everything.

He had been in high school, only weeks after his sixteenth birthday, and had saved money to drive across town to see a new act, "Ulysses the Unbelievable" (a corny name, but he had seen so many trite aliases that he barely registered that sort of thing anymore). His parents had no interest in joining him, especially since he could finally drive himself, and Steve had only agreed to go if John *promised* not to ruin the illusions for him. John had no qualms about Steve's stipulation — by this point he had learned to keep his mouth shut and his thoughts to himself ... at least until after the show.

John had been to this small theatre twice before, knew that he and Steve would get no flack for being unaccompanied minors, so long as they didn't get cute and try to order alcoholic beverages. Soon after they shuffled into their seats — not first row, but close — the show began like many others, with a warmup comedian and ladies in skimpy clothes; the latter John appreciated (he was a teen boy, after all), the former just annoyed him. Eventually, Ulysses — a plain-looking, average-sized, middle-aged man, his bald pate gleaming in the stage lights — emerged from backstage, and the show started in earnest.

Several minutes passed before John could put his finger on what was different about Ulysses' presentation. The tricks were standard enough — the Dove Pan, the Inexhaustible Bottle, the Bill in Lemon, and a few others; all pretty routine, though Ulysses did put a new spin on the Quick-Change that John had never seen. Just run-of-the-mill illusions for an audience member as well versed as John Davison ... so why was he getting more and more excited as the show rolled on? What was nagging him, in a good way, about familiar tricks he had seen so many times before?

He figured out part of it by the twenty-minute mark: Ulysses engaged in minimal banter. Sure, he addressed the audience from time to time, but he wasn't bothering with the plethora of distraction techniques that were usually vital to an illusionist's performance; nor had he opted for the

typical, often-gaudy wardrobe, but wore a simple, black suit — not even a tuxedo, just a regular, everyday ensemble. Instead of trying to draw the viewers' attention to one thing so he could manipulate another, Ulysses appeared comfortable allowing them to look wherever they wanted, to focus on any area that struck their fancy. Most looked right at the center of the trick, but John couldn't be the only one who, if the illusionist waved around his right hand, would keep an eye on his left. Whatever his personal methods, Ulysses was clearly very confident that the audience would fail to see through them.

*He's got balls, I'll give him that,* John thought with growing admiration.

Another difference was Ulysses' choice of "magic words." Most stage magicians had dismissed with "Abracadabra" or "Hocus Pocus" many years ago, but Ulysses clearly embraced the classic verbiage ... except that he didn't, quite. Instead of "Abracadabra," et cetera, he punctuated the climax of each trick by blurting some sort of foreign language. It didn't sound like pure gibberish to John, but nor did he recognize it; it sounded exotic, like Latin had sex with German. And he didn't project those words, either, but said them in a regular speaking voice; had John and Steve not been sitting so close to the small theatre's stage, he would not have heard them at all. Whatever they were, his favorite one seemed to be "*Nignius*;" he said it every time he used flash paper. It was another different approach, to be sure.

Then, as Ulysses entered what felt like the final act, the first thing happened that really revved up John's engine ...

Ulysses did not have an official "assistant," though one of the skimpily-dressed ladies from the pre-show popped on stage from time to time to move things around or take props away. One item, however, had been overlooked — the bottle from the Inexhaustible trick still rested on the little table at stage-right, having merely been shuffled aside rather than removed.

Ulysses was in the middle of a Cut and Restore Rope when someone backstage bumped against the side curtain, nudging the little table hard enough to jostle the bottle; it wobbled, then started to topple over the edge...

... except Ulysses glanced over, saw what was about to happen, and with only the slightest interruption to his current presentation, he flicked a pinky finger at it and muttered something that sounded like, "*Firmumin*."

The bottle had been on the edge of falling ... and then it wasn't. It was

steady on the table, with only the barest shake to hint that it had ever moved at all, and Ulysses plunged forward with his rope trick as though no disruption had occurred. Four or five other audience members must have seen it as well, because there was a smattering of applause and one audible gasp from the row behind them, but Ulysses had done it with such brief, casual grace that most of the crowd remain oblivious.

