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MANUSCRIPT

Chapter 1 – Halloween

Weaving down the hall, Cole avoided a ninja, a witch, a pirate, and a zombie bride. He paused when a sad clown in a trench coat and fedora waved at him. “Dalton?”

His friend nodded and smiled, which looked weird since his mouth was painted into a frown. “I wondered if you’d recognize me.”

“It wasn’t easy,” Cole replied, relieved to see that his best friend had worn an elaborate costume. He had worried that his own outfit was too much.

They met up in the middle of the hall. Kids streamed by on either side, some dressed for Halloween, some not.

“Ready to score some candy tonight?” Dalton asked.

Cole hesitated. Now that they were sixth graders, he was a little nervous people might think they were too old to go door to door. He didn’t want to look like a kindergartener. “Have you heard about the haunted house on Wilson?”

“The spook alley house?” Dalton clarified. “I heard it has live rats and snakes.”

Cole nodded. “The guy who moved in there is supposed to be a special effects expert. I guess he worked on some big movies. It might just be hype, but I keep hearing amazing things. We should check it out.”

“Yeah, sure, I’m curious,” Dalton said. “But I don’t want to skip the candy.”

Cole thought for a minute. He *had* noticed some sixth graders trick-or-treating in his neighborhood last year. A few kids had looked even older. Besides, did it matter what

anyone else thought? If people were handing out free candy, why not take advantage? They already had the costumes. “Okay. We can start early.”

“That’ll work.”

The first bell rang. Class would start soon. “See you,” Cole said.

“Later.”

Cole walked into his classroom, noticing that Jenna Hunt was already at her desk. Cole tried not to care. He liked her, but not in *that* way. Sure, in the past, he might have felt excited and scared whenever she was around, but now she was just a friend.

At least that was what he kept telling himself as he tried to take his seat behind her desk. He was dressed up as a scarecrow that had been used for archery practice. The feathered shafts protruding from his chest and side made it tricky to sit down.

Had he ever had a crush on Jenna? Maybe, when he was younger. During second grade, the girls went through a phase where they ran around trying to kiss the boys at recess. It had been disgusting. Like tag, except with cooties involved. The teachers had been against it. Cole had been against it too--except with Jenna. When she was chasing him, a secret part of him wanted to get caught.

It wasn’t his fault that he kept noticing Jenna during third, fourth, and fifth grade. She was too pretty. He wasn’t the only one who thought so. She had modeled in some catalogs. Her dark hair had just the right amount of curl, and her thick eyelashes made her eyes look made-up even when she wasn’t wearing make-up.

He used to sometimes daydream about older jerks picking on Jenna. In his imagination, he would come along and save the day with a burst of bravery and action movie karate skills. Afterward, he would be forced to suffer through her tearful thanks.

But everything had changed at the start of sixth grade. Jenna had not only ended up in his class, but by pure chance the seating chart had placed him directly behind her. They had worked together on group projects. He had learned to relax around her, and they had started to talk regularly and make jokes. She had turned out to be cooler than he had hoped. They were actually becoming friends. So there was no reason for his heart to pound just because she was dressed up like Cleopatra.

A graded test sat on top of his test, a circled 96 in red ink proclaiming his success. Tests waited on the other empty desks as well. Cole tried not to spy on the other scores, but couldn't help noticing that his neighbors got a 72 and an 88.

Jenna turned and looked at him. She wore a wig of limp black hair with ruler-straight bangs. Dramatic makeup accentuated her eyes. A golden circlet with a snake at the front served as her crown. "What are you?" she asked. "A dead scarecrow?"

"Close," Cole replied. "I'm a scarecrow that got used for target practice."

"Are those real arrows?"

"Yeah, but I broke off the tips. Halloween or not, I figured they would send me home if I brought arrows to school."

"You aced another test. I thought scarecrows weren't supposed to have brains."

"I wasn't a scarecrow yesterday. I like your costume."

"Do you know who I am?"

Cole scrunched his face as if she had stumped him. "A ghost?"

Jenna rolled her eyes. "You know, right?"

He nodded. "You're one of the most famous ladies in history. Queen Elizabeth."

"Wrong country."

"I'm kidding. Cleopatra."

"Wrong again. Are you even trying?"

"Seriously? I thought I knew it for sure."

"I'm Cleopatra's twin sister."

"You got me."

"Maybe I should have come as Dorothy all shot up with arrows," Jenna said. "Then we would have matched."

"We could have been the sadder ending to *The Wizard of Oz*."

"The ending where the wizard turns out to be Robin Hood."

Laini Palmer sat in the desk next to Jenna's. She was dressed as the Statue of Liberty. Jenna turned and started talking to her.

