

The Adventures of Rupert Starbright ~ Book Three

The Ghost of Winter Joy



Mike DiCerto



The Adventures of
Rupert Starbright
Book 3

THE GHOST of WINTER JOY



Mike DiCerto



This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

THE GHOST OF WINTER JOY

© 2013 by Mike DiCerto

ISBN 978-1-612710-92-1

Cover art © Brad W. Foster

Cover Design © Tamian Wood

All rights reserved. Except for use in review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means now known or hereafter invented, is prohibited without the written permission of the author or publisher.

“Zumaya Thresholds” and the dodo colophon are trademarks of Zumaya Publications LLC, Austin TX,
<http://www.zumayapublications.com>

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

DiCerto, Michael, 1965-

The ghost of Winter Joy / Mike DiCerto.

pages cm — (The adventures of Rupert Starbright ; book 3)

ISBN 978-1-61271-111-9 (trade pbk. : alk. paper) —
ISBN 978-1-61271-112-6) — ISBN 978-1-61271-113-3
(epub : alk. paper)

I. Title.

PZ7.D546Gh 2014

[Fic]—dc23

2013046752

To Grandparents

ALL OF THEM. ON EARTH. IN THE BEYOND.

Chapter 1

A Tinkle and a Twinkle

There was only one spot of land at No. 17 The Curving Road that Rupert Dullz didn't mind raking. It was a spot in back of his house where four large trees stood in a clump like chatty kids in his schoolyard.

Standing in this mini-forest reminded Rupert of The Garden of Dreams in Far-Myst. It was the *only* place in his boring town of Graysland that reminded him of his adventure in that wondrous, colorful land he helped to save from the terrible mind of Murkus.

That had been only six months ago, but it felt like a million years.

Rupert sat on the old tree stump that had been a mighty tree years and years before he was born. In the bark of the tallest of the four trees, the word *Folky* had been carved up way over his head in a fanciful script. He wondered for about the millionth time what *Folky* meant and who

had taken the time to scratch the bark with such neat and pretty writing.

He pushed his rake across the leaf-covered ground and poked the edge of the mulch pile in the corner against the old wooden fence that marked off his yard from his neighbor Mrs. Clearlynuts's.

"Rupert!" his father Polgus called. "You finished tidying up the yardback?"

The folks in Graysland weren't very clever when it came to naming things, so the yards in the back of the houses were just called yardbacks.

"Almost, Dad."

He stood and started lazily raking again. He moved the little piles of leaves he'd gathered into the big pile and looked around. *Good enough*, he decided. He used his rake to pack the old leaves down.

"Hurry up, Mister Dullz! We still have the front walk to clear!"

Rupert bit his lip and sighed hard.

"Yeah, Dad!"

Rupert hated to be called Dullz. Ever since his adventure, he had wanted everyone to call him Rupert *Starbright*. Of course, no one did. Even his best bud Squeem had doubts that Rupert had actually traveled to the magical land. The few times he had tried to share his adventure with his friends they just laughed and snickered.

He lifted the chain that hung around his neck. Once, the fish key he had Imagined had hung on it. Now, it was gone. It hadn't fallen off or gotten lost. It had simply vanished when he returned to Graysland.

He looked up at the sky, past the towering trees and into the gray clouds that blanketed the world. He did this often, hoping to see the bright and colorful bagoon of Pie O'Sky. He never did.

"Mister Dullz! This instant!" shouted his father.

Rupert flung the rake at the leaf pile in frustration. A soft *tinkle* sounded from beneath the rotting leaves. Like a little bell. It was muffled, but Rupert was certain he'd heard it. Curious, he picked up the rake and whacked the leaves again. Nothing. He tried one more time.

Tinkle.

A little smile teased up the corner of his lips, and he whacked the pile again. Once again came the mysterious sound.

Using the rake, he began digging. Clump by clump, he removed leaves and mud and tossed them aside. He banged the surface again, and this time the bell sound was a bit louder. An itty bit clearer. Growing more curious, he dug and dug. Banged and banged. The tinkle grew louder and clearer.

