

Chapter One



“When God handed out curiosity, he gave you a second helping, Johnny! And a third helping of mischief!”

John Avery Whittaker heard his stepmother’s words in his mind as clearly as if she were sitting next to him. *Fiona wouldn’t like being here with me now, though*, he thought with a smile, but he knew she had a point.

In his nearly 10 years of existence on planet Earth, he had experienced more than his share of curiosity and seen much more than his share of mischief—and this misty early morning was a great example of both. Though the skies were threatening to storm, he was holding a metal rod while sitting atop an old, wooden water tower near the center of

Provenance, the small town in North Carolina his family had just moved to, near the university where his father was about to start a new job.

Johnny brushed his strawberry blond hair back from his eyes with a grimy hand, smudging his freckled face in the process. He looked around. He could have seen for miles from way up here if it weren't so cloudy and murky. Through the mist, he could still see the spires of the ancient mansion on the grounds next to the water tower. But he could barely make out the shape of the old town hall clock tower a few blocks away, even though it was built on a rise and taller than the water tower.

When the Whittaker family first drove through Provenance a few days ago, Johnny had noticed that the clock's hands seemed stuck at 12:30. He'd made a mental note to explore both the mansion and the clock tower someday soon. For now, though, he was happy that the grounds around the water tower were deserted. At this hour, there weren't even any cars on the streets. Perfect.

Johnny pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and examined it. Across the top was written, "Attempt to Store Electrical Energy from Lightning Bolts in Dead Battery Cells." Under that, he had drawn a diagram of his experiment. It was simple. Set up a lightning rod, wrap two wires around it, and attach the other end of the wires to the ter-

minals of a dead car battery. *Ben Franklin would be proud*, Johnny thought, smiling again.

He removed a hammer and nails from his backpack and skillfully nailed the rod in place on the water tank's wooden roof. He then used a pair of pliers to twist the ends of two long, coiled strands of heavy-duty wire to the rod. After securing the connections, he crawled to the edge of the roof and, one at a time, tossed the coils of wire over the side. He peered over the edge, checking to see that the wires were untangled all the way to the ground. All he had to do now was climb down the ladder attached to one of the tower's legs, hook up the other ends to the battery, and wait for the storm to start.

But as he swung his leg over the edge to begin his descent, a sudden wind gust blew the diagram out of his hand. Johnny watched as the paper fluttered to the ground and skittered across the lawn, flattening against a high, wrought iron fence that bordered the water tower property. The fence ran the entire distance between the tower land and the unkempt grounds of the ancient, abandoned mansion. The barrier was overgrown with shrubbery in places on the mansion side.

"Rats," Johnny muttered as he swung his other leg over the roof's edge. Then suddenly he saw something that made his heart skip a beat.

Through a gap in the overgrown bushes and trees lining the fence, Johnny saw a boy about his own age standing in the mansion's knee-high, weed-filled yard, watching his every move.

The boy had large, brown eyes and hair to match. He was barefoot, dirty, and dressed in a threadbare shirt and raggedy overalls. During the drive to Provenance, Johnny had seen similar kids in the surrounding farm country, from the back seat of his father's black Ford Victoria Model 18. The Great Depression, which had been going on for nearly six years now, had ravaged the country, but it had hit farmers and farm families the hardest.

The raggedy boy and Johnny stared at each other, and for a moment time seemed to stand still. Then Johnny smiled and waved, and the boy smiled and waved back. Johnny was about to signal for the boy to meet him at the fence when he saw something that nearly made his heart stop.

A tall man in a hooded cloak emerged from a small thicket of trees behind the boy. The hood covered the man's face. His right hand wielded a long, wicked-looking dagger, while his left gripped a coil of rope.

He was slinking straight toward the boy.

Johnny swallowed hard, yelled, "Hey!" and pointed frantically behind the boy at the man in the cloak. The boy's

smile faded. He turned, let out a yelp, and ran off, disappearing into the shabby bushes. The man in the cloak slunk after him.

Johnny grabbed the rungs of the ladder and started down rapidly. This was the first person his age he had seen since moving to Provenance two days ago, and he wasn't about to let him get away—or get murdered!

He zipped down the ladder but stepped down too hard on one of the old, wooden rungs. It snapped in two. Fortunately, his hands were still on the rungs in front of him. If they hadn't been, he would have plummeted to the bottom of the tower. *Plummeting may be inevitable, though*, he thought, as he was still dangling a considerable distance from the ground.

The next lower rung was too far for him to reach. Johnny fought his panic and tried to pull himself up, but the added weight of his backpack sapped his strength.

To make matters worse, his hands, already greasy from the rod and the wire, started to sweat. He was quickly losing his grip.

Just when he thought he couldn't hold on a moment longer, he felt a strong arm around his waist. "Don't worry, son," a deep voice drawled. "I gotcha."

Johnny and his rescuer moved carefully down the

remaining rungs of the ladder. When they were finally on the ground, Johnny turned and found himself face-to-chest with a sheriff's deputy.

"You all right?" asked the deputy.

Johnny nodded. "Yes, thanks, but—"

"You wanna tell me what you were doing up there?"

"I was conducting an experiment, but that's not important right now. There's a man in a cloak with a dagger on that property over there, chasing after a kid!"

The deputy's brow furrowed. "Where, the old Granville House property?"

"Yes!" Johnny almost screamed, pointing. "Right over there!"

The deputy looked over, then back at Johnny, and smirked. "Okay, that's a good one. But ol' Deputy Miller wasn't born yesterday. I know when someone's makin' up a tale to get outta trouble."

Johnny grabbed the deputy's sleeve. "I'm not making it up, sir! I promise! The man in the cloak is chasing after the kid! He has a dagger and rope! I think he wants to kill him!"

Deputy Miller's smirk faded. "You're serious?"

Johnny fairly jumped up and down. "Yes! Completely!"

The deputy took a deep breath, swallowed, and nodded. "All right, all right. Let's go."

They made their way to the street, past the deputy's

Ford Model A police car, and around to the front gates of the Granville House property. The gates sat ajar. “See?” said Johnny. “Someone is in there!”

“That don’t mean anything,” the deputy replied. “Them gates have been that way since I was a kid—before that, even.”

Johnny couldn’t believe the deputy was being so casual about this. “Please, we need to hurry!”

They slid through the opening and crossed the dried-up, weed-infested lawn. The trees were so overgrown they made the already dank day seem even gloomier, casting hazy shadows across their path. The statues of people and animals were slimy with moss at their bases and covered with bird droppings at their tops.

“There!” Johnny pointed. “That’s the spot!” He recognized the thicket of trees and the weedy clearing beyond. He and Deputy Miller ran to the clearing. It was definitely the right place. Johnny could see the water tower from it, clear as a bell.

But there was nothing there. No footprints or cloak prints. “Well?” asked Deputy Miller.

“The dew from the trees must have covered up the prints,” said Johnny. “I’m telling you, they were here!”

At his urging, they searched the thicket of trees and the nearby bushes, but there was still no sign that anyone but

them had been on the grounds that morning. "Okay," said the deputy, "that's enough. Joke's over."

"It wasn't a joke! Honest!" Johnny insisted. He scratched his head. "I ... I don't understand it."

Deputy Miller smiled. "Well, whatever it was, there's nothin' here now." He put a hand on Johnny's shoulder. "Let's go."

The two walked back to the gates in silence, Johnny lost in thought. Just before they reached the street, Deputy Miller asked, "What was the experiment?"

Johnny jolted out of his contemplation. "Hmm?"

"Before we came over here, you said you were on the water tower conducting an experiment." He slipped through the gap between the gates. "So, what was it?"

Johnny followed him and said, "I was attempting to store electrical energy from lightning bolts in dead battery cells."

Deputy Miller's eyebrows rose, and he whistled. "You don't say! And just how's it supposed to happen?"

As they walked, Johnny explained the details of the experiment, finishing up just as they reached the deputy's patrol car. "Hmm," the deputy grunted. "Think it'll work?"

Johnny shrugged, distracted. "I dunno, I didn't finish setting it up." Then in a small voice he asked, "Are you gonna arrest me?"

Deputy Miller considered him for a moment, scratching his chin. “Weeeell,” he drawled, “seein’ as how you’re new here ... and how you’re a scientist ... and how no real harm was done ... and how you took me on a nice little adventure to break up the morning doldrums ... I figure I can let you slide—this time.”

Johnny heaved a sigh of relief. “Oh, thank you! Thank you very much!”

Deputy Miller’s eyes narrowed. “Just make sure you get permission before you go climbing around on the tower again.”

Johnny smiled. “Yes, sir.” He then nodded toward the Granville House. “And I really did see a boy and a man in there.”

Deputy Miller nodded. “Yeah, well, if you see ’em again—and can prove it—let me know.” He spat on the ground and said, “Now, where do you live?”

“Uh, live?”

“Sure. If I’m not gonna take you to the sheriff’s station, then I’ve gotta take you home.”

Johnny’s heart sank. *Home. To face Father.*

He would almost rather go to jail.

Chapter Two



Harold Whittaker was an imposing figure by anyone's standards—tall, with salt-and-pepper hair and a matching, neatly trimmed mustache and beard. He walked with a slight limp, a result of his participation in World War I, though Johnny didn't know exactly what that "participation" involved.

Harold now listened quietly at the front door of their home at 413 Magnolia Lane as Deputy Miller related Johnny's antics. When the deputy had finished, Harold nodded gravely and said, "Thank you for bringing him here, Deputy Miller. I'll be happy to pay for any damage he may have caused."

Johnny piped up. “I didn’t cause any—”

Harold gave him a withering look, and Johnny seemed to shrivel, which didn’t go unnoticed by Deputy Miller.

“Oh, no sir,” the deputy said kindly. “No worries about that. The tower is old and not in use. We just don’t want anyone getting hurt climbing on it, or climbing on it without permission. Even if they are junior scientists.” He winked at Johnny.

Johnny stifled a grin and muttered, “Wouldn’t have hurt myself.”

Harold ignored him. “I’m sorry for your trouble, Deputy Miller. I can assure you this incident won’t be repeated.”

Deputy Miller nodded. “Thank you, Mr. ... Whittaker, is it?”

“Professor, actually.”

“Right. That explains a lot. Well, have a nice day now!”

He left, and Harold closed the door and faced Johnny, who braced for the storm. Well, not a storm exactly. His father never raised his voice, even in anger, which just made him all the more imposing.

“We haven’t been here three days,” he began, “and you’ve already had a run-in with the law? How could you do something so foolish and dangerous?”

Johnny tried to look at him, but he couldn’t match his still-withering gaze. “I was just trying to—”

Harold held up a hand to silence him. "I want you to stay out of trouble. But since that seems to be so difficult for you, I'll make it simpler: You will not leave this property until school begins next week. Is that understood?"

"A whole week? Even Labor Day?"

Harold didn't say a word. He didn't have to. The "look" communicated more than enough. Johnny looked down. "Yes, sir."

Harold walked away. Johnny had disappointed his father again. Next to a spanking, that knowledge was the worst punishment he could have received.

Suddenly, a voice behind him scolded, "Are you completely daft, laddie?" Johnny turned to face his stepmother, Fiona.

She wasn't much taller than he, but when she got her dander up, she seemed every bit as imposing as his father. While Harold always talked in even tones, however, Fiona's Scottish lilt rose and fell to fit the occasion.

"Have you no brains at all?" she said, her green eyes flashing. As she spoke, two strands of dark auburn hair worked themselves loose from her ponytail and framed her heart-shaped face.

"I knew what I was doing," Johnny replied.

"Did you now? And if you had fallen, would you have

known how to land so you wouldn't break your neck? Or how to comfort your father and me and your little sister at your funeral?"

Johnny sighed heavily. "I'm sorry, okay?"

Fiona's eyes softened. "I know you are, Johnny. You just need to be more careful, that's all." She smiled. "Actually, I'm surprised at your resourcefulness. Where did you get the materials you needed? Most of our things aren't expected to arrive until this afternoon."

Johnny shrugged. "I found it all in the shed out back. I had everything diagrammed, too, but I lost the paper." He didn't mention anything about the boy or the man in the hooded cloak.

"Well, maybe you'll be able to conduct your experiment later." Then she grinned and added, "Like when you have permission from the town, and your father and I aren't around anymore to worry about you."

Johnny sighed again. "He never used to worry about me. He used to encourage me."

Fiona put her arm around his shoulders. "It's hard, I know. Moving away from your friends and loved ones."

Johnny nodded. He didn't have a lot of friends in Charlotte, the last place they'd lived, but he'd really liked the ones he did have. And he had left a lot of family back in

Scotland. He was six when his father moved them to America, so the bulk of his memories were of the beautiful Scottish countryside outside of Kinglassie, where he was born ... and the loss of his mother, Janneth, and his grandparents Jackson and Maryn.

Johnny looked at Fiona's kind face. "What about you? Is it hard on you?"

"Surely! I'll always think of Scotland as my home."

"You don't seem to be having any problem adjusting."

Fiona smiled. "That's because I have Someone helping me."

Johnny winced. "Not the God stuff again."

"Is that any way to talk about the Creator of the universe?" Fiona chided. "Now, go get washed up for breakfast."

He turned and started toward the stairs when she suddenly grabbed him, spun him to her, and hugged him tightly. "I'm glad you're all right, love," she whispered. "And one day, I pray you'll see just how important the 'God stuff' really is."

She released him and then turned and walked quickly to the kitchen. Johnny watched her go, then smiled and shook his head. He loved Fiona, but she just didn't understand. God simply wasn't that important to him. He crossed the living room and lumbered up the stairs, thoughts of

God and Fiona fading rapidly, replaced by the raggedy boy and the man in the cloak at the old Granville House. He knew they were both real. He would just have to figure out a way to prove it—as soon as he wasn't grounded anymore, that is.

Chapter Three



Johnny stayed quiet throughout breakfast, mostly because his four-and-three-quarters-year-old stepsister, Charlotte, did enough talking for all of them. Everyone called her “Charlie,” and she was a miniature version of Fiona, with long, dark auburn hair that framed a heart-shaped face. She had green eyes and a beautiful mouth that on this particular morning was filled with an endless stream of questions, mostly about Johnny’s run-in with the deputy. The questions started the second Harold finished the blessing.

“Is Johnny in trouble? How come he’s not talking? Did he kill somebody? Did he steal something? Will he have to go to jail? If he does, can we get a dog?” Harold tuned her

out by turning to his newspaper, and Fiona tried to silence Charlie with food, but the little girl's stream of questions continued through breakfast. Johnny longed to yell at her to be quiet, but he held his tongue. He didn't need more trouble from his father.

Suddenly, Charlie squealed, "Oo! Truck!" The family looked out the dining room window to see a huge moving van backing up their driveway.

"Ach! They're early!" exclaimed Fiona. They all piled out the front door.

The morning sun shone. Johnny looked up at the rapidly disappearing clouds. Fiona also looked up and clucked her tongue. "Tsk. I was hoping we'd get a nice shower this morning," she said. "The lawn could sure use it."

Harold guided the truck back toward the door and signaled for it to stop. The driver and his helper hopped out. "Morning, Professor Whittaker, Mrs. Whittaker," the driver said.

"Good morning, Kyle, Hugo," Harold replied. "Glad to see you made it safe and sound. I'll show you where we want the furniture and bigger items. Johnny, help your mother unload the boxes and smaller things."

"Yes, sir."

"This way, gentlemen." Harold and Kyle walked into the house. Hugo opened the back of the truck, set up the

loading ramp, and then followed them. Johnny climbed up and started handing boxes to Fiona, who set them in a neat stack on the ground.

Charlie jumped up and down with excitement. "What about me?" she cried. "I wanna help, too!"

Fiona spied a water hose on the truck bed. She picked it up and took Charlie's hand. "I have a very special job for you, my lass!" she offered. She screwed the hose fitting to the spigot by the front door and handed the nozzle to Charlie. "The lawn looks pretty thirsty. Why don't you give it a drink?"

"All right!"

Fiona turned on the spigot, and Charlie screamed with glee as the water shot out of the nozzle. "Not all in one place, Charlie," Fiona called. "Move around the whole lawn!"

Charlie laughed, and Fiona walked back to the truck.

"You realize you're just going to get a lot of wet boxes and mud puddles, don't you?" asked Johnny.

"At least it's keeping her occupied," Fiona said with a grin. She picked up a box and took it into the house. Johnny chuckled and went back to the boxes. He moved several smaller ones to the ramp, which uncovered one of the things he was looking for.

A large, wooden trunk.

He fished in his pocket for the skeleton key that opened

it, and he felt it, attached as always to a long, golden chain. He knew he couldn't open it here in the moving van, but he was glad to see, after a quick examination, that it had made the journey intact. The trunk was old, after all.

It was also the only thing bequeathed to him by his Grandpa Jackson McClintock when he died.

Johnny sat down next to the trunk and ran his hand over its rough surface. It had belonged to his Great-Grandfather Thomas Avery McClintock, whose middle name he shared, and who had died a hero while rescuing people from a massive train wreck and fire, according to Johnny's mother, Janneth, and Grandpa Jackson. Both of them were gone, too. Johnny's mother died of smallpox when he was almost five years old, and his grandfather died the following year in an accident at the mine where he worked back in Kinglassie.

His grandpa's death coming so closely after his mother's was what made Johnny's father decide to move them all to the United States. Those last years in Scotland, so filled with death, were not good ones for the Whittakers. In fact, the only good thing to come of them was that his father had married Fiona. Still, Johnny never wanted to forget Janneth Dee McClintock Whittaker, which was one reason the trunk was so special to him: In it were his most cherished mementos of her and also of Grandma Maryn and Grandpa Jackson.

The trunk had been a source of strife between Johnny's father and grandfather. The only time Johnny ever saw his father and grandfather disagree was when Grandpa Jackson insisted that when he died, the trunk and everything in it would go to Johnny, not Harold. Harold thought the trunk should go to him, since it contained mementos of Janneth, but Grandpa was extremely clear on the matter: "The trunk goes to Johnny."

When Harold wasn't around, Johnny asked his grandfather why he was so insistent, but all Grandpa Jackson would say was, "*Neamhnaid fíor prís ... beatha fhada,*" and then smile benignly and add, "Not yet. When you're older, but not yet." Grandpa died before "yet" came, however, which just made the trunk all the more mysterious for Johnny—and one more cause for strain between him and his father.

Most of the mementos in the trunk were fairly routine—pictures, including a nice framed one of his mother; a few pieces of her costume jewelry; some clothing; an old book of his great-grandfather's inscribed by J.M. Barrie; the enormous McClintock Family Bible; bound bundles of letters to and from various family members; a few personal items of Johnny's, including a baseball autographed by Babe Ruth (which should be pretty valuable since the Bambino had retired earlier that year). There were a few other things as well. Johnny cherished the contents of the trunk, not for

their monetary value but because of the people who had owned and worn them.

But there was one item he couldn't figure out: a bundle of what looked like old rags tied together with string. He had a vague memory of the rags' being very important to his mother and grandpa, but he couldn't remember why. And so the bundle remained, and probably would always remain, a mystery.

Johnny rose and moved a few more boxes to the tail of the truck, and then he found one he couldn't even budge. He opened the box, and a look of delight spread across his face. "Speaking of mysteries—my books!" he said aloud.

He removed the top two. "Ah! *The Sign of the Four* and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Ha!" He then tested several boxes to see which one was the lightest. Once he found one he could easily carry, Johnny put the two books on top of it. He opened *The Sign of the Four* to chapter six, picked up the box, and walked down the ramp, reading out loud, dramatically. "'You will not apply my precept,' he said, shaking his head. 'How often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, HOWEVER IMPROBABLE, must be the truth?'"

"Um—never?"

Johnny jumped, startled, and dropped the box, which thudded to the ground. Standing at the bottom of the

ramp were two girls, one who looked his age and one who looked Charlie's age. The younger girl had curly, dark hair; big, brown eyes; and a round, dirty face. She was holding a helium-filled balloon. The older girl also had dark hair, but it was straight and in pigtails. Her oval face included a cute, slightly up-turned nose and deep-brown eyes that studied him.

