



Chapter 1

A Mystery Awaits

Lulled by the rhythmic clickety-clack of the train, Aveline's eyelids drooped. Sleep reached out with its soft, spongy arms, but she resisted and blinked herself awake. Outside, the countryside drowned beneath a watery deluge, the rain hurling itself horizontally across the landscape like a fistful of grey nails. Grim mires of dark water pooled in the fields. Black clouds billowed like clenched fists. Frowning, Aveline pushed back her glasses. This was supposed to be the best time of the year. The laziest. The comfiest. The most magical. School had finished and the Christmas holidays had started. By now, she should have been existing mainly on chocolate, watching films in her zebra onesie, and curled up on the

cushions in front of the fire reading her favourite books. Nothing to do and all day to do it. Instead, here she was, sitting on a hard seat in a chilly train carriage with a rumbling stomach.

They were on their way to a village called Scarbury, about fifty miles away from their home in Bristol. Aveline's Uncle Rowan lived there – or at least he used to live there – before he'd disappeared.

Aveline had only been two years old at the time, but her mum had told her a little bit about what had happened. It had been December, almost ten years ago. He had gone out one day, and just never came back. At first, everyone expected Uncle Rowan to reappear. It wasn't that unusual for him to go AWOL every now and then. But as time passed, and he didn't return, it quickly went from odd, to weird, to worrying. No sightings. No clues. Just thin air and an empty house gathering dust and junk mail. Since that day, Uncle Rowan had never been heard from again. And so, eventually, the time had come when her mum had to accept that, miracles aside, he wouldn't be coming back. And with mortgage payments on his house still outstanding, they would need to sell it. It was a sad task for Aveline's mum, almost like an official goodbye, which is why she'd wanted to conclude matters before Christmas.

Blinking out of her trance, Aveline glanced across the table, which was covered with coffee cups, mobile phones, biscuit wrappers, books and a scattered deck of playing cards. Opposite her, Aunt Lilian twitched in her seat. She'd fallen into a doze sometime after they boarded the train. Even in her sleep, she frowned slightly, obviously displeased at whatever was happening in her dreams. This trip would be hard on her, too. Uncle Rowan was her younger brother. Normally strong and assured about everything, right now, Aunt Lilian looked small and fragile. Aveline would have gone and sat beside her, and maybe leaned into her a little, but Aveline's mum was sleeping, too, her head lolling against Aunt Lilian's shoulder. Aveline silently promised herself that she would try to be there for them both over the next few days.

Rummaging in her backpack, Aveline retrieved the only photo she had of herself and her Uncle Rowan. She pulled it close to her face. Then she drew it away until it was in her lap, peering at it through half-closed eyes. She repeated this motion a couple of times, like a detective examining an important clue. The photograph had a white border around it, and the colours had faded. It showed a man standing by the edge of a lake, wearing hiking shorts and a grubby blue T-shirt. He had long, straight, black

hair, parted in the middle, and small, round glasses with wire frames, behind which narrowed eyes peered suspiciously at the camera. By far, his most striking feature was his bushy beard, which sprawled over the lower half of his face. He was holding the hand of a tiny girl who resembled a baby bird that had fallen out of the nest. Aveline smiled at her younger self, hoping that these days she didn't look quite so scruffy and bewildered.

"Does it ring any bells?" her mum said with a tired smile.

Aveline shook her head. She hadn't realized her mum had woken up.

"No, sorry, Mum."

"Don't be sorry, love, you were only tiny. But you remember me talking about him when you got older?"

"A bit," Aveline said, wanting her mum to talk more about his disappearance but afraid to ask. Her mum always seemed reluctant to discuss *that* part of Uncle Rowan's life, and Aveline was sure there must be more to it than the few vague details she had. In the end, she settled for a safer option. "What was he like?"

Aveline's mum smiled sadly, before beginning to clear their lunch leftovers off the table.

"Very kind. Super smart. Generous to a fault. But

always very shy, even with his own family. He definitely kept his cards close to his chest."

"How do you mean?" Aveline asked. She wanted to know Uncle Rowan better; her own memories were so vague.

