



*Take a haunted house, three brothers, and a dare. Then you have the makings of a hair-raising Halloween story. – John McCormick*

## *Beware the House on Weeping Willow*

*By John, William, and Connor McCormick*

Every town has a spooky old house. Usually it's an abandoned home that over time has fallen down around itself from neglect. Shutters hang askew and floorboards rot. The neighborhood kids contribute to its dilapidated appearance by throwing rocks through the windows. They make up stories about the house, claiming they saw a ghost in the attic window or heard moans coming from the basement. Before long, even the grown-ups in town believe the

house is haunted. They warn their children to stay away from the house if they know what's good for them.

Of course, as soon as kids are told not to do something, that's exactly what they do. It was no different for the children in the little town of Maplewood. The kids who lived in the Parkside district were fascinated with the abandoned house on Weeping Willow Street. Legend had it that the former owners of the home, a sweet elderly couple, had been stabbed to death by a pair of railroad tramps. The crime scene was so bloody and ghastly that no one wanted to buy the home afterwards. True or not, the home was abandoned and fell into disrepair. Everyone called it the "Haunted House," or simply referred to it by the name of the street which it haunted.

"I dare you to spend a night inside the Weeping Willow," said Johnny Parker to a group of neighborhood kids.

"Our mom told us to never go near that place," said Johnny's younger sister Maggie.

"Don't be such a wus," said Johnny condescendingly to his sister. "Come on folks, who'll take me up on my bet?"

Johnny was the neighborhood troublemaker. He was always hustling other kids for money. One time he sold copies of the same essay he'd pulled off the Internet to his mates in history class who had a writing assignment. Another time he signed up for a paper route and paid his friends to deliver the papers for a fraction of what he was paid. His moneymaking schemes were not only legendary but profitable too. He always had the latest i-Pad and wore expensive, shiny red, Zigtech sneakers.

Yet the other kids could never resist his golden pitch.

“What’s the bet?” asked Mikey Sellers, the tallest kid in the neighborhood but also the skinniest. Mikey was Johnny’s best mark. Mikey swore he’d never lose his allowance money to Johnny again but always did.

“Weren’t you listening?” said Johnny with feigned annoyance. “The first kid to spend the entire night in the Weeping Willow wins.”

“Wins what?” asked Mikey.

“That’s the best part,” said Johnny, clearly expecting the question. “To enter our contest, everyone has to put up their entire monthly allowance. Whoever spends the entire night keeps half the money.” (Johnny failed to mention he was going to keep the other half.)

“I live down the street from the Haunted House,” said Leticia Vargas, the smartest kid in class. “Weird things go on there. No one will take that bet.”

“I will,” announced one boy standing at the edge of the crowd. Everyone turned to look. He was a good looking kid, thirteen years old, with curly black hair. His name was Kevin Kramer. He lived nearby with his two younger brothers, Danny and James, in the home of their foster parents, the Bakers.

“That’s the spirit,” said Johnny, a little suspiciously. Kevin was the only kid in the neighborhood or at school whom Johnny couldn’t intimidate.

Danny and James joined the crowd. Though Danny was eleven and two years older than James, everyone thought they were twins because they looked and acted alike.

“What’s going on?” they asked in unison.

“What’s going on?” mimicked Johnny. “Where have you two been? We have a bet to see if your brother can spend an entire night in the haunted house on Weeping Willow. If he can, he’ll win a lot of money.”

“Then we want to do it too,” said Danny and James, grinning from ear to ear.

Before Kevin could protest, Johnny seized the moment. “You heard it everyone. The Kramer boys say they’re brave enough to spend the entire night in a haunted house. I bet they won’t last an hour. You know why? Cuz they’re chickens.”

“We are not,” said little James, gritting his teeth and twisting his face into a snarl. “Take it back.”

“You and your brothers have always been a bunch of whiny babies,” said Johnny. “But don’t take my word for it. Ask them.”

Johnny pointed to the other kids. “What do you think?” he asked. “Can the Kramers make it an entire night in the house?” All the other kids started arguing among themselves.

Ben Wagner spoke up for the Kramers. “I say they can. They’re tougher than you are, Johnny.”

