



A COWBOY'S  
*Halloween*

SIERRA GAMBLE

A SMALL TOWN HALLOWEEN ROMANCE

# A COWBOY'S HALLOWEEN

Seven Holidays in Shooting Star Canyon Book Four



SIERRA GAMBLE

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*To Pop-Pop*

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## CHAPTER 1



Jack Griffin's phone rang, and he shimmied it out of his pocket as he kicked his apartment door shut behind him.

"Hey there, Roy!" he said enthusiastically. Not all brothers got along as well as the Griffins did, but Jack would do anything and everything for Roy, Parker, and Ronald. "How's it going?"

"Hey, Jack! I'm good, just getting ready for Halloween. All stocked up on candy for the kids this year."

Jack burst out laughing. "Halloween is over two weeks away! Are you sure you aren't going to eat all of the candy and need to buy more for the trick-or-treaters?"

"I'm not going to open the bag," Roy insisted.

"Or did you buy two bags? One for the kids and one for you?"

"Maybe..."

Jack laughed some more. "I'm so glad you called," he said as he lowered himself to sit on the edge of his couch. "I was actually going to call you."

"Really? What's up?"

"Well, I had an idea. How about we, you, Parker, and Ronald, get together at my place this Saturday night for a Halloween movie marathon? We can watch some classic horror films and really get into the spooky mood."



“That sounds awesome! I’m in for sure. Let me check with Parker and Ronald. Or do you want to call them?”

“Doesn’t matter to me,” Jack said.

“I’ll call back in a few.”

Roy hung up.

Jack chuckled to himself. Roy was the oldest, so he tended to be a take-charge kind of guy. Roy wanting to call the others didn’t surprise Jack at all.

A few minutes later, Roy called back. “Jack, they’re both up for it too! Count us in.”

“Fantastic! It’s going to be a blast. I’ll text you the details, but save the date. Saturday night, seven PM, at my apartment.”

“Got it. We’ll be there with bells on. Can’t wait for some Halloween scares!”

Jack laughed. “Great, Roy. It’s going to be epic. See you on Saturday!”



Jack couldn’t wait for his brothers to arrive for their Halloween movie night. With excitement in the air, he decided to transform his apartment into a cozy yet eerie setting for the spooky movie marathon.

First, Jack began by hanging up some Halloween decorations. He draped fake spider webs across his living room and strategically placed plastic spiders and bats on the walls. Jack also scattered some battery-operated candles around the room to create a dim, eerie atmosphere.

Then, he turned off the overhead lights and switched to soft orange and purple string lights. The subtle glow added a haunted ambiance that would be perfect for their horror movie marathon.

Jack made sure to stock up on everyone’s favorite movie snacks. He had bowls of buttery popcorn, a variety of candy,

and a big bowl of punch with floating “eyeballs” made from lychee fruit and blueberries.

To get into the Halloween spirit, Jack set up a costume corner with a selection of masks, hats, and props. He planned on encouraging his brothers to dress up if they felt like it, and he had a few spare costumes ready just in case.

Jack had carefully curated a list of classic horror movies, including favorites like *The Shining*, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, and *The Others*. He made sure the remote control was easily accessible, ready to start the scares whenever they were ready.

He arranged the seating area with cozy blankets and cushions, ensuring that everyone would be comfortable during their movie marathon.

Jack played a spooky playlist of eerie music softly in the background, enhancing the overall Halloween experience.

As Jack finished setting up, he couldn't help but feel the excitement building. Everything was ready for a night of scares and laughter with his brothers. All that was left to do was wait for Roy, Parker, and Ronald to arrive and enjoy the Halloween movie night they had been looking forward to.

The clock approached seven on that crisp autumn evening, and Jack anxiously awaited the arrival of his brothers. He had finished meticulously preparing his apartment for their Halloween movie night, and the anticipation was building.

The sound of the doorbell echoed through the apartment, and Jack rushed to the front door. He swung it open to reveal his three brothers, all dressed in costumes that reflected their unique personalities.

Roy, the eldest, arrived first. He was dressed as a classic vampire, complete with a black cape, pale makeup, and sharp fangs. He flashed a mischievous grin as he greeted Jack.

“You dressed up!” Jack exclaimed as they hugged.

“And you didn't.” Roy laughed and tugged on the cloak string around his neck. “I'm going to feel sheepish if the others didn't.”

“I ran out of time,” Jack said.

“Good ahead and—”

“Here I am!” Parker declared.

Jack grinned. “Love the costume!”

Parker was dressed like a mummy with strips of white cloth wrapped haphazardly around him. He stumbled playfully toward Jack, groaning like a mummy from an old horror film.

Jack burst out laughing. He could already tell that tonight was going to be a great night.

Ronald, the youngest of the group, had gone for a humorous approach. He was dressed as a giant slice of pizza, complete with a triangular costume and a cheesy grin on his face. Jack couldn't help but chuckle at the unexpected choice.

“Come in, all of you!” Jack exclaimed, holding the door open wide for them. “I'm so glad you all dressed up!”

“Well, now we'll be able to get more bang for our buck,” Roy pointed out.

“Yeah. Wearing a costume only once gets expensive,” Ronald added.

“No if you recycle them,” Jack said.

Parker snorted. “As if you've ever worn the same costume twice.”

Jack glanced over to where he had stacked up his old costumes in the corner. “You got me,” he admitted, and they all laughed.

The room was bathed in a soft, eerie glow from the orange and purple string lights. The decorations, snacks, and spooky ambiance created the perfect Halloween atmosphere. The scent of freshly popped popcorn wafted through the air.

“Make yourselves comfortable,” Jack said, ushering his brothers toward the cozy seating area he had arranged. They settled in, grabbing bowls of popcorn and drinks as they chatted and caught up on each other's lives.

Jack couldn't help but feel a warm sense of joy as he watched his brothers enjoying the Halloween festivities he had prepared. The stage was set for a memorable night of horror movies and brotherly bonding, the perfect way to celebrate Halloween together.

All of the Griffins were Christians, and they viewed Halloween as a fun and festive occasion to celebrate with costumes, decorations, and activities like watching spooky movies, going trick-or-treating, or hosting gatherings with friends and family. Like Thanksgiving, they treated it as an excuse to hang out with loved ones, although they all saw each other almost every day as they worked at Hidden Creek Orchard together.

For all of their lives, they used the holiday as an opportunity to spend quality time together, create positive memories, and enjoy the festive aspects of Halloween while staying true to their faith.

