FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *ESCAPE ROOM*

CHRISTOPHER EDGE



A FEAR FILES CASE

# A TRICK OF THE LIGHT

SCHOOL TRIPS CAN BE A NIGHTMARE...


FOR THE THROAT, CHEST,
& LUNGS.
FEAR FILES
2
1929
What you are now,
we once were.
What we are now,
you sha be.

FOR ANYONE WHO'S EVER BEEN
ON A SCHOOL TRIP.

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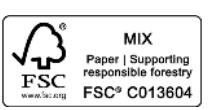
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# FEAR FILES

## A TRICK OF THE LIGHT

CHRISTOPHER EDGE

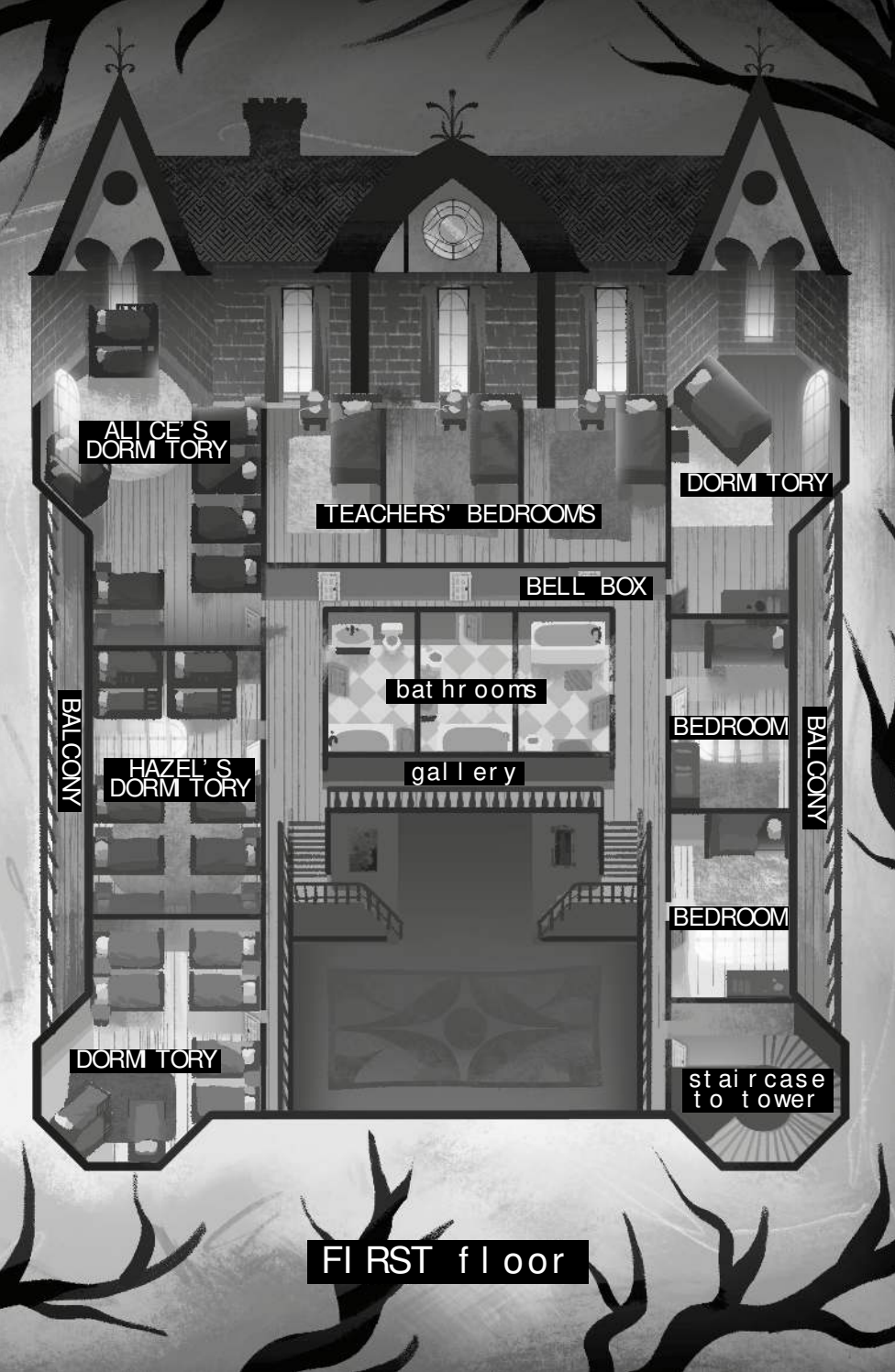


WALKER
BOOKS

# HOWLSFIELD MANOR




ground floor


ALICE'S DORMITORY
TEACHERS' BEDROOMS
DORMITORY
BELL BOX
bathrooms
BALCONY
BEDROOM
BALCONY
HAZEL'S DORMITORY
gallery
BEDROOM
DORMITORY
staircase to tower
FIRST floor

Nobody knows who started the DARKIVE — a top-secret database of the strange and unexplained. The files recovered in the FEAR FILES leak have all been given a rating of LEVEL 4: BEYOND FEAR. This is the highest fear rating there is, reserved for special cases only.

TOP SECRET. AUTHORIZED EYES ONLY. LEVEL 4 CLEARANCE REQUIRED.

# CONFIDENTIAL

DARKIVE FILE NUMBER: 511326

Subject: hazel o'brien

Location: [redacted]

File notes: a trick of the lig...

The following account was recovered by Agent Haines during the ill-fated HOWLSFIELD INVESTIGATION. All the surviving case notes and evidence found during this investigation are contained in the file, but this can only be read in an RSPF (RESTRICTED SECURE PROTECTED FACILITY) to avoid contamination. The search for Agent Grav continues...

DESTROY AFTER READING

DISCLOSURE OF THIS CLASSIFIED INFORMATION MAY ENDANGER PUBLIC SAFETY.



