

Just Like Always

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The Costume Box

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Chapter 1

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"Alright, Dad's gone. You can leave me alone now." Nolan muttered, tugging down one of his sleeves over the paper wristband as he led the way through the gate.

"Uh-uh. Dad said we have to stay together." Miles reached out to grab his brother's hand to stop him from getting too far ahead. He spun and glared, an instinct that was much less threatening now that his eyes met his brother's chest. He looked up, cheeks turning slightly pink. Stupid growth spurts. Little brothers were supposed to stay that way.

"No one else has to."

"You don't know that. Plus, this way you don't gotta go down the haunted trail alone, right?" Nolan grunted something that sounded like 'I'm not afraid'. Miles chuckled and reached out to ruffle his hair.

"Stop!" Nolan dodged, pulling the hood of his black Nike sweatshirt over his chestnut curls protectively.

"Fine. Don't want my hand to smell like that stupid Gunflint shampoo you've got." Nolan glared at him from under the shade of the hoodie.

"Let's just do this."

"You don't wanna do the pumpkin patch first?" Mom and Dad usually told him to stop annoying his brother, but they weren't

here, and what else were brothers for? "Mom'd probably love it if we recreated that photo she's obsessed with." He grabbed Nolan's shoulder and turned him toward the pumpkin patch. "See? They even still have that pumpkin bench!"

"You'd probably crush me if you tried to sit on my lap."

"I mean, we could-"

"No!" Nolan snarled in frustration. He knew what Miles was about to suggest. "Let's just do the trail. It's the only cool thing here."

"We're sticking together." Miles said, grabbing Nolan's hand as he once again seemed like he would wander off. He needed a leash!

"Let me go."

"Only if you go with me to the witch's wishing well." Nolan groaned yet again. "It's not gonna kill you." Nolan rolled his eyes. "Wishing well or that kiosk with the ducks." Both of them knew that the wishing well was the epitome of maturity compared to the stuffed yellow ducklings dressed as the most babyish version of Halloween icons.

"The wishing well is for kids."

"I'm eleven." Miles replied with a laugh. "I am a kid!" He grinned. "And so are you, small fry."

"Hey!"

"Yeah, that didn't sound right. I'll figure it out though."

"Figure what out?"

"You don't know? How 'bout we ask the witch?" Nolan rolled his eyes and trod along beside Miles toward the obvious fake well with a woman sitting next to it. "What are you gonna wish for?"

"I'm not doing it." Nolan replied at once. "Wishes aren't real."

"It's just for fun." Miles explained. "You remember what fun is, right?" Nolan rolled his eyes.

"Alright, whatever." He rolled his eyes again as the witch cackled as they got closer.

"Come closer, my pretties." She crooned. She looked right at Nolan. "Lean over my magic well, and a wish into it you must tell."

"Huh?"

"He's not doing it." Miles said. "But I will!" He knelt down and leaned over the well. "Now what should I wish for?"

"Just pick something." Miles looked at him, grinning mischievously. Maybe I'll wish for his hat to fall in, Nolan thought.

"I wish Nolan was my baby brother."

"Hey!" Miles laughed as he got back up.

"You said it's not real. Besides, even if it was, wishes don't come true if you tell someone, right?" He tousled Nolan's hair.

"Don't." Miles grabbed Nolan as he once again tried to get ahead of him, spinning him around as he pulled him back so that his face landed in Miles's chest.

"I've been meaning to do this since we got here." He pulled up Nolan's pants. "Your lime green booty was ruining the vibe."

"Wasn't even that bad." Nolan mumbled into his chest.

"Uh-huh, that's why I had to pull your pants up over your entire butt cheek." Nolan's cheeks were red as he pulled away from Miles.

"Let's just go do the trail thing." Another lunge earned Miles Nolan's hand.

"I'm holding this until I can trust we can stay together."

"You sound like mom."

"Well," Miles shrugged. "In this one case, maybe she's right?" Nolan scoffed. "Whatever, dude. I'm holding your hand." Nolan sulked for a moment, but then seemed to begrudgingly accept it.

"What do you think they're gonna have this year? We can hear the chainsaw, obviously, but what else?"

