

Chapter One

“Whoa, did you feel that?” Isaiah asked. He quickly looked up from his cell phone and his body wiggled—like when you get an unexpected chill. The look of shock and fear on his face was one I had seen before. It was the same look as last year, when we first landed in the foreign-snow near the town beneath Grandpa’s Christmas tree. It’s a look you never forget. For those of you who don’t know, Isaiah is my fifteen-year-old cousin and the accidental leader of last year’s Christmas brigade—the one who helped us find our way through the landscape. Although not the one who brought us home.

“That was really freaky,” I replied, eyes open wide, shaken by the experience and Isaiah’s response. “It was like an earthquake, except the house didn’t move.” I grabbed my chest, trying to figure out how only our bodies shook; and how the air could ripple, like in movies when there’s some sort of time warp.

“Here we go, again, Hailey,” Isaiah continued. “I bet this is how last year’s Christmas nightmare started; we just didn’t know it at the time. We’re a year older now. We should know better.”

“You’re just being paranoid,” I said. Even though I thought Isaiah might be right, I didn’t let on. Perhaps this was how last year’s Christmas escapade got started. After all, we were in this room when it all began. But it was decided that last year happened when all of us cousins were arguing about the presents under the tree, and then accidentally hit our heads together—at the same time no less. “On second thought,” I whispered, having a new revelation, while blankly staring at the carpet. “Being a cute, almost grown-up, fifth-grader is much better than being a lowly fourth-grader. So maybe we should know better?”

I shrugged and looked back at Isaiah. “But let’s keep an eye out anyways, just in case. If we’re going back to the Christmas town then I want to be prepared.”

Trembling, Isaiah gave a forced, nervous laugh. “You don’t have to convince me,” he whispered, as he stared back at his vibrating phone.

“Yep, just in case,” I whispered, over-and-over, while I turned my attention back on the TV, and of the remake of the movie, *Miracle on 34th Street*. But I couldn’t focus—the characters were talking but the words made no sense. I kept looking around, trying to see if there were any changes to our existence—just in case. I first checked the wood paneling that covered the southern wall. “Nothing.” My attention quickly turned toward the heavy drapes on the northern wall, which covered the forever-locked French doors. Finally, I looked at the windows in front of the built-in, bench seat at the eastern wall. “Hmm.”

“Hmm?” Isaiah repeated, slightly over a whisper. He glanced up from the phone and quickly back at the seemingly never-ending, dancing screen. He turned his head and then, again, looked up. “Hailey, do you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“It sounds like Harper, but she’s talking like us.”

“Not again.”

Slowly, we rose and crept to the room’s entrance.

Isaiah put his finger to his lips and leaned. “She’s right there,” he whispered.

“I hear her.” I leaned and saw Harper sitting in front of the washer and dryer, playing with a doll.

“I will,” I heard her say. “I’ll tell him later.” She paused like she was talking to someone. “I love you too,” she continued, then seemingly waited for someone to finish a sentence. “I’ll be

good, I promise.”

“OMG! Wow.” I turned my unbelieving eyes toward Isaiah.

“She can’t talk like that,” Isaiah scorned. “See, I told you. It’s last Christmas all over again.”

“Maybe,” I muttered, trying to hide my distress. “Let’s see.” I peeked my head out and cleared my throat.

“Harper?”

Harper looked up. “I Aidey.”

I knelt next to her, and asked, “What are you doing?”

“Paying daws.”

“Playing with your dolls?” I looked up at Isaiah and we shared shrugs.

“Es.”

“Who were you talking to?”

“A ady.”

“A lady? Harper, were you talking to a lady?”

“Es.”

“What lady?”

Harper shrugged and turned to her left. She stared straight at the door leading to the garage, and in a clear, coherent voice said, “I won’t tell them.” Suddenly, as if we weren’t there, Harper stood and walked toward the kitchen.

I stood and looked Isaiah in the eyes. Anticipating his next question, I blurted, “No, we’re not telling our moms.”

“Okay,” he said. “So, what then?”

“I don’t know.” I looked around and then went back inside the room. “I don’t see anything out of place, do you?”

“No.”

We shuffled to the middle of the room and waited—for what, neither of us knew.

Isaiah looked around without turning his head. Suddenly, he shivered. “You feel it?”

“I do,” I said, trying to fight an eerie feeling. “It’s just like when we landed in the field of snow that surrounded the Christmas town.” Frozen in my stance, I searched the room, including the carpet and all the wires. “Stay away from the wires!” I barked. “You never know, there could be an electronic connection like in that movie about haunted electrical lines.”

“You mean *The Mothman Prophecies*?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”