

The Ghosts of Raynham Hall

The first novel in the Watchers of Time series

By S G Taylor

For Dannie, Andrew, and Christian

My Talismans

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Let us go in together,
And still your fingers on your lips, I pray.
The time is out of joint—O cursèd spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!
Nay, come, let's go together.

Hamlet Act 1, scene 5

Chapter 1

The Ghost Boy

“There are no such things as ghosts!” said Grandpa George in a singsong voice as he tucked Andrew and Christian into their beds. “Nothing but figments of the imagination. Stuff and nonsense.” He pulled a silly face, and his big blue eyes sparkled brighter than ever through the thick lenses of his gold-framed glasses.

“But Ethan said he saw a small ghost boy,” Andrew insisted, his little face earnest in the bedroom light.

“Ghosts are as real as flying pigs. Have you seen any of *them* around here lately?” Grandpa George’s face contorted in exaggeration. He put his hand above his eyes and pretended to look out the window like an old sea captain looking for dry land. “Nope, nothing out there!”

“But Camille said the reason adults don’t see ghosts is because they only come out at night to scare kids.” Christian hated being frightened. He disliked nothing more than eerie music in movies and loud surprises, like fireworks banging on the Fourth of July.

“Ha!” chortled Grandpa George, his eyebrows bouncing like dancing caterpillars. “Those children are filling your heads with hogwash.” The old man tutted to himself.

But as Andrew looked at his grandfather’s face, he could tell there was something Grandpa George was holding back. Only someone who knew Grandpa George very well could have spotted the all-too-brief expression. His lip twitched, he raised one eyebrow sharply, and he cast a sideways glance at Christian and Andrew, as if he didn’t want them to see his eyes in case they were giving away the truth. Although Andrew didn’t believe Grandpa George was lying, he did believe his grandfather wasn’t quite telling him the truth.

Andrew leaned as close as he could to Grandpa George, hunting for clues in his grandfather's face. "So you're telling me there are no such things as ghosts?"

"Poppycock!" said Grandpa George without blinking. His face had returned to its normal appearance.

Andrew laughed. "People don't say 'poppycock' anymore."

"They do in England," said Grandpa George.

"But we live in America," Christian replied.

"I know that!" Grandpa George faked being indignant and put his hands on his hips. "But don't forget, I came from England."

"How could we ever forget!" Andrew said. "You remind us every day."

Grandpa George was a tall, portly man. He had a tuft of gray hair that crept in a semicircle around the sides of his bald head. Despite his age, Grandpa George was still a very powerful-looking man. His hands were as large as bear paws and his fingers were as strong as grappling hooks. He stood on stout legs, and his chest was as broad as a kitchen table. But there was a softness to him also. Grandpa George never raised his voice, and he didn't anger easily. Instead, he always spoke kindly and was incredibly polite to everyone. And there was nothing quite like the sound of Grandpa George laughing. It reminded the boys of birthday parties.

"It's late. You'd better get to sleep or you'll wake up all tired and grumpy. Don't worry about silly things like ghosts. They don't exist. Nothing but a waste of the imagination. You should think of something nice before you go to sleep."

"But Grandpa," said Andrew, trying desperately to get to the truth, "if there are no such things as ghosts, why are there so many ghost stories?"

Grandpa George huffed to himself and sat down on Christian's bed, which creaked and dipped gently under the old man's weight.

"All those stories," said Andrew, gaining confidence, "of ghosts, and vampires, and werewolves, and trolls. Are you telling me there's no truth in any of them?"

"You do have a point," Grandpa George conceded. "There are a lot of stories about things that go bump in the night. But that's all they are: stories." As Grandpa George finished talking, Andrew saw it again: a sign in his face indicating Grandpa George wasn't quite telling the truth. Only this time, Andrew was sure of it.

"But if some stories are true, why aren't ghost stories?" Christian asked.

Grandpa George laughed loudly, filling the bedroom like a booming drum. He crossed his arms in front of him and jutted out his chin. "Because ghosts don't exist and ghost stories are written to scare naughty boys so they'll be good for their grandpas!"

Getting up from Christian's bed he patted each of the boys on their head, then turned off the table light and shuffled toward the door.

"Are you sure there are no such things as ghosts?" Andrew called, his small, round eyes peering intently through the dark.

"*Really* sure?" Christian insisted, tilting his head to see his grandfather.

"I'm confident," Grandpa George said, looking back at them with a smile. "They're the stuff of books and silly folklore. Now go to sleep. It's late."

With that, he turned away and walked downstairs, the sound of his heavy footsteps receding as he went.

"Do you believe him?" whispered Andrew as soon as he knew Grandpa George was out of earshot.

“I guess so,” Christian replied.

