

Excerpt from **ROTWOOD**

(my upcoming horror novel)

Logline: A 12-year-old boy named Ozzie uses comic books and heavy metal to cope with the divorce of his parents, plus, there's a creepy tree in his backyard that eats pets.

Chapter 10

Dragons Never Die

I put the Snickers bar, ice-cold can of root beer, and a copy of *Jungle of Doom* #42 on the counter next to the cash register.

The cashier is this older teenage girl with blonde hair down to her chin, and she dyed her bangs hot pink. She's got a silver nose ring on her left nostril (I wonder how much it hurt to get that?) and a lot of dark makeup around her eyes. Her name tag says Tiffany on it. She pulls out a hand-held laser scanner and starts zapping my stuff into the register. I notice that she's wearing a fingerless fishnet glove on one of her hands. Not sure what that'll protect her hand from...

When she's done ringing it all up, Tiffany says, "That'll be \$2.52."

I lay my three crumpled dollars on the counter and drop two pennies on top. "Can I get the change back in quarters?" I ask.

"Sure," she says. She tosses two quarters onto the cover of my comic and then shoves in the cash drawer until it clicks. "Do you need a bag for that?"

"No, I'm fine," I tell her. "I'll just use my backpack."

"OK, but you better stash that stuff in your bag while you're right here at the counter, because... you know," she leans in and whispers, "Big Brother is always watching." She points at the cameras up in the corners of the room. "Wouldn't want him thinking you're trying to pull a 5-finger discount."

“Um, sure,” I say as I put my backpack on the counter, unzip it, and stash the comic book inside. I look at her like she just told me the trickiest riddle ever. I lower my voice too and say, “I thought Pops owned this place... who’s Big Brother?”

“Don’t sweat it, kid. Better that you don’t know.”

Big Brother must be some really mean dude that works security for Pops. He’s probably watching me right now through those cameras. I guess I better not ask about that discount, then.

I put on my backpack, grab my candy bar and soda, and head over to the arcade machines. I glance over and see that Lewis is still reading that same issue of *Dr. Phantasm*. He must be right at the end by now. I’ll just check out the pinball machine while I wait for him to finish up.

I couldn’t make out what was on the lit-up signboard of the pinball machine from across the room, but I can read it clear as day now: Elvira & The Party Monsters. I didn’t know Elvira had her own pinball machine! Man, Elvira is the coolest creepy chick ever. I remember staying up late a few times with my dad to catch her late-night show. She loves showing the worst movies she can find—just so she can make fun of how bad they are. I think one of the ones we saw was called *Psycho Cyborg Slave Girls from Planet Z*, or something like that. You could just tell from the title that it was going to be a wild ride. I can’t remember the movie’s plot, it’s all kind of blurry now, but I do remember there were lots of ladies covered in shiny chrome armor, lots of lasers shooting everywhere, and lots of lovesick guys bursting into flames after kissing robotic babes. My kind of flick.

On the lit-up backboard of the pinball machine, Elvira is hosting the spookiest barbecue ever. It’s in the graveyard at night with a haunted house in the back, and all the classic movie monsters are hanging out. The Wolfman is wearing shades and holding up a glass mug of *Elvira’s Party Punch*—which is oddly green and being brewed up in a witch’s cauldron by a couple of skeletons (one of which is using it as a jacuzzi). Dracula is drinking blood, but out of a wine bottle and wine glass, like a proper gentleman. Frankenstein is in the back, curling some dumbbells while wearing a muscle shirt that says *Ghoul’s Gym* on it. The Mummy is trying to grab the burning hot dog that Elvira is serving up. Sitting on a stone pedestal is this

smiling zombie head who has long hippie hair and a headband with a peace symbol on it—underneath the head it reads: *Deadheads never die... they just mellow with age.*

You can tell they put two light bulbs right behind Elvira's boobs, 'cuz they kept lighting up like a pair of headlights. On her TV show, Elvira would always wear this long slinky black dress that had a big wide cut down the front to show off her chest—pretty sure that's why my dad liked watching her show, not because of her corny jokes. One time he even asked me, "So, Ozzie, what do you think of Elvira's rack?"

"Her rack?" I said.

"You know. Her cans. Her hooters. Her jugs. Her bazookas. C'mon, I know you and the guys talk about this stuff."

"Um, you mean her boobs?"

"Yes, thank you, finally. Well, what do ya think of 'em?"

"Well, they're really round, and they look really soft... it's like they defy gravity... like two fleshy balloons..."

"Uh, Ozzie," Lewis says right next to me, snapping me out of my sleazy memory. "Are you staring at Elvira's boobs?"

"What? Me? No, I... I was checking out all the cool monsters. And there's all these dumb jokes on the gravestones, you know, like "Party 'til You Drop Dead" and "R.I.P. ~ Rest in Party!" That's some funny stuff right there."

"Right..."

"Anyway," I clear my throat, "we're here to play some Double Dragon. I used to play this game at the 7-Eleven in my old neighborhood. Have you tried it yet?"

"No, not yet," Lewis says. "Pops just got this one in. They had some ninja game here before this one."

"All right, I'll give you the lowdown, then. It's called Double Dragon because two people can play at once, and both players are like dragons since they can do martial arts."

“Like Bruce Lee’s *Enter the Dragon*, right?”

“Exactly.”

I stash my candy bar in the outer pouch of my backpack and put it on the ground, leaning up against the side of the arcade cabinet, which has the artwork for *Double Dragon* on it—two tough dudes with buff arms, tight jeans, and bandanas tied around their foreheads, with a couple of dragons snaking around behind them. I call Lewis over to get a better look at it.

“See,” I say to him, “these are the two guys you can play as. I think their supposed to be brothers, but they have different color hair, so maybe they’re just best buds.” I point at the tattoos on their bulging biceps. “I’m pretty sure their names are Spike and Hammer since that’s what their tattoos say.”

“I call dibs on Hammer,” Lewis says. “Rather be a hammer than a nail. Nails get hit by hammers.”

“Yeah, that’s true, I guess. Still, Spike is a pretty badass name. You don’t mess with a dude named Spike.”

Not that I ever met one.

I put my soda down on the glass top of the pinball machine, then I reach into my pocket and pull out my change. I do a quick recount.

“I’ve got five quarters, how about you?”

Lewis checks. “I’ve got three.”

“Okay, should be enough to make it to the end of the game. I’ve never passed it before, but I came pretty close a couple of times. Don’t worry, I’ll spot you a quarter if you need one.”

“Thanks.”

“All right,” I say, pinching a quarter and holding it up. “Let’s fire this puppy up.”

My quarter goes clink down the coin slot, which makes the text on the title screen change from “INSERT COIN” to “PLAYER 1 PRESS START.” Lewis slides

his quarter into the second slot. The text changes to "PLAYER 1 OR 2 PRESS START." Lewis reaches for his START button, but then I say, "Whoa, hold on."

"Why?" Lewis says, looking confused. "What's wrong?"

"When I used to play this game with a couple of kids that lived on my street, we used to always say this thing before we started a game of Double Dragon. Something for good luck."

"What would you say?"

"Dragons never die!" I say, holding up a clenched fist and scrunching up my brow so I look really mean.

Lewis chuckles. "Nice. I'm with it."

"Say it with me, Lewis, and then we'll begin our epic kung-fu quest. 3... 2... 1."

"Dragons never die!" we both say together.

We both press our START buttons.

The game begins.