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Gossettink@yahoo.com  
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Cody Donovan sat in Algebra class and pondered just how badly it sucked to be the new kid. A new freshman, no less, in a town big enough that everybody shouldn't know everybody, but it seemed to him that they did. On the first day at Jefferson High School, when it became obvious that every other freshman was going to stare at him, but not talk to him, Cody had immediately fallen back on his old stand-by: the cool attitude. Cool would get him through just about anything. He had discovered cool when he was ten and his parents had divorced. He had perfected new levels of cool when his mom had married Dave Womack three years later. Less than a year ago, Dave had gotten a swell new job and they had all moved practically to the suburbs of Chicago, which was calling for a completely different category of cool. His little sister Amber was nine and thought it was all just wonderful. Cody, on the other hand, worked at perfecting the ultimate cool. He never tucked his shirt in. He wore his dark blond hair just long enough that it brushed his collar and his eyebrows, looking like he was constantly in need of a haircut. Add the shrug and the 'whatever,' and he was practically there.

But he did wish that he could get somebody to speak to him on a regular basis. Speaking to him about algebra would be even better.

He could still hear the manic voice of Ms. O'Brien, the school guidance counselor, telling him that Track 2 Algebra would fit just perfectly into his schedule and would be easy. Easy to her maybe, sitting in her office downstairs. It was almost the end of October, two months into the semester, and Mr. Clark had just cheerfully announced that next week they would begin geometry. Cody was thinking that 'Track 2' was some kind of code for 'classes for smart people' and he was about to have serious problems. He glanced around the class, wondering if there was someone who had a clue and might be persuaded to help him out a little. Felisha Monroe, who sat right in front of him, would have been a good choice to ask for help. Felisha was smart. And nice. And had creamy pale brown skin and golden green eyes and wore her hair in these adorable little miniature dreadlocks that Cody really wanted to touch, just to see what they felt like. He was currently incapable of stringing two sane words together in her presence.

Homework was assigned, class ended, and Cody walked out into the hall just in time to see a very big, very dark guy snatch Felisha up in a bear hug. She giggled and Cody nudged whoever was next to him.

“Who’s that?” he asked, pointing at the big guy.

“Tyrell Marshall. He’s a senior. On the football team.”

Well, of course Felisha had a huge football-playing boyfriend. Why wouldn’t she?

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A few days later, in Music Appreciation, Ms. Hodges was discussing feeling the music and asked if anyone played an instrument. Cody raised his hand before he remembered that volunteering was the opposite of cool. Several other people had their hands up too, maybe...

Ms. Hodges went straight for him. “What instrument do you play, Cody?”

“Guitar.”

“Good enough to play in front of people?” Ms. Hodges was smiling. She must have some ability to see through his cool act.

Cody shrugged, his ego took over, and he said, “Sure.”

Somehow Cody ended up in the band room next door, getting a battered but still serviceable Epiphone out of its case, while Ms. Hodges quizzed everybody else that had raised their hand.

Christie Gilliam played a tune on the piano, Joshua Vaughn blew a few squeaky notes on a trumpet. Felisha took out a flute and played some Mozart stuff, with her eyebrows scrunched together in concentration. Cody found that expression almost as mesmerizing as the tiny dreadlocks. Then, with five minutes left to go before the bell, Cody sat down and played the Eagles ‘Hotel California’ with the cool pseudo-Spanish licks that he had worked so hard on. He remembered all the verses and felt fairly sure that he hadn’t made a fool of himself. When he finished the last lick and looked up, Felisha was smiling at him. Half the class was clapping and Ms. Hodges was telling him he was very talented. Dylan Mueller was sitting in the back of class, glaring. Then the bell rang and Cody was scrambling to get his backpack.

By that afternoon, it seemed to be all over school. “You know Cody Donovan? You know, the new guy? He can play guitar.”

So much for cool.

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The next afternoon, Cody had to squeeze around Dylan to get to his locker.

As Cody was tugging the handle, Dylan said, "You should come too, Donovan."

Cody turned. "Where?"

"We're going to Mermet, to the big haunted house they have over there. It's cool."

Cody gave up on his locker and turned all the way around to face Dylan. Felisha was standing next to him. "You really should come with us, Cody."

"When?"

"Saturday night," Dylan said.

"I'm not sure..."

"You aren't scared are you?" Dylan said.

"I'm not scared. I just have to check and see if there's anything else I need to do."

Dylan grunted and walked off.

Felisha looked after him and said, "I hate it when people like that ask me to go somewhere. Even if it's in a group."

"Really? What's wrong with Dylan. Well, besides the obvious IQ problem."

Felisha smiled, then she sighed. "Half the time it's not even about me, it's about Tyrell."

"Tyrell?" Cody didn't know that he really wanted to hear this.

