

Chapter 1: The Halloween Man

Brightly colored leaves fell like rain onto the sidewalks and yards in Annie's neighborhood; their bold colors the perfect companion to a strikingly blue sky. Autumn was in full swing that last Saturday morning before Halloween. Roddy Olsen had been missing for five days.

Annie pulled on her favorite sweatshirt and headed downstairs to the kitchen. Passing the den, she spotted Jenny and Lukey parked in front of the TV. Without turning around, Jenny asked, "What's for breakfast?" Lukey trotted over to sniff Annie's shoes.

"Why aren't you out jogging with Mom and Dad?" Annie asked the cocker spaniel, reaching down to scratch his dark curly head.

"Because he wanted to watch cartoons with me," answered Jenny, yet to make eye contact with her big sister. Lukey gracefully stood up on his hind legs and twirled several times before sitting back on his haunches, front paws waving lightly in the air. Annie grinned and continued on to the kitchen, a hungry Lukey hot on her heels.

"Don't you ever feel just a little bit embarrassed putting on a floor show like that for food?" Lukey's wagging tail only accelerated; his nose pointed toward the pantry closet. Annie fetched his bowl and filled it

with an ample supply of brown crunchy pellets. Lukey danced his way across the floor to the spot where his food and water were kept next to the refrigerator. As soon as his dish was within reach the little dog happily buried his face in it. Annie patted his rump; Lukey took no notice. He was on a mission and nothing could deter him.

Noises at the back door. Moments later it opened to reveal the splendid morning and Annie's mother. "Hi, honey, what's for breakfast?"

"Eggs, bacon, hash browns," a voice resounded from outside, "and biscuits!"

"Now, Gill," reproached Rachel Wanewright to the man who entered the kitchen carrying wet jogging shoes. "Something healthier would be better."

Annie's dad flopped down in the nearest kitchen chair and gratefully accepted the glass of cold water his daughter offered. "Rachel, please. It's Saturday. I've eaten multi-grain cereal and fruit for breakfast all week."

"I was sort of in the mood for waffles," said Annie.

"Do they come with a side order of sausage?" Gill Wanewright asked hopefully.

"Of course, Dad."

"Then I'd like a double order of each."

"What's for breakfast?" Jenny asked a second time, coming into the kitchen and putting a small arm around her father. "Ugh, Dad! You're all sweaty."

"I totally blame your mother for my unsightly perspiration," Annie's father replied, giving his youngest a quick hug before heading off to shower.

“What are we having?” Jenny once more asked her sister.

“Waffles. Now scram. I’m busy.”

Leaping into the air and clapping her hands, Jenny cried, “Oh boy, Lukey, waffles!” Lukey, not understanding the word but hoping it meant food, repeated his twirl and begging stance.

“Okay,” said Mrs. Wanewright with a soft chuckle. “Let’s get out of the chef’s way.”

After breakfast had ended and the necessary chores completed, Annie, Jenny, and Lukey headed outdoors. “We’re going to Stacey’s,” Jenny announced, attaching Lukey’s leash to his collar. “She and I are working on our Halloween costumes.

“What are you planning to be?” Annie helped her sister zip her jacket.

“It’s a surprise. See ya.” Jenny and Lukey walked out to the sidewalk and turned right.

“Keep Lukey away from Caesar,” Annie called after her.

“Caesar won’t bother Lukey if he’s with me,” Jenny called back.

Annie knew this to be true. Caesar was not a friendly dog. He wasn’t so much threatening and vicious as he was, well..., unsociable. If left alone, he was usually fine. But, of course, like other canines, Caesar was territorial; he wouldn’t appreciate Lukey trotting by his front yard.

Caesar lived with Frannie Hansen, who rented the little white, black shuttered, cottage a couple of blocks

down. Annie didn't think Caesar even liked Frannie all that much.

Yet, despite his aloofness, the huge camel-colored dog took pleasure from the attention Annie's little sister gave him. Everyday on her way to school, the first grader would pause and wait for the massive hound to haul himself up from his front porch station and amble down the walkway to where she stood. "He likes to have his ears scratched," Jenny explained matter-of-factly when asked the reason for their mutual fondness.

Stuffing her hands into the pockets of her jeans, Annie stepped off the porch steps and gazed up at the cloudless sky. "Hey, Annie, you want to shoot some hoops?" Breathing in a huge lung-full of autumn air, Annie turned toward the voice. Dustin Ferrell stood in the driveway next door. They smiled at each other and Annie started over.

