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USBORNE

THE SPIRIT SNATCHER

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"Look," the girl said. "I'll spell it out." She adopted a slow, exaggerated tone. "If you stay here, something extremely bad is going to happen!"

To Freddie, Rupert and Toby

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1

On the Move

All parents are challenging on some level, but Pip Ruskin's parents were off the scale. Their unrelenting weirdness had blighted the first twelve years of his life and it seemed as if things were about to get even worse.

"It's a dream come true," sighed Mrs Ruskin, as she stretched out in the front seat of their battered turquoise car, a large jar of home-made pickles in her lap.

"No, it isn't," corrected Pip. He was squashed in the back seat, along with a dozen bulging suitcases. "I don't want to live in London."

"When I was your age, I'd have given anything to live in the middle of a city like this," said his father, grinning at him madly in the rear-view mirror. He was so excited, he looked as if he was about to explode. "Isn't it wonderful?"

Pip stared miserably out at the never-ending traffic jam. Massive grey buildings reared up on either side of the wide road, and people hurried through the rain, their hoods up or hiding behind umbrellas. For the millionth time that day, Pip wished they hadn't had to move.

It wasn't that Pip liked their old life in Norwich. It was more that he had learned how to deal with it. Living with Mr and Mrs Ruskin was not exactly easy, and Pip had become an expert at damage limitation.

There were the obvious things that made them different from other people's parents, like his mother's hair, which was silvery grey and so long that she could sit on it, and her round little glasses that made her look like an owl. There was his father's yellow corduroy suit, which he wore every single day and was so bright he had once been mistaken for a clown. Some things were less noticeable at first, but still not great, like his father's habit of singing to himself or his mother's extreme forgetfulness, or the way that his parents held hands and kissed in public – not the peck-on-the-cheek kind of kiss, but the slobbery sort that goes on for too long and makes other people stare. Individually, none of these things were too bad, but when you put them all together it became a problem. The more his parents stood out, the

harder it was for Pip to fit in. In fact, fitting in, or at the very least, not having anyone notice him, was Pip's main ambition in life.

"How about a fermented Brussels sprout, darling?" said Mrs Ruskin. She flipped open the glass lid of the pickle jar and instantly a hideous smell, like rotten vinegary eggs, filled the car. She twisted round, waving the jar under Pip's nose. He choked, trying not to be sick, and opened the window. He stuck his head out and breathed in the petrol fumes gratefully.

"Don't you want one?" asked his mother, still holding out the reeking jar.

"I'm not hungry," said Pip, then felt bad when he saw her face fall.

"But I'd love one anyway," he amended. He prised a slimy green Brussels sprout out of the jar as his stomach lurched again and the bile rose in his throat.

Mrs Ruskin beamed at him. She was a great believer in gut-friendly food. All their meals involved large quantities of every sort of fermented vegetable you can imagine. Even worse, she insisted on making Pip a packed lunch every day. After five long hours of sweating away in Pip's schoolbag, Mrs Ruskin's carefully prepared lunchbox of mackerel, broccoli and home-made pickles

inevitably transformed into a hand grenade of appalling smelliness. Pip dreaded opening the lid. It was like setting off a stink bomb – the ripe bin-lorry stench would hit him full in the face then whoosh outwards, spreading across the room and causing everybody to do a stadium wave of nose-wrinkling, face-scrunching and gagging noises. After the first few times, Pip learned that it was better if he ate his lunch alone, in the furthest corner of the schoolyard. With lunches like his, it had been impossible to make any friends. But his mother looked so surprised and upset whenever he mentioned he didn't like her food that he had long since dropped the subject.

He tossed the Brussels sprout out of the car window when no one was looking, and wondered what his new school would be like. At least he didn't have to start until after the half-term break at Halloween, so he had several weeks of freedom before he had to figure out how to blend in all over again. He was pretty certain that his parents would be as peculiar in London as they had been in Norwich.

In the next lane, a Range Rover had pulled up beside them. A boy a few years older than Pip was sitting in the passenger seat, shaking with laughter. He had his phone pressed to the window and seemed to be videoing the

Ruskins' car. For a moment, Pip stared at him, wondering what was so funny. The fact that the little car was twenty years old? The bright turquoise paint? A second later, Pip realized what it was and his heart sank. The chaos of the move and leaving in the early-morning darkness had made him forget his usual routine. He had forgotten to clean the car.

"Dad?" he croaked. There was no reply. Mr Ruskin was singing to himself again.

"Dad!" he tried again. He kicked the back of the driver's seat and the singing stopped.

"What is it, son?"

"The car," said Pip. "Did you remember to clean it?"

"Of course not," replied his father. "I don't know why you're always so worried about it. Who cares about a little mess?"

To describe what had happened to the outside of the car as "a little mess" was like calling the prime minister " a little famous" or the devil "a little evil".

