

Chapter One

CLAIRE FELT SOMEONE watching. As she approached her locker, a sensation came like the cool spring breeze that had snuck in through her open window earlier that morning, creeping through her blanket, seeping into her skin, and chilling her bones. She turned away from the lock and glanced down the half-empty hallway of Archer's Mills Middle School.

A boy was standing at the far end of the hall, clutching one strap of his ratty-looking backpack, his gaze like two lasers aimed at her face. It was enough to make Claire gasp.

His name came to her.

Lucas Kent.

Though they'd been in several classes together, Claire did not know the boy well. She stared back. Lucas flinched when her eyes met his, then moved quickly down the stairs behind him.

Claire shuddered. She fiddled with the lock hanging from her locker, spinning the numbers again and again, as if that would make the chilly feeling go away.

A finger poked at her spine.

Claire startled, then turned to find her friend Norma Gillhop standing a little too close. "Gosh, I didn't mean to make you jump out of your jeans, Ghosty."

"No prob, Norma-1." Claire caught her breath and popped open her lock.

She told Norma about the boy who'd been staring.

"Lucas Kent? The creep! Do you want me to walk with you to your first class?"

"I'll be fine. Lucas doesn't scare me."

"His *grandmother* scares me. She's totally a witch."

Claire thought that kind of talk was cruel, so she

ignored it and shoved her bag into her locker, slamming the door shut.

“The group is meeting after school today, right?” Norma asked.

Claire nodded even though she wasn’t sure she wanted to meet up with her ghost-story group today. Seeing Lucas Kent watching her had left a bad taste in her brain. The first bell chimed.

She caught Lucas staring again in the library a couple of hours later. Claire had just come around the end of one aisle when she discovered him peering through the library door at her. They locked glances for a moment before he took off again, bolting from view. She backed into the shadows between the shelves, trying to shrink down, her lungs fighting for breath.

Was he looking for her? If so, why did he keep running away?

What was it about him that was so unsettling?

When she mentioned Lucas’s disappearing routine to her other friends in the cafeteria at lunch, Francine

Perkins burst out laughing. “Aww, Kent has a crush on the ghost hunter’s daughter!”

Claire cringed. Lucas shared the same lunch period. What if he’d overheard Francine’s outburst?

Claire didn’t like upsetting anyone.

She also didn’t like being called the ghost hunter’s daughter, even though everyone in town, in the whole country, and even some parts of the world, knew it was the truth. Or *a* truth. Part of a truth anyway. It was true that her father hunted ghosts. But the other part of the truth was that Claire imagined herself as her own person, not just someone’s daughter.

She knew that who she was on her own wasn’t as impressive as being the ghost hunter’s daughter. As a person, Claire Holiday was a girl with knees like door-knobs. Her Coke-bottle lenses made her eyes look twice as big as they actually were, and they were already pretty big. Her brown hair wilted like corn silk far below her shoulders, but it shone copper in the sun, so she didn’t mind. Her socks often did not match. She was a

voracious fan of science fiction paperbacks as well as a user of words like *voracious*.

The third encounter with Lucas was at the water fountain, right before the end of the day. Claire experienced that similar spring breeze sensation in her bones. She spun to find him standing several steps away.

Was Lucas waiting for a drink?

Again, their eyes met, but this time, Claire felt something pass between them. Something strange. Something she didn't have a word for. His lips parted as if he wished to speak. Then he reached around her for the fountain's button. "Excuse me," he whispered.

Flustered, Claire sidestepped far away from him. He leaned over the fountain. Cold water rushed down the drain.

After school, Claire walked with Norma and Francine, and their friends Mikey and Whit, through the woods behind the middle school, over the creek, to the nearby housing development where many of their classmates lived.

“Where are you taking us, Francine?” Claire asked.

“You don’t already know?” Francine answered mysteriously.

Claire had a good idea, but she didn’t like the direction they were heading.

The houses there had been built on what used to be an old farm. Now several detention basins protected the neighborhood from flooding. When the basins were dry, they looked like large empty ponds, and in the summer their grounds were covered in lush green lawns. But sometimes they filled up during storms and became like small lakes. At one side of each basin was a compact concrete opening connected to tunnels that passed into spillways at the creek by the school.

On this day, the sun was shining, the ground was dry, and the closest tunnel was waiting for the group to huddle inside. Dead leaves crunched beneath their sneakers, and their voices reverberated as they stepped into the shadows. Claire swallowed down her fear.