Cole glanced at the clock. There were still a few minutes before class would begin. Jenna had a habit of arriving by the first bell, and Cole had coincidentally developed the same habit. More kids were coming in: a zombie, a vampire fairy, a rock star, an army guy. Kevin Murdock wore no costume. Neither did Sheila Jones.

When Jenna had finished talking to Laini, Cole tapped her. "Have you heard about that new haunted house?"

"On Wilson Avenue?" Jenna asked. "People keep talking about it. I've never really been scared by Halloween decorations. I always know they're fake."

"The guy who just moved in there supposedly did effects for Hollywood," Cole replied. "I heard that some of the stuff in his spook alley is real. Like live bats and tarantulas and amputated body parts from hospitals."

"I guess that might be freaky," Jenna admitted. "I'd have to see it to believe it."

"It's supposed to be free. Are you going trick-or-treating?"

"Yeah, with Chelsea and Sarah. You?"

"I was planning to go around with Dalton." He was relieved that she would be out hunting candy as well.

"Do you know the address?" Jenna asked.

"For the haunted house? I wrote it down."

" We should check it out. Want to meet up around seven?"

Cole tried to keep his expression casual. "Where?"

"Do you know that old guy's house on the corner with the huge flagpole?"

"Sure." Everybody in the area knew that house. It was one story, but the flagpole was basically a skyscraper. The old guy looked like a veteran. He raised and lowered the flag every morning and night. "Meet there?"

"Bring the address."

Cole retrieved a notebook from his backpack and opened it. While he looked for his homework, his mind strayed. He had never hung out with Jenna after school, but it wasn't like they were going on a date. They would just be part of a group of kids checking to see if a spook alley was actually cool.

Mr. Brock started class a few moments later. He was dressed as a cowboy, with chaps, a big hat, and a sheriff badge. The outfit made it tough to take him seriously.

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Cole walked along the street beside Dalton, one foot on the curb, the other in the dry gutter. He was still a scarecrow bristling with arrows. The straw poking from his neck kept tickling the bottom of his chin. Dalton remained a gloomy clown.

"She wanted to meet at the flagpole?" Dalton verified.

"Just near the house," Cole said. "Not on his lawn."

Dalton pulled back the sleeve of his coat and checked his watch. "We're going to be early."

"Only a little."

"Are you nervous?"

Cole shot him a scowl. "I'm not afraid of haunted houses."

"I don't mean the spook alley," Dalton clarified. "Haven't you always sort of liked—"

"No, Dalton, come on," Cole interrupted. "Be serious. It isn't like that. We're friends."

Dalton bobbed his eyebrows up and down. "My parents say they started out as friends."

"Gross, knock it off." Cole couldn't let Dalton say or do anything that might make Jenna suspect he thought she was cute. "I should never have told you I used to like her. That was forever ago. We're just doing this for fun."

Dalton squinted up ahead. "Looks like a big group."

He was right. They found Jenna waiting with seven other kids—three of them boys. She was still dressed like Cleopatra.

"Here they are," Jenna announced. "We can go now."

"I have the address," Cole offered.

"I know where it is," Blake said. "I went by earlier tonight."

"What's it like?" Dalton asked.

"I didn't go inside," Blake replied. "I just live nearby."

Cole knew Blake from school. He was the kind of guy who liked to take charge and talk a lot. He always wanted to be goalie at recess, even though he wasn't that good.

As they started walking, Blake took the lead. Cole fell in beside Jenna. "So what's your name?"

"Huh?" she replied. "Cleopatra?"

"No, you're her twin."

"Right. Want to guess?"

"Irma?"

"That doesn't sound very Egyptian."

"Queen Tut?"

"Sure, let's go with that." Jenna laughed lightly, then strayed over to her friend Sarah and started talking. Cole fell back to walk with Dalton.

"Do you think the spook alley will actually be freaky?" Dalton asked.

"It better be," Cole said. "I have my hopes up."

Blake set a quick pace. They marched briskly, passing a herd of little kids with plastic superhero faces. Most of the houses had halfhearted decorations. Some had none. A few had really elaborate jack-o-lanterns that must have been carved using patterns.

Dalton elbowed Cole and nodded toward a doorway. A portly witch was handing out full-size Twixes to a group of little kids.

"It's okay," Cole said, hefting his pillowcase. "We already made a good haul."

"Not much full-size candy," Dalton pointed out.

"A few little Twixes are just as good," Cole said, unsure whether he had any in his bag.

"I heard they have some real cadavers," Blake was explaining. "Dead bodies donated to science but stolen to use as decorations."

"Think that's true?" Dalton wondered.

"I doubt it," Cole replied. "The guy would end up in jail."

"What do you know about it?" Blake challenged. "Have you been stealing corpses?"

