

# Prologue

The attic was deserted. That is to say, deserted as far as humans were concerned. Most would have only noticed a spider busily building yet another web between the arms of an ancient rocking chair. The most observant may have spotted a lonely battered suitcase discarded on the carpetless floor, but they would not have given it a second glance. It had been many, many years since it had seen sun, sea and sand, and was now the home to several small rodents.

The cardboard box with the words *Aunt Rosie's Dried Egg* printed in fading blue letters may have raised an eyebrow, but most people would not have been interested. Even the large drum propped against the peeling wall would have been ignored. In its centre there was a hole where many years ago a clumsy foot had stumbled. It was now yellow with age, and covered in thick layers of dust. Among this rubbish, not even the most observant of people would have seen the rather unusual inhabitants of this particular attic. To humans it was simply deserted.

The building that the attic sat on top of was a large, elegant Edwardian house – once proud, full of servants and their well-off masters. The house now stood quiet and still. Outside in the overgrown garden the sun began to set and the 'For Sale' sign planted haphazardly in the flowerbed cast eerie shadows on the ground. With a flutter, a magpie flew upwards out of the undergrowth. Landing on his usual perch, the branch of a nearby tree, his eye caught something glittering through the cracked attic window. The bird watched with interest as an ancient and dusty television set, the kind that your grandmother may have recalled from after the last World War, flickered into life.

Almost as soon as the set came on an old husky voice yelled loudly, 'Oi! Turn the lights out!'

A younger voice replied sulkily, 'Keep yer 'air on! Thought there was an audience outside.'

A click and the light on the old television went out. With the glitter gone the bird soon lost interest and took to the air, returning to his nest for a night's sleep. As the sun went down, the house again appeared deserted. Really, it was only sleeping. Just like the magpie.

# Chapter One

## *Arrival*

The inside of the house was dark and gloomy. Sophie reached for a light switch and flicked it on. There was a feeble 'ping' as the bulb blew. She pulled a face in irritation, but her eyes quickly adjusted to the darkness. Glancing around, she saw that she was standing in a short corridor with no windows. There were several closed doors and at the end of the corridor was a large, winding staircase. Her face lit up when she saw sprawling cobwebs hanging from the ceiling.

'Great! Spiders! Wow, do you think there's a big one?' she exclaimed.

Barnaby just shrugged his shoulders. Annoyed by her little brother's lack of excitement, Sophie decided to tease him.

'This place looks so spooky,' she said in her most ghoulish voice. 'Do you think there's a ghost?' she added, rolling her eyes to bring the maximum chill up Barnaby's spine.

'What with no head?'

'Oh, yes. No head and no arms.'

'I'd like to meet a ghost with no feet and no legs,' said Barnaby.

Sophie lost interest. Her plan was not working. How can you scare somebody who wants to meet a ghost?

'Don't be daft. He wouldn't be able to move.'

'That means he can't get away,' shouted Barnaby gleefully, 'But he might float away if it's drafty. Quick! Let's get him!'

Barnaby clomped off at speed along the corridor and up the winding staircase. Sophie afforded herself a smug grin. Now she would have a chance to explore by herself. Once more she looked around the place that was to be her new home. The building was a whole world away from the modern house she had lived in until now. This house had stood proud through two world wars, kings and queens had come and gone, and thousands of new inventions had delighted and horrified. Sophie let her mind wander, wishing that she could see just a little of the drama that it must have witnessed.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sounds of the unloading of the removal van drifting in from outside. If she remained where she was any longer, her parents would find some boring task for her to do. Too late, the front door flew open. Sophie's father, Bob, a short man with thinning black hair and a large belly, flopped into the hallway. Clutched tightly in his hands writhed Ginger, the family's pet cat. The cat glared at Sophie with his shiny green eyes and struggled in her dad's grasp, as keen as Sophie to explore. Bob pressed the animal firmly into Sophie's arms.

'Careful,' he said. 'Don't let Ginger out of the house yet. He'll get lost. He has to get used to his new territory first.'

Bob retraced his steps back to the removal van. Hugging the wriggling puss in her arms, Sophie sat on the bottom step of the staircase. Looking after Ginger wasn't too bad a job she supposed. Exploring would have to wait. Being careful not to loosen her grip on the cat, she attempted to unroll the new issue of *Urban Teen* that her mother so disapproved of. She had nearly succeeded when a loud crash made her jump and Ginger lashed out with his claws at her bare arm. Yelping, Sophie rubbed her arm and peered around to find the source of the

noise.

'Sophie, Sophie!' shouted an excited Barnaby from the top of the stairs. 'I've found where the ghost lives!'

Sophie was both relieved and cross. It was only Barnaby, but his clumsiness had made Ginger hurt her. 'There isn't a ghost, silly,' she said sulkily. 'I made it up.'

She pretended to read the magazine, but Barnaby came down the stairs and pulled insistently at her arm. Sighing, she stood. There would be no peace unless she did as he asked. Barnaby grabbed Sophie's hand and dragged her stumbling up the stairs. At the top she noticed a large pile of tatty books, spread across the floor. Her brother must have knocked them over, causing the almighty crash that made Ginger lash out. Barnaby pulled her past them and down a thin corridor.

