Chapter One

Eight skinny legs scurry across the glass. Eight unblinking eyes study him over dripping fangs. They'll tear his throat, spurt poison into his bloodstream. His mouth will droop and drool, his glassy eyes will roll back as the silk spins, spins, and—

"ARGH! ARGH! ARGH! AR—"

"God, George, calm down!" Lacey shouted. "It's just a spider. Why've you got to be such a wimp?"

"'S'alright, George!" Dad called back. "Just open the window, matey, it'll blow out!" He shot Lacey a frown. "He's alright," he added.

Course he is, Lacey huffed to herself. Three hours they'd been driving through endless countryside, and all the way she'd had to put up with her little brother's panics and demands. *It's too hot. I'm hungry. There's a spider.* No way did she get away with that kinda fuss at twelve.

George opened his window, the wind burst through the car, and with her hair blowing frickin' *everywhere*,

Lacey turned in her seat to show him just how much of a tiresome little snot bubble he was.

Aaaand . . . then she felt bad. George was pinned back into his seat with terror. Staggering along the window towards him, its legs bowing and quivering in the force ten gale, was the dreaded spider.

Lacey sighed. The bug was medium-sized at best. But she wasn't heartless.

"It's still there," she muttered. "*Dad*."

"Oh," her dad said, glancing in the rear-view mirror, "Alright, hang tight, George, there's a shop just ahead."

The car slowed, coming to a halt beside a run-down wooden shack. Lacey took in the withered hanging baskets, the creaking ice cream stand and the sign that read *Rose's Stores* above a dusty, flower-free basket.

"I thought Uncle Zeedie was loaded," she groused. "This place is a dump!" But her dad was already halfway around the car.

"Where is the spider, George?" he asked soothingly.

"It . . . it jumped out the window," George replied lamely, and Lacey couldn't help but grin at the look on her dad's face.

". . . Right-o," he said, trying to sound patient. "Well, now we're here, I'll get us some snacks, then. Your Uncle Zeedie's food was always a bit dodge."

With that latest revelation, their Dad hurried on to the rickety shop. Checking her phone for signal *again,* and finding no bars *again*, Lacey sighed, and got out of the car.

"Dodgy food, crappy shops and no signal," she said, and

slammed the door behind her. "More great reasons to be excited about staying at weirdo not-Uncle Zeedie's house!"

"Mum said not to call him weird," George bleated from the car. "She said Uncle Zeedie's just eccentric."

Lacey ignored him. Uncle Zeedie *was* weird. She hadn't seen him in ages, but she could remember that much. He wasn't really their uncle either, just a friend of their mum and dad's from years before Lacey was born. Before the divorce, Mum and Dad would've spaced out their work, and she and her brother would never have been forced to stay with him out here, in the middle of the Welsh valleys, miles away from her friends, from her girlfriend Mandy.

Before the divorce, she thought, *George could survive a tiny spider crawling across the window.*

"How's the view?" he called to her.

"Get out the car and look yourself," she snapped.

The view was actually incredible. The road ahead plunged like a waterfall, winding into a valley so steep on every side that it might once have been a giant crater. A green delivery van was crawling up the opposite side, tiny against the epic vista. The autumn sun was already ducking behind the hills, dragging a shroud of shadow across the woods below. It made them seem completely wild in a way a townie like Lacey had never seen before; violent mobs of gnarled branches clawing out between dark, suffocating leaves. She took it in, and for some reason she shivered. Then a glint of light caught her attention, and she spotted the big, sprawling, modern mansion sitting in the very middle of it all.

"I hope that's his place, at least," Lacey admitted. "That house is sweet."

"Are you talking about Death House?" a voice said behind her.

George didn't hear the girl approach. He'd been concentrating on two more spiders that were crawling across his window. They were small, even smaller than the last one, and that one had been pretty titchy, if he was to be honest, and so rather than shout out again, he instead sat very still, pretending that they didn't bother him at all. The spiders crawled along the same path the previous spider had taken, scurrying to the top of the glass before tumbling out to the road like it was desperate to get home.

"Bugmakazi," George whispered to himself, and grinned. That was when the girl spoke, making him flinch.

"Are you talking about Death House?"

She looked about the same age as Lacey – fifteen, maybe sixteen – with a tumble of jet-black hair. Her clothes were retro; a pastel-green T-shirt and blue jeans, her skin pale against the faded colours. Straight away George fancied her in that same thoughtless way he fancied most older girls – like she was a popstar or some princess. Which, he'd find out later, she kinda was.

"Death House?" he blurted out. "What do you mean?"

The girl turned, her eyes resting thoughtfully on him as though she was weighing him up.

"It's just a name," she replied, and turned back to face Lacey. "A man lives there, all alone. Do you know him?"

Her Welsh accent was strong. It made her seem older than Lacey somehow. George looked to his sister, and realised with a sinking feeling that she fancied this girl too.

"If it's the right place, he's our Unc— he's called Zeedie," Lacey said. "We're staying with him. Do you live around here?"

The girl smiled, and gestured to the woods down in the valley. "I'm Rose. What's your name?"

"Lacey."

"I'm George," George piped up from the car.

"Are you here for long?" Rose continued, still looking at Lacey, "You should come to our party this evening."

Lacey blinked. George could guess what she was thinking – he was good at that. She was thinking of her girlfriend Mandy back home. She was wondering if it would be cheating just to go to a party with a girl she thought was attractive.

"Sounds good," she said eventually. "So there's more people our age?"

"There's three of us."

"Not a big party, then."

Rose smiled at Lacey. "We've known each other for ever," she said.

Just then, the shop door opened and George's dad walked out, looking confused.

"Hi," he said to Rose. "Do you know who runs that place?

The radio's on, and I called out, but nobody answered."