"Nope," Cole said. "Your mom was too broke to hire me."

Everyone laughed at that one, and Blake had no reply. Cole had always been good at comebacks. It was his best defense mechanism, and usually kept other kids from bothering him.

As they continued down the street, Cole tried to think of an excuse to walk alongside Jenna. Unfortunately, she now had Chelsea on one side and Sarah on the other. Cole had spoken with Jenna enough to feel fairly natural around her. Sarah and Chelsea were a different story. He couldn't work up the nerve to barge in and hijack their conversation. Every possible comment that came to mind seemed clumsy and forced. At least Dalton was getting plenty of proof that he and Jenna were only friends.

Cole paid attention to the route. Part of him hoped that Blake would lead them the wrong way, but he made no mistakes. When the spook alley house came into view, Blake displayed it to the others as if he had decorated it personally.

The house looked decent on the outside. Much better than average. A few fake ravens perched on the roof. Webby curtains hung from the rain gutters. One of the jack-o-

lanterns was puking seeds and pulp all over the sidewalk. The lawn had lots of cardboard headstones with an occasional plastic hand or leg poking up through the grass.

"Pretty good," Dalton conceded.

"I don't know," Cole said. "After all the buildup, I was expecting granite tombstones with actual human skeletons. Maybe some ghost holograms."

"The best stuff might be inside," Dalton said.

"We'll see," Cole replied. He paused, studying the details. Why did he feel so disappointed? Why did he care about the impressiveness of the decorations? Because he had talked Jenna into coming here. If the haunted house was cool, he might get some reflected glory. If it was weak, she would have gone out of her way for nothing. Was that really it? Maybe he was just frustrated that he had hardly talked to her.

Blake led the way to the door. He knocked while the other nine kids mobbed the porch. A guy with long hair and a stubbly beard answered. He had a cleaver through his head, with plenty of blood draining from the wound.

"He must be the special effects pro," Dalton murmured.

"I don't know," Cole said. "It's pretty gory, but not the ultimate."

The fatally injured man stepped away from the door to invite them in. A strobe light flashed nonstop. Dry ice smoke drifted across the floor. Tinfoil coated the walls, reflecting the pulsing light. There were webs and skulls and candelabras. A knight in full armor came toward them, raising a huge sword. The strobe light made his movements jerky. A couple of the girls screamed.

The knight lowered his sword. He moved around a little more, mostly from side to side, trying to milk the moment, but he was less menacing because he had failed to

pursue his attack. Seeming to realize that he was no longer very threatening, the knight started doing robotic dance moves. A few of the kids laughed.

Cole frowned, feeling even more disappointed. “Why did everyone build this up so much?” he asked Dalton.

“What were you expecting?” Dalton replied.

Cole shrugged. “Rabid wolves fighting to the death.”

“It’s not bad,” Dalton consoled.

“Too much hype,” Cole replied. “My expectations were through the roof.” Turning, he found Jenna beside him. “Are you terrified?”

“Not really,” she said, looking around appraisingly. “I don’t see any body parts. They did a good job though.”

The clunky knight was retreating to his hiding place. The cleaver guy started distributing candy, miniatures, but he gave everybody two or three.

Then an older kid with messy hair wandered into the hall. He was skinny, probably around college age. He wore jeans and an orange T-shirt that said BOO in huge black letters. Otherwise he had no costume.

“Was this scary enough?” he asked nonchalantly.

A couple of the girls said yes. Most of the kids were silent. Cole felt like it would be rude to tell the truth.

The BOO guy folded his skinny arms. “Some of you don’t look very frightened. Anybody want to see the really scary part?”

He acted serious, but it also could have been a setup for some corny joke.

“Sure,” Cole volunteered. Jenna and a bunch of the others chimed in as well.

The BOO guy stared at them like he was a general and this new batch of troops might not be up to his standards. “All right, if you say so. Fair warning, if any of this other stuff was freaky at all, don’t come.”

Two of the girls started shaking their heads and backing toward the door. One of them turned and buried her head against Stuart Fulsom. Stu left with them.

“Check out Stu,” Cole muttered to Dalton. “He thinks he’s Dr. Love.”

“Why would those girls have come in the first place if they didn’t want to get freaked out?” Dalton complained.

Cole shrugged. If Jenna had wanted to bail, would he have left with her? Maybe if she had buried her head against his chest, trembling with worry…

The remaining seven kids followed the BOO guy. He led them through a regular kitchen to a white door with a plain brass knob. “It’s down in the basement. I won’t be coming. You sure you want to go? It’s really messed up.”

Blake opened the door and led the way down. Cole and Dalton shared a glance. They had come this far. No way were they wimping out now. None of the others chickened out either.