

It needs to be bloody.” Nole sat backward on his chair, its straight back between his splayed legs. In spite of the chair’s cheap tan plastic and the rest of the room’s less-than-upscale ambiance, Nole managed to look cool and confident. Sam wondered how he pulled that off so easily.

Feeling like the nerd that he was, Sam tried to adjust his long legs to fit another of the cheap plastic chairs. He disagreed with Nole: “Horror’s not in the blood. It’s in the creep factor.”

“Creep factor,” Nole repeated.

“It’s a technical term.”

Nole nodded. “I must’ve dozed off when Grimmly was talking about that.”

“More likely you were staring at Darla Stewart.”

“You make a point.”

“And we’re not getting anywhere.” Sam sighed and

shifted in his seat again. His legs were cramping. He was hungry. And he was pretty sure he and Nole were the only pair in the room who hadn't come up with an idea yet.

Although Sam's back was to the rest of the space, he could hear the jumble of eight hushed conversations going on all over the gray-walled room. The classroom had little to muffle the intense babble: a few folding tables, some plastic chairs, a portable closet packed with sound equipment, and a viewing screen. Through an open door behind Nole, Sam could see the project room, which had open space for filming scenes, a green screen, and several shelves stuffed full of more AV equipment. The conversations between Sam's classmates were mostly incomprehensible because they were taking place in cautious whispers and mumbles, lest a brilliant idea get stolen. Occasionally, though, someone would get excited, and Sam could make out a word: *serial killer*, *zombie*, *vampire*, *demon*. The words

he heard drained some of the tension from his shoulders. If those were the other teams' ideas, maybe he and Nole still had a chance. They didn't have an idea yet, but at least they didn't have a done-to-death idea.

"You have to admit she has a fine caboose," Nole said.

Sam stretched all 37 inches of his legs and stared at his huge feet. Both Sam's legs and his feet defied the normal proportions that should have gone with his six-foot-five body. According to a chart his doctor showed him once, his legs should have been about 34½ inches long. You wouldn't think 2½ extra inches would be much, but apparently they were enough to make Sam look like a stork or a heron or a crane (he'd heard all three from various unkind kids). And those inches were enough to make him prone to grand displays of ungainly clumsiness, which prevented him from turning his height into something useful like, say, on a basketball court. All Sam's legs did, as far as he could tell, was get in his way.

"Earth to Sam."

"Huh?"

"Looks like we're lagging here, dude." Nole gestured out into the room behind Sam's shoulders. Sam looked around. Four teams were leaving the room. Two were getting ready to leave. Only two other teams were still talking. Great.

Actually, it was kind of great. Sam thought better in silence. He looked at his watch. The classroom was open for another half hour. They had thirty minutes to come up with something.

“Would you get out of that chair?” Nole flung his foot out and kicked the side of Sam’s seat. “You’re squirming so much you remind me of my nephew when he needs to take a piss.”

“I can’t get comfortable.”

“My heart bleeds.”

“There you go with the blood again.”

Nole grinned. “It’s all about the blood.”

“Seriously. We need to think.”

“Hey!” Nole’s blasé posture disappeared. He glanced over at the remaining teams. “Seriously, dude, get off the chair. Come over here.” Nole exited his chair with enviable grace, and he took a couple steps to the wall behind him. Sliding down the wall, he folded his normal-length legs—perfectly proportioned for his six-foot-one height—into a meditative position. He motioned to Sam again when Sam hesitated.

So Sam gave up on the too-small chair and awkwardly put his skinny body on the floor in front of Nole. He had to admit his legs were happier.

Nole leaned forward and spoke softly. “Do you remember Freddy Fazbear’s Pizza?” Nole’s breath smelled like licorice.

Sam leaned away. “Sure. Why?”

Nole lowered his voice into a whisper so faint Sam had trouble understanding him. All he heard was *creepy animat*. But that was enough.

“Oh, those!” Sam felt goose bumps on his arms. He was

glad he was wearing a long-sleeve T-shirt so Sam wouldn't see how the mention of the characters affected him.

"Yeah, those were creepy all right."

"Thinking about pizza gave me the idea," Nole said.

"What idea?"

Nole gazed out over the classroom again. Sam checked it, too. Only one other team was left. It was the infamous Darla, her fine caboose, and her friend Amber, who actually was the nice one of the two girls. They had their heads together and seemed to be having a whispered disagreement. They weren't paying any attention to Nole and Sam.

"My idea is to write a horror story plot around a creepy animatronic of our own," Nole whispered to Sam.

Sam, edgy from just thinking about Freddy Fazbear's animatronic characters, had to admit that was a great idea. "I like it!"

"Awesome." Nole held out a fist, and Sam bumped it.

"So what would be a good character?" Nole asked.

"You're asking me?"

"You're the genius."

Sam wasn't a genius, but he did get good grades. Some people, like Nole, who tended to be a bit of a screw-off, got those things confused.

Sam leaned back and looked at his feet again. A good animatronic character. A good animatronic character. A good animatronic . . . Sam looked at his legs. Stork, heron,

crane. “How about a bird? Not a chick, obviously. Something more obviously intimidating.”

“That’s not bad. How about a goose?”

“A goose?” Sam repeated loudly. He laughed.

“Don’t laugh. A goose attacked me when I was little. I still bear the scars.”

“Seriously?”

Nole pulled up the left leg of his faded jeans. He pointed at a white scar below his knee.

“It bit you?”

“Well, no. It chased me while I was on my bike. I fell off my bike and cut my knee.”

Sam laughed again. Nole dropped his pant leg.

“Sorry,” Sam said. “I can see you’re traumatized.”

Nole stared blankly into the middle distance. “You have no idea. I probably need therapy.”

“I don’t think I want to do a horror film about an animatronic goose,” Sam said.

“You’re right. We need the creep factor. What’s a creepy bird?”

“You guys win the rotten-egg prize,” Amber called from across the room.

“Saving the best for last,” Nole said, holding his clasped hands above his head in a victory gesture.

Amber laughed. “You’re an idiot.”

Darla said nothing, and the two girls left the room, talking about a poetry reading for their English class.

“She likes you,” Sam said.

"She thinks I'm an idiot."

"So she likes you, *and* she knows you."

Nole kicked Sam's foot.

Sam returned to the problem. "Oh, I've got it!" He sat up and said, in a solemn ominous tone, "Once upon a midnight dreary . . ."

"Huh?"

"Oh, come on. You're not that much of an idiot."

"I might be."

"Quoth the Raven," Sam prompted.

"Huh? Oh, wait. I know this. That poem by the scary dude. Poe. Oh. A raven."

"Yeah. Only, no, not quite. The raven, obviously, is cliché. A crow would be, too. I'm thinking of a blackbird. It has the same connotation, but blackbirds are a little smaller. They're songbirds, and we actually have more of them in our area than we do crows or ravens."

"How do you know this stuff?"

"I'm a genius, remember?"

"No. I'd forgotten, because I'm an idiot."

They both laughed.

"Okay. So we've got a creepy blackbird," Nole said.

"Now what?"

"Ever had one of them stare at you?" Sam asked.

"I mean, *really* stare at you?"

"There was one in the quad the other day. I was thinking about skipping Psych 201, and that bird kept looking at me, and I felt so guilty I went to class."