Both boys sat up in their bed. It was impossible to know they were brothers simply by looking at them. Andrew Redmond was tall and willowy, with dark hair and olive-colored skin. He had inquisitive eyes that were always brimming with questions. Christian Redmond was fair-haired. He had a bridge of freckles that crossed his nose, running from cheek to cheek. He loved to solve puzzles and always had a book in his hand. Christian was eleven months younger than Andrew, but the two brothers stood nearly as tall as one another. Christian was stocky and looked like his grandfather, whereas Andrew’s slenderness came more from his mother’s side of the family.

“I don’t believe him,” Andrew said. “He’s hiding something.”

“Why would he do that?” Christian protested.

“I don’t know. I just feel there’s something he’s not telling us.”

“But Grandpa never concealed anything from us before.”

“I guess not,” Andrew said, agreeing reluctantly. “But I’m sure there’s something he’s not telling us.”

The boys looked at each other. They had shared the same bedroom for as long as either of them could remember. They did everything together whenever they could. They played on the same soccer team, went to the same school, and sometimes even finished one another’s sentences.

“What made you ask Grandpa about the ghost boy?” asked Christian.

“The rumors,” Andrew said. “I wanted to know if he knew anything about them.”

Andrew remembered how, earlier in the week, stories about the ghost boy had begun to float around school like bits of old paper blown by the wind. Andrew’s friend Ethan had told David

about the ghost boy while playing on the basketball courts two weeks ago. Later, David told Chloe, and then Chloe told Alison, James, and Chase. Soon, children all over school were huddling in packs and whispering among themselves about ghosts. The rumors grew ever more fantastical with each retelling.

Christian opened a book about a guinea pig detective who hunted werewolves. The night-light between the brothers' beds shone dimly as he thumbed through a few pages and then stopped. He stared intensely at a picture of the small hero, who was dressed in a cloak and was wearing a deerstalker. The hero shook a little fist at a huge man-shaped monster with a wolf's head. Christian wanted to turn on the table light, but he knew it was late and Grandpa George, or, worse, his mom and dad, would expect them to be asleep by now. So he struggled in the half-light, squinting to read as best he could.

"What did Ethan say that got you so spooked?" asked Christian, without taking his eyes from his book. "You didn't tell me everything about the ghost."

Andrew paused before speaking. "Well . . . Ethan saw a strange-looking boy in his backyard one night last week when he went to take out the garbage."

"What was strange about him?" Christian said. He put down the book and shuffled across his bed to get closer to his brother.

Andrew smiled. He enjoyed telling stories to Christian. Nothing gave him greater pleasure than making his brother laugh or scaring him silly.

"Ethan said the strange boy was *shining*," said Andrew, carefully pronouncing every word.

"What do you mean 'shining'?" asked Christian. "Was he carrying a flashlight or something?"

"Shining," Andrew whispered, "like a ghostly spirit."

“No way,” Christian said, pulling back from his brother. The hair on the back of his neck stood up, and he felt a little shiver go down his arms and legs.

“But the strangest thing,” Andrew continued, “is that Ethan said the ghost boy just disappeared right in front of him, as if by magic.”

“Are you kidding me?” Christian’s eyes grew to the size of small saucers.

“He was there one minute and gone the next,” Andrew said, clicking his fingers.

The boys sat quietly in their beds, feeling the warmth of the blankets lying against their bodies. The dim night-light cast deep shadows on their faces and exaggerated their features, making them look like little goblins in the dark. The room felt eerily quiet, as if it were scared by the ghost stories. Neither boy knew quite what to say next.

“Ghosts can’t be real,” said Christian, shaking his head and trying to convince himself.

“I guess you’re right,” Andrew said, pulling the sheets closer to him. “There are no such things as ghosts.”

Suddenly, they heard a massive crash. A heavy book about dinosaurs had slipped off Andrew’s bed and crashed to the floor. Both boys jumped in surprise, their hearts rushing into their mouths.

“Jeez!” Christian exclaimed. “That scared the life out of me.”

“Me too,” Andrew said.

They both began to laugh uncontrollably. The tension eased. The boys were safe at home, in bed, warm, well fed, and sleepy. Nothing could be going wrong in the world. Grandpa George was downstairs reading, or, more likely, sleeping, with a book rising and falling on his broad chest as he snored. *Ghosts are just a figment of the imagination*, thought Andrew. *They’re just stuff and nonsense, as Grandpa George says. How can we be so silly?*

From the living room, the deep, soft voice of the children's grandfather filled the house then rose to the second floor: "Time to go to sleep, boys!"

"Feel the wrath of The Grandpa," Christian joked, placing both hands on his cheeks and feigning fear.

Turning off the night-light, Andrew lay down and stared at the blank ceiling. Christian did the same.

"I'm going to find that ghost boy," Andrew said, in a clear, determined voice.

"Can I help you?" Christian asked, turning to look at his brother excitedly.

