

GREYSTONE SECRETS
THE STRANGERS



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Greystone Secrets #1: The Strangers

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First Edition

ONE



FINN

The three Greystone kids always raced each other home when they got off the school bus, and Finn always won.

It wasn't because he was the fastest.

Even he knew that his older brother and sister, Chess and Emma, let him win so he could make a grand entrance.

Today he burst into the house calling out, "Mom! We're home! It's time to come and adore us!"

"Adore" had been on his second-grade spelling list two weeks ago, and it had been a great discovery for him. So *that* was what it was called, the way he had felt his entire life.

Emma, who was in fourth grade, dropped her backpack

on the rug beside him and kicked off her red sneakers. They flipped up and landed on top of the backpack—someday, Finn vowed, he would get Emma to teach him that trick.

“Twenty-three,” Emma said. There was no telling what she might have been counting. Finn hoped it was a prediction of how many chocolate chips would be in every cookie Mom was probably baking for them right now, for their after-school snack.

Finn sniffed. The house did not smell like cookies.

Oh well. Mom worked from home, designing websites, and sometimes she lost track of time. If today was more of a Goldfish-crackers-and-apple-slices kind of day, that was okay with Finn. He liked those, too.

“Mom!” he called again. “Your afternoon-break entertainment has arrived!”

“She’s in the kitchen,” Chess said, hanging his own backpack on the hook where it belonged. “Can’t you hear?”

“That would mean Finn had to listen for once, instead of talking,” Emma said, rubbing Finn’s head fondly and making his messy brown hair even messier. Finn knew she didn’t mean it as an insult. He was pretty sure Emma liked talking as much as he did.

Chess was the one everyone called “the quiet Greystone.” He was in sixth grade and had grown four inches in the past year. Now Finn had to tilt his head way back just to see his

brother's face. He also cupped his hand over his ear and pretended to be listening really, really hard. There was a low mumble coming from the kitchen—maybe a man's voice?

“Is Mom watching TV?” Chess asked. “She never does that during the day.”

The kids all knew their mother's routine. She never listened to anything but classical music while she worked, because she said songs with words were too distracting. And when she really didn't want to be disturbed, she worked in a windowless room in the basement. The computer down there didn't even connect to the internet.

The three Greystone kids called that “the Boring Room.”

Now Finn laughed at his older brother.

“Are you going to stand around asking stupid questions when you could get your answer just by walking into the kitchen?” Finn asked. “Let's go eat!”

He dashed toward the kitchen, dodging both Emma's backpack and the family's cat, Rocket, lying in the middle of the floor. He yelled, “Mom, can I cut up apples? It's my turn, isn't it?”

Mom was standing at the kitchen counter with her back to Finn, but she didn't turn around. She had both hands clenched onto the edge of the counter, as if she needed to hold on. Her cell phone lay facedown on the floor by her feet. Her laptop sat on the counter in front of her, but it was

tilted up, so Finn couldn't see what was on the screen.

“Mom?” Finn tried again.

She still didn't turn around. It was like she didn't even hear him, like she was in a soundproof bubble.

This was not like Mom. She had never acted like this before.

Then she began to moan: “No, no, no, no, no. . . .”

TWO



EMMA

Emma had had a substitute teacher that day. The sub had dressed all in gray and had gray hair and a gray face and even a gray voice—somehow, Emma decided, that was possible. And the sub made the entire day so dreary and dull that Emma had started looking for and counting weird things about the day just to keep herself awake.

The thing was, if you started looking for weirdness, suddenly everything seemed that way. Wasn't it weird that the pattern of coats hanging up on the classroom hooks went blue-green-red, blue-green-red twice in a row? Wasn't it

weird that the sub could have a gray voice? (Or was that just normal for her?)

By the time Emma got off the school bus and began racing toward the house, she'd counted twenty-one things she considered indisputably weird. To her way of thinking, that actually made the day pretty interesting, and she was excited to tell Mom about the new trick she'd discovered for surviving school.

Then she noticed that the porch light was still on, even though Mom usually turned it off when Emma and her brothers left for school.

And then, stepping into the house, Emma noticed that the living room curtains were still drawn tight across the windows, and so were the blinds on the bay window at the back of the house. This turned the living room's cheery yellow walls dim and shadowy; it made the whole house feel like a cave or a hideout.

Twenty-three weird things in one day. What if that was a normal amount, and Emma had just never noticed before?

She'd have to count again some other day—or, really, lots of other days—to know for sure.

Finn and Chess started yammering on about Mom and the kitchen and TV. Emma joined in and then rubbed Finn's head, because it felt good to do something normal again. Musing Finn's hair was like petting a dog—you had to do

it. Finn had thick, unruly hair with odd cowlicks that sprang up no matter how much Mom smoothed them down. Finn being Finn, he claimed this meant his hair had superpowers.

And . . . now Finn was racing off to the kitchen, shouting about apples.

Emma looked up at Chess, and they both shrugged and grinned and followed Finn.

But when they got to the kitchen, Mom wasn't hugging Finn and reaching out to hug Emma and Chess, too. Finn stood in the middle of the kitchen, staring at Mom. Mom stood at the counter with her back to the kids, all her attention focused on her laptop.

And the voice coming out of the laptop was saying, "The kidnapped children are in second and fourth and sixth grade."