In recent years, Jack had started to think of Halloween as an occasion to reflect on themes of light and darkness, good versus evil, and the triumph of light over darkness, = seeing parallels with his faith and beliefs.

Jack grinned and rubbed his hands together. "Hey, guys, you know what time it is, right?"

Roy smiled. "Oh, I think I know where you're going with this. It's that time of year again, isn't it? You don't want to wait until Halloween night?"

Jack nodded enthusiastically. "No need to wait." He turned to Parker and Ronald. "Are you all ready for our annual tradition?"

Parker chuckled. "Jack, you don't even have to ask. I've been waiting for this since last Halloween."

Ronald looked as excited as ever. "Me too! Hocus Pocus time is the best time!"

Jack laughed. "That's what I like to hear. Let's keep the tradition alive, guys. Hocus Pocus it is!"

Every year since Jack had turned six and Roy had been seven, Parker had been three, and Ronald had been one, they had started the beloved tradition and enjoyed the Halloween classic together.

The brothers settled into their cozy Halloween-themed living room. They dimmed the lights, making the orange and purple string lights glow more prominently, creating a spooky yet comfortable atmosphere.

Jack set up the movie on the screen, making sure the volume was just right for the upcoming Halloween treat. As the iconic film began, the brothers got comfortable on the couch and grabbed their bowls of popcorn.

Throughout the movie, they laughed at the antics of the Sanderson sisters—Winifred, Sarah, and Mary—and their comical attempts to wreak havoc in modern-day Salem. They cheered for Max, Dani, and Allison as they tried to outsmart the witches and save the children.

Between the scenes, they shared fond memories of previous Halloweens and their favorite moments from the movie. The costumes, decorations, and the warm company of the family made the experience even more enjoyable.

As the end credits rolled, Jack and his brothers couldn't help but feel a sense of nostalgia and contentment. They had successfully continued their cherished tradition, and it had brought them closer once again.

After enjoying their tradition and savoring the Halloween movie night, Jack and his brothers decided to indulge in more Halloween treats. Perhaps they had a variety of candy and desserts on hand to satisfy their sweet tooth.

Jack made his brothers show off their costumes in an impromptu showcase that had all of them laughing. Jack's stomach started to hurt from laughing so hard.

"Since it's movie night, we should watch another one," Jack said.

It didn't take them too long to settle on *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, which had been Ronald's favorite movie as

a kid to the point that there was a good stretch of two to three months where he would force them to watch the movie every day.

Once this movie was finished, Jack and his brothers played a Halloween-themed board game to keep the festive spirit alive.

To add a touch of suspense to the night, they shared some spooky ghost stories and tales of their own Halloween adventures.

There wasn't time for it, but Jack planned on setting aside the Halloween crafts he wondered if they would have time to do. He also eyed the pumpkins they weren't going to carve. It would've been a nice touch to further enhance the holiday atmosphere, but it wasn't as if tonight was Halloween. The thirty-first was two weeks from tonight.

Which also meant it wouldn't be worthwhile to do a moonlit walk. For the most part, the people in Shooting Star Canyon hadn't yet put out their Halloween decorations.

As the night came to a close, Jack and his brothers Roy, Parker, and Ronald prepared to say their goodbyes. They had enjoyed a memorable evening, and Jack was already wondering about what they might do on October thirtieth, since most of them would want to stick around by their apartment doors for the kiddos in their complexes that would come around.

Jack yawned and stretched. "Well, guys, it's been an amazing night. I'm so glad we could continue our tradition."

Roy nodded. "Absolutely, Jack. It was a blast, as always."

Parker smiled. "Thanks for hosting, Jack. The decorations and movie choices were top-notch."

"Yeah, and dressing up was so much fun!" Ronald shook his head. "I still can't believe that we all dressed up, and you were the only one not to, Jack!"

Jack shrugged, and everyone laughed. "Thanks, everyone," he said gratefully. "I couldn't have asked for a better night with my favorite people."

They patted each other on the back, and Jack and Ronald gave each other a one-armed hug.

Jack turned to the door. “All right. Drive safe, guys. And remember, it’s not even Halloween yet. Plenty more Halloween fun can be had!”

Roy waved. “We will, Jack. Thanks again for tonight.”

Parker nodded. “Take care, and happy Halloween!”

Ronald rubbed his hands together. “Goodnight, Jack! Can’t wait to see what else you have planned for Halloween this year!”

With final waves and smiles, the brothers parted ways, each heading to their own homes with hearts full of Halloween spirit and the anticipation of many more spooky and memorable celebrations in the years to come.

After Jack shut the door, his mind was already churning with ideas about what to do next. Normally, they would have their movie night much closer to Halloween.

And then a brilliant idea came to him. He could turn Hidden Creek Orchard, the ranch he and his brothers worked at in Shooting Star Canyon, into a haunted ranch to raise money for charity!

The more he thought about the idea, the more he loved it. He started to excitedly pace in his apartment.

“It would be so much fun,” he murmured to himself, “and we could make a real difference in the community.”

He quickly grabbed his phone and dialed Roy’s number, eager to share his idea with his brothers.

“Hey, Jack, what’s up? Miss me already?” he joked.

“Roy, I just had an amazing idea,” Jack said enthusiastically. “What do you think about turning Hidden Creek Orchard into a haunted ranch for Halloween and raising money for charity?”

Roy paused. “That sounds fantastic! It’s a huge property, and we could create an unforgettable haunted experience.

Parker and Ronald will love this idea too!”

Jack grinned. “I knew you’d be on board. We can get together soon to discuss it with everyone. We can brainstorm ideas and start planning right away.”

“Sounds like a plan, Jack. Let’s make this Halloween unforgettable for the community and for a good cause.”

After their conversation, Jack began drafting a proposal for their family meeting, outlining the concept, potential charity organizations to support, and the logistics of transforming Hidden Creek Orchard into a haunted ranch. He couldn’t wait to share the idea with his brothers and turn it into a reality, creating a Halloween event that would not only scare visitors but also warm their hearts through charitable contributions.



## CHAPTER 2



**H**eather Carter, a creative makeup artist, found herself in the final stages of her work on an upcoming movie. As the production neared completion, her role in bringing characters to life through makeup and special effects became increasingly critical.

Being a movie makeup artist had always been Heather's dream job. Creating iconic looks was something she took a great deal of pride in, even with minor characters.

