



**KEY
HUNTERS**

**THE
HAUNTED HOWL**

by Eric Luper

Illustrated by Lisa K. Weber

SCHOLASTIC INC.

*For my critique partners: Loree, Liza, and Kate.
It's been fifteen years and still no fluff.*

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CHAPTER 1

“Have you seen Ms. Crowley today?” Evan asked Cleo across the library table.

“No,” Cleo said. “It’s weird because she’s usually hanging around with her clicky high heels and her screechy voice.”

They were already halfway through recess, and Evan and Cleo had a job to do. They needed to get another step closer to finding their former librarian, Ms. Hilliard, who had

mysteriously disappeared into one of the magical books in the secret library beneath their school.

“What are you working on?” Cleo asked.

Evan pushed away his book. “A gross report.”

“What’s gross about it?”

“It’s about bats,” Evan said. “Few things scare me more than bats.”

“Have you ever seen a live bat up close?”

“I don’t need to see one up close to know they’re gross.”

Cleo looked at the book. “They’re kind of cute, like dwarf hamsters. I’d call this one Moe and that one Sprinkles.”

“I’d call *you* crazy.”

“I’d call me bored,” Cleo said. “Let’s go.”

Evan and Cleo found their way to the farthest shelf in the darkest corner of the library—to the shelf that hid the secret door that led to the magical library. Cleo laced her fingers and boosted up Evan until he was eye level with a huge, dusty, boring-looking book titled *Literature: Elements and Genre from Antiquity to Modern-Day*.

Before Evan could pull out the book, Cleo groaned and lowered him back to the floor.

“What’s the matter?” Evan asked.

“My shoulders are sore from Ansley Teal’s birthday party last night.”

“Your shoulders are sore from a birthday party?” Evan asked.

“The party was at Adventure Time Rock Gym. Rock climbing is really hard. We

learned all about rappelling and harnesses and carabiners.”

Evan pretended to know what she was talking about. He rolled a stool over, climbed up, and pulled on the book. It tipped forward and the secret bookcase swung open. The stairway that led to the hidden room under their school library was darker than usual.

“Don’t you think it’s weird that Ms. Crowley isn’t around?” Evan asked as they went down.

“Maybe she’s on break or something,” Cleo said.

The magical library was darker than Evan remembered. Shelves, sliding ladders, and spiral staircases stretched into the darkness above them. Catwalks and balconies reached

around corners and across gaps to let readers explore every nook. At the back of the library, over a stone fireplace, hung a tapestry that showed an open book with people swirling into it among a sea of colorful letters. The fireplace was already lit, but dimmer than usual.

“Does the library look creepy today?” Evan asked.

Cleo shrugged. “It always looks creepy to me.”

They snuck along the library wall. Evan pulled out the key they had gotten on their last adventure. It was the key to a fancy sports car given to them by the head of a secret spy organization.

“Which book do you think it unlocks?” Evan asked.

“I don’t know. Why don’t we ask the woman in that painting?”

They looked at the painting that hung just above them. Evan didn’t remember ever seeing it hanging there before. It showed a woman wearing a yellow dress and a crown. Her eyes seemed to follow them wherever they moved.

Suddenly, the canvas of the painting began to stretch toward them. The woman’s hands reached out from the painting and swiped at them.

Cleo let loose a scream. Then she and Evan ran.

They climbed a ladder and darted across a catwalk. But when they hurried around a corner, they bumped straight into their current librarian, Ms. Crowley.

“I’ve been waiting to grab that key from you!” she said. She reached for Cleo, but Cleo ducked.

The kids slid down a brass pole, and that’s when they spotted it. A locked book lay on the table in the center of the room. The cover was made of cracked leather and covered in cobwebs. The title read *The Werewolf’s Curse*.

“Give me the key,” Cleo said.

“I am *not* going into a werewolf story,” Evan said.

“You want to rescue Ms. Hilliard, right?”

Ms. Crowley was already sliding down the pole, her sharp heels scraping against the metal. “Come here!” she screeched. “I need that key!”

Evan shifted from one foot to the other.



He had told Cleo that few things scared him more than bats. Werewolves were one of those things.

But then he thought about Ms. Hilliard. She needed their help.

Evan handed Cleo the key.

“Don’t go without me!” Ms. Crowley cried.

Cleo jammed the key into the lock and turned it. The lock popped open. Letters burst from the pages of the book like a thousand crazy spiders. They tumbled in the air around them and began to spell words. The words turned into sentences, the sentences paragraphs. Before long, they could barely see through the letter confetti.

Then everything went black.