Thunderstruck, John sat with his mouth hanging open. What the hell was that? If Ulysses had called attention to it, he would have assumed it was a refreshing new trick, something to stand apart from the commonplace displays they had seen thus far ... but he hadn't. He had called *no* attention to it whatsoever, had treated it like anything gone wrong during a live performance — adjust, adapt, down-play, and hope the audience suspected nothing.

So what in the world had he just *seen*?

For the rest of the show, he studied every little move Ulysses made, waiting for something, *anything* else to occur like the toppling bottle that did not fall. But nothing did. Ulysses ambled through the rest of his act, took an almost impatient bow to his applauding audience, and disappeared backstage.

“Come on, we have to go, come on ...” John jabbered as he grabbed his brother’s wrist and pulled him across the row of seats, weathering grouching from offended people whose feet he trod upon and letting his mystified brother handle the mumbled apologies.

John remembered the layout of the theatre from his past visits, knew exactly where to find the back exit, where the talent would usually emerge. Steve gave up asking questions after the first thirty seconds and just followed him (and John probably would not have waited if he had fallen behind). John just *had* to meet Ulysses the Unbelievable, to talk with him, to get just the slightest hint of ... *something* to explain what he had seen with that damned bottle!

Hustling through the evening twilight, John released a very unmacho squeak of disappointment when he rounded the back corner and saw that, not only had Ulysses already exited the theatre, he was striding away from them at a brisk walk. He carried nothing with him, no rolling case of supplies, not even a briefcase. And he wasn't heading toward the parking lot, but crossing a small side street toward an alleyway between the neighboring buildings.

“Wait!” John cried as he broke into a sprint, desperate to catch up with the illusionist. “Wait, please!”

Ulysses didn't exactly glance back, but he did turn his head in profile, suggesting that he had heard John. Instead of stopping, however, he looked forward again and picked up his own pace.

"Please, *wait!*" John called, running faster.

"John, *you* wait up, damn it!" He heard his brother, but like Ulysses, he chose not to look back, just kept going, eyes only for his target.

Ulysses entered the alleyway and disappeared into the shadows.

*Come on, John,* whispered the growing voice that was maturity, and a sense of peril. *You aren't really going to chase a strange man into a dark alley with only your baby brother to save you. You're smarter than that.*

He did slow his pace, just a little, as he crossed the narrow street, but that was all the caution he was willing to indulge.

"John!" Steve shouted again, nearer this time, having closed the gap between them.

Thanks to the evening's gloom, John didn't have to wait long for his eyes to adjust to the relative darkness between the buildings. He spotted Ulysses almost at once; the bald man had stepped up onto the back entrance of the building on the right, the alcove almost but not quite hiding him from view.

Seeing that his quarry had finally stopped — he didn't know why, and he didn't care — John slowed further and gasped for breath. "Sir ... please, I ..."

Ulysses looked at him, glanced over John's shoulder (presumably at Steve), then returned his gaze. And he smiled. It wasn't a big smile, nor was it especially pleasant; it was more of a smirk, falling somewhere between humor and ... what? John wasn't sure.

Ulysses lifted one hand, twiddled his fingers in a farewell wave, then twisted his wrist around to wave at himself. He stated, "*Subcinctinin*" ... and then he was gone.

John cried out, stumbling backward so that Steve nearly ran into him.

"John, what the hell?" Steve grumbled, not even out of breath. "What was that all about?"

John didn't answer. His startlement at Ulysses' vanishing faded as his analytical mind took over: He had wanted to ask about the bottle, because he had never seen that particular trick before ... but a disappearing act? That was old hat for John Davison. If Harry Houdini could make an elephant disappear, how impressive could it be, really, for Ulysses to drop from sight?

... even if it *was* the smoothest execution John had ever seen, as

Ulysses had never broken their direct line of sight, had not passed behind or through anything, had simply been standing there and a heartbeat later he was gone ...

