

# 12 years earlier...

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.”