Heather had been responsible for crafting memorable looks for the movie's characters, from subtle enhancements to full-fledged transformations. Her makeup skills had played a pivotal role in defining each character's personality and appearance.

Throughout the production, Heather collaborated closely with the director, costume designers, and the rest of the film crew to ensure that the makeup and special effects aligned seamlessly with the overall vision of the movie.

Heather often found herself working long hours on set, meticulously applying makeup and prosthetics, and ensuring that every detail was perfect for each scene. Late nights and early mornings were not uncommon as she strived for perfection in her craft.

In addition to traditional makeup, Heather's expertise extended to special effects makeup. She had created wounds, scars, and other effects that added authenticity to the film's action sequences and dramatic moments.

Heather's attention to detail extended to maintaining continuity throughout the filming process. It was her responsibility to ensure that the characters' makeup remained consistent from scene to scene, even if the scenes were shot out of sequence.

Heather had faced her fair share of challenges during the movie's production. From dealing with tight shooting schedules to addressing last-minute changes in character appearances, she had learned to adapt quickly and find creative solutions.

As Heather wrapped up her work on the film, she couldn't help but feel a mix of excitement and nostalgia. The characters she had helped bring to life would soon be seen by audiences worldwide, and she was eager to see how her makeup artistry would contribute to the movie's success.

"That's a wrap!" Mark Reynolds, the director, yelled.

Heather and the rest of the cast and crew who remained on set all clapped and cheered, but Heather's work wasn't done. She helped to remove the movie makeup from the male and female leads. By the time she finished cleaning up her workstation, she spied a note.

Receiving an invitation to the afterparty with the rest of the cast and crew was a delightful surprise for Heather. After months of hard work, late nights on set, and meticulous attention to detail, this was her chance to unwind and celebrate the completion of the movie project.

With a sense of excitement, she headed home to change. It took some time for her to settle on what to wear before settling on a stylish yet comfortable blouse and skirt that reflected her unique and creative personality. After carefully selecting her attire and makeup for the evening, she headed to the afterparty venue with a mix of anticipation and eagerness.

The afterparty was a gathering of talented individuals who had dedicated their time and effort to the film. As Heather walked through the door, she was greeted by familiar faces from the cast and crew, many of whom she had worked closely with during the production. Laughter and conversation filled

the air as everyone shared stories, reminisced about the challenges they had overcome, and celebrated the successful completion of the movie.

Heather found herself engaged in animated discussions with fellow artists, actors, and production team members. They talked about their favorite moments on set, the creative process, and the impact they hoped the film would have on audiences.

Heather found herself talking to the film's charismatic lead actor, Sean Wells.

“Sean, you were incredible in the movie. I'm so glad I could help bring your character to life.”

Sean smiled gratefully. “Thank you, Heather! Your makeup work really added depth to the character. It was a pleasure working with you.”

“You're too kind.”

Heather soon found herself in a deep conversation with Sarah Anderson, the movie's lead actress, who had undergone several striking makeup transformations throughout the film. They chatted about the challenges and rewards of creating the character's signature look. Sarah expressed her gratitude for Heather's expertise in helping her get into character.

Sarah's grin was as warm as ever. “Heather, your makeup artistry truly brought my character to life. I couldn't have done it without you.”

Heather felt truly humbled. “Thank you, Sarah. It was a pleasure working with you. Your dedication to the role was inspiring.”

Heather also had the chance to catch up with Mark, the director of the film. They discussed their shared vision for the characters and how makeup and special effects had played a crucial role in conveying the story's emotions and themes.

“Heather, your attention to detail was impeccable. You helped translate the script onto the screen seamlessly.” His appreciation was clear in his tone, and Heather was amazed.

“It was a collaborative effort, Mark. Your guidance and vision made it all come together. This movie just might have been my favorite to work on.”

“I’m glad to hear it! I hope you’ll come on board with my next movie?”

Heather beamed. “That’s the highest compliment you can give me! So long as it works out in my schedule, I would be honored.”

He patted her on the back.

Jenna Mitchell, the costume designer, approached. Heather and Jenna had collaborated closely to ensure that makeup and costumes were perfectly aligned.

The three of them talked about the synergy between makeup, costumes, and character development. They shared anecdotes about last-minute adjustments and how they had worked together to ensure that the characters’ appearances were cohesive.

Mark moved on first, leaving the two ladies to continue talking.

Jenna turned animated. “Heather, your attention to detail was amazing. You made my job so much easier.”

“Likewise, Jenna. Your costume designs truly complemented the makeup, and it all came together beautifully.”

The costume designer threw back her head and laughed. “Remember that one scene where we had to make those quick wardrobe changes? You were a lifesaver!”

Heather chuckled. “Absolutely, Jenna. Teamwork made it happen!”

As the night continued, Heather enjoyed chatting with various members of the cast and crew, including the production team, fellow makeup artists, and actors. The atmosphere was filled with camaraderie and appreciation for the collaborative effort that had brought the movie to life. It

was a night of shared stories, laughter, and a deep sense of accomplishment, and Heather was grateful to be a part of it.

Heather, with a glass of sparkling water in hand, mingled with her fellow partygoers at the afterparty. She couldn't help but feel a sense of camaraderie among the people who had become like a second family during the movie's production. The afterparty was not just a celebration of their work but also a chance to forge lasting bonds and create memories that would endure long after the credits rolled on the big screen.

For Heather, this afterparty was a fitting culmination of her role as a creative makeup artist on the movie. It was a night to relax, enjoy the company of her colleagues, and revel in the sense of accomplishment that came from being a part of something truly special.

Alex Turner, the special effects coordinator, spied her. "Heather! I don't know what I would have done without you. There were so many challenging scenes that required intricate special effects and makeup effects."

"Oh, definitely." She groaned, but it was all in jest.

"It was because of us that the film is going to be so memorable to audiences," he murmured. "Don't you think?"

"I don't know. The script was amazing, and the actors really brought it to life."

"In part because they looked the part!" He laughed. "Your special effects makeup was on point! It added that extra layer of realism to the intense scenes."

"You're too kind! Your creativity with the special effects was incredible."

"You knew exactly what would work best under the lighting. That takes skill."

"Or practice."

"Don't sell yourself short," he warned. "Our business isn't always a kind one, so be kind to yourself."

"I will," she promised.

With a nod, she headed over to strike up a conversation with Rachel Carter, the sound engineer, who had worked diligently to capture every nuance of the film's audio.