"Kinda jumpy, aren'tcha?" the older girl asked.

"You scared me!" Johnny said. "I didn't expect you to be there."

"Obviously." She held out her hand. "I'm Emily Capello. Everyone calls me Emmy."

Johnny took her hand, and they shook. "Pleased to meet you. I'm John Avery Whittaker. But everyone calls me Johnny."

Emmy wrinkled her nose. "No."

"No, what?"

"You're not a Johnny. It doesn't fit you."

Johnny grinned. "Sorry, but that's my name."

Emmy shrugged. "We'll see. This is my sister, Henrietta, but we call her Hen."

Johnny bent over and shook the little girl's hand. "Hi, Hen," he greeted her.

Hen cocked her head to one side and stared at him. "We live across the street," she said. "What are you doing here?"

“Moving in.” He pointed to his sister, who was turning the flowerbed into a river of mud with the garden hose. “That’s Charlie—short for Charlotte. I’ll bet the two of you are gonna get along just fine.” Hen giggled and started playing with her balloon.

Johnny and Emmy bent down to pick up the contents of the upended box. “So, you’re the P.K., eh?” she asked.

“P.K.?”

“Professor’s kid.”

Johnny chuckled. “I’ve never heard that before. Yeah, I guess I am. How’d you know?”

“My father works at Duke University, too,” Emmy replied. “Not as a professor, though. He’s in charge of the admissions office. He knew your dad was coming and heard you all were moving here.” Emmy picked up the books, eyeing the titles. “You like dogs, huh?”

Johnny smiled. “Uh, no. I mean, yes, I like dogs, but *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is a Sherlock Holmes mystery.”

Emmy opened the book to the inside front cover. There, in neat penmanship, was an inscription, which she read aloud: “To Johnny ‘Sherlock’ Whittaker. Never take anything at face value. May all your cases be grand ones. Arthur.” Emmy looked at him quizzically.

Johnny nodded at the book. “My father was a good friend of Sir Arthur’s.”

“‘Sir’ Arthur?”

Johnny turned to the title page. “Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. He created Sherlock Holmes.”

Emmy’s eyes widened. “Your father knows the creator of Sherlock Holmes?”

“Knew,” Johnny replied. “Sir Arthur is dead now.”

Just then, Fiona came back outside. “Johnny, these boxes are never gonna get inside if we don’t—Oh! Who do we have here?”

“This is Emmy and her sister, Hen. They live across the street.”

“Pleased to meet you,” said Fiona with a little curtsy. “That’s a lovely balloon, Hen. Did you just come from a circus?”

“No, a carnival,” Hen replied. “We were visiting Grandma, and we stopped there on the way back. It was fun. My daddy got sick. Too many hotdogs.”

Now Emmy’s face grew red. “That’s enough, Hen,” she said. “They don’t want to hear about that.”

Fiona chuckled. “It’s quite all right. But if you’ll excuse us, we do need to get back to work.” She looked at Johnny. “Or in some cases, *start* working.”

Johnny jerked up his shoulders. “Hey, I’m working!” he protested. “See? This is me getting some boxes ready to take

to my room!” He put the box he’d been holding on the tail of the truck and reached for the books.

Instead of handing them to him, however, Emmy opened *The Hound of the Baskervilles* to the inscription page and turned to Fiona. “Mrs. Whittaker,” she asked, “was this book really signed by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle?”

“Indeed it was, lass,” Fiona replied. “Johnny’s father, Harold, visited Sir Arthur just before he died. Took Johnny with him. Sir Arthur was impressed that Johnny liked his book so much, so he signed one for him.”

“Why was Sir Arthur so impressed?”

Fiona picked up another box. “Because Johnny had read the whole thing, and he was only four at the time.” She smiled proudly at her stepson and then turned and walked inside.

Emmy slowly turned to Johnny, whose freckled face was even redder now. He smiled sheepishly. “Toldja.”

“Yeah ... uh ... here.” She handed him back the books. “You probably don’t want me messing with these.”

Johnny took them. “It’s okay. You can borrow them if you want.”

“I think they’re a little too valuable for that—at least one of them is.”

There was an awkward pause.