“Yeah,” said Alexa Rodriguez, who secretly liked Kevin. Looking in his direction, she said, “I think Kevin’s plenty brave enough.”

“Then put your money where your mouths are,” shouted Johnny, thinking on the fly of a new angle to take money from his friends. “If you bet on the Kramer brothers, then you and they win if they make it the entire night in the house until dawn. But if they don’t, then I win

everything. Now go home, and meet me in front of the Weeping Willow tonight at seven sharp *with your money!*”

The kids scattered like cockroaches when the kitchen lights are switched on in the middle of the night. Only Johnny and the Kramers were left.

“So when are we doing this?” asked Kevin.

“When else?” said Johnny. “Tonight. Halloween night. See you back here at seven, and bring your money with you. Now I’ve got work to do,” he said as he trotted home.

After Johnny had left, James asked Kevin, “Do you think we’ll be alright? That house is really scary.”

“Of course. We’ll be fine,” replied Kevin. “There’s no such things as ghosts.”

James looked worried. “But you’ve heard the stories. People see strange lights inside late at night. No one lives there, so it has to be ghosts.”

Kevin sighed. “You believe those stories? People make them up just to scare kids away. Besides, we’ll have each other for protection.”

“You sure?” asked James. He looked at his older brother with eyes as big and trusting as a puppy’s.

“Absolutely. Listen, we’ve lived apart in foster homes for over three years. Now we’re back together under one roof with nice people, the Bakers. If we made it this far, we can spend one night in an old house. Besides, we sure could use the money. Our foster parents don’t have a lot of money, so some extra cash would sure come in handy.”

For the first time, Danny spoke up. “What about the Bakers? What will we tell them?”

Kevin chewed on his lower lip, deep in thought. After a few moments, he said, “I’ve got it. We’ll tell them we’re spending the night at Ben Wagner’s house after trick-or-treating. Let’s go home now so we can pack our bags.”

An hour later the Kramers showed up in front of the Weeping Willow. They looked ghostly themselves, as their faces were white as sheets. All the other kids were waiting, dressed for trick-or-treating.

“You’re late,” snapped Johnny. “We thought for a second you had chickened out.”

“Here’s our money,” said Kevin, ignoring Johnny’s taunt. Kevin handed over the contents of Danny’s, James’s, and his piggy banks. They didn’t receive an allowance, so this was all they had.

“Good,” replied Johnny indifferently, oblivious to the fact that this money represented their life savings. Johnny stuffed the Kramers’ money into a shoebox with everyone else’s. “With the Kramers’ money, we now have in the box . . . wait for it . . . two hundred dollars! Let’s get this show started.”

“Wait a second,” said Kevin. “Who’s going to watch the money while we spend the night inside?”

“I am,” said Johnny.

“Oh no, you aren’t,” said Kevin. “The money stays in the house with us. I don’t want to walk out of there tomorrow morning to find that you’ve somehow ‘lost’ our money.”

“Listen Kramer,” said Johnny, digging a finger into Kevin’s chest. “I’m running this, not you.”

Johnny had barely finished his sentence when all the kids howled in protest.

“No way, Johnny,” said Ben. “We don’t trust you. The money stays inside the house, or we walk.” All the other kids yelled in agreement.

“Fine,” conceded Johnny. “Here, Kramer. Take the money in with you, but don’t steal any. There’d better be two hundred dollars inside when I claim it tomorrow morning. Now get moving.”

Kevin took the shoebox of money and turned toward the house. He paused for a moment while Danny and James joined him on each side. The three brothers walked together toward the house, mouths dry and palms sweating. The other kids watched from the safety of the front walk.

As the boys approached, they saw details of the house in the glare of their flashlights they’d never noticed before. The house was made of wood, which had turned gray from the passing years. Several shutters dangled by a single nail, their slats chipped or broken. Perched on the sloping roof above the front porch was a gargoyle that unnerved all visitors with its creepy stare.

Some welcome. The boys gulped. What had they gotten themselves into?

They stepped onto the porch and felt the floorboards creak underneath their feet. After a moment’s hesitation, they walked to the front door and opened it. They took a deep breath and entered.

The interior of the home spoke of its former grandeur. A dusty chandelier hung in the foyer, into which curved a sweeping staircase. Danny and James turned to Kevin with a “what do we do now?” look on their faces.

