



TALES FROM THE

# Haunted Mansion



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# Haunted Mansion



VOLUME I

THE Fearsome Foursome

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as told by mansion librarian *Amicus Arcane*

Illustrations by *Kelley Jones*

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*For the dearly departed*

—AA

*For Karen, Benjamin, and Sarah . . .*

*my three favorite tales*

—JE

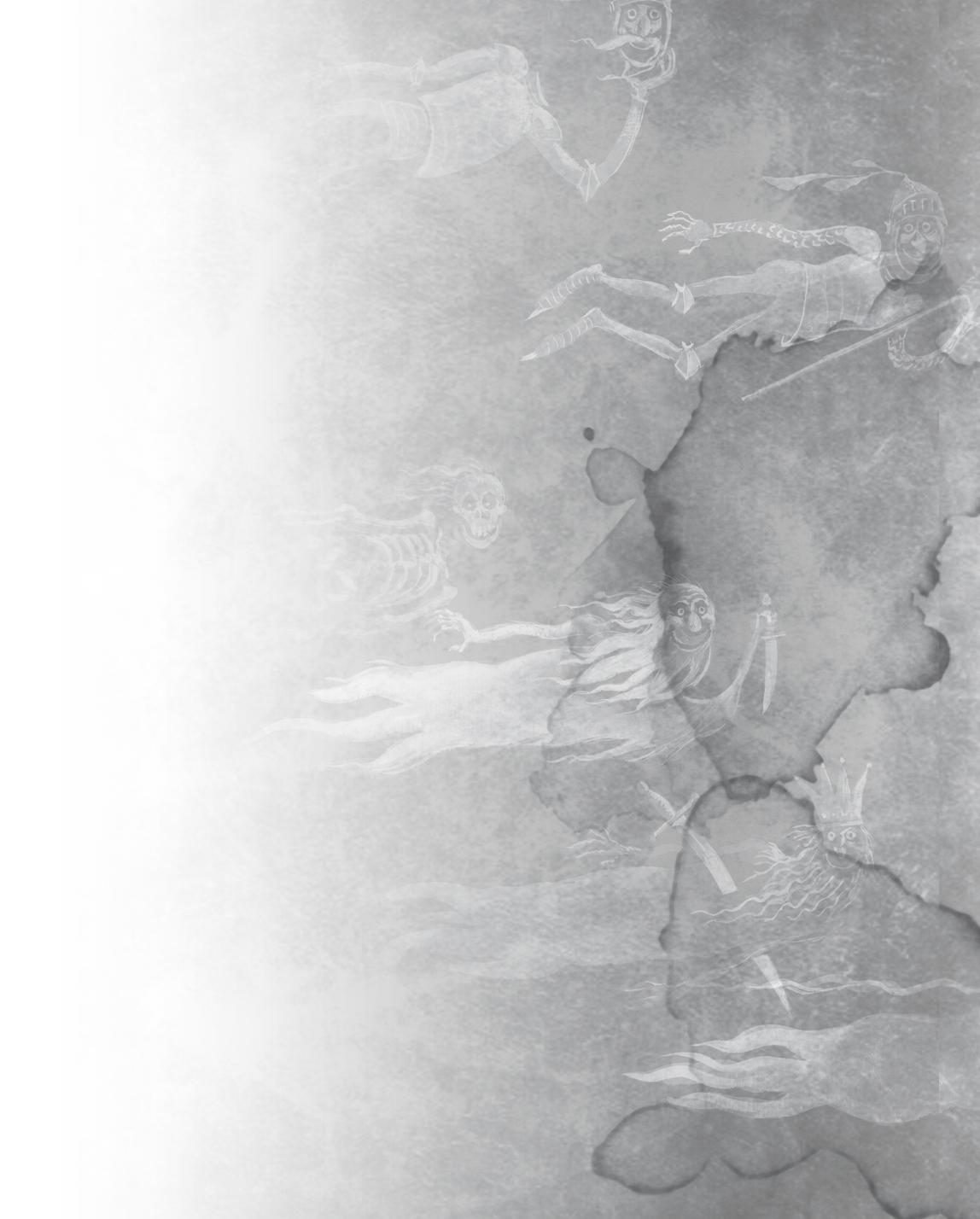
*For Sam and Carter*

—KJ



Welcome to Our Library







# STOP READING!



*You heard me. Put this book down this instant.*

*Put it back where you found it!*

*For your own sake, I beseech you.*

*You're not the type.*

What type is that, you ask?

