

# CHAPTER ONE

“It’s the scariest story ever,” Casey Slater said in a voice barely above a whisper.

She leaned back on the pillows on her best friend Jillian Morton’s bed, holding a fuzzy plush pig in her hands. As she spoke, Casey squeezed the pig tightly.

“Tell me,” said Jillian, frowning down at her nails. She was sitting cross-legged on her white bedroom carpet, painting her fingernails traffic-cone orange. The two friends were hanging out in the apartment where Jillian lived with her parents and brother, catching up on gossip from school that afternoon.

Casey shook her head. “I don’t even want to say it out loud.”

This time Jillian looked up. “Casey,” she said with exasperation.

“What?” Casey’s large brown eyes widened innocently.

“You always do that. You always say, ‘It’s the scariest thing ever,’ and then you won’t say what it is.”

“Well, this is really scary,” Casey told her.

*“Just tell me!”*

“Okay. But you asked for it.” Casey took a deep breath. “Today I was checking my e-mail during library time. Jaycee Woodard sent me a story about this girl in New Jersey who got *killed*.”

“Killed how?” asked Jillian, as Casey knew she would.

“Some girls at her school were teasing her,” Casey explained, “and they pushed her down a man-hole into the sewer —”

“They pushed her into a *sewer*?” Jillian interrupted. “That’s not teasing. That’s, like, seriously warped.”

Casey raised her eyebrows as if to say, *Do you want to hear the story or what?*

“Sorry,” said Jillian. “Go on.”

“Well, she never came up,” Casey said in a hushed voice. “So the police went down into the sewer and they found her body. She broke her neck when she fell. When the police talked to the girls that pushed her, they all lied and said that she’d fallen by accident, and everybody believed them.”

“Wow, that’s really horrible,” Jillian said.

“I know. But that’s not all,” Casey told her. “There was another part.” This was where the story started to get scary. She gave the plush pig another comforting squeeze.

“The e-mail said to forward it after you read it, so that everybody knows what really happened to the girl,” Casey explained. “But a boy who was a friend of Jaycee’s cousin didn’t forward it. That night when he was taking a shower, he heard this creepy laughter. Well, as soon as he got out of the shower, he ran over to his computer and forwarded the e-mail, but by then it was too late. The next morning the police found him *dead* in the sewer.” Casey shuddered. “And when they did the autopsy —”

“Autopsy,” said Jillian.

Casey blinked. "What?"

"When they cut the dead person open," said Jillian, who liked gory TV shows. "It's called an *autopsy*."

"Okay, autopsy. Whatever." Casey felt slightly annoyed at being interrupted during the scariest part. "They found out his neck had been broken in the *exact same place* as the girl who got pushed. And at the bottom of the e-mail it said you have to forward it to five people with the message 'She was pushed!' or you'll wake up in the sewer in the dark, and the ghost of the girl will come get you." Casey gave the pig an extra-hard squeeze.

But Jillian didn't look frightened at all. "Please tell me you did not forward that e-mail," she said, giving her friend a stern look.

"Of course I did!" Casey exclaimed.

Jillian rolled her eyes. "Casey, that story was obviously bogus. People make up that junk just to get you to forward it. It probably had a virus attached."

Casey tried to remember if there had been an attachment. "I don't think so," she said without much confidence.

With a jingle of bracelets, Casey pushed her long black bangs out of her eyes and sighed, wondering what she should have done. Which was worse, a computer virus or a killer ghost? It seemed like you were taking your chances big-time either way.

It just reinforced Casey's belief that the world was full of hidden perils. Despite what people said, she thought that what you didn't know probably *would* kill you in the end. It simply did not pay to take chances.

Jillian was the opposite of Casey. She took chances all the time. She Rollerbladed and ate sushi and shopped at secondhand stores. Even Jillian's hair was daring, cut in a sharply angled bob with a long, bleached streak through her bangs. Jillian had gotten the streak after school one day; she'd just walked right into a salon and sat down in the chair like it was something she did all the time. Even though her parents hated the way it looked, there was nothing they could do, Jillian said, because, after all, it was Jillian's hair.

Jillian had encouraged Casey to get a streak, too. But Casey had worried that a bleached stripe in her black hair might make her look like a skunk. Besides,

she'd heard that you could get cancer from the peroxide.

"I don't know why you'd pay attention to anything Jaycee Woodard says, anyway," Jillian remarked as she twisted the cap onto the nail polish bottle. "She's so full of it. Remember when she told everyone at school that you can die from swallowing your gum? Which, by the way, you can't. I looked it up."

"But this was her *cousin's friend*," argued Casey, who never swallowed her gum. "So she would know if it was true, right? It's so awful to think that could have happened to someone we almost sort of know."

Casey could clearly picture the boy waking up in the dark sewer, frightened and confused. And somewhere nearby in the shadows, a vengeful ghost lurked, ready to —

"Stop thinking about it," Jillian commanded, pointing an orange fingertip at Casey's nose. "I know you are going to obsess about this. So just stop right now."

Jillian was right. Stories like this always got stuck in Casey's brain. She couldn't forget them even if she wanted to. They were a little like having canker

sores. She poked and poked at them, even though she knew it would just make it worse.