"The importance of sound in creating an immersive movie experience can't be understated," Heather said. "It complements the visual aspects, including makeup and special effects."

"Thank you for saying so!" Rachel giggled. "I agree, and I think the soundscape really enhanced your makeup work. It all came together so well!"

"I can't wait to see the finished film," Heather said. "It's amazing how every department contributed to the film's overall impact."

"Without a doubt!"

They continued talking for a bit before Heather had a chance encounter with Marcus Bennet, one of the supporting actors. They conversed about their favorite scenes and how the makeup and costumes had helped him get into character. Marcus shared anecdotes about the camaraderie on set and how it had made the filming experience unforgettable.

Marcus grinned and shook his head. "I don't know how you did it, Heather, but your makeup transformations were like magic. I felt like a different person in those scenes!"

Heather laughed. "That's the goal, Marcus. I'm glad it helped you connect with your character."

"It really did," he said, turning more serious. "When you look the part, it's so much easier to act the part, you know?"

"I'll take your word for it."

"You never thought about acting yourself?"

"Oh, no!" She laughed and held up her hands. "I don't like the limelight."

"I do," he admitted. "I'm hoping to eventually move up to being the main lead."

"I'm sure you'll get there one day."

“I hope so!”

“Without your character, Sean’s character wouldn’t have been able to win. I mean, look at Samwise Gamgee is how many people’s favorite character in Lord of the Rings?”

“True, true.” He grinned. “You always know what to say. Thank you.”

“You can do anything and everything,” she assured him.

Heather continued to enjoy the diverse conversations with her fellow partygoers. Each interaction reminded her of the collective effort that had gone into creating the movie, and it reinforced the sense of unity and achievement that defined that special evening.

As the lively atmosphere of the afterparty continued, an unexpected incident occurred. Heather, amidst the celebration, took a sudden misstep and slipped, landing with a painful thud on the floor. She immediately felt a sharp pain in her wrist.

Heather winced in pain. “Ouch! That really hurt.”

Jenna rushed over. “Heather, are you okay? That looked like a nasty fall.”

Heather held her wrist. “I’m not sure. My wrist really hurts.”

Marcus looked concerned. “Heather, you should definitely get that checked out. It could be serious.”

Heather’s wrist was swollen, and she was finding it increasingly difficult to move. Concerned friends and colleagues at the party urged her to seek medical attention. Recognizing the severity of the injury and not wanting to take any chances, Jenna offered to accompany her to an urgent care facility. The nearest one would close in a half hour, so if she wanted to go tonight, she needed to go now.

Heather sighed reluctantly. “You’re right. I should get this checked. Thanks, everyone, for your concern.”

Marcus helped Heather to her feet, and with the support of him and Jenna, she made her way to the urgent care center, where medical professionals could evaluate her wrist and

provide the necessary treatment. It was an unexpected turn of events at the afterparty, but Heather's well-being and a quick recovery became the top priority for all those in attendance.

Jenna offered to drive, but Marcus insisted on coming too, and Heather felt better having their support. Her wrist, however, was feeling worse and worse, and every bump in the road made her want to scream.

Accompanied by her concerned friends, Heather soon arrived at the urgent care center. They helped her check in and provided details about the slip and fall incident. Heather's injured wrist was clearly in need of medical attention.

Inside the urgent care facility, a nurse promptly assessed Heather's condition. She carefully examined her wrist, noting the swelling and limited range of motion. Dr. Hernandez came in, and an X-ray was promptly ordered to determine the extent of the injury.

While they waited for the results in the examination room at the urgent care center, Heather's friends offered words of encouragement and support, making sure she was as comfortable as possible. They reassured her that seeking medical help was the right decision and that they were there for her.

Heather tried not to move at all as she waited for the doctor who would provide more information about her fractured wrist. She was still feeling some discomfort, but her friends were there to offer support. Emotionally, she felt pretty good, but physically? Not so much.

Finally, the doctor entered the room again. "Hello, Heather. Let's take a look at the X-ray and discuss your injury."

Feeling nervous but eager to know the extent of her injury, Heather leaned forward. "Hi, Dr. Hernandez. I feel like such a klutz. I slipped at a party and landed on my wrist. It's been quite painful."

Dr. Hernandez pulled up the X-ray images and examined them carefully. "Based on the X-ray, you have a fracture in



your wrist. It appears to be a fracture of the radius bone.”

Her heart sank, and she grew slightly concerned. A fracture? Would she need a cast? How would she be able to work? Would she have to be sidelined? This movie was the biggest one she had ever worked on before, and the hype was already enough that people were talking about awards. The thought of her momentum being stalled made her sick to her stomach.

“What does that mean for my recovery?” she asked.

“Well, the good news is that this type of fracture can often be treated conservatively with a cast or splint. The bone should heal with proper care and immobilization. I’ll recommend you to a specialist who can provide you with more specific instructions on the type of cast or splint you’ll need.”

She let out a sigh of relief. “That’s good to hear. How long will it take to heal?”

“Healing times can vary, but typically, it may take several weeks for the bone to mend. Physical therapy might be necessary to regain strength and flexibility in your wrist once the cast is removed.”

Heather became resolute. “I’ll do whatever it takes to heal properly. My work involves intricate hand movements, so I want to make sure I recover fully.”

“That’s the spirit, Heather,” the doctor encouraged. “Follow the specialist’s recommendations, and you should be on the road to recovery. If you experience any severe pain, swelling, or any issues with the cast or splint, don’t hesitate to seek medical attention.”

Heather felt reassured by Dr. Hernandez’s explanation and advice. She understood the importance of following the treatment plan and attending the follow-up appointment with the specialist. While her injury was an unexpected setback, she was determined to focus on her recovery and get back to her creative makeup artistry as soon as possible.

Heather was given detailed instructions on how to care for her wrist and was scheduled for a follow-up appointment with

a specialist. The urgent care staff also provided her with a medical certificate that she could share with her employer to explain her injury and the potential need for time off work. They provided her with pain relief and immobilized her wrist to prevent further injury.

Dr. Hernandez, the doctor attending to Heather's fractured wrist, took a moment to explain how she should care for her injury and what to expect during the healing process.

The doctor offered instructions, "Heather, caring for your fractured wrist is crucial for a smooth recovery. Here are some key points to keep in mind. You'll likely need a cast or splint to keep your wrist immobilized. This will help the fractured bone heal properly. It's important not to try to remove the cast or splint on your own. Whenever possible, keep your injured wrist elevated above heart level. This can help reduce swelling and promote healing. I've prescribed pain medication to manage any discomfort you may experience. Follow the dosing instructions carefully, and don't hesitate to take it if you're in pain."

