



### Chapter 3

## Secrets Unlocked

Aveline knocked on Harold's door. Real or not, she couldn't stop thinking about the figure on the stairs, and she didn't want to be alone right now. There was silence for a moment before Harold called out in a muffled voice.

"What's the code?"

Sighing, Aveline knocked twice more.

"Seriously, Harold?" she said as he opened the door and waved her in, scratching at his messy bed hair.

"Better safe than sorry," he said in all seriousness.

"Why are you up in the middle of the night?"

"Well...I'm not exactly sure but..." Aveline trailed off. Harold's eyes widened. He wrapped his arms around

himself and rubbed the top of his shoulders.

"Oh no. What did you see? It was a ghost, wasn't it? You have to tell me, Aveline, it wasn't the ghost of your—"

"No, it wasn't Uncle Rowan, Harold. But I did think I saw something on the stairs. I heard a creak, just after we went to bed."

"What was it?"

"I don't know, couldn't see it properly, but it looked like a person. Sort of crouched over, as if they were looking for something. It was pitch black though."

"Really? Show me."

"Okay, but we have to be quiet. I've already woken my mum up once."

Together, they sneaked out of Harold's bedroom and crept down the stairs until around halfway down.

"Here, I think," Aveline whispered, beginning to regret not going straight back to bed.

Harold stepped down to the next stair, then up again, pressing down with both feet. The stair let out a loud creak.

"Shush!" Aveline hissed.

Harold held up his hands in a silent apology.

"Is that the right place?"

Aveline nodded.

"I think so."

Bending down, they had a look. Harold ran his hands over the carpet, frowning as his fingers ran over a noticeable bump.

"There's something underneath here," he whispered.

Looking at Aveline, he pointed down. They felt around at the edges of the stair. It was difficult to see in the gloom, but Aveline was able to work her fingers underneath the carpet. As she pulled it back, it came away easily as if it had never been nailed down or glued. Underneath was a key. Aveline shivered as if a cold breeze had just blown in from outside.

"I reckon I can guess which keyhole that might fit into," Harold whispered, swatting away his fringe like a bothersome fly.

Aveline glanced downstairs. It was so quiet and dark. She could easily imagine someone waiting down there, just out of sight. But Harold was right. This had to be it, the missing key they'd been desperate to find. Grabbing it, they crept down the stairs trying to make as little noise as possible. Aveline's hands shook with a mixture of excitement and fear. It took her a few seconds to slide the key into the study door. Taking a deep breath, she turned it. It stuck. She wiggled it around and tried again. Then

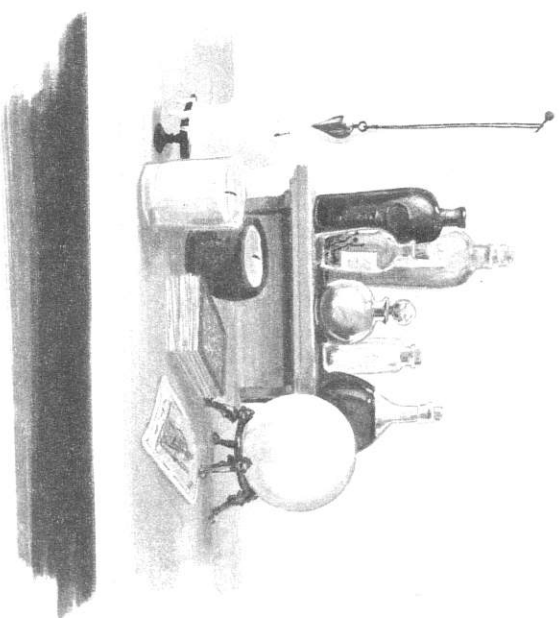
they heard a neat click and the door swung open.

"Finally!" Harold said, reaching in a hand. Flicking the light switch, they heard a strange hum, as if the bulb had just been shaken awake after a long sleep.

Then they stepped in.