"I was hoping you would say that," Andrew said. He smiled to himself before drifting off to sleep.

Chapter 2

The Plan

When Andrew woke up, he was relieved to see it was a beautiful summer's morning in the town of Oyster Bay. That night, he had dreamt about the shimmering ghost boy. But he had also seen something else in his dreams. Something that had been chasing him. A dark, gloomy man with big teeth and orange eyes.

The sun was slowly beginning to crest the steeple of St. Dominic's Church, and although the morning still was early, all signs pointed to a sweltering, hot day. Birds were chorusing: chickadees, blue jays, and cardinals, their sweet melodies dancing between the trees like dueling echoes. The grass and leaves bloomed a fresh, lush, summer green. Down by the bay, the water, still cold to the touch, lapped invitingly against the pebble beach at Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Park. People were beginning to start their mornings, and they breathed the sweet, fresh scent of a day full of hope and optimism.

From the house next to Andrew and Christian's came the sounds of Michael Young practicing his trombone. He slowly fumbled up and down scales and then hesitantly played "When the Saints Go Marching In." Across the street, a neighbor's dog barked. Someone, somewhere, was mowing a backyard. Next door, two older boys played basketball, bumping into one another as they tried to dribble the ball to the net, laughing and cheering whenever one of them scored.

Andrew and Christian climbed slowly out of bed and sleepily plodded downstairs, where they heard Grandpa George cooking in the kitchen. They were both glad today wasn't a school day.

“Are you okay?” Christian could see that Andrew wasn’t his usual self.

“I think so.” Andrew sighed. “Had a bad dream is all.”

“About what?” Christian asked.

“About a ghost trying to eat me,” Andrew said, with a wry smile. “Would you believe it?”

“All that talk last night spooked you,” Christian said.

“I guess,” Andrew replied. “But I’m still going to find that ghost boy.”

“I knew you’d say that,” Christian said, seeing the determination in Andrew’s eyes. “And I’m still going to help you!”

Andrew gave his brother a playful punch on the arm, and they skipped down the hallway to the kitchen.

Breakfast time in Andrew and Christian’s house was always hectic, especially on the weekends. Grandpa George liked to cook a big breakfast on Saturdays. The boys watched as he shuffled around the kitchen, cooking bacon, breaking eggs, and mixing pancake batter. Pancakes were a favorite of Christian’s.

The boys sat next to one another at the countertop, on their usual stools. They sipped from large glasses of milk and then compared milk mustaches while they waited for their grandfather to finish cooking. From where they were sitting, Andrew and Christian could clearly see their parents. Mr. and Mrs. Redmond drank coffee in the family room and stared intently at their laptops. If Andrew didn’t know any differently, he would have thought his parents’ brains had been sucked dry by work zombies. The harsh, white glow of the computer screens shone in his parents’ eyes as they gazed vacantly at facts and figures on spreadsheets.

Andrew and Christian’s parents loved to work. If they weren’t working, they were talking about work, thinking about work, or simply being excited about work. Andrew believed they

even dreamt about work. When Mr. and Mrs. Redmond were with their friends, all they would do was talk about work while they drank huge glasses of wine and regularly checked their phones for email. At times, Mr. and Mrs. Redmond would leave for days on end to meet clients, traveling to Chicago, Boston, or San Francisco. Not that Andrew and Christian worried about it all that much; after all, they had Grandpa George to look after them.

But there were times when Andrew wondered if his parents even knew he and Christian existed. They would be so caught up in work they would hardly speak to him; instead, they would sit for hours on end taking calls and working on their laptops. He couldn't help but feel forgotten, as if he and his brother were an afterthought. Andrew still loved his mom and dad just about more than anything else in the world. But some days he felt as if he were an inconvenience, like having to do homework after a long day at school.

Grandpa George served breakfast and sat down at the countertop beside Andrew and Christian. "So," he said, in between bites of a piece of lightly buttered toast. "It's a beautiful day out there. The sun is shining, the day is young. We should all do something together. Something fun. What do you think, my beautiful boys?"

"Sounds great," Christian said, as he eagerly forked large bites of pancake into his mouth.

"What are you thinking?" Andrew asked.

"Dunno. A walk to the park, perhaps?" Grandpa George replied. "Finish it up with some ice cream. What do you think?" The old man winked at his grandsons.

"Sounds good to me!" both boys exclaimed.

No one was quite sure how old Grandpa George was. He never told anyone. Andrew guessed his grandfather was well past seventy, but he often acted much younger. Andrew loved to listen to Grandpa George's stories about how he had come to America when he was a young

man and worked in construction. “It was the only thing I could do,” Grandpa George said, shrugging his shoulders. “But I got good at it—so good, I never had to do it anymore.” Grandpa George would wink when he told Andrew and Christian this story, as if he were letting them in on a deep secret, but he never fully explained himself, and Andrew thought better than to ask.