Rupert was unaware of the utter mess he was making as he flung the old rotting leaves all around the yard-back. He no longer heard his father's shouts. He was focused on the mystery buried under his feet.

Finally, when he was knee-deep in the hole, he tapped the ground.

Tinkle!

He grinned and knelt down and, using his hands, began to dig. He tossed fistfuls of mud up and out of the hole until finally he saw it. A twinkle of gold light winked at him. It was the same color as Pie O'Sky's rings. He took hold of the treasure and pulled it from the ground.

It was a little golden bell.

Rupert cleaned it off with his shirt and discovered little engraved moons and cat faces decorated it. He shook it and let a big old smile open on his face as its pretty, clear voice rang out. He was certain he saw a shimmer of golden light flicker across the surface of the bell, too. He rang it again.

Then, without warning, a cold gust of wind blew across the yard and sent a wicked chill up his spine. He shivered.

"What in the name of cheese are you digging for?"

Rupert looked up to see the round walrus face of his father glaring down at him.

"Dad! Look! It was buried! Isn't it cool?"

Polgus took the bell from Rupert. He examined it, and a sudden look of worry wrinkled his brow.

"Imagine that, Dad! All these years it was buried right in our own yardback!"

"Up here this instant!"

Rupert rolled his eyes and climbed out of the hole. His father looked around at the mess, one hand on his hip and the other holding the bell like a dead frog. His mouth was contorted into such a tight frown it looked like he would swallow his mustache.

"Will you please explain this mess?"

What a mess, indeed! Rupert chuckled.

"Nothing amusing, Mr. Dullz."

"I heard the bell. Under the ground. I had to free it! Isn't it great!"

"What will be great is you getting this yardback cleaned up! As for this *thing*—I will dispose of it properly."

"Why?"

"It was buried in the dirt. It should go right back where it belongs. With the worms. I've heard stories about such bells."

"What kind of stories?"

"Never you mind. Get to work."

Chapter 2

An Old and Wise Tale of Tails

Rupert, his dad Polgus, his mom Olga and his grandma Folka sat around the dining room table having their evening meal. Rupert stopped eating and played in his bowl of crispyslop soup with his spoon as he watched his grandma. She sat across from him, carefully lifting the spoon to her wrinkled lips.

“Grandma, I found this really cool bell buried in the yardback.”

Folka stopped eating, and a curious look tied some of the lines in her face into knots.

“Rupert, some things are better left forgotten. Now, eat,” Polgus ordered.

“What sort of a bell?” Folka asked.

“This one.” Rupert held up the bell that was hidden on his lap.

"Rupert! I threw that away! Did you go digging in the trash?" Polgus shouted.

Grandma's eyes seemed to be looking far away, as if she was looking for a memory.

"Where did you find that?" she asked in a voice not much louder than a whisper.

"Buried underneath that old pile of leaves in the yard-back," Rupert explained with great excitement.

"Did you ring it?" Folka whispered.

"Sure. It sounds nice." He rang it.

What little color was in Folka's face drained away. She coughed.

"What's wrong, Mother?"

"Nothing, dear. Nothing." She coughed again.

"I thought your coffus was gone, Grandma," Rupert said sadly.

"Oh, its been better thanks to that wonderful red dripsludge of yours."

"That isn't dripsludge, That's a special cure from Far-Myst."

Rupert knew it was just red water, a nasty trick played on him by Murkus. Yet, deep down, he had hoped somehow his grandma would *think* it was real medicine and it would cure her. And it had! But just for a while.

Rupert felt his father staring at him and turned to face him.

"It was, Dad! A special, magical liquid."

"Magic potions, evil bells," Polgus huffed. "If only I could keep that outrageous imagination of yours focused on schoolwork."

"How do you know the bell is evil, Dad? What's the bell for, Grandma?"

He set it gently on the table.