"Probably just a buncha paper pumpkins stapled to a tree with strobe lights."

"Why do you say that?"

"Cuz that's what they did last year. You were sick, so you

probably don't remember."

"Come on, they won't do that same- oh." Nolan pointed with his free hand at the very thing he had described.

"It'll be boring." Nolan intoned solemnly, as if it was a done deal.

"Then why'd you beg to come?" Nolan seemed unsure for a moment before cackling.

"Cuz I bet you'll pee your pants!" Miles snorted.

"Do you know how dorky you sound?" Nolan yanked his hand free, but stayed next to his brother. "Only way that'll happen is if you had wished for it." He laughed as Nolan looked back towards the witch's well. "We're not going back just so you can wish me into a peepants." He said, raising his hand and then lowering it. Yet another hair tousling might put Nolan back into a sulk. He wanted to have fun, not deal with a pouting brother all night.

"Probably just a bunch of stuff to scare little kids who convinced their parents to take them into the haunted trail." Nolan said, getting back on topic. "Then again, you're only eleven."

"Website said ten and up." Miles said a bit too quickly. He blushed lightly and quickly changed the subject. "Pants."

"Huh?"

"Pull 'em up, dude. Bad enough I gotta see that stuff at home." Nolan made a face.

"You wear 'em too." Miles thought he heard him mumble as he pulled them up.

"Alright, there's the entrance." Miles said. "See? Haunted. Trail."

"I can read."

"Barely." Nolan growled and punched him in the arm. It was such a bad attempt at a punch, Miles couldn't help but laugh.

"Don't hit, Noogie."

"Do not call me that."

"But it's so cute!"

"We're not here for cute."

"I saw you eyeing that Frankenstein duckie." Nolan rolled his eyes and grunted something that seemed to say he wasn't sure how serious Miles was, if at all. Interesting. Miles thought.

"We're here for scary." Nolan frowned. "I mean, here for fear!"

"Well," Miles could not help but grin as he heard screams from the woods. "Let's go get scared!"

"Are you both at least ten?" The attendant at the gate asked, looking them over as if their ages might be printed somewhere on their bodies.

"Yep!" Miles said, taking the opportunity to pull Nolan closer to him so he could pull up both of their sleeves to show the

wristbands.

"Still gotta check your height, squirt." Nolan grinned until he realized the attendant meant him.

"What? I'm not-"

"Just do it, Nolan." Miles rolled his eyes, watching intently as the attendant held the plastic measuring pole up to his older brother, hoping he could remember every detail of this for a long time to come. "Don't slouch!"

"He's good."

"Why are you telling him?" Nolan spat. "He's eleven." The attendant seemed surprised by this information.

"And how old are you?" Nolan sputtered.

"He's old enough." Miles pushed Nolan along, waiting for the attendant to stop them, but it didn't happen. "Just let it go, bruh." Miles said. "We're in and that guy probably doesn't even remember us already." Another scream cut through the crisp autumn evening.

"What are they screaming about?" Nolan muttered. "See? It's just as dumb as I said." As if he had predicted it, there was a paper skull stapled to a tree with a light flickering below it.

"Coulda at least done like a zombie or something." Miles agreed. "Oh, well. Just means we'll get through this easy-peasy, right?"

The breeze picked up and rushed through the few leaves still

on the trees overheard, but it also brought a tinny sort of calliope.

"What is that?" Nolan asked. Miles could only shrug.

"Race you?" He took off running, but took care not to run too fast. He didn't want to lose Nolan, nor did he want to send him back into a sulk. They turned the corner and gasped as one. "That's not a paper pumpkin." Miles said as he stared up in wonderment at a carousel.

"Isn't that the one from the garden?" Nolan said, staring just as much. "But how'd they move it here?"

"The one at the garden doesn't have skeletons." Miles replied, watching the skeletal horses go around and around, running laps in time with the jaunty tune. Nolan dared closer, though there was a fence preventing him from going up to the carousel. That was for the best, far as Miles was concerned. It seemed like the sort of thing that might-

Nolan jumped back as a cackle cut through the night. Even Miles jumped a bit as a figure came running from the far side of the carousel. Nolan ran too, fleeing back over to Miles as whoever, whatever that was came right up to the fence with a bone-chilling scream.