"Well, I'd suddenly find it was time to say goodbye to him and realize that I'd been speaking about myself the whole time. I think he liked to keep his private life... well...private. I wish I'd taken more time to be with him, but I was a busy, single mum and, sometimes, all I could think about was getting through to the end of the day in one piece. I suppose in some respects, we drifted apart. It happens – you're so absorbed in your own life and your own problems that you forget about everybody else's until it's too late."

Her mum nudged a knuckle at the corner of her eye, as if she'd drifted off into her own little world for a moment. Aveline glanced away. The rain left glistening scars on the train windows. More sodden, lifeless fields sped by, reflecting the sombre mood in the train carriage. Aveline wanted to say something upbeat, but it was hard to find the words. The bleak winter weather dampened everything, including her spirits.

"What did Uncle Rowan do, you know, as a job?"

"He was an archaeologist. It meant he worked alone, a lot, which I think suited him very well. And he always seemed to be rushing off somewhere, which is probably why we didn't get to see him that much. But even though you didn't get to know him, Aveline, I do know that he thought the world of you."

A tingle of pleasure warmed Aveline's cheeks.

"Really?"

"Oh, yes. He didn't have any children of his own, you see, so he quite took to his new niece after you were born. He called you *Little Aye*, and you were equally taken with him, following him around like a baby duck paddling after its mother."

"No, I did not!"

"I thought you said you couldn't remember anything?" Aveline's mum said with a *gotcha* grin. Glancing at her watch, Aveline's mum eased herself out of her seat. "I think we're nearly there, love. I'm just popping to the loo."

Aveline leaned back into her seat with a smile. It felt good to know that her Uncle Rowan had loved her. She only wished he hadn't vanished before she'd got the chance to get to know him better. If only she could discover what had happened. Maybe he was still out there somewhere?

"Tickets, please!"

Glancing up, Aveline saw Harold, his floppy fringe framing a giant grin. As always, she was glad he was here. Him *and* his terrible jokes. She hadn't been sure he'd want to come, but his mum and dad were away with their furniture business again, and with school having just finished for the holidays, he had a few days free and nothing better to do. Also, Aveline had told him that they were here to solve a mystery, which while more of a *hope* than a *fact*, had intrigued him enough to agree to join her. "I'd keep my voice down if I were you," Aveline whispered. "If my aunt wakes up, she might decide you need to do some extra study."

With a nervous glance at Aunt Lilian, Harold squeezed in next to Aveline.

"You know, trying to pee on a train isn't easy," he said in a low voice.

"Thanks for the update," Aveline said, which made Harold snicker. She could happily live life without knowing the grisly details of Harold's bathroom challenges.

"So, what's the plan then?" Harold said, twirling his dark fringe around his finger like strands of liquorice.

"We're putting my Uncle Rowan's house on the market."

Harold paused, letting the strand of hair unwind itself.

"No, I mean, aren't we going to try and find out more about..." Harold gave Aunt Lillian another quick glance.

"You know?"

"His disappearance?" Aveline whispered.

"Yes, I mean, it's strange that we don't know much about what happened. You'd think they might have CCTV or something."

Pushing back her glasses, Aveline sighed.

"It was ten years ago, Harold, and he lives in a small village. Not sure they were hooked up with a state-of-the-art CCTV system."

"He could have been kidnapped."

"No ransom notes. Besides, I'm not sure that scruffy archaeologists without much money are high up on the list of kidnap targets."

Harold shrugged his shoulders.

"Witness protection programme? I dunno, maybe he saw something he shouldn't have and was given a new identity."

"While possible –" Aveline said, screwing up her face – "I really doubt he witnessed any mafia deals in a small village near Cheltenham."

"Alright, fair enough. Do you have any theories?"

"No, but that's exactly what we're here for," Aveline said. "And you know what's going to help us? We're going to have his house all to ourselves. Mum arranged for a cleaner to go in every now and then, but apart from that, it hasn't been touched. It should be just as he left it. There's got to be something in there that's going to tell us more."

Harold sat up in his seat, his eyes shining at the prospect.

"Okay, what's the name of the place where he lives again?"

"Scarbury."

Harold fell silent, pulled out his phone and began to look at something. After a few minutes he said *woah* under his breath and began to move his fingers really fast as though he was reading something fascinating. Eventually, Aveline couldn't help but peer over.