Glancing into a few of the bedrooms as they passed, she spotted masses of old crates and the occasional piece of furniture swathed in big white dustsheets. In one room she saw a large four-poster bed. Sophie hoped that it would be her bedroom. However, Barnaby dragged her onwards, along the landing and up a tiny staircase. In this part of the house it was becoming harder and harder to see. In fact, Sophie realised that in the dark she would have missed this staircase altogether and it surprised her that Barnaby had seen it at all.

At the top there was a small door. It opened with an eerie creak, and the children went in. Looking around, Sophie saw that she was in a small attic room. Set in one slanted wall was a large window. The daylight that filtered in cast peculiar shadows that danced on the faded and torn wallpaper.

'See! Told you!' said Barnaby proudly. 'This is bound to be where the ghost lives. Maybe he'll float back! Or maybe he's hiding!'

As her brother searched for his ghost, Sophie took in her surroundings. The items in the attic were very old, and very dusty. Cobwebs hung from every surface. Certainly there was an odd feeling in the air, but it was not ghostly. It was just an empty room, in a state of advanced neglect. Even the window was cracked. On the wall near it there was a big frame, hung on a crooked slant as if it had been put up in a great hurry. Sophie noticed that it was not only crooked, but it had also been put up back-to-front. All she could see of it was the old rough wooden back. It must be a picture, she thought. Maybe a long lost masterpiece that would be worth thousands. Even millions.

Sophie put down her magazine and let Ginger scamper off into the attic. Free of the cat at last, Sophie gripped the frame and turned the picture around. It was plastered in dust and grease, but Sophie could just about make out an outline of a person. Perhaps it was a portrait of some long dead owner of the house. Picking up an old rag from the floor, she carefully wiped away at the dirt that had built up over decades of neglect. It came off easily, but instead of a picture she was confronted with grimy glass. Sophie's heart fell. It wasn't a lost masterpiece, but a dirty old mirror. The outline she had seen was just her reflection through the grease and dirt.

'Nothing supernatural about this stuff, Barney. Junk, that's all,' she said.

Sophie saw the look of disappointment in Barnaby's eyes, but it didn't last long. Suddenly, his round face lit up as he moved the old box of *Aunt Rosie's Dried Egg* out of the way. He had spied something in the far corner. Excitedly he rushed over to an old upturned chest. Placed in front of it was a creaky old rocking chair. One of its arms was broken, and deadly looking splinters threatened anybody who dared to sit down. But it was not the rocking chair that had attracted

Barnaby. Hidden partly behind the chest was a strange-looking television set.

'Wow, look at this telly,' Barnaby said to his sister. 'It must be a thousand years old.'

Sophie studied the bizarre-looking TV. It was a lot larger than the one that her parents had bought for her the previous Christmas, and it was as wide as it was tall. In fact, it was almost box shaped. The screen took up a sizeable portion of the front, and wasn't completely flat like modern televisions. It curved outwards slightly, and had rounded edges. If it still worked, it certainly wouldn't be as good quality as her dad's new TV. Sat on top was a large aerial made up of two pieces of tarnished and slightly bent wire.

The oddest thing about it was, this television appeared to be made of wood. On the front there were several large knobs, and there was not a remote control in sight. Sophie thought that there was a good chance that this particular television was made long before remote controls were invented. There was no doubt that it was old, but she was sure that televisions were not invented a thousand years ago. However ancient it looked, she was positive it couldn't be as old as Barnaby had suggested.

'Not that old, silly,' she said as she ran her finger over the television screen. Sophie looked at her finger. It was covered in dust. Nobody had been in the attic for a very long time. 'It's been here ages though. I wonder if it works.'

Sophie let her curiosity get the better of her. She turned the biggest knob, which looked likely to be the 'on' switch. Nothing happened.

'Shame. Doesn't work. As I said, junk.'

'Yeah! But it's my junk. I found it!' said Barnaby.

Sophie shook her head. Why did Barnaby always say such stupid things? He could have all the rubbish in the house as far as she was concerned. She wanted that four-poster bed. How could she convince her parents to let her have it? An unexpected creak caused her to look up sharply. The door hadn't been shut properly! Ginger! Sophie turned towards the door just in time to witness the cat slipping out of the attic.

'Ginger! Come back!' she cried. 'Come on Barney, better catch him or Dad will kill us.'

The children rushed out of the attic, slamming the door behind them. As they left, the room was again quiet, but it wasn't to last for long. A few seconds later the old television broke into a loud hum.

With a flicker, the screen sprang into life to portray a black and white picture of a pretty young woman dressed in a flowing ball gown. Finally the hum cleared, and she began to speak in a posh clipped voice.

'Good afternoon, and welcome to...' The woman suddenly stopped mid-sentence. Shouting over her shoulder, her voice abruptly changed. In a rough Cockney accent she exclaimed, 'Lads! There's no one 'ere! Are we still doing the show?'

An old husky voice replied, 'May as well. We could all do with a rehearsal anyhow.'