

## One

Mommy forgot to warn the new baby-sitter about the basement.

Chloe teetered on the top step, chubby hands reaching up to clutch both railings, her arms shaking so much she could barely hang on. Her legs shook too, the Scooby Doo heads on her slippers bobbing. Even her breath shook, puffing like she'd been running.

“Chloe?” Emily’s muffled voice drifted up from the dark basement. “Your mom said the Coke’s in the cold cellar, but I can’t find it. Can you come down and help me?”

Mommy said she’d told Emily about the basement. Chloe was sure of it. She closed her eyes and thought hard. Before Mommy and Daddy left for the party, she’d been playing in the TV room. Mommy had called, and Chloe had run into the front hall where Mommy had scooped her up in a hug, laughing when Chloe’s doll poked her eye.

“I see you’re playing with Princess—I mean, *Pirate* Jasmine. Has she rescued poor Aladdin from the evil genie yet?”

Chloe shook her head, then whispered. “Did you tell Emily about the basement?”

“I most certainly did. No basements for Miss Chloe. That door stays closed.” When Daddy came around the corner, Mommy said, “We really need to talk about moving, Steve.”

“Say the word and the sign goes up.” Daddy ruffled Chloe’s hair. “Be good for Emily, kiddo.”

And then they were gone.

“Chloe, I know you can hear me,” Emily yelled.

Chloe peeled her fingers from the railing and stuck them in her ears.

“Chloe!”

“I c-can’t go down there,” Chloe called. “I-I’m not allowed.”

“Well, I’m in charge and I say you are. You’re a big girl.”

Chloe made her feet move down one step. The back of her throat hurt and everything looked fuzzy, like she was going to cry.

“Chloe Saunders, you have five seconds or I’ll drag you down here and lock the door.”

Chloe raced down the steps so fast her feet tangled and she tumbled into a heap on the landing. She lay there, ankle throbbing, tears burning her eyes as she peered into the basement, with its creaks and smells and shadows. And Mrs. Hobb.

There’d been others, before Mrs. Hobb scared them away. Like old Mrs. Miller, who’d play peek-a-boo with Chloe and call her Mary. And Mr. Drake, who’d ask weird questions like whether anyone lived on the moon yet, and most times Chloe didn’t know the answer, but he’d still smile and tell her she was a good girl.

Chloe used to like coming downstairs and talking to the people. All she had to do was not look behind the furnace, where a man hung from the ceiling, his face all purple and puffy. He never said anything, but seeing him always made Chloe’s tummy hurt.

“Chloe?” Emily’s muffled voice called. “Are you coming?”

Mommy would say “Think about the good parts, not the bad.” So as Chloe walked down the last three steps, she remembered Mrs. Miller and Mr. Drake and she didn’t think about Mrs. Hobb at all . . . or not very much.

At the bottom, she squinted into the near darkness. Just the night lights were on, the ones Mommy had put everywhere when Chloe started saying she didn’t want to go downstairs and Mommy thought she was afraid of the dark, which she was, a little, but only because the dark meant Mrs. Hobb could sneak up on her.

Chloe could see the cold cellar door, though, so she kept her eyes on that and walked as fast as she could. When something moved, she forgot about not looking, but it was only the hanging man, and all she could see was his hand peeking from behind the furnace as he swayed.

Chloe ran to the cold cellar door and yanked it open. Inside, it was pitch black.

“Chloe?” Emily called from the darkness.

Chloe clenched her fists. Now Emily was being *really* mean. Hiding on her—

Footsteps pattered overhead. Mommy? Home already?

“Come on, Chloe. You aren’t afraid of the dark, are you?” Emily laughed. “I guess you’re still a little baby after all.”

Chloe scowled. Emily didn’t know anything. Just a stupid, mean girl. Chloe would get her Coke, then run upstairs and tell Mommy, and Emily would never baby-sit her again.

She leaned into the tiny room, trying to remember where Mommy kept the Coke. That was it on the shelf, wasn’t it? She darted over, and stood on her tiptoes. Her fingers closed around a cool metal can.