"What are you looking at that's so interesting?"

"Thought you would have already found this yourself."

"Found what?"

Harold raised his eyebrows. "Take a look."

Handing her his phone, Harold sat back and crossed his arms. Pushing back her glasses, Aveline saw that he'd been reading a blog.

The Spooky Blogspot

Strange Lights Spotted Above Scarborough

A number of people living in and around Scarborough have reported seeing ghostly lights at night, again, close to the old long barrow. Residents shared pictures and videos on social media, many claiming that the lights appeared to be moving. Mike Williams, 42, a local builder, said that generations of his family have witnessed the strange phenomenon. "My grandmother used to call the lights will-o'-the-wisps. She told me they were evil faeries, trying to lure unsuspecting travellers off the path, sometimes into bogs and rivers where they would drown. My father used to see the lights a lot, too, and he always told me never to follow them." However, local geologist, Mia Khan, offers an alternative explanation. "As organic matter in waterlogged fields and marshes breaks down, it releases flammable toxic gases that can often burst into flame as they come into contact with the air. I strongly suspect that this is what people are actually seeing."

Posted Dec 16, 2021 by:

Sammy-Adamu-Taylor11@SpookyBlogspot

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Aveline handed him back the phone. "That's weird.

How did you find it?"

"There's this thing called the internet, see, and if you type stuff into your browser it—"

Aveline pushed him away.

"You could be a comedian, Harold...if only you had some funny jokes."

They were interrupted by the sound of a crackly voice over the train tannoy.

We'll shortly be arriving at Cheltenham, where this train will terminate. Please remember to take all your belongings with you when you leave and thank you for travelling with Great Western Railway. Next stop, Cheltenham.

Blinking furiously, Aunt Lilian shot up from her seat and began to hurriedly help pack away their belongings, while Aveline's mum arrived back from the loo and started handing down their bags. As Aveline disembarked onto the windswept platform, needles of icy rain blew into her face. Shivering, she bowed her head. Now that they'd actually arrived, everything seemed slightly daunting.

Her uncle, gone.

A house, abandoned.

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Answers, none.

But she was determined to find some. Her mum and aunt needed to know.

Taking a deep breath, she followed the others through the ticket gates. Thankfully, there was a row of taxis waiting outside, their exhausts sending plumes of petrol-scented smoke into the air. A man with a shaven head wound down his window when he saw them approach.

"Now then, am I right in thinking that you four will be wanting a taxi?" the taxi driver said in a cheery voice.

"You would indeed be correct," Aunt Lilian said. "These four will be very grateful if you could take them to Scarbury."

While the driver loaded their bags into the boot, they climbed in, with Aunt Lilian assuming a position of authority in the front seat. After being outside in the cold, the warm air humming through the taxi felt like a hug, and Aveline stretched out her cold toes.

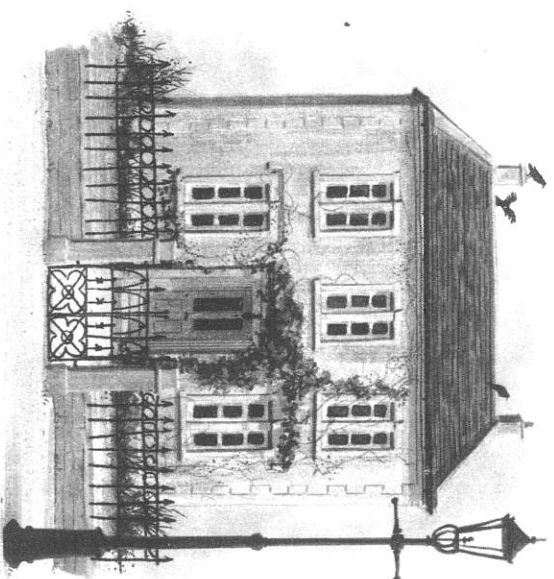
After they'd navigated their way through Cheltenham's busy streets, the lanes narrowed. The houses grew older and more historic. Huge trees lined the road, their branches hanging above the pavements like leafy umbrellas. The modern street lights fell away to be replaced by the occasional lamp, and in the darkening

afternoon, it did feel a little as if they'd stepped back in time. Aveline felt a flicker of apprehension as their final destination drew near. With a hiss of tyres on the damp road, the taxi drew to a halt.