"The Winter Joy," Folka murmured. A little faraway smile that was at once happy and sad lit her eyes.

“Mother, never mind,” Olga said.

“Dear,” Folka scolded her daughter, “something spoken is not something done. Better to know and know why than not know and walk the dodo.”

“You and your old sayings,” Polgus muttered.

Rupert smiled. “Tell me, Grandma. Please.”

“The Winter Joy was a special and wondrous holiday,” she said. “On the night when the Eyes of Aranthal were in the sky over the moon, the Cat of Winter Joy would travel the land and leave gifts for all the folks in the world who had been kind to others. Who had shared and not gossiped. Who were good neighbors.”

“People would decorate a special tree with trinkets.” Olga smiled, too, as she recalled the details. “People made special meals and would visit all their neighbors and share the treats. Families who were poor were given extra. Songs were sung.”

“What does the bell have to do with Winter Joy?”

The lines on Folka’s face were like diaries full of many old tales, and she stroked them as if flipping pages on a dog-eared and dusty book.

“Everyone would ring their gildens – that’s what the bells are called – on the eve of Winter Joy. In the town square the great bell – the *Gildengroat* – was rung, too, and we all would gather to hear it. Until one night...”

She stopped, and her forehead wrinkled even more. Rupert was at the edge of his seat.

“Don’t stop now, Grandma!”

She went into a coughing fit, and then her smile came back.

“Anyway, often a great snowfall would cover the land like a lovely blanket. There was something in the air. An indescribable something that you could feel in your heart.”

"Wow." Rupert sighed. "Why did people stop doing the Winter Joy stuff?"

"I guess times just changed. A law was passed that made it against the law to have leaves on your lawn and driveway and such. People started getting real fussy about things."

"Father used to talk about a man named Ensen Starkey," Olga said. "I think he may have had something to do with that."

"Rich bugger," Polgus chimed in. "Made a miser's fortune selling rakes, lucky codger. Wish my old man would have jumped on that business. You remember that Starkey fellow, Folka?"

"He's just a blur. Not sure if that tale is true. Do you remember celebrating Winter Joy as a boy, Polgus?"

"Just bits," Polgus said as a tiny smile lifted the corner of his mouth. "Was too young. But my pops told me about waking up and seeing the snow covering the trinket tree and eating the honey cakes. He used to go to the square for the bell-ringing as a boy. Wish he would have gotten a piece of that rake action!"

"What happened to the big bell?" Rupert asked.

"I'm not sure," Folka said. "My memory of the Winter Joy are so faded."

"Story is," Polgus said, "it ended up in one of those big ugly houses on Old Homes Road."

"Like that big empty house they say has ghosts?" Rupert was even more excited.

"Silly rumors," Polgus said with a chuckle.

"What about the Winter Joy Cat? Did he keep coming and bringing gifts after? Did people still put trinkets on trees and sing songs anyway? What about all the little bells?"

An odd look came over his grandmother's face, and it melted her smile to a frown. She cleared her throat.

Polgus stood up.

"Enough talk of Winter Joy. Time for dessert. Rupert, help me serve the sweet ice. And take that filthy thing off the table!"

"Yes, Rupert, enough. Help your father."

"Yes, Grandma."

"And Rupert—don't ring the bell anymore. It's old. A relic. Wouldn't want to break it."

Rupert took the bell back into his hands. It felt sturdy enough, but he just nodded and joined his father.

Chapter 3

A Jeoper and a Creeper

Rupert couldn't sleep. The whole idea of Winter Joy had really sparked his imagination. He couldn't believe that a boring place like Graysland had once had such a colorful and *unboring* holiday.

He held the bell out into a beam of moonlight that was shining in through his little window. He studied the little engraved moons and cat faces.

I wonder why Grandma asked me not to ring it?

A feeling came over him. He wanted to ring the bell again. He knew he shouldn't, but something seemed to be calling him to do it.