"Tyrell Marshall. My brother. Well, half-brother. Some of those sports types think if they hang with me, they can make a good impression on Tyrell." Felisha rolled her eyes. "Like he couldn't see through that."

Half-brother. Cody managed to suppress the stupid grin he could feel rising to the surface. "So, when did you say you were going to Mermet?"

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Dylan pulled up in front of Cody's house Saturday night, two more cars behind him. Maybe a dozen people total. Felisha was already in the front seat of Dylan's car. She

smiled at Cody as he got in. A few yards down the street, Dylan hit the volume on the stereo. Rap music blared so loud that Cody could feel the bass through the seat of his pants. Conversation was impossible.

After ten or fifteen minutes on country roads, they pulled off into a grove of trees. Dylan cut the engine and Felisha said, "This isn't Mermet."

"Yeah, we've got another stop first."

"At the Pumpkin Farm?" Felisha asked.

"Yeah, we're going to go through the maze. It'll be great."

"But isn't that for little kids?"

"Nah. It's huge. Besides it'll be loads of fun in the dark." Dylan turned and looked at Cody. "What do you say, Donovan? Want to go through the maze?"

"Sure," Cody said. What was he supposed to say? 'Please don't throw me in that cornfield?'

Cody had been through one corn maze, several years before. From the outside, it looked like just another cornfield, the corn left to dry on the stalk. But it had a maze laid out and cut into the stalks of corn. The other maze had only been open to walk in the daytime. Since the place was dark and completely deserted, Cody had to assume this one was only open during the day too.

They rushed past the 'Enter Here' sign. Cody caught a glimpse of an aerial photograph of the maze, a few looping heavy lines in a vaguely circular pattern, interlaced heavily with lighter thin lines that seemed to concentrated around the outer half of the maze, with another tracery of small lines at the very center. There was a caption at the bottom that said 'Largest in the Midwest' but Cody didn't quite catch the acreage.

Then they were caught up in the twisting corridors, narrow and intersecting at odd angles. At the first cross-aisle, people split off both directions. Cody remembered reading somewhere that the way to get out of a maze was to keep your left hand on the wall and follow it. So he turned left.

The full moon was high in the clear, starlight night, illuminating the corn. At every turn or side lane, Dylan's buddies and their girlfriends would take off in different

directions. There were a couple of guys left behind him for a while, then they were gone too.

After a few minutes, Cody could hear voices at a distance. "...little kid exit...over there..." Then silence. He didn't care for what he was thinking - that they were deserting him. He took the next left, and concentrated on getting out of the corn.

Cody followed the narrow corridor around to where it intersected with one of the wide lanes. The left turn led him into the wide section, heading toward the edge. At least he thought it was toward the edge, from the position of the moon behind him. He felt oddly exposed, with the space all around. He turned and looked behind him. Nothing. He started forward again.

He admitted to himself that everyone else probably had left him. There was no noise, had been no sign of anyone else for at least ten or twenty minutes. They were either completely quiet or completely gone. Most likely gone. Even Felisha. And that hurt. He wasn't really surprised that the rest of those assholes thought it would be funny to dump him in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night. But Felisha should be nicer than that.

Cody turned left into another narrow twisting aisle. Was that a noise? He stopped. Behind him, there was a rustle in the dry corn. He walked back and looked up and down the wide lane. Nothing. Another quiet rustle across the lane from him, where there was no opening in the corn. What were the possibilities, Cody thought. Raccoons, possums, Dylan sneaking back to try to scare him... He turned around and started back down the narrow aisle, in the proper direction.

Behind him there was a crackle of dry corn stalk. Just once, then silence. It occurred to Cody that if it really was Dylan or some of his crowd, they would be trying harder to be scary, making moaning noises or some crap like that. What did that leave? Raccoons?

Left. Cody stopped, his back not quite touching one of the walls of corn. He waited. There was a faint rustle, farther away. He suddenly realized that the corn behind him might have given the impression of being a solid wall, but it wasn't. It was nothing but corn stalks, not much more than tall thick grass, with leaves on it. And just because he couldn't get through it from this side...

He stepped away from the corn and started walking, quicker than before. He would not be afraid. He refused. He would not run, or yell. He wasn't going to give that bunch of stupid jocks the satisfaction. Yeah, that sounded good.

There was a sudden breeze that set all the corn to gently whispering and carried a vague smell. Something rotten. Then the breeze faded. The air was still, but the corn still gave off gentle noises here and there. Something small, brushing against the dry husks. Something that had never seen the inside of Jefferson High School.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want." Cody whispered. "He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."

