



**HOW
NOT
TO BE A
VAMPIRE
SLAYER**

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SCHOLASTIC INC.

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Well,” Mum says, gesturing excitedly at our new house, “what do you think?”

I take in the grubby white walls, the chipped, flaking blue paint of the rickety front door, and the smeared windows that look as though they were last opened in the Stone Age.

“The house is . . .” I search for the right word, tilting my head at an angle. “. . . wonky.”

“Yes, Maggie, it is,” Dad chuckles, stretching after the long drive and throwing his arm around me. “I think there’s something charming about living in a wonky house, though, don’t you? As long as it doesn’t fall over!”

Mum joins him in laughing heartily at this, but I don’t get the joke. The house really does look like it might topple over. As my parents cheerily turn back to the car to start unloading some of our stuff, I stay standing at the broken

wooden gate in front of the winding, overgrown path leading up to the house.

When Mum and Dad announced out of the blue two weeks ago that we were moving to a town I'd never heard of called Goreway, which was in the middle of nowhere on the Yorkshire coast, I thought they had maybe lost their minds.

Now, looking at this run-down house, I KNOW they have.

This house isn't even in the town. We drove through the main street to get here and then kept on going for a while, right past all the other clusters of houses. This one is on the outskirts, completely on its own in the middle of a field, which happens to border a huge woodland.

I look over my shoulder at the edge of the woods. It's hard to make much out in the dark, but I can see the gnarled tree trunks are thick, tall, and strangely twisted, their branches creaking eerily in the wind.

Suddenly, I see something in the shadows behind them—two red dots—and squint to make it out.

“Skeleton Woods!” Dad says suddenly, making me jump. Coming to stand next to me, holding a heavy box, he nods toward the trees, his forehead furrowed. “An ancient

woodland, full of history . . . and stories. You're not to go in there. No one is allowed."

"Why not? What kind of stories?"

"All sorts," he says, his eyes gleaming. "Some say—"

"Don't listen to your dad," Mum interrupts, shaking her head and nudging him in the ribs as she passes on her way up to the house. "The reason you're not to go in there is because it's big and people get lost. Nothing to do with ghosts and ghouls."

"Ghosts and ghouls?" I ask in amazement, staring wide-eyed at the woodland, wondering what it was that I saw lurking in there before. "Is it *haunted*?"

"See what you've done?" Mum sighs, narrowing her eyes at Dad. "She won't let it go now."

"I wasn't the one who mentioned ghosts and ghouls," Dad points out, chuckling.

Mum is right, I won't let this go. I don't know why, but I've always been wild about horror stories. When I was little and my parents read to me before bed, I would make them tell me scary stories, forcing Dad to turn off the lights and hold a flashlight beneath his chin, lighting his face up in a spooky way. I love that feeling of suspense, of being on the edge of your seat, not knowing what's going to happen

next. Whenever we go to fairs or theme parks, I'm only really interested in the scary rides, the "haunted houses" where actors dressed as mummies and skeletons jump out at you from the darkness, making you scream your head off, before you burst out laughing at yourself for being so silly.

I guess you could blame my love of scary stuff on Dad. He's just as into it as I am, and Mum always rolls her eyes at us when it's our turn to pick a film for movie night. Annoyingly, they're both strict about which ones I'm allowed to watch.

"You're eleven years old," Mum reminds me when I try to persuade them to let me watch something that looks truly terrifying. "Trust me, you'll get nightmares."

That's the thing, though—I don't. I've never had nightmares. I know that's weird. Everyone has had a nightmare at least *once* in their life. But I NEVER have. Not one. I don't feel chilled to the bone after reading a horror book or watching a scary film. I'm just *fascinated* with them. My favorite thing is trying to work out how the hero is going to win before the end. How can anyone possibly defeat a ghost? How can a human destroy a league of vampires? What will they do to stop that monster? My brain is always

too busy trying to answer those questions, while everyone else is screaming or hiding behind a cushion.

Weird, I know.

“Stop staring at the woods, Maggie,” Mum says with a knowing smile, jolting me from my thoughts. “It’s only old folktales and stupid stories.”

“There are folktales about those woods, then?” I ask eagerly, getting my phone from my pocket. “I want to read about them.”

Mum clears her throat pointedly. “It’s going to be pitch-black soon. You can read up on it *after* you’ve helped us unload the car. Got it?”

Mum can be quite intimidating when she wants to be. She has this stern voice that she reserves for the times when she really means it. Once the stern voice comes out, you know to listen. I reluctantly put my phone away.

“Come on, then,” Dad chuckles, jostling the box in his arms. “Let’s go explore our new house!”

Feeling a lot more enthusiastic about the house now that I know the woodlands nearby have some cool history, I grab my backpack from the car and also a pillow, so it looks like I’m helping, and traipse after them, kicking through the weeds to the front door. Mum unlocks it and pushes it

open enthusiastically, turning on the lights as we head into the hall.

Mum and Dad came down here last weekend along with the movers to furnish the house with the majority of our things and get it ready for moving in, so it's comforting to see some of our furniture already dotted around, but the house is very poky compared to our old place and the ceilings are so low that Dad is going to have to watch his head ducking through the wooden-beamed doorways.

But I like it. It's different.

"It needs a lot of work," Mum sighs, putting her hands on her hips as she looks about us. "But we can make this homey in no time."

"That's right," Dad says. "I'm afraid my uncle Bram clearly didn't look after the house too well when he lived here, but it has such potential! Just you wait and see, Maggie."

"It's cool," I say, noticing a large cobweb in the doorway to the kitchen.