"I don't prefer to take medication," she said, "but in this case..."

"Listen to your body," he advised. "If you need it, it's all right to take it."

She nodded.

"You'll need to see a specialist, an orthopedic surgeon, who will provide more specific guidance on the type of cast or splint you'll receive. They'll also discuss the timeline for your recovery. Avoid putting any weight on your wrist and refrain from using it for strenuous activities during the initial healing period. This may mean some temporary adjustments to your work and daily routine."

"Got it."

"Depending on the severity of the fracture, you might need physical therapy to regain strength and mobility in your wrist. The specialist will provide guidance on when to start and what exercises to perform. Keep an eye out for any signs of

complications, such as increased pain, numbness, tingling, or discoloration of your fingers. If you notice any of these, contact the specialist or return to urgent care for evaluation.”

Heather was mentally taking notes. “Thank you, Doctor Hernandez. I appreciate your guidance. I’m committed to following these instructions to ensure a full recovery.”

“That’s the right attitude, Heather. Healing can take time, but with proper care and patience, you should be back to your creative makeup artistry in no time. Remember to attend your follow-up appointment with the specialist, and don’t hesitate to reach out if you have any concerns along the way.”

Heather had a clear understanding of how to care for her fractured wrist and a sense of determination to adhere to the recommended treatment plan. She knew that her journey to recovery had begun and that she was on the path to regaining full use of her wrist and returning to her passion for makeup artistry.

As Heather left the urgent care center with her wrist in a cast and her spirits lifted by the doctor’s reassurance, her friends remained by her side, ready to offer their support. She did feel tired, though, and was in a little discomfort from the fall and the medical evaluation.

Jenna carefully gave Heather a side hug. “How are you feeling now that you’ve seen the doctor?”

Heather smiled. “Better, thank you. Dr. Hernandez explained everything, and I have a plan for my recovery.”

Marcus seemed concerned. “That’s great to hear, but you’ve been through quite an ordeal. Do you feel up to driving home?”

Heather considered this. She would need to be driven back to the party to get her car, but the thought of driving right now...

“Well, with this cast, it might be a bit tricky,” she admitted.

Jenna piped up, “How about this? We’ll drive you home, Heather. It’s no big deal, and we can make sure that you get your car back tomorrow.”

Heather couldn't feel more grateful. "That would be wonderful. Thank you, both. I appreciate your help."

With Heather's friends offering to drive her home, they made their way back to the parking area. They carefully helped her into the car, making sure she was comfortable and had everything she needed for the journey.

As they drove Heather home, their conversation shifted from the incident to more lighthearted topics, providing her with a welcome distraction from the events of the evening. Heather couldn't help but feel grateful for the support and care of her friends during this unexpected turn of events. Their presence made the situation more manageable, and she knew she could count on them as she embarked on her path to recovery.

Heather's friends not only offered to drive her home, but they also wanted to help her with any immediate needs—getting groceries and arranging transportation to her follow-up appointment. Despite the unexpected turn of events, Heather felt grateful for the support of her friends and the prompt medical care she received.

As she continued her recovery, she knew that her creative makeup artistry would need to take a temporary back seat, but she was determined to heal properly and get back to doing what she loved as soon as possible.

## CHAPTER 3



**W**ith a day off from his usual responsibilities at Hidden Creek Orchard, Jack Griffin saw an opportunity to delve further into the planning and development of the haunted ranch project. While his brothers, Roy, Parker, and Ronald, were busy tending to their daily tasks at the orchard, Jack decided to take the initiative and work on the project's details independently.

Jack was eager to present his concept for turning Hidden Creek Orchard into a haunted ranch for charity to his brothers. He began outlining the key points he wanted to discuss during their family meeting.

First, he created a concept proposal for the haunted ranch charity event, which required a name. He decided to go the simple route and opted for Haunted Harvest at Hidden Creech Orchid.

The objective was easy enough. He wanted to create a thrilling and immersive Halloween experience for the community while raising funds for a charitable cause.

The location was obvious—Hidden Creek Orchard in Shooting Star Canyon. He would have to narrow down the where on the ranch, of course, but first, he needed to determine what exactly they would offer.

Depending on how quickly they could get this up and running, the event could run on the weekends leading up to Halloween and conclude on Halloween night.

Now, for the fun part. What would make up the haunted ranch experience? The orchard would be transformed into a haunted wonderland featuring a haunted corn maze. The spooky maze could be filled with surprises and scare actors.

Definitely a pumpkin patch. Visitors can pick their own pumpkins and enjoy pumpkin-related activities. He already had those pumpkins his brother hadn't carved, but they were growing plenty of pumpkins on the ranch already.

Ghostly hayrides! That would be fun. A haunted hayride through the orchard would require ghost stories and other surprises.

Hmm... what else? He had always liked scarecrows growing up. What about a... scarecrow alley? There could be a display of creatively themed scarecrows made by the community.

He and his brothers would have to select a local charity or non-profit organization that aligns with their values and community needs. Maybe a local food bank, shelter, or organizations supporting children and families in need.

To gain money for charity, the visitors would have to pay an entrance fee. Separate donations would be appreciated too. They could have a box near each activity so that if people had fun and thought it was worthwhile, they might chip in a little more.

All of this already sounded like a lot of work. They might need some volunteers from their community to help with scare acting, event logistics, and safety.

Marketing and promotion... that would be huge, especially if they wanted to try to get the ball rolling sooner rather than waiting until closer to Halloween. They should utilize social media, local advertising, and community outreach to promote the event.

Naturally, ensuring the safety of our visitors will be a top priority. They would have security personnel on-site and follow all safety regulations.

A family meeting would be needed to discuss the concept further, assign roles and responsibilities, and decide on the charity they wanted to support.

Jack was proud of the concept he had outlined and believed it could be a fantastic way for their family to combine their love for Halloween with their desire to give back to the community. He eagerly awaited the family meeting to gauge his brothers' reactions and work together to turn this idea into a reality.

Not only was he proud, though. He was hungry. He knew from past experience that he always worked harder and smarter on a full stomach.



Entering The Old Ship restaurant at lunchtime, Jack took a moment to appreciate the peaceful ambiance. The Old Ship was known not only for its delicious food but also for its cozy and welcoming atmosphere, making it an ideal place for quiet contemplation and focused brainstorming.