He studied the face of one little cat, and it came alive and roared at him like an angry lion! Startled, he flung the bell away, and it landed on his bedroom floor with a series of *tingles*.

Rupert sat frozen. Did that cat really roar at him, or was he dreaming? A chill crawled up his spine like a spider. He wondered if his grandmother had heard the sound. He slipped out of bed and knelt beside the bell.

As he reached for it, a shadow swept across his room. He shot a glance to his window. The sound of crunching leaves came from outside. Who could be out there?

Rupert tiptoed over to investigate. He peeled away the curtain and peered out, and his eyes widened.

Something raced across The Curving Road. Was it a dog? But it ran on a bunch of legs like a huge, hairy spider and had a head like a lizard's. It churned up the fallen leaves as it galloped off and vanished down the street.

That was no dog! Rupert thought. He shivered and sat on the edge of his bed. He'd hated spiders ever since one had bitten him when he was in his basement trying to find the light switch in the dark.

He looked at the little can of soil on his dresser where he had planted the pepper poet seeds he'd brought back from Far-Myst. He wished the plant would grow. Maybe it could explain the strange things that had just happened.

He looked down at the bell and decided to leave it where it was. He crawled into bed and threw the covers over his head. That night he had nightmares of big hairy spiders.



Rupert stood by Squeem's locker, one of dozens that lined the off-white hallway of Graysland Grammar School. The locker was a disaster; Squeem could barely open it without causing an avalanche of papers, books, clothing, old half-eaten sandwiches, rocks and a leaf or two.

Now, Rupert was trying to be patient as Squeem tried to find his jacket, balancing books and smelly articles of clothing as he dug deeper.

"Would you hurry? I want to get home so I can do homework. We have a long night ahead."

"Huh? Why? What are we doing?" Squeem juggled three large textbooks that had cascaded from the top shelf.

Rupert grinned with the excitement he was trying to keep inside and leaned closer.

"We're gonna take a walk to the creepy houses on Old Homes Road. Visit the haunted one."

"You nuts? There's ghosts and killers and rats in those houses!"

"What's there to be scared of?"

Squeem turned to him and pretended to think deeply.

"Oh, let's see...*ghosts and killers and rats.*"

"Squeem." Rupert lowered his voice. "I found this little gold bell in my yard. It was buried. Something weird about it. My grandma says it's what they used to ring in olden days on this special holiday called Winter Joy. She didn't want me to ring it. She seemed scared of it. But I did, and..."

Squeem waited for the end of the sentence then asked, "And what?"

"And I saw this thing, this big giant spider-lizard dog outside my house."

Squeem looked at him like he had sixteen noses.

"I know you think I'm nuts, but I'm dead serious. It was bizarre. And I think it had something to do with the bell. And my grandma said there used to be this giant bell in the town square that just disappeared one day. I don't know why, but I think it might be in that big haunted house."

Squeem was still studying Rupert's many noses.

"Squeem! Just don't be a dull-head. We'll sneak out and go explore that old creepy place. It'll be exciting!"

Squeem shook his head slightly then smiled.

“What are you looking at?” Rupert asked, suddenly feeling self-conscious.

“You’re not the same since you met that funny guy in the balloon.”

“Bagoon. And, you’re right. I had this amazing adventure. It was scary, but it was just so...” He tried to find the right word but couldn’t.

“What?”

“It’s like when you go on an adventure, you really live. Maybe you have to have danger to appreciate what you have.”

“Wow.” Squeem sounded impressed. “I just wanna go home and eat some green potato soup, watch some boring TV show about leaves and go to sleep.”

“Wouldn’t it be more fun to go on an adventure and see if that giant bell is still in that house? Maybe there’s all kinds of treasure!”

Squeem thought about it, and a tiny smile began to form on his face. Rupert nudged him and forced the smile all the way out.

“Treasure?” Squeem repeated.

Rupert nodded.

They slapped palms excitedly.