“Chloe? Chloe!” It was Emily’s voice, but far away, shrill. Footsteps pounded across the floor overhead. “Chloe, where are you?”

Chloe dropped the can. It hit the concrete with a crack, then rolled against her foot, hissing and spitting, soda pooling around her slippers.

“Chloe, Chloe, where are you?” mimicked a voice behind her, like Emily’s, but not quite.

Chloe turned slowly.

In the doorway stood an old woman in a pink housecoat, her eyes and teeth glittering in the dark. Mrs. Hobb. Chloe wanted to squeeze her eyes shut, but she didn’t dare because it only made her madder, made everything worse.

Mrs. Hobb's skin rippled and squirmed. Then it went black and shiny, crackling like twigs in a campfire. Big chunks fell off, plopping onto the floor. Her hair sizzled and burned away. And then there was nothing left but a skull dotted with scraps of blackened flesh. The jaws opened, the teeth still glittering.

“Welcome back, Chloe.”

## Two

I bolted up in bed, one hand clutching my silver pendant, the other wrapped in my sheets. I struggled to recapture wisps of the dream already fluttering away. Something about a basement . . . A little girl . . . Me? I couldn't remember ever having a basement—we'd always lived in condo apartments.

A little girl in a basement, something scary . . . Weren't basements always scary? I shivered just thinking about them, dark and damp and empty. But this one hadn't been empty. There'd been . . . I couldn't remember what. A man behind a furnace . . .?

A bang at my bedroom door made me jump.

“Chloe!” Annette shrieked. “Why hasn't your alarm gone off? I'm the housekeeper, not your nanny. If you're late again, I'm calling your father.”

As threats went, this wasn't exactly the stuff of nightmares. Even if Annette managed to get hold of my dad in Berlin, he'd just pretend to listen, eyes on his BlackBerry, attention riveted to something more important, like the weather forecast. He'd murmur a vague “Yes, I'll see to it when I get back” and forget all about me the moment he hung up.

I turned on my radio, cranked it up, and crawled out of bed.

A half-hour later, I was in my bathroom, getting ready for school. I pulled the sides of my hair back in clips, glanced in the mirror, and shuddered. The style made me look twelve years old . . . and I didn't need any help. I'd just turned fifteen and servers still handed me the kiddie menu in restaurants. I couldn't blame them. I was five foot nothing with curves that only showed if I wore tight jeans and a tighter T-shirt.

Aunt Lauren swore I'd shoot up—and out—when I finally got my period. By this point, I figured it was “if,” not “when.” Most of my friends had gotten theirs at twelve, eleven even. I tried not to think about it too much, but of course I did. I worried that there was something wrong with me, felt like a freak every time my friends talked about their periods, prayed they didn't find out I hadn't gotten mine. Aunt Lauren said I was fine, and she was a doctor, so I guess she'd know. But it still bugged me. A lot.

“Chloe!” The door shuddered under Annette's meaty fist.

“I'm on the toilet,” I shouted back. “Can I get some privacy maybe?”

I tried just one clip at the back of my head, holding the sides up. Not bad. When I turned my head for a side view, the clip slid from my baby-fine hair.

I never should have gotten it cut. But I'd been sick of having long, straight, little-girl hair. I'd decided on a shoulder-length, wispy style. On the model it looked great. On me? Not so much.

I eyed the unopened hair color tube. Kari swore red streaks would be perfect in my strawberry-blond hair. I couldn't help thinking I'd look like a candy cane. Still, it might make me look older . . .

“I'm picking up the phone, Chloe,” Annette yelled.

I grabbed the tube of dye, stuffed it in my backpack, and threw open the door.

I took the stairs, as always. The building might change, but my routine never did. The day I'd started kindergarten, my mother held my hand, my Sailor Moon backpack over her other arm as we'd stood at the top of the landing.

“Get ready, Chloe,” she'd said. “One, two, three—”

And we were off, racing down the stairs until we reached the bottom, panting and giggling, the floor swaying and sliding under our unsteady feet, all the fears over my first school day gone.

