

## The Attic

*Creak.*

Lisa awoke, her heart pounding. Her vision swam, her mind fuzzy. It was rare that anything stirred her after she pulled an all-nighter. What had woken her?

*Creeeeeak.*

She tried craning her neck to see where the sound had come from, but she couldn't move. The creaking continued, and she finally saw the attic door yawning open. It stretched like the mouth of some great beast, a terrifying maw that threatened to devour her.

Something inky and dark oozed down from the attic, forming an arcane approximation of head and shoulders as it descended. Its orange eyes crackled with hellish fire, and Lisa's breath caught in her throat. And then it turned its brimstone eyes on *her*.

Startled awake, she shot up in bed. "Just a dream..." She panted, slick with sweat. It was the same dream she'd been having all week. She pressed a hand over her heart to calm herself.

*BANG BANG BANG* went the front door.

Crap.

Standing on Lisa's front porch, Freddie was an angel in braids and tattered jeans. She held up smiling bags from their favorite Chinese restaurant and a bottle of wine.

Lisa ushered her in, still shaken, and they settled in to celebrate.

"To meeting deadlines." Freddie clinked her glass against Lisa's.

"Barely." Lisa took a gulp of wine and dug into her box of noodles.

It wasn't long before they caught up on the normal gossip. Over fortune cookies and second glasses of wine, Freddie broached the subject of whether Lisa's new house was haunted.

"Hearing weird noises doesn't mean I have a ghost," Lisa said through a mouthful of cookie. "It's an old house with rats in the attic—creepy, but not *haunted*."

Freddie was skeptical. "Let's find out. We can do some ghost hunting. There's this app called Haunter..." Freddie's wide grin lit up her face.

Lisa snorted. "Is that, like, Tinder for ghosts?"

"It's a ghost box app," Freddie said. "Let's try it out."

Lisa glared at her phone. Freddie turned off the lights and rejoined her on the couch.

"Open the app."

Lisa did. A radar showed a single green dot in the upper left quadrant. "Ghost Detected" blinked at the bottom of the screen in spooky red letters.

"This is the cheesiest thing I've ever seen." Lisa tried to ignore that unsettling green dot.

Freddie laughed. "Click Communicate. Maybe we can talk to this ghost."

Lisa tapped the dot, pulling up the ghost's profile. "This is so fake." She rolled her eyes. "George Burns, died of a heart attack in 1892. He weighs zero pounds—because he's a *ghost*—and likes long walks on the beach."

Freddie took Lisa's phone. "This app translates messages from the living into ghost-speak." Her face glowed green, lit by the eerie light of the Haunter app. "Let's try talking to him." She pressed record with a mischievous grin. "Hello, George. How are you?"

"Don't swipe right on a ghost!" She nibbled a hangnail, eyes glued to the screen. When ten seconds passed and nothing happened, she breathed again. "This is ridiculous. There aren't ghosts in my house—just creaky floors and a basement full of spiders." Lisa snatched her phone back.

Then the phone's speakers blared.

"ATTIC," the app hissed.

Freddie shrieked happily.

Lisa whimpered. "Why do these things always have creepy voices? Why can't Siri deliver ghostly messages instead?"

"Siri would be creepier." Freddie slid off the couch and pulled Lisa along. "Come on. We need to check out the attic."

Lisa's heart thudded in her chest. "Are you crazy? A ghost tells you to go in the attic and you wanna do it?"

She was convinced: Freddie was going to get them both killed. Or at least *haunted!*

Freddie patted her shoulder and steered her from the living room, using the phone flashlight to guide them. "Don't worry. Ghosts can't hurt you."

"Don't say that in front of the ghost." She didn't want to give George a challenge. She also didn't want to walk down the hall to where the attic was, but Freddie urged her forward. She clenched her fists, her shoulders tense as a bear trap. She was ready to spring at the first sign of a murderous ghost.

Static popped, and she grabbed Freddie's arm.

Unfazed, Freddie recorded another message. "What about the attic, George? Is there something up there? Something that belongs to you?"

Lisa stared straight ahead as they shuffled forward. They passed the bathroom, where a peek at some otherworldly horror in the mirror might stop her heart. She ignored the kitchen, where the ghosts of takeout and wine haunted the granite counters and ancient oak cabinets. The study, too—who knew what horror might be lurking there, crouched under her desk?

"HSSSSSSH." The app crackled and boomed.

Lisa jumped a foot in the air and screamed.

*creeeeek*

"Aww, babe, you've got *no* chill. Don't worry, it's gonna be fine. I'm sure George is... friendly." Freddie patted her back to soothe her and tried again. "Sorry, George. What's in the attic?"

Static shushed them as they reached the bedroom door. Lisa stared at the ominous attic looming above them, accessible only by a pull string. She had always thought attics were creepy, gross, and hot—places for Christmas decorations and wily raccoons, but not people.

"George," Freddie tried again. "We're about to go to the attic. What will we find up there? Antiques? Or skeletons?"

"Just boxes and dust." Lisa clenched her jaw and willed herself to believe it. Her heart stuttered, trying to beat out of her chest like a hummingbird's wings. "He probably wishes I'd take better care of the attic. I'm sorry, George, but I'm not going up there. It's—"

"Terrifying," she wanted to say. But the words died in her throat.

George's voice boomed again, as harsh and staccato as machine gun bullets.

"IT—LIVES—IN—THE—ATTIC."

Freddie dropped the phone, her eyes wide and mouth agape. Lisa swallowed a scream.

And the attic door opened with a long .