"Let's... let's go." Nolan said, whimpering slightly.

"They really know how to hit ya, huh?" Miles observed. "Do you want to leave?"

"No." Nolan said. "No!"

"Ok, well, your pants are nearly down to your knees from your..." he couldn't think of a way to politely say 'cowardly retreat'. "And I don't think Big Bird and Elmo are quite the right fit for this place." He tugged up Nolan's sweatpants. "You're being so brave." Nolan looked at Miles, a bit puzzled.

"Let's... let's keep going." He said after a second. Miles shrugged it off, figuring Nolan was still a little shaken.

That was all but confirmed for him a moment later when Nolan seemed back to himself. He began to widen the distance between him and Miles, almost as if he was daring him to run to catch up. The path's not all that twisty, I can still see him, Miles thought. Sure, Dad had made them promise to stick together, but Nolan couldn't get into too much trouble five steps ahead of him, could he?

VRRZZZZT! Miles jumped, then laughed. How could someone with a chainsaw sneak up on you? And why was there always a chainsaw? Texas Chainsaw Massacre was like a million years old! As the silence returned, he heard a soft whimper.

"It's just a chainsaw, Nolan." He said with a chuckle.

"M-Miles." Nolan said, pointing to something.

"Stay on the path." The fear in Nolan's voice set something deep inside him on edge, but he figured Miles should be scared. He was the one making fun of all this.

"Come here." An ethereal voice said. "Come. Come."

"N-n-no." Nolan stammered.

"Come lie down for just a moment." Miles watched as two spectral figures standing in a graveyard approached Nolan and began to gently prod him past the graves, obviously styrofoam that no amount of artificial fog could conceal. "Come with us. Come, come."

"No, I gotta stay on the path. No, no!" Nolan sounded like he was on the verge of tears, spinning around to try to keep both ghosts in front of him, so Miles snapped into action.

"He said no, you guys!" Feeling a wave of some indescribable feeling, maybe pure courage, he lifted Nolan up before he even knew what he was doing. "Move!" He didn't want to touch the scare actors, so he maneuvered past them, pressing the terrified boy into his chest.

"Miles!" Nolan whined.

"Sorry, buddy. I didn't realize you were that far ahead of me." He glared at the two women, who were still in character floating around the graves. "He's just a little boy!" He scolded, though he wondered if he should have gotten Miles one of the No Scares Please wristbands. "Come on, buddy. There's some more light over here." He carried Miles a short distance down the trail and set him down. "Do you feel better?"

"N-not really."

"Do you wanna be done?"

"No!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. This isn't... it isn't that scary."

"Really?" Miles couldn't help but laugh. "I was terrified, noogie!" He expected Nolan to roll his eyes, but he looked at him in amazement.

"You were?" There was something different about his voice, something more innocent. Miles felt the same sensation that he had felt when he had rescued Nolan. That was what it was, right, rescuing? Sure, he hadn't been in real trouble, but Nolan had felt like he was and that was all it had taken for Miles. He was feeling love, a strong love, a protective love.

"Sure, buddy." He said. "You were calling for me, remember?" Nolan shuddered and Miles hugged him tightly. "But we don't need to think about that now." Nolan said something, muffled beyond comprehension, into his chest. "Huh?"

"Let go of me." Gone was the innocence. This was regular thirteen year old Nolan again. Miles released him and chuckled self-consciously.

"Sorry, don't know what came- let's keep going, huh?" He reshouldered his backpack and let Nolan lead the way, though he seemed to be staying closer to Miles now. He wasn't sure which was stranger: that or the fact that he didn't remember having a backpack before this moment.

They had only made it a few steps before Nolan suddenly fell to the ground, almost cartoonishly going head over heels due to a tree root.

"Whoa! Man overboard!" Miles said, noticing the telltale papery waistband sticking out of Nolan's Spider-Man sweatpants. "Oh, shi-oot. We completely forgot to take you potty."

"What?" Nolan squeaked.

