# THE HAUNTING OF OLD SPLINTER

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ROCK THE BOAT

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*For my dad*

… something may be done that we will not:
And sometimes we are devils to ourselves,
When we will tempt the frailty of our powers,
Presuming on their changeful potency.

from *Troilus and Cressida*
by William Shakespeare



# 1

# The Magician

It was all Uncle Lawrence's fault.

That was what Peter would tell himself, over and over, but there were several people who were to blame for what happened. George, for moving them to Old Splinter in the first place. Alfie, for telling them the story. Adrian, for believing it.

But more than anyone, Peter blamed himself. It was his foolishness that had caused it.

His terrible mistake.

It began on the coldest day of an unusually cold summer. Peter Carney and Adrian Lee were walking home from the park, hands tucked into the pockets of their anoraks.

"I'm bleeding," said Adrian. "I don't want anyone to see."

"Chin up," said Peter.

"That's the problem, Pete. It's my chin that's bleeding."

The boys were walking down the main road towards their end of town. They had lived in Barghest-on-the-Moor ("Barghest" for short), with its streams and bridges and brightly coloured doors, for a year now. Dry-stone walls divided the surrounding fields into a patchwork of greens and purples, but today the heavy cloud turned everything a shade greyer.

"Mum and Dad are going to be so upset," Adrian groaned.

Peter and Adrian were half-brothers, although they rarely acknowledged the "half" part. They saw no reason to behave as if they were anything other than just brothers. True, you couldn't always tell at a glance that they were related. Peter was lanky, while Adrian was stocky. Peter's hair was light brown, while Adrian's was jet black. Peter was pale, while Adrian had olive skin that never seemed to burn. Only when they stood next to each other could you see the likeness in the shape of their noses and the corners of their mouths. Nevertheless, they were practically inseparable. Wherever Peter went, Adrian's red woollen beanie would always be bobbing along not far behind.

"It'll be okay," said Peter. "Mum will get you a plaster and George will have a word with Mr Horner."

"You called him George," Adrian said pointedly.

"Ah, sorry. Force of habit."

Peter had agreed not to call his stepfather by his first name in front of his younger brother. Adrian couldn't understand why Peter had such trouble with the word "Dad" because, unlike Peter, he only had one. Peter's other dad, Robert, lived an hour or so away, in Leeds.

"I won't say it was Jethro," said Adrian. "I'll just say I tripped and fell, which is only half a lie." The mark on his chin was an angry shade of scarlet. They had been walking through the park when, before they even realised he was there, Jethro had stuck out his foot and Adrian had tripped, hitting his chin on a rock.

"If you tell Dad that Jethro has been pushing you around again, he'll get straight in the van and go over to their house," said Peter.

"That's what I'm afraid of. If I snitch, it'll just get worse."

"I think you should tell Mum, at least." Adrian shook his head. "Fine. I won't force you. But if Jethro does anything like this again, I'll tell her myself."

"Okay," said Adrian. They walked a little further along the path, loose stones crunching under their mud-spattered shoes. "Were you ever bullied?" he asked.

"A little. The boys at my old school used to laugh at me during PE. Whenever I ran, my legs would stick out at funny angles, so they called me Bambi. But other than that, they mostly ignored me. I haven't had any problems here yet. I think I've mastered how to blend in."

"Like a gecko," said Adrian eagerly. "Or a rattlesnake. Or Spring-Heeled Jack."

"Who?"

"Spring-Heeled Jack," Adrian repeated. "He blends into the shadows and then jumps out at people. He's got claws and glowing yellow eyes like balls of fire, and he can leap really high, which is why they call him 'Spring-Heeled'. At night he jumps onto rooftops and peers through the windows of naughty children to scare them. I read about him in *Ghastliest Tales*. Issue Thirteen, the one with the Edgar Allan Poe story. You remember the one I told you about, where the man gets buried in the wall?"

"'The Black Cat'?"

"No, that's the one where someone walls up his wife's corpse in the basement. I mean 'The Cask of Amontillado'. The main character buries his friend alive in a wine cellar."

"His friend? Why would he do that?"

Adrian shrugged. "For revenge."

"Doesn't sound very friendly to me. Why do you read this stuff, Adrian? You'll give yourself nightmares."

"Mum read horror comics when she was my age."

"You hide behind the sofa when *Doctor Who* is on."

"Not anymore. I'm getting older. I can handle it now."

The street led them past the town hall. In the car park, there was a large steel bin where locals could donate unwanted clothes to charity. It was shaped like a purple

monster, with the sliding deposit slot painted to look like its mouth. The boys wandered over to the bin and Adrian jumped up to pull on the handle. It creaked open and a man's voice came out.

"All right, lads?" said the voice.

