

CHAPTER 1

THE DARKEST PLACE

The house, when they finally found it, was like nothing Morton had ever seen in the city. Tucked away at the end of a winding gravel driveway and veiled in curtains of tangled ivy, it loomed behind a dense row of trees like an ancient lost monument.

“Here we are,” Dad announced cheerily as they pulled up to the end of the driveway. “Eighty-eight Hemlock Hill. Our new home.”

Morton felt a jolt of excitement wash away the tensions of the long journey. Could it be true? Could this immense old house really be their new home? He clambered forward from the backseat to get a better view. To Morton it looked almost like a small castle. There was a tall round turret at the front and long wide porches wrapping around the sides. It had countless windows of all shapes and sizes, and there were at least two large upstairs balconies. Morton began to get so excited he felt he might burst. It had to be three times bigger than their old house.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” a morose voice intoned

from beside Morton. It was Melissa, his sixteen-year-old sister. "That's not a house, it's a ruin."

"It does look kind of run-down," agreed James, Morton's thirteen-year-old brother, who was also squashed uncomfortably in the backseat.

"I hate it!" Melissa added, as if declaring a guilty verdict at a trial.

Morton turned to look at them in bewilderment. "What are you talking about? It's perfect!" he exclaimed.

"Well, of course you'd like it. You're a freak," Melissa scoffed.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's ghastly, creepy, and almost certainly haunted. In fact, it's like something right out of that horrid comic you read all the time."

Morton looked up at the house again. It was true; it did look a little neglected. Some of the windows were cracked, shingles were missing, and the paint was peeling here and there, giving way to green mildew, but surely that was all part of the charm.

"I told you it was a stupid idea to buy a house without seeing it," Melissa said with a scowl.

Dad ignored Melissa's comment and climbed stiffly out of the car to gaze up at the old building. Morton wriggled over to the front seat and bounded out after him. Melissa and James followed suit, throwing the back doors open wide and stepping out onto the gravel driveway.

"I suppose it is a little worse than it looked in the picture," Dad admitted, in his clipped British accent. "But it's not that bad. Anyway, it wouldn't be any fun if we didn't get to fix it up and make it our own, would it?"

"No offense, Dad," James said, stretching his arms and legs, "but you're not exactly the world's best handyman."

Morton had to agree with James on this point. Whenever Dad tried to do anything around the house he inevitably bungled it, and it had always been Mum who'd swooped in with a big smile to save the day. But now . . .

"Don't they have normal houses in this freak show of a town?" Melissa pouted.

"But it's a cool house," Morton said, feeling irritated by Melissa's barrage of pessimism. "And what's wrong with the town?"

"Didn't you see that sign as we drove in?" Melissa went on. "It said, 'Welcome to Dimvale, the Darkest Town in the Civilized World.' What's that all about?"

Dad began rubbing his temples. "I'm quite sure I've explained the situation to you at least a dozen times," he said, trying to sound patient. "Astronomers need absolute darkness to get good results. Dimvale is one of the few places left in North America that has bylaws controlling light pollution, which is why I jumped at the chance to work at the Dimvale Observatory."

"'Bylaws controlling light pollution'? What does that even mean?" Melissa asked suspiciously.

“It means no neon signs, no office buildings spilling light into the sky, no unnecessary street lights. . . .”

“No street lights! Are you sure this place actually is civilized?”

“I assure you it has everything you need. It has a cinema, a library, lots of restaurants. It even has a school.”

“Oh, a school! So glad you didn’t overlook that little detail. I’ll bet they don’t have any good shoe stores,” Melissa said, crossing her arms and sinking into a big sulk.

“Melissa, it’s going to be just fine,” Dad said soothingly. “Come on, let’s explore inside.”

After being stuck in the car for five hours, this, at least, was something everyone was happy to do. They followed Dad along the path to the sagging porch at the back of the house. Dad produced an old key from under the doormat and clicked the lock open with a satisfied smile.