He kicked something hard and looked down, almost afraid to see what it was. Cylindrical... an ear of corn. He picked it up. It was hard, the kernels dry. Cody held it in his hand, making a fist around it. It made him feel just a little more confident. But he still walked quickly. And murmured, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

The narrow aisle he was following twisted and intersected. Cody turned left. The little rustling noises concentrated, just past the next turn. He turned left, the low sound now to his right. It was beginning to sound like the wind moaning around the eaves of a house. Only there wasn't any wind. He couldn't help himself. With his better judgement screaming warnings, Cody went right for a few steps. Just far enough to see one of the wide corridors.

There was motion, rushing. Formless and dark. Like smoke blowing in the nonexistent wind. A little cloud, moving along the corridor, toward the center of the maze. Then it was gone, leaving a faint odor of decay. A sense of complete wrongness. All was still and silent. There was a crinkle of dry cornstalk across the open corridor.

Cody turned, to take up his path again. He had to get out. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Around a curve, left into another aisle. A few yards away, there was a man walking slowly toward him.

One low cry of surprise, then Cody clinched his teeth together and stopped the next shout. He stood and waited for the man to get closer, fighting the urge to run.

The man stopped a decent distance away. He was definitely not one of Dylan's crowd. He was wearing a jean jacket, a dark shirt and a ball cap pulled low over his face. "The Psalms are a really good choice for recitation. The twenty-third, right?" His voice was calm and friendly.

Cody gripped the ear of corn tighter. "Who are you?"

There was a flash of a white smile under the cap. "I'm Matthew."

"What do you want?" Cody could hear the tension in his own voice, but he sounded steady, so that was okay.

The man looked around at the corn stalks. "This thing has really become an attractive nuisance. I need to do something about it before somebody gets hurt." He looked at Cody. "Don't you think so?"

"Wha... Wait. Are you the owner?"

The man shrugged. "I'm the one who needs to take care of it."

Cody couldn't contain the question any longer. "What's that out there? In the corn."

The man waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. "That would be the 'nuisance' that I'm here to take care of."

"What are you going to do?" Cody asked.

"Destroy it," the man said. "But we have to get you out of here first."

Cody looked up and down the narrow aisle. "Which way?"

"First of all, stay out of the wide corridors. They lead you in a big figure-eight. They'll channel you into that tight knot in the very center and you don't want to be there just now."

Cody tilted his head, listening. "The middle is where the bad stuff is, right?"

The man's eyes might have widened a little. "Never you mind that." He pointed to Cody's left. "That way for a start. Keep to the left turns and you should be okay."

Cody grinned. "I had that part right at least."



The man grinned back, his smile pale in the moonlight. “Right. Good job. Off you go then.”

“Wait,” Cody started to say. “This doesn’t make any...”

The man was still smiling, but he made a little shooing motion with his hands. “Go on, so I can get started.”

In spite of his need for answers and explanations, Cody turned and started walking. He was only a few steps away when the man said, “Hey!”

Cody turned back.

“When you talk to people about this?”

“Yeah...”

“You might want to be a bit selective about the details.”

“Yeah.”

After a few more steps, at the next left turn, Cody glanced behind him. The man was gone.

It seemed like only a few minutes till he was out of the corn, crossing the field to the road to start the long walk back to town.

There was a flash down the road in front of him. Cody squinted. A person, walking toward him. He could hear the click of boot heels on pavement. He walked out of the shadow of a huge oak tree and Felisha shrieked, “Cody!” She broke into a run and flung herself at him, throwing her arms around his neck. “Omigod! I thought you were in Zack’s car, I swear I did!”

Cody hugged her tight around her waist and put his cheek against hers. The tiny little dreadlocks were soft.

Felisha stepped back just far enough to look at his face. “Are you okay?”

“Sure,” he said.

“Dylan is such a... a dickhead!”

Cody couldn’t help laughing.

“He is!” she insisted.

“Is that the worst name you know?”

After a second, she managed a shaky grin. “No, but it’s the most appropriate. I can’t believe they just left you. And when I started asking if he was sure you were in Zack’s car, he laughed at me. He said you were a little smart-ass and this would scare you and teach you a lesson. And then I tried to get him to turn around and he told me if I was that worried, I could check on you myself and he just stopped the car. So I got out.”

And there went Dylan’s chances, Cody thought. He found it adorable that Felisha chattered when she was upset.

She still had her hands loose around his neck. So he felt it when her whole body went tense. She was looking over his shoulder.

“Is that a fire?” Felisha asked. “In the maze?”

Cody turned and looked behind him. Flames were starting to flicker above the corn in the middle of the maze. He said, “Maybe one of the dickheads dropped his cigarette.”

“I don’t think...”

This would definitely qualify as ‘taking care of things,’ Cody thought. Then he thought about all the rustling in the corn. He took Felisha’s hand and said, “Maybe we should leave.”

They started walking toward town. After a few minutes of silence, with the maze and the fire well behind them, Felisha said, “I have a cell phone.”