It had to be one of the most bizarre rooms Aveline had ever been in. Part explorer's camp, part laboratory, part wizard's cave, part cosy nook, part artist's studio, every single surface – including parts of the ceiling – had been covered with pictures, sketches, charts, diagrams, maps, Post-it notes, newspaper cuttings, pages torn from books and various artwork. There was a huge mahogany desk, a chair, a brass lamp, a battered old leather sofa, a woodstove, a giant wardrobe and a crammed bookcase that had long since reached breaking point; books spilled out over the floor like groceries from burst supermarket bags. There were strangely shaped glass bottles and vials on one shelf. A pendulum hanging from a nail. Strange figurines that appeared to be half human and half animal. Scented candles. A pack of tarot cards. A crystal ball. In one corner, there was even a camp bed, suggesting that this was a room that Uncle Rowan rarely left. It felt woody and warm, with a russet rug stretched out in front of the woodstove like a cat.

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"This is more like it," Harold said.

"Wow," Aveline said, wondering where to start. It was a jigsaw puzzle without a guide to follow, but there had to be *something* in here that would tell her more about her Uncle Rowan and his life.

Aveline went to the wardrobe. There was a mirror on the front with a sticker that said:

*An Archaeologist's career lies in ruins.*

"These archaeology jokes are almost as bad as yours, Harold," Aveline said, pulling the wardrobe open. Inside there were wax jackets hanging from hooks but not much else.

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Harold plonked himself down in front of the bookcase and began pulling out the books, frowning at each one, before placing them to one side and grabbing another.

"Your uncle's got similar reading tastes to you by the looks of it," Harold called out.

"Keep it down, Harold!" Aveline hissed.

"Sorry," Harold said, quieter this time. "But you've got to see these."

He held up a few books for Aveline to look at.

*The Underworld and its Citizens.*

*Contacting the Dead.*

*The Power of Crystals.*

*Ley Lines & The Mystical Network.*

*Astrology in the Landscape.*

"Wow," Aveline said again, feeling a sudden closeness to her uncle that she'd never really experienced before.

"I had no idea. I just thought he was into history."

"Doesn't look like it. Those are just the tip of the iceberg, too; there are loads of them here."

Aveline took another look around the room, taking in details she hadn't noticed at first glance. A frightening-looking mask gazed sightlessly at her from the wall.

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A poster advertised a *Psychic Festival* in somewhere called Harrogate. There was an otherworldly feel to it all. She turned to what appeared to be her uncle's noticeboard, though its contents had broken free of the frame and spread out to the rest of the wall. The first thing that caught her attention was a newspaper cutting.

### **A CHRISTMAS DISAPPEARANCE, STILL UNSOLVED AFTER SEVENTY YEARS.**

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE  
SCARBURY SCHOOLGIRLS?

"Harold, look," Aveline said. "Missing people. In Scarbury. My uncle kept the newspaper report and put it on the wall – why would he do that?"

Harold glanced up with a puzzled frown.

"What's it say?"

Aveline did her best to give Harold the essential information. It concerned two schoolgirls, Mary and Fiona, who had gone missing in Scarbury many years ago just before Christmas, while on a school history trip to a long barrow. The case had never been solved. It had been a puzzling incident and the journalist had decided to write

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about it in the hope that someone might still come forward with information. Uncle Rowan didn't have anything else on the wall that suggested they'd come any closer to solving what happened.

"Why do you think your uncle would be interested in that?" Harold said. "Was he an amateur detective as well as an archaeologist?"

"I don't know, maybe? But there's another article here, right next to it."

It was a photocopy of a newspaper article from the 1970s. This time Harold came and read it himself.

#### WORKMAN PRESUMED DROWNED.

December 27, 1973.

The search for a missing employee of Cheltenham Water Company was officially called off today. Bob Andrews, 43, had been working in Scarbury on a drainage project in and around the area close to the long barrow. It is believed he may have been caught up in a flash flood after heavy rainfall swelled the local river to record levels, but until his body is located, police are refusing to speculate. The man's family are being kept up to date with developments.

"So," Harold said, scratching his hair, which was still sticking up from when he'd been asleep. "Your uncle was interested in people that were missing in the area – and now he's missing, too. Seems a bit of a coincidence, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does," Aveline said. "And you know what's really weird? Both articles mention the long barrow, same as that blog post you showed me. I wonder where exactly it is?"

"Maybe we can find it on here," Harold said, pointing to a large map that had been pinned to the wall.

They spent a few minutes examining it before Aveline suddenly spotted what they'd been looking for and pressed a finger to the map.

"There!"

A symbol like a postage stamp, beneath which was written:

*Scarbury Long Barrow.*

*Historical Landmark.*

"This is your uncle's house here," Harold said, pressing his finger up beside Aveline's. "So the barrow looks like it's just...half a finger away!"