Grandpa George turned to the boys’ parents. “And what about you, Mum and Dad? Do you care to join the fun?” Grandpa George already knew the answer but thought it polite to ask anyway.

“Too busy,” said Mr. and Mrs. Redmond together, without looking up from their laptops, their fingers typing frantically on the keyboards. “We have work to do.”

The boys watched as their mom and dad began a short conversation between themselves:

“Did you get the name of that client?” Mom said to Dad. “It’s crucial.”

“I’ll look him up,” Dad said to Mom. “Here he is. Now would you look at that? This could be a good deal!”

Grandpa George shook his head slowly, disappointed in their reaction. He looked at the two boys with an apologetic expression, but Andrew and Christian just shrugged their shoulders. Then, they all began to laugh. It had become a bit of an inside joke that Andrew and Christian’s parents were a lost cause when it came to participating in any activity that involved having fun.

“Seems like your mom and dad have got an exciting deal on the horizon.” Grandpa George arched his caterpillar eyebrows.

“They always do,” said Andrew, in a resigned voice.

“So!” Grandpa George boomed in such a way that his voice grabbed everyone’s attention. He was in a good mood and was excited to get the day started. “Let’s get ready to have some fun. Last one dressed is a rotten egg.”

The boys scrambled from their seats, raced down the hallway, bumping each other playfully, and then skipped up the stairs. And as their parents continued to talk to one another over their laptops, Grandpa George slowly sauntered after Andrew and Christian with a big grin on his face.

*

“How are we going to find the ghost boy?” Christian asked.

Andrew and Christian were sitting on the swings at the park by the harbor, slowly rising forward and ebbing backward, in the bright sunshine. This was their favorite park in all of Oyster Bay. Tall masts of clean white boats were moored in the bay. Seagulls rode the ocean breezes, hovering over the water and crying to one another. The boys could smell the pungent seaweed that fragranced the air, and, across the water, in the distance, they saw the outline of the houses on Center Island.

The morning had quickly grown into noon, and the boys had spent the day in the playground. Grandpa George sat on a bench not too far away, reading the newspaper and thinking his way through the crossword. Every now and then he would raise his head to the sky in deep thought, count on his fingers, and then hunch over to complete a clue. Doing the crossword was one of Grandpa George’s favorite morning treats, and his mood for the day would be largely determined by whether or not he was able to complete it.

“It’s not as if we know where to find a ghost, and we can’t just go and hang out in Ethan’s backyard waiting for it,” Christian continued. “His parents might get mad at us or think we’re crazy.”

The boys were determined to do everything they could to find the ghost boy. The problem was, they didn’t know quite where to start. Christian racked his brains trying to think of a

solution. He knew how to solve the most intricate math problems or spell the most complicated words at school, but ghost hunting wasn't on the curriculum.

“Well,” Andrew said, with the cautious voice of a conspirator as he leaned closer to his brother, “Ethan wasn't the only person to see the ghost.” The boys stopped swinging and now sat motionless, as close to one another as possible.

“What do you mean?” Christian asked, surprised.

“I heard someone else talking about seeing a strange ghost boy. The same strange ghost boy that seemed to glow in the dark.” Suspense hung on every word that Andrew spoke.

“Who told you that?” Christian's eyes were a mile wide, eager to learn more.

“Riley,” Andrew announced. “Apparently she saw something strange down by Raynham Hall when she went grocery shopping with her mom last week.”

“Where's Raynham Hall?” Christian asked.

“You know,” Andrew said, “that ancient house opposite the supermarket.”

“Didn't we go there with Boy Scouts?”

“No,” Andrew replied, “that was Sagamore Hill. This is the other old house that's a museum.”

“What did she see?” Christian was anxious to know everything Andrew had to say.

“Riley told me she saw a strange-looking boy who seemed to glow in the dark,” Andrew said. “He was standing by Raynham Hall, and Riley thought he was just one of the kids who worked at the museum.” He stopped for a moment to let the tension build. Seeing Christian almost about to burst with excitement, he continued: “That is, until he suddenly disappeared. And that got her spooked.”

“Ethan only lives a block away from Raynham Hall,” Christian said, in slow comprehension as the pieces of the puzzle began to slot into place.

“Exactly,” Andrew replied, a knowing smile on his face. “It’s a bit too much of a coincidence, isn’t it?” Andrew’s inquisitive eyes burned brightly. “Do you think the two could be connected?”

“I guess,” Christian said, shrugging his shoulders.

A brief silence fell between them as they sat still on the swings. Both boys looked over at their grandfather holding the newspaper, pen in hand. He was staring at the sky, looking for inspiration, counting on his fingers again, shaking his head and mumbling to himself.

“Raynham Hall is really old,” remarked Andrew.

