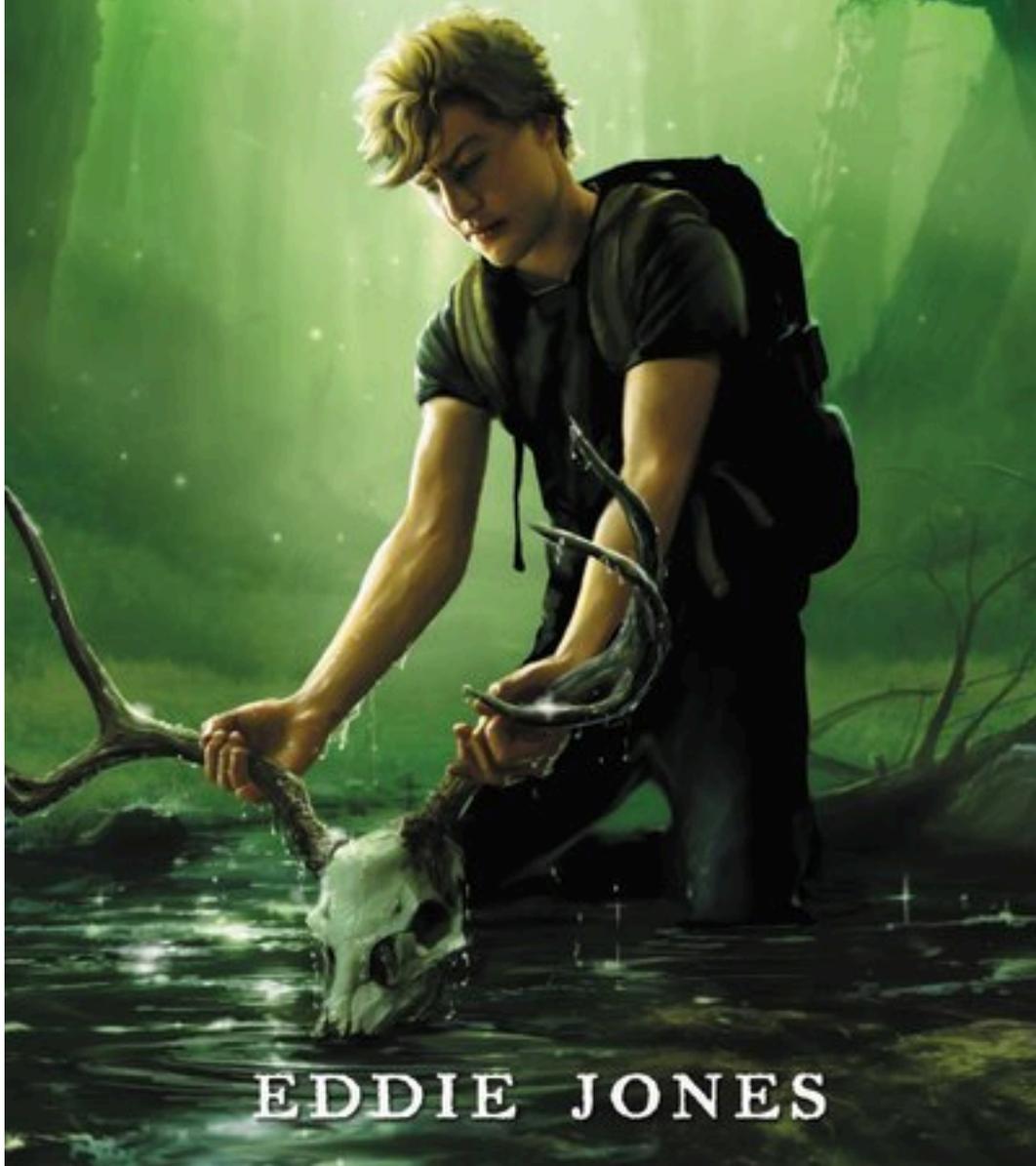


THE CADEN CHRONICLES

SKULL CREEK STAKEOUT



EDDIE JONES

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CHAPTER ONE

A Case I Can Sink My Teeth Into

Death found me on a hot June morning in Walt Disney World's Tower of Terror. Minutes before I heard about the vampire in Transylvania, North Carolina, I pulled the seat belt across my waist and showed my hands to the bellhop. Behind me buckles snapped shut; arms shot up. The smiling service attendant in his maroon and gold cap bid us a pleasant stay at the Hollywood Hotel and retreated into the boiler room. Service doors sealed us inside, and the elevator yanked us up.

The young boy seated next to me whispered to his mom, "Why did he make us raise our hands?"

"So when they snap our picture it looks like we're having fun."