Seated at a corner booth, Jack opened a notebook filled with his ideas, sketches, and potential concepts for the haunted ranch. He knew that the success of the project would depend on careful planning, creativity, and attention to detail.

As he perused the menu and considered his order, Jack's mind raced with possibilities. He thought about the layout of Hidden Creek Orchard, the various attractions they could create, and the spooky elements that would make the haunted ranch an unforgettable experience for visitors. Jack also considered the logistics, budgeting, and safety measures required to execute the project successfully.

Jack knew that his brothers would be eager to hear about his progress and contribute their own ideas when they had the chance. Their combined creativity and passion for Halloween made this project a shared dream, and Jack was determined to bring it to life.

So, with his notebook and a meal before him, Jack set to work, immersing himself in the planning and development of the haunted ranch project. He was excited to see where his day of solitary brainstorming would lead and looked forward to sharing his vision with his brothers when they were available.

He delved deeper into planning the haunted ranch project and continued to jot down ideas, sketch out layouts, and consider the various elements that would make the Halloween attraction truly remarkable.

Jack's meal arrived, and he enjoyed a brief moment to refuel and gather his thoughts. The tantalizing aroma of his food filled the air as he savored each bite. The bustling ambiance of the restaurant provided a backdrop for his creative brainstorming.

After finishing his meal, Jack reviewed his notes and sketches, refining his ideas and making a to-do list of tasks for the project's next steps. He knew that turning Hidden Creek Orchard into a haunted ranch would require coordination, resources, and a dedicated team of volunteers.

With a sense of determination, Jack decided to reach out to potential volunteers and discuss the project with local businesses that might want to contribute in some way. He also considered the logistics of obtaining props, decorations, and costumes to create the desired eerie atmosphere.

Throughout the afternoon, Jack continued to work diligently, periodically sipping on a cup of coffee to keep his energy and focus high. He felt a growing sense of excitement as his plans for the haunted ranch took shape. This Halloween project had the potential to not only provide a thrilling experience for the community but also raise significant funds for a charitable cause.

Minutes turned into hours, and Jack's notebook filled with more details and ideas, and he made mental notes of the next steps to take. He knew that when his brothers returned from their work at Hidden Creek Orchard, they would be eager to join him in turning their Halloween dream into a reality.



As Jack Griffin continued his planning session for the haunted ranch project at The Old Ship restaurant, he couldn't help but notice a young woman who had just arrived. She appeared to be alone and seemed a bit lonely. Jack, being a friendly and approachable person, decided to strike up a conversation to brighten her day.

Jack approached the young woman with a warm and welcoming smile, introducing himself.

"Hi there, I couldn't help but notice you're here alone. I'm Jack. Mind if I join you?"

The young woman, looking pleasantly surprised by the gesture, smiled back. She held up her hand but not out for a shake. "I would shake your hand, but I just fractured my wrist. I came here to try to take my mind off it. It's nice to meet you, Jack. I'm Heather, and I'd love some company."

Jack took a seat across from Heather. "I'm sorry about your wrist."

"Me too. I'm a makeup artist, and I was at a party since we had just wrapped up. I slipped. I don't even think the floor was wet or anything, but I came down right on my wrist..."

"Ouch," he said sympathetically.

"It'll heal up in no time."

"I'm sure. So, Heather, you mentioned you're a makeup artist. That sounds fascinating. What kind of work have you been doing?"

"For the most part, lately, it's been quite an adventure being a makeup artist. I didn't used to work on movie sets, but now I do, and it's not just makeup. It's special effects for the characters too. It's been a whirlwind of creativity and long hours on set."

Jack was impressed. "That sounds incredible. I'm actually planning a Halloween project myself, turning an orchard into a haunted ranch. I can imagine the attention to detail required for movie makeup is similar to what we'll need for our haunted attractions."

Heather leaned forward, engaged. “A haunted ranch? That sounds amazing! Halloween is my favorite holiday, and I love all things spooky. Tell me more about your project.”

Jack grinned. “Well, my brothers and I are turning Hidden Creek Orchard into a haunted wonderland,” he said eagerly. “We’ll have haunted corn mazes, ghostly hayrides, and plenty of scares. The best part is that all the proceeds will go to a local charity. It’s a way for us to combine our love for Halloween with giving back to the community.”

Heather looked genuinely impressed. “That’s incredible, Jack! It’s not often you find someone who’s so passionate about both Halloween and making a positive impact.”

Their conversation continued, with Jack and Heather sharing their experiences, ideas, and visions for their respective creative projects. It was a chance encounter that blossomed into a meaningful connection, as they discovered common interests and a shared love for the magic of storytelling through makeup and Halloween-themed endeavors.

The waitress interrupted them, and Heather ordered her food. Jack had already eaten, so he just opted for coffee, pointed to his abandoned table, and asked for his bill.

“If you want to go after you pay, I’ll understand,” Heather said.

“Not a chance,” he said. “I’m enjoying myself, thank you very much.”

She laughed.

Their conversation flowed easily. Heather’s creative background in makeup artistry intrigued Jack, and he found himself genuinely enjoying her company.

The chance encounter with Heather added an unexpected but pleasant dimension to Jack’s day. Their spontaneous conversation not only brightened Heather’s day but also provided Jack with a new friend who shared his enthusiasm for creative endeavors.

Jack, intrigued by Heather's creativity and background in makeup artistry and special effects, decided to ask her for input on their haunted ranch project. He wanted to tap into her expertise and gather ideas that could enhance the spooky and immersive experience for visitors.

"Heather, since you have experience with makeup and special effects, do you have any ideas for our haunted ranch project?" he asked curiously, more than a little hopeful. "We're always looking for ways to make it more immersive and thrilling."

She tapped her chin with the fingers of her good wrist. "Well, one thing that could work really well is incorporating interactive elements," she said thoughtfully. "Maybe have actors in creepy costumes who can interact with visitors in unexpected ways. It adds an extra layer of fear and excitement."

Intrigued, Jack slowly nodded. "Interactive elements. I like that. It would definitely make the experience more engaging. Any specific makeup or special effects ideas that come to mind?"

"Absolutely!" she said, sounding as enthusiastic as Jack was. "How about having a zombie transformation station where visitors can get a quick zombie makeup makeover? It's interactive and fun and adds a unique touch. Plus, you can have actors dressed as zombies roam around afterward."