Pip didn't need to see the video the boy in the next lane was clearly uploading to the internet to know what the outside of the car looked like. He knew that the roof, the bonnet and all four sides of it were covered in a thick layer of lumpy bird poo.

The problem had started four years ago, when a pair of swallows decided to build their nest in the garage, which also doubled as a storage space for Mr Ruskin's unsuccessful antiques business. There was only one area that wasn't crammed to the rafters with old furniture, and that happened to be the spot right above the car. Soon, the swallows multiplied, more nests appeared, and every single bird decided that the Ford Fiesta was their preferred toilet spot.

"Swallows nesting in your building are lucky," Mr Ruskin had said. "And if a bird poos on you, that's lucky too. So if we have swallows living in our garage *and* pooing on our car, why that means we'll have more luck than we'll know what to do with."

It had not been very lucky for Pip.

Every afternoon during the summer term, his father would drive up to Pip's school far too early and park right in front of the gates, in full view of Pip's classroom. Before long, someone would spot it, a note would be passed around, and by the time the final bell rang, the entire class would be collapsing with laughter and Pip would be bright red with embarrassment. He'd rush out of school as fast as possible, hoping that if he was quick enough, he might be able to get away before any more

students got a chance to see it. But it was no use. He had become firmly associated with the Poo-mobile, as it was known, and although everyone usually forgot about it by winter, the swallows would return the following spring and the whole horrible cycle would begin again. This year, the swallows had stayed unusually late. They were obviously enjoying themselves.

Since he was ten, Pip had covered the car with a sheet of plastic each evening, and every morning he carefully cleaned off all the bird poo that had missed the sheet. But last night he hadn't remembered to put on the plastic sheet, and they had left so early in the morning that it had still been dark. He hadn't even thought about what might have happened to the car during the night.

The traffic lights turned green and they lurched forwards. The pile of suitcases toppled over and crashed on top of Pip. By the time he'd freed himself they were heading through a maze of city streets.

"Nearly there," said Mr Ruskin, squinting at the satnav. They went past a large auction house, its windows plastered with images of treasures they'd sold, past galleries displaying gold-framed paintings and strangely shaped sculptures, and office buildings with revolving glass doors. It was not the sort of place where families

usually lived, but Mrs Ruskin was a scientist and had got a new job in London, which meant they all had to move home just six weeks into the new school year. Pip's father had come across an advert for a shop to rent in one of London's most famous antiques districts, which had a flat above it. The rent was very cheap, and as it had always been Mr Ruskin's ambition to open an antiques shop, they'd taken on the lease without even having seen the place and promptly booked a removal van.

"We're here!" announced Mr Ruskin. He looked round expectantly, then frowned. "At least, it says we're here."

"We can't be," replied Mrs Ruskin. "The shop's in Elbow Alley and we're still on Magwitch Street."

Leaving his parents puzzling over the satnav, Pip opened the car door and climbed out, rubbing his arm from where the suitcases had bruised him. He took a few steps away from the car, so no one would think that he had anything to do with it, but then he realized there was no one around anyway. It was a Sunday and the street was completely deserted. The offices were closed and so was the auction house, their windows dark. The only place that was lit up was a grand-looking gallery, where two huge old portraits stood in the windows, illuminated

against a blood-red background. One of the paintings was of a stern, sallow man in a ruff, the other of a woman who looked remarkably like a poodle.

Pip pushed at the gallery door, intending to ask for directions, but it didn't open. There was a bell, but something stopped him from pressing the button. Perhaps it was the unfriendly expressions on the pair of portraits, but the place felt intimidating. As he backed away, he spotted something. An archway was sandwiched between the side of the gallery and the office building on the other side, so narrow and tucked away that you'd hardly notice it was there.

Beyond the tunnel of the arch, there was a narrow little street, lined with shops. It looked like it belonged to a different time. The buildings were high and teetering, looming towards each other. Billows of steam from an air vent swirled about like mist. A painted pub sign swung creakily in the autumn breeze. Pip spotted a street sign fixed a little way down the dark passage. It was Elbow Alley. He stared for a moment in surprise, unable to believe that this peculiar place was his new home.

His parents had got out of the car now and were gazing around Magwitch Street in their usual way – his mother looked distracted and dreamy, as if her mind was

on other things, while his father was bouncing up and down on the soles of his feet, as if he couldn't contain his excitement.

"It's down here!" called Pip. He was too intrigued to wait for them, so he went on ahead, through the archway and into the shadowy alley.

2

An Unwelcome Beginning

The further Pip went down Elbow Alley, the stranger it got. A rat scuttled out, and when it saw Pip it sat up on its hind legs and stared at him instead of running away. The shops weren't like normal shops. The doors were shut, and most of them seemed to be doing their best to make sure that no one would be tempted to go in. A shop called The Pickled Trout had a giant mouldy cheese displayed in the window, while the one next to it was crammed with an extraordinary quantity of junk.

