

CHAPTER ONE

Paul was what used to be called a latch-key kid. Do you know what that is? It's a child who has their own front-door key even if they're quite young. Their parents work long hours so there's nobody there when they come home from school or after-school club. They have to unlock the door themselves. Paul was a child like that.

On the first day of term after the summer holidays, Paul was on his way home from school. He clattered his key along the bannisters as he went upstairs to his flat: *Clong-clong-cling. Clong-clong-clang.*

On the first floor, he met old Mrs Wilhelm, who had her flowery shopping bag with her. Mrs Wilhelm was rather strange. She could often be seen walking up and down the stairs or standing around outside somebody's door.

Sometimes when Mum or Dad opened the door in the morning, she was right there, as if she'd just been eavesdropping on them or looking through the keyhole.

'Hello, Mrs Wilhelm,' called Paul.

'Hello, Paul,' said Mrs Wilhelm. 'I haven't seen you around for a while.'



As she spoke, she was staring at him with her right eye. Her left eye was screwed up tight, the same as ever. This had made Paul very scared of her when he was younger. By now he was more or less used to her only looking at him with one eye, but it was still a bit creepy when she came right up close to him. He could see all the creases around her squinting eye.

'Yes,' said Paul, 'we only got back from our holiday last night.'

'And? Did you have a good time?' asked Mrs Wilhelm.

'Yes, very nice,' said Paul, 'but it was school again today.'

'Oh, no!' cried Mrs Wilhelm. 'Schooool! Is it bad?'

'Uh-huh,' said Paul, who really didn't like school. Not because of the lessons, or his teacher, Mr Ampermeier, who was actually very nice, but because of Tim and Tom, who picked on him every single day. So he generally ended up standing around alone in the playground. But he didn't want to tell Mrs Wilhelm all that now.

'I've got homework to do,' he exclaimed. 'Bye, Mrs Wilhelm!'

'Bye, Paul!' said Mrs Wilhelm.

Paul ran up another two flights of stairs, *clong-clong-cling, clong-clong-clang*, until he came to the flat with *Fellmann* on the door. That was where he lived. With his mum and dad. They were the Fellmanns.

Paul stuck his key in the lock and was about to turn it, when he heard a very quiet voice: 'Ow! Ow-ow-ow. Zippeldesticks, what's all this?'

Paul listened. Was somebody at home already? But the voice didn't sound the least bit like his parents. More like a child. He looked around. There was nobody on the stairs. He put his ear to the door. Nothing. So he moved the key in the lock again.

'Hey!' cried the voice. 'What's this stick doing in here?'

Paul pulled the key out, put his eye to the lock and looked into the flat. He saw the long, empty hallway. There were two half-unpacked suitcases standing there, and at the end of the hall, the parasol and lilo were leaning against the bookcase. It was all perfectly quiet. But hang on, wait a moment, what was that? Paul jumped. To the left. In the darkness. There was something moving. Something white. In the keyhole! Paul jerked his head back. He stood by the door, dead quiet, held his breath and listened.

He wasn't sure, but he thought he could hear someone breathing . . . in the door.

'Is there anyone there?' he asked.

'No-no,' said the voice. 'There's no one here. Nobody there.'

Paul ought to have been startled, but the voice sounded so small and scared that he wasn't afraid. Well, maybe only a little.

Cautiously, he asked: 'Really? Nobody there?'

'Yes-yes,' said the voice, 'no one at all. Really truly, nobody there.'

'So *nobody's* talking?' said Paul.

'Nobody's doing anything, it's just the wind.'

'The wind can't talk,' said Paul.

'Exactly, nor can I,' said the voice. 'I'm no one, no fear. There's nobody here.'

'Will you come out anyway?' asked Paul.

'No,' said the voice and then, a little more quietly: 'I'm scared.'

'I won't hurt you,' said Paul, 'cross my heart.'

It was as though a lamp went on in the lock. Then, for a moment, Paul thought that the lock was blowing

a little bubble of glowing gum. Because the thing that billowed from the keyhole was slowly getting bigger. At first it looked like a little white pea. But it grew from a pea to a ping-pong ball to the size of an orange, stretched lengthways, and gently eased itself away from the door, and floated over to Paul. Paul held his breath and stared at it in silence. Now the thing was as big as the water bottle he took to school. Or his cuddly tiger. It had big eyes and a mouth, and was gleaming white, and it said: 'Good morning.'

'Oh. Erm. Actually, it's getting late, it's five in the afternoon,' said Paul.

The white thing seemed to ponder. Then it said: 'But I've only just got up. Why's it late for you?'

'Because I get up in the mornings. When the sun comes up. And when it goes down, I go to bed.'

'Aha,' said the strange thing. 'The sun. Aha.' Then it sank slowly to the floor. 'Oh,' it went, 'oh-oh-oh.'

It seemed to have little arms. Or wings. At any rate, it was waggling some stumpy little things about in the air, but they weren't much help and the creature sank down lower and lower until it landed on the floor.



Paul crouched next to it. 'Can I help you?'

'No-no. I'm only just learning to float and fly properly. I'll get there.'

'But . . . What are you doing in our door?' asked Paul, sitting down cross-legged on the floor.

'Well, I live in there. Not in the door. I live in the keyhole.'

'Oh, right, yes,' said Paul. 'Sorry. How long have you lived in the . . . in the keyhole?'

'A little while,' said the white creature.

'Ah,' said Paul. 'Were you born there?'