And so John spent the next half-hour studying every angle of the alcove, the door (which appeared to be locked solid from the inside *and* chained from the outside), the steps leading up to it, and then the alleyway itself. Steve tried talking to him several times, but after John's third or fourth monosyllabic dismissal, his brother sighed and helped him look around — even though he didn't understand what it was John was looking for, or why. John refused to give up until it started drizzling, and Steve reminded him that their parents would be expecting them home soon. Only then did John, grudgingly, leave the alleyway.

For weeks after that, John blathered about what had happened to anyone who would listen (and even to a few who clearly were not interested). Most thought it was hilarious that John Davison, *the* premiere illusionist fan/nitpicker, had finally seen a trick that even he couldn't explain.

They didn't get it. It wasn't that he couldn't explain it ... well, actually it was, but it was more so that he couldn't even *fathom* how it was done, especially when he was given unlimited access to the "stage" that was a simple alleyway (which he had revisited three times since, at different times of day, as well as inside the cleaning service that owned the business into which the back entrance led). It was an illusion beyond anything he could imagine, unless ...

Unless he had stumbled across *real* magic?

That notion both exhilarated and frightened him in a way that stage magicians had never achieved.

He played that particular theory a little closer to the chest, sharing it with only his closest friends and his brother. All of them, even Steve, laughed. He wasn't serious, right? Had all the magic shows finally shaken his sense of reality? Come on, man! Magic wasn't real.

Magic *wasn't* real. Obviously.

And so, for another week or more, that became his mantra as he tried to dismiss his silly ideas and get back to the real world.

Magic. Wasn't. Real.

That was that ...

... and then the Night of the White Flash happened. And the Paranormal Effect became undeniable. And to hammer the whole thing home, the newly-formed Paranormal Control Agency came knocking on

their dad's proverbial door, seeking his professional help in dealing with the brand-new superpowered rogue problem.

"Reality," as humankind perceived it, had taken a sharp left turn. And what was most hammered home for John was that the paranormals proved that the "impossible" could exist — and from John's renewed, excited point of view, the paranormals could not exist *without* magic. The White Flash had come from the heavens, so most people looked to an extraterrestrial origin. But to suddenly give random people superpowers? Modern science couldn't explain that, nor could modern medicine. But if one allowed for the existence of *real magic*, as far as John was concerned, that could explain a great many things.

"Maybe," Steve once tried to point out, "you're putting the cart before the horse? Or the chicken before the egg, or whatever?"

"Huh?" John had glanced up from an article about Ulysses the Unbelievable, one of the few he had been able to find. "What do you mean?"

"I think we're all a little more open to the idea of magic now," Steve stressed, "since we've got all these potential superheroes running around. But that's *after* the White Flash. You thought you saw that Ulysses guy disappear *before* the Paranormal Effect got started. Don't you think you're looking at it a little backwards?"

"Contrary to the theories of Stan Lee," John countered, his eyes already returning to the article, "radiation, even cosmic radiation, should not create superpowers; if that's what the White Flash was, a small percentage of us should have cancer, not superhuman gifts. *Magic* makes more sense than that, since it's all about bending the laws of reality. Which means magic had to come first." Then he grinned, just to show he appreciated his brother trying to reason with him about it. "Who needs to start with a chicken *or* an egg if you've got magic?"

Steve kind of nodded, a familiar gesture that suggested *I suppose* — but actually meant *I don't buy it, but I'm done arguing with you, so I give up* — and headed off to his bedroom.

John Davison was a young man on a mission. Yes, he acknowledged the awesome wonder, and dread, of the paranormals who walked among them. But he sought the miracle *behind* the miracle, the phenomenon that he believed was the true answer to the questions surrounding the White Flash and the Paranormal Effect. If he could track down the source of these earthshaking mysteries, it would prove the ultimate in killing two birds with one stone — or, put in less morbid fashion, embracing the best of both

worlds.

He soon determined that modern media wasn't going to help much; all he could find were standard fluff pieces (and it was salt in the wound that Ulysses never returned to perform at any local venues), and a general Internet search for "real magicians" was too broad a net to cast for his purpose. With college looming in his near future, he decided to major in History, with an emphasis on Ancient and Medieval History. He understood that the class curriculum itself would do little for his pursuit, but it might grant him access to rare books that he would otherwise never discover on his own. It was worth a shot, and it wasn't as though he had ever settled on any other major (in that respect, he and Steve were two peas in a pod).

