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Haunted School House

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In October, the tiny town of Great Bear Heart undergoes a radical change. The northern Michigan summer has dwindled to a distant memory, and the nights are colder, warning of the coming winter. The air has a bite to it, a peculiar ice-cream texture that brushes your skin like a cool sheet. When you breathe it in, you can feel the chill right to the bottom of your lungs.

Even the smells are different. The scents of barbeques, of sticky pine and musky cedar, and the delicate aromas of wildflowers are gone,

replaced with the occasional, pungent odor of burning leaves.

And the animals act differently, too. There's a heightened urgency in the scamper of chipmunks and squirrels as they gather food for the winter. More birds appear at the feeders, wolfing down loads of seeds. The animals sense the coming winter, and they busily prepare for the long, cold months ahead.

But the most dramatic transformation comes in the way of colors. Gone are the lush, thick greens of summer. Maples, oaks, and other trees display brilliant leaves of red, orange, purple, crimson, yellow, bronze, copper, and gold. The entire countryside is engulfed in a display of colors that are only seen once a year. Even the clouds are different. In October, their giant bellies take on a steely-gray hue, and they sail slowly across an ocean of blue sky like magnificent iron ships, their mammoth hulls rimmed with fiery white.

After a few weeks, the colors fade. The leaves lose their vibrant shades, wither, turn brown, and fall from the trees. Those that remain are yanked and tugged by the harsh October winds until they, too, are sent flying across the sky,

twisting and turning, fluttering and falling to the earth.

And for the six of us in the Adventure Club—Shane Mitchell, Tony Gritter, Lyle Haywood, Holly O'Mara, Dylan Bunker, and me, Parker Smith—October in Great Bear Heart meant just one thing:
Halloween.

But for us, the holiday meant much more than trick-or-treating. Halloween meant dressing up in fun costumes. It meant parties at school, pumpkin carving, and caramel-dipped apples. It meant a shiny, silver moon gazing down through clear, chilly nights, and bats fluttering through an inky, star-studded sky. It meant reading scary stories out loud in our clubhouse high in a maple tree not far from Devil's Ridge.

However, Halloween never really scared us. I mean . . . we all read scary stories. We dressed up like ghosts or goblins or witches or mummies . . . but that's all it ever was. Pretend. We didn't believe in that sort of stuff . . . we were just having fun.

But this year, Halloween was going to mean something entirely different. This Halloween, we would have an experience that still

freaks us out to this day. In fact, most of us in the club don't even talk about it anymore. Sure, we've had some scary things happen to us. We had a weird experience at Devil's Ridge when we were playing a prank on the Martin brothers, who happen to be the three biggest goofballs in Great Bear Heart. If there was trouble to be found, you can bet that the Martin brothers weren't far away. They didn't like us, and we didn't like them . . . which was just fine. Then, there was the really creepy day that we spent at Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island. Plus, we restored an old research submarine . . . only to have it spring a leak in Puckett Lake. We didn't think we were going to get out alive. And we had been caught in a forest fire . . . and let me tell you: that was scary.

But what happened this Halloween was going to be far freakier than anything else that had ever happened to us . . . and it all started at our weekly meeting high in a tree, in our clubhouse tucked away in the forest.

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Our clubhouse is really cool. We built it in a maple tree in the middle of the woods, complete with separate, multi-level rooms and a lookout. In the summer, when the leaves are thick and full, it's nearly invisible. We built it with scrap wood from Mr. Beansworth's old barn, which wasn't too far away. The barn had collapsed, and Mr. Beansworth let us have the wood for free.

Five of us were there, waiting for Dylan Bunker, who was always fifteen minutes late for our meetings. Holly O'Mara was seated near an open window, gently stroking Dollar, our adopted gray cat, who was sleeping on her lap. Dollar was a stray that we'd found in an old shed near town,

and he'd become a loyal pal and our official club mascot. The cat was amazing: he'd climb the tree trunk to get up to our clubhouse, and then climb all the way back down when we left. Lyle joked that the cat was probably part squirrel.

