CHAPTER 1



A Friend in Need

It was the first day of the summer holidays. The sun was beating down on Eve's back as she pedalled her bike towards Tom's house. She was excited to start the holidays off with her best mates Tom and Clovis – they had so much to fit in. As she rode the short distance from her own house, she wondered which item on their busy schedule they would do first: the cinema, swimming or the theme parks? But really she knew which one they would all be most *excited* to do. Ghost hunting. Ghost hunting was their passion, and the friends had really begun to take this unusual hobby very seriously – helped by Eve's strange and rather eccentric Uncle Rufus, of course.

Eve and her friends had first stepped into the world of the paranormal last Halloween and now they were desperate for more spooky adventures. For the last few months, Uncle Rufus had been teaching them about the world of the supernatural and all the famous cases, as well as showing them how to use many of the ghost-hunting devices he'd invented. But now the friends were eager to take what they

had learned out into the world. Eve had decided that tonight, when she got back home, she would talk to her uncle about the possibility of the three of them going with him on his next proper investigation.

Eve squeezed the brakes on her bike as she rode up to Tom's house, leaned her bike up against the wall and knocked on the door. It wasn't long before Tom's dad's huge outline could be seen through the frosted glass. He opened the door, the chain dangling across his bulbous face as he glared through the small gap.

'Oh, hello, Mr Lake. I've come for Tom.'

Tom's dad grunted, unhooked the chain and opened the door fully. He wiped his hands down the front of his stained white vest and nodded upwards, indicating that his son was upstairs in his room.

Eve had never seen Tom's dad smile, not once in all the years she had known the family. She knew how Tom felt about him and how upset he got over the way his dad treated his mum, Ange. They were always arguing, and his dad often barked orders at Tom's mum, who nervously did his bidding.

Eve smiled brightly at Mr Lake, hoping to encourage some sort of happy response, but as usual, no luck.

'Go on up,' he grunted over the sound of the TV. He shuffled his large body around and, without a backwards glance, went into the front room to carry on watching his programme.

Eve ran up the stairs two at a time and knocked on Tom's door. 'Hey, it's me. You ready?' No response.

'Tom?' She knocked again, harder this time. She was just about to knock a third time, when she heard a small voice.

'Come in.'

Eve pushed the door open, just a little, and peeked through into Tom's tiny bedroom. Her friend was sitting on the floor, his back against the side of his bed, staring sadly into space. Something was wrong.

'Hey, what's up?' Eve sat down next to him and leaned in close. Tom was always the happy one in their group, the one who liked to see the positive side of things. What had happened to make him look like this?

Tom didn't respond at first, he just stared at the floor. Then Eve noticed his chin begin to wobble.

'Mum's gone.' The statement was delivered quietly, almost a whisper. He turned to face Eve and only then did she see just how upset he was. His face was tear-stained, eyes red and swollen.

'Gone where? . . . What, she's *left*? Oh my God! Tom, I'm so sorry. When did this happen?' Eve grasped her best friend's hand, squeezing it tight.

'This morning. I woke up and heard them rowing again, but this time it was different. My mum was the one doing the shouting. She said if he didn't change his ways, she would leave for good. Then she came upstairs, kissed me and said she'd be back for me soon. She's gone to my auntie's house

in Leeds.' Tom paused and let out a long breath. He pulled a loose red thread that had come away from the old rug on the floor, winding it round and round his finger, staring at it intently as if the thread itself were the cause of his upset. 'She says she's going to sort a place for us up there and then she's coming back for me.' Tom sniffed and wiped his watery eyes with the back of his hand. 'I want her here with *me*. I miss her so much already and I don't want to be stuck in the house with *him*.' His voice began to falter with emotion.

Tom sucked in a long breath, trying to mentally calm himself down. He squeezed his eyes tight shut, and then whispered, 'And I don't want to live in bloody Leeds.'

Eve put her arm round his shoulders. She wanted to make the hurt go away. She knew how close Tom and his mum were. He did so much to help her and she was always the parent he could turn to. They had each other's back. Tom had been able to cope with his dad's moods because he always knew he had his mum. But now she was gone. Eve didn't know what to say. She squeezed his shoulder. 'It'll be all right, you'll see. Your mum will be back soon and I bet she changes her mind about Leeds.'

'D'you think so?'

'Definitely.' Eve swallowed her true thoughts and fears. She couldn't bear it if Tom moved away. Tom and Clovis were her best friends, her only friends, really. Sure, she knew other girls and messed about with them at school but Clovis and Tom were her true friends.