"That's helpful, Harold," Aveline laughed, before looking at the scale at the bottom of the map. Placing her

finger alongside it, she worked out that it was roughly half a mile or so away.

"Walking distance," she said. "We have to go and see it."

"Look, there's a photo of it here," Harold said.

Aveline examined it. It was black and white and showed a group of men standing by a hill, though it was no ordinary hill, more of a long and unnaturally shaped mound. Aveline thought it looked like a submarine made of grass and there were huge stone slabs at one end. The men all had moustaches and wore flat caps, and in their hands they held shovels and pickaxes. They all looked very serious, except for a figure standing in shadow behind the group, right on top of the curious mound. Aveline couldn't be sure, the photograph was very old, but it looked like they might have been smiling. The caption said *Scarbury Long Barrow Excavation, 1904*. Every inch of Uncle Rowan's study was proving to be both useful and mystifying.

"Harold," Aveline asked, trailing a finger over the photograph, "what is a *long barrow* exactly?"

Harold flicked his fringe.

"Well, you know, like a wheelbarrow? A long barrow is the same except that it's really, really long."

"You don't know, do you?" Aveline said, trying not to give Harold the satisfaction of seeing her grin.

"Nope."

Aveline pulled out her phone and typed *Scarbury Long Barrow* into the search bar. The result flicked up.

*Scarbury Long Barrow is a prehistoric monument in the south-west of England that dates to the Early Neolithic period. Similar examples can be found across Western Europe. Archaeological excavations have uncovered a wide range of human remains at these sites, suggesting they were used as either community or high-prestige burial chambers. The Scarbury Long Barrow is noted for its alignment with the winter solstice sunrise, during which its passage and chamber are illuminated.*

She read it out to Harold.

"So...it's like a fancy grave for cavemen?" he said.

"I suppose, something like that," Aveline said.

Turning her attention back to the desk, she began riffling through a stack of cardboard folders. One held a bundle of receipts. There were bank statements and bills.

Correspondence from an accountant. Nothing out of the

ordinary. All pretty boring, everyday stuff. Then there were more folders, more bills, and things that might have been important ten years ago but had long since ceased to matter.

Then, in a bottom drawer, Aveline found something way more interesting. She knew what they were because her mum still used them: a small pile of old cassette tapes. Intrigued, she picked one up. On it, written in biro, was a short note.

*Session One. September 22<sup>nd</sup>*

The others were all labelled similarly.

*Session Two. October 31<sup>st</sup>*

*Session Three. December 21<sup>st</sup>*

*Session Four. May 1<sup>st</sup>*

Aveline pulled out the other drawers, rooting through them until she found what she was looking for: a cassette player to listen to the tapes on.

"Harold, here, I've found something."

Harold glanced at the cassette player and wrinkled his nose as if he'd just smelled something unpleasant.

"An antique? Nice."

"No, well, yes, but my uncle's left some cassette tapes in his desk. We can listen to them on this."

"Are you sure? Might be private."

"That hasn't stopped us before, has it? Anyway, this is important – might tell us more about why he went missing."

Aveline plugged it into the wall, before popping open the player and inserting the cassette labelled *Session One*.

"Ready?" she asked Harold. She felt like she'd just arrived at the top of a roller coaster, about to take the stomach-churning plunge down.

"Okay."

Harold came and sat on the carpet beside her, drawing his knees into his chest and hugging them. Making sure the volume was turned down low, Aveline took a deep breath, then pressed *PLAY*.

At first, all they could hear was a hissing sound. Then they heard what sounded like an object being placed on a hard surface. Following that, they heard what must have been the sound of a match being struck, followed by a faint sizzle – presumably a candle being lit. And then silence again, for a minute or so, before, finally, a voice. It was high-pitched and shaky, with a tinge of a south-west accent.