"Your Pull-ups still good?" Miles pulled Nolan to his feet and patted the front of his crotch. What was he doing? Something felt so off, though he didn't know why. Didn't he always ask Nolan that if Mom or Dad wasn't around? It wasn't groping your brother when you were checking his Pull-ups.

"Yes." Nolan looked as confused as he did.

"Ready to keep going, noogie? That tree didn't mean to trip you." Nolan did not look so sure.

"We're almost done, right?"

"Think so." Miles looked ahead as if he might be able to look through the trees and see the exit. "But it might be like a grand finale, so it'll be super scary." Nolan smirked, back to his old self again.

"Good, cuz the rest of this has been lame!" Miles thought about pointing out how scared Nolan had been, but thought better of it. He liked his newfound – or was it regained? – confidence.

"Stay close to me." Miles called, fully aware of just how futile it was as he had to start walking to avoid losing sight of his brother. Why did he care so much? Nolan was his older brother, wasn't he? Why was he feeling so protective? Was it some sort of response to fear? Sure, he had jumped a little, but he was less afraid than worried about-

"Miiiiiiiiles!" Nolan screamed. Any confusion Miles had vanished as he charged forward, Nolan's light up sneakers kicking desperately in the air as he was lifted up.

"So much for thinking the trees weren't evil." Miles muttered as he realized a guy dressed as – what? An evil tree? At least that made sense for a haunted trail – was in the midst of lifting Nolan up. "Let him go!" Miles yelled, lunging in and grabbing Nolan. As soon as he realized Miles had him, Nolan stopped kicking and latched onto his hoodie with both hands, burying his face in his hoodie, clinging too tightly to Miles for him to pull up Nolan's sleeve to show them his No Scares Please wristband.

"I wanna go!" Nolan protested shrilly. "Too scary!"

"Yeah, that was scary." Miles agreed, patting his back with every step until they were finally out of the haunted trail. They must have been right at the end because no other scares came.

"Too scary." Nolan repeated into his shoulder. Miles nodded.

"Yeah, that one was really, really scary, huh?" He kept rubbing Nolan's back as he tried to make a plan. They still

had one more thing to do before going to the gate to meet Dad, but first... He frowned. No, that couldn't be right. He was going to take Nolan potty, wasn't he? But even that didn't make sense. Nolan was thirteen. If he needed to go, he would say. But that also didn't make sense. A thirteen year old who was still whimpering into his shoulder? A thirteen year old he could still carry? And how could Nolan be thirteen when he...

"Miles?" Nolan asked, lifting his head up slightly and then quickly returning his head to his brother's shoulder. "Why are we just standing here?"

"I... I'm not sure, noogie." Miles said. Why was he standing here, thinking? Nolan needed his diaper changed. "Wanna go get a dry butt?"

"Uh-huh." Nolan mumbled into his shoulder.

"Getting sleepy?"

"Nuh." Miles chuckled and Nolan giggled. "I like feeling it in your chest, just like papa." Miles grinned and kissed the top of Nolan's head. He smelled like baby shampoo, just like always.

Figuring it would be best not to risk having to change Nolan on the bathroom floor, Miles made a beeline for the family restroom. Family meant a guaranteed changing table.

"Time to detach, barnacle."

"Wutsa barnacle?" Nolan asked, yawning.

"It's a sea creature that sticks to ships, rocks, and whales."

Miles shrugged out of the backpack as Nolan nodded as if he had suspected that and just wanted to confirm, hardly even acknowledging when Miles pulled down his sweatpants.

"Look! Big Bird and Elmo! Elmo's the kinda monster we like, right?"

"Yeah-huh." Nolan agreed. "And Cookie, hooaaahhhhhh, Cookie Monster."

"Big yawn! Don't doze off."

"Not gonna." Nolan seemed to find his second wind from the accusation. "What're you gonna be for Halloween?"

"What about you?" Nolan shrugged.

"I think momma said cowboy."

"Like Woody?"

"Yeah." Nolan agreed. They fell back into silence as Miles wiped him off, secretly thrilled that Nolan had only peed.