The door on the side of the clothes bin opened up and a man's face peered out. It was a weathered, leathery face, slightly pinched but with friendly crinkles around the eyes. His mane of blondish hair was paired with a bristly beard, which was starting to turn grey. The familiar smell of old blankets drifted out of the bin.

"Hello, Alfie," said Adrian. "What are you reading?"

Alfie's smile was crooked, and one blue eye stared off to the side, giving him a slightly lopsided look. He brandished the book in his hand.

"*Uncle Silas*," he said. "Something dark to match the weather."

Peter and Adrian, having always got on best with each other, found it difficult to mix with the other kids at school, whose interests seemed so alien to theirs. Since moving to Barghest, their parents had encouraged them to try to make friends. They were not expecting the first and best of these friends to be the middle-aged man who lived in a car park clothes bin.

A few weeks after moving in, the boys went to the bin with a bag full of pyjamas they had outgrown. When they

tossed the clothes into the deposit slot, a gravelly voice from inside growled, *"Delicious!"* Startled, the boys saw that the bin was unlocked and opened it to find Alfie inside, wrapped up in his blankets and shaking with laughter. He apologised for frightening them, only he liked to put on a monster's voice to play jokes on passers-by. "They think the bin is talking to them," he'd said. "It's hilarious."

After that, Adrian took to stopping by the bin whenever he could. He shrugged off their parents' concerns, insisting, "Alfie has an honest face. And he tells such interesting stories." Mum and George came to accept that there wasn't much they could do to prevent Adrian from seeing Alfie, but George demanded that Peter always be there to supervise, just in case.

The more time they spent together, the more Peter saw there was nothing to be afraid of. Alfie was generous and kind; more than that, he was fascinating. He was a fountain of knowledge on everything from Victorian literature to aeronautics. He told them he had worked half a hundred jobs in his lifetime: bricklaying, welding, lecturing on Proust at a university in Düsseldorf. He even claimed to have spent a year living in a monastery, and when the boys didn't believe him, he impressed them with full-throated Gregorian chanting. Alfie had never explained why, after such a varied career, he had ended up living in a clothes bin. Peter had never had the courage to ask.

"Aren't you cold in there?" said Peter.

"Cold? *Au contraire.* This is the comfiest bed I've ever slept in. It's a palace compared to where I was living before." He frowned suddenly. "Adrian! Have you hurt yourself?"

"It's nothing," said Adrian, then changed the subject. "What's your book about?"

"Well, it's a mystery story, but a very dark one. It might be too mature for you."

"Oh, come on, Alfie. Tell us!"

"Adrian's been reading horror comics again," Peter explained. "He's in the mood for frights, apparently."

"Frights, eh?" Alfie said. "You want a *scary* story, do you?"

Adrian nodded keenly.

"You don't have to, Alfie," said Peter. "He'll wake me up tonight saying he's too scared to sleep."

"I know one that'll be of particular interest to you boys," said Alfie. "You're still living up at Old Splinter, right?"

"Old Splinter" – that was what the locals called Flinders Fell, the dilapidated mansion on the far side of town. Peter, Adrian and their parents lived in the old gardener's cottage on the estate, which Uncle Lawrence owned. George, a painter-decorator by trade, was helping his brother renovate Old Splinter in exchange for a token wage and a place for his family to live.

The boys nodded. Alfie's eyes lit up, like they always did whenever he was about to spin a yarn.

"Did you know," he said in a low voice, "that a magician used to live in this town?"

Adrian leaned closer. Despite himself, Peter did the same.

"Really?" said Peter.

"Did he do card tricks and saw women in half?"

Alfie wheezed a laugh. "No, Adrian. He wasn't that kind of magician. He came from a family of shoe salesmen, but as a young man he developed an interest in magic. *Real* magic, not that stage stuff. The kind of magic that can bend fate to its will. He devoted his life to the search for magical artefacts, and his travels took him across the world, snooping around flea markets and bazaars. Most of what he collected was useless junk. However, every once in a while, he would find something: a rare antiquity with vestiges of magic still clinging to it, sold or discarded by someone unaware of its power. He would take it back to his home to experiment, trying to unlock the artefact's secrets, though whatever magic he unearthed was never enough to truly change his fortune.

"Then, one day, he stumbled across a stall in the corner of a night market in some far-off land. His funds were low. He barely had enough money for food and he had taken to sleeping rough in doorways. But at this stall was something that he couldn't ignore.

"It was a hand: an ancient, gnarled, mummified *human* hand, more like a claw. The pedlar insisted that it could

grant any wish, though I'm sure he didn't believe it himself, otherwise he would never have sold it. The magician knew better. He wrote home to wealthier associates in England: fellow occultists with large collections of their own. He begged for money. For some time, he waited, fearing that the pedlar would move on and take the wishing claw with him. But his associates wrote back, agreeing to help him on the condition that, when he returned, he shared the claw and its wishes with them.