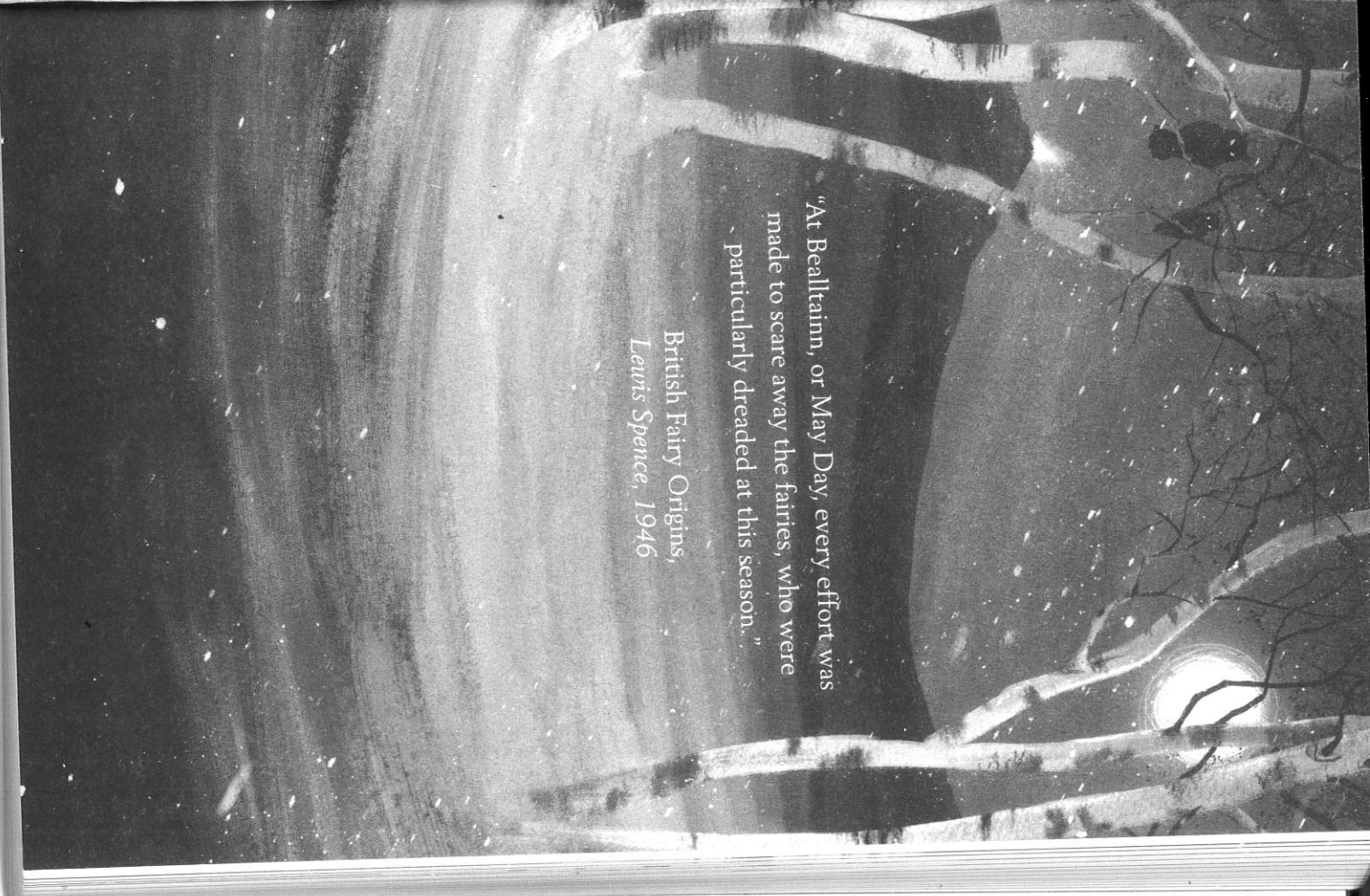
Uncle Rowan.

But it wasn't just hearing her uncle's voice after so many years that made Aveline shiver.

It was what he said.

*I'm speaking to the spirits of those who have gone before.*

*Is there anybody there...?*



"At Beallfainn, or May Day, every effort was made to scare away the fairies, who were particularly dreaded at this season."

British Fairy Origins,  
*Lewis Spence, 1946*



## Chapter 4

# The Séance Tapes

Aveline gasped. She reached out and grabbed Harold's arm. He held a finger to his lips as Uncle Rowan's voice came again.

*Is anybody there?*

Silence for a few more seconds. Outside, the wind gusted, pressing against the windows. Somewhere in the distance, an empty can rattled along the road. Part of Aveline wanted to reach out and turn off the tape, but she knew they had to keep listening.