# 1

Leaning against the balcony railing, I look out over the manor house grounds. The sprawling gardens are bathed in fading sunlight as evening draws in, and I can hear birds calling as they head to their nests, high in the trees. Glancing to the left, I glimpse the wooded hills that lie to the far side of the house, while straight ahead, a long green lawn rolls down to a shimmering lake, its still waters stained red by the setting sun.

This place looks perfect, and we've got the entire week to explore it. If only I actually wanted to be here…

I shiver as a chill autumn breeze plucks at my thin T-shirt, feeling suddenly cold as the sun sinks further behind the trees. From the open window behind me, I hear the sound of laughter as the others rush into our dormitory room, and hastily step to my right, hiding out of sight at the far end of the balcony. I only climbed out to get some fresh air, but I can't let them know I'm here. A trellis screen separates the balcony outside our bedroom from the next one along, and I huddle in its

shade, listening as Imogen's voice rises above the rest.

"I can't believe we've got to share a room with her," she says, sounding indignant as the other voices quickly fall silent. "She's *so* annoying."

I know who she's talking about straight away. When it came to picking rooms, I was here first and grabbed one of the comfiest beds beside the dressing table, but when Imogen and the others arrived, she decided that this was *their* dormitory. Imogen stole my bed from right under my nose and now all my stuff is dumped next to the spare camp beds they've set up beneath the window. She must be moaning about *me*.

"Maybe we can get the teachers to move her out," Leilani says, chipping in like she always does when Imogen holds court. "It's not like there's any room for her here."