Our type.

Still here? Very well. Can't say we didn't warn you.

Welcome, foolish reader, to the illustrious library of . . . well, you know where you are. Allow me to introduce myself. I am your guide, Amicus Arcane, the soul librarian and entrusted keeper of 999 bone-chilling tales. Every spirit has a story, you see: a haunted history dying to get out . . . so it can follow you home. But heed this warning: we're always on the lookout for one more tale.

Perhaps even yours.

We—if you haven't guessed—are known in the parlance of the living as spirits, specters, poltergeists, apparitions. Or, if you prefer . . .

ghosts.

We are at our most spirited amongst the books, harboring a special affinity for those tales that burrow under the flesh, long after their authors have departed their corruptible mortal vessels. In this way, books themselves are rather like ghosts. Their very bindings contain the spirits of the dead. And that means this terrifying tome is haunted, which means this isn't merely a book you're holding, but an actual ghost. And that brings us to the subject at hand: the Fearsome Foursome.

Their little club, you see, was also interested in ghosts . . . and zombies and mummies and just about everything that goes bump in the night. Their founding body consisted of Willa, Tim, Noah, and Steve, four middle school students with a talent for storytelling and an appetite for the macabre. Their one goal: to frighten the wits out of each other with the scariest stories they could muster. A lofty goal, if I may say so myself. But this week, their meeting was abruptly canceled.

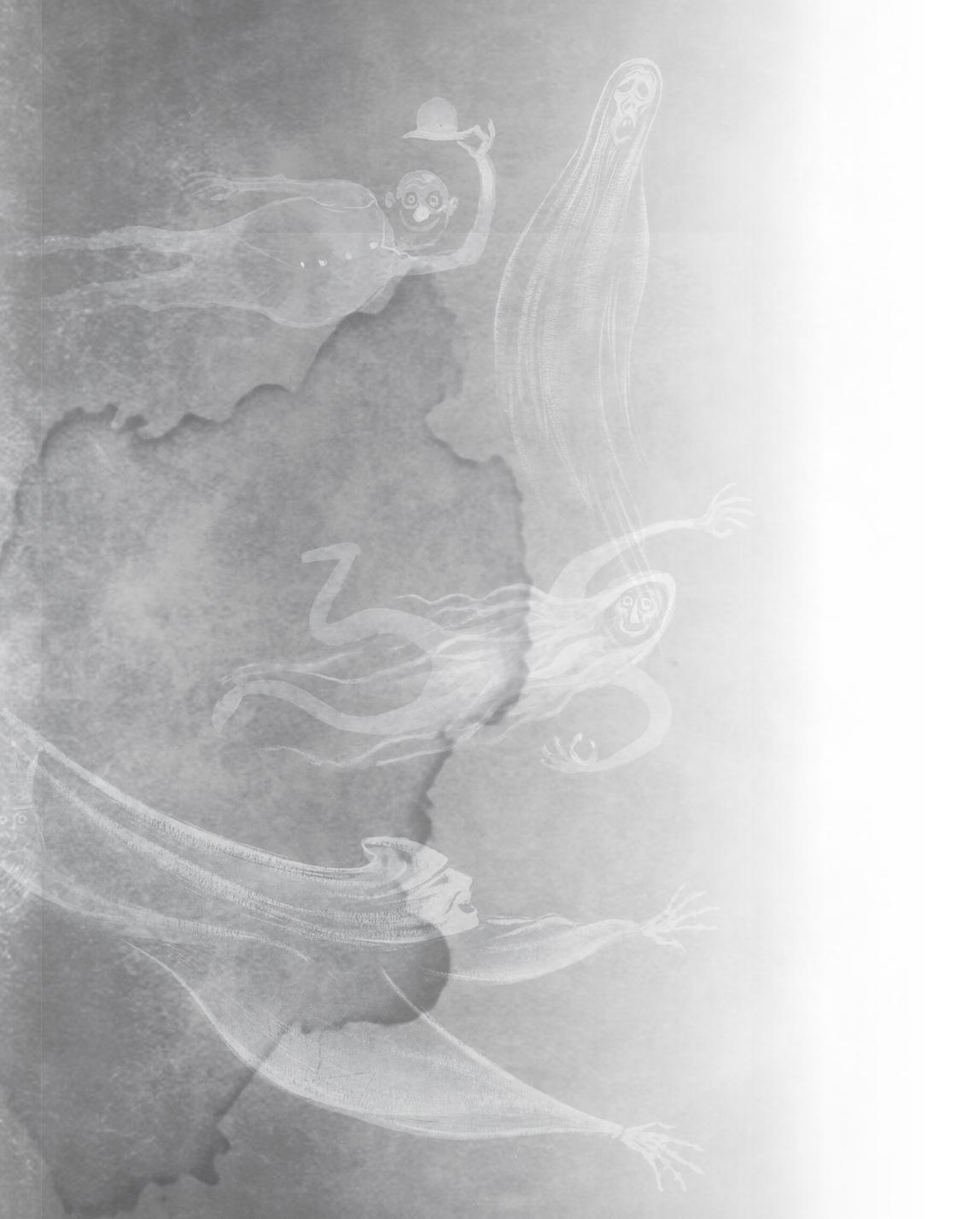
As it happens, their clubhouse was ravaged by a violent storm. Perhaps we had something to do with it. Who can say? My memory isn't what it used to be since that coroner removed my brain.