“I hope the ghost isn’t hungry,” said Whit. “I don’t want to get eaten.”

“I’m hungry,” said Mikey. “Maybe I’ll eat the ghost!”

“I brought snacks,” said Norma. “How about you eat these instead? Cashews and yogurt chips.”

“Yogurt chips?” Mikey whined. “But I’m lactose intolerant! Why not chocolate chips?”

“Next time bring your own,” Francine said with a sneer.

Claire held out her hands, allowing her fingers to drag lightly against the gritty concrete walls. Cool light filtered in through the spillway entry behind her, casting her shadow forward along the path she was walking. There was a smell down here that was both dirty and clean at the same time—earth and minerals and the decay of washed-up leaves and twigs and the tiny bones of rodents that had drowned long ago.

“I brought this,” said Whit, opening his backpack and sliding out his sparkly black-and-silver luchador mask.

“Who are you planning on wrestling?” asked Norma.

“No one.” He slipped it over his head. “It makes me feel safe.” Whit suddenly looked like a walking and

talking sugar skull skeleton. “Sometimes the stories are a little too scary.”

“Nobody forces you to come with us,” said Francine, spreading out her jacket and sitting delicately on the tunnel floor. The others joined her, forming a small circle.

Whit clasped Mikey’s hand. “Mikey asked me. And as long as he asks, I’ll be here.” His voice was muffled inside the mask.

Claire glanced into the shadowy part of the tunnel and shivered. Some of the kids from school had told stories of a boy who’d been swept away during a thunderstorm. They said that his ghost wandered these tunnels, looking for a way out.

As soon as Francine had gotten wind of the story, she insisted that they come find him.

“Let’s just do this the way your father does it on television,” Francine told Claire.

One of the ways that Miles was able to call forth the spirits on his show was to lie about them. To tell outrageous stories about their lives that would anger the

spirits and make them appear. And once they appeared, Miles would use his special tools to capture them and send them away. Claire hated this. It felt mean, like a kid in high school picking on a defenseless third grader. So, she sat back and allowed her friends to tell the lies instead.

Francine began. “Hello? We know that you drowned here. You were our age. A boy whose name was . . . Argyle Mesnerfloof.” The others snickered at the outrageous name that Francine had offered.

Norma added, “You came down here looking for something you lost. It was a . . . a golden football.”

Mikey laughed and then leaned forward. “You used it to stare into as you brushed your teeth every night. But your sister threw it out the window. And it splashed down into the gutter and went through the grate at the curb. And that’s why you ended up in these tunnels. You were looking for your football!”

“I love it!” Whit cheered.

A crunching of leaves resounded down the concrete tube, and the light in the passage went dim.

A silhouette was standing at the far end of the tunnel, near the spillway.

Goose bumps tickled Claire's scalp.

"Who's there?" she asked. When the figure didn't answer, Claire was struck with a sudden fear. They *had* angered the drowned boy. He was coming to make them pay for their lies. What would be the cost? The only escape route was the opposite direction, into the darkness of the detention tunnels. The silhouette came closer and Claire stood up, moving between it and the others. "Not one more step," she said, her voice wobbling.

Her echo mocked her, revealing her nerves to everyone, over and over.

A boy's voice called back. "Claire? Is that you?"

The silhouette lost its mystery. But it maintained its menace.

"It's Lucas." The voice was soft. "I . . . I need to talk to you."

Norma whispered into Claire's ear. "Should I tell him to shove off?"

“Talk to me about what?” Claire said, huddling closer to her friends.

“Your dad,” Lucas answered. The day’s events clicked into place.

Right, thought Claire. My dad. Everyone always wants to talk about my dad. Lucas was just another *fan*.

“Have you heard from him?” he asked.

Strange. This was not a usual fan’s question.

Coldness emanated out of the tunnel walls, and the tips of Claire’s fingers went numb where she held them against the concrete. “Not since he left town a couple of days ago,” she answered hesitantly. “Why do you want to know?”

Lucas stepped closer. “I’m sorry, Claire, but wherever your father’s at, he’s in real trouble.” A drip of water echoed out of the murk. Claire imagined the drowned boy wandering the tunnels, shuffling closer, milky eyes scanning the darkness for daylight. Lucas went on, “The kind of trouble someone doesn’t come back from.”