'Come on,' said Eve, trying to sound upbeat and happy. She sprang up and began to pull at Tom's arm. 'Come and stay with me and Uncle Rufus. You might as well, until your mum comes back.' Eve certainly wasn't going to leave Tom here with his dad. He would end up doing all the cooking and chores, and have to put up with the moods. No, Eve wasn't having that. No way. He could stay at her house. She knew how much Tom loved Professor Rufus and that her uncle would be happy for him to stay.

'Are you sure the professor won't mind?'

'Course I'm sure, he'll love it. He'll have more people to tell ghost stories to.'

It worked. Tom got up, grabbed a bag from the top of his wardrobe and began to stuff clothes into it.

'I'll have to ask . . . *him.*' He said the word 'him' as if spitting out a disgusting piece of food. 'But I'm sure he'll be OK with it. It's not as if he's going to miss me, is it?'



After Tom and Eve had packed as much as they could into the bag, they made their way down to the front room.

Dan Lake was wedged into his well-worn armchair, the TV blaring out. The main horserace was on and Dad was fully absorbed by it. He sat upright, bouncing up and down in the small armchair and shouting as if the horse he had backed could hear him. 'Go on, Peggy's Legs, get a bloody move on!' Dad yelled; his eyes gleamed with excitement.

Tom looked on and thought how sad it was that his dad showed more enthusiasm for a horse he didn't know than for him and his mum.

Dad hadn't always been this way though. According to Mum, he'd been a happy man, besotted and totally in love with her. Apparently, he couldn't wait to have a son so he could play with him, read to him, take him to football matches. Tom had seen all the photographs of his parents when they were younger – laughing, dancing and sunbathing on the beach. And the old videos of his dad chasing his mum around the garden, spraying her with the hose as she squealed with delight. But then it all changed, the war came in Afghanistan and his soldier dad was shipped off. And when he came home, he just wasn't the same. He was quiet, sullen most of the time, except when his explosive rages would appear from nowhere. Tom remembered being so scared one night that he ran upstairs to hide under his bed until his mum found him, put him under the duvet and held him tight. His mum was always trying to explain that his dad was a good man really, but he was damaged and hurt by a terrible war that had killed many of his best friends. Tom knew there had been another side to his dad, a fun side, a happy side, a side that loved him, he just wished he could see it. Was it too late? Tom definitely thought so and it seemed now so did his mum.

'Dad?' shouted Tom above the din.

Dad's eyes were glued to the television. He didn't move

a muscle and answered back curtly, annoyed at the interruption. 'What?'

'Can I go and stay with Eve for a bit?'

'How long for?' Still Dad's eyes didn't leave the screen.

'Just for a few days.'

'Suppose,' Dad shouted back over the din. The racing was obviously coming to its finale, the commentator's voice was at an excitable pitch, ridiculous horse names spewed out of the TV one after the other.

'Great, thanks, Dad,' said Tom. His stomach flipped over, the familiar feeling of relief washed over his body.

'Get your uncle to call me,' shouted Dad to Eve, now on the edge of his seat.

'Will do,' said Eve.

Tom was already pushing her out of the door, he didn't want to hang about.

The race obviously came to a disappointing conclusion for Dad. Tom and Eve could hear the swearing as they left the house.

'Quick,' said Tom, straddling his bike. 'Before he changes his mind.'

'Let's go and get Clovis,' shouted Eve over her shoulder as they set off pedalling.

The three friends all lived on the same estate and had grown up together. Tom lived in a small council house, Clovis in a flat with his mum and older brother Jahmeel, and Eve lived in the weirdest house in the area with her eccentric

Uncle Rufus. Eve's house was very old and positioned between two council tower blocks, one of which Clovis and his family lived in. The ancient house, with its crooked walls and warped black and white timber beams, looked as if the life was being squeezed out of it by the tower blocks that hugged it from either side.

'I hope Clovis's mum has made one of her cakes,' called out Eve as she bumped her bike down a kerb.

Tom's face lit up at the thought, obviously the situation at home had been put to the back of his mind and Claudette's cake was now at the forefront. 'Fingers crossed it's the chocolate one,' he said, licking his lips and smiling.

The pair cycled the short journey to Clovis's tower block. Much to their annoyance the lifts were out of action again so they both sighed, rolled their eyes and reluctantly hitched their bikes up onto their shoulders to begin the long trek up the stairs. Once on Clovis's floor, Tom and Eve walked slowly, panting to catch their breaths. They leaned their bikes up against the railings opposite Clovis's front door and Tom rang the doorbell.

Jahmeel, Clovis's older brother, answered. 'Hiya, come in. He's in the kitchen with Mum. Clovis!' he called out. 'It's your girlfriends!'

Eve playfully punched Jahmeel on the arm while Tom flicked the back of his head.