High school graduation passed, college began, and John attacked his classes with a vengeance. By the end of his freshman year, he had very little to show for his private efforts, but he appreciated every tidbit he could scrape together. This prompted a switch in majors, from History to Literature, with an emphasis on Rare Classics; the latter led to his developing some contacts in the collectors' world — a few of which he even used for his class work.

He got chummy with some of the more eccentric collectors, and thanks to the Internet, that group spanned the globe. These connections led to some whispered gossip, gossip led to rumors ...

... and those rumors eventually led to the precious, expensive tome which he held in his hands tonight, the book which had sapped his next semester's tuition money, which was leading to the coming storm when his parents find out.

It was totally worth it.

Opening the book with gentle fingers, John turned to the only page he had marked with a soft, thin strip of ribbon. Midway down the page awaited the word which had convinced him to purchase the book at all cost, figurative and literal. The only word which he was certain he knew how to speak with the proper pronunciation, surrounded as it was by so many terms in that mysterious, probably dead language, because he had heard it spoken aloud by Ulysses the Unbelievable: *Subcinctinin*.

Oh, he had some ideas about other terms contained therein; his personal studies had taught him that much. But knowing how to actually incant them was another story. He had a good feeling about one or two others, but *this one* he knew how to say, and even had some solid leads on what it meant, both from his studies and the context of his initial experience: *Subcinctinin* meant "shift," or more literally, "transfer" or

“move elsewhere.”

Relaxing upon his bed, John whispered the word, “*Subcinctinin*,” over and over, until he fell asleep ...

### **PCA**

John jolted awake to the loudest thunder he had ever heard in his life.

Bolting upright, his thoughts fixated in an instant upon the treasured book, which still rested on his lap. Had he actually nodded off without putting it away? Irresponsible! Setting aside its considerable personal and monetary value, the last thing he needed was for his mom or dad or Steve to walk in and—

Another crash of thunder, even louder than the first. Jesus, was the lightning striking right across the street? In their yard?

John glanced toward his window. Hard to be sure from what little light peeked through the closed blinds, but it looked like typical early-morning sun. If a storm were brewing—

Thunder, yet again, this one so intense the water in his drinking glass on the nightstand rippled. If he didn’t know better, he could’ve sworn that one came from *inside* his own house—

More thunder. And this time, a scream. Aunt Carol? What in the world...?!

He couldn’t think straight. Between the rude awakening and the incredible noise, he felt addled, disoriented, almost detached. Was this a dream? It felt like it might be ...

Reaching for the book’s cloth cover, he attempted to focus at least that far, to get the book protected—

More thunder and another scream, this one with words, but he couldn’t make them out. Was that his cousin Dan?!

He shook his head, trying to clear it. Something horrible was happening, and he needed to get his act together and find out what.

Against his better judgement, he moved the book to his pillow, prepared to leave it aside until—

The next thunder wasn’t quite as deafening as the others, but it wasn’t soft, either. He heard more voices, but he missed those because he was staring at the book.

When that last thunder struck, the words on the open pages had ... pulsed? No, not the words, the page surrounding the words, the paper turning just a little more white than its current aged-yellow.

No, that didn't make sense. And he didn't have the luxury of dealing with a trick of the eye right now.

Crossing his bedroom, John reached for his doorknob, then hesitated. He didn't know what exactly was happening out there, but the screams and yelling — not to mention the goddamn thunder! — did not paint a pretty picture. Should he grab a weapon? He didn't have a gun, not even the BB variety, but he had an aluminum baseball bat in the closet ...

Then he heard the first distinct words, coming from his dad. "Richard, stop!" his father yelled, pleaded, begged. "No, Richard, please—!"

Then his dad howled in anguish.

Instinct overrode common sense, and John opened the door sans weapon.