"They won't listen," Imogen replies scornfully. "This whole school trip is supposed to be a *bonding* experience. Remember what Mrs Carroll told us when we arrived here." Clapping her hands together, she sarcastically imitates their teacher's monotonous tone. *"It's a chance to break down barriers and forge new friendships."* Imogen's

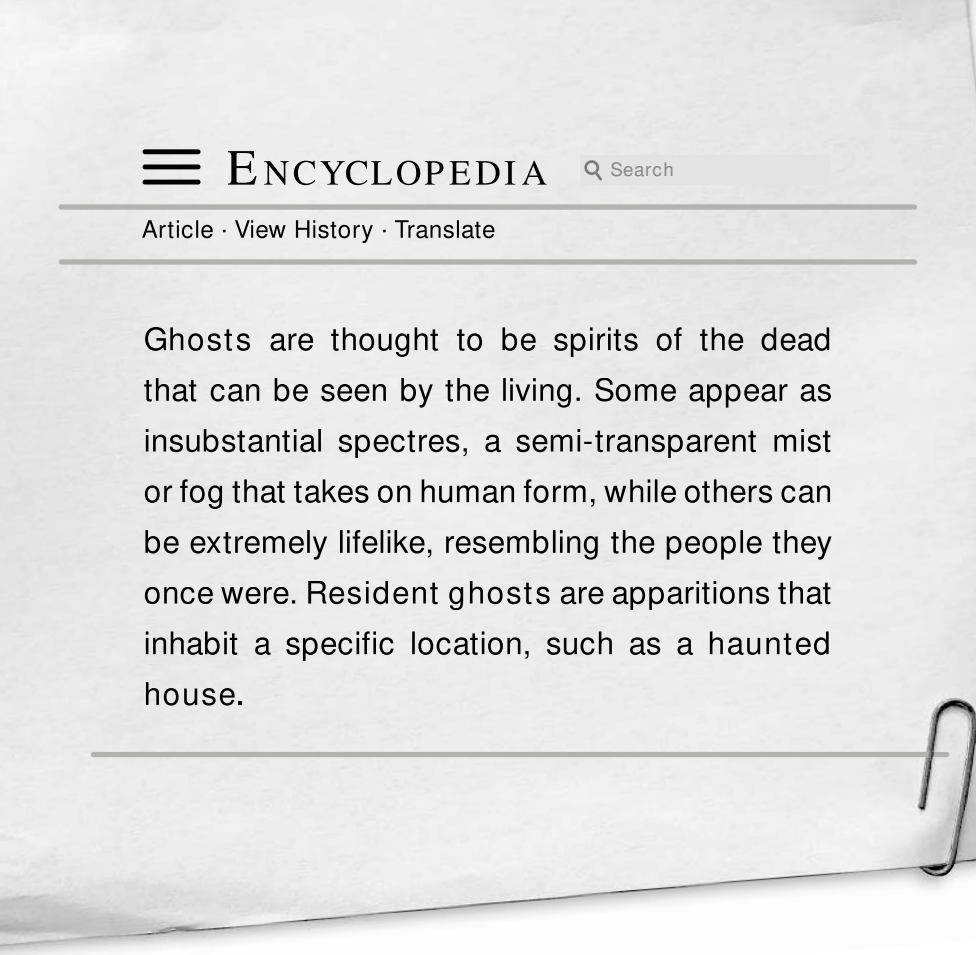
voice snaps back to a sneer. "They've probably put her in here with us on purpose."

I cautiously peer round the edge of the window frame, curious to see exactly who Imogen is talking to. She's standing with her back to the window, her long blonde hair looking almost golden as the low evening sunlight streams into the room. I can see the others sitting around on the beds that flank the walls: Poppy, Freya, Amy and Leilani. The usual crowd.

Then I hear another voice, piping up out of sight. "So what can we do?"

Imogen turns towards the door, but I can't see who's just spoken to her from where I'm standing here. It could be Aisha or maybe Jess or any of the other girls that hang around on the fringes of their gang. I edge forward, trying to peek between the gap left by the open window, but then freeze as I hear Imogen's ice-cold reply.

