

CHAPTER FIVE

They checked for cars and neighbors to make sure no one saw them. It seemed to take a year to walk down the pathway from Janie's porch to the street, gravel crunching under foot. Her heart pounded, and it hardly seemed real.

When they reached the gate, she made no move to open it.

Reggie reached in front of her and opened the gate. "Hurry up." He pushed her through with a hand on her back. "Somebody's gonna see us."

He propelled her all the way down the walk, up the creaking porch steps, and to the front door. He paused, bent down, and unzipped his school bag, which Janie had forgotten he had with him. He pulled out a flashlight.

"You keep a flashlight in your backpack?"

"Yes, I do. And you have no idea how many times it's been useful."

He grinned mischievously. This made Janie feel better, as she had started to feel all too serious.

He motioned towards the door. "You wanna do the honors?"

Janie smiled back, and relaxed a little, though her hand shook when she reached out. The doorknob turned easily. She had half-expected it to be locked. She pushed the door open, holding her breath, and let it out slowly as they peered inside. Reggie shined his flashlight into the shadowed corners of the entryway.

They couldn't see much at first except dust motes flying around in the beams of sunlight coming through the open door. Their eyes did not adjust quickly to the dramatic contrast between dark and light. They slowly stepped inside.

"Watch your step," Reggie said.

She still held the doorknob. "I don't want to shut the door behind us."

"You have to, or someone will notice it's open."

She pushed it to, hoping it wouldn't latch.

The foyer was larger than they expected. A steep staircase stood centered in front of the doorway, its banisters curving outward and circling around so the stairs at the bottom were wider than those at the top. Spacious hallways lined either side of it with closed doors running three deep. An old chandelier with a thousand swaying prisms hung above their heads, and when

Reggie pointed his flashlight at it, tiny points of light splashed out and twinkled on the walls, giving some idea of the grandeur of the past. Two ornate claw-foot sideboards with marbled tops faced them from the sidewalls, and large, matching sconces hung just behind their heads on either side of the doorway.

“This is intimidating,” Janie said, breaking the silence with a whisper.

“It is, a little, isn’t it?”

“You were supposed to say something to make me feel better.”

They had not yet taken another step since closing the front door behind them, though their eyes had become accustomed to the gloom.

“OK,” Reggie said, “let’s get moving. That’s why we’re here, after all. The floor looks all right.” He bounced on his toes to demonstrate, creating only one small creak from a disgruntled floorboard. “I don’t think we’re going to have to worry about it caving in.” He started walking. “That’s good. I didn’t want to have to stare at my feet the whole time.”

Janie trailed close behind him.

He suddenly flailed madly, and she clapped her hand over her mouth to keep from screaming.

He recovered quickly and whispered, “Just cobwebs. Should’ve expected that.”

She stifled a laugh. “Yeah, well, I’m glad you’re in front.”

“OK,” he said, “let’s stay together and look at everything before moving on to the next area. I want to make sure we don’t miss anything.”

Janie just nodded, too busy soaking up the details of this place that had been a mystery for so long.

They continued walking past the front of the staircase. The doors were dark and heavy, with ornate carvings veiled by cobweb draperies. They could see now that the hall wrapped all the way around the staircase, and you could walk underneath it to the other side. One more door stood in the back wall behind the staircase. They circled their way back to the front and stopped.

They had both been very quiet, but Reggie suddenly yelled, “Hello? Anybody here?” It hung in the air like the ring of a bell.

Janie whirled on him. “What are you doing?! That’s not a very scientific way to search the house. I thought you wanted to be thorough!”

“Sorry.” He laughed without trying to be quiet. “Honestly, I couldn’t handle the intensity anymore. This is supposed to be an adventure.”

“Well, sure, now that anyone who may have been in here is out the back door and running down the street.”

His grin remained. “I wouldn’t have done it if I thought there were people in here, anyhow. Didn’t you look at the floor when we came in? The dust hadn’t been disturbed in ages. And if the whole house lit up last night like you say it did, there would have had to be a ton of people in here at once, or at least just one person who had taken some time to rig it all up, and there’s no way that could be done without kicking this dust around.”

He kicked at the floor and a new cloud puffed around his foot.

“*If* the house lit up like I said? Are you saying you don’t believe me?”

“No, that is NOT what I’m saying.” He rolled his eyes. “Don’t be so defensive. I’m thinking the owners really must have had this place rigged to do some crazy stuff from the beginning. Maybe they just upped the juice on it on recently or something.”

“Well, *I’m* thinking they would have had to have some pretty advanced stuff for the house to stop lighting up when I look at it. I’ve never seen technology that would be able to sense someone looking,” Janie said.

“Yeah, that’s true. I guess I hoped the lights just happened to go off when you decided to look.”

“You read the log book, right? And saw how many times that happened? I’ve been watching this house for, literally, years.”

“You’re right.” He held up his hands in surrender. “Just trying to be practical.”

“There’s nothing practical about it. Especially now, because I see you have to be right about the dust.” She could see every footprint and every scuff they had made since entering, but no evidence of anyone else. “So, whatever has been going on in here has been happening without human aid, which makes it even weirder.”

“Whoa, back up, are you trying to say there’s something weird and paranormal going on in here? ‘Cause I don’t believe in stuff like that.”

Janie opened her mouth to respond but stopped when a bright light suddenly gleamed from the crack underneath the door at the very back of the hallway. She grabbed Reggie’s arm, nails digging into his flesh. He followed her gaze, and they both stood glued to the spot.

“We should open it,” she whispered after a pause. “This is why we came, after all.”

They crept silently to the door, forgetting they’d given up on being quiet only moments before.

Reggie nodded at Janie and raised his flashlight over his head, ready to use it as a weapon – ready for anything.

Janie reached for the doorknob.