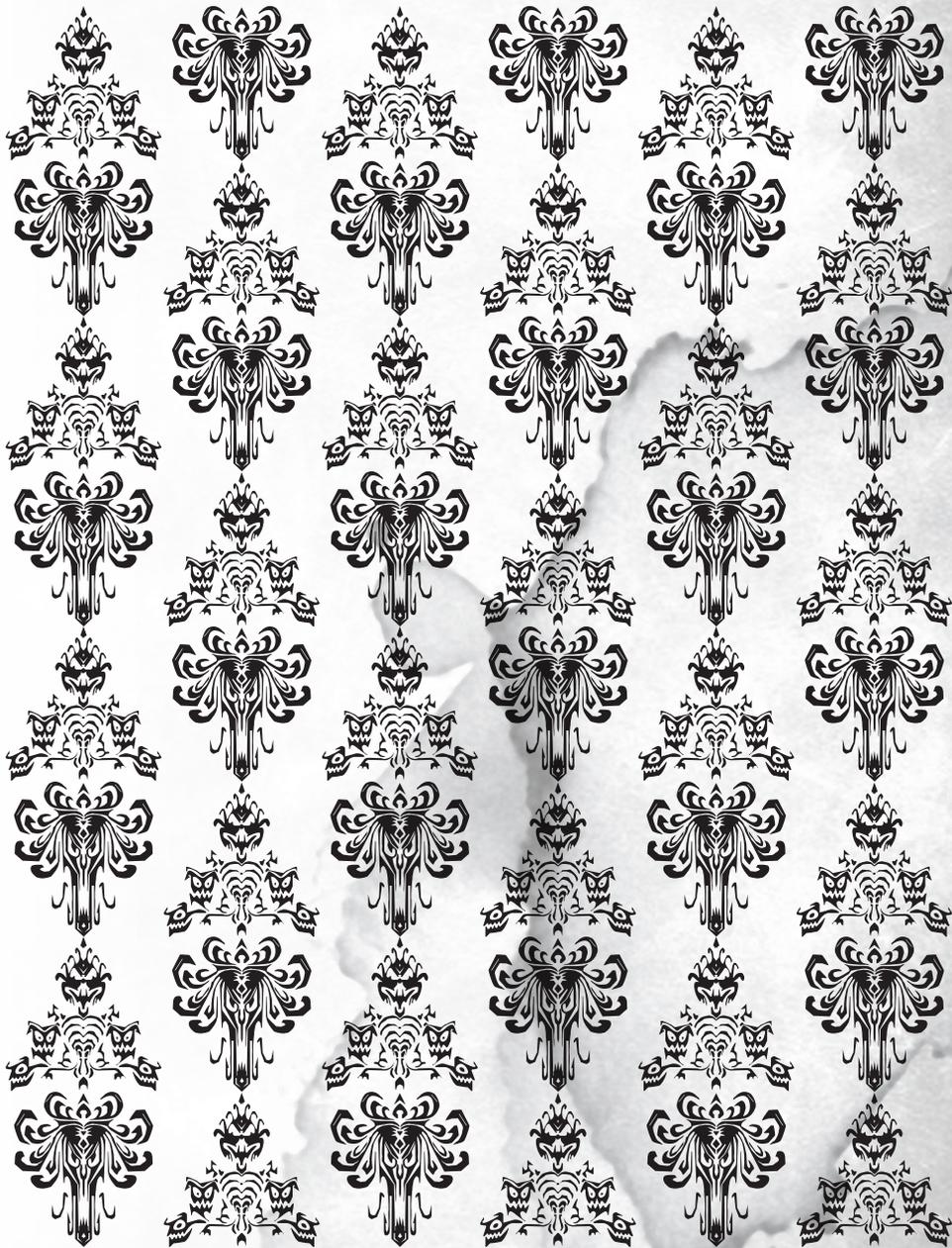
The important thing to take with you is that the Fearsome Foursome had no place to tell their tales. So we provided them with a home. A bit off the beaten path, I will admit. But you can always take the shortcut through the graveyard.