"Where's your shadow?" she asked when she reached him.

Dustin bounced the basketball a few times and took aim at the basket. "What do you have against Cory?" he asked, watching the ball sail smoothly through the net. "He's really a nice guy."

Annie smirked and looked across the street to Kate's house, knowing the sounds of a bouncing basketball would soon draw her out. "So how's the nursery coming?" Annie caught the ball and effortlessly launched it to rebound off the backboard and into the basket.

Dustin grinned broadly at the question. “Great! Dad and I will have it finished in another week or two. It’s really going to look good.”

Annie smiled too. “That’s terrific. Exactly what that old room needs.” Then she caught herself. “I mean, what I mean is...”

Dustin tossed her the ball again. “That’s okay, Annie. You’re right. That *is* just what that old room needs. It’s been empty for too long.”

Annie glanced again at Kate’s house and wished, not for the first time, she’d think before she spoke. “Bryan would be happy to be getting a baby sister,” she told Dustin, hoping this remark would cancel out the previous one.

Bryan Ferrell had been Jenny’s age the last time he’d climbed aboard a neighbor’s sled and tore off down Dead Man’s Trail. No one knows why he didn’t roll off once he’d realized he’d lost control. But instead, the little boy had hung on desperately while the sled swerved sharply to the right and shot off down the hill, going the wrong direction. At the bottom it had jumped the embankment, sliding out onto the road and under the car driven by Mrs. Dottie Canfield, wife to Bobby Canfield, minister of the First Baptist Church of Tuckersville. Bryan had died instantly.

Dustin bounced the ball to Annie. Taking aim, Annie was about to ask if Dustin’s parents had narrowed down their list of names for the new arrival when she heard the familiar sound of bicycle tires on the cement sidewalk; the Shadow had arrived.

Cory Albertson leaped off his bike, hurriedly pushed down its kickstand, and trotted up the driveway. “Hey, man, you are not going to believe this!” he fairly shouted to Dustin. “I mean, you *are* not going to believe it!”

Annie ignored the Shadow, concentrating instead on performing the perfect dunk.

“What’s got you so excited?” asked Dustin with a laugh. “Did you win the lottery or something?”

Cory ran a hand through his thick blonde hair and grinned. “After Dad picked me up last night, we stopped by the mini mart. You’ll never guess who was there.”

“Two points,” Annie said to no one as she again took aim.

“Who?” asked Dustin, turning to watch Annie make another flawless shot.

Cory’s grin widened. “Mr. McLarty. Guess where he’s going?” Before Dustin could think twice, Cory blurted out, “He’s going to Arizona for three weeks to visit his sister; he left early this morning!”

This time Annie’s ball missed its goal, but it didn’t matter. She suddenly realized where Cory’s conversation was going. “The Halloween Man,” she said softly to herself, but apparently not soft enough. For when she glanced round, both Cory and Dustin were staring at her.

“The Halloween Man?” said Cory, his green eyes wide and mocking. “I thought only little kids believed in that rubbish.”

Annie felt her face grow hot. Cory was such a jerk! “I, uh...,” she stammered. “Uh..., what I meant to say is you’re going up to Manor’s Peak, where the murders happened.”

There, that sounded much better. Annie took a deep breath and willed her normal facial color to return; it didn’t.

Cory plunged his hands deep inside the pockets of his jeans and grinned. Annie felt her face redden even more. “That’s right, Wanewright. Would you like to come along?”

What an absurd question! Snooping around old Manor’s Peak would be a dream come true. Annie had never even seen it. No one was allowed up there. “I might be interested,” she replied, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible, while she hastily looked around for something besides the Shadow’s annoying smirk to focus on.

“Sure, well, suit yourself. You may not get another chance.”

Annie replied with an uncaring shrug and bounced the basketball back to Dustin.

“Chance for what?” a voice asked from across the street.

Cory called out, “Hi, there, Katie.”

“Her name’s Kate,” corrected Annie. “She hates Katie.”

“It’s okay,” Kate responded, smiling at the Shadow as she came strolling over. “What’s going on?”

“How would you like to go exploring Manor Peak this afternoon?” asked Dustin. “Mr. McLarty left

town this morning to visit his sister and won't be back for three weeks."

Kate pushed her glasses back up her nose and stared at them in wonderment. "Are you sure? Mr. McLarty has never taken a vacation before."