"Wow," said a familiar voice.

Pip whirled around and saw his parents. They were both carrying a suitcase in each hand and their eyes were shining brightly. His father was gazing into the junk-filled windows of Dribs & Drabs with the expression of someone whose wildest dreams have just come true.

His mother was humming a folk tune.

"Which shop's ours?" asked Pip.

"It's number thirty-two, I think," said Mrs Ruskin. One of the suitcases slipped from her hand and it fell open, scattering her clothes all over the ground.

"Oh dear," she said, vaguely, setting down the other case.

Pip scrambled about, retrieving his mother's collection of sensible trousers, white lab coats and pickle jars. He stuffed them back into her case and forced the clasps shut again.

"I can carry it," he said, and hefted it up.

"Thank you, darling," she said. She smiled at him, then started to hum again.

Pip had always felt an inexplicable need to protect his parents. They seemed unusually helpless when it came to navigating daily life, and their eccentric behaviour somehow made them appear even more vulnerable. Pip often had the sensation that he had to look after them, even though he knew it should be the other way around.

He continued up the alley, scanning each doorway for numbers while his parents lagged behind, pausing to exclaim over the hat shop or admire the display in the bookshop window.

As he approached the pub, he stopped dead.

A girl was standing in the dark doorway of The Ragged Hare, her arms folded, watching him. A small wiry-haired dog stood next to her, so still that it took Pip a moment to realize it was a living animal. The girl was about Pip's age, with brown skin, a mass of springy curls, and a flamboyant taste in clothes. She was wearing a gold jumpsuit and a denim jacket that was embroidered all over with brightly coloured flowers. Pip caught her eye, and she stared back at him suspiciously.

"What?" she said, curtly.

"Do you know where number thirty-two is?" he asked. For a moment, Pip thought the girl wasn't going to answer, but eventually she unfolded her arms.

"Next door," she said, pointing and still looking at him with a curious expression, as if he was from a different planet. "Why?"

"We're moving in," said Pip, nodding down the alley to where his parents were still peering through the bookshop window.

The girl turned to look at them, then frowned. "You shouldn't have come here," she said. "You need to leave right away."

"We've rented the flat above the shop," said Pip. "We're living here now."

"Well, you've made a massive mistake. Get out of here. Seriously."

"I don't understand…" started Pip, beginning to feel confused at the girl's strange reaction.

"You lot are outsiders," she said, impatiently. "I can see that a mile off."

"What do you mean, 'outsiders'? And why do you care if we live here or not?" asked Pip.

For a moment, the girl looked worried, as if she'd said too much. Her dog gave a low growl.

"None of your business," she said eventually, her voice distinctly cold now.

"Well, it's too late – we're living here. There's nothing you can do about it."

"Look," the girl said, sounding exasperated. "I'll spell it out."

She adopted a slow, exaggerated tone, the sort you use when you're speaking to someone behind a thick pane of glass.

"IF YOU STAY HERE, SOMETHING EXTREMELY BAD IS GOING TO HAPPEN!"

Pip wasn't quite sure if it was meant as a warning or as a threat.

"Who's that you're speaking to, Pip?" called his father.

"Is it one of our new neighbours?"

But the girl had already disappeared back inside The Ragged Hare, without saying another word. Pip peered into the shadowy pub but there was no sign of her or the dog.

Her words still rang in his ears. So far, London was turning out to be even worse than Norwich. Pip felt like crying, like going back and sitting in the car until his parents agreed to drive him somewhere else. But his mother and father were looking so pleased and excited that he knew there was no chance of that.

"Our place is just here," said Pip in a heavy voice, and pointed at the peeling brown door. The house had a curved shop window that had been covered over with old newspapers. Mr Ruskin pulled a key out of his pocket and struggled to turn it in the rusty lock.

"There we go!" he cried at last, as the lock gave way and the front door groaned as it juddered open.

Inside was disgusting. The shop on the ground floor was covered in dust. Their living accommodation was up a steep flight of stairs, which was covered with mouldy brown carpet. The previous tenants must have used these rooms as an office, because ancient computers with tangled cables were stacked up in a corner of the sitting

room along with piles of cardboard folders and an old television.

The kitchen was tiny, with iron bars across the single small window. The countertops were a greyish plastic, while the tiles above them were a reddish brown. A semi-melted microwave stood in one corner while a used fire blanket was clipped to the wall above it – someone had tried to stuff it back into its container, even though it was covered in scorch marks.

"Let's just leave," suggested Pip, who was still pondering over what the strange girl had said to him. "We can't stay here."

"Don't be silly, Pip," said Mrs Ruskin, but she was beginning to appear uncomfortable.