"We *ghost* her," she says. "Let's all pretend that she doesn't exist. Nobody talk to her. Nobody listen to her. If everyone ignores her, maybe she'll get the message that she's not wanted here. I bet it won't take more than



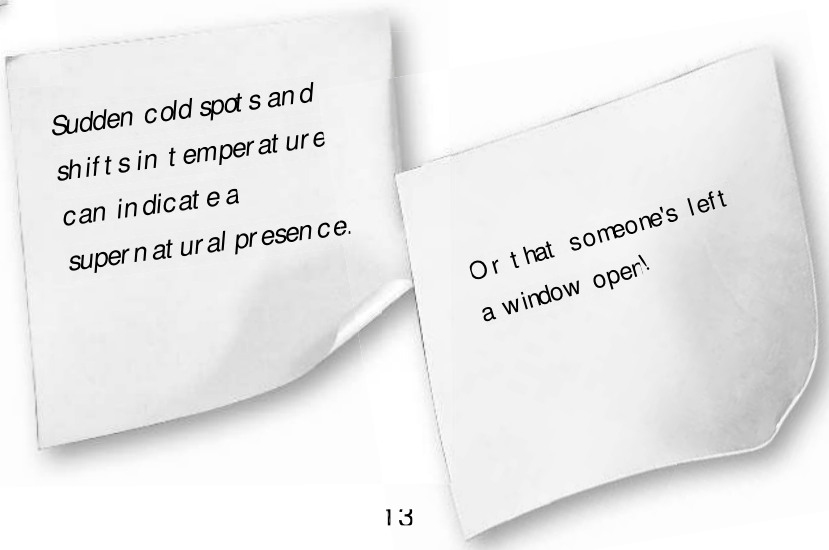

a day before she's begging the teachers to let her change rooms and then we'll be rid of her."

Standing in the shadow of the trellis screen, I feel my eyes sting with tears. I didn't think Imogen could be so mean, but it's the silence from the others that's really killing me.

"That's *so* clever," Leilani says, and I hear a soft murmur of agreement ripple around the room. I take a step back, pressing myself against the screen and wishing I could just melt right through it.

The wind is picking up and goosebumps prickle my skin. I glance towards the gathering gloom as the setting sun slowly disappears behind the trees. I'm stuck out here until everyone heads downstairs for dinner, unless I want them all to realize I've heard every single word they've said.

"It's freezing," Imogen says with a note of irritation. "Who left this window wide open?"



I stand stock-still as I see her hand reach for the handle. If she glances to her right, she's bound to see me. I shrink back into the shadows, praying that these will somehow keep me out of sight. Then I hear the distant chime of the dinner gong.

*BONG!*

Imogen pulls the window shut with a clatter. "Last one downstairs has to sit next to *her*," she says, her voice now muffled as she heads towards the door.

The others scramble to follow her, the same peals of laughter ringing out as they race towards the stairs.

My shoulders shake as I listen to them leaving, waiting for the moment when I can finally step out from my hiding place. The leaves of the plants growing up the trellis screen behind me seem to rustle in the breeze. Then I jump in surprise as I hear a soft voice close to my ear.

"Are you OK?"

# THE HOWLSFIELD INVESTIGATION – JOURNAL ENTRY 1

*Although the damage to the front entrance is extensive, we finally gained access to Howlsfield Manor not long before sunset. The house has been abandoned for more than a decade since the incident, but its interior appears almost unchanged from the day it was deserted. The tables are set in the Long Room, the beds in the dormitories look like they've just been slept in, and I even found a book lying open next to an armchair in the library.*

*Agent Gray has set up monitoring equipment in every room of the house, with multiple cameras placed in locations where sightings have been reported. Now we wait to see what our first night here brings...*

Agent Gray was a highly experienced investigator, specializing in paranormal properties.

(See DARKIVE FILES 95128 [THE WINCHESTER HOUSE], 52857 [DUCKETT'S GROVE] and 50123 [HOTEL BURCHIANTI] for examples of her excellent fieldwork.)

# 2

I spin round to see a girl standing on the other side of the screen. The trailing plants almost hide her face, but then she steps to the right and peers round the edge of the screen.

"It sounded like you were crying," she says and then repeats her question. "Are you OK?"

I stare at the girl. She's tall, with long blonde hair painted in almost strawberry tones. She looks a little like Imogen, but where Imogen's face usually wears a sneer whenever she's near me, this girl's lily-white features are creased in concern. And I realize I've never seen her before in my life.

