

CHAPTER 1

I awoke with a start. What was that noise? It had been real . . . hadn't it? Or was it just something I'd heard in my dreams? It was hard enough for me to sleep in my own house, with its own noises, but it was always harder at somebody else's place. My sleep had been so disturbed that I'd already woken up a half-dozen times and — there it was again! It sounded like something dragging across the floor. My mind raced to all the horror movies I'd seen. The scene that stuck was of a body being dragged across the floor. That's what it sounded like.

“Smarten up,” I said to myself softly.

Sometimes my imagination got the better of me. This wasn't a horror movie, and there was nobody there. This was Mr. McCurdy's farmhouse. There was nothing here to be afraid of. Of course, that didn't stop me from wishing that my mother was here, instead of

at our house. It was just the next farm over, across a few fields, but it might as well have been on the other side of the country for all the good that was doing me now.

At least I had Nick. He was sleeping in a room down the hall. Though somehow relying on my eleven-year-old brother for protection wasn't a particularly reassuring thought.

I pulled my feet out from under the covers, threw them to the side and stood up. The floor creaked and groaned under my weight. I began to shuffle across the floor as quietly as I could. I reached the door and peered down the darkened hall. I couldn't see anything. Fumbling along the wall, I tried to locate the light switch. It couldn't be far away. My hand bumped into the faceplate, and I flipped the switch. There was a quiet click, but no light. Oh, right, this one didn't work. The wiring in this house was as old as the house itself, and many of the switches didn't work. I'd had to turn the hall light off from the kitchen when I shut everything down last night.

Maybe I should just retreat into my room. I could turn on the lamp beside my bed to throw a little light down the hall. Then again, maybe it was better if I didn't turn on the light. The dark didn't just stop me from seeing, but stopped anybody from seeing me. Somehow, being in the dark seemed safe, or at least safer.

The noise came again. It wasn't so much a dragging sound as something being pushed, like the noise a chair makes when you get up from your desk at school.

There's nothing to be afraid of, I thought. Don't be stupid. Just walk down the hall. It was nothing. Certainly not something to be afraid of. Certainly not someone dragging a body around. Or pushing it. Could you even push a body?

I pressed myself tightly against the wall and started to slide down the hall. This was a trick my brother had shown me that minimized the creaking of the floorboards when you moved around in old houses like ours — or Mr. McCurdy's. Slowly, I inched toward the kitchen. I knew there was nothing to fear, but my head didn't seem to be winning the argument with my body; my knees were shaking, my stomach was fluttering, my mouth was dry, and the hairs on the back of my neck were all standing at attention.

I had never liked the dark and was still spooked by our farmhouse with its nooks and crannies. It was even worse at Mr. McCurdy's place in the dead — the middle — of the night. Why had I even volunteered to stay here with Nick while Mr. McCurdy was away? I knew somebody had to watch the animals, but it didn't have to be just us. Our mother had said she'd stay with us, but she didn't sleep well unless she was in her bed, and she was preparing for a big trial at work and needed all

the rest she could get. Besides, I was fourteen years old — a very grown-up fourteen years old — and I didn't need to be babysat while I was babysitting.

Of course, as I stood there in my bare feet, in my pyjamas, in the dark, in the middle of the night, in Mr. McCurdy's house, I wouldn't have minded having my mother there beside me. I couldn't even call her. Mr. McCurdy's phone was dead, or rather, disconnected. He hadn't had a working phone since before we met him. My phone sat uselessly on the night table — no cell reception here either.

The sound came again. Somebody was moving around in the kitchen. It had to be Nick. Probably fixing himself a snack — that kid was always hungry. But why wouldn't he have turned on the kitchen light? It would be awfully hard to fix a sandwich in the dark.

I stood and listened as the noises continued. They were louder, closer, clearer, coming from the kitchen, the dark kitchen, right on the other side of the wall I was pressed against. I stood frozen, not able to move forward, but not wanting to go back. I couldn't just stand here all night, though, could I? I wondered what time it was, and how many hours until the sunrise when the kitchen wouldn't be so dark. Hold on — I didn't have to wait until then to get light. Slowly, I reached my hand around the corner into the kitchen, feeling for the switch and . . . I touched another hand!