The smell of a freshly baked cake wafted under everyone's noses. In the small kitchen, Clovis was sitting at the table,

stuffing his face with the squidgiest-looking chocolate cake Tom had ever seen. Claudette Gayle was resting against the fridge with a large mug of something in her hands. Her face lit up when she saw Eve and Tom.

'Well, hello, you two. Cake? As if I need to ask,' she chortled as she cut two massive slices, placed them on plates and put them on the kitchen table. 'Sit,' she commanded warmly. 'And I want it all eaten.'

Clovis mumbled a familiar 'Hey' to Tom and Eve through his mouthful of cake.

'Do you want to come back to mine?' asked Eve. 'Thought we could watch a movie and have a pizza tonight.'

Clovis nodded happily while shovelling more cake into his mouth. It always astounded Eve that he could eat so much and remain so slim. And at almost six feet tall, with his dark skin and Afro hair, he was striking; lots of girls at school thought so. Of course Clovis wasn't interested in good looks or fashion or even girls, all he cared about was researching facts and periods of history. He looked super-intelligent too, with his large square glasses that were for ever steaming up, a sign that he was excited about some fact which most people would find boring.

Eve began to rib him about the latest girl at school who seemed to have taken a shine to him. Jahmeel joined in and the three of them happily joked and teased each other.

Claudette took the opportunity to sit down next to Tom. She took his hand in hers and leaned in close. 'I spoke with

your mother this morning, she told me to keep an eye out for you . . . are you OK, darlin'?' she whispered.

'Yeah, I'll be fine.' Tom looked uncomfortably down at his feet, hoping Claudette would understand that he didn't want to talk about it.

'Your mum told me she's just taking a little holiday.' Claudette carried on rubbing Tom's hand in hers as she spoke. Tom blanked out her voice, so that it sounded like a soft drone in the background. He looked down at his feet, noticing the different marks and stains on his Converse trainers. Hot tears burned in his eyes. He blinked them away quickly, desperate that no one should see how upset he was.

He tuned back in to Claudette's voice. '. . . I'm sure she'll be back in a few days and everything will go back to normal real soon.' Then she grabbed Tom and hugged him to her. He squeezed his eyes tight, swallowing down his embarrassment and momentarily enjoyed the comforting smell of rose talc and cake.

Claudette gently let Tom go from her embrace. 'You can stay here with us if you like.'

'Thanks, Claudette, but I'm going to stay with Eve and the professor.'

'Well, I'm always here for you, Tom. You know that don't you, darlin'?' Claudette got up from the table, her colourful chunky necklaces clanking and jangling against each other.

'Thank you. I know that.' Tom smiled and got up to kiss Claudette on the cheek. She ruffled his blond locks.

'When you going to get that mop cut, young man?'

Clovis decided to come to his friend's rescue. 'Mum, thanks for the cake, can we go now?'

'Can Clovis stay at mine?' asked Eve, giving one of her most persuasive looks.

'Yes. OK then,' laughed Claudette. 'Remember to brush your teeth, young man.'

'Yes, Mum, I will,' answered Clovis, feeling a little self-conscious. 'Come on, guys, let's go.'

Once out into the hot afternoon sun, they rode their bikes through the estate and up into the nearby park. By the shade of a lone oak tree, they sat in the long grass, looking down on the city of London.

'I'm so excited,' sighed Eve. She lay back, the grass tickling her pale freckled skin as she watched the few wisps of white cloud float over their heads.

'What about?' asked Clovis.

'This summer. I've a funny feeling we're going to have another adventure.'

'That would be brilliant!' said Tom. 'I could do with that.'

'I'm going to ask Unc if we can go on a real ghost hunt. Maybe even by ourselves. I think we're ready, don't you? We've done loads of case studies and understand how to use most of the ghost-hunting equipment now.' Eve sat up and ran her fingers through her short spiky blonde hair. The boys were reminded of an adventurous pixie that could never sit still for long. Tom and Clovis loved her like a sister and were

extremely protective of her. She was the one who always came up with the schemes and plans that, more times than not, landed them in trouble.

'Here we go again,' said Tom.

'I think we could give it a go,' said Clovis, looking at Tom knowingly, 'but I'd prefer it if the professor came too. Last time we tried to ghost hunt on our own, we brought a distressed spirit home with us. I don't want to put my family through that again.'

'Yeah, I agree,' said Tom.

'Oh, all right,' said Eve, 'I guess you've got a point. I'll ask him.' She suddenly jumped up and raced to her bike. 'Last one to the Pizza Palace has to pay!' She began to pedal down the hill furiously.

'Eve!' shouted back Tom and Clovis, scrambling behind and trying to catch up.