

Chapter One

The Harlem Hotel





PARENTS HAVE RULES FOR A REASON. BUT SOMETIMES KIDS disobey. Ten-year-old Jeff Bickenheuser had the scare of his life one evening when he broke the rules.

Jeff grew up in the town of Harlem, halfway between Malta and Havre. Harlem sits along Montana's Hi-Line, at the very edge of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. Founded in 1889 (the year Montana became a state), Harlem was a railroad town.

The old buildings from Harlem's early days stood empty down by the railroad tracks. Parents warned their children not to play there. The ramshackle buildings were unstable and dangerous.

One summer evening, Jeff and his friend Jesse decided to ignore the rules. They had finished their dinner, and there was still plenty of daylight. The boys headed down to the tracks. They wanted to explore.

The Harlem Hotel was one of the oldest buildings in town. In the early days, it was the finest place to stay in northern Montana. Travelers passing through town spent the night there while waiting for the next train. Ranchers came to do business there. The Harlem Hotel had steam heat and hot water, as well as a fancy dining room. Back in those days, a room cost two dollars a night.

Those days were over. The hotel was abandoned and crumbling, and Jeff and Jesse could hardly imagine that anyone had ever stayed there. It was nothing like the modern motels they'd seen while on vacation. This old hotel was a mess. And that's what they liked. They found the collapsing ruin irresistible.

Sometimes the setting sun casts a bright-red glow as it drops toward the horizon. And that's what the sunset looked like on that warm summer evening. The boys figured they had enough time to explore before it got dark. They imagined there were treasures left from long ago, waiting to be discovered.

Jeff and Jesse made their way to the front door and stepped inside, leaving the heat of the day behind them. The air inside was cool and stale. Light came through the cracks in the walls, casting dim shadows in the old lobby. Dust and cobwebs glistened in the sun's red rays. Shreds of wallpaper clung to the ceiling, and debris littered the floorboards. It was creepy.

The boys stepped out of the lobby and into the dining room, where a hundred years ago guests ate fine meals of roast chicken

or beefsteak, biscuits and honey, and warm apple pie. Through the filtered light, they saw bits of plaster, broken glass, and pigeon droppings covering the floor. Dust hung thick in the air, and cobwebs, fixed to the ceiling, floated above their heads. Although the floor creaked, the building seemed solid enough to the boys. So they carefully climbed the narrow stairway to the second floor. There they found a long, dark hallway.

Jeff wished he had brought his flashlight. He and Jesse moved down the black corridor.

“Hey, Jeff, there’s nothing much in this old place,” Jesse noted uneasily.

Not wanting his friend to guess that he, too, was a little nervous, Jeff replied gruffly, “Awww. This place is just a dump. But maybe we can find something useful. C’mon. Let’s look.”

They discovered rooms on each side of the hall and began to peer through each doorway, one by one. There was not much to capture their interest. There was a broken dresser in one room, some rusty bedsprings in another, and a cast-off chair here and there. The boys did not find the treasure they sought.

Jeff and Jesse slowly inched their way to the very last room. As they peered inside, they saw that it was not empty. Sitting in the center was an old-fashioned wooden wheelchair, the kind with a woven seat. They had seen these old wheelchairs in movies, but they had never seen a real one. They knew exactly what it was.

The boys looked at each other, and silently they wondered what it was doing there. They both stood in the doorway for a long moment, staring. The day’s last light shone through the



broken window and cast a reddish glow on the solitary object in the middle of the room.

Suddenly, the boys saw something. They looked at each other. Neither said a word, but each knew that the other had seen it.

As the dim light hit the wheelchair, it caught the metal spokes. The boys' eyes grew wide and their mouths hung

open as they saw the spokes of the wheels move. Jeff and Jesse froze. In the darkening room, they could see that the wheelchair was creeping toward them.

The boys looked at each other one more time. They both had the same idea. The frightened pair spun around and bounded down the hallway, past all the rooms where darkness now was beginning to creep. Just minutes before, the distance to the stairway had not seemed long at all. Now it seemed endless. They could not get there fast enough.

As they approached the staircase, the only sound was the pounding of their sneakers on the old floorboards and the thumping of their hearts. They could sense something behind them, but neither had the courage to turn around and look.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the pair tumbled down the stairs, one on top of the other, in their rush to get out. They landed at the bottom of the steps in a tangle, picked themselves up, and leapt for the door.

The terrified boys stumbled outside. Only then did Jeff have the courage to turn and look back into the silent building. The doorway to the old hotel, so enticing before, now seemed like a giant mouth that threatened to swallow them. Jeff felt lucky to have escaped.

Out of breath and shaking with fear, Jeff slowly stepped toward the doorway and peered inside. His eyes adjusted to the dark, and he shifted his gaze to the bottom of the stairs, where he and Jesse had been just seconds before. What he saw still sends chills through his body. The memory of it brings on bad dreams, even though he is now an adult. There, at the foot of the stairs, was the empty wheelchair, waiting. 