"So, the magician bought the wishing claw and returned at once to England. Alone in the pitiful shack where he lived, his first wish was to be rich. The next morning, he got a telegram from his bank. Years earlier, he had made a desperate investment in a diamond mine in a foreign country. The investment had suddenly turned enormous profits, and the magician became a wealthy man overnight. He was thrilled. But then he remembered that he had promised his associates that he would repay them in kind. Worse, he worried that if they saw just how powerful the wishing claw truly was, they would come to take it for themselves.

"From that day on, he severed all contact with those associates, ignored their letters, assumed a new identity and moved to an isolated town on the moors. There, he used his newfound wealth to begin construction of a new home – a mansion large and grand enough to suit a gentleman with

expensive taste. But this still wasn't enough. He knew that his creditors were still hunting him, so he took even more drastic measures to protect his prize. In a fit of paranoia, he *grafted* the claw to his own body. That way, it could never be parted from him."

"Grafted?" Peter repeated. "What does that mean?"

"He attached it physically to himself. How exactly he did it, I don't know. But I can only assume that the process was … gruesome."

The images swimming into Peter's imagination were too awful to entertain. Adrian shuddered and Peter wondered if it was time to go home, but Adrian said, "What happened next, Alfie?"

"I'm not sure I should say," said Alfie. Perhaps he had noticed the shudder too, or maybe he was just building anticipation. He was nothing if not a showman.

"I'm not scared," said Adrian, wrapping his anorak tighter around himself. "The wind is cold, that's all."

"What do you think?" said Alfie, fixing his good eye on Peter. "You're the eldest. It's up to you."

George always told Peter that, as the older brother, it was his responsibility to protect Adrian. He probably should have made an excuse and taken him home, but something stopped him. Curiosity, perhaps. He wanted to hear what happened next. It was just a story, just words. Stories couldn't hurt them.

"Go on," he said finally. "Tell us. But we really should get back soon."

"All right, then," Alfie said, "but don't say I didn't warn you. I don't want to get in trouble with your mum and dad."

"You won't," Peter assured him.

"Right. Well. I'll tell you the rest, then. Where was I? Oh, yes, the next wish." And off he went again. "The magician had all the money he could want, you see, but he realised that he was still desperately lonely. His mansion was growing larger and larger, but the rooms felt cavernous and empty. He decided to wish for a companion. And lo and behold, he met one, far more beautiful than any other woman he'd ever met. He showered her with such riches that she felt that she had no choice but to accept his proposal of marriage. Years passed and the couple had plenty of children together. Then one child, the youngest, fell terribly ill. The magician used his wish to heal him of his illness and … well …" Alfie paused, as if second-guessing himself. "It's complicated. But the child was healed, anyway.

"It was then that it all fell apart. Word had spread of the magician's sudden appearance in town, his immense wealth and the strokes of good fortune that befell him. News reached his old associates, and they came searching for him. The magician heard they were coming, and he knew that he would suffer for reneging on the promise he had made. It was then he made his final wish: for a hiding

place where he would never be found by those who would seek to harm him. And d'you know what happened?"

"What?" the brothers whispered in unison.

Alfie clapped his hands, making the boys jump. "He disappeared."

"Huh?" Adrian said.

"The creditors arrived and searched the mansion. The magician was nowhere to be seen. There was no record of him leaving the town. He had simply vanished without a trace."

"Oh," Adrian said, trying to hide his disappointment. He had been hoping for gorier details. "And they never found him?"

"Never. But they did turn the whole place over searching for the wishing claw. They even dug up the garden in case he had buried it. They never found what had been promised to them. But you know what they *did* find?"

The boys leaned further in.

"Hidden under a shed behind the gardener's cottage, they found a wooden box. At first, they thought the thing inside was a dead animal, a small rodent carcass. But then they realised what it was."

"What?" Adrian urged him. "What was it?"

Alfie grinned. "It was a human hand. Rotted almost to the bone."

Peter and Adrian gaped at him. "A hand?" said Adrian. "The wishing claw?"

"No. It wore a ring with the magician's family seal on it. It was his *own* hand, cut off at the wrist. Or so the rumours say."

"Where was the rest of him?"

"Who knows? That was all that was left … or all they could find of him."

"Wait," said Peter. "You said they found his hand behind '*the gardener's cottage*'. You don't mean …?"

"Oh, yes," said Alfie. "Didn't you guess? There's a reason I brought it up. The magician built his mansion on a hilltop here in Barghest. You know it very well. The name he gave the house was Flinders Fell. Otherwise known as *Old Splinter*."

And he wheezed with laughter at the look on their faces.