"And to prove you're not holding anything in your hand," I offered. "See, if you place a penny on your palm, like this, when the car drops the coin will —"

"Don't you dare try that, Grayson!"

I shoved the penny back in my pocket and said under my breath, "Wasn't suggesting he do it. Just saying that's why they make you put your hands up."

The car stopped on the thirteenth floor. Doors opened. Our elevator car rumbled down a darkened hallway, and the theme song from the Twilight Zone began playing through headrest speakers. A short ways in front, Rod Serling magically appeared, warning riders: "You unlock this door with the key of imagination. Beyond it is another dimension — a dimension of sound, a dimension of sight, a dimension of mind. You're moving into a land of both shadow and substance, of things and ideas. You've just crossed over into . . . (dramatic pause) . . . the Twilight Zone."

Instantly a barrage of objects shot past — a wooden door, Einstein's formula for relativity, an eyeball. Windowpanes shattered and shards of glass morphed into twinkling stars. Through the speakers a little girl began singing, "It's raining, it's pouring . . ."

Buried in my front pocket, my smartphone began vibrating. I pulled it out and quickly read the text message. "PHONE ME NOW. RIGHT NOW! GOT KILLER OF A STORY

FOR YOU!" It was from Calvin.

Right, I thought. Bet it's just another zombie fest or supposed house haunting.

See, weeks earlier I'd signed on to be a reporter for the Cool Ghoul Gazette — an online website dedicated to exploring ghosts, zombies, werewolves, vampires, and all things super-natural and freaky. For months my parents had been after me to get a summer job. Mom thought I needed to start saving for college, even though I don't start high school until next year. Dad kept saying it was time I did something other than sit around and watch TV, even though watching TV is my job.

No kidding. Watching television (online, mostly) is my job. I'm a founding member of TV Crime Watchers, a group of teens that analyzes and catalogues crime, cop,

and detective shows. We have a huge database of episodes going back almost thirty years, and we use this information to catch real murderers. At least, when law enforcement officials will let us help. Our little group has an 80 percent close rate. That means in most cases we can correctly identify the killer before the real detectives can. Problem is, TV Crime Watchers doesn't pay, and making money is apparently a big deal.

"Can't pay for the good life without a good job," Dad keeps reminding me. "And sometimes, you can't even pay for it then." Dad hoped I'd get a job cutting grass like my cousin Fred. Fred has like a gazillion customers and last summer he made enough to buy his own truck — a used Ford Ranger that has over a hundred thousand miles on it and leaks oil like a Gulf oil well.

But I'm not Fred.

The elevator car stopped. Another set of doors opened, this time revealing a bird's-eye view of Walt Disney World's Hollywood Studios theme park. Crowds choked Sunset Boulevard and moved in random directions like energetic ants bent on beating the other ants to the top of the hill. Children lined up near a pretzel stand to get Buzz Lightyear's autograph. Parents milled about in the designated stroller area.

Our car dropped. Girls screamed; moms shrieked.

Not me. You couldn't have blasted the smile off my face with a power washer. Down we plummeted! Sudden stop, then rocket back up. Once more doors peeled open, and the park flashed before us. Again we fell. Up and down we went with cables yanking us both directions. I'd learned about the cables from watching the Discovery Channel. It seems the initial design of the tower proved too tame. The head of the design team complained that if his tie didn't fly up and hit him in the face, the car wasn't falling fast enough. So they added cables underneath the car, and now when you fall the cable jerks you down at a rate of almost two g's. It's way better than just jumping off a building.

Our car fell the final time, then slowed. Doors opened. Buckles unsnapped. Passengers rushed across the lobby of the old hotel toward the photo counter to see themselves on video monitors.

I checked the floorboard for my phone.

"I think you're looking for this," said Grayson's mom, thrusting my phone at me. "It nearly hit me in the face."

"I'm sorry. I meant to — "

"This is no place for a prank like that. Someone could get hurt."

"I know. I'm really, really sorry."

Grayson's mom, having loudly made her point in front of the other riders, turned away and marched toward the monitors, pulling Grayson along.

I hung back, waited for the crowd to thin, and aimed my phone at the monitor and snapped a picture of the picture of myself. Outside I found Mom and Dad and Wendy waiting for me at the Fast Past gate.

Dad said, "Well? How was it?"

"Awesome! Can I go again?"

"Maybe after lunch," Mom said. "If we have time. We're supposed to be at the ESPN Sports Complex by four."

"She has to be there," I said, cutting my eyes toward Wendy. "Not me."

"We're all going," Mom countered. "Your sister's cheerleading is a big deal, and we're going to be there for her."

“Yeah,” said Wendy, mounting her virtual high horse. “For once we’re doing something I want to do.”