Morton thought the inside was even better than the outside. True, there was a lot of cracked plaster, and several of the rooms had ugly wallpaper, but the grand, high ceilings and beautifully preserved original woodwork more than made up for that. Everything smelled of furniture wax and mothballs, and Morton felt instantly at home, which was odd because the house couldn’t have been more different from their clean, sterile, modern place in the city. Morton decided this had something to do with the fact that the movers had already delivered all of their furniture and boxes, which had been neatly arranged in the appropriate rooms.

Dad immediately led them on a brief tour, and both James's and Melissa's moods seemed to pick up when they saw their new spacious bedrooms. James was particularly pleased because he and Morton had always had to share a room up until now.

"You've got to admit, it's pretty cool," Morton said to James as they trooped through the house.

"I guess it will be nice not to have to listen to you snoring all night," James said, ruffling Morton's wavy hair.

"I don't snore," Morton protested, and then James laughed for the first time since Morton could remember.

"Just kidding," James said.

"And last but not least," Dad was saying, "this is Morton's room."

The three kids followed Dad to the very end of the narrow upstairs landing into a large bedroom at the back.

"Whoa! This is awesome!" Morton said, pushing past the others to get a good look. The room was at least twice the size of the one he used to share with James, with two large windows and a small door leading to one of the balconies he'd seen from outside. Not only did he get his own balcony but now he'd also have more than enough room for his large collection of comics and toys. Morton threw his arms around Dad's waist and squeezed him tight. "Thanks, Dad. I love it."

Dad looked over at James and Melissa. "You see," he said, raising his eyebrows. "Not so bad, eh?"

James nodded appreciatively while Melissa kind of

shrugged and chewed her nails, which was as close as she'd come to agreeing with Dad.

"Now," Dad went on, "how about you lot start unpacking the small stuff, and I'll see about fixing us some lunch." And he paced off down the stairs, leaving the three kids alone.

Melissa glared at James and Morton. "Living in this place is going to be a nightmare. You know that, right?"

"I dunno," James said. "My nightmares don't usually have spacious bedrooms with balconies overlooking the flower garden."

Melissa sneered. "There you go again."

"What?" James said.

"Trying to make jokes about everything."

"I'm being serious," James said, with a teasing smile. "I've never had a nightmare about flower gardens."

Morton braced himself for this teasing exchange to explode into the now familiar all-out fight, but to his relief Melissa bit her tongue and stomped off down the hallway to her new bedroom.

James shrugged. "It *may* actually be a nightmare with her around," he said.

Morton didn't reply. Things had been so tense between James and Melissa recently that it was pretty much unbearable any time they were in the same room together. James couldn't seem to resist winding Melissa up, and Melissa had become more petulant and moody than ever.

"What's up?" James asked, as if sensing Morton's mood.

Morton sighed. "I don't know," he said. "It's just, why do you two always have to fight? It's not fun anymore."

James reflected on this for a moment and then snapped his fingers. "You know what *is* fun?" he said. "Attic hunting. There's sure to be one in this old house."

Morton hadn't even thought of that. He'd seen the large peaked roof from the outside, but Dad hadn't mentioned anything about an attic on the tour. That would be fun, he thought, and moments later he and James were racing around the upstairs, looking in all the corners and cubbies. They soon found a narrow, dusty staircase hidden behind what appeared to be a door to a small closet.

"Whoa!" James said. "Jackpot."

Morton peered up. The stairs vanished into complete blackness. James flipped a tarnished old brass light switch mounted just inside the door with no result.

"Looks like the bulb's gone. Maybe we should wait until . . ."

But Morton wasn't about to wait. All his life he'd wanted to live in a house with a big old attic. He bounded up the bare wooden steps, his eyes rapidly adjusting to the dim light, until he arrived on a narrow landing at the top.

James hesitated below.

"Come on," Morton called. "Your eyes get used to it pretty quick."

"Aren't you afraid of the dark?" James said, timidly following him up the stairs. "Most kids your age won't even

go to bed without a night-light, never mind dash up into a strange attic.”

“You can’t be afraid of something that’s not there,” Morton said matter-of-factly.