Chapter 4

Bring on the Night

Rupert sat in his easy chair in the living room with a schoolbook on his lap. Grandma Folka was snoring in her lounging chair, and his parents sat beside each other on the couch. His mother was reading a medical journal, and his father was going over some numbers on a sheet of paper.

He looked at the clock on the wall. It said one minute to nine.

"I think I'll go to bed. Kinda tired," he announced, slamming the History of Leaf Gathering Implements shut.

"Well, well! There must be two moons in the sky," Polgus said with a chuckle. "A first for everything. Going to bed without a battle."

"Hey, Dad, maybe the Eyes of Aranthal are in the sky and the Winter Cat is gonna come," Rupert said with a devilish smile.

"Get to bed!" Polgus huffed, going back to his work.

Rupert smiled and kissed his mother's and grandma's cheeks and wished them goodnight. He stepped up to

his father, who cracked a smile and held out his face. Rupert gave his dad a peck on the cheek, too, and headed into his room.

"Night, Dad," he called out as he closed his bedroom door.

"Good dreams, son."



Rupert took a flashlamp from his dresser drawer and put it in a small black-cloth bag. He then knelt and took from under his bed an object wrapped in a faded blue T-shirt. He placed it gently on his bed and unwrapped it.

The little bell with its cat faces stared back at him, and he felt like he was falling into its gaze. Finally, though, he was able to snap his eyes away from it.

"You're a mystery," he whispered.

He rewrapped it tightly and placed it in the bag with the flashlamp. He glanced at the little clock that sat on a table beside his bed. Two minutes past nine. In twenty-eight minutes, he would squeeze out his little window and meet Squeem on the corner of The Curving Road and Hollow Tree Way.

Rupert took his pillow and shaped it under his blanket so it would look like he was asleep, in case his parents checked on him. He then sat on the edge of the bed and stared at the window.

He wondered if any more of the creatures would be wandering around. It would be much scarier to see those green eyes glowing on a pitch-black road — all the street lamps on Old Homes Avenue were broken, so it would be as dark as the Wildness of Far-Myst.

Time oozed by like dripsludge off a spoon. Rupert felt like his mind was going to explode. He wished he could use his Imaginings to speed up the clock. What was it about this little bell? Why did it make him feel so creepy? Did

it have something to do with the mysterious spider-thing he'd seen?

Boy, even Dream Weaver would be impressed with this mystery!

For the first time in his life, he didn't think his hometown was boring. There was actually something cool going on!

A shadow passed in front of his window, and Rupert's heart skipped a beat. He stood up and tiptoed to the curtains. He could hear the soft sound of crunching leaves just outside on his lawn. He ducked down below the sill and slowly peeked over like the moon on the horizon.

A face popped up, and two eyes were staring right at him! Rupert gasped and jumped back, falling onto his rump. He saw Squeem on the other side of the window, and he felt like a total dufus.

"Squeem, you moron!" he said, probably too loudly. He rushed to the window and lifted it fully open. "I told you to meet me on the corner of Hollow Tree!"

"I went there."

"And what are you doing here?"

"I was scared," Squeem said sheepishly. "It's creepy on that corner at night by yourself."

Rupert smiled. It probably was.

"Let me get my stuff," he said as he grabbed the black cloth bag. He handed it to Squeem and carefully crawled out. He closed the window halfway and gave Squeem a huge smile. "Let's go!"

They rushed off on quiet tiptoes down The Curving Road two blocks to Hollow Tree Way. At the corner they stopped before the massive trunk of the giant tree that stood leafless all year round and gave the path its name. Against a moonlit sky, it was like the skeleton of some huge prehistoric animal.

There was no moon this night, and the tree was just a shadow against an even more shadowy world around it. The closest streetlight was half a block behind them, and as Rupert and Squeem approached the corner, their two long shadows moved like ghosts across the pavement in front of them.

They stopped at the beginning of Hollow Tree Way and looked down the snaking street. It was dark and seemed more like a cave, as it was lined with overhanging trees and had not a single house.

“Ready?” Rupert asked.