Poking his head out just enough to see, he peeked to the left first. He could make out the open doors to his brother's room and the guest bedroom. Steve's room looked undisturbed, but a small fire burned in the guest room where his aunt and uncle had slept. And God, what was that horrible stench?

He glanced to the right into his parents' bedroom, which appeared to be empty, but he could see the wood smoldering on their open door, as though scorched. What in—?

Movement caught the corner of his eye from back the other direction; someone was emerging from the guest room, some guy with red hair. He was looking back over his shoulder, raising his right hand about chest high, so he didn't see John yet.

What should he do? Press the advantage while the guy was still oblivious to his presence? He wasn't exactly an action hero — that would be Steve's role. Where was his brother when—?

A flash of bright white light erupted from the redhead's palm, and John understood the source of the thunder.

*A paranormal!* he gasped, barely holding it inside. *A rogue, in our house!*

He didn't understand any of this, but he recognized the danger he was in, and he eased back into his room, pushing the door closed with the gentlest of clicks. He turned the lock on the knob, but how long would his wooden door stand up against *lightning*?

Turning around, his mind juggled between calling the cops or the PCA, resuming his search for a weapon, or just crawling out the window. He couldn't leave, could he? His father was still wailing out there, and he had no idea about his mother or brother. But what could he *do*?!

That was when his gaze swept across the open book ... and halted.

Before, he thought the page had “pulsed” into a brighter white; now, the paper practically *glowed* before his eyes.

His hands trembling for a myriad of reasons, he reached out and lifted the tome. The archaic ink remained, for the most part, the same against the luminescent paper, except for a few scattered words, which each looked darker, deeper than before.

One of those words was *Subcinctinin*.

“*Subcinctinin* ...” John whispered aloud.

Did the text, that word, swell in response?

Another bolt of lightning and thunder, small by comparison but still ominous inside the confines of the house, and the book — the text, that word — reacted in kind.

Was the book ... was it *feeding* off the rogue’s power?

A casual rap sounded from the door. “Knock, knock,” came a stranger’s voice, dripping with sarcasm, “anyone home?”

But John was fixated on that word, *feeling* it in a way that he never had before. “*Subcinctinin* ...”

The word swelled beyond question this time, the ink raised into a third dimension, puffy to the touch on the page; John checked, to be sure he wasn’t just seeing things.

The door handle rattled a bit, and the man singsonged, “I think there iiiiiiss ...”

“*Subcinctinin*,” he said, louder; the text responded in kind.

The stranger’s chuckle drifted through the locked door. “Sure, whatever floats your boat.”

The air crackled with electricity, the thunder rattled John’s teeth, and the door warped out of shape, but remained closed — for the moment.

The pages glowed so bright, most of the words became difficult to see. But not *Subcinctinin* — that remained clear as day.

“*Subcinctinin!*” he cried, even as a foot connected with the door and it broke open ...

... and then John Davison was somewhere else.

**PCA**

Graham kicked open the door with another lightning bolt already primed and ready to fire. Because, hey, *someone* in this family had to be able to put up a damn fight eventually, right? According to McLane, the

only one who might have was that sad sack Graham had taken out on the motorcycle. Still, didn't hurt to be safe.

The door flew open and Graham saw someone in pajama bottoms sitting on the edge of the bed, his hands out in front of him as though reading a book, except Graham didn't see a book. Then again, Graham wasn't sure *what* he was seeing, because it didn't make a lot of sense. The guy in the pajamas looked ... weird, wrong, his skin kind of mottled and green-ish, like he was really sick — like, on-death's-door sick. He looked up at Graham with dark eyes and snarled like an animal, exposing toothless gums that were black instead of pink.

Was one of these Davison people a paranormal? McLane didn't say anything about that. Hell, this guy barely looked human ...

*To hell with this!*

Edgy, and a little freaked out, Graham cut loose with his prepped lightning, striking the guy — the thing? — square in the chest just as he rose to his feet. He convulsed, as Graham had seen many times before ... then burst into flames, which Graham had *not* seen before, not so quickly anyway, not after a single bolt.

The guy (thing?) screeched, and even roaring like a bonfire, took a step toward Graham.