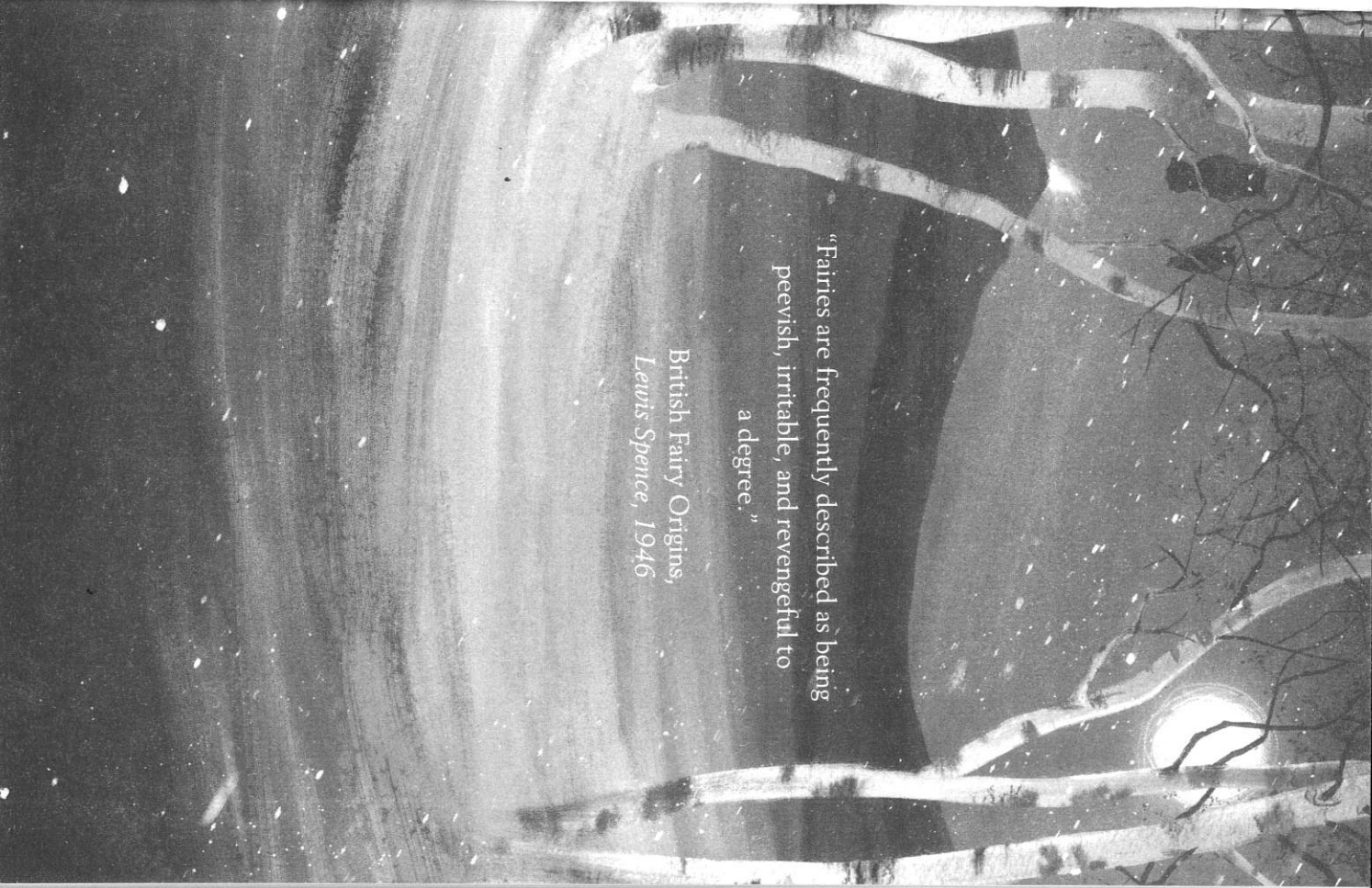
Aveline peered out of the window at a large, two-storey house, built from sandstone. Iron railings fenced it off from the road. A solitary lamp post stood guard outside. Steps led up to a path and then on to a porch, above which dark windows glinted like suspicious eyes.