We'd run down the stairs together every morning all through kindergarten and half of first grade and then . . . well, then there wasn't anyone to run down the stairs with anymore.

I paused at the bottom, touching the necklace under my T-shirt, then shook off the memories, hoisted my backpack, and walked from the stairwell.

After my mom died, we'd moved around Buffalo a lot. My dad flipped luxury apartments, meaning he bought them in buildings in the final stages of construction, then sold them when the work was complete. Since he was away on business most of the time, putting down roots wasn't important. Not for him, anyway.

This morning, the stairs hadn't been such a bright idea. My stomach was already fluttering with nerves over my Spanish midterm. I'd screwed up the last test—gone to a weekend sleepover at Beth's when I should have been studying—and barely passed. Spanish had never been my best subject, but if I didn't pull it up to a C, Dad might actually notice and start wondering whether an art school had been such a smart choice.

Milos was waiting for me in his cab at the curb. He'd been driving me for two years now, through two moves and three schools. As I got in, he adjusted the visor on my side. The morning sun still hit my eyes, but I didn't tell him that.

My stomach relaxed as I rubbed my fingers over the familiar rip in the armrest and inhaled chemical pine from the air freshener twisting above the vent.

"I saw a movie last night," he said as he slid the cab across three lanes. "One of the kind you like."

"A thriller?"

“No.” He frowned, lips moving as if testing out word choices. “An action-adventure. You know, lots of guns, things blowing up. A real shoot-’em-down movie.”

I hated correcting Milos’s English, but he insisted on it. “You mean, a shoot-’em-up movie.”

He cocked one dark brow. “When you shoot a man, which way does he fall? Up?”

I laughed, and we talked about movies for a while. My favorite subject.

When Milos had to take a call from his dispatcher, I glanced out the side window. A long-haired boy darted from behind a cluster of businessmen. He carried an old-fashioned plastic lunch box with a superhero on it. I was so busy trying to figure out which superhero it was, I didn’t notice where the boy was headed until he leaped off the curb, landing between us and the next car.

“Milos!” I screamed. “Watch—”

The last word was ripped from my lungs as I slammed against my shoulder belt. The driver behind us, and the one behind him, laid on their horns, a chain reaction of protest.

“What?” Milos said. “Chloe? What’s wrong?”

I looked over the hood of the car and saw . . . nothing. Just an empty lane in front and traffic veering to our left, drivers flashing Milos the finger as they passed.

“Th-th-th—” I clenched my fists, as if that could somehow force the word out. *If you get jammed, take another route*, my speech therapist always said. “I thought I saw some-wha-wha—”

*Speak slowly. Consider your words first.*

“I’m sorry. I thought I saw someone jump in front of us.”

Milos eased the taxi forward. “That happens to me sometimes, especially if I’m turning my head. I think I see someone, but there’s no one there.”



I nodded. My stomach hurt again.

## Three

Between the dream I couldn't remember and the boy I couldn't have seen, I was spooked. Until I got at least one question out of my head, focusing on my Spanish test was out of the question. So I called Aunt Lauren. When I got her voice mail, I said I'd phone back at lunch. I was halfway to my friend Kari's locker when my aunt called back.

"Did I ever live in a house with a basement?" I asked.

"And good morning to you too."

"Sorry. I had this dream and it's bugging me." I told her what bits I could recall.

"Ah, that would have been the old house in Allentown. You were just a tyke. I'm not surprised you don't remember."

"Thanks. It was—"

"Bugging you, I can tell. Must have been a doozy of a nightmare."

"Something about a monster living in the basement. Very cliché. I'm ashamed of myself."

"Monster? What—?"

The PA system on her end cut her off, a tinny voice saying: *Dr. Fellows, please report to station 3B.*

"That'd be your cue," I said.

"It can wait. Is everything okay, Chloe? You sound off."

"No, just . . . my imagination's in overdrive today. I freaked Milos out this morning, thinking I saw a boy run in front of the cab."

