

# Chapter One

Bran jabs the elevator button with his elbow and waits for the doors to close. The empty recycling tubs are lighter now. They're still big, though, and he has to use both hands to hold them. The doors slide closed. Bran leans his head against the back wall. It's been a long day already. His mom got on him about his room as soon

as he got home from school. Cleaning it up took ages. Then he still had to do his regular chores. He hasn't even started the English homework that's due tomorrow. Somehow he has to write a book report on a book he hasn't read. Bran taps his head against the wall.

*Thunk.*

The elevator shudders to a halt. The bright white lights go out. It's so dark Bran thinks maybe he's gone blind. The emergency lights flick on. A dull orange lights up the small space. Bran sighs and drops the plastic tubs. He digs into his pocket for his phone to call his mom. This is the third power outage this month.

He presses the unlock button on his phone. Nothing happens. Bran puffs out air to get his bangs out of his eyes and tries again. Nothing. Great. So now the power is down. His phone is dead. And he *still* has an English report to write. He bangs on the door a few times, without much hope. His hand starts to sting around the tenth slap. No one comes. Not even his mom. She knows he went down to the basement to take out the recycling!

Frowning, Bran sits down on the tubs and waits to be rescued.

It's about an hour before the lights come back on. The elevator makes some grumpy noises but starts to move again.

Bran kicks the recycling tubs down the hallway to his apartment. An extra-hard kick dents the outside tub. Bran curses. He does not need more trouble today. He picks up the tubs, hiding the dented side against his stomach. He kicks the door to his apartment to try to open it. It's easier than turning the knob with his hands full. No one comes.

Behind Bran a strange noise makes all the hairs on his neck stand up. *Crack, crack, crack, crack*. The noise makes him think of the raptors in *Jurassic Park*. A throaty hunting sound. Bran's not usually afraid of things. He's the one who comforts his mom when they watch *The Walking Dead*. He never jumps in scary movies. But this

sound...he doesn't want to turn around and see what's making it. *There's nothing there*, he tells himself, kicking the door again, harder. He wedges the tubs against the door and fumbles for the handle. His hand is wet with sweat. There's something behind him. Something awful. He drops the tubs.

Finally he gets the apartment door open and tumbles through. He slams the door behind him. But it won't shut! The tubs are blocking the way. Something slams into the door from the other side. The door hits Bran in the face and bounces back. Bran sees a blur of fabric and skin and smells a horrible smell. It smells like death. *Crack crack crack crack crack*. The thing shoves the door hard enough to push Bran backward.

He falls over, yelling in fear. He flings out a leg and kicks the tubs clear of the doorway. The tubs ram into the legs of the thing that's trying to get in. It falls back, just for a moment. It's enough. Bran slams the door closed and rolls onto his back, gasping.

"Mom? MOM!" he yells. The thing outside thuds against the door again. Trying to get in. Trying to get to Bran. Twitching with a kind of fear he's never felt before, Bran scrambles to his feet. He looks wildly down the hallway to the main bedroom. The door is shut. His mom must just be asleep.

The apartment door shudders as the thing throws its weight against the wood. Bran tries to lock it, his fingers shaking. The sound of the metal lock clicking into

place echoes through the hall. Bran almost cries with relief.

Bran tiptoes up close to the door and puts his eye to the peephole.

## Chapter Two

There's nothing there. The hallway is empty and silent. Bran's breath is coming in tiny puffs. He makes an effort to slow his breathing. There's nothing there.

A flicker of movement, and then the thing is back. It presses up against Bran's door. He can see its shoulders—and its face. Its face is the worst. It's the face of

his neighbor, Mr. Fernandez, but it's all wrong. Mr. Fernandez always has a big smile and a hello for Bran. He's not smiling now. He's wearing a twisted expression. His mouth is open much too wide. And there is something black and gooey all over him. Bran thinks it might be blood. But then Mr. Fernandez pulls back and smashes his head into the door. His forehead splits and oozes red blood. The muck below his nose and streaking his chin is too black to be blood.

Bran squeaks and sprints for the bedroom. Behind him the door rattles on its hinges. What used to be Mr. Fernandez is trying hard to break it down.

"Mom?" Bran whispers as he opens the bedroom door. Sometimes his mom gets headaches. She often has to lie down. That must be why she didn't come to look for him. "Mom?"

He can hear the *whoosh, whoosh* sound of blood in his ears. But nothing else. He creeps forward. The blinds are drawn. The faint, cold glow of the moon streams through the pink curtains. He can see a lump in the bed. He reaches out, his hand trembling.

"Mom?"

His mom jerks forward, sitting up straight. It is her. Relief rushes through him so strongly that his legs give out. He crumbles to the carpet. It saves him.