



“Bwahahahaiaaaaaaaaaa!”

Leo moved his cellphone a few inches away from his ear when he heard the creepy laughter. The poster that was up all over the walls of Aspen Springs Middle School had been clear: you had to call the number for instructions. Not that the invitation lasted very long: Mr. Grant, their Biology teacher, spotted one of the posters and made a couple of kids take them all down. But not before Leo had written down the phone number, the one the poster told you to call on October thirty-first after seven pm.

It was a Halloween challenge. And he was up for it.

So now Leo was listening to the message that came after the annoying scream.

“Are you... a chicken? Or are you brave?”

The poster had said the same thing: *R U... BRAVE?* Leo’s older sister Grace had gone on a rant about correct spelling and youth of today (she always sounded like an old lady), but Leo saw an opportunity. See, Leo was new in town and wasn’t exactly the cool kid. He was short, always seemed to wear last year’s fashion (who could keep up?), and he preferred to have his nose in a mystery novel with a hefty spine. Leo was a bookworm. The cool kids told him so, repeatedly.

But Leo knew he could be brave, if only he had a chance to show it. And today, Halloween night, was his chance. The poster had an outline of the Jones Mansion on it, so Leo had a hunch what this was about.

“Here’s your challenge,” the recorded message went. Leo thought he recognized Meghan’s voice. She was part of the seventh-grade popular kids. *“Go to the Jones Mansion—that’s right, you middle grade chickens, we want you to go to the most haunted house in Colorado. You have to go on a treasure hunt. Bring back the message, and…”*

BwahahahaAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

Leo moved the phone away from his ear again, just as the message repeated. He disconnected the call, and looked up at the Jones Mansion. He knew he had to come here tonight. Leo pulled the straps on his backpack tighter and straightened his spine.

He was going in.



The Jones Mansion was once the crowning glory of Aspen Springs, Colorado. Or so the story went—Leo had a hard time believing it as he walked up the weedy gravel driveway. The Mansion’s windows were all boarded up, the once-white paint was peeling, and the bushes and trees surrounding the building were so overgrown, you had to duck to not get smacked by branches. The front of the Jones Mansion had a sagging porch and the turrets’ stone was crumbling.

Leo stepped onto the porch, hearing the boards creak under his weight. But he wasn’t afraid. It was just a building, right? And the stories about the ghosts, those were just urban legends, the kind kids tell around a campfire. Not that he’d know; Leo quit Boy Scouts after just one meeting. All that outdoorsy stuff was not his game.

But Leo was brave. At least on paper he was—just like in the detective and thriller novels he loved to read. It didn’t seem so hard in his books. And

now that he reached for the rusty door handle, Leo felt a surge of adrenaline. Time to put up or shut up.

Maybe he should get his flashlight out.

Just as he took down his backpack, the door flew open. And a dark figure came charging at Leo, knocking him to the ground.

“Dude, *RUN!*”

Leo scrambled to get up, clutching his unzipped backpack. He watched Pete from Algebra class run down the driveway, sending gravel flying as he fell and got back up, looking at the Jones Mansion like it would eat him alive.

“Didn’t you get the message? RUN!” Pete yelled, before disappearing down the hill and into the night.

Leo gathered his granola bar, his book (you never knew when you might need a distraction), his bottle of water, and his little sister’s princess flashlight. He hesitated, wondering if maybe Pete was right. What was waiting for him inside that made Pete so afraid? But then Leo remembered why he was here: to prove he was brave. So he turned on the pink flashlight.

And he went inside through the open doorway. The place smelled musty and old, like the basement at his grandma’s house. The boards over the windows made it so Leo could only see as far as the beam of his flashlight, which wasn’t very far. He wished he’d been more of a boy scout now—maybe then he’d own a decent flashlight.

The entry hall led into a circular room, which Leo assumed was the lower level of a turret. He was wondering why there weren’t more middle schoolers here. No matter—if he was the only kid who finished the treasure hunt, maybe he’d finally be seen. Maybe the other kids would take him seriously and stop calling him a bookworm. He imagined they might actually invite him to do stuff together on the weekend. What that was, Leo didn’t

know. But it had to be cool, right?

He was so lost in his imagination, he almost fell over a bag that sat in the middle of the wood floor. A group of three girls, each with long hair and wearing a black dress, were dancing around the bag, holding hands, spinning and laughing. The fireplace had a strong fire going, smoking and crackling behind the girls.

Leo searched for a clue, then his flashlight caught a name on the bag.

MEGHAN

The girls locked eyes with him now. Meghan and her friends had done a good job making this look scary, Leo had to give them credit. These girls were creepy—their teeth were even all blacked out.

Leo knew the story: the mansion owner's three daughters had a sleepover in the dining room, with the fireplace going to keep them warm. Only unknown to mansion owner Mr. Jones, the chimney had been clogged, spreading carbon monoxide. All three girls had died in their sleep.

The girls spun around, faster and faster. *Come dance with us, Leo.* He heard the words, but none of the girls' lips were moving.

"An overhead sound system," he said to the girls. Meghan and her friends had to have wired it in somehow. The dancing girls didn't seem to hear him.

Leo wondered if his first clue was inside Meghan's bag, but then he looked up and saw it, above the fireplace mantle. A black letter, the paint still dripping down the wall.

R

Leo smiled, and took a picture with his phone. The flash seemed to have angered the girls, because they stopped dancing.

And they all turned to face him, their eyes black and angry.

“I’m going, okay?” Leo said, his hands up in defense. He backed out of the room, still facing the girls. Behind him was the entry. And the grand, circular stairway leading upstairs.

Leo was about to go to the second floor when he saw a dark figure in the doorway. His heart jumped inside his chest, but then he realized it was Meghan’s friend John.

“Hey John.” Then Leo realized: if he didn’t beat John at this hunt, he would lose. “Look man,” Leo said, trying on his best cool-guy voice, “you probably don’t want to go in there.”

John just breathed really heavy. “I came from upstairs.” He made a sound, like Leo’s dog made when there was lightning and he got scared.

“You’re just trying to get me to leave,” Leo said, clutching the pink flashlight. He flashed it right in John’s face.

John was sweating and had been crying. Snot was dripping from his nose. His eyes were panicked. “Don’t go up there. Meghan...”

For a split-second, Leo believed him. But then he remembered: *R U... Brave?* “Nice try, John. But I’m not a chicken, no matter what you say.” To prove it, Leo started to walk up the rickety stairs, careful to avoid the cracks in the split planks. Once at the top, he turned around. But John was gone.

“Chicken,” Leo whispered to himself. But he wasn’t feeling so brave anymore. Was it him, or was it actually darker upstairs? Colder, too...?

Then the heavy front door slammed closed. Making Leo jump.

He turned and exhaled all his fear. Meghan had done a really good job making the Jones Mansion feel haunted. Leo reminded himself to give her

credit. You know, when he won this silly treasure hunt. Because he already knew what the next letter was going to be: *U*, obviously. The invitation said *R U Brave* after all.

He walked down the dark hallway. The Jones Mansion was a lot larger than Leo imagined. There were doors on both sides of the hall, at least a dozen already. How was he supposed to know where to go?

But then it was clear—there was an open door to Leo’s right. He smiled, picked up the pace, and walked into the room. His pink flashlight died just as he entered the room. Leo cursed to himself, realizing he hadn’t brought extra batteries. He shook the thing, smacked it on his palm. The flashlight flickered, then gave a faint glow, enough for him to see a little. He had to hurry.

Inside the room, he saw Amanda. She was Meghan’s friend. Amanda sat in a chair, and at first Leo thought she was asleep.

But then she looked up. Her eyes were bloodshot. “Leo.” Her voice was choked.

He was surprised she knew his name. Mostly, his fellow seventh graders called him a bookworm, and rarely by his first name.

Amanda closed her eyes again. Above her, he saw the letter *U*, painted in the same black paint. Just like Leo guessed.

U

“Thanks, Amanda,” Leo said to the sleeping girl. “Nice job, being creepy and all.”

Despite his fading flashlight, Leo was feeling pretty good about himself. There weren't any other seventh graders here. He had to be the winner of the challenge, right?

Leo roamed the dark halls, but there were no more open doors, no more clues. He'd walked the halls twice now. Maybe he had to go downstairs?

Then his phone rang.

Leo jumped and fumbled to answer, dropping his flashlight. It died completely. The hallway was pitch-dark as he answered.

"Hello...?" His voice betrayed his fear. This wasn't fun anymore.

There was no sound. Just a clicking noise.

Leo almost hung up, but then there was the creepy laugh like in the recorded message. "*Bwahahaaaaaaaaa!*" Only this time, Meghan sounded scared, *really* scared.

Leo hung up, then scrambled to get his flashlight. It turned back on, but the light was so faint, it barely illuminated the space in front of him.

And he saw the arrow on the wall. Pointing downward, toward a small opening. It was an elevator, the kind the service staff used way back in the day—a dumbwaiter. It was only the size of a moving box. Leo froze. Did they really expect him to go in there?

"No," Leo said to himself. But he was already walking over there, thinking to himself that he could fit in there, as small of a kid as Leo was. But it was enclosed, and he hated small spaces.

"No," he said again, and louder now. Leo knew where this small elevator would take him: to the kitchen. The dumbwaiter was there for the staff, to bring food up and dirty dishes back down. So Meghan probably put the next clue downstairs, in the staff kitchen. Leo turned, then hurried to the stairs, taking two steps at a time as he descended.

He rushed past the closed front door where he'd seen John earlier. As confident as Leo had been then, he wanted out of the Jones Mansion now. The place was making him spooked—people were right about it being a bad place. Leo didn't believe in ghosts, but you didn't have to believe in the supernatural to be creeped out by a nasty old mansion.

Maybe the stories he'd heard about the mansion were true... After Mr. Jones buried his three daughters in the fall of 1964, he was devastated. Unable to focus on his work, Mr. Jones was quickly going bankrupt, and he was desperate. So on Halloween night in 1964, he tried to set the mansion on fire for the insurance money. But the fire was put out, only Mr. Jones still died in his attempted arson. With the mansion empty, falling in disrepair, the ghost stories of the Jones Mansion began to circulate.

Leo hurried to the back of the mansion, passing another large room, and another until he reached large double doors with portholes for windows in them. That had to be the kitchen. Leo pushed the doors open.

The kitchen was a big room, with everything in stainless steel. There was a huge stove as well as an island with dusty pots on top of it. But Leo's eyes quickly drifted to the back of the kitchen, where the dumbwaiter was. The doors were open, Leo saw, but he couldn't see anything inside. It was too dark. His princess flashlight just projected a dim, yellowish glow.

But Leo went toward the dumbwaiter anyway. He moved slowly, until he could see there was a figure inside. A girl, with dark hair. He couldn't see her face, not until she looked up at him.

It was Meghan. Her face was tear-streaked, and she looked terrified. Then she raised her hand, to show Leo his final clue on the inside of her palm. A letter.

N

“*R-U-N*,” Leo said. “You want me to run.”

Meghan hesitated, then gave him a very small nod, and laughed like she did on the phone.

As if on cue, his flashlight gave out.

And Leo was in the dark, with his message clear. He should run. Any other person would.

“No,” he said to the darkness. “I’m not going to run. You asked me: are you brave? I am.”

It was silent and dark. The moment seemed to last forever. Leo held his breath.

Suddenly, a flashlight illuminated Meghan’s face. She was no longer crying or looking scared. She smiled at Leo. “Congrats, Bookworm. You won the challenge. Everyone else copped out, or ran when they got the last letter. Way to go, dude.”