"I can't help it," she told Jillian. "It's just so . . . *horrible*."

"What's horrible," said Jillian, "is that you're killing my pig!"

Casey looked down. She was squeezing the pig so tightly that she looked like she was trying to strangle it.

Casey laughed and threw the pig lightly at Jillian's head. Jillian grinned and ducked. That was the great thing about Jillian. She could always make Casey laugh and forget about whatever was bothering her.

"Let's talk about what we're going to wear to Makayla's party," Jillian said, changing the subject. Makayla Meyers, one of their classmates at James J. Walker Junior High, was having a party the first weekend of summer. Everyone at school had been talking about it.

"You have to see this dress I want to get," Jillian said. She got up and went over to her computer. Very carefully, so as not to disturb her still-drying nails, she typed in an address.

Casey got off the bed and went to peer over her shoulder. “Wow,” she said, looking at the dress Jillian had pulled up on-screen. It was a green plaid with a smocked top and a tied halter neck; Casey thought it looked like a cross between a swimsuit and a kilt. “Does it, um, come in any other colors?”

“Nope, that’s the only one,” said Jillian, not taking the hint. “Isn’t it cute?”

“Sure,” Casey lied. It wasn’t worth the trouble to disagree about a dress.

“So what are you wearing?” Jillian asked, swinging around to face Casey.

“I was thinking of just wearing jeans and my coral vest,” Casey said.

Jillian shook her head. “Too safe.”

“What’s wrong with safe?” Casey argued. “Just because I’ve worn it before doesn’t mean it’s boring.”

Jillian rolled her eyes. “Not ‘safe’ as in ‘boring.’ I meant ‘safe’ as in ‘that vest makes you look like a crossing guard.’ This is the time for something new and exciting. May I remind you that this party is the first weekend of the first summer . . .”

“Of the rest of our lives,” Casey chimed in with a grin. She and Jillian already had their whole



summer planned out. “We’re going to hang out every single day.”

“And we’ll meet two cute boys,” Jillian reminded her.

Casey nodded. “Who are best friends, too.”

“And they’ll be our boyfriends. The four of us will do everything together.”

“Like, go to the beach . . .”

“And to Six Flags . . .”

“But not on the roller coaster,” Casey put in quickly. “I don’t do roller coasters.”

“Okay,” Jillian said with a shrug. “Me and *my* guy will go on the roller coaster, and you and *your* guy can hang out on the merry-go-round or whatever. Either way, it’s still going to be the awesomest summer ever.”

Casey’s cell phone rang. She pulled it out of her pocket and looked at the number. “It’s my mom. She’s probably calling to tell me to come home for dinner.”

“Ask her if you can eat here,” Jillian said.

Casey flipped open her phone. “Hi. Can I stay at Jillian’s for dinner?” she said.

“Is that how you’re answering the phone these days?” her mother replied.

Casey sighed. “Hi, *Mom*,” she said. “So can I?”

“Not tonight, Casey,” Mrs. Slater said. “Dad and I have some news. We’ll tell you at dinner. Fifteen minutes, okay?”

“Okay.”

“What did she say?” Jillian asked as Casey hung up.

“She said I have to come home. My parents have some kind of big news they want to tell me.”

“You better watch out,” Jillian warned her. “That’s what *my* parents said when they told me we were getting the Pest.” The Pest was Jillian’s five-year-old brother. She called him that because he was always getting into her stuff and driving her crazy.

Casey picked her backpack up from Jillian’s floor and swung it onto her shoulder.

“Call me later,” Jillian said.

“I will.” The two friends hugged like they always did, then Casey headed for the door.

Outside Jillian’s apartment, she took the stairs five flights down to the first floor. Casey tried never to take the elevator, ever since she’d heard a news story about a cable that snapped and sent four people plunging to their doom. There were lots of

things that Casey was afraid of, but falling to her death definitely made the top of the list.

Casey and Jillian lived in identical redbrick buildings just two blocks away from each other on the east side of Manhattan. Casey walked slowly, enjoying the early evening. The trees overhanging the sidewalk were thick with leaves, and the warm air felt rich with the promise of the summer ahead. Even the rush-hour crowd, with their briefcases and business suits, seemed to be dawdling more than usual.

As she walked, Casey tried to guess what her parents' news could be. She didn't think it was very likely that they were having a baby; there wasn't room for another person in their small two-bedroom apartment.

*Maybe Mom lost her job, Casey thought with a lurch of fear. Or maybe Dad got fired from the school where he works. And then we'll have to go on welfare, and we probably won't be able to afford our apartment anymore. We'll move to a different part of the city, and I'll have to go to a new school, where the kids are mean and push people into sewers. . . .*

“Stop it,” she told herself, interrupting that train of thought. “It’s probably nothing like that at all.”

Casey sighed. She wished her mother could have just told her the news on the phone. She hated surprises, even good ones.

As she turned onto her block, Casey noticed part of the street was marked off with orange cones. Two workers in blue hard hats were working in an open manhole.

Casey shivered, thinking again of the ghost in the sewer. Tightening her grip on her backpack, she ran the rest of the way home.