

Creep

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CHAPTER ONE

People who don't live here, who have just heard of our town, know it for two reasons. Back in the 1980s, a man murdered his whole family, wrapped their bodies up in sleeping bags, and cut his own face out of every photo. He stopped the mail, called the high school to say the family was off on a trip, and then disappeared. He left the lights on throughout the house, some lamps shining through the windows. A month passed, and that provided the man with a head start, until the lights burned out one by one, and the neighbors finally called the police.

I'm less familiar with that story. After all, it happened

long before my time. But the house still stands, as unyielding as it looks in the black-and-white photos on Wikipedia. Someone bought it eventually, but they never decorate the yard with Christmas lights or place boxes of flowers in front of the windows. As if that's the compromise. They moved into that home, with all its ghosts, but decided to never celebrate living there.

Lots of people in Glennon Heights think the house should have been bulldozed. Maybe you can scrub blood off the floorboards, but people still died in those rooms. When you stand at the front walk and consider approaching, the fine hairs on the back of your neck might prickle. You might feel a static electricity crackle over you, carrying a current of fear.

I don't believe in ghosts the way most people imagine them. When I walk by that house, I don't envision floaty wisps shaped like people darting in and out of the attic windows. No invisible clammy hand clamps on my shoulder. I think it's more likely that when people feel really intense feelings—the worst kind of feelings—those feelings imprint the earth and the air. They don't dissipate even when we disappear. So it wouldn't matter if you knocked the house down where that family died. Those deaths would still create a permanent and painful haze on that property, in our town.

Besides, if we intend to go around knocking houses to the ground, we can't stop with that one. There is, after all, another house that put Glennon Heights on the map. Another place of

nightmares. And now, after everything that's happened, I get the same cold ball in my belly when I walk past it. The Donahue house. The Sentry's house. What happened there stamped the air with fear and put a family to ruin as much as if they were sitting at their dining room table, eating supper as the bulldozers plowed through.

CHAPTER TWO

I'm pretty much an expert on the Sentry. As Janie Donahue's closest friend, I can speak with authority on the matter. From the morning the moving truck blocked her driveway until classes started six weeks later, Janie and I spent almost every minute together. You know how it is when you meet someone designed the same way as you? When she makes sense to you like no one else has ever made sense? That's the reassurance that meeting Janie Donahue gave me.

It's not like I didn't have friends before Janie. Glennon Heights is tiny enough that everyone has to get along. It's the kind of place where your mom makes you invite the entire

class to your birthday party. But every year, in every grade, there's always one or two kids who just can't handle the rest of us. I can remember in kindergarten it was Raf Cruz because he hated loud noises so much he wore earmuffs year round. And now none of us would dare to mention the earmuffs. Raf is certainly not the same Raf, with his tousled hair and dirt bike expertise. Now our outsider is probably Julia Haber because she refuses to launder her yoga pants and picks her top lip until it bleeds.

It has never been me. I've always moved through school with a group of girls who dress like me and talk like me. We sleep over at each other's houses and text our outfits in the mornings. Sometimes the configurations change; Kaia, Allie, Brooke, and me evolved into Brooke, Allie, and me, and then adjusted to Allie, Kaia, Mirabelle, and me. With drama club and cross-country practice, we made room for Tyler and Nicholas. Liam and Micah. Eddie Roebuck. I could walk into the coffee shop and join a table. Whenever a teacher announced group work, my heart didn't sink. I didn't ever have to search desperately for someone to talk to.

But with Janie, it was another kind of talking. I never worried that what scrolled across her brain was different from the thoughts scrolling across her face. That first day, when the Donahues arrived, my mom said, "Olivia, you should stop over and introduce yourself." I did it to be kind, standing at the back door and calling out, "Yoo-hoo?" because it seemed

like something a neighbor might say. As soon as the syllables floated up from my mouth, I heard my mistake. *Yoo-hoo* was an old person sound, the coo of a fat lady in an apron, the jolly neighbor.

Janie was unpacking boxes in the kitchen. She wore a bandanna on her hair and cut through the packing tape with an enormous carving knife. I could see the silver blade glinting in the light.

“Hello?” she called out.

“Hi. I’m Olivia. Danvers. From up the street.”