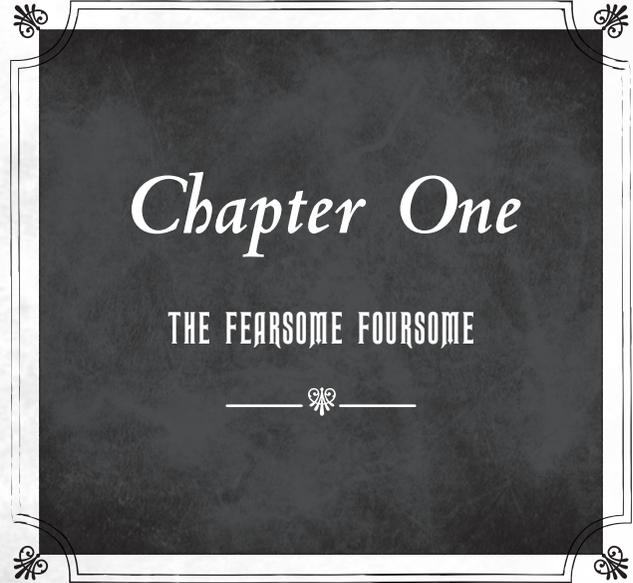
It's almost time for you to meet them. You see, I, too, have a tale or two or three or four that I'm dying to share. Once they heard them, their lives were never the same.

Nor will yours.







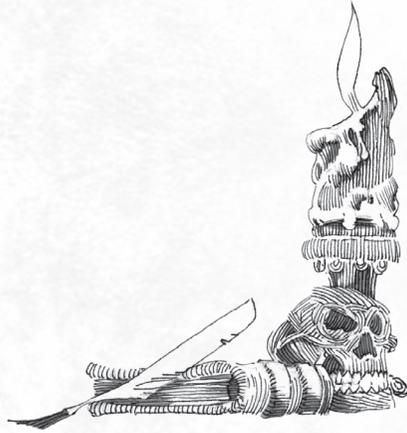


# *Chapter One*

THE FEARSOME FOURSOME







**I**t all began at a lunch table, where a good number of friendships are born. Willa was reading *Poe's Tales of Mystery and Suspense*, a dog-eared paperback containing classic stories written about a million years ago. The wording could be tricky, but once you got used to it, you'd be treated to the finest horror stories ever put to paper. More important, Willa was reading because she liked to read, not because it was assigned. And really, who reads anymore? *Besides you, that is.*

Tim was passing the table, balancing a tray of what could generously be described as a macaroni item, when the cover

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caught his attention. It featured a black cat with a missing eyeball drooling something red. You know, one of those covers you can't take your eyes off of—or, in the case of that particular black cat, eye, singular.

Tim made a beeline for Willa. Maybe it was her book. Or her hair, which could best be described as “seasonal.” Not the cut—the color. Those days it was blue, matching Willa’s eyes. Tim cleared his throat before opening with a compliment. “That is *so* sick.”

Willa glanced up over her shoulder. “Excuse me?”

“I have the same book,” he said, “only mine has a raven on it.” Tim slipped his hand into a New York Yankees backpack and pulled out his copy of *Poe’s Tales*.

Willa was momentarily impressed, until she spotted the word *abridged* under the title. “You got ripped off,” she said. “‘Abridged’ means they cut things out. Usually the good parts, like when they show *Beast Feast* on TV. You need to get the uncut version.” She went back to her Poe—not coincidentally, the uncut version.

But Tim hung around like a puppy, waiting for Willa to finish her page. Again, she glanced back. “May I help you?”

“My name’s Tim.” He extended his hand and Willa shook it, almost breaking it. She wasn’t a tomboy or anything. She



was just stronger. And faster. But not smarter. On that score, Willa and Tim were in the same league.

“Willa,” she finally conceded.

Tim took the initiative, asking her if she knew his pals Noah and Steve. She’d heard of Steve, of course. Who hadn’t? Steve had a reputation for being a bad boy, which he wasn’t. But like it or not, looks went a long way in middle school. And Steve certainly looked the part.

Noah looked his part as well. He was a chubby redheaded geek she remembered from a recent science fair debacle: the banned *Dinosaurs versus Teachers* exhibit.

“They’re really into horror, too.”

She looked surprised. “Steve’s into horror?”

“You wouldn’t think so, I know. He’s one of the cool kids.” Willa shot him a look that suggested he was about to get decked. “Not that you’re *not* cool!” he quickly added, fearing for his life. “Steve-o got me into Poe.” He turned his paperback on its side, showing her Steve’s name written in marker. “Noah’s into Lovecraft. Ever hear of him?”

Willa nodded. “H. P. Lovecraft, the writer? Providence’s own? Of course!”

Tim was bubbling with excitement. Or maybe it was the macaroni item. Let’s just say *something* was bubbling in his

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belly. “We’re starting a club. For horror lovers only. Right now, it’s just the three of us. But there’s always room for one more.”

Willa instantly took to the idea. Horror lovers were in short supply those days. “You mean like a readers’ circle?”

“More like a storytellers’ circle.” Tim leaned in, suddenly serious. “We don’t just read scary stories. We *invent* them.”

That brought Willa to her feet. She was about three inches taller than Tim on a good day. It was a good day. “Scary’s what I do!” she said. “I’m going to be a horror writer when I grow up.”

*If you grow up, Willa. If!*

“Does that mean you’re in?”

“Does a vampire drink blood?” she replied. Tim raised his hand for a high five, fearing a second handshake might send him to the emergency room.

SLAP! *Ouch.*

They exchanged smiles, the first of many. Tim recognized her as one of his own. That’s what a club is, after all: a group of people who like the same things you do. Not to mention Willa was a girl. One day he might recognize that, too.

During the walk home from school, Willa met with Noah and Steve for their approval. Their first order of business



was coming up with a name for their club. After passing on Club Wretched and the Nightmare Fraternity, they officially settled on the Fearsome Foursome.

And every week after, barring sickness, funerals, holidays, and funerals—*Did I say funerals twice?*—Willa, Tim, Noah, and Steve gathered to exchange tales of ghosts, ghouls, and graveyards. In no time at all, they became more than a club. They became like a family. A family of friends united by all things spooky.

That brings us to one particularly important night—about a hundred stories later. Thunder crackled and lightning flashed; it was a night tailor-made for tales that make you shiver.

Earlier in the day, their regular headquarters had been mysteriously demolished by a freakish storm. *Call it fate. Call it destiny. Call it a convenient plot twist.* In the place where it used to stand were four frighteningly fancy invitations, directing Tim, Willa, Noah, and Steve to an address on the other side of town.

So they gathered after dark, carting standard storytelling paraphernalia—flashlights, marshmallows, and blankets—and made their way to the unwelcoming wrought iron gate of a sprawling estate.

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The gate itself was half open, as if they were expected, which they fully were. As they slipped through, Willa was surprised at the pristine condition of the grounds. There were no cobwebs or screeching rats or any of those unsightly accompaniments one usually associates with that sort of dwelling. However, the property did have its share of creepy delights. . . .

Like the pet cemetery, which Willa spotted on a hill. That sent a shiver up her spine.

Directly after that, Noah pointed out a trio of stone enclosures resembling those hideous storage pods you see on people's lawns. These had drawers with coffins in them, a few still decorated with wilting flowers. Right away, Tim knew what they were. "Mausoleums. Dead people live inside those things."

Steve rolled his eyes. "That's an oxymoron, moron. Dead people don't *live* anywhere." He knocked on one of the drawers. "You up?" Noah half expected a response.

Willa elaborated: "Some people don't like the idea of being buried under the ground. In the old days, certain mausoleums even attached bells. In case you got buried alive, you could ring for help."



“Or for *tomb* service,” Noah said, giggling.

Willa and Tim groaned. But not Steve. “That was so bad I won’t even dignify it with a groan,” he said.

Noah couldn’t shake off the thought. The very idea made his skin crawl. “Buried alive. Eeeeh. That’s a fate worse than death.”

Steve considered it. “I don’t know. I could think of worse.”

“Like what?”

*I could say, but that'd be telling, and I wouldn't want to do that. Not yet, anyway. You and young Steven will find out soon enough.*

The Foursome continued up the winding path, where blackened branches hovered like the dying limbs of an ancient behemoth. Or, if you prefer, old tree branches drooped over their heads.

*Caw! Caw!* A large black bird—a raven, if you haven’t guessed—was watching from one of the branches. Its head turned as they went by, as if the bird was passing judgment. Poor Steve. He had a queasy feeling, like he’d seen it all before. Somebody *always* feels like that in one of these stories.

*You thought so, too. Didn't you?*

“Déjà vu,” Steve whispered.



“Déjà who?”

“That’s French for been there, done that.” It was his best translation.

“My mom’s learning French,” said Noah, his cheery pronouncement met with complete and utter silence. No one cared. *Caw! Caw!* Well, except for the raven.

The others continued moving, but Steve lingered a bit longer, examining the landscape, the trees. It wasn’t just that he felt he’d been there before. It was like he’d never left.

Willa arrived at the front door, the boys bunched behind her like three curious shadows. At precisely the same moment, all four heads looked up to see a mansion towering above them.

It was an imposing structure of a time and a place all its own, erected from brick and mortar and a touch of grand imagination. Its very design was a contradiction in styles; turrets jutted into the clouds like a centuries-old Gothic, while stone columns adorned the entrance like something you’d see in an antebellum manor. What the Fearsome Foursome couldn’t know was that the mansion looked whichever way they thought it should appear, as if it was some kind of phantom manor.

The front door was decorated with a wreath of dead



flowers. Not a holiday wreath—unless you consider a funeral a holiday. Willa crossed over the threshold and entered the house, with the boys sticking close behind her. Instantly, the humid night air turned frosty. It was as if someone had cranked up the AC. (But let's get real. Ghosts don't do "air-conditioning.")

She abruptly stopped and Tim slammed into her, something he did so often it was barely noticed. He heard something, a jingling noise he didn't recognize. It came from Willa's wrist. "Hey! What is that thing?" he asked.

She jiggled her arm—*jingle-jangle*. "It's not a thing, it's a charm bracelet. Why? Can't a girl wear jewelry if she wants to?"

"I guess. It's just . . . I never thought of you as a girl before."

Willa shot him a look, followed by a sharp elbow. "Why not?"

Tim coughed, winded. "Ugh . . . *that's* why not."

They moved forward as a unit, arriving in a larger foyer. Willa moved her flashlight up and down the walls. The mansion was a morbid masterpiece of design. There were snakes for door handles and skulls carved into the molding. Even the wallpaper had eyes! And yet the house was well tended.

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As Willa pointed out, there was nary a speck of dust, let alone a dirty sock. Noah silently disagreed, seeing layers of dust on the railing and cobwebs on the chandelier.

As the group moved forward, Willa held her light on a luxurious fireplace. In the dark, it also appeared to have eyes. She dismissed it as an illusion, a trick perfected by the shadows.

*Oh, I hate to break it to you, Willa, but our fireplace has eyes in the daytime, too. The better to see you with, as the saying goes.*

Her flashlight continued crawling up the wall until—*Gasp!*—a face stared back at her. It was the portrait of a gentleman, a real old dude. Judging from his attire, he lived—*that term's used loosely around here*—a seriously long time ago. As a group, they guessed fifty years ago. Maybe even a hundred. Or last Tuesday. Art experts they were not.

“I’ll bet he was the master of the house,” speculated Willa. “The lord of the manor.”

“He probably croaked here, too,” added Steve. He pointed to the spot where Noah was standing. “I’d say in this very room.”

*Gab!* Noah backed away, gobbled up by the shadows, and reemerged . . . in the next corridor. The others followed, and



as the darkness swallowed their lights, the portrait returned to its natural appearance—which was one of decomposition—for now there was a well-dressed skeleton, still possessing the master’s eyes, in the oversize frame.

*You're thinking these were mere parlor tricks, hmmm? Well, think again. The worst is yet to come.*

The next stop was a portrait chamber of octagonal design. *That's eight sides—must I do all the work here?* A framed portrait hung on every other wall panel, resting below a domed ceiling. Perhaps those portrayed were former residents. But something else was bothering Noah.

“This place was supposed to be empty, right?”

Steve confirmed that was what the invitation said.

“Then who lit the candles?” Noah pointed at the wall sconces. They were shaped like gargoyles, each one clutching two lit candles.

And then something utterly bizarre for a book called *Adventures in Happyville* took place. But for one called *Tales from the Haunted Mansion*, it was not so unusual at all. The portraits began to stretch, changing the images from serene to sinister. The four didn’t know if the pictures had elongated or if the whole room had stretched.



“How?” Tim asked. “How are they doing this?”

Willa and Noah took some guesses, but not Steve. He didn’t care about the how. He was too busy looking for a way out. “Hey, guys, I hate to break it to you. We’re not going anywhere! There are no windows and no doors.”

Panic would have set in had Willa not been leaning against a false wall. Right on cue, it glided open to reveal a secret passageway. She couldn’t resist embracing this magical moment. “There’s always my way.” Willa passed through the wall that was no longer a wall.

The others followed her through. Had they remained a second longer, they would have witnessed a series of lightning flashes flickering from the dome. And then they would have seen the figure of a man hanging by a noose from the rafters. But they had already moved on, so they were spared.

*Unlike you, foolish reader.*

Now the storm had arrived, full force, and wouldn’t be going anywhere for a while . . . just like our four friends. All bunched together, arms holding arms holding waists, eight legs moving as one like a human spider. As horror experts, they knew this was only the beginning.

One corridor led to another. A suit of armor stood



guard by what could only be described as an endless hallway. And far down the hallway, a candelabrum seemed to float weightlessly. Before they could question what they saw, the candles winked out and they were ensconced in darkness once more.

Then Willa heard a distinctive sound. “Shhhhhh!” she hissed.

Tim whipped his head around. “Why ‘shhhhhh?’”

“I heard music.” Willa turned to Noah and Steve to see if they’d heard it, too. Like Tim, they hadn’t. But they knew Willa well enough to believe every single word she said.

“What kind of music?” Noah asked. “Rap? R & B?”

“More like D & B. Dead and buried. It was an organ. Like you hear at church or a funeral.” She aimed her flashlight into the hallway. “It came from down there.”

“Down where?” Steve asked.

Indeed, the corridor appeared to have no end. It did, of course. It had to, right? But the idea made about as much sense as anything else around the place—like the various staircases climbing up walls and across ceilings, leading to nowhere. Or the strange grandfather clock that struck thirteen. All they could do was keep moving. If there was a



mystery as to why they'd been invited, that would be the only way to solve it.

