

# FRIGHTVILLE

THE HAUNTED KEY



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BY MIKE FORD

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**FOR VINZ**





“Did you get it open?”

Sofia tried turning the key that she’d inserted into the lock on the trunk. It didn’t budge. She twisted it again, then rattled the lock in frustration. It was the ninth key she’d tried.

“No,” she said. “And that was the last one on the ring.”

Her father came over and attempted to turn the key himself.

“I already *did* that,” Sofia said.

“Just making sure,” said Mr. Flores, pulling the key out. “Sometimes these old locks stick when they haven’t been used in a while.”

Sofia sat down on the trunk and let out an exasperated sigh. Then she looked around the attic. The bare wood floor was covered in dust, and the only light came from a single tiny window at the far end of the room. It was covered with dirt and cobwebs, so the attic was shrouded in shadows. Fortunately, her father had brought a flashlight, which was how they had noticed the trunk pushed into one corner of the attic.

The rest of the room was filled with cots, or at least metal frames that were supposed to have mattresses on them. Only one did. The

rest were bare. There were seven on each of the two long walls of the attic.

“Why are there so many beds in here?” Sofia asked.

“People had a lot more kids back when this house was built,” her father answered, poking at a hole in the ceiling where it looked like water was getting in. “One more thing to add to the to-do list,” he muttered.

“But there are plenty of bedrooms downstairs,” said Sofia.

In fact, there were nine bedrooms in the house. It’s why her father had bought it in the first place, why they had moved from their little apartment in the city to the big old place in Sorrow’s Hollow. He thought it would make a great bed-and-breakfast.

“Maybe they had boarders,” her father

suggested. “That was a big thing back then, renting rooms to people who couldn’t afford their own houses.”

Sofia supposed this might explain it. She still thought it was odd, though. She stared hard at the trunk, as if her glare might make it feel bad for being so stubborn about opening up for her. “Why would the people we bought the house from leave a locked trunk in the attic?”

“Who knows,” her father said, examining the bunch of keys in his hand and jangling them. “Maybe they forgot about it. It looks like no one has been up here in years. Or maybe there’s nothing in it.”

Sofia was annoyed. They had been in the house for only a few days, and she wasn’t exactly excited about it. She missed their apartment in the city. She missed her friends. The locked

trunk felt like one more reminder that her life had changed, and not for the better.

“Nothing works in this house,” she said angrily. “There’s no hot water in the bathroom. We don’t get Wi-Fi. And there’s no air-conditioning. It was so hot last night! I thought I was going to melt!”

“And yet, you didn’t,” said her father. “Look, I know this house isn’t perfect. But it will be, with a little work. You’ll see. It’s going to be beautiful, and everyone is going to want to stay here.”

Sofia snorted. “Maybe people who like creepy old houses will,” she said. “Everyone else will go to places where there’s actually something to do.”

“Hey, there’s lots to do around here,” her father countered. “There’s hiking, and fishing,

and tubing on the creek. And next month there's the Firefly Festival."

"Fireflies," Sofia said. "Wow. I can't wait."

"I have to go to the hardware store in town," her father said, pretending not to see her rolling her eyes. "Why don't you come with me? I bet we can find a fan for your room there. And I'm pretty sure the real estate agent said there's a bookstore."

At the mention of books, Sofia perked up a little. Books were always good. She was currently reading Lucy M. Boston's *The Children of Green Knowe*, and she had only a few chapters left. Maybe she would be able to find the next book in the series in town. She followed her father out of the attic and down the stairs.

"Aren't you going to lock the front door?" she asked as he descended the front steps and

walked toward the beat-up red pickup truck he'd bought to get around now that they didn't have the subway or bus.

“What for?” her father said. “This isn't the city. What could possibly happen in Sorrow's Hollow?”

“Nothing,” Sofia mumbled as she walked to the truck and got in. “That's the problem.”



The hardware store was out of fans, and Sofia's mood had not improved by the time they finished picking up the other things they needed. Back outside, she looked around for the bookstore her father had mentioned. None of the stores really seemed like they might carry books, but one of the nearby windows was filled with some curious things. Sofia looked at the name painted on the door.

“Frightville,” she said. “Doesn’t sound like a bookstore to me.”

“Maybe whoever runs it knows where the bookstore is,” her father suggested. “Let’s go ask.”

Sofia pushed the door open, and she and her father stepped inside. The store was stuffed with things. All kinds of things. Sofia didn’t know where to look first. Her eyes moved from a clown marionette dangling from its strings to a large dollhouse in which a family of what appeared to be real mice was celebrating a birthday party. The store was eerie and magical all at once, like a junk shop and carnival combined, and Sofia wanted to examine everything.

Then a man appeared. Quite tall and quite thin, he wore a black suit and had silver hair

and pale skin, as if he'd lived his whole life indoors and never seen the sun. "I am Odson Ends," he said in a low, smooth voice. "Welcome to my shop. May I help you find something?"

"I was actually looking for the bookstore," Sofia told him.

"I do have a number of books," the man said. He tilted his head, peering at Sofia with interest before lifting one long, bony finger and pointing it at her. "But I think you're looking for something else."

"I am?" Sofia said. "Oh, well, I couldn't find a fan at the hardware store."

"Mmm," said Mr. Ends, shaking his head. "I don't think that's it."

Sofia laughed. "Well, unless you have a key that can open a locked trunk, I can't think of anything else."

The man smiled. “A key,” he said thoughtfully. “Now *that* I may be able to help you with.”

He walked away, going to a cupboard and opening it. When he came back, he was holding an old wooden box. He lifted the lid, and inside were dozens of keys of all shapes and sizes. He held the box out.

“Do they all open trunks?” Sofia asked, looking at the jumble of keys.

“They open all kinds of things,” Mr. Ends answered.

“How do I know which one to try?”

“If it were me,” said Mr. Ends, “I would choose the one that seems the most lonely.”

Sofia nodded, but she didn’t really understand what he meant. How could a key be lonely? It was just a piece of metal. Still, she looked closely at the keys in the box, and

to her surprise, there *was* one that seemed to stand out from the others. Even more peculiar, there was nothing particularly interesting about it. It was definitely old, the kind of key Sofia knew was called a skeleton key, with a circular handle, a long shaft, and a tip featuring two toothlike points. Other than that, it was hardly worth noticing. Still, she picked it up.

“This one,” she said.

The man shut the box. “Ah,” he said. “You’ve selected a whichkey.”

“Witch key?” said Sofia. “Like, it belonged to a witch?”

Mr. Ends shook his head. “*Which*,” he said. “Because you can never be sure *which* thing it will open.”

Sofia laughed. “Well, I hope it opens the trunk in our attic,” she said.

“Do you?” asked Mr. Ends.

Sofia nodded. “Sure,” she said. “I want to see what’s in there.”

The man looked at her, another smile playing at the corners of his mouth. “In that case,” he said, “I have a feeling you’ll find that this key is exactly what you’re looking for.”



When Sofia and her dad got home, she ran up the stairs to the attic. Inside, she knelt on the floor in front of the trunk. She took out the whichkey and gripped it in her hand. She slipped it into the lock on the trunk, then held her breath as she turned it.

There was a click. Sofia put her hands on either side of the lid and lifted. This time, it opened.