Kevin’s voice didn’t reveal the fear he felt inside. “Let’s go upstairs and sleep in the front room. That way, we can see anyone who comes up the front walk or hear them if they sneak up the stairs.”

The boys walked up the stairs and into the front bedroom. Kevin made sure the door was closed tightly behind them. They unrolled their sleeping bags and crawled inside. “The best thing we can do is fall asleep,” said Kevin. “As soon as we know it, we’ll wake up and it’ll be morning.” Before zipping his sleeping bag, Kevin checked that the shoe box of money was safely next to him.

But sleep wouldn’t come. Every creak in the house, every gust of wind against the shutters, jostled them awake. If James asked, “Did you hear that?” once, he asked it a million times.

Suddenly, the creaking and howling stopped. The silence that followed was even more frightening than the noises before. The boys held their breaths and strained their ears.

“Thump.”

James raised his head in alarm. “What’s that sound?”

“Thump.”

Danny sat up. “It’s on the stairs. Someone’s walking up.”

“THUMP.”

“Kevin, are you doing that?”

“I’m right here,” replied Kevin to Danny. “I’m not doing anything.” Kevin tried to sound brave to reassure his brothers, but he was scared too.

“It’s getting closer. Kevin, what do we do?”

Before Kevin could answer, a low moan came from the hallway outside their door.

All three boys jolted upright. Kevin switched on his flashlight and shone it at the door.

With a rusty creak, the door knob slowly turned. The boys gasped and their eyes grew big as saucers. They heard the moaning again, this time accompanied by a barely audible growl.

Someone—or some thing—pushed against the door, but it wouldn’t budge. The door hadn’t been closed in ages, and now it was stuck. Whatever was on the other side shook the door in a frenzy. With each rattle, the boys’ terror mounted.

“Kevin, make it stop!” James held his hands over his ears.

Without explanation, the rattling ceased. The boys heard footsteps receding down the hall. Then silence.

The boys looked at one another, mouths open in disbelief.

James whispered, “Do you think it’s gone?”

No one dared answer. They waited another minute, but it felt like an eternity.

Finally, Danny whispered, "It's gone. Now's our chance to get out of here." He jumped up and ran to the door.

"Where are you going?" asked Kevin. "What about the bet?"

"What about it?" replied Danny. "I'm not sticking around here with that thing in the house. Let's get out of here while we can."

James chimed in. "Please, Kevin. I'm scared. Let's get out of here."

"But we don't want to let Johnny Parker win, do we?" pleaded Kevin.

Danny and James didn't respond. They didn't need to, because the look on their faces said it all.

"Fine," said Kevin. "I'll go with you. But what about the shoebox?"

Danny said, "Johnny said to leave it here."

Kevin looked dejectedly at the shoebox on the floor, thinking of all the razzing he would take from Johnny in the coming week. "Let's go," he said with a sigh.

But when they tried to open the door, it wouldn't budge.

"What do we do now?" asked James.

"If we all push and pull on the door together," said Kevin, "I think we can open it."

James shook his head. "But that will make a lot of noise. The thing will hear us."

"Do you want to spend the entire night in this room?" asked Kevin.

“No.”

“Then let’s all pull together.” Kevin grabbed the door knob. Danny grabbed Kevin by the waist, and James grabbed Danny.

“On the count of three, everyone pull,” commanded Kevin. “One, two, three!”

The brothers pulled with all their strength, and the door bent under the force. Still, it wouldn’t open.

“One more time,” said Kevin, “but harder. Here we go. One, two, THREE!”

The door flew open with a crash, sending the boys sprawling to the floor. Wasting no time, they sprang to their feet and rushed toward the door. James, in the lead, yelled, “Let’s get out of here!”

As James jumped through the door, he slammed with a thud into something standing in the darkened hallway. Danny ran into the back of James. Kevin, bringing up the rear, switched on his flashlight and shone it into the hallway.

It was worse than anything in their nightmares. There in the hallway stood two ghosts, covered in blood. A long knife stuck out from the chest of one. The other had an ice pick skewered through its neck.

Danny shouted, “It’s the ghosts of the people who were killed here.”