Jack was impressed. "That's a fantastic idea! It not only engages our visitors but also allows them to become part of the experience. I can already picture the eerie atmosphere."

"And don't forget lighting and sound effects," Heather continued. "They can create an atmosphere of suspense and anticipation. You could use fog machines, eerie music, and strategically placed lighting to keep everyone on edge."

Jack could only shake his head, beyond thrilled. A chance encounter brought on by his God-given kindness had led to this. If God had made him shy, Jack never would've approached Heather, but they were already becoming fast friends.

Jack and Heather continued to exchange ideas, with Heather's creative input sparking Jack's imagination. Her suggestions for interactive elements, makeup stations, and atmospheric effects began to take shape as exciting possibilities for the haunted ranch project. It was a collaborative conversation that left them both eager to work together and make their Halloween project an unforgettable experience for all who dared to enter.

## CHAPTER 4



**H**eather hadn't known what to expect when the handsome stranger approached her, but Jack had such an easygoing nature that she found herself liking him right away. He was friendly and genuine, and she appreciated that. Plus, she didn't enjoy eating alone, and she had been feeling a little sorry for herself before he came over. Their conversation was helping her to completely forget about her wrist.

Although, when it came time for her to eat, she was a bit nervous. She had injured her dominant wrist, after all.

The conversation with Jack had been both engaging and inspiring. She admired his passion for the haunted ranch project and his dedication to creating an immersive Halloween experience while giving back to the community. As their conversation continued, Jack's proposition took her by pleasant surprise.

"Heather, I've been really impressed with your ideas and your passion for Halloween," Jack said sincerely. "Would you consider joining us in bringing the haunted ranch to life? We'd love to have your expertise, and we can compensate you for your time and creative input. Working on a movie set... You're clearly someone who's passionate about your craft."

Heather felt a rush of excitement at the prospect of joining Jack and his brothers in creating the haunted ranch project and the thought of collaborating on such an imaginative and community-oriented project. She appreciated the offer and could see the potential for her skills to make a significant

impact. The opportunity to channel her creative talents into such an immersive and charitable endeavor was something she couldn't resist.

She grinned. "Jack, I would be honored to be a part of this project! I can't resist the allure of Halloween, and the idea of using my makeup and special effects skills to create a hauntingly memorable experience is thrilling. I'm in!"

Jack's warm smile and genuine appreciation were evident as he extended his hand in agreement.

His left hand.

He had accepted his check with his right hand, and she was pretty sure he had signed it with his right hand too, so he had noted which hand of hers was off-limits, and that made her smile grow even more. He really was a kind, considerate guy.

"That's fantastic, Heather!" he said gratefully. "We're thrilled to have you on board. Your expertise will elevate our haunted ranch to new heights. Let's work together to make this Halloween unforgettable."

An awkward handshake because neither of them was lefthanded sealed their partnership, and Heather and Jack began to envision a Halloween project that would not only captivate their community but also fulfill their shared passion for creativity and giving back. Heather knew she had found an exciting new project and a team that she was eager to be a part of.

"I'm serious about the compensation," he said. "Just name your price, and we'll work it out."

As Jack mentioned compensation, Heather made a heartfelt decision. She paused for a moment, a warm smile on her face, and then gently declined the offer in favor of a more charitable approach.

"Jack, I'm truly excited about this project, but I'd like to suggest something different. Instead of paying me, why don't we allocate that money directly to the charity you've chosen? I'm here because I'm passionate about Halloween and the

opportunity to create something amazing for our community. Let's use those funds to make an even greater impact."

Jack's eyes widened. He was clearly, deeply moved by Heather's selfless gesture, and he nodded in agreement. "Heather, that's an incredibly generous offer. Thank you for your willingness to contribute to the greater good. It aligns perfectly with the spirit of our project, and I couldn't agree more. Let's use those resources to support our chosen charity and make Halloween even more special for everyone."

Heather's decision to join the haunted ranch project and her selfless offer to direct her compensation toward charity brought a newfound sense of excitement and fulfillment. It was a moment that lifted her spirits and invigorated her outlook. She couldn't help but feel thrilled and grateful for the unexpected turn of events, especially considering that she had come to the restaurant feeling a bit down and upset about her recent wrist injury.

As she and Jack continued their conversation about the project, Heather's enthusiasm grew. The prospect of collaborating on something creative, meaningful, and community-oriented had rekindled her passion for her craft and helped her see the positive side of things.

She ate a little as Jack talked on and on, and she could feel her own eagerness grow.

"Jack, I can't express how excited I am about this project! Honestly, I was feeling a bit down and upset about my injury, but this opportunity has completely turned my day around. I'm thrilled to be a part of it."

"Heather, I'm so glad to hear that. It's amazing how unexpected opportunities can brighten our outlook. I'm certain your creative contributions will play a crucial role in making this project a huge success. God really does work in mysterious ways."

"He really does."

He brightened considerably. "You believe in God?"

She laughed. “I’m a Christian. Why wouldn’t I be a believer?”

“Oh, well...”

“Yes, there are a decent number of actors and actresses who might not be quite as religious, but I try to show and lead a life of example, and if I can maybe change one mind, one heart...” She shrugged.

“That’s wonderful.”

“Thank you.”

Heather’s decision to join the project had not only enriched her day but had also reinforced her belief in the power of creativity, community, and giving back. It was a turning point that she would carry with her, inspiring her to overcome any challenges and make the most of every opportunity that came her way.

She could scarcely believe how everything had fallen into place like this. Jack was right. God did work in mysterious ways.

Heather didn’t live in Shooting Star Canyon. Her parents did. She had had a thoughtful and heartwarming surprise in mind for her parents. Since her wrist injury had temporarily sidelined her from working on another movie set, Heather had planned to surprise her parents by visiting them at their home. She knew how much they meant to her and how they had always been there to support her in both her personal and professional life.

However, as she arrived at her parents’ residence, it appeared they were out shopping or running errands. It was a bit disappointing not to see them at home, so she decided to make the most of her time and headed to The Old Ship to pass the hours while waiting for their return.

Heather’s visit to the restaurant had unexpectedly turned into a pivotal moment in her day, leading to her serendipitous encounter with Jack and the opportunity to channel her creative energy into a meaningful project. Little did she know that this turn of events would bring her closer to her parents



and help her find a fulfilling and heartwarming way to spend her time during her temporary hiatus from work.

Heather realized she was in no rush to finish her meal. She was talking too much, and that wasn't going to change now.