*Come into the circle. Know that this is a safe place and that you will be listened to.*

"He's doing a blinkin' séance!" Harold hissed. "You know, trying to talk to the spirits of the dead!"

"Sssh!" Aveline hissed back. "I know what a séance is."  
*Tonight is the autumn equinox. The earth is in balance between light and dark. It is a time to speak freely. I am going to ask questions. Make the pendulum move, if you can. Swing it sideways for NO. Back and forth for YES. So, I ask again, is anybody there?*

More silence. A heavy sigh.

*Is anybody there? Come into the circle and speak to me if you can.*

More silence. The tape hissed. The scrape of what might have been a chair being pushed back. Then a cough, followed by rustling sounds, then the recording ended.

For a while, Aveline and Harold could only stare at each other with wide eyes.

"That's...super creepy," Harold said, eventually.

"Didn't sound like it worked," Aveline said.

"Let's see if he had any success in his next session then."

Finding the appropriate cassette, Aveline inserted it.

Again, the sounds of someone getting organized. The rasp of the match. Bumps and scrapes. A nervous cough. And then after a few moments, Uncle Rowan's tremulous voice.

*Halloween. Also known as Samhain in the old language.*

*As the sun sinks, the veil grows thinner and I invite you, spirits, to come into the circle and warm yourselves. I wish to speak in particular to Mary and Fiona. To those who were lost. Come and share your story.*

Aveline dared not breathe, almost as if she was sitting in the dark herself, by the light of a solitary candle, one finger stretched out to gently touch the top of an upturned glass. She'd seen pictures of séances in books. She knew how it was done.

Uncle Rowan only said one more thing before the tape shut off.

*Who took you? What happened? Was it...them?*

Aveline pulled out the tape. Harold rearranged his fringe with one shaky hand.

"Mary and Fiona," Harold said with a frown.

It only took Aveline a moment to remember where she'd just seen the names.

"The two girls who went missing! My uncle's trying to find out what happened. It has to be!"

"Certainly sounds like it," Harold said. "And who's the *them* that he mentions?"

"I don't know. But he seems to be doing séances on special days of the year," Aveline said, collecting up the other tapes to look at them. "He said the first one was on

the autumn equinox. The next one was Halloween of course. Then December 21<sup>st</sup>, the midwinter solstice. The last one is on May 1<sup>st</sup>. What's special about that? They call it May Day, but I'm not sure why it's special."

"Give me a minute," Harold said, getting to his feet. "Let's see if the good old internet has the answer."

With his face lit by the glow from his phone, which made him look a little bit spooky in the dark study, Harold tapped and swiped. Pausing, he stabbed his finger down on the screen and read out loud. "May 1<sup>st</sup>. Also called Beltane. The old pagan new year."

"Okay, so we have Beltane, the autumn equinox, Halloween and the midwinter solstice. Special days in the old calendar. He must have thought it would help him in some way. Maybe it's easier to contact the dead on those days?"

Harold glanced at his phone.

"Oh no."

"What is it?" Aveline asked.

Harold screwed up his face.

"My phone says it's almost 2 a.m. now which means today is December 20<sup>th</sup>. So tomorrow is the 21<sup>st</sup>," Harold pointed out. "It's one of those special days – the solstice!"

"My uncle went missing near Christmas, maybe it was actually on the solstice, too?"

"Well, shouldn't we find out if he...you know, got through to anyone?" Harold suggested, pointing at the remaining two tapes. "And if there's any more mention of...*them*?"

Nodding, Aveline played the tapes. But while it appeared that Uncle Rowan had continued trying, he'd had no success. All they could hear was him talking away to thin air, with not so much as a rattle or a knock in response.

"Hmm," Aveline said, looking around the study. "So, we've got a lot more to go on than when we arrived. Long barrows. Séances. Missing people. Special days. And goodness knows what else there is in here. I think we're getting somewhere, don't you?"

"I think so, maybe?" Harold said with a shrug. "Not quite sure how it all fits together yet, though."

"No, nor me. We just have to keep looking."

After the excitement of finding the tapes, Aveline's heart took a while to stop thudding. She knew what séances were but had never actually *heard* one for real. And while, as Harold had correctly said, it was pretty creepy, particularly the mention of *them*, Aveline also

found it very sad. Her uncle had been alone here in the house, surrounded by his pendulums and incense and candles, talking away to himself without, it seemed, anything to indicate that he'd had any kind of success.

