

CHAPTER ONE

SITTING ON THE PORCH STEPS of his aunts' Victorian house, Neil Cady clutched a small satchel in his lap and waited for his new friend, Wesley Baptiste, to arrive. Neil had found the bag at the back of the pantry in his aunts' kitchen and knew it would be perfect for exploring Graylock Hall. Inside, he'd stashed a small flashlight for the shadows, one of his sister's bobby pins for picking locks, a bottle of water, some plastic sandwich bags for collecting evidence, his digital camera, and a notebook and pen.

The night before, Wesley had told him the legend of Nurse Janet. Even after hearing the dire warning to "keep out of Graylock . . . or else!" that concluded the tale, Neil wanted nothing more than to get inside the asylum in the woods to see for himself what the fuss was about.

When it came to ghosts, spirits, and spooky things, Neil considered himself an expert. He and his friends back in New Jersey knew how to create a Ouija board with poster board and a Sharpie marker, how to capture a spirit on film, how to recognize the prickly feeling you get in supposedly haunted places. These all took practice to master, but Neil had some good mentors. His favorite show, *Ghostly Investigators*, was on every Friday night. Neil had not missed an episode since the show had debuted two years ago. The hosts, Alexi and Mark, had three great tips for

optimizing data collection during a ghost hunt: Keep your batteries fresh, your mind open, and your underwear clean.

“Waiting for the bus home?”

Neil turned to find his older sister, Bree, standing behind him in the doorway.

“Har-har,” said Neil, swiveling away from her. “So funny, you are.”

“I don’t think it’s coming,” said Bree, continuing the joke. She stepped out onto the porch, pretending to gaze down the quiet street. A strong breeze shook the leaves in the woods across the road, as if a phantom vehicle were passing by on its way to an unfathomable destination. After a moment, Bree sat down next to him. “Seriously, though, why do you look like you’re going somewhere? Aunt Claire and Aunt Anna told us to wait here for them.”

“Aunt Claire mentioned that they’d ‘be right back.’ Neither of them said a thing about waiting for them.”

His sister pursed her lips. “They’re picking up groceries to cook us dinner tonight. The waiting was *implied*. I don’t want to get on their bad side after only two days up here.”

“I’ve got plans,” said Neil softly. *The more time I spend around the aunts, the more I think about Mom.* He kept the thought to himself.

“Plans?” Bree squinted at him, as if to scold him. “Oh, well, you’ve *got plans*. Sor-ry.”

Frustrated, Neil was about to shout out the truth — *I need to think about something else!* — when she gently touched his arm.

“You’re not the only one having a hard time with all of this. Come on.” Bree tilted her head at the door behind her. “Let’s watch TV.”

"I'm not having a hard time with anything," Neil lied. "I just don't feel like moping around when we have a whole new town to explore."

"You're skipping out on the aunts to explore Hedston?" Bree's tone conjured a picture in his mind of the run-down main street he'd first encountered a couple days ago. The polluted river smelled a bit like old coffee; a short, yellow waterfall poured over a concrete divider near the small bridge at the town's edge. Rusted train tracks — the wooden ties of which were well on their way to a state of rot — crossed through what had once been a thriving business district, and grass had grown so high between the disintegrating planks that when the wind rustled the tall stalks, it almost sounded like a whistle. The sidewalks of Hedston were cracked and crumbling.

Step on a crack . . . It was a wonder that up here everyone's mother didn't have a broken back.

"Aunt Claire's pie shop is the only thing this place has going for it," Bree continued, resigned. "What else do you and Wesley think you're going to find out there?"

"We're not going into town."

Bree flinched. "Then, where are you going?"

Neil hesitated. "The insane asylum. Graylock Hall?"

"It's a psychiatric hospital," Bree said. "I don't think people call them asylums anymore except in horror movies."

"Wesley says it's haunted. We're going looking for ghosts."

"No way."

"What do you mean, 'no way'?" Neil fumed.

"Give me a break, Neil! In what world do you think it's okay for you to break into an abandoned building? Who knows what

toxic stuff is floating around? Never mind what might be hiding in there. Or who.”

Neil cringed — he should have just lied. *Why does lying always get such a bad rap?* The thought of an empty building in the woods had been his only incentive to get out of bed that morning. Since Wesley had told him about the hospital the night before, he’d been ecstatic to have a *real* reason to be here in Hedston. It was something to do — somewhere to go, to escape the idea of his parents. Back in New Jersey, his mother was lost in a swarm of anxious thought, trouble that had been sparked by his father’s departure earlier that year to pursue a long dreamed of acting career in California.

Neil’s parents had created their own hideaways, both real and imagined, and now Neil would too. Like parent, like child. He hoped the mystery of Nurse Janet would be his escape from all this. Thank goodness for nonexistent cell service near the mountains, or else Bree might actually have a chance of stopping him. The aunts were virtually unreachable at the grocery store.

Still, they could turn into the driveway at any moment.

“Since you’re so worried about me, why don’t you come too?” Neil said, forcing himself to smile, shrugging his shoulders, chuckling a bit.

When his sister raised an eyebrow, he realized he’d laid it on way too thick.

“Nice try.” Bree grabbed his arm. “Come on. Inside.”

Neil began to pull away, when a sputtering noise came up the driveway. Thin rubber tires kicked up gravel. A boy on a bicycle skidded to a stop. Wesley Baptiste.

“Hey, Neil! You ready?”

Someone else turned off the street and rode swiftly up the path. He stopped beside Wesley and lifted off his helmet. Neil realized instantly who the boy was. Wesley had mentioned an older brother but had said nothing about him coming with them. “This is Eric.”

Eric was like a stretched-out version of his little brother — his face longer, his jawbone more angular, his shoulders wider. His eyes and skin were slightly darker than his little brother’s, but it was obvious that the two boys came from the same parents. Straddling his bike, Eric waved a curt salute.

“His band kicked him out this morning,” said Wesley, “so he decided to tag along. He plays guitar.”

Eric’s smile dropped away, and he threw a death glare at his little brother. “They didn’t *kick* me out,” he said, almost to himself. “I quit. They’re a terrible band.”

Bree stood, moving in a single fluid motion, like a dancer lifting delicately off a stage. Neil watched as she smoothed her long brown hair and straightened the hem of her baby blue T-shirt. “I play the viola,” she said. As the words escaped her mouth, she blushed. Eric simply stared at her. “So . . . I know how hard it can be to work with other musicians — an orchestra, in my case, which is slightly different. But still . . .” She cleared her throat. “Maybe I should come with you guys too,” she said, glancing at Neil. “I mean, it’s probably a good idea to have some adults there. For safety’s sake.” Neil pressed his lips together. He hated when she made him feel like a kid, even though she was a mere four years older than him. “I just need to grab my sneakers. Wait for me?” She dashed back into the house, not listening for an answer, slamming the screen door behind her.

“Who’s an adult?” Wesley said to Neil. “I thought you said Bree was only sixteen.”

“Give the girl a break,” Eric said softly. “She’s looking for an adventure. Just like you guys.”

Neil raised an eyebrow as Wesley smiled at him.