James arrived on the landing and stood next to him. There was a second door, much older than the first, with a large ragged hole in the woodwork, and Morton could see dim shapes in the attic beyond.

“But darkness is there,” James said. “I can see it.”

Morton shook his head. “Darkness is the absence of light. It’s not actually anything, and you can’t be afraid of nothing.”

“I can,” James said, looking through the hole in the door. “In fact, I’m very good at it.”

“I learned a trick from *Scare Scape* issue 275,” Morton said. “The story about the boy lost in an abandoned mine shaft. He had to find his way out in the complete dark and he kept telling himself that darkness was nothing, but it still made him afraid, so he started shouting, ‘I *am* afraid of nothing, I *am* afraid of nothing.’ And then he realized that was the same as saying he wasn’t afraid, so then he wasn’t afraid, get it?”

James scratched his head. “You know, that almost makes sense. Not quite, but almost.”

“So now you don’t have to be afraid of the dark either,” Morton said, and without pausing he pushed the broken door open and stepped into the gloom beyond.

The attic couldn’t have been more perfect. It had tall

sloped ceilings, rough-sawn rafters covered in cobwebs, and an uneven planked floor scattered with old discarded objects. There were moth-eaten suitcases, a moldering baby carriage, and several old wooden trunks. Strangely, like the rest of the house, the attic had an air of familiarity to it. Yet this time Morton realized exactly why.

“Hey, this reminds me of another story in *Scare Scape*,” Morton said excitedly. “The one where the lawyer gets an infestation of Flesh-Eating Cockroaches in his attic. You must remember that one?”

James stepped timidly into the attic and gave a thin smile. “Ever think you might be getting too old for that comic, Morton?”

Morton sighed, feeling a pang of disappointment. *Scare Scape* had once been James’s favorite comic too, but over the last few years his interest had waned completely. Some of Morton’s fondest memories were of the times they’d stayed up late reading and talking and making up their own creepy stories. In fact, it had been James who first showed him the comic, and it had been James who bought Morton his first mail-order monster, starting off his prized collection of *Scare Scape* toys.

James didn’t seem to notice Morton’s disappointment and turned to look at the tiny, cracked windows that were casting hazy shafts of light across the room. “How do you suppose they all got broken?” he asked.

Morton shrugged. “Kids throwing stones?”

James shook his head. “We’re too high up for that.”

Morton looked again at the disheveled attic. A standing lamp had fallen and smashed, several boxes were on their sides, and sawdust had spilled from a large wooden crate in the corner. This really was like something from one of the creepy stories in *Scare Escape*.

"You think somebody might have been trapped in here?" Morton said, in an excited whisper.

"Uh, maybe we should go," James said, his mood suddenly shifting. But before either of them had time to turn, a sudden scratching noise made them freeze on the spot. Something was moving behind one of the old trunks. Morton and James stared at each other.

"Mice?" James asked hopefully.

"Uh-uh," Morton said. "Too big for a mouse. Could be a Visible Fang."

"A what?"

"Visible Fang. You know, the creature with a transparent body, likes to hide in attics and basements."

James looked around nervously. "You do know those creatures in your comic aren't real, right?"

Morton grinned. This was starting to be fun.

The scratching noise came again, and this time it seemed to be coming from inside the trunk, not behind it.

"Well, it's definitely too big for a mouse," Morton repeated firmly. "So I don't know what else it could be."

James swallowed hard. "Why would Visible Fangs be in an attic anyway?"

“Don’t you remember? They like to live near people. They creep down into their houses at night and hypnotize them.”

“Oh, yeah, what was all that about? They’d hypnotize you and then steal stuff?”

“No, you’re getting them confused with Swag Sprites,” Morton replied. “The Visible Fang paralyzes you with hypnosis so it can eat your heart out while you’re asleep.”

“Oh, right,” James said, a distinct tremor in his voice. “Now I remember.”

“Didn’t they used to be your favorite?” Morton asked.

“No. That was the Toxic Vapor Worms. They were the coolest.”