“It’s ancient,” Christian agreed.

“Perhaps it’s haunted?” Andrew said, in conclusion.

On a tall street lamp in the parking lot, a crow started cawing. Its piercing call filled the harbor.

Andrew looked up. The crow was staring at him, or so it seemed. It twitched its black head from side to side, as if trying to get a better look at Andrew. Then it started to caw again, but this time it cawed much faster. “Caw, caw, caw!” the crow wildly screeched, but it sounded to Andrew as if the crow were laughing, “Ha, ha, ha!”

“So how do we go about finding a ghost in the middle of Raynham Hall?” Christian looked at his brother perplexed. “Do you know how crazy that sounds?”

“Well,” Andrew said, momentarily breaking his gaze from the crow to look at his brother. “Ethan said he saw the shining ghost boy two weeks ago today. Riley said she saw something weird a week ago today, exactly a week after Ethan.”

“So you’re saying that if the ghost boy is going to appear anywhere at all, then it will be today at Raynham Hall?” Christian asked, hopefully.

The crow began to caw again. It jumped up and down on the lamppost, bobbing its head maniacally, and this time Andrew was confident the crow was laughing at him. “Ha, ha, ha!” it screeched repeatedly. “Ha, ha, ha!” The crow pointed its long, shiny beak at Andrew and stared at him with small, black, beady eyes. Andrew stared right back, refusing to blink, and, after what seemed like a long time, the crow stopped bobbing and stood motionless. It eyed Andrew in eerie silence and then—spreading its big, black wings—flew off toward Center Island. Its laughing caw faded away across the bay.

Andrew watched it go, and a shudder ran up his back and down his arms.

“So, a ghost? Today? At Raynham Hall?” Christian asked.

“What?” Andrew said. He was still thinking about the crow and was wondering why it had laughed at him.

“I don’t know,” Andrew eventually stuttered, turning back to Christian, “but it seems more than just a coincidence that a ghost is seen on the same day of the week, exactly one week apart, at Raynham Hall. And I think if we’re going to have any chance at all seeing something, it will be tonight.”

On the bench near the playground, Grandpa George started laughing to himself. Then, taking his pen, he started filling out a piece of the crossword. “Of course!” he said to himself. “How could I have been such a Silly Billy?” He seemed content, sitting in the sun, finding the answers to his puzzle.

“We’re going to need a plan if we want to get out tonight,” Christian said. “You know Mom and Dad won’t notice, but we have to say something to stop Grandpa George from worrying.”

“Working on it,” said Andrew.

Neither boy wanted to deceive their grandfather, but they both knew that without a plausible excuse, getting out of the house would be impossible.

Grandpa George looked up with a satisfied smirk on his face as he put the lid on his pen. “Boys!” he called. “I’m going back to the house. It’s getting too hot for an old man like me, and I’m slowly boiling like a lobster. Are you coming home or do you want to stay down here a little bit longer?” He stood up and put the folded newspaper under his arm. He seemed happy with himself; the boys knew he had completed the crossword puzzle.

“We’ll stay a little bit longer, if that’s okay.” Christian replied.

“Of course it is young man,” Grandpa George said. “I’d rather you were out here than inside playing those silly video games.” He looked at the boys with kindness, then walked over to them and ruffled their hair. “My boys,” he said. “My beautiful boys.”

“Grandpa, have you ever been to Raynham Hall?” Christian asked, without thinking about it. As soon as he’d asked the question, Christian wondered if he’d said the right thing.

Grandpa George looked at Christian with a surprised expression. “Yes, I’ve been there. It’s very nice indeed. Why do you ask, son?”

Andrew gently nudged Christian forward, as if to say, “You started this, so now you need to finish it.”

“Well, some kids were saying they sometimes see some strange things there, and I wanted to know if you knew anything about it?”

“Are we talking about ghosts again?” Grandpa George said, with a huge smile on his face. “I thought we agreed there were no such things.” He thrust his hands into the pockets of his shorts and peered quizzically at Christian and Andrew.

“But if there *were* such things as ghosts,” said Christian, in an almost confident voice, “then perhaps they would be there. We think it could be haunted.”

“Yes,” Andrew said, “really haunted!”

The boys watched as Grandpa George thought about what they had said for a few seconds. His caterpillar eyebrows raised in contemplation, and then he began to smile, as if he’d just solved one of his crossword puzzle clues.

“Do you want to go to Raynham Hall and have a look around?” he asked, leaning down toward them.

“Can we?” Andrew returned, surprised. He hadn’t thought their grandfather would even suggest such a thing.

“Of course we can. It’s a museum nowadays, and it’s open most of the time.” The old man looked at his watch. It was a quarter past one in the afternoon. “It should be open, so let’s take a walk over there and have a look around.”