Squeem’s face was pale, but he nodded. They took out their flashlamps, turned them on and started down the gloomy path.

Chapter 5

The Pitchiest Black

Even with two flashlamps, the darkness hung around them like a wet sweater. It was like trying to cut a slab of tough porker steak with two pencils. The two boys took careful steps, watching for potholes and glowing eyes.

The trees rustled in the breeze, and there was the occasional sound of little feet scampering and the chirping of bugs and night birds. Their footsteps cracked and popped no matter how hard they tried to step silently.

"It's so dark," Squeem whispered. "How far is Old Homes Avenue?"

"Not that far," Rupert said as he jumped over a large stone in the road.

A stick cracked. The two boys froze.

"Something's up there," Squeem gasped.

"Relax. Probably just a squirrel," Rupert assured him as he waved the flashlight towards the sound. The beam barely had the energy to push the night back.

They marched on, their ears cocked and their eyes straining to see any possible danger.

There was another snap. This time it was like a gunshot.

"If that's a squirrel then it's the size of a horse!" Squeem said, grabbing Rupert's jacket sleeve.

Rupert swallowed his fear. He did not want to admit he was scared. He had learned in Far-Myst it was okay to be scared, but the fear had to be controlled. You couldn't let it control you. He had to be the leader on this quest. It had been his idea and was responsible for his friend.

He stopped and reached into his bag. He carefully removed the bell wrapped in the T-shirt and held it in his hand.

"What's that?" Squeem asked.

"It's that bell I told you about."

"Why did you bring it?"

Rupert wasn't sure what to say. He shrugged. Squeem gave him a doubtful look and they trudged on. After five more minutes of walking, they came to the intersection where Old Homes Avenue began.

Most of the houses there were, well, old. And empty. They had all been built long before Rupert or even his parents were born. They all looked different, and this made them the target of insults by modern-day Grayslander adults.

"Why would you want to live in a house that's different from your neighbor's?" they said. "Those weird old houses all need to rot and be torn down and replaced by proper Graysland houses! They're the stuff of nightmares!"

Rupert and Squeem stepped up to the front gate of the first house on Old Homes Avenue. It was old Crabstick's house. Malcolm Crabstick was a hermit they would sometimes see in town buying food or leaf bags.

They stopped to listen and scan around them. It all looked so much scarier in the dark. Every little breeze

was the breath of a killer. Every little crack of a twig was the approach of a deadly spider-dog creature.

"The old mansion we want is down there about half a mile," Rupert said, pointing.

"Then what?"

"Then what, what?"

"What do we do when we get to the mansion?"

That was a good question. Rupert wasn't really sure. He just felt drawn to see the place. He didn't really believe there were ghosts in the house—at least, not bad ones. And ever since he'd found the little bell and learned about Winter Joy, he'd felt a tug in his stomach. A tug of anger. How could one man ruin such a beautiful thing for so many people?

If the Gildengroat was still sitting in that old house just getting dusty and rusty, maybe it could be returned to the townsfolk. Maybe then people would want to start celebrating Winter Joy again. Maybe this would be the beginning of the end of Graysland being the most boring place ever.

"I just wanna see if it's there." he stated.

"The big bell?"

Rupert nodded.

There was another crack of a branch. Then another. Then another! Their flashlamp beams swished and slashed across and into the night, revealing nothing but trees, leaves and bushes.

Another crack—this one behind them.

"Turn off your light," Rupert whispered to Squeem and turned off his own.

"Why?"

"Just do it."

Squeem reluctantly did, and they stood silently in the pitchiest black night. Rupert slowly turned around.

He saw them. He swallowed hard and slowly began unwrapping the little bell.

“What’s up?” Squeem asked.

“Just get ready to run—*forward*.”

Confused, Squeem turned to look, and he saw them. Green eyes. Many green eyes.

“We’re dead.” he gasped.