Graham hit him (it?) again. And again, the third bolt striking after his target stopped moving.

But the weirdness didn't stop there. His victim had caught fire from head to toe, yet was already burning down to ash. Like, he had combusted big time and then just ... fizzled, leaving a pile of human-shaped soot.

Graham blinked a few times, trying to slow his breathing, regain his cool. Because really, what had he just seen here? He had been firing lightning bolt after lightning bolt since they stormed the house, so it was understandable that he had a lot of spots floating about his vision. Maybe the guy was paranormal, maybe he wasn't; the important part was, he was down, which was what McLane wanted on this little revenge run of his.

Speaking of revenge, he heard more screams from the other side of the house, and these were kind of gargled and choking, which suggested they were just about done here. Better to skip out, before the cops or the PCA had time to respond.

He sneaked one last look at the ashen remains, which barely smoldered at this point. Yeah, probably best not to mention this to McLane; he wouldn't want the big man to think he was starting to hallucinate under pressure.

Closing the door on this unsettling experience, Graham walked away from John Davison's bedroom.

**THREE-HUNDRED-NINETY-SEVEN  
YEARS AGO**

## THE GLADIUS

One moment, John Davison was huddled in his bedroom, chanting the magic word, waiting for the rogue who could shoot lightning from his hand to burst through the door ...

... and then, a heartbeat later, he was very cold.

And very naked.

He felt no transition, no sense of movement or displacement, he was simply at home, in his room, and then he was here. Wherever “here” was.

Blinking, shivering, John took in his new surroundings. He appeared to be in a very small grove deep in some forest. It wasn't snowing at the moment, but there was snow in dirty clumps around the trunk of each tall, thick tree. Back home, it had been after dawn, but the light here smacked more of twilight, or maybe night under a full moon; he glanced upward, but couldn't see the moon through the trees.

A strong shudder caused him to grip the book tighter, which was the first time he realized he still held it open in his hands. The pages were no longer glowing, the pertinent text back to normal. Why had the book come with him, but not his pajama pants? Not that the latter would have helped all that much; if he didn't find a way to get warm soon ...

Closing the book and holding it against his chest, less to protect it than to capture whatever body heat he could, he considered what to do. He had only the most basic knowledge of building a campfire; he had never been a Scout. In fact, the closest he had come to actual, outdoor camping was during his *Dungeons & Dragons* role-playing with his friends when he was younger. He doubted he would be able to build a fire by sprinkling magic dust onto some wood. Then again ...

He considered the book in his arms, but only for a moment. He believed in magic, now more than ever; the conviction that it was the chanted “*Subcinctinin*” which brought him here was the only reason he

wasn't freaking out more about his sudden change in locale. But "*Subcinctinin*" was the only word he knew so far, and since he had no idea how to direct it — if he had, he would have teleported to PCA headquarters, not into a dark, cold forest! — he doubted he would find help therein.

*Teleported to the PCA, because my family's in trouble ...*

But he couldn't think about that. Not yet.

His feet were already numb. He needed to hustle.

His first move should be to gather wood, and maybe pine needles — he would probably need those for kindling. He would have to figure out how to make some sparks, too, but one step at a time.

Moving underneath the nearest tree, he bent to gather the needles ... except there weren't any.

Stepping back again, he examined the woods, the trees, with greater attention. Given how cold it was but how lush the trees still were, he had assumed that he was surrounded by pine trees. But this was not the case. The trees were filled with dark leaves; it was difficult to be certain in the dusk, but the leaves looked almost black. What kind of trees were these? He had no idea.

John had been so absorbed with the cold and his surroundings, he had not thought about how quiet it was, with barely a breeze making a sound ... until he heard something new. Turning his head, he tried to figure out what it was and where it was coming from; he thought it might be the mushy *clip-clop* of horse hooves on dirt, but he wasn't at all sure.

He didn't have to wait long to found out.

Only seconds had passed since the *clip-clop* sound registered when a large beast emerged from amongst the black-leaved trees right in front of him. The black-and-white animal, which was a horse and yet not *quite* a horse, halted before him without a whinny, its breath steaming through its nostrils. It had no mane ... or rather, it did, but it did not appear to be made of horse hair, looking too ropey. And the teeth that gripped the bit were too long, too fang-like.