"I'm fine," I reply, stuttering out the words as my racing heartbeat gradually slows to a steady thrum. "You gave me a shock, that's all. I thought you were a ghost."

Stepping forward, I join the girl at the balcony railing. The trellis screen still divides her side of the balcony from mine, but as I rest my arms on the railing, I glance across to meet her gaze with a shy smile.

Many theories have been put forward to explain sightings of ghosts and other supernatural encounters. Some believe that certain locations can “record” the emotional energy of an event that has taken place there, especially if this event generated strong emotions. This same event is then replayed over time, appearing as a haunting to anyone who visits that place.

The human mind is also very open to suggestion. If you tell someone a place is haunted, they're much more likely to think they've seen a ghost!

Technological devices such as smart video doorbells have also been known to capture ghostly presences. See DARKIVE FILE 37812 [NICKY NINE DOORS] for more information.

"I'm Hazel," I tell her. "What's your name?"

"I'm Alice," the girl replies, returning my smile. She's wearing a dark grey pinafore dress with a slouchy cardigan wrapped round her shoulders. "I'm from Newstone School, but you don't go there, do you?"

I shake my head. Somebody said there were pupils from another school staying at the manor house too, but until now I haven't set eyes on any of them. I glance over Alice's shoulder, and, beyond her balcony, I see another dormitory room through the window behind her. It looks like a mirror image of mine and I catch a glimpse of a handful of kids lounging on their beds.

"My school's just arrived," I tell her. "When did you get here?"

"We've been here ages," Alice replies. "I've done fencing, archery, den building, tree climbing, orienteering and pond dipping, and there's still days to go before the end of the trip. I just wish I hadn't been stuck with them." She jerks her thumb in the direction of the room behind her. "I came out here to get some peace. Are your lot as annoying as mine?"

"Mine are worse," I confide. "There's this girl called

Imogen, and she's told everyone to ignore me. I wish I'd never come on this trip."

I bite my lip as I try not to think about home. I can picture all my things waiting for me there. The art and craft books on the shelves beside my bed and the posters on the walls. I remember where I left the half-finished tunic dress that I'm making, laid out on the desk in my room. There, I can just close the door and shut out the world, but there's no escape from anyone here, even when they're ignoring me.

"That's just mean," Alice says, her green eyes flashing angrily as she meets my gaze. "I wouldn't let *anyone* treat me like that."

Her remark hangs in the air between us. I don't want to let Imogen treat me like this either, but I don't know how to stop her. She's the most popular girl in the school and *everyone* follows her lead. Sometimes it even seems like she's got the teachers in her pocket. Nobody ever stands up to Imogen.

"What about your friends?" Alice asks, her question filling the silence. "Aren't they sticking up for you?"

"I don't really have any friends," I admit reluctantly,

struggling to put my shyness into words. "I don't mind. Most of the time I prefer my own company. It was my mum who made me come on this trip. She thought it would be good for me. A chance to make some new friends. But it seems like I'm just making new enemies, thanks to Imogen."

"You can't let her get away with it," Alice mutters darkly.

The shadows are lengthening around us, and I shift uncomfortably under the intensity of the other girl's stare. I'm grateful for her concern, but there's nothing she can do to help me.

"It doesn't matter," I reply, breaking her gaze as I look out towards the gathering darkness. "She's bound to get bored soon and start picking on somebody else."

From inside the manor house, I hear the distant chime of the dinner gong ringing out again. *Last one downstairs has to sit next to her,* Imogen said, so it looks like I'll be sitting on my own.

"I've got to go," I tell Alice, casting an apologetic glance in her direction as I turn away from the railing. "Maybe I'll see you around."