“No,” Rupert said. He kept his gaze on them as he unwrapped the bell. “Gonna see if the bell will scare—”

There was a sudden chorus of hisses, and the eyes bounded towards them like angry green bees.

“*Run!*”

Chapter 6

A Light in the Night

Rupert raced down the dark street with Squeem close behind. He was holding the bell by its waist so it was only able to make dull muffled tones. The old abandoned houses flashed by as dim blurs. Flashlamp light glinted on broken glass or faded paint on rotting wood.

Then Rupert saw it. A light. A soft yellow light floating in the air among the trees down at the far end of the road. A candle! A candle flickering in a window of the last house.

The mansion!

He shot a glance over his shoulder. Squeem was struggling to keep his legs moving. The green eyes were close behind. He never saw the thick, twisted branch lying like a frozen snake across the road.

Rupert's ankle slammed into it, and he was sent head over butt through the air and onto the hard, dusty ground. The bell flew from his grip and landed in the dark. Silently.

The flashlamp flew, too, and plopped on the road; its beam continued to glow.

Squeem tripped over Rupert and landed with a painful *oomph!* He managed to hold onto his lamp.

Rupert ignored the pain in his ankle and looked for the creatures. They stopped running and walked around him and Squeem to form a circle. Squeem crawled closer, and they sat back-to-back in a ring of glowing eyes. The breath of the dark creatures puffed in wet and steamy clouds. They hissed like snakes.

"What are we gonna do?" Squeem asked, his voice trembling with fear. "They're gonna eat us!"

Suddenly, there was the sound of approaching footsteps, and a deep voice shouted, "Begone!"

The creatures backed off a bit. Rupert turned his head and saw a tall figure approaching. The man was dressed in a black cloak with a baggy hood that covered most of his face. Just his pointy, stubbly chin and a crooked mouth peeked out.

He raised his arms high and wide and cried out again, "Begone, I say!"

Seven of the eight creatures obeyed, but the eighth remained and stared defiantly.

"I said *begone!*" the hooded man shouted for the third time, so loudly it startled the boys. His voice echoed down the road.

The spider thing lowered its head and walked off. Rupert wasn't sure if it simply disappeared into the shadows or actually vanished.

He and Squeem looked at the man.

"Thanks, mister," Squeem said.

"Who are you? Why are you on my road?" the man demanded.

Squeem's face went white, and he was too scared to reply. Rupert took a deep breath to gather his courage.

"We were just heading home."

"Home? Where? Why are you out after dark?"

"We'll just be on our way," Rupert said, getting to his feet. He stumbled a bit as the pain in his ankle flared. He helped Squeem stand then picked up his fallen flashlamp and began scanning the ground.

"What are you looking for?"

"His bell," Squeem said before Rupert could shut him up with a stern glare.

"Bell? What bell?"

"Nothing," Rupert said. "We'll be gone in a few minutes. Thanks for your help."

"Who sent you? Are you here to spy on me?"

"No." Rupert insisted. "Like I said — we were just heading home."

"Liars!" The man took a large, ancient-looking pistol from his cloak and pointed it at them. "You will come with me!"

Rupert felt like running off into the darkness. He figured if he ran zigzaggy he would be hard to hit, and he could vanish into the night like the creatures had.

But the throbbing in his ankle reminded him that would be difficult. And Squeem was frozen with fear, and he couldn't leave him behind.

"We swear, mister, we're not spies. Let me just get my thing, and we'll be gone. Never come here again." he offered in as friendly a voice as he could manage.

"No!" the man shouted. "Go! That way. Now!"

He pointed towards the last house. The one with the candle burning in the upper window.

Rupert swallowed hard and patted Squeem on the shoulder.

"Let's do what he says," he whispered.

"Go!"

Rupert ignored the pain in his ankle, and they started toward the mansion. The hooded man prodded them on with the barrel of the pistol.

If you enjoyed the sample, you need not stop there!

[Buy Now - Amazon](#)

[Buy Now - B&N](#)

Check www.zumayapublications.com for other retailer links.