Tony Gritter was shooting a rubber band at a knot in one of the boards on the ceiling, catching the band when it fell, aiming, and shooting once again. Lyle Haywood was talking quietly with Shane Mitchell, our club president, about ways that we could earn some money during the fall and winter months. Earning money always seemed to be a prime focus for us, since most of the fun things that we wanted to do always cost money. Holly, our club treasurer, had reported at our last meeting that we had less than thirty dollars in our club savings, and Shane had given us the order to start thinking about ways we could earn money. Now we were gathered high in our clubhouse, waiting for Dylan Bunker, so we could discuss our ideas.

Tony made a wild shot with his rubber band. It bounced off the ceiling, struck the wall, and tumbled out the open window. He frowned and looked at his watch.

"Geez . . . where is that guy?" he asked.

“He’s always late.”

“It hasn’t been fifteen minutes yet,” I said, looking at my own watch. “My guess is that he’ll be getting here right about . . . now.”

Suddenly, the rope ladder that extended down from the trap door in the floor began to shake. We heard a grunt and a groan from below, and several gasps. Then Dylan’s mop of red hair popped up through the opening in the floor.

“Hey, guys!” he chirped, out of breath from the twenty-foot climb. He reached out and clumsily pulled himself into the clubhouse. “Sorry I’m late.”

“What’s new?” Tony snapped. “You’re always late.”

Dylan shrugged, as if the very thought that someone could be offended by his tardiness was some new and strange idea.

“All right, let’s get the meeting started,” Shane said. “Lyle has some cool ideas about things we can do to earn some money.”

Lyle nodded and pulled out a pad of paper. “Okay,” he began as he adjusted his glasses. “There’s a lot of things we can do. For starters, we could sell candy bars, like we did at school. If we—”

Lyle stopped speaking when he saw Holly shaking her head. Dollar opened his eyes, shifted in Holly's lap, and went back to sleep.

"We already talked about that, remember?" Holly said. "It'll cost too much to buy the candy bars. We'd have to raise the price to make money, and people aren't going to pay more than what they would at the store."

Lyle shrugged, then made several pencil scratches in his notebook. "Okay," he said. "How about an apple cider stand? We could have it down at the park, like we did when we sold food and drinks to the people who came to town to look for Bigfoot."

I smiled. One time we played a prank on Norm Beeblemeyer, the local newspaper reporter for the Great Bear Heart Times. Shane made two giant feet out of wood, and Tony strapped them to his shoes and made 'Bigfoot' tracks all around town. The joke got way out of hand, and people came from all over to hunt for Bigfoot. We earned oodles of money selling hot dogs, hamburgers, and juice at a roadside stand that we set up across from the Great Bear Heart Market.

"But that was different," I said. "That was summertime, and a lot of people were in town."

This is October. All of the tourists and summer residents have gone home. I don't think business would be very good."

"I saw a thing on television about some kids who put together their own carnival in somebody's back yard," Tony said. "They had games and contests, and they charged money for people to enter."

"That would be fun," Holly said. "But what if it rains? Then we would have to hold the carnival indoors, and there isn't any place in Great Bear Heart that would be big enough."

Holly was right about that. Great Bear Heart is a tiny town in northern lower Michigan, on the shores of Puckett Lake. It was named after Potawatami Indian Chief Great Bear Heart, way back in the 1800s. Our town has a post office, a library, an historical museum, a market, a hardware store, a township hall, a fire station, a bar and grill called Rollers, a strip of rental cottages called Lazy Shores Resort, and a small restaurant called The Kona. There's also a really cool park and beach area right behind the library, across from the market. We go swimming there in the summer.

But there really isn't a place big enough to

set up an indoor carnival.

About this time, I noticed that Shane, our club president, hadn't said anything for a few minutes. Shane is usually pretty talkative . . . unless he has an idea. Then he just kind of stares up into space—until he starts grinning. When he starts grinning, he's got an idea. Usually, when Shane Mitchell gets an idea, you can bet ten times out of ten that it's a good one.

And right now, Shane's grin was so wide that you could see every single one of his upper row of teeth.