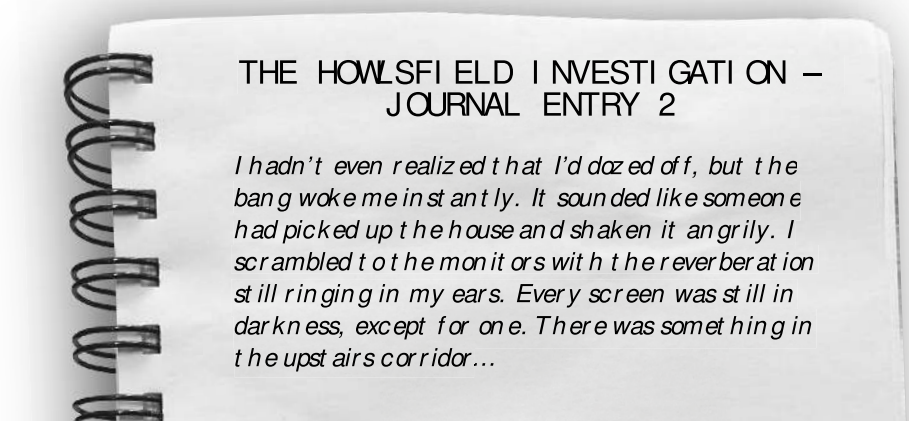
Still peering round the trellis screen, Alice smiles back at me. “It was nice to talk to you, Hazel.”

Stepping across the balcony, I head towards the tall window I climbed through before. As I pull it open, I catch a glimpse of my own reflection in the glass. The faint smile on my face mirrors Alice’s, even though my short dark haircut is a total contrast to her long blonde locks. It’s funny – I’ve only just met her, but it feels like I might have found a friend.

Clambering back into the dormitory, I raise a hand to say goodbye as I pull the window closed behind me, but Alice is already gone. Maybe her school is heading down to dinner too.

Jumping down from the window seat, my feet land with a thud on the bare floorboards. The sound seems to echo through the house. Then I hear a distant scream followed by a sudden clattering noise.

It’s coming from downstairs…



THE HOWLSFIELD INVESTIGATION – JOURNAL ENTRY 2

*I hadn’t even realized that I’d dozed off, but the bang woke me instantly. It sounded like someone had picked up the house and shaken it angrily. I scrambled to the monitors with the reverberation still ringing in my ears. Every screen was still in darkness, except for one. There was something in the upstairs corridor…*

# 3

"Howlsfield Manor was originally owned by the Howell family, who built the manor house in the late nineteenth century. Originally from Wales, their family name means 'well seen' in Welsh, which explains the decorative carvings you'll find throughout the property."

Mrs Carroll's voice echoes around the grand hall as she leads us up the sweeping staircase. From the oak-panelled walls, portraits of old people peer down at us severely as we climb the stairs, but my gaze is drawn to the wooden balusters that support the curving banister



beneath my hand. A strange circular design is carved and painted in the middle of each post. It looks like the shape of an eye, picked out in blue, white and black concentric circles.

"The symbol of the watchful eye was the Howell family crest," Mrs Carroll explains as she reaches the topmost stair, "and was supposed to guard against ill fortune, but sadly it couldn't protect William Howell III,

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A curse is a supernatural wish that is made to cause harm to someone. Some cultures believe that the evil eye is a curse that can be passed on with a single glance, causing injury or bad luck to the person it is aimed at. To protect against the evil eye, a circular or teardrop-shaped amulet known as a nazar can be worn. This protective talisman usually has a blue, white and black design, making it look like an eye itself.

who lost his family fortune in the stock market crash of 1929, forcing him to sell Howlsfield Manor. After changing hands several times, the manor house eventually became a residential centre run for the benefit of the youth of the nation, where visiting schools could enjoy a wide range of educational activities and experiences. You are following in the footsteps of the thousands of children who've made this place their home from home throughout the years."

Mrs Carroll turns to lead us along the long gallery that spans the hall. Glancing up, I notice how the same symbol is carved into the plasterwork ceiling and I shiver under the scrutiny of countless staring eyes. It almost makes me feel as if the house is watching me.