“Hey, you never read the issue where the Visible Fangs and the Toxic Vapor Worms teamed up, did you?”

“I don’t think so.”

“It’s awesome. Do you want me to lend it to you sometime?” Morton asked, a hopeful note in his voice.

James opened his mouth to respond but the scratching noise came again, and this time there was no doubt that it was coming from inside the old trunk.

“It can’t really be a Visible Fang, can it?” James whispered, looking genuinely afraid now.

“Only one way to find out,” Morton said, and without even thinking about it he stepped swiftly forward and threw the lid open. There was a sudden screech and the fierce rattle of claws scratching on wood. Morton heard

James let out a shriek and saw him fall to the floor just as a fast-moving gray blur flew out of the trunk, bounded onto James's leg, and then rushed to one of the tiny windows. Morton spun quickly around to see the creature's body silhouetted in the cracked glass. A small head with a curved body and a large fluffy tail. It was a fat gray squirrel. It chirped angrily at them before disappearing through the hole in the broken window.

"It was just a squirrel," Morton said, surprised to feel his heart pounding against his ribs.

James lay motionless on his back, his face as white as chalk. For a moment Morton couldn't interpret James's expression, then quite unexpectedly he began to laugh. Morton felt a wave of relief and started laughing too, and before he knew it, they were both rolling around on the dusty wooden floorboards, practically suffocating with laughter.

Just like the old days, Morton thought, and for the first time in months he dared to hope that things were going to get back to normal.

James finally stopped laughing and stood up. "Come on, Squirto," he said, offering his hand to Morton. "We'd better go help unpack or Dad will give us one of his long speeches about pulling our weight."

Morton grabbed on to James's hand and got to his feet.

"Hey, I know which box that Toxic Vapor Worm and Visible Fang issue is in. Do you want me to get it for you?" Morton asked as he followed James down the stairs.

“Sure,” James said, “but I should get started unpacking.”

The two of them stepped back out onto the wide landing.

“I’ll bring it to you,” Morton said eagerly.

“Okay, then, but don’t get lost in this big creepy house of ours,” James said with a wry smile. “And look out for Kamikaze Cobras.”

Morton chuckled again and sprinted to his new room at the end of the hallway. Since Morton had insisted on packing his moving boxes himself, he knew exactly what he was looking for. He quickly found the box marked SCARE SCAPE, ISSUES 200 TO 400 and ripped the tape from its lid. The familiar, comforting smell of old musty paper filled his nostrils. He pulled issue 237 from the box and was about to run from the room when he noticed something odd about the front cover. It had a shadowy illustration of a girl who looked exactly like Melissa. She was tall and skinny, with jet-black hair and dark brown, almost black, eyes. The girl was screaming, terrified of a giant centipede-like creature. Funny, Morton thought, he must have seen this cover a hundred times but never noticed the resemblance before now.

He put the lid back on the box and rushed down the hall to James’s room. The door was closed, but he burst in without knocking.

“Hey, I found that issue, and it’s the weirdest thing — the girl on the cover looks just like Melissa. . . .”

Morton stopped short. James was huddled in a corner over an open moving box, with his hands covering his face.

“James?” Morton asked softly.

After what seemed like too long a pause James turned around, wiping his face with his sleeve. “Oh, wow!” he said, putting on a crooked smile. “The dust in this place is out of control. Just look at me, allergies totally gone berserk!”

James’s eyes were bright pink and his cheeks were wet.

“Here’s that issue we talked about,” Morton said, wishing suddenly that he’d knocked first.

“Oh, yeah, thanks,” James said, holding the same crooked smile, and without even looking at the comic, he took it from Morton’s hand and placed it on his small desk. “I’ll read it later.”

Morton nodded and began to shuffle awkwardly out of the room. “Yeah, I better go, uh, unpack,” he said, and a moment later he was standing in the hallway with his back to the wall as an odd choking feeling seemed to envelop him.

No, not like the old days, he thought. It had been stupid of him to even think that. It would never be like the old days again.