









STORM & SHADE

Why? There's no one answer. The mortal families who attempted to dwell within the mansion have always abandoned it within a year or two... or a month or two... or, occasionally, only an hour or two. But abandon it they inevitably did, whether in terror, in mourning, or in hearses. When they try to describe what they witnessed, what they felt, words fail them completely. (Assuming they can still speak. Some of them can only weep, or scream, for a very long time afterward.)

At first glance—a stolen look, perhaps, from the gates that offer passage through the brick walls that surround the estate—the mansion doesn't appear so very different from other great houses in New Orleans: the tall white columns at the front of the house, the cast-iron fence, the glint of candlelight behind its windows at night. Then you ask yourself why candles are burning in an abandoned house. Don't panic! The glow you see isn't fire, exactly. It's something far stranger.

The fates of those who have chosen to enter the mansion vary widely. Some left with their hair gone white from fright. Some never left at all. The example of one girl's destiny after her decision to explore the Haunted Mansion may serve as a lesson about the very nature of fear itself. . . .

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Doctor Ron gave her a look over the rims of his reading glasses. "Your parents still work outside the house, though, don't they?"

There wasn't much way to be homeschooled if nobody was home. Audrey tried again: "One of them could work remotely, maybe. Tons more offices allow it now, right?"

"Yes, but not every job can be done remotely, and not every office is open to telework when it's not absolutely necessary." *Telework?* Doctor Ron tried to keep current but sometimes fell short. "Also, if your parents were putting in enough effort to homeschool you, they probably wouldn't have time to do their jobs at all."

"Still. I could ask."

"You could," Doctor Ron said. He was constantly, soothingly calm, which was one of the things Audrey liked best about him, but when his voice took on this slow, gentle tone, she knew he was trying to buffer bad news. "But you said that your parents went over this with you pretty thoroughly the first time. Do you have any reason to think they've become more receptive to the idea?"

Audrey slumped back onto the couch. "No. They're convinced this move is the greatest thing that's ever happened to me. Ooooh, a fancy school in New Orleans. All-girls schools provide a better learning environment. School uniforms mean nobody gets bullied for what they wear. Blah blah blah." She

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folded her arms across her chest. "It's that last one that gets me. Great, so nobody will bully me for what I'm wearing—instead, they'll bully me for something else! Uniforms stimulate creative bullying. This is what they're calling the 'bright side.'"

Doctor Ron laughed. She liked it when he thought she was funny, even though he never let that distract them for long. "You had hardships at your old school, though, didn't you? It certainly wasn't perfect."

"No," she admitted. "But I had Chase there with me. And I knew what I was dealing with. Here I won't know."

"What if you're ready for it?"

"What if I'm not?"