Lowering my gaze, I see the rest of the class are now following the teacher as she heads down the long corridor that leads to our bedrooms and the rooms beyond. I don't know why we're bothering with this grand tour of the manor when we've got the whole week to explore this place for ourselves. I'd prefer to be outside climbing trees or building dens like Alice has been able to do, but as I glance towards the rain-streaked windows

that overlook the hall, it seems like Mrs Carroll is more bothered about staying dry than us having fun.

Reluctantly, I trudge after the others, wondering if any of them are going to crack and talk to me today. So far, Imogen has got them all dancing to her tune – everyone is still ghosting me. It started as soon as I got down to dinner yesterday evening…

I'd raced down the stairs the moment I heard the sound of a scream followed by a sudden noisy clatter. Rushing into the Long Room where everyone was eating, I saw Aisha with her dinner tray and all of its contents tipped over the floor at her feet. She looked upset, nervously twisting the dark curls of her hair between her fingers. The teachers were fussing round her, while everyone else was looking on with an uneasy mixture of excitement and concern. I'd spotted Imogen and the others seated at one of the tables close by, a spiteful grin playing around the corners of Imogen's lips.

I shuffled closer, wanting to find out what had happened.

"It's an old house, Aisha," Mrs Carroll said, her voice cutting through the hubbub. "There's no need to jump

at every sudden bang and creak you hear." She glanced down at Aisha's upturned tray and the food splattered across the floor. "Now go and get yourself something else to eat, while I get this mess cleared up."

Squirming uncomfortably in the glare of the teacher's attention, Aisha nodded, the anxious expression on her face caught somewhere between fear and embarrassment. Turning away, she headed for the long table where the food was all laid out and I followed in her footsteps, stepping over the orange slick left by her spilled drink.

It was a buffet and there was still a ton of food left on the table: chicken and vegetable skewers, mini quiches and macaroni cheese, various salads and stews, and bowls and bowls of thick-cut chips and French fries. Picking up a fresh tray, Aisha reached for a serving spoon as I sidled up next to her, ready to choose my own dinner.

"Are you OK?" I asked her.

Aisha flinched at the sound of my voice. Her startled gaze darted towards me with a look of surprise but, realizing it was me, she didn't reply. Instead, she glanced towards Imogen as if checking that she wasn't going to be caught breaking their pact. I followed her gaze to see

Imogen's warning stare, and I remembered what she had told the others earlier. *Nobody talk to her. Nobody listen to her. If everyone ignores her, maybe she'll get the message that she's not wanted here.* Then Aisha turned away, picking up the serving spoon with trembling fingers as she gave me the cold shoulder.

That was over twelve hours ago and nobody's spoken a word to me since. Bedtime. Lights out. Breakfast. Silence seems to follow me round like a cloud. Imogen's got *everyone* ignoring me. She's just waiting for the moment I crack and ask to change rooms, but I don't want to give her the satisfaction. My mum always told me you should never give in to a bully. It only ever makes things worse.

I can see Imogen now, whispering conspiratorially with the others as they follow Mrs Carroll along the corridor. Aisha is trailing at the back of the group, and I see her cast a nervous glance in my direction as I hang back at the end of the gallery.

"The manor house is built over three storeys," Mrs Carroll explains, her voice drifting back towards me as she walks down the corridor, "and the large dormitory

rooms in which you're staying on this floor used to be the bedrooms that belonged to the Howell family themselves. Keep an *eye out* for more examples of the family crest on the walls and the ceiling."