"H-hello?" he called, craning his neck to see the rider. Because there had to be a rider, right? The horse/not-horse had a bit in its mouth, which implied reins, which implied a rider.

He was right; a person perched atop the horse/not-horse — a tall, long-haired, feminine figure covered in brown furs against the cold.

John remembered that he was naked and lowered the book accordingly.

"Hello," he repeated. "Can you please help me? I'm ... lost."

It wasn't until he said "lost" aloud that he truly began to feel frightened. Not just of his strange surroundings, but for his family — except for that fleeting thought after wishing he had appeared at the PCA HQ, he had managed to hold the horror of what was happening back home at bay. But it all rushed forward now.

"Please help me," he gushed, "my family's being hurt and I don't know where I am and I think they're all being killed by the rogue with the lightning and now I'm naked and—"

As his ranting erupted, the rider brought her leg over and slipped in calm fashion from the horse/not-horse's back, her dark hair whipping around her. She approached him, demonstrating that she was indeed quite tall as she looked down at him ... and then she slapped him; not hard, but hard enough.

John stopped talking.

"*Quissen ess?*" In spite of her height, standing over six feet — and the fact that she had just smacked him — her voice was soft, gentle, tender. Her eyes, the only part of her covered face that he could see, were a bright green.

Always sharp on the uptake, he replied, "I ... what?"

"*Quissen ess?*" she repeated, slower.

"I ... I don't understand you. Do—?" A cold shiver hit him hard, but he pushed through it. "D-Do you speak English?"

Her head tilted to one side.

"I'll take that as a 'no,'" he commented, forcing a friendly smile which prompted no reaction from the tall woman. "Look, do you have a cell phone?" He mimed using one. "Phone? A mobile phone?"

Nothing. She just stared at him.

What was with this woman, anyway? She had to know he was freezing his balls off (almost literally!), so even if she didn't understand his words, he would have expected her to help him *somehow*, even if nothing more than offering him one of her furs.

He tried something else, slipping the book under his arm, and caring far less about how it left him exposed. He mimed wrapping something around himself.

"M-May I have a b-blanket, please?" he asked. "I'm very c-cold." Hell, his chattering teeth should convey that.

She had stopped looking at his face and was instead staring at the book. In total silence, she reached out and snagged it with one hand while pushing him back with the other.

“Hey!” he protested, half because he almost fell on his butt, half out of possessiveness for his treasured prize.

The tall woman flipped the book open, turned a page, then another, then slammed the book shut with a loud *crack*. Stepping forward, she pointed a finger at him, her quickening breath steaming through her face wrap.

“What—?” he tried to ask.

But she cut him off. “*Sonin, ubiit impattros tis?*” she snapped, then repeated from before, “*Quissen ess, sonin?!*”

John shook his head. “I still d-don’t—”

Her pointing finger jabbed him in the chest with each word. “*Quissen - santis - ess?*”

“I don’t understand you!” he yelled, frustration and bewilderment and fear bolstering him as he batted her hand away. “And stop poking me!”

For a moment, her green eyes burned with such intensity, he thought she was going to punch him in the face ...

... but then she calmed down, her eyes and voice growing kinder once more as she asked, “*Ess nani hincen ... ess?*”

He shook his head again, folding his arms against his shivering chest. “Still n—not getting it.”

She took a step back and looked him over, finally seeming to absorb the state he was in, how cold and vulnerable he was. “*Trigiddius ess, tono ess?*”

John shrugged at that; in spite of the situation, he was beginning to feel sleepy. He didn’t know for a fact if that was a symptom of hypothermia, but he would be willing to bet on it.

At last she got with the program and, with surprising grace, twirled her outermost fur covering from her own shoulders and onto his.

“Th-Thank you,” he stammered, huddling into the blessed warmth; he feared he might lose some toes soon if he didn’t get his feet warm, too, but progress was progress.

