

Midnight Phantom



If Shanna hadn't called me a selfish, stuck-up brat, I NEVER would have seen the Phantom. But Shanna had acted like a jerk and our friendship was over. So instead of being asleep at 11:45, I was awake. I kept thinking about Shanna. Maybe I should have let her copy my history test. Cheating was wrong, but we WERE best friends.

I looked out my bedroom window over to Shanna's house. No light in her room. Bet she was sound asleep. The jerk!

As I glanced away, I noticed a light in the orchard behind my house. Like a floating ghost, the small light flickered between shadowy trees, disappearing and then reappearing through tangled branches.

Someone or SOMETHING was out there. And it was coming closer. I wanted to call 911 or my parents. But I couldn't move. The flickering light grew larger. Then I saw IT. A huge floating dark blob. And it carried something long and silvery. A SHOVEL.

A dog barked, shattering the quiet night. I knew that dog. Taffy belonged to Shanna. We'd found the tiny bundle of white fur while collecting aluminium cans last summer. So when a whirl of white jumped over the fence into the orchard, I freaked out. Oh, no! Taffy, come back! I flung on a jacket and raced outside. Tiny Taffy had the heart of a lion, but the paws of a rabbit. She would be helpless against the shadowy Phantom.

I crept to the fence that separated my house from the orchard and cautiously peered through a knot hole. Nothing. So I pulled myself over the fence. Crunch. I landed on a brittle branch, the snap echoing like a gun shot.

Then I heard a shrill yelp. TAFFY!

Before I could go to Taffy's rescue, I heard a footstep behind me. Suddenly, a hand reached out and grabbed my neck. Another hand covered my mouth, strangling my cries. I struggled to escape; kicking, hitting and biting.

"Ouch!" my attacker exclaimed. "Your teeth are sharp!"

"Shanna!" I broke free and faced my ex-friend. "Why did you grab me? I nearly wet my pants, you scared me so much."

"Shhssh! Do you want that creep to hear us?" she said. "I'm afraid he has Taffy. I saw her jump the fence, so I came out to find her."

"Me, too," I said. Shanna and I were so much alike. I started to smile, but remembered our fight and frowned. We were NOT friends anymore. "Let's just find Taffy."

She nodded, then pointed to a light flickering up ahead, so we moved forward.

My heart thundered. I was afraid for Taffy. Why wasn't she barking anymore? I remembered the deadly silver shovel and felt sick. Taffy just HAD to be all right.

Finger-line branches clawed me as we entered a thick tangle of trees. And there he was: The Phantom. A shadowy figure in a black cloak and high dark hat. His face looked as gnarled and ancient as the orchard trees.

"He's digging a grave!" Shanna grabbed my hand. I could feel her trembling.

"Quiet," I warned. "Unless you want to be the dead body he buries."

"Dead body! You mean he could be a killer? Oh, no! Where's Taffy?" I shook my head. I hadn't seen Taffy since entering the orchard. NOT good.

I squeezed Shanna's head and watched in terror as the Phantom kept digging. My eyes had adjusted to the dark and I saw several gaping holes in the ground around him. One was long and deep; wide enough for a small person. LIKE ME.

Abruptly, the Phantom stopped digging. He bent down and pulled out a skateboard-shaped box. After brushing off caked-on dirt, he reached inside and grabbed something small, thin, and white like a small bone! Maybe from an animal or young child. And not just ONE bone. I could see a whole pile of them inside the box.

With my life flashing before me, a dumb argument just seemed plain dumb. So I turned to Shanna and whispered, "I'm sorry."

"I'm the one who's sorry." Her soft voice was sad. "I never should have asked you to cheat. Forgive me, and let's be friends again."

I nodded. "Best friends. If we get out of here alive." Then we both jumped when we heard a dog bark. "TAFFY!" we screamed.

Startled, the Phantom dropped his box. Small white bones spilled on the ground. "Who's out there?" he growled. "Show yourself!"

I wanted to run. Believe me, I really, really, REALLY wanted to run. But I saw Taffy's adorable white head pop out from the deep hole in the ground, and I couldn't leave her. So I sobbed, "Please don't hurt our dog! Or us, either!"

"Your dog?" The Phantom reached for Taffy and held her in the air. Taffy's legs dangled and she looked so helpless. "Hey, I like dogs. You'd better take care of this pup before it falls in another hole. Luckily I was here to pull it out." He leaned against the shovel and stared at us. "Bet you girls wonder why I'm digging in the middle of the night."

"Digging... uh... graves?" Shanna stepped forward to take Taffy in her arms. The pup wiggled and happily licked Shanna's face.

I pointed to the ground. "Whose...uh... bones?"

"Those aren't bones. Look closer." He shined his flashlight. "They're carved white chess pieces. My old pal Zeke had the black ones. See, a long time ago Zeke and I were playing chess. Zeke won, but I thought he'd cheated. I got mad. Took my chess pieces and left, telling Zeke he was a dirty cheater and we weren't pals anymore."

"And you buried the chess pieces here?" I guessed. He nodded. "But the next day Zeke was in a terrible accident. He died. And I never got a chance to say I was sorry. Until now."

Suddenly a blond boy in old-fashioned clothes appeared out of nowhere. The boy held a box filled with black chess pieces. I glanced at the Phantom and he changed right in front of us--into a dark-haired boy holding white chess pieces. And I could see right through him. He wasn't human. Shanna and I exchanged horrified looks. THE PHANTOM REALLY WAS A PHANTOM! Only now there were two of them!

Screaming, Shanna and I ran out of the orchard... together.