Rose looked, George thought, strangely surprised to see that anybody had even visited the shop at all.

"It's supposed to be me," she said. "Shoot, sorry!"

"Ah, not to worry, I left your money on the counter," Dad said. He shot a quick, amused glance at Lacey.

"Thanks!" Rose said. She turned to leave, then paused. "So you'll come?" she said to Lacey.

Lacey grinned, and nodded, taking out her phone. "What's your—"

"Phones don't work in the Sink," Rose interrupted, gesturing towards the valley. "Just come to the path around the back of the hedge animals at nine. I'll wait for you there."

"Hedge animals?" George asked. "Uncle Zeedie has *hedge* animals? And what's the Sink?"

Rose smiled, then turned to look at George. "It's all the Sink," she said, and gestured to the valley. "Everything down there."

She had a deep stare, with wide, open eyes that seemed to look right through him. Never the most comfortable talking to girls at the best of times, George swallowed . . . and didn't say any more.

"*Great*," said Lacey, shooting George a look. "I'll see you later, Rose."

Back in the car, Dad handed Lacey the chocolate bars with a wide grin. "How's Mandy?" he asked playfully.

"I don't know," Lacey fired back. "*There's no signal out here to call her.*"

"Touché."

As Dad started the car and pulled back along the road, George looked out of the window back at the shop. Secretly, he hoped Lacey wouldn't go to the party. He didn't want to be left alone the first night here, not in 'Death House', and definitely not if Uncle Zeedie was as weird as Lacey said.

You can't complain, though. Not after the spiders, and the drive, and . . . and last week.

Thinking of that awful time in the train station, George gazed unhappily out of the window . . .

. . . and froze.

Beside the shop was a noticeboard, an old one laden down with pamphlets and posters. Even though the font changed on each pamphlet and every poster, George could see two words repeated, again and again:

MISSING CHILD

— Chapter Two —

"Swimming Pool!" Lacey shouted out. "It's got a swimming pool! *Look,* George!"

Uncle Zeedie's house was *massive*, like American houses she'd seen online. All the way up the drive, spotlights illuminated the path ahead. In one direction was a wide tennis court, with tall wire fencing around it. In another was the swimming pool.

"How does Uncle Zeedie own all *this*?" Lacey asked in amazement.

"Not such a bad trip after all, eh?" Dad said with a chuckle. "Zeeds was always very smart. His software company was making megabucks when I was still trying to work out what to do, although weirdly enough I saw something that said the company was in trouble a while ago. Haven't heard anything since, though."

Lacey gazed up at the forest spreading around them. In the distance she caught glimpses of other houses, a roof poking out of the trees here, a chimney poking out there. Lacey wondered which house Rose lived in. Even with those other houses in view, they were so swallowed up by the wild woods that it felt more like some ancient settlement, like they were the first explorers of an untamed land. *With swimming pools and tennis courts*, she corrected herself with a smile.

"Pretty sweet, innit, George?" she said. George didn't answer, didn't even say a word, and Lacey rolled her eyes. He was probably still sore about the stupid spider.

Lacey was wrong, though. George had forgotten all about the spider. What George was thinking about was something he thought of as the Feeling.

He didn't tell people about the Feeling any more, not since all the trouble it had caused at the train station. If he said what it was, they would just tell him he was sad, or worried about his mum and dad. Which he was, but it wasn't that.

The Feeling had begun when they began to descend that winding road down the hill. He'd lied to himself like he always did – *you're just too hot, you're nervous, you're tired* – but the curdling taste had struck the back of his throat like Covid, and as they drove further along his mouth had flooded with saliva like he was gonna puke. Still, he'd tried to pretend that it wasn't what it was, kept urging himself: *don't complain, don't stress Dad out, don't make Lacey look after you*. He'd held his breath, had turned and looked fixedly out of the window so nobody, not even Lacey, would guess what was happening.

But he shouldn't have looked anywhere. He should've shut his eyes until the Feeling passed.

Looking out, George saw this place for real, not what Lacey was wowed into seeing. The square hedges were weed-infested and scruffy, like they'd been hacked at. The lights sparkling on the drive highlighted the dark, muddy stains splotched like sores across it. And yeah, the pool looked amazing . . . but the path beyond it led to those wild, dark woods.

George's eyes followed that path, traced it all the way to the twisted trees. And there, by those trees, stood a boy. A boy who hadn't been there before.

The boy was so far away that George couldn't see his face, although he could see he had a cap on backwards and rips in his denim. Oh, and his mouth. George could see the faceless boy's mouth, because it was opening, wider and wider, until it was stretched out much more wide than a mouth should be, until it was screaming a silent scream that made George want to weep.

And then George had blinked, and the boy had gone.

"Here we are," said Dad. "Zeedie!"

— Chapter Three —

Uncle Zeedie had barely changed. He still had that slightly android face: short, plain, dark hair, no stubble, eyebrows that were almost too perfect, like they'd been crayoned in. In short, he was the basic avatar on every video game, except with bags beneath his eyes. Lacey couldn't remember his eyes looking *that* tired before.

"Zeeds," Dad said happily. "How's it going, mate?"

"Well– I– I'm well, Daniel," Uncle Zeedie said awkwardly, and smeared a sheen of sweat across his forehead with the back of his hand. "How are you? I trust the drive was not too long?"

"Not at all. This place is amazing, Zeeds!"

"Yes?" Uncle Zeedie said. "Good." He sounded surprised by the compliment, Lacey thought.

"Hey, Uncle Zeedie," she said with a smile. She didn't hug him. It was one of those things they knew, something her parents had always drilled in. *Don't hug Uncle Zeeds. Don't even shake hands. He doesn't like to be touched.*

"Larissa," Uncle Zeedie said. She *hated* that name. "How are you? Your father tells me you enjoy reading."