Both ghosts let out a blood curdling scream that raised the hair on the backs of the boys’ necks. One ghost pulled from the folds of its shadowy form a bony hand and pointed it at James. James froze in terror. As he watched, blood dripped from the bony fingers onto the floor.

That was enough for James. He ran screaming down the stairs, banged open the front door, and sobbed all the way home. Danny wasn't far behind, screaming so loudly that he set off car alarms along Weeping Willow Street.

Kevin froze in the hallway, unsure what to do next. The ghost with a knife in its chest jerked its head toward him and growled, which was enough to cure Kevin of his indecision. Kevin bounded down the stairs, still trying to make sense of what had happened. He hadn't believed in ghosts before, but what he'd seen tonight convinced him they were very real. And scary too. The image of that ghost would be seared into his memory forever. Its ear piercing scream, the knife sticking from its chest, blood dripping from its gnarled fingers, its shiny red sneakers . . .

Kevin stopped in his tracks, just feet from the front door. "Wait a second. Red sneakers? That was Johnny dressed as a ghost. I bet the other ghost was Mikey Sellers. Well, two can play this game."

At the top of his lungs, Kevin shouted, "I'm outta here," and slammed the front door shut. He stomped his feet on the floorboards, loudly at first and then softly. He looked around for a hiding place and spied a room off the front parlor. He dashed in there and waited.

Kevin heard nothing at first except the sound of his own heavy breathing. Suddenly, laughter broke out on the second floor. It was Johnny and Mike alright. Kevin heard the sounds of high fives smacking and lot of trash talking.

It was time to turn the tables. Kevin looked around the room. Off in the corner he saw a pile of white sheets and a bucket of red paint. Kevin put on one of the sheets and used a paint brush to cover himself with blood. He took off his shoes so he wouldn't make the same mistake

that Johnny had. From the fireplace in the room, Kevin grabbed two heavy fire pokers. For good measure, he dipped them into the paint can.

Upstairs Johnny and Mikey had taken off their costumes and were counting the money. “Three dollars for me, one for you,” said Johnny. As usual, Mikey had come cheap.

“Of course, it’s not about the money,” Johnny explained. “Did you see the looks on their faces?”

Mikey’s jaw dropped. “If it’s not about the money, can I have your share?”

“That was just a figure of speech,” said Johnny. “Speaking of faces, you should’ve seen yours just now.” Johnny was about to fire off another wisecrack when he was interrupted by a thud coming from downstairs.

“What was that?” asked Mikey. “It sounds like the footsteps we were making, only louder.”

“Shhh,” whispered Johnny. “It’s coming up the stairs.”

Indeed, “it” was. Kevin, clothed from head to toe in white sheets bloodied in paint, was banging the cast iron pokers on each step he climbed. When he came to the upstairs front room, he banged on the door with one of the pokers. The deep thud shook the house down to its very foundation.

Kevin put his ear to the door. Inside he heard scurrying and a noise that sounded like whimpering. He knocked again and listened. This time there was no sound from inside.

Kevin pushed on the door, but it was stuck again. Kevin looked at the heavy pokers in his hands, then at the door.

Seconds later, the entire door came crashing in. Johnny and Mikey cowered in the corner, trembling with fear. Through the door stepped a ghost covered in gore, holding what appeared to be swords tipped in blood.

“Please don’t hurt us,” begged Johnny. “We’re sorry we came into your house. Please let us go.”

Kevin raised one poker directly at Johnny, and then gestured with it toward the door. Johnny didn’t need to be told twice. He grabbed Mikey by the hand and dashed out the door. It seemed like his feet didn’t touch the ground until he and Mikey were halfway down Weeping Willow Street.

Kevin stood in the front room window and watched them go. At one point, Johnny stopped to look back. Kevin shook the poker at Johnny, who didn’t stop again until he dove underneath his bed at home.

As Kevin watched Johnny and Mikey run out of sight, the sun poked its rays over the horizon. Morning had come at last. Kevin took off the sheet, and tidied up the house as best he could. He picked up the shoebox, and decided to give all the money to his brothers once he got home. They deserved it. Kevin had a reward better than money. On this Halloween night, the trick was much better than the treat.

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