There was the sound of cheerful singing and Mr Ruskin bounced into the kitchen.

"Don't look so glum!" he cried, flinging his arms wide. "Once we've moved all our things in, it'll be just like our old house."

"I'm sure you're right," agreed Mrs Ruskin. "I wonder where the bathroom is?"

She wandered back into the hall. They heard her open another door, scream, then slam it shut again. When she came back into the kitchen, Pip recognized the expression

on her face. It was the look she always got when things got too much. He knew what was coming next.

"I'm going to pop over to the laboratory," she said, glancing at her watch. "Just to let them know I've arrived. I know it's a weekend, but some members of the team will still be there."

"We'll have things shipshape for when you get back," said Mr Ruskin. He was the only one who still seemed to be in good spirits. Mrs Ruskin practically fled from the house, towards the comfort of her new workplace. That was the strange thing about his mother. At home, she was incredibly absent-minded, but when it came to her job, she was very focused.

"The removal van won't be here until four," said Mr Ruskin, who was rummaging in one of his suitcases. He pulled out a kettle and a squashed box of teabags. "We might as well make ourselves at home."

Despite the tea, the flat didn't feel any more comfortable as the afternoon went on. The removal men didn't show up until five o'clock, and they weren't too happy when they found out that they couldn't drive their lorry down the alley, but had to park on the main road instead. Pip

and his father had to help them carry box after box, passing them from one to the other in a human chain. It seemed to go on for ever because of the enormous amount of junk that Mr Ruskin had collected over the years.

"There's at least three times the normal amount of furniture here," said the driver, staring into the back of the van with his forehead wrinkled. "You sure it's all yours?"

"It's for my antiques business," said Mr Ruskin proudly, and passed a three-legged chair to Pip, who added it to the growing pile on the shop floor.

Pip had a feeling they were being watched – he saw a curtain twitch from an upstairs room of one of the tall, narrow buildings, and a bell jingled as someone inched open a shop door then shut it again.

"I'd not fancy living here myself," said the driver, as he handed the last of the boxes to Pip. "It's a bit creepy, isn't it? Too quiet."

"That's just because it's a Sunday," said Mr Ruskin. "It's mostly office workers who pass through here. Come Monday morning, we'll have plenty of customers."

Mr Ruskin hurried back into the dusty shop and began to tear open the cardboard boxes with great enthusiasm. Pip left him to it and went back upstairs,

past the dreary sitting room and up to the set of bedrooms on the top floor. There was one with a single bed in it that didn't look too awful – it looked out over the alley instead of a brick wall – and he sat down heavily on the jangling mattress. It had been warm when they were moving their things inside, but now he shivered in his thin grey jumper. He remembered that the rest of his clothes were still in the suitcases he'd left in the car, which was still parked on Magwitch Street.

Pip grabbed the keys from where Mr Ruskin had dropped them on the kitchen counter and went back outside. It was dusk now and the alley was dark, save for a couple of old-fashioned street lights that cast a dim orange glow. He passed the pub, which was lit up, and shadowy figures were silhouetted behind the little glass squares of the mullioned windows. There was no sign of the girl or her dog.

There was a light on in the bookshop and a round-faced man with wispy grey hair was sitting at the desk, reading. Pip didn't stop, but carried on up the alley and out into Magwitch Street. It was still very quiet. A couple swept past him, arm in arm, on their way to somewhere else. Pip retrieved his bags from the car and headed back towards Elbow Alley. As he turned the

corner by the gallery, he came face to face with a man standing in the shadows of the arch, smoking a cigar. It was so unexpected that Pip only just managed to hang on to his suitcases.

The man was dressed smartly, in a dark suit. His features were sharp, his cheeks sunken and his greying black hair was slicked back severely. All of this made him look intimidating, but that wasn't what made Pip stare. It was his deathly paleness. His skin was almost luminous in the twilight, as white as paper.

The man looked at Pip coldly. His pupils were huge and rimmed with red. Pip edged past him, his skin prickling, and the strong smell of tobacco caught in his throat.

The man finished the cigar, dropped it on the ground, then, to Pip's utter shock, he vanished. Pip looked around wildly, trying to figure out where the man had gone. There was a black studded door behind where he had stood, but Pip was certain that it hadn't been open. He looked up and down the alleyway, but there was no sign of the man.

One side of his brain was screaming at him, insisting that he had seen the man melt through the solid door. The other side, the logical part of him, told him it was impossible, that he was being ridiculous.

Perhaps he'd imagined it. The stress of the day, the strange surroundings, the shadows, any one of those things would be enough to make your imagination play tricks on you. But it was hard for Pip to keep telling himself that when there was the butt of the cigar lying at his feet, the tip of it still glowing, sending a wisp of smoke into the cold air.