“Nailed it!” Christian said, with a huge grin. He was excited at the prospect of visiting Raynham Hall.

“What are we waiting for? Let’s go!” Grandpa George said, chuckling. “Follow me!”

Chapter 3

A Visit to Raynham Hall

Raynham Hall is as old as the town of Oyster Bay itself. It's a small, white, saltbox house with broad wooden clapboards and a black, shingle roof. Nine small windows poke through the facade, and a red brick path leads to the front door. The old house stands on a modest plot of land, edged with a white picket fence and a small, neat garden. Two large oak trees stand proudly in front of Raynham Hall, their stretched branches and broad leaves obscuring the house from view, as if trying to keep it secret.

Andrew and Christian followed their grandfather. They walked past the train station and turned up Spring Street, then turned onto West Main Street. Grandpa George took long, purposeful strides, slapping the newspaper rhythmically against his leg as he walked. The boys did their best to keep up with his pace, walking and jogging gently behind him. Both boys were excited their grandfather had agreed to take them to see the old haunted house.

Their parents must have driven the boys past Raynham Hall countless times, but somehow they had never really noticed it before. As they now stood in front of the white, saltbox house, Christian was amazed how small and beautiful it was. *A relic from another time*, he thought.

Grandpa George opened the gate in the white picket fence then walked up the brick path to the stout front door. It was painted stark white, with a black, iron handle and a shining brass door knocker shaped like an eagle. At the top of the door loomed two windows made of antique glass, warped so much that each looked like the concave bottom of a murky wine bottle.

"Those windows remind me of Grandpa George's glasses," Christian said.

"Shh!" Andrew urged.

“I heard that!” Grandpa George said, with a smile on his face.

The boys looked at each other and sniggered. Grandpa George ignored them and knocked on the door.

They waited. The sun beamed high in the sky, and they could see that Grandpa George was sweating. He didn’t like the heat very much, saying he preferred the cool, fresh air of autumn.

Still, no one answered the door. Grandpa George and the children were becoming a little impatient.

“Strange,” said Grandpa George.

He knocked again, a little harder.

Still nothing.

The boys began to feel anxious, believing they wouldn’t get to explore the house and search for clues about the ghost boy’s whereabouts.

“Maybe there’s no one home.” Grandpa George huffed to himself. “It should be open.” He checked his watch again and then looked at the museum sign attached to the wall.

Open 1 P.M. – 5 P.M. Closed Mondays.

Grandpa George was about to knock again when a loud *click!* echoed and the dead bolt was pulled back. It seemed a long time before the door slowly opened.

“Hello!” said a cheerful elderly woman. She was wearing a red and white dress with puffy sleeves, and a full, round petticoat. The dress seemed to date from the colonial period. Andrew had seen pictures of women wearing such dresses when he had learned about the War of Independence and General George Washington at school.

“Sorry about that. I was upstairs,” the elderly woman said, out of breath. “Takes me a little longer to get down the stairs these days.”

“No problem.” Grandpa George smiled. “I know all about old age.” He rubbed his hip in sympathy.

The elderly lady nodded. “Come in,” she welcomed, “come in.” She opened the door wide to let everyone enter.

Grandpa George and the boys walked into a narrow corridor. On each side of them, entrances led into small, square rooms. Looking directly ahead, they could see a passageway leading to the back of the house.

The air was silent in Raynham Hall. The street noise was muted, and, despite the searing sun, the entryway was cool. An old smell, like the odor of one of Grandpa George’s history books, faintly permeated the air. Andrew wondered how Raynham Hall had survived. The old museum was so different from every other house he had seen.

“Have you ever been here before?” The elderly lady put on a friendly smile. She looked at Grandpa George and the boys for an answer.

Grandpa George cleared his throat. “Some time ago,” he muttered. “Quite some time ago, actually.”

The elderly woman nodded again. “And how about you boys?” She looked at them with intense, mouse-brown eyes.

“This is our first time,” Andrew said.

“Oh good!” the elderly woman replied, clasping her hands. “This is a lovely place. It’s full of incredible history. Feel free to look around. I’m here if you have any questions.” She smiled at

the boys again and then walked toward the back of the house, leaving them to explore its musty interior alone.

“Wow!” Andrew said. “This place is old.”

“Older than Grandpa George,” Christian quipped, in a voice just loud enough for his grandfather to hear.

“I heard that!” said Grandpa George. “This house is over two hundred and fifty years old—and I’m not quite there yet.” He grinned at the boys, his blue eyes beaming large through his glasses.

Andrew and Christian began looking around the house, trying to find clues about the ghost boy. *Any* clues at all. The house seemed narrow and compact, and all the passageways were dark. Only a slither of light entered the rooms from the tiny antique windows, and the clapboard floors creaked as they walked.