What do you mean “for once”? I wanted to scream. That’s all we ever do.

“Speaking of being on time,” Dad interrupted, “we’d better start walking. We have lunch reservations at the Brown Derby.” The hostess met us at the door, took our names, and told us to wait. I slid open the keyboard on my phone and caught Mom looking over. I knew what she was thinking — Family bonding time, and that means no phone — but Dad was already checking out baseball highlights on his smartphone, and Wendy had wandered over to another group of cheerleaders seated at a round table.

“Put it away,” Mom said.

The hostess returned and ushered us across the dining room to a window table, dealing each of us a menu. As soon as I looked at the prices, I knew Mom and Dad were wondering how they were going to get out of there for under a hundred dollars. Going to the Brown Derby had been Wendy’s idea. She didn’t want the other girls on her cheerleading team to know how broke we were, even though I was pretty sure they all knew anyway.

The waiter arrived with a pitcher of water, four glasses, and a friendly smile suggesting he expected a larger tip than he would receive. He started explaining the lunch specials when I interrupted.

“I’m thinking of getting a bowl of lobster bisque.”

Dad glanced over. “You sure, son? That doesn’t sound like enough for you.”

“That last ride left me feeling a little queasy. Just a bowl of soup,” I told the waiter. “And maybe some rolls.”

Mom closed her menu and said to Wendy, “In that case, how about the two of us split a Cobb salad?”

“But I wanted to get the Noodle Bowl.”

“You should eat something light, honey. Remember how your nerves are before you perform.”

Dad handed his menu to the waiter. “I’ll have the crab cakes.”

“As an appetizer?” the waiter asked.

“Make it my meal. We’re in sort of a hurry.”

“Frank, for goodness’ sake. Get the rib eye.”

“Saving the steak for later when we celebrate,” he said, kissing my sister on top of her head.

The waiter — still smiling but now probably thinking what a bunch of cheapskates we were — closed his order pad and hurried off. While Wendy scanned the restaurant for other girls in the US Spirit Nationals, I told Mom and Dad about the message from my editor, leaving out the part about how my phone went airborne.

“You mean that blogging website?” Mom asked. “That’s not a job.”

“Sure it is, Mom. A writer in Seattle made almost a grand last month reporting on a zombie festival.”

“How much have you made?” Wendy asked.

“My story on grave robbers in New Orleans got me seventy-five bucks. The editor has me writing fictional obits and some of the ‘Breaking Noose’ headlines.”

“Did you say noose?”

“It’s a play on words, Mom. Supposed to be funny.”

Our waiter returned with rolls. Dad lathered one with butter and said, "Tell me again how you get paid. By the number of visitors to the site?"

"Not to the site, Dad. To my article. See, each reporter is responsible for coming up with his own story. I can write on any topic as long as it deals with the supernatural. Once it goes live, I share the post with friends, get them to click on the link, comment on the story, and spread the word."

Mom said, "Sounds like a scam."

"At first I thought it might be. But then my editor sent me a screen grab of some of the royalty payments. Anytime I get a thousand visits to my article, I earn like five dollars. If I do a good job and have the right key phrases and words in the article, it can go viral."

"That means the story becomes popular," Wendy explained to Mom and Dad. "For those not familiar with the modern technological world. So, Nick, are you saying you actually got some hits? I'm mildly impressed."

"My pay is all based on how many eyeballs I can pull," I said. "Eyeballs?"

"Readers, Dad. We've got this cool eyeball counter on the bottom of each story that shows how popular an article is. Ghost sightings are big right now. I think that's why the site's owner wanted me on his staff. My name lends credibility to the site."

Mom displayed a frosty look of skepticism. "You mean because of what happened in Deadwood? That wasn't a ghost story."

"But it was a ghost town. And I caught the killer."

"Who threatened to kill you, I might add."

"Fact is, I'm a pretty good writer, Mom. At least that's what I've been told."

"Well, if you ask me," Wendy chimed in, "the Cool Ghoul Gazette still has a credibility problem if they're letting you write for them."

Before I could respond with a snarky comment, my phone buzzed.

I looked at Mom and said, "Speaking of the Cool Ghoul . . ." "Not while we're eating."

"But we're not, yet." I pivoted in my chair and answered the call. "Can't talk right now, Calvin. I'm eating lunch with my family."

"But I have a really sick story for you."

I saw Mom scowling at me. "Let me call you back."

"In Transylvania." "Like in Romania?" "North Carolina."

"Shut up. There's really a town called that?" I asked.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Mom mouthing, "Hang up right now."

"Outside of Asheville," Calvin was saying. "Get this. Oh, this is so good." I could hear Calvin's excitement through the phone. "They found the victim with a wooden stake in his chest."

"I'm hanging up, now."

"Did you hear what I said, bro? The dead guy is a vampire!" Just then our waiter arrived, which distracted Mom for a few seconds.

I said to Calvin, "Bet it's just another mannequin stuck in a cornfield dressed to look like Edward Cullen."

"Come on, dude. This is huge!"

"Has to be a hoax. No way there's a real live vampire in Transylvania, North Carolina."

“Won’t know for sure until you check it out. They found the body yesterday on the golf course at a place called the Last Resort. How creepy is that? Today’s Wednesday so I need you on this right away.”

“I told you already. I’m in Florida with my family. My sister has her middle school cheerleading competition tonight.”

“Think of all the hits this story is going to get,” Calvin continued. “Assuming we report it first.”

“Come on, seriously? You really think the victim is a vampire?”

“Who cares what I think? It’s the perfect Cool Ghoul story! One our readers can sink their teeth into. Hey! Let’s go with that as the title.”

I groaned audibly.

“So whaddya say, bro? You want the story or don’t you?” “I’ll call you back.” I hung up from talking to Calvin and looked at Mom. “What?”

Dad got that serious look on his face the way he does sometimes when he’s about to say something he thinks is really important. “Did I hear right? The owner of the publication wants you to cover a story in North Carolina?”

“Editor. The owner of the site is a graduate student at Yale. Don’t worry, though. I’m not going. Mom’s right. I’d hate to miss a chance to watch Wendy blow her big debut as flyer.”

“Jerk.”

“Love you too, sis.”

“What’s a flyer?” Dad asked.

“Seriously, Dad? You don’t know my position?”

“Flyer is the girl at the top of the pyramid,” I whispered to Dad.

“I knew that.”

“Then it’s settled,” Mom said. “Nick’s staying. Now can we eat before our food gets cold?”

“Hold on a second, Sylvia. Let’s think about this. We’ve been after Nick to get a part-time job, and if he’s getting paid — you are getting paid, right, son?”

“Already put part of the money from the grave robbing story into my savings account.”

“What could you make on a story like this? Ballpark figure?”

“Hard to say, Dad. Like I mentioned, it’s all based on readerships. Might not get paid anything if it turns out to be a hoax.”

“But this Cool Ghoul thing, you think it’s legit?”

“Frank, don’t do this.”

“Do what?”

“Encourage him. Nick’s already said he’s here to support Wendy’s routine, so drop it.”

“Tell me more about the website.” Dad passed me the basket of rolls. “How does the owner make money — off ads?”

“He makes some money off ads, but Calvin said the real source of the site’s income comes from the virtual gaming community. They share visitor data with role-playing companies and get a kickback. Plus, they have a couple mobile apps that are popular.”

Dad, passing the butter to Mom: “I think we should let Nick go, if he wants to.”

“Frank!”

“You serious, Dad?”

“Why not? You already said your heart isn’t really into watching your sister’s performance. Think your company will foot the bill for the airfare?”

“I . . . ah . . .”

“Call your editor and find out. Then we’ll see how hot they are about this story.”

Wendy complained, “I knew you’d find a way to make this all about you, Nick.”

“It’s Dad that’s pushing me to do this. I’d be happy riding the Tower of Terror another day.”

“Yes, Frank, why are you so anxious to let Nick do some- thing like this?”

“Two words: Aunt Vivian.” “You can’t be serious.”

“Who’s Aunt Vivian?” I asked.

“Dad’s scatterbrained aunt,” Wendy said. “The one who still thinks you’re a girl.”

“I thought that was Aunt Effie.”

“No, Effie is my aunt,” Mom said to me.

“Aunt Vivian makes the best sugar cakes,” Dad said. “And every Christmas when she sends us her card, she reminds me that I haven’t seen her since Mom died. Family is everything, son. May not seem that way now, but it will when you get older. What do you say, son? Want to spend a couple of days with your great-aunt?”

“I think you’re doing this because you’re jealous,” Wendy said to me.

“Of what, cheerleading? It’s not even recognized as a sport, Wendy.”

“Should be,” Mom said.

“We could pick you up on our drive home,” Dad was saying. “It’d be a little out of our way, but not too much. This Cool Ghoul story could be great on your résumé, assuming you don’t really uncover a vampire.”

“Funny one, Dad.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Frank. Our little boy, flying on a plane all by himself?” Mom reached her hand across the table and squeezed mine. “Promise me you’ll be careful.”

“I promise.”

“And that you’ll phone as you board the plane. And when you land. And when your aunt gets you.”

“Yes, Mom. I promise.”

“I’m still not comfortable with this,” Mom said to Dad. “What if something happens?”

“Come on, Sylvia. How much trouble can he get into?”

“With Nick anything is possible.”