A sign on the gate read:

Bier House.



Aveline took a deep breath.
The truth to Uncle Rowan's disappearance could lie
somewhere within these four walls.



"Fairies are frequently described as being
peevish, irritable, and revengeful to
a degree."

*British Fairy Origins,
Lewis Spence, 1946*



Chapter 2

The Midnight Visitor

Fishing a key out of her purse, Aunt Lilian led them through the gate. As she unlocked the front door, a chill draught rushed out like a fleeing ghost. The door only opened a fraction, a mountain of junk mail piled stubbornly behind it, but with a well-aimed kick from her pointy shoes, Aunt Lilian sent it flying, and they entered.

In front of them, a staircase led up into a discomfiting darkness. Aunt Lilian flicked the light on, and the hallway lit up with a sickly yellow glow. A grandfather clock stood silently in the gloom. The hallway table had a phone on it and behind it, a long mirror with an ornate wooden frame stretched almost from the ceiling to the floor. Most houses had a lived-in feel, Aveline thought. You'd smell

what everyone had eaten for breakfast. There'd be dirty shoes by the door. A cat might be sat in a window swishing its tail, or a dog would come and give you a welcome wag. This house had an unnerving emptiness about it. A stale smell. Even if you knew nothing about the house and its sad history, you could still sense that it hadn't been occupied for some time.

At the end of the hallway, Aveline could see strange shadows leaping around the walls as her aunt explored the kitchen.

"The good news is that the heating appears to be working," she called out.

"Well, at least we'll be warm," Aveline's mum said, seeming a little apprehensive herself.

"That's the spirit, Susan," Aunt Lilian called back.

"Come and give me a hand, will you? I need a volunteer for potato-peeling duties."

Aveline's mum rolled her eyes.

"I can't believe she brought a bag of groceries with her on the train," she whispered. "Hasn't she ever heard of takeaways?"

Aveline watched her mum go. She seemed stressed, which was understandable, given the circumstances. She was glad to hear the heating was working, though, because

it was uncomfortably cold. Aveline's breaths came out in ghostly clouds. In the darkness of the hallway, Harold looked like a shadow.

There were two closed doors in the hallway, one on their right and one on their left. Harold motioned to them.

"Left or right?"

"Right," Aveline said, turning the knob on the door. Were the first clues about to be revealed? It opened with a creak, revealing a sparsely furnished room. Just a coffee table and two uncomfortable-looking wooden chairs. Nothing on the walls, bare floorboards. There was a fireplace, its blackened grate telling them that it must have been used once, but probably a long time ago. It smelled of dust and furniture polish, the latter probably thanks to the cleaners that still came in occasionally.

"Oh," Harold said, failing to hide his disappointment. Aveline was disappointed, too. She'd told Harold the house had lain untouched, which had got them both excited, but this wasn't how she imagined it to be. Maybe the house had been cleaned out after all?

"Let's try the other one," Aveline said.

Harold stepped across the hallway and twisted the knob. "Locked."

"Really?"

"Either that or it's protected by an invisible force field."

Aveline wrinkled her nose. "Hmm, I wonder what's inside? There must be a key somewhere." Impatiently, she looked around and spotted a small wooden door underneath the staircase. "Maybe in there?"

She walked over and opened it, then fumbled around in the dark for a light switch. A cord hung from the ceiling. She gave it a yank and up above, a bare light bulb flickered into life. Hanging from hooks, there were old waterproofs that smelled of mould. On a narrow shelf there was a torch, which Aveline grabbed and switched on to give them a little more light. In one corner, she could see a pile of old junk mail, probably dumped there by the cleaners. Next to these envelopes full of offers for credit cards, car insurance and home loans, there was a stack of newspapers. Harold wedged himself in beside her.

"Can't see any keys, can you?"

"Nope."

"Maybe we could pick the lock or something, I mean, we've got to get in there somehow and..."

He trailed off as Aveline's mum came to join them.

"What are you two doing hanging about in the cupboard like a couple of coats in search of a hook? Come

and have something to eat; there'll be plenty of time later to have a nose around."