A fireplace stood front and center in each small room. “No forced-air heating or air conditioning in those days,” said Grandpa George. “You had to make a fire to keep warm.” Simple decorations adorned the walls: a display of spoons, an elegant mirror, and an old rifle in one room. A walnut-brown writing desk, a chest, and a commanding grandfather clock in another room.

They wandered from room to room, searching every unusual, dust-covered object and every dark, murky corner of the house for clues.

“What do you think, boys?” Grandpa George asked.

“It’s so small,” Christian said.

“Well, people didn’t need big houses back then.”

“So, when did you last come here, Grandpa?” Andrew asked.

“Many, many years ago,” Grandpa George said, wistfully. “And it hasn’t changed a bit since the last time I was here. Everything seems the same. I wonder . . .” He began to lose himself in thought then left the boys to walk upstairs. The steps creaked under his weight, and the boys heard his distinct footfalls, pacing the bedrooms above them.

The boys walked to the back of the house and entered the kitchen. A huge cast-iron range stood along one wall. Tin pails were stacked on the floor. Pots and pans hung from the walls. A wooden table and four chairs sat in the middle of the kitchen, and some pretend food lay in a bowl, depicting how the table would have been arranged when Raynham Hall was in use.

As they drew close to the pantry, Christian stopped short, as if someone had pulled him sharply backward. He felt the room go dark, and a tingle rushed up his body, like cold water.

“Do you feel that?” Christian stammered.

“What?” Andrew said. “I don’t feel anything.”

Christian felt a freezing breath blowing on him, and fields of goose bumps sprouted along his arms and neck. He shuddered in surprise and started rubbing himself to get warm.

Andrew was surprised to see his brother shivering. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“Kind of,” Christian said, his mouth chattering. “Don’t you feel cold? I’m absolutely *freezing*.” He looked intently at his brother.

“No,” Andrew said. “It’s still pretty warm in here.”

The next instant, Christian began to feel normal again. He felt the warmth rush back to his fingers and hands, as if he had been covered by a large duvet. Christian was confused. One minute he was hot, the next freezing—and then he was suddenly warm again.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Andrew asked.

“That was *really* strange,” Christian replied.

“Did you know that Raynham Hall played a significant role during the War of Independence?”

Christian and Andrew jumped. The elderly woman had suddenly reappeared. She smiled quietly and clasped her hands in front of her.

“No,” said Andrew, trying his hardest not to let on that she had scared him half to death.

“Yes, indeed, it did. From seventeen seventy-six to seventeen eighty-three, this house protected one of General Washington’s most valuable spies, a critical member of the Culper Spy Ring. The spy ring helped Washington win the War of Independence.” The elderly woman smiled again and tilted her head to one side.

“Really?” Christian asked.

Both boys looked at her, enthralled.

“Indeed,” the elderly lady said once more. “He lived here. In this very house. His secret agent code name was Culper Junior. And he had a special secret agent number. Seven twenty-three. But his real name was Robert Townsend. And the Townsend family owned this house for over two hundred years.”

Andrew saw that the elderly lady was getting excited.

“When war broke out, this house was taken over by the British, and the British colonel, John Simcoe, used it as his headquarters. A good part of Simcoe’s battalion, the Queen’s Rangers, was camped here in Oyster Bay, in a place called Fort Hill, which is by where the fire station is now on South Street. There were over three hundred men here. You couldn’t move for Redcoats—that’s what the Americans called the British soldiers back then.”

“I never knew that,” Andrew said, surprised.

“Well, that’s the good thing about life.” The elderly lady grinned. “You get to learn something new every day!”

“And there’s something else,” she continued, stepping closer to whisper to the boys. “Another big secret.”

“What’s that?” Christian asked. He watched as the fine lines on the woman’s face crinkled as she smiled. Her small brown eyes seemed electrified, and she wrung her hands, as if washing them with soap.

“This house is haunted!”

Both boys nearly fell backward, as if they had been pushed.

“Haunted?” Grandpa George said. He had come down the stairs with one of his eyebrows raised.

“Our grandpa doesn’t believe in ghosts,” Andrew said, gathering himself. “He says it’s all a load of hocus-pocus.”

The elderly woman laughed as Grandpa George came to stand beside them. He stared skeptically at the elderly lady, wondering if she could be trusted.

“Well, it’s said that the house has ghosts from many different eras,” the elderly lady continued, ignoring Grandpa George. “But the most frequent ghost seen around here is Sally Townsend’s.”

“Are you kidding me?” Christian was astonished. “So, there’s a real ghost?”

“Indeed,” the elderly woman said, smiling kindly. “Some people say this is one of the most haunted houses on Long Island.” She paused for effect, searching the boys’ faces for any hint of fear, but instead saw only an eagerness to learn more. “Some people say Raynham Hall is like the Grand Central Station for ghostly activity.”