"Well, he's gone now," replied Cory. "I overheard him telling Fred at the mini mart all about it yesterday. He took an early flight out of Vicksboro this morning, direct, nonstop to Arizona."

Annie rolled her eyes and made a perturbed sound with her lips. So he knows all about plane flights and terminals, she thought. Big whoop!

Kate interrupted Annie's displeasing thoughts of Cory with a shrillness that caused her to jump. "Can you believe it, Annie?" Kate gushed. "We're going up the Manor's Peak! Manor's Peak!" Kate was fairly bouncing with excitement. "This is so amazing!" Turning to Cory and Dustin, she clapped her hands together and exclaimed, "Annie and I have wanted to explore that place ever since we were in the third grade and Annie's grampy told us about it."

Annie shot Kate an expression meant to imply *be quiet*, but Kate took no notice. "Mr. McLarty has eyes like a hawk. As far as I know, no one has been able to sneak up there since it closed and that was, how long ago, Annie?"

Annie refused to look at Cory as she answered, "Almost nineteen years."

"Yeah, that's right, nineteen years; it's been closed since before any of us were born." Kate continued to clasp her hands together. "Mr. McLarty has been the

caretaker since Manor Peak first opened. When was that, Annie?"

Annie glanced up to the spotless blue sky and sighed. She could feel Cory watching her, enjoying her discomfort. "Manor Peak was open for thirteen years; it's been closed for nineteen. That means it opened thirty two years ago."

"Wow! Good in history *and* math," said Cory.

"I am so excited," Kate explained needlessly.

Dustin caught Annie's eye and winked. "So what time can everybody be ready?" he asked. Annie wished for the umpteenth time that Dustin and Cory weren't friends. "How about one o'clock in front of the school?" Dustin went on. "It's going to be a great day for a hike."

So it was agreed; the four would meet after lunch on the sidewalk outside Harlin Elementary. Annie and Kate left Cory and Dustin to basketball practice and headed back to Annie's house.

"This is so unbelievable," Kate whooped, jumping rear-first onto the porch swing, lifting her knees high as her body made contact. "Oh, this is going to be the greatest day!" Annie lowered herself to the swing's padded seat. "We are going to have such fun," gushed Kate, grabbing Annie's arm in a viselike grip and giving it a vigorous shake. "It's the perfect time of year to explore an old haunted hotel. I mean, with Halloween coming and all."

Annie could feel her friend's nervous energy starting to spread. Sure, a trip up to Manor's Peak *would* be a super adventure, no doubt. Just think of it.

An old hotel closed to the public for all these years, a place where two mysterious deaths had occurred. Two deaths that happened years apart, yet remained strangely connected.

“Maybe we can search for the Halloween Man,” said Kate, her voice suddenly dropping to a whisper, while her clasp of Annie’s arm grew stronger.

“Don’t let the Shadow hear you say that,” Annie said, prying Kate’s fingers away.

Kate flexed her hand and stared at Annie. “Why do you call Cory, the Shadow? You certainly don’t like him very much.”

Annie sighed. “I don’t care for people who think they’re better than anyone else. I call him the Shadow because he’s always with Dustin. Always! It’s like they’re joined at the hip or something.” Annie could hear the disgust in her voice and didn’t care. She ignored Kate’s vigorous headshake.

“Cory does not think he’s better than anyone else. Where did you come up with that? He’s nice. Just because he has his own computer and private telephone and other stuff doesn’t mean he thinks he’s better than the rest of us.”

“You’re repeating yourself.” Annie smiled at Kate, feeling much too excited to want to argue.

“Well..,” Kate tried to appear stern but failed, “I wish you’d try and give him a chance.”

Annie decided it was time to drop the subject and get back to discussing their afternoon. “Wouldn’t it be neat if we could find an unlocked window or

something? I'd love to be able to walk around inside, maybe find our way down into the basement."

Kate shivered. "I'm not so sure I want to go exploring the basement. What if we saw *him*?"

Annie shivered at the thought as well. "Yeah, what if he was actually there, hanging from the rafters by his necktie? Oh, man." As she said it, she could feel a million goosebumps break out along her body. Both girls erupted in nervous giggles.

"And afterward, we still have tonight," added Kate, "and the *Festival of Vampires*. My bag's all packed."

Annie grinned and hugged herself; she couldn't wait for the afternoon to begin. Not even the thought of spending it with Cory Albertson could dampen her spirits; she was going to Manor's Peak!