“Jack, you've mentioned that Halloween is your favorite holiday. What is it about Halloween that you love so much?” she asked curiously.

Jack took a thoughtful sip of his coffee, the warm beverage contrasting with the chill in the air outside. He then leaned forward, a nostalgic smile on his face. “Well, Halloween has always held a special place in my heart. It's more than just costumes and candy. It's about family and cherished memories. You see, my three brothers and I grew up in a small house not far from here. We didn't have a lot, but we had each other.”

Heather listened attentively, captivated by Jack's story.

“Halloween was the one night of the year when everything felt magical. My parents would help us create homemade costumes, and we'd spend weeks planning elaborate pranks and decorations for our house. It was a true team effort.”

Heather could sense the nostalgia in Jack's voice, the memories of those simpler times.

Jack smiled. “On Halloween night, we'd invite our friends over for a spooky adventure. My dad would tell ghost stories around a bonfire, and my mom would make the most delicious pumpkin pies. It was a night of laughter, creativity, and togetherness.”

Heather felt deeply moved. “That sounds incredibly special, Jack. Those childhood memories must have left a lasting impact.”

Jack nodded. “They did. And that's why I'm so passionate about creating something unforgettable with this haunted ranch project. I want to share that sense of wonder and togetherness with our community, just like I experienced with my brothers on Halloween.”

As Jack shared this personal story with Heather, it was clear that his love for Halloween wasn't just about the costumes and scares. It was about the cherished moments spent with loved ones. Heather felt privileged to have heard this intimate part of Jack's life, and it deepened her admiration for his dedication to the haunted ranch project and his desire to bring joy to others through Halloween.

Considering he had shared his heartfelt story about Halloween, Heather was inspired to open up about her own experiences with the holiday. She saw this as an opportunity to connect with Jack on a deeper level and share a part of her own journey that had led her to become a makeup artist.

She smiled. "Jack, I love hearing about your Halloween memories. It's amazing how those moments can shape our lives. You know, Halloween has always been a big deal for me too, but in a slightly different way."

Jack leaned in, his interest piqued. "How so, Heather?"

She turned reflective. "Growing up, I was obsessed with Halloween costumes. I would spend months planning and creating my own outfits. My parents would often find me in the attic, rummaging through old clothes and props to put together something unique."

Jack's eyes sparkled with curiosity and intrigue. "That sounds like a lot of fun! What were some of your favorite costumes?"

She smiled, nostalgia washing over her. "Oh, I've been everything from a wicked witch to a fantastical fairy, but what really got me excited was doing my own makeup to complete the look. I would spend hours experimenting with different styles and effects, learning as I went along."

Jack was genuinely impressed by Heather's creative journey. "So, that's how your passion for makeup artistry began?"

"Exactly!" She grinned. "Halloween was like my canvas, and I was the artist. Over the years, I got better and better at it, and eventually, it turned into a career. Now, I get to create all

kinds of characters and bring stories to life through makeup and special effects.”

As Heather shared her story, she felt a sense of connection with Jack, who appreciated the transformative power of creativity and shared her love for Halloween. It was a moment of mutual understanding and admiration that strengthened their bond and added another layer to their growing friendship.

## CHAPTER 5



**A**s Jack listened to Heather's story about her Halloween costume adventures and her journey into makeup artistry, he couldn't help but be captivated by her passion and creativity. Her dedication to her craft resonated with him, and he admired her for turning a childhood fascination into a successful career.

"Heather, your journey is truly inspiring," he said, impressed. "It's amazing how your love for Halloween and makeup led you to where you are today."

"Thank you, Jack," she said, appreciative. "It's been a fulfilling journey, and I'm excited to bring my expertise to the haunted ranch project."

Jack realized that he wanted to ensure they could stay in touch and collaborate effectively on the project. With a sense of enthusiasm, he decided to take the next step.

"Heather, I think it would be great for us to exchange numbers. That way, we can coordinate our efforts for the haunted ranch and stay in touch more easily."

Heather smiled warmly. "Absolutely, Jack. I'm looking forward to working together on this project. Let's make it a Halloween to remember."

She took out her phone, and they exchanged contact information.

Jack couldn't help but feel a surge of excitement. With Heather on board and their plans taking shape, he was eager to move forward with the haunted ranch project. Their shared

vision and budding friendship filled him with anticipation for the creative journey that lay ahead.

He grinned. Her plate was finally empty.

“Good food here, huh?” he asked.

“So good!”

“I should probably get going. Do you need anything? Did you drive here?”

“I did. I’m fine driving.”

“Just be careful,” he said.

“Oh, I’m so careful now! I won’t risk falling again and hurting my other wrist!”

With the haunted ranch project gaining momentum and Heather as a valuable collaborator, Jack wasted no time in getting things in motion. After waving goodbye, he left the restaurant and set out to visit stores to start purchasing supplies for the Halloween attraction. Armed with a list of needed items, Jack was determined to transform Hidden Creek Orchard into a spooky wonderland.

His first stop was a local hardware store, where he picked up lumber, nails, and various building materials for constructing the haunted mazes and eerie structures. He carefully selected items that would not only create a chilling atmosphere but also ensure the safety of visitors.

Next, Jack headed to a costume shop, where he scoured the aisles for spooky costumes, masks, and accessories. He wanted to ensure that the actors and volunteers would have a wide array of options to choose from, allowing them to fully embody their haunting characters.

Jack then visited a special effects store, where he purchased makeup, prosthetics, and supplies that would help bring Heather’s creative visions to life. The store’s shelves were filled with everything he needed to make the haunted ranch’s makeup and special effects truly terrifying.

As Jack moved from store to store, he couldn’t help but envision the transformation that was beginning to take shape.

The haunted ranch project was becoming a reality, and he was excited to bring the community a Halloween experience they would never forget. With every item he purchased, the anticipation grew, and he knew that they were one step closer to creating something truly special.

Jack's shopping spree for supplies was just the beginning of a flurry of activities that would be required to turn Hidden Creek Orchard into a haunted ranch. After securing the necessary materials, he returned home to start planning the construction and decoration of the various haunted attractions.

The next day, Jack collaborated closely with Heather, sharing his vision and ideas while incorporating her expertise in makeup and special effects. Together, they designed the layout of the haunted corn mazes, the ghostly hayrides, and the eerie scenes that would greet visitors at every turn.

Jack also reached out to his brothers, Roy, Parker, and Ronald, who were eager to join the effort and contribute their own creative ideas. They began constructing the structