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SCHOLASTIC INC.

Goosebumps book series created by Parachute Press, Inc.
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ISBN 978-1-338-84707-9

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

22 23 24 25 26

Printed in the U.S.A. 37
First printing 2022



Flames crackled in the fireplace. They sent shadows leaping and dancing over the walls of the small cottage. Outside, the wind moaned, shaking the glass in the windows and whistling through the cracks in the thin walls.

Feeling a chill, Ephraim Darkwell pulled his gray robe tighter around him. The old man's hood fell over his forehead, covering his long white hair. He leaned over his workbench, his hand moving a knife quickly, smoothly.

Darkwell's deep gray eyes locked on the rounded piece of wood he was sculpting. A head. He rubbed his thumb over its scalp, brushing away a splinter. He worked the slender wooden eyelids up and down.

The face was nearly completed. Darkwell knew he had little time to finish. He had heard the rumors. The talk in the village. He had explained to everyone that he was a simple doll maker, a builder of puppets.

But the superstitious villagers didn't believe him.

They spied on him. From the woods behind the cottage, they watched him through the cottage's windows. Somehow, they had learned the truth.

Darkwell was no simple puppet-maker. He was a sorcerer who could magically bring his puppets to life. A master of the dark arts. But he had vowed never to use his power for evil.

He came to the village to work in peace. To be left alone to build his creations and explore the magic he had learned. He meant the villagers no harm . . .

Until yesterday . . . when Darius Koben, the chief constable, burst into the cottage, grim-faced and wheezing in anger. That moment, Darkwell knew his peace had ended.

“You and your nephew must leave,” Koben boomed, banging his cane against the floor with each word. “You are not wanted here. Your evil magic has frightened everyone.”

Darkwell bowed his head. “I am a simple doll maker,” he said.

Koben smacked the cane hard against the wooden wall. His cheeks reddened above his gray beard.

“Your lies cannot protect you, Darkwell!” he shouted. “You have been seen talking to your dolls—and they have been seen talking back. They move about your cottage as if they are alive. You cannot deny the truth. It is too late!”

“I mean no harm,” Darkwell insisted.

“I did not come to argue,” the constable said, waving his cane in the air. “I came to warn you.”

“Warn me?”

“There is talk in the village,” Koben said, lowering his voice. “Talk of burning you out. The torches are already lit, Darkwell. Do you understand? The townspeople’s anger—it cannot be controlled.”

Darkwell stared at the constable, allowing his words to sink in.

“Get out!” Koben shouted. “Leave now! You and your nephew. Pack up and get out if you value your lives!”

The constable spun on his cane and stomped from the cottage. The slender door banged in the swirling wind. Darkwell pulled the door closed, feeling the cold air on his face.

He shivered, but not from the cold. He shivered in anger that his work would be interrupted. He was about to finish his most magical creation yet. He couldn’t allow the foolish, ignorant villagers to destroy his masterpiece.

Darkwell leaned over the workbench all night, his hands working feverishly. And now he held the doll in front of him.

“Those fools will be sorry,” he told the doll. “They have pushed me too far. Once you are finished, we will make them sorry they are alive.”

The lifeless eyes gazed up at him. The wooden lips turned up in a grin. The head lay tilted to one side.

“Almost complete, my little friend,” Darkwell said. But then he uttered a startled gasp as the cottage door swung open.

A figure staggered in. His hair flew wildly about his face. His white shirt was stained, one sleeve nearly ripped off. A trickle of blood ran from his nose. His cheek was cut, dark blood forming a crooked line.

“Isaac!” Darkwell cried, staring in horror at his twelve-year-old nephew. “Isaac! Isaac! What have they done to you?”