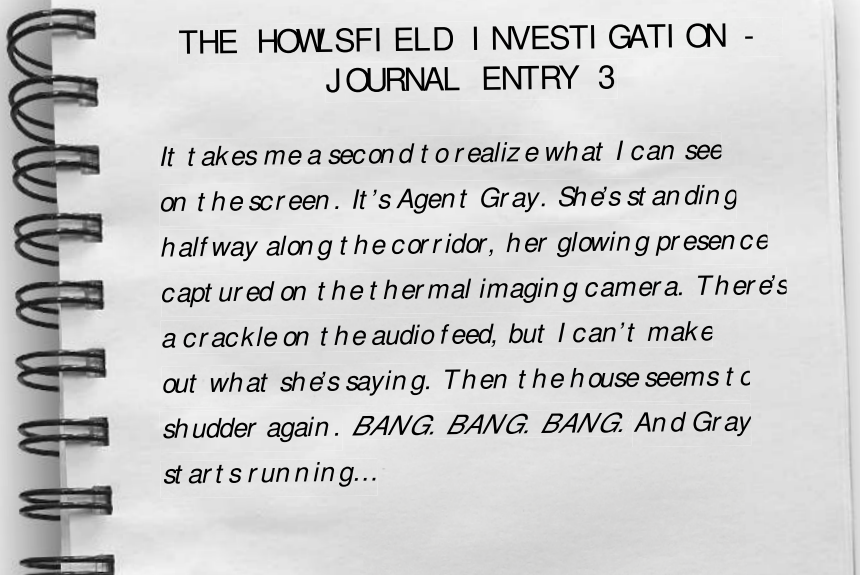
The teacher laughs at her own lame joke, but nobody else does. It's bad enough that we're stuck inside on this boring tour without Mrs Carroll thinking she's a comedian.

The others follow her as she turns the corner at the end of the corridor, and I grudgingly trail in their wake. Spying the concentric circles carved into the oak-panelled walls, I can see what Mrs Carroll means.

Unlike the blue, white and black eyes that climbed the stairs, these circles have been left unpainted, but I still feel as if their beady gaze is following me as I head down the corridor. Lifting a hand, I trace the patterns on the oak panels, feeling the grain of the wood beneath my fingertips as the shadows seem to shift around me.

Then I hear the creak of a door. Glancing round, I see a face appear from the doorway of the dormitory room next to mine. Her long blonde hair is held in place by a dark blue Alice band, and beneath this a pair of emerald eyes peer out from her pale face as she meets my gaze.

"Hello again," Alice says.



THE HOWLSFIELD INVESTIGATION - JOURNAL ENTRY 3

*It takes me a second to realize what I can see on the screen. It's Agent Gray. She's standing halfway along the corridor, her glowing presence captured on the thermal imaging camera. There's a crackle on the audio feed, but I can't make out what she's saying. Then the house seems to shudder again. BANG. BANG. BANG. And Gray starts running...*

# 4

Holding a book in her hand, Alice steps out of the dorm and pulls the door shut behind her. She's wearing the same grey pinafore dress that I saw her in yesterday evening, although she's ditched the slouchy cardigan. From around the corner, where the corridor turns, I can hear Mrs Carroll droning on about the history of the manor house, but I'm more interested in what Alice is up to.

"Where's the rest of your school?" I ask her.

Alice pulls a face. "They're reading in the library while it's raining," she replies. "I forgot my book, so I came back up to my room to get it."

I glance down at the book that she's holding. On its cover, I glimpse the figure of a girl in a flowing white dress fleeing from a shadowy mansion. It reminds me a little of the place we're staying in now. The title is picked out in stark white letters against a darkened sky: *A House of Secrets and Shadows*.

"That looks a bit scary," I say as I glance up from the book's cover. "Is it any good?"

Alice gives a shrug. "It's OK if you like ghost stories. I'll let you have it when I finish it, if you like."

We can still hear the others around the corner, Mrs Carroll's voice drifting back towards us as she leads them further along the corridor.

"What are you up to?" Alice prompts me. "Are they giving you the grand tour?"

I nod my head in reply, but before I can answer Alice properly, I hear Mrs Carroll calling out.

"Can we keep up at the back, please!" Her voice rings out loudly. "I think we're missing somebody."

"That'll be me," I say, casting an apologetic glance in Alice's direction. "I'd better catch up with the others."

I make a start for the end of the corridor but then falter as Alice falls into step beside me.

"What are you doing?" I ask her, feeling confused.

"I'm tagging along," she tells me with a grin. "It's got to be more fun than reading in the library."

Turning the corner, I see Mrs Carroll and the rest of the class are standing at the corridor's end. The passageway is lined with the same dark oak panels – the Howell family crest of the watchful eye engraved on