The woman seemed to understand his intention, if not his words, and said, “*Tisi satta.*” Which he was pretty sure was the equivalent of, “You’re welcome.”

They just stood there in silence for a moment, John unsure of what to try next. He was so afraid for his family, and yet all of this was overwhelming him to the point where he just wanted to shut down. Pretty soon, he was going to fall asleep on his freezing feet, and this stranger would have to do whatever she was going to do ...

Then the woman reached up to uncover her face. And, for a moment, John was again wide awake.

“She” wasn’t a *she* after all ... or was she? Maybe hypothermia really was setting in, because what he was seeing made about as much as sense as ...

*As teleporting yourself away from danger with a magic word?*

Her eyes were green, he had known that, but he could not have predicted the silver hue to her skin, which was beautiful against her dark hair. Her chin was extremely narrow, given the width of her jaw. Her eyebrows swept upward at a steep angle, like a Vulcan on *Star Trek*. Her ears were pointed, too, though they looked less like Mister Spock and more like Nosferatu.

Even with all the “her,” he still wasn’t positive about her gender. Her voice and her body were feminine, but those facial features left her far more androgynous. But why did she look like this at all? Why—?

Then the explanation came to him, and it was so obvious he felt stupid.

“You’re a paranormal,” he said aloud.

She said nothing to that, not understanding him any more than before.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, his adrenaline rush already fading. “Sorry, I was just b-being a little slow. Of course you’re a p-paranormal.”

She offered a little shrug to that, then placed her hand on her fur-covered chest and said, “*Dryal*.”

Ah. Her name? “Dree-al?”

She repeated, “*Dryal*.”

“Dree-all.”

She smiled and shrugged, apparently content with his effort to repeat it. And then she waited, expectant.

He wanted to say, *You know, lady, I’m a little too cold for introductions right now*. But as she was his only benefactor at the moment...

“John,” he said. “My name is John.”

Her high brow furrowed. “Joo-an?”

He shook his head, his eyes barely open at this point. “John,” he repeated.

“Juu ... on?”

*For Christ’s sake, it’s not that hard to say “John.”*

But she seemed to be having trouble with the “o,” for whatever reason, so he tried a different tactic (anything to hurry this along!), switching to a nickname a friend of his tried to get started way back in elementary school.

“Try this: ‘J. D.’ ‘J’ ... ‘D’ ...”

She mulled that for a second, then said, “*Jay ... dee?*”

“J. D.”

“*Jaydee.*”

*Close enough.* He nodded with a sluggish smile ...

... and then he collapsed, pitching forward right onto his face.

Except he didn’t land on his face. Because she caught him before he hit the ground.

*Strong for such a thin gal ...* He might have chuckled, if he had the energy. Which he most definitely did not.

The stranger — Dryal — not only caught him, she scooped him up in her arms and carried him back to her horse/not-horse.

*She gonna throw me over the saddle?* he wondered, wanting to giggle over it. *And what’d she do with my book? Did it just disappear? Magic!*

Then he heard another voice. A man’s voice, calling from the woods.

Dryal called back.

A second fur-clad figure appeared. Shorter, but stockier, more masculine, or so John thought; he was having trouble seeing. They conversed in their language, whatever it was, and then the new fellow leaned in, pulled down his own face covering.

Same silver skin, same brows, same ears; the only differences were a somewhat wider chin and purple-ish eyes.

*Huh,* John thought. *Two paranormals who changed the same way? What’re the odds? Any takers?*

Then they were lifting him up, and the last thoughts John Davison (who would apparently be known as “J. D.” for the time being) had before he drifted away into a dark, cold, fitful slumber were of his family, prayers that they would be all right, and that he would see them again soon ...

**PARANORMALS**  
**DARKNESS REIGNS**

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

CHRISTOPHER ANDREWS lives in California with his wife, Yvonne Isaak-Andrews, and their wonderful daughter, Arianna. In addition to his duties as stay-at-home Dad, he is always working on his next novels, and continues to work as an actor and screenwriter.

Excerpts from all of Christopher's novels can be found at [www.ChristopherAndrews.com](http://www.ChristopherAndrews.com).