“Great. Cause it’s got to be at least five or six miles back to town.”

She was frowning. “But if I call my parents, they’ll freak. It won’t matter why I got stuck out here, I’ll never hear the end of it.” She glanced at Cody. “And Tyrell’s on a date.”

Cody said, “My stepfather once told me that if I ever couldn’t get a safe ride home, I could call him and he’d come get me. No questions asked. Let’s see if he was serious.”

She fished the little phone out of her purse and he called. His little sister answered.

Hello. Womack Donovan residence.

“Hi, Amber, it’s Cody.”

Hi Cody, whatcha doin'?

"Is Dave home?"

Yeah.

"Could you go get him?"

Don't you want to talk to Mom? She's in the kitchen.

"No, just go get Dave."

Are you sure?

"Yes, I'm sure."

Hello?

"Hey, Dave, I'm stuck."

Did they start drinking already?

"No booze, they just left me. I think it was supposed to be a joke."

Doesn't sound too funny.

"Well, I didn't think so either."

Okay, where are you?

"Out by the Pumpkin Farm."

Where exactly is that?

"Route 142," Felisha said.

"Route 142," Cody repeated into the phone.

How many of you are there?

"Just two. That's Felisha Monroe. She's a friend."

Dave was there very shortly. Cody sat in the back seat with Felisha who had grown quiet. When they stopped in front of her house, she squeezed Cody's hand, smiled and said, "See you Monday."

"Okay."

After she went inside, Cody got in the front seat and they started home.

Dave glanced at Cody and said, "I know I always said no questions asked, but I will admit to being a little curious as to how you ended up walking on a country road."

Cody thought for a minute. He wasn't even sure himself what had happened. Sitting in the SUV, driving past nice normal houses with Halloween decorations in front of them, it was easy to think that he had imagined most of it. "Dylan Mueller thinks I'm a smart-ass," Cody began, and proceeded to tell Dave most of the story, downplaying the noises. He left out the man he had talked to and the fire entirely. When he got to the part about Felicia getting out of the car and coming back for him, Dave said, "That would be a good sign, right?"

"Oh yeah," Cody replied.

Dave turned to grin at Cody; Cody grinned back. It was a moment of perfect understanding, the first Cody could ever remember having with Dave.

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Cody didn't think Dave said a word to Mom about what had happened. However on Thursday night, Halloween, Dave looked at Cody and said, "I think you could take your sister and her friends trick or treating." A meaningful pause.

"Um, sure," Cody said. Cooperation was apparently the price of silence. Not a bad trade.

Except for the fact that Amber, plus her friends, were a mob of seven squealing little kids, ranging between eight and ten years old. It was going to be a long evening, Cody thought.

He managed to get through the neighborhood by keeping them in a tight group and counting them at every opportunity.

One more house with its porch light on, just a half a block down the street. Cody herded the kids that direction. He counted them off as they trooped up the steps and gathered around the door. The woman that answered the bell was tall, with curly red-brown hair. She oohed and ahed properly over all the costumes as she doled out candy. Then she looked at Cody and smiled sympathetically.

"Are you the designated grown-up?" she asked over the bouncing heads of Amber and her crew.

"Yeah, I guess so."

She reached inside the door and came out with a full-sized candy bar. "Here you go," she said and tossed it to Cody.

He caught it and smiled. "Thanks."

She shook her head. "You've earned it."

A dark haired man walked up behind the woman. Something about the way he moved seemed almost... No, Cody thought. No way. He carefully reigned in his imagination.

The man put his arm around the woman's waist. "What do we have here?" he smiled at the kids.

"Look at the little witch," the woman said. "Isn't she darling?"

"How many does that make?"

"I've counted seventeen witches tonight. All girls." This last in a mischievous tone.

"No little boy witches?" the man asked her.

One of the kids said knowingly, "Witches are always girls. With pointy black hats. And brooms."

"And they're bad!" A little girl added.

The woman laughed. The man said seriously, "Oh no, there are witches who do good. There are boy witches too."

Amber piped up. "What do boy witches look like?"

The man looked right at Cody, who was paying close attention, and said, "They look just like everybody else." Then he winked. "Good-night kids." He and the woman started back inside.

Just before the door closed, there was a toddler's voice inside calling, "Daddy, Daddy, kitty no come down."

"Aw, Gerry, not again," the man said. "Kitty doesn't like that..." Then the door closed.

Cody was left standing on the porch, looking at the door. Wondering just how much he was supposed to read into that conversation. Amber's voice interrupted his

train of thought and he turned to see ...six, seven kids already on the sidewalk and scampering away.

Cody hurried after them. He looked at his watch. If he could just convince the brats that it was time to stop, he could still get home and call Felisha. There was undoubtedly something geometrical that was confusing him. He could think it up on the way home.

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