"What?"

"There wasn't a boy. Not outside my head, anyway." I saw Kari at her locker and waved.

"The bell's going to ring so—"

“I’m picking you up after school. High tea at the Crowne. We’ll talk.”

The line went dead before I could argue. I shook my head and ran to catch up with Kari.

School. Not much to say about it. People think art schools must be different, all that creative energy simmering, classes full of happy kids, even the Goths as close to happy as their tortured souls will allow. They figure art schools must have less peer pressure and bullying. After all, most kids there are the ones who *get* bullied in other schools.

It’s true that stuff like that isn’t bad at A. R. Gurney High, but when you put kids together, no matter how similar they seem, lines are drawn. Cliques form. Instead of jocks and geeks and nobodies, you get artists and musicians and actors.

As a theater arts student, I was lumped in with the actors, where talent seemed to count less than looks, poise, and verbal ability. I didn’t turn heads, and I scored a fat zero on the last two. On a popularity scale, I ranked a perfectly mediocre five. The kind of girl nobody thinks a whole lot about.

But I’d always dreamed of being in art school, and it *was* as cool as I’d imagined. Better yet, my father had promised that I could stay until I graduated, no matter how many times we moved. That meant for the first time in my life, I wasn’t the “new girl.” I’d started at A. R. Gurney as a freshman, like everyone else. Just like a normal kid. Finally.

That day, though, I didn’t feel normal. I spent the morning thinking about that boy on the street. There were plenty of logical explanations. I’d been staring at his lunch box, so I’d misjudged where he’d been running. He’d jumped into a waiting car at the curb. Or swerved at the last second and vanished into the crowd.

That made perfect sense. So why did it still bug me?

“Oh, come on,” Miranda said as I rooted through my locker at lunchtime. “He’s right there. Ask him if he’s going to the dance. How tough can that be?”

“Leave her alone,” Beth said. She reached over my shoulder, grabbed my bright yellow lunch bag from the top shelf, and dangled it. “Don’t know how you can miss this, Chloe. It’s practically neon.”

“She needs a stepladder to see that high,” Kari said.

I banged her with my hip, and she bounced away, laughing.

Beth rolled her eyes. “Come on, people, or we’ll never get a table.”

We made it as far as Brent’s locker before Miranda elbowed me. “Ask him, Chloe.”

She mock-whispered it. Brent glanced over . . . then quickly looked away. My face heated and I clutched my lunch bag to my chest.

Kari’s long, dark hair brushed my shoulder. “He’s a jerk,” she whispered. “Ignore him.”

“No, he’s not a jerk. He just doesn’t like me. Can’t help that.”

“Here,” Miranda said. “I’ll ask him for you.”

“No!” I grabbed her arm. “P-please.”

Her round face screwed up in disgust. “God, you can be such a baby. You’re fifteen, Chloe. You have to take matters into your own hands.”

“Like phoning a guy until his mother tells you to leave him alone?” Kari said.

Miranda only shrugged. “That’s Rob’s mother. *He* never said it.”

“Yeah? You just keep telling yourself that.”

That set them off for real. Normally, I’d have jumped in and made them quit, but I was still upset over Miranda’s embarrassing me in front of Brent.

Kari, Beth, and I used to talk about guys, but we weren't totally into them. Miranda was—she'd had more boyfriends than she could name. So when she started hanging with us, it suddenly became really important to have a guy we liked. I worried enough about being immature, and it didn't help that she'd burst out laughing when I'd admitted I'd never been on a real date. So I invented a crush. Brent.

I figured I could just name a guy I liked and that would be enough. Not a chance. Miranda had outed me—telling him I liked him. I'd been horrified. Well, mostly. There'd also been a little part of me that hoped he'd go “Cool. I really like Chloe, too.” Not a chance. Before, we used to talk in Spanish class sometimes. Now he sat two rows away, like I'd suddenly developed the world's worst case of BO.