"Lil peepants." He mumbled, suddenly struck by a strange sense of déjà vu. Who had he been calling a peepants? No, someone had been calling him peepants.

"A whale."

"Hmm?"

"Imma barnacle and you're the whale I was on."

"Oh. Oh! Right! Such a smart little noogie." He grinned down at Nolan, half naked on the table. Even now, something

nagged at the back of his mind, but what could possibly be wrong with this?

"What's the matter?" Nolan asked, seeing his brow furrow as he tried to remember.... Something. Something was wrong here. Why was.... Why were they here? Nolan was too young for the haunted trail, wasn't he? That's obviously why he had been so scared, but why had Mom and Dad let him bring him here? Had he just figured it wouldn't be as scary as they claimed? Still, Nolan was too little for anything scary. Wasn't he?

"Hey, noogie." Miles felt like his voice sounded hollow. The bathroom acoustics were weird like that. How could he ask this without scaring Nolan more? "Big brother's feeling silly. How old are you?"

"I'm c-c-c-c-cold." Nolan shivered.

"Yeah, I suppose it gets cold when you're not wearing pants, huh?" Miles laughed, unsure how Nolan had made his lips blue through sheer willpower. "Let's get you figured out and I can ask... whatever it was I wanted to know a minute ago."

Going into the bag for a fresh diaper, Miles noticed a fluffy head and smiled. That was it! He'd been trying to find a way to slip his special surprise into the conversation.

"Hurry up!" Nolan whined. Miles smiled and held up the diaper.

"Is this what the young monsieur is looking for?" Nolan nodded.

"What's mizzur?"

"It's just something snooty waiters say." Miles explained, taping up Nolan's diaper and pulling his pants up. "And this one's got Cookie Monster on it, so you know it's good. Here, we'll leave the top of your diaper exposed, so you can be a cool sagger." Nolan sat up and held his arms out. "Is that for a hug or uppies?"

"Both."

"Well, I've got someone you can hug while I'm carrying you." Miles reached down into his backpack and unveiled a soft yellow duckling dressed as a jack-o-lantern. Nolan gasped and all but snatched it out of his brother's hands, hugging it and grinning from ear to ear. "Nearly forgot, noogie. I bought this for you." I guess, he added in his head. Where else had it come from?

"Thank yo-" VRZZZZZT "Scary!" Nolan buried his face in the duckling.

"How about we get out of here? Maybe the chainsaw guy needs his diaper changed?" A nervous little giggle escaped from either the duckling or the boy holding it. "Uuuup you come." Miles was taken aback by how heavy Nolan was at first before he got him settled in against his hip. Now was not the time to wonder out loud how much longer he would be able to carry his baby brother. Baby brother. He liked the sound of that. He had always liked the sound of it ever since Mom had brought Nolan home from the hospital. How long ago had that been? Wasn't Nolan-

"We gotta get the punkin photo!" Nolan decreed.

"You're right!" Miles said. "Good thing you remembered. And I'm gonna sit on your lap, right?"

"No!" Nolan giggled. "Quackers is gonna sit on my lap and I'll sit on yours."

"Oh! Of course. Quackers, huh?"

"He says that's his name." Nolan explained as if it was obvious.

"Gotta set you down for a sec, noogie. Gotta fix my pants." He set Nolan down, tugged up his pants, and looked at Nolan. Something was wrong. He was still wearing his hoodie with all the blue, green, and orange dinos on it. He hardly ever took it off! For just a moment though, Miles had expected him to wear a black Nike hoodie. "Wanna walk over to the pumpkin bench?"

"Punkin."

"No, it's pumpkin. Pump-kin."

"Punkin." Nolan replied.

"Alright, fine. Show me where the... punkin bench is." Nolan grinned and ran off. "Not so far, Nolan!" Miles rubbed his eyes in disbelief. Nolan's teeth. Why did a toddler who wasn't even potty trained have adult teeth?

"Come on, Miles!" Nolan called. The thought slipped away. By the time they had taken the photo and Nolan had proudly

presented it to Dad, Miles didn't see a single thing wrong with the little boy he buckled into a carseat. In fact, the little guy dozing off as they drove through the autumn night was perfect. The perfect baby brother.