Leaning back in her Uncle Rowan's chair, she took a moment to gather her thoughts. Her eyes strayed first to the old picture of the excavation, then back to the map.

"Harold, I think we should go and pay this long barrow a visit as soon as possible."

Before Harold had a chance to answer, another voice made them both jump.

"Good grief, what on earth are you two doing?"

Aveline's mum leaned against the doorway in her dressing gown.

"We...um...found the key to Uncle Rowan's study," Aveline said. "And we...um...wanted to see what was in here."

"Well, of course, you had to do it right away and couldn't wait a few hours until morning," Aveline's mum snapped. Shaking her head, she looked around the room, her voice softening. "You know, this is just like Rowan's bedroom used to be when he was young, like a bomb had just gone off. So, where was the key?"

"Under the carpet on the stairs."

"Oh, of course." Her mum rolled her eyes. "Typical of your uncle to leave it in such an odd place. So, have you found anything interesting?"

Aveline paused, noticing Harold had glanced in her direction. He wasn't going to say anything about the séance tapes, and Aveline decided on the spur of the moment not to mention them either. It had made her sad, so what would it do to her mum and aunt? She didn't want them to think Uncle Rowan had been sitting here alone, trying to contact the dead.

"Nothing really, except that he was interested in the local long barrow," Aveline said. "We were planning on going to take a look after breakfast."

"Well, breakfast usually happens after people have slept and woken up in their beds in the morning." Aveline's mum smiled. "So come on, you can nose through the rest of this tomorrow. Time to get some sleep."

Despite being exhausted by the time she went to bed, Aveline found sleep difficult to come by. Her uncle's tapes, the sense that he was desperately searching for answers, just like her – it was hard to take it all in. Yet, eventually, she'd drifted off and woke later than usual to

the delicious smell of toast, which made her stomach rumble. After breakfast, Aveline's mum and aunt announced that they were going into Scarbury to see an estate agent about the house.

"I'm not sure how long this is going to take," Aunt Lillian said. "But hopefully we'll be back by mid-afternoon."

"Can we go to see the long barrow while you're out?" Aveline asked. "We looked on the map, and it's not far away. We can walk there."

"An educational field trip," Aunt Lillian said with a triumphant smile. "How wonderful that you and Harold have chosen to broaden your minds while you're here. And I didn't even have to threaten anybody. What do you think, Susan?"

"Fine with me," Aveline's mum said. "As long as you take your phones. I've left you some sandwiches in the fridge for when you get hungry. Call if you need anything. Take your coats and scarves, it's chilly out. There's a key to the front door on the hallway table, don't lose it. And—"

"I think we've got it," Aveline said. "Stop worrying, Mum. We're only going to be tramping about in muddy fields looking for something that looks like a Neolithic burial chamber."

"Okay, well, try not to get dirty and—"

"Susan, they'll be just fine," Aunt Lillian said. Aveline and Harold finished off their breakfast and got their coats on. Just as they were about to leave for the barrow, Aveline had a thought.

"Harold, remember that blog post you showed me on the train up here?"

Tapping his phone a couple of times, Harold held it up for her to see. *The Spooky Blogspot*.

"That's the one. Read me that email address at the bottom, would you? I can't find anything else online about the Scarbury Long Barrow. Maybe whoever wrote this knows something?"

Aveline typed it into her phone and wrote a quick message.

To: Sammy-Adamu-Taylor11@SpookyBlogspot.com

Subject: Long Barrow

Hello,

I've been reading your blog and just wondered if you knew anything more about the Scarbury Long Barrow?

Thanks,

Aveline

A few moments later, Aveline heard her phone ping. Someone had replied.

Aveline,

Don't go to the barrow alone.

Meet me at the coffee shop in Scarbury, and I can tell you more.

It's called Barista. I'll be there in 30 mins.

Text me when you arrive. My number is...

Sammy.

Aveline read it to Harold. "He must live here. We have to go and meet him. He says we shouldn't go there on our own."

"But we don't know who he is," Harold protested, screwing up his face. "Not sure I fancy meeting a total stranger. You know the rules."

Suddenly, Aunt Lilian reappeared from the kitchen.

"You most certainly do know the rules, Aveline. This boy from the internet could be anyone. I know that as a rule you like to throw caution to the wind, but I think on this occasion, it's best if I accompany you."