The friends found themselves entering a quaintly decorated room, loaded with books from floor to ceiling, in cases and on shelves. Hardcover, exclusively, of various colors and conditions: a collection that could only be built over time. It was the mansion's library, of course, absent any modern amenities you might find in your local library. *Unless your local library happens to be located inside a haunted mansion, in which case I offer my sincerest condolences.*

Almost immediately, Willa hopped onto the lowest rung of a ladder built on a sliding track, perusing the titles. "Guys, you're not going to believe this."

Tim walked under the ladder. "What'd you find?"

"These books. They're all ghost stories. Every single one of them."

Weird enough. But what happened next really chilled their blood. A disembodied voice boomed from the dark recesses of the room: "Our library is well stocked with priceless first editions."

Willa, Tim, Noah, and Steve spun around to face . . . whatever it was.



A figure materialized from the shadows: a thin man with a lantern-shaped jaw, holding a candelabrum. He had an ashen complexion and wisps of white hair outlining his cheeks so that when he spoke, he resembled a talking skull. *Which really shouldn't offend anyone. When you think about it, we're all talking skulls.* "Welcome, foo—" He corrected himself. "Friends." His voice was gentle, almost soothing, but that didn't fool anyone.

Willa was quick to explain: "We're not burglars or anything. We thought nobody lived here."

"You're quite right," the talking skull confirmed. "No *body* lives here. Forgive me for creeping up on you. Old habits die hard." He was formally dressed, all in black, as if he was attending a wake—his own, of course. A crumpled carnation was still in his lapel.

He tilted his candelabrum, throwing both light and shadow onto a collection of exquisitely sculpted marble busts, of which he was justly proud. "You will recognize their faces. Marble busts of the greatest ghostwriters the literary world has ever known. They were commissioned by the master . . . before his untimely demise."

"Who are you?" asked Steve directly.

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“I am the librarian,” he replied. “I have always been the librarian.”

“How long’s ‘always’?”

The librarian furrowed his brow. “I’ve never been very good with dates, but I do recall President Lincoln complimenting me on my spats. A fine gentleman, Mr. Lincoln. Wonderful hat. Is he still in office?”

The others chuckled politely. Yet the librarian wasn’t joking. “Have I interrupted a meeting of some importance?” he asked.

“We’re the Fearsome Foursome,” replied Willa. “We tell stories. But not just any old stories. We only do scary.”

Tim completed her thought. “The scariest one wins. All the dessert you can handle. Usually ice cream.”

Noah raised his hand. “I won six times!”

“No doubt,” said the librarian with a nod. He reached for a book on the highest shelf. Again, it must have been a trick of the light, because the book seemed to glide down into his hand on its own. “It sounds like a most delightful endeavor. May I begin?” He blew dust from the old tome. “It’s been forever since I tasted ice cream . . . and I have the scariest stories of all.”

Willa’s eyes lit up. “You do?”



Steve was growing impatient, and when that happened, rude was never far behind. “Go chase an ice cream truck!” He turned to the others. “It’s time to split.”

The librarian clasped a hand over his mouth. “Oh my, I’ve frightened you.”

“Fat chance, old man. It’ll take a lot more than you’ve got!”

“But I’ve told you—I’ve got the scariest stories of all,” the librarian replied.

But Steve wasn’t giving in. “Oh, yeah? And what makes yours so scary?”

“My stories are about each of *you*.”

There was a moment’s hesitation as the four friends glanced at one another. Then Steve stepped forward. “Nice try,” he said defiantly.

The librarian smiled. “Then you’ll have no objections if I begin on this side of the room.” The librarian extended his finger, panning it across the library until it stopped. “Tim.”

Tim gulped. “H-h-how did you know my name?”

Steve shook his head. “Because he heard Willa say it, like, two seconds ago.”

But Tim knew different. *As do you.* “Master Timothy,” continued the librarian, “are you ready to hear your tale?”

“What do you mean, *my* tale?”

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“The first story is all about *you*. And that remarkable old glove you found.”

A jolt of fear shot through Tim’s body. He turned to Willa. “My mitt. Lonegan’s glove. How did he . . .”

Steve, ever the skeptic, replied, “He sees you’re into baseball, Einstein. You’re wearing a uniform!”

“Would you care to hear what else I know?” It was more a statement than a question, and before Tim could reply, the librarian was leafing through the introductory pages, his finger stopping on our first story, a tale known as . . .