After a moment, we all stopped speaking and just looked at him. He looked at us, and his grin never faded. "Guys," he said, scratching his chin, "it's time once again for the Adventure Club to get into the haunting business."

None of us said a word as he began to explain his idea.

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“A haunted house!” Shane exclaimed, glancing around. I was a little puzzled, and I think the rest of us were, too.

“You know what I mean, guys!” Shane said. “We find a place and put together a haunted house! Then we charge a dollar admission for people to go through it, like they did at that school last year!”

“Oh, yeah,” Dylan said. “I remember that. That was cool.”

“Yeah,” Tony agreed. “That was fun!” Shane continued. “Remember how they decorated some of the rooms? They had a coffin that opened up, and there was a mummy inside?”

“That was scary,” Holly said.

“Yeah,” I said. “When that coffin lid opened and that thing popped out, I about jumped out of my skin!”

“That’s what I’m talking about!” Shane

said. "The school did it as a fund-raiser! We could do the same thing! We could set up a haunted house and charge people admission to walk through it! We could do it Halloween weekend, which would mean we wouldn't get to go trick-or-treating."

I shrugged. "So what?" I said. "I'd rather earn money! A haunted house would be great!"

"It would be awesome!" Tony trumpeted. "We could scare people . . . and get paid to do it!"

"We could make a ghost on a wire, like we did at Devil's Ridge!" Dylan chimed in.

Lyle Haywood raised his hands in caution. "Guys, guys," he said, "a haunted house might be a lot of fun . . . and we might be able to make some money doing it. But where are we going to have it? It's just like Tony's carnival idea . . . there isn't a place in Great Bear Heart big enough for something like that."

Once again, reality set in. A haunted house would be a lot of fun . . . but where would we host it?

"Maybe we could do it outside," Tony suggested. "You know . . . like some kind of haunted trail through the woods, where people could walk through at night."

“Yeah,” I replied, “but like Holly said: what if it rains? If the weather is cold and rainy, nobody will want to walk through the woods. Especially at night.”

“Wait a minute,” Holly said. “Why don’t we do it at the township hall? I mean . . . it’s not big enough for a carnival, but we could probably turn it into a haunted house for a few days.”

The Great Bear Heart township hall is located right between the hardware store and the Great Bear Heart Market. There is a large hall, a kitchen area, and several offices. Also, located in the same building, is the fire department. It’s an all-volunteer department, so no one is there . . . unless, of course, there’s a fire somewhere. “That place would be perfect,” Lyle said. “The only question is . . . would we be allowed to use it?”

“It belongs to the township,” Shane said, “so it belongs to everyone who lives here. I know some people have wedding receptions and banquets and things like that at the hall. All we’d have to do is go to a township meeting and ask for permission.”

“The next meeting is tomorrow night at seven, at the township hall,” Holly said. “I know,

because my dad goes to all the meetings.”
“Let’s take a vote, then,” Shane said. “All in favor of making a haunted house to earn some money, raise your hand.”

All six of us raised our hands.

“Who can make it to the township meeting tomorrow night?” he asked.

Again, we raised our hands.

“Okay,” he continued. “The matter is settled. Let’s meet at the market at ten minutes to seven, tomorrow night.”

That closed the meeting, and we took turns descending the rope ladder that dangled from our clubhouse. Dollar scrambled down the tree like an Olympic raccoon. When we were all on the ground, Lyle pulled out a remote control from his pocket. He and Shane had set up the rope ladder with the remote, so a button could be pressed to retract it, raising it up to the clubhouse. That way, if anyone happened upon our fort, they wouldn’t be able to get to it very easily. And of course, the same remote control was used to lower the rope. It was pretty nifty.

We hiked through the woods, following the trail that snaked back to Great Bear Heart Mail Route Road and into town. From there, we went separate

ways . . . except for Holly and me. She lives near my house, so we walked home together.

“Do you think they’ll let us use the township hall to make our haunted house?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “But I don’t see why not.”

We were pretty hopeful—and pretty certain—that the township board would allow us to go ahead with our plans for a haunted house. Boy, were we in for a big surprise.