In the kitchen, Aunt Lilian stood at the stove, harassing some sausages around a sizzling skillet. A pan full of boiling water bubbled beside it, loaded to the brim with potatoes. Unlike everything else they'd seen so far, the kitchen retained some sense of Uncle Rowan's character. Blackened saucepans hung from hooks. There was a large wooden dining table. Pictures hung on the wall. One photograph showed him as a young man, standing in a trench with a muddy trowel in one hand, holding up what might have been an earthenware pot in the other. A big grin on his face suggested he was pretty pleased to have found it. There were colourful magnets on the fridge freezer door. Aveline glanced at one.

Archaeologist. (Noun.)

One crackpot digging up another cracked pot.

Smirking to herself, she opened the back door and beckoned to Harold. Walking out, they found themselves in a conservatory. Aveline glanced up at the glass ceiling, seeing a reflection of a girl with wonky glasses and a boy with messy hair peering back, like two ghostly versions of themselves that just happened to live on the roof. At the back door lay a pair of weathered boots and a walking

stick, together with a couple of jackets on hooks. Picking up the boots, Aveline inspected them. They were quite worn out, to the point that one even had a small hole in the sole. Narrowing her eyes, Aveline put them back where she found them. Obviously her uncle had been outdoors a lot, which she sort of knew already. These things told her little snippets about her uncle's day-to-day life. They told her absolutely nothing about his disappearance. It wasn't the start she'd hoped for.

"Mum, one of the doors in the hallway is locked. Do you have a key?"

Aveline knew that if there were any answers to be found, this room was currently the most promising lead.

Pausing with a potato masher in her hand, Aveline's mum frowned.

"You know, the cleaners asked me that, too, but I'm not sure where Rowan keeps it."

"It's Rowan's study, if I remember rightly," Aunt Lilian said. "He always locked it when he went out. When he went missing, the police unlocked it, just in case he was in there, but I have no idea what they did with the key. Probably lost it, I expect. Anyway, I can put a locksmith on my to-do list since Susan obviously forgot to put it on hers."

"So glad you're here to point out my mistakes," Aveline's mum said.

"My pleasure," Aunt Lilian snapped back.

Aveline grimaced at Harold, who made an *uh-oh* face.

Yet, once the meal was ready, things seemed to calm down. The sausages and mash gave them all the pleasant feeling of a full belly, and Aveline's mum and aunt seemed to relax a little more into each other's company, much to Aveline's relief. At the same time, the heating kicked in, and the house began to feel more welcoming.

"Well, I suppose we best get the bedrooms sorted," Aveline's mum said. "You two can come and give me a hand."

As Harold followed her mum upstairs, Aveline hung back and tried the locked door again, giving it a hard wiggle as if that might do the trick, but whatever secrets lay behind it refused to reveal themselves. Getting on all fours, Aveline peered beneath the crack in the doorway. A street light shone through the windows, but she couldn't see much. The legs of a chair. Some papers. The bottom of a desk, perhaps. But it smelled different to the other room: of dust and wood and leather.

Then, for a second, a shadow passed across the light. Aveline flung herself back in shock. Her glasses slipped

and fell across the bridge of her nose. Her heart accelerated to 100mph. She forced herself to breathe. Probably just someone walking down the street outside, their shadow cast into the room as they passed.

"Are you okay?" Aunt Lilian emerged from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a tea towel. "I heard an almighty thump. What's the matter? Did you slip? Are you hurt?"

"N-no...I..." Aveline fought to get some breath back into her body. "I was just looking under the door and made myself jump."

"Silly you then," Aunt Lilian said without any humour in her voice. "This is a large and gloomy house, so please let's not start making it feel more unsettling than it already is."

And with that, Aunt Lilian marched back into the kitchen. Aveline felt annoyed for a second. It wasn't her fault that she'd startled herself. But then she tried to imagine how Aunt Lilian must be feeling. Walking into the kitchen, where her aunt had returned to drying the dishes, Aveline reached up from behind and gave her aunt a hug.

"I'm sorry I snapped at you, Aveline," Aunt Lilian said, reaching down to squeeze Aveline's hands. "It's just... it makes me so sad seeing Rowan's house without Rowan in it."