Aveline paused. She suspected that Aunt Lilian really just wanted to spend her morning at a coffee shop rather

than an estate agent, but she knew it was probably the sensible thing to do.

"Okay," she said. Quickly, she typed back to Sammy.

Okay, thank you. We're on our way,

see you there.

Checking where *Barista* was on their phones, and after explaining the situation to Aveline's mum, the three of them were out of the door just a few moments later.

Reaching the gate, they turned and headed down into Scarbury, following the directions on Aveline's phone. Their feet squelched on the sodden leaves, autumn's soggy leftovers. The wind gusted through the spiny trees; the bare, spiky branches waving at them like witchy fingers.

But although the clouds were dark and grey, it didn't rain and all they had to contend with was a cold, insistent wind. After about only ten minutes or so, they reached the centre of Scarbury, which was just a short row of shops. They saw the coffee shop immediately, its name painted on the steamy windows.



"Well how do we find this spooky Sammy?" Aunt Lilian asked.

Frowning, Aveline tried to see through the glass.

"I said I'd text him when we got here. Let's go in. We can have a hot chocolate and a cookie while we wait."

That was enough to convince Harold and Aunt Lilian, and after ordering they found a seat by the window. It was busy, the hum of conversation loud enough to make them feel relaxed. While they were waiting for their drinks to arrive they had a look around, but with no idea what Sammy looked like, or even how old he was, it was impossible to spot any likely suspects. Aveline decided to send Sammy a text, as they'd agreed.

Hello, it's Aveline. We're in Barista. Sat by the window.

Immediately, they heard a ping from the table behind them. They turned to see a boy in a blue raincoat staring down at his phone, before he glanced up at them with a frown.

"Aveline?"

"Um, yes, hello," Aveline said, feeling herself blush.

"This is my friend, Harold. And my aunt Lilian. You must be Sammy?"

"Yes, Sammy, the Spooky Blogspot."

He announced it as if *The Spooky Blogspot* was his surname. Drawing back his hood, he picked up his drink and came and sat beside them. He was around their age, Aveline guessed. His hair was black, shaved at the sides and curly on top. He wore glasses with thick, round blue frames, which had the effect of making his large, watchful eyes appear almost owl-like.

Before Aveline and Harold could say anything, Aunt Lilian burst in. "So, Sammy of the Spooky Blogspot, I assume you live in Scarbury? Do you like it here?"

"It's not bad," Sammy said without adding any further detail.

"Have you always lived here?" Aunt Lilian pressed.

"No. In London before that. My dad's parents moved back to Nigeria, so we came here to be closer to my mum's parents."

"And how old are you?"

"Eleven," Sammy said, looking a bit flustered. Aveline wondered if she needed to step in, in case Aunt Lilian planned on interrogating him all day. Besides, she wanted to ask Sammy some questions herself.

Luckily, Aunt Lilian seemed satisfied.

"Well, I'm going to take my cappuccino over by the

fire," she said. "Where I can read uninterrupted by any talk of long barrows. Lovely to meet you, Sammy."

Sammy nodded curtly and turned his attention back to his drink.

As she left, there was silence for a few moments, which began to become uncomfortable, so Aveline spoke.

She suspected Sammy was probably as shy as they were.

"Sorry about my aunt, she's just making sure we're safe."

"No problem," Sammy muttered.

"Cool blog."

"Thanks."

"So...um...you know a bit about the long barrow?"

"Yes, enough to know it's dangerous," Sammy said very matter-of-factly.

"Dangerous?" Aveline said. Sammy's blunt statement took her aback. She took a sip of her drink. "Why's that?"

"Faeries live there." Seeing Harold smirk, he added,

"Not the sort you're probably thinking of. I don't mean Tinkerbell and little people with wings. These are proper faeries. Also known as The Family. The Hidden People. The Fey. They're like evil spirits. And they don't like humans creeping around."

"Oh, I see," Harold said. Aveline could tell he didn't have a clue what Sammy was talking about.

Seeing Harold's face, Sammy pulled out his phone.

"Maybe it's best if I give you an example." Sammy typed something in. Then he held it out for Aveline to take. "I found this old story and put it up on my blog. You should read it. Both of you. Before we go up there. It'll help explain what we're dealing with."

Aveline took the phone and began reading.

By the time she'd finished, she felt a chill in her bones that had nothing to do with the weather.