

CHAPTER ONE

CASSIDY BEAN CLOSED her notebook and glanced out the bus window. The world outside was a blur of green. She blinked several times, trying to capture mental snapshots of the scenery. A field of young corn. A tilted barn. Unending hills, lush with summer growth.

Having traveled nearly an hour from New York City already, Cassidy knew she was close to Whitechapel. The landscape was a good gauge. Fifteen minutes out: the yellow grasses of the Meadowlands and the yellow air above Elizabeth, New Jersey. Twenty minutes out: the broken sidewalks and graffiti-covered concrete walls of Newark's side streets. Thirty minutes out: the ramshackle Victorian houses of Maplewood, Milburn, and Summit, surrounded by the first real vision of green and leaves and flowers and trees. Forty: the suburban sprawl of the towns and the malls just off Route 78. Fifty: the ridge and the sky and the purple distance of a western eternity . . . and beyond.

Here, at an hour out, the bus had begun its lazy descent toward the Delaware River, where another of New Jersey's great ridges met the state of Pennsylvania.

Cassidy wouldn't get that far. The hamlet where the Tremonts lived was nestled in a warrenlike grouping of peaks and valleys a couple miles north of the highway. Soon, the bus would stop at a small shopping center a few miles before the first visible twist of the upcoming river. That parking lot was where Mrs. Tremont had promised she'd be waiting with Joey to bring her the rest of the way to their home, a house where Cassidy had spent the past two

summers as part of a program that brought city kids out to the countryside.

This summer was to be her third with the Tremonts. It was also to be her last. Next year, Cassidy would turn thirteen. Too old for the program. And so this was it: *Whitechapel — The Final Chapter*.

She drummed her fingers nervously on the cover of the notebook in her lap — a cheap journal with a black-and-white marbled cardboard cover that her next-door neighbor had given to her a few years back. The Tremonts had not finalized their decision to accommodate Cassidy until the previous week. The past couple of months had delivered a nerve-wracking series of *almost-nots* and *wait-and-sees*. What hurt was feeling that the Tremonts didn't want her back again. But now she knew that wasn't true. They'd said yes. Finally. Yes.

Dennis and Rose were like the dad and mom she'd always dreamed of. They treated her like one of their own children. One night, a couple years ago, after Rose had scolded her for leaving a bowl of melted ice cream on the coffee table in the living room, Cassidy had gone to sleep wearing a smile, pleased that Rose had spoken to her the same way she'd speak to Tony or Deb or Joey.

Tony, the oldest of the Tremonts' three, was in college in Virginia where he spent summers working internships. Cassidy stayed in his bedroom, and whenever he'd visited while she was there, he'd slept on the pull-out couch in the den. Deb was in high school and spent most of her time with her older friends. But Cassidy and Joey were the same age, ten that first summer, and had become fast friends. They'd ridden bikes to the town pool, hiked the trails through the nearby state parks, trekked to the Dairy Queen for Blizzards, plopped exhausted onto the patio furniture out back, swatting at mosquitos, telling each other ghost stories late into the night.

The house in Whitechapel felt more like home than the apartment she shared with her mom, in the supposed *center-of-everything*, ever could.

When her social worker had called and told her that “the placement” had gone through, she’d run upstairs to tell Janet and Benji, her best friends in the apartment building. They were disappointed she was leaving them, but she promised to send postcards and they pretended to cheer up. That night, her mother had been as unexcited as she’d been the first two summers, but Cassidy was used to her mother’s eye rolls, her tight lips, her silences. Later, wrapped up in the afghan quilt on the couch in the small living room, Cassidy couldn’t sleep. The social worker’s words ran through her head, two in particular: *host family*. Something about the term had bothered Cassidy, and it had continued to bother her for the next few days. The words echoed even as she climbed onto the bus at the Port Authority that morning.

Now, she drummed her fingers on the notebook cover again and shivered. The air-conditioning that had felt so nice an hour ago was suddenly overwhelming. She pulled a sweatshirt from the backpack on the seat beside her and slipped it over her shoulders, the sleeves extending over her chest like a pair of extra arms. She pressed her lips together and glanced down at the notebook — her journal, her *Book of Bad Things*. Five minutes ago, it came to her, the meaning of the words *host family*. She’d yanked the book from her bag, flipping through pages, desperate to find the relevant entry. It had been number fifty-two. Parasites. Parasites need *hosts* to live.

Cassidy squeezed her eyes shut. *Why did the Tremonts wait so long to say yes?* she wondered. *Why didn’t they write to me this past year? Did I do something wrong?*

Yes, the previous summer had ended badly, but what had happened with Joey’s dog, Lucky . . . That hadn’t been her fault. Had it?