"I know."

"Go on then, best get yourself upstairs. Harold's probably bagged the best bedroom."

On her way to join the others upstairs and foil Harold's best-laid plans, Aveline paused to peer into the long hallway mirror. In the gloom, the dust on the surface made her reflection look old and faded, as if she were looking at an antique version of herself. Like a Victorian doll, perched on a bed in some old house, staring sightlessly out at the world. It gave her the creeps, so she quickly scuttled upstairs, the middle stair groaning as if it resented being stepped on.

Harold and her mum were busily piling quilts, pillows and blankets on the beds. The bedrooms had yet to feel the benefits of the central heating and the harsh clacking of cold rain on the windows made Aveline want to immediately jump beneath the sheets. Nobody wanted to sleep in Uncle Rowan's empty bedroom, so it had been decided that she and Harold would sleep in adjoining rooms. An inside door connected the two rooms together. While Aunt Lilian and her mum made their own rooms comfortable, Aveline and Harold chatted before going to bed. With his toothbrush stuck in one cheek, like a hamster storing a nut, and dressed in a bizarre combination

of pyjamas, striped socks pulled to his knees, and an oversized dressing gown that he'd found in one of the cupboards, Harold seemed well prepared for the cold night ahead. Aveline told him what she'd seen downstairs.

"What do you think it was?" he said.

"Oh, I don't know, probably someone walking down the street."

"Must have given you a fright though, eh?"

"Yes, my glasses fell off and Aunt Lilian got angry with me. But seriously, Harold, we have to find a key for that study. Why else would it be locked unless there's something important in there?"

Smiling, Harold took out his toothbrush. "Okay, well, that's our priority for tomorrow. And locksmith or not, we won't stop until we find a way in, alright? Anyway, I'm off to bed; it's freezing in here. If anything happens in the night, knock once, then twice, then I'll know it's you."

Aveline laughed.

"Who else do you think it's going to be?"

"Dunno, ghost or something? See you in the morning."

"Night."

As she snuggled into her bedclothes, it took a while, but Aveline finally began to feel properly warm, probably for the first time that day. She put thoughts of the study

and locked doors and creeping shadows out of her mind. Just as she began to feel as though she was sinking into a giant pile of feathers, and her mind began to wander into the misty world of dreams...

A long, slow creak.

Creee-ak.

Aveline opened her eyes.

It was as if a foot had pressed down hard on one of the stairs.

The house lay silent, holding its breath, waiting to see what she would do.

Aveline strained to listen, dreading the sound of footsteps. When none came, she slowly inched her feet out of bed and searched in the dark for her slippers. Sliding them on, she pulled her dressing gown from the top of the bedclothes, grabbed the torch she'd found earlier, and crept to the door.

Opening it a crack, she shined a light out onto the landing.

"Harold?" she whispered, thinking that he might have been going downstairs to use the loo or something. But the silence was so thick, she knew immediately that it wasn't him.

"Hello?" she called again.

Peering down the stairs, for a moment she thought she saw something – or someone – about halfway down. Fear clawed at her limbs with icy nails. It looked like a small, hunched figure, scrabbling and scratching at the steps like a dog burying a bone.

With shaky hands, Aveline slowly raised her torch, the beam creeping down the stairs one by one until...

Light flooded onto the landing. Turning, Aveline saw her mum step out of her bedroom. She flashed her torch back down the stairs, but all she could see now was an empty staircase leading down to the silent hallway.

"I might have known, the midnight wanderer strikes again," her mum said. "Are you okay, Aveline, did you need something?"

"It's nothing," Aveline said, suppressing a shudder. "Just thought I heard somebody on the stairs."

Walking to the top of the stairs, her mum peered down.

"The only thing I can see is an old musty carpet that probably needs chucking out as soon as possible. So, if you're in agreement, let's get back to bed; it's freezing out here."

Aveline didn't reply. She hurried back to bed, where warm sheets were waiting to comfort her. Burrowing her

face in the pillows, she tried to forget what she'd seen.

Or thought she'd seen.

It was no good. Her mind was racing, and she needed to speak to someone about it.

And by *someone*, she meant Harold.