“Thanks. And my name is Leo.”

“I know.” Meghan got out of the dumbwaiter. “I just call you Bookworm because you’re always reading.” They walked out of the kitchen, following the glow of her flashlight. “I love to read too, you know. Have you read Bo Winters’ latest novel?”

Leo shook his head. It was strange, talking about books when just minutes ago, he wondered if he was in a haunted mansion.

“You’ll love it—awesome twist at the end,” Meghan said with a smile. “You can borrow my copy.” She called for Amanda, who came down the stairs and high-fived Leo.

“Let’s get out of here,” Amanda said. “This place gives me the heebie-jeebies.”

“Just let me get my bag,” Meghan said. They followed her to the room where the girls had been dancing, but they were gone. The fireplace was a dark, empty hole.

“You guys did a cool job, with those spooky girls and everything,” Leo said. “You even got the fake fire and the sound right.”

Meghan gave him a puzzled look. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she said. She charged ahead. Leo tried to see if she was being serious.

Amanda looked at him. “What did you see?” she whispered. “Because when I was here earlier, I—”

“Hey guys!” John called as he walked in, meeting them in the entryway. He thumbed over his shoulder. “I think we scared Pete half to death—I saw him running down the hill.” He laughed. “I’ll give him a call, tell him it’s not real.”

They all walked out, and stopped at the open metal gate to the Jones Mansion. They exchanged numbers, to talk books and hang out, and Leo couldn’t feel better. He had new friends, and he’d proven that the Jones Mansion was not haunted.

Right?

Leo turned and looked up at the mansion one last time, as he was leaving. And in the top of the turret, a warm glow lit up the window. It was no longer boarded up. A dark figure stood in the window, waving. The hand was on fire, and the flames spread to the figure’s body, until it was completely ablaze.

“Leo?” John called behind him. “We’re getting some milkshakes in town. Are you coming?”

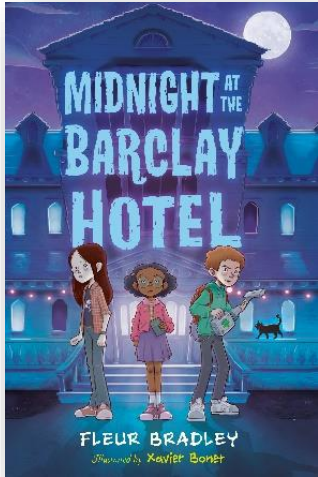
“Yeah.” Leo blinked. The figure was gone.

Meghan laughed and started downhill, calling over her shoulder, “Can you believe people think this place is haunted?”



Want more scary stories by Fleur Bradley...?

Try *Midnight at the Barclay Hotel*, out now:



When JJ Jacobson convinced his mom to accept a surprise invitation to an all-expenses-paid weekend getaway at the illustrious Barclay Hotel, he never imagined that he'd find himself in the midst of a murder mystery. He thought he was in for a run-of-the-mill weekend ghost hunting at the most haunted spot in town, but when he arrives at the Barclay Hotel and his mother is blamed for the hotel owner's death, he realizes his weekend is going to be anything but ordinary.

Now, with the help of his new friends, Penny and Emma, JJ has to track down a killer, clear his mother's name, and maybe even meet a ghost or two along the way.

And if you're into extra haunted stories, try *Daybreak on Raven Island*...

Tori, Marvin, and Noah would rather be anywhere else than on the seventh-grade class field trip to Raven Island prison. Tori would rather be on the soccer field, but her bad grades have benched; Marvin would rather be at the first day of a film festival; and Noah isn't looking forward to having to make small talk with his classmates at this new school.

But when the three of them stumble upon a dead body in the woods, miss the last ferry back home, and then have to spend the night on Raven Island, they find that they need each other now more than ever. They must work together to uncover a killer, outrun a motley ghost-hunting crew, and expose the age-old secrets of the island all before daybreak.