"Why don't you go pick your room?" Mum suggests. "You get first choice!"

Still clutching my pillow, I head up the creaky stairs and take a good look at all the options. One of the rooms is a

lot bigger than the others and is clearly the main bedroom—that one must have been Great-Uncle Bram’s—so I leave that to Mum and Dad, and decide on the second biggest, which is on the other side of the house. Its windows look out toward the woods. All the bedrooms have gigantic, heavy-framed mirrors in them. I conclude that Dad’s uncle must have been very vain.

I never met Great-Uncle Bram. I’d barely heard of him before two weeks ago when he passed away and left us this old, creepy house. When Dad told me we were moving here, I asked a lot of questions about this Uncle Bram, but Dad could barely tell me anything. They’d lost touch years ago. All he said was that Bram kept to himself, and lived a very isolated life.

Now that I’m here, I can see how that happened. There’s no one for miles.

I thought it was strange that he would leave his house to us when I’d never even heard of him before, but Dad just shrugged and said it was because we were his only family and he didn’t have anyone else.

I sit down on the bed and get my phone out, ready to google Skeleton Woods, but there’s no signal. I try standing on the bed and holding my phone up to see if that

helps, but get zero bars. I wander around the room with no luck before giving up, slumping down on the bare mattress and peering out the window. It's so *quiet* here.

Mum and Dad are now making their way back down the path to the car, and I smile as they pull out suitcases from the trunk, chatting excitedly about the plans they have to do the place up. I already feel like we're going to be much more at home here than we ever were in London.

Mum has always wanted to move to the countryside. My parents are both dentists and worked in the same practice; that's how they met all those years ago. They decided to live near their work because it made sense, but Mum has often talked about how she'd love to move out to a country village and have her own little practice there, as part of a small, friendly community.

I guess that's why they decided to move here so quickly. Great-Uncle Bram leaving them this house couldn't have been more perfect. And just as Mum dreamed it, Goreway has a small, overrun dental practice, which is in desperate need of help—apparently the dentist there has been wanting to retire for a while now, but there was no one to take over. He advertised the job last year and didn't get any applicants because no one wanted to move to such an

obscure little town. Mum and Dad got jobs here straight away and have grand plans to make the practice bigger and better.

“There you are,” Mum says, appearing in my doorway, pushing her hair back from her forehead. “Good choice on the room. All your boxes are in the big bedroom. Shall we move them in here and then you can start unpacking? Dad is going to put the kettle on so we can have a nice cup of tea.”

“Sure,” I say, jumping to my feet and following her to the stack of boxes in the main bedroom. “Mum, when do we get Wi-Fi? There’s no signal here.”

“Monday,” she informs me, examining the scrawled black marker writing on the side of the boxes, working out which one’s which.

“No internet for the whole of tonight and tomorrow?” I say, wrinkling my nose.

“I know, we’ll have to talk to one another and stuff,” Mum teases, handing me my first box. “I wouldn’t worry. We have lots of exploring to do to keep us busy. We can go check out the town. We may even be able to go have a sneak peek of your new school,” she adds brightly. “Depending on whether we have time.”

I'm instantly hit by a wave of nerves.

I've never been very good at school. I always got the same thing in my reports: I was easily distracted and had to stop drifting off into daydreams. I wasn't good at the "friends" side of things, either. I wish I were one of those people who could make friends easily, the ones who always know the right thing to say to get people to like them.

Nina Delby is one of those people. She was the most popular girl in my old school, and two years ago she invited me to a sleepover, along with all the girls in our class. I wasn't exactly unpopular then, I was just quiet compared to the others, but it was nice of her to invite me when I wasn't part of her group. I think she didn't want anyone to feel left out.

Anyway, that was the night it all went wrong.

We were all in the sitting room in our pajamas, eating ice cream and listening to music, when Nina announced it was movie time. Nina's parents were nowhere near as strict as mine, and they left us alone to pick our own film.

I still don't know why I decided *that* was the time to speak up.

I could have stayed quiet. I didn't have to say anything. I could have continued eating my ice cream happily, nodding

along to whatever movie someone else suggested. That's not what happened. Instead, I said we should watch this AMAZING film I'd heard about called *Vampires at Dawn*.

"Oooh," one of the girls said. "Is that the one with the vampire at school? I've heard that's really funny!"

I didn't know what she was talking about, but because I didn't really know the plot, I shrugged and said, "Maybe!" Nina said that sounded good and so she found it and pressed play. We all settled down to watch a nice film.

It was a total DISASTER. It was not about a vampire at school, and it was not funny. It was terrifying . . . for everyone else. I was the only one who enjoyed it. The others screamed their heads off the whole way through, and one girl, who happened to be Nina's best friend at the time, even started crying. Apparently they all had nightmares for weeks, and my parents got a lot of phone calls from furious parents. I was grounded for a LONG time.

Nina told me I ruined her party and, after that, barely spoke to me again. A few days later, I was walking past a group of them and overheard her say, "Maggie Helsby is a total FREAK." That reputation stayed with me for the next two years, so when Mum and Dad announced we were moving and I would be leaving my school, I was very happy about it.

But what if I mess it up again? What if all the kids at my new school don't like me, either?

What if I am just a big freak? *FOREVER?*

"It's natural to feel nervous," Mum says, reading my expression as she helps me carry boxes through to my new bedroom. "Everyone feels that way when they start a new school."

"I know." I nod, swallowing the lump in my throat. I place a box down on the floorboards and then straighten up, looking out the window across to the woodland, letting out a long, hopeful sigh. "I just really hope things are different here."