We'd just reached the cafeteria when someone called my name. I turned to see Nate Bozian jogging toward me, his red hair like a beacon in the crowded hall. He bumped into a senior, grinned an apology, and kept coming.

“Hey,” I said as he drew near.

“Hey yourself. Did you forget Petrie rescheduled film club for lunchtime this week? We're discussing avant-garde. I *know* you love art films.”

I fake gagged.

“I'll send your regrets, then. And I'll tell Petrie you aren't interested in directing that short either.”

“We're deciding that today?”

Nate started walking backward. “Maybe. Maybe not. So I'll tell Petrie—”

“Gotta run,” I said to my friends and hurried to catch up with him.

The film club meeting started backstage as always, where we'd go through business stuff and eat lunch. Food wasn't allowed in the auditorium.

We discussed the short, and I *was* on the list for directors—the only freshman who'd made the cut. After, as everyone else watched scenes from avant-garde films, I mulled through my options for an audition tape. I snuck out before it ended and headed back to my locker.

My brain kept whirring until I was halfway there. Then my stomach started acting up again, reminding me that I'd been so excited about making the short list for director that I'd forgotten to eat.

I'd left my lunch bag backstage. I checked my watch. Ten minutes before class. I could make it.

Film club had ended. Whoever left the auditorium last had turned out the lights, and I didn't have a clue how to turn them on, especially when finding the switch would require being able to *see* it. Glow-in-the-dark light switches. That's how I'd finance my first film. Of course, I'd need someone to actually *make* them. Like most directors, I was more of an idea person.

I picked my way through the aisles, bashing my knees twice. Finally my eyes adjusted to the dim emergency lights, and I found the stairs leading backstage. Then it got tougher.

The backstage dissolved into smaller areas curtained off for storage and makeshift dressing rooms. There were lights, but someone else had always turned them on. After feeling around the nearest wall and not finding a switch, I gave up. The faint glow of more emergency lights let me see shapes. Good enough.

Still, it was pretty dark. I'm afraid of the dark. I had some bad experiences as a child, imaginary friends who lurked in dark places and scared me. I know that sounds weird. Other kids dream up playmates—I imagined bogeymen.

The smell of greasepaint told me I was in the dressing area, but the scent, mingled with the unmistakable odor of mothballs and old costumes, didn't calm me the way it usually did.

Three more steps and I did let out a shriek as fabric billowed around me. I'd stumbled into a curtain. Great. Exactly how loud had I screamed? I really hoped these walls were soundproof.

I swept my hand over the scratchy polyester until I found the opening and parted the curtains. Ahead, I could make out the lunch table. Something yellow sat on the top. My bag?

The makeshift hall seemed to stretch before me, yawning into darkness. It was the perspective—the two curtained sides angled inward, so the hall narrowed. Interesting illusion, especially for a suspense film. I'd have to remember that.

Thinking about the corridor as a movie set calmed my nerves. I framed the shot, the bounce of my step adding a jerkiness that would make the scene more immediate, putting the viewer in the head of our protagonist, the foolish girl making her way toward the strange noise.

Something thumped. I started, and my shoes squeaked and *that* noise made me jump higher. I rubbed the goose bumps on my arms and tried to laugh. Okay, I did say *strange noise*, didn't I? Cue the sound effects, please.

Another noise. A rustling. So we had rats in our spooky corridor, did we? How clichéd. Time to turn off my galloping imagination and focus. *Direct* the scene.

*Our protagonist sees something at the end of the corridor. A shadowy figure—*

Oh, please. Talk about cheap thrills. Go for original . . . mysterious . . .

Take two.

*What's that she sees? A child's lunch bag, bright yellow and new, out of place in this old, condemned house.*

Keep the film rolling. Don't let my mind wander—

A sob echoed through the silent rooms, then broke off, dissolving into a wet snuffling.

Crying. Right. From my movie. The protagonist sees a child's lunch bag, then hears eerie sobs. Something moved at the end of the hall. A dark shape—

I flung myself forward, racing for my bag. I grabbed it and took off.