The elderly lady enjoyed the suspense for a moment before continuing.

“You know, sometimes I hear strange things, like footsteps upstairs, or doors opening and closing in the kitchen when nobody is here.”

Grandpa George huffed. His hand slowly cupped his chin in thought, but, uncharacteristically, said nothing.

Then, Christian asked, “What about a ghost of a small boy? Have you ever seen that?”

The elderly lady looked at Christian thoughtfully. “You know, I’ve not heard of any ghosts of small children. All the ghosts I know of are adults.”

Christian stared at the elderly lady, considering her words. Suddenly, from the kitchen, loud creaking rose off the floorboards, as if someone were in the room, cooking dinner. Everyone stood still and listened—even Grandpa George.

“There’s one of them now,” said the elderly woman. “They’re just letting us know they’re listening to us.” She started giggling to herself. “Oh my, they must like you boys. Generally, they only come out when I’m here alone!”

The boys instinctively moved closer to Grandpa George, as if for protection. Christian held onto the old man’s arm.

“Aren’t you scared?” Andrew looked at the elderly lady.

“What for?” The elderly lady looked confused. “There’s nothing to fear. They won’t hurt me. They’re like my friends. They keep me company when the house is empty.”

The floorboards upstairs then began to creak, as if someone were pacing in one of the bedrooms, and the elderly lady giggled to herself again. “They seem really excited,” she said.

“Well, I’m sure we’ve taken up too much of your time as it is,” Grandpa George said. He looked anxious, and one of his caterpillar eyebrows stood raised in concern. “Come on boys, it’s time for us to leave.”

“Going already?” The elderly woman seemed upset. She rushed to the front door, almost blocking them from leaving.

Grandpa George blurted, “Afraid so. It’s time for us to go. It’s late.”

He marched to the door, and for a moment, Christian thought the elderly woman was going to try and block his exit. But at the last second, she stepped aside. Grandpa George opened the front door, letting sunlight flood into the dim hallway.

As Grandpa George stepped outside, the boys said “thank you” to the elderly woman in a single voice then followed their grandfather outside.

“Have a beautiful day,” the elderly woman said. “Come back and see us again soon.” She gave them a broad smile, a quick fluttering wave, and then gently closed the door.

*

Grandpa George quickly strode along the brick pathway, toward the sidewalk. The boys could see that he was flustered.

“Are you okay, Grandpa?” Andrew asked. “You seem a little out of sorts.”

“I’m okay. Not a problem,” Grandpa George said, slapping his newspaper against his leg. However, the expression on his face said otherwise.

The sun had grown hotter. The air had become dense and more humid. Andrew could feel beads of sweat under his T-shirt. Christian felt like he needed more sunscreen.

“What do you think?” Christian asked. “Do you still believe there are no such things as ghosts?”

Grandpa George remained quiet for a little while as he thought about what to say next. Then, he let out a big sigh and said, "I only said there were no such things as ghosts so you wouldn't get scared." He looked at Andrew and Christian carefully. "But in truth, there are many strange things in this world which are difficult to explain, and I don't have an answer for all the weird things that happen."

The boys were flabbergasted. They looked at Grandpa George as if he had just stepped off a spaceship from Mars.

"So, there *are* such things as ghosts?" Christian cried.

"Perhaps," Grandpa George acknowledged, under his breath.

"Really?" Andrew looked at his grandfather and could tell he was telling the truth.

"If you can call them ghosts." Grandpa George seemed unwilling to say anything more, and the boys knew better than to ask. He stood silently, slapping the newspaper against his leg, staring past Raynham Hall as if he were trying to remember something long forgotten . . .

Christian looked back at the house and saw the elderly lady at one small window. He saw her smile at him; then, the curtain slipped back into place as she disappeared into the darkness of the house.

Christian shuddered. The freezing cold he had felt in the kitchen was not a figment of his imagination. It was real to him, like snow.

There was something unusual about Raynham Hall. He could sense it, but he couldn't explain it.

"I'm going back home," Grandpa George said, breaking the silence. "It's getting far too hot for an old man like me, and I have some things I have to do. Are you coming?"

The boys looked at one another. "Can we come back later?" Andrew asked. "I thought we would go down to the park again for a little while longer."

"Fair enough," Grandpa George said. He began fishing in his pockets for something. "Here's a little bit of allowance for you." He handed Andrew ten dollars. "You can go and buy yourselves some water or a snack if you get hungry. But don't go wasting it on sticky candy. That will rot your teeth. And I want you back at the house in two hours. I'll have dinner ready, so don't be late."

"We won't," the boys said together.

Grandpa George kissed them both on the tops of their heads then turned to start the short walk home.

Christian was excited. "Got any excuses to tell Grandpa George why we're ghost hunting tonight?"

"Yes," said Andrew, smiling to himself. "I know just the thing."