





**Nothing scares me.**

That's why I'm the best at what I do—making haunted houses. My friends and I, we're called the Bloody Banshees, and every year we make it a point to outdo ourselves and scare the entire town of Happy Hills in our yearly haunted house competition.

We've created some of the scariest rooms this town has ever seen. Labyrinths filled with terrifying beasts. Chambers filled with horrific old dolls and cracked mirrors that reflect back ghosts. A circus tent complete with contorted clowns and roaring zombie lions.

But this year, I know we have to do more. Ever since our rivals, the Monster Mashers, cheated and stole our title last year, I've been dreaming up something even more terrifying than all our old scares combined. This year, my team and I will create something so horrifying, even the bravest adult will fear going inside. We'll create something that *might* even scare me. It will have to be completely, utterly horrifying. And I think I have the perfect plan.

Nothing will get in our way.

Nothing human, at least . . .



**“Ewww, I have fake blood on my shirt!”**

I glance over to Julie, who—sure enough—has bright red corn syrup dripping down from the pocket of her T-shirt.

Tanesha breaks into laughter.

“That was me,” she says. “I put a blood capsule in your pocket. Don’t worry—it will wash out.”

Julie glowers over at her, but Julie’s anger never lasts very long. Almost immediately, she starts laughing.

“Good one, Tanesha, but just remember—”

“I don’t get mad, I get even,” both Tanesha and I

say. And then we all start giggling. It's Julie's favorite phrase. But I'm pretty certain that she's never actually tried to get even.

Which is good, because Tanesha is a master prankster. If Julie tried to pull one over on her, I don't think it would end well.

Still giggling, we continue carrying our crates of scary props to the big old mansion in front of us. Three stories tall, with fading blue paint, huge windows, and a yard the size of a football field, Corvidon Manor is our town's largest and oldest home. Most of the year, it's a history museum, where people can look at old photographs of our town or talk to Mr. Evans, the proprietor, who gives free tours. I've been inside a few times for school field trips. From November to September, it's pretty boring.

Then October arrives.

For the month of October, Corvidon Manor is our playground. Every Halloween, Happy Hills holds a fund-raiser for our animal shelter. Four teams of kids each design a creepy experience for the mansion, one per floor, including the basement. The one with

the scariest floor gets a year's supply of pizza and ice cream from Jolly Jerry's Pizzeria.

For the other teams, it's just a fun way to raise money. For me, it's a life calling. Someday, I want to build real haunted houses or work in movies. I take this seriously.

Which is why, when I see Patricia's mom's sports car rounding the corner, a sick acid roils in my gut. She and her team beat us last year. And they didn't win fair.

"Come on, Kevin," Tanesha says, noticing my stare. "We're going to win this year. Don't let her psych you out."

I nod glumly.

"Bloody Banshees forever," Julie says hopefully. Our little slogan.

"Bloody Banshees forever," Tanesha and I repeat.

I stare up at the house as we reach the wraparound patio. In the summer, this place is green and filled with birds and a gurgling fountain. But it's like the moment October hits, the house itself knows it's game time. The trees in the yard have already turned a deep

red orange. The fountain no longer gurgles and instead sits heavy with fallen leaves and wary toads. And maybe it's my imagination, but the closer we get to the house, the colder it seems to become.

As if the house knows it's time to get scary.

As if it, too, is excited.

Our feet creak on the wooden front steps.

Behind us, a murder of crows startles from a tree, flying off in a flutter of angry caws and black wings and orange leaves.

Julie shivers.

"Do you think that's a good sign?" she asks quietly.

I smile.

"Definitely. I think it's a sign that this year is going to be the scariest yet."