Johnny took a deep breath. “Well ... I’d better get to work here.”

Emmy nodded. “Yeah. It was nice meeting you.” She took Hen’s hand.

“Do you go to school at Brookhaven?” he asked.

Emmy nodded again.

“Great! Then maybe I’ll see you on Tuesday?”

“Uh, sure. I’ll show you around and—”

Suddenly Hen cried out, “My balloon!” She had let go of the string, and the balloon was floating gently into the sky.

Johnny didn’t hesitate. He darted the few steps away to where Charlie was and grabbed the garden hose. Charlie let out a startled “Hey!”—and then Johnny pointed the spray above the rising balloon, showering it with water.

At first it skittered sideways. Then slowly, the balloon began to descend. When it got low enough, Johnny called out, “Get it, Emmy!”

He turned the spray away, and Emmy grabbed the balloon. Johnny handed the hose back to Charlie, then reached for the end of the balloon’s string. He tied a slipknot and then placed it around Hen’s wrist. “There,” he said. “Now it won’t fly away again.”

Hen’s face beamed. “Thanks!” she said.

Emmy looked at Johnny, brow furrowed. “How did you know that would happen?” she asked.

Johnny shrugged. “Simple physics. Water is heavier than helium, so adding it to the top of the balloon made the balloon come down.”

Emmy squinted at him for a moment, studying him intensely. “Right ...” she said. She turned with Hen, and they slowly walked away, Emmy shaking her head.

Johnny watched them disappear around the side of the truck and then sighed and slumped down on the tailgate. “She thinks you’re a freak, Whittaker,” he muttered. Then a thought suddenly popped into his head. He jumped up, rounded the side of the truck, and called, “Hey!”

Emmy and Hen stopped, and he approached them. “Do you know anything about the old Granville House?” he asked.

Hen’s eyes grew wide. “You mean the ghost house?” she said.

“Ghost?” Johnny repeated.

Emmy rolled her eyes. “That’s what she calls it. One of her friends told her there were ghosts there.”

“What kind of ghosts?” asked Johnny.

“How many kinds are there?” Emmy replied. Then she said, “You don’t believe in them, do you?”

Johnny scoffed. “Ghosts? Hardly. I’m a man of science.”

Emmy glanced at Hen’s balloon and then at the water hose, now back in Charlie’s hands. “Yeah, I know,” she said.

Johnny reddened. "So, do you know anything about the old Granville place?"

Emmy shrugged. "Just that it's old—and kinda spooky."

"And ghosty," Hen whispered.

"Have you ever seen anyone walking around the grounds or anything?" Johnny continued.

"No, but I don't go by it that much, either," Emmy replied. "In fact, nobody does. Everyone pretty much stays away from it. Why do you ask?"

Johnny considered telling her what he had seen during his water tower incident, but then he thought better of it. She already thought he was weird; no need to add fuel to the fire. "I'm just ... curious about the place, that's all. I like history, and it looks very historical."

"Yeah, it is that," Emmy answered with a nod.

"Storical and ghosty," added Hen.

After a pause, Emmy said, "Anything else?"

Johnny shook his head. "No, um, I—I guess I'll see you at school."

Emmy nodded. "Yeah, okay. See ya." She and Hen walked off.

Johnny returned to the back of the truck, deep in thought, and sat on the tailgate. So the old Granville House had a reputation, and people around here avoided it. That was hardly an earth-shattering revelation. Most small towns

probably had an abandoned, spooky mansion that everyone avoided. But he had seen two people at this one, and he was going to find out who they were if it was the last thing he—

Suddenly Emmy popped her head back around the truck and announced, “I know what to call you now.”

Johnny stood up. “Oh! Uh, what?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Sherlock,” she replied, and then her face broke into a wide grin. “Welcome to the neighborhood.” She disappeared again.

Johnny also smiled broadly. He had finally made a new friend after all, even if it *was* a girl.

Fiona’s voice shattered the moment. “John Avery Whitaker! Get busy!” she called.

Johnny grabbed a box quickly, rushed toward the house, tripped over the garden hose, and landed face-first in one of Charlie’s mud puddles. “Nice,” he muttered.

Charlie giggled.