Janie stood up and pushed the screen door open. I could tell she was about my age, maybe a year younger. She blew the hair out of her eyes and her face crinkled with questions.

“Do people talk like that here?” she asked.

“No. I was trying it out,” I answered. She nodded like she absolutely understood and held the door open for me to come inside.

“Olivia Danvers, you’ve been promised to me,” Janie proclaimed in a solemn voice while brandishing the knife. My eyes must have darted back to the door because she laughed, a quick bark that sounded almost angry. “Don’t worry—you’re not the first person my parental figures have ruthlessly used to get their way in the world. They’re basically mercenaries climbing over the corpses of anyone who doesn’t scurry out of their way.”

“Janie, stop.” A tiny woman with a blond pixie cut hovered



in the kitchen doorway. “Please excuse my charming daughter, Olivia. The realtor told us someone Janie’s age lived nearby. Edward McGovern—I believe he knows your aunt? It’s so kind of you to stop by.”

Janie glowered for a second and I thought, *This was the worst idea, ever. Thanks, Mom. Thanks, Janie’s mom. Thanks, moms everywhere for insinuating yourselves into the social lives of your teenagers.*

Janie’s smile broke through into a fit of giggles. “I’m sorry—sometimes I like to scare my mom and make her think I’m more like my brother, Ben, than my sister, Lucy. They’re twins, but she’s a valedictorian and he’s a sociopath.”

“Janie! Honestly!” Her mom shook her head. “I told you to stop calling your sister a valedictorian.”

“She would have been.” Janie leaned forward and revealed the first of five thousand secrets we’d share. “In our old town. Now she has to start from scratch and she’s pretty much frothing at the mouth.”

“What about you?”

Janie smiled in a small way, as if making a compromise with herself before she spoke. “Freshman year is a great time for me to move. I don’t have to switch high schools like the twins.” This bright version of her voice sounded more like her mom’s. “Besides, we get to live in these digs.” She gestured all around her. “Back in Northampton, we were not a mansion-dwelling family.”

For the first time, I let myself look around and actually take the house in. My whole life, I'd lived four doors down and had never ventured past the front door. Sixteen Olcott Place was the kind of home you assumed would shelter someone famous. Or magical. A majestic Victorian with bay windows and a rounded turret, its three stories stacked up like the layers of a wedding cake. It was white, with gray slate shingles and shutters painted deep green. None of the other homes nearby matched its grandeur, and my dad said that made it vulgar—like a guest who'd shown up overdressed for a party. But what did he know? He measured homes by the amount of time it would take to mow the lawn.

The house did not have marble columns or those statues of lions poised on either side of the stone steps. But it could have. You wouldn't have wondered, *Hey, what are these disproportionately fancy lions doing here?* They would have fit right in.

I'd been trying to look around surreptitiously. I hadn't wanted to seem so easily impressed. When Janie called it a mansion, she gave me permission to openly stare. While the kitchen was all white marble and sleek silver, the rest could have been rooms in a church, with vaulted ceilings and the smell of furniture polish. So much wood everywhere—paneling on the walls and thin bands of darker wood edging the ceiling. The heavy sliding door that separated the kitchen from the dining room made me realize how lovely a plank of

wood could be, with its deep chestnut color and the swirling pattern of its grain. Behind me, the windows stood taller than I could reach, the center one filtering sunlight through stained glass.

I could see a winding staircase with a thick, tawny banister snaking toward the upper floors. In the living room, the fireplace yawned, flanked by two more soaring windows. Floor-to-ceiling bookcases stood in one corner; I hoped fervently that leaning back against one might trigger a mechanism that would swivel you into a secret chamber behind the wall. All the furniture looked small in the rooms, but I felt gratified to see the pieces shrouded in white sheets in the tradition of haunted castles and Scooby-Doo cartoons. Unpacked boxes and crates sat waiting all over the place, but the spaces still seemed empty.

I liked Janie the minute I met her. I liked the honest way she spoke and how she made me wonder what she'd say next. Some people, kids I've known forever, have no idea how tense they make me. Janie set me at ease.

But the truth is that even if she hadn't, I probably would've faked it, at least that first day or week. All those times I'd walked by the house, making up stories in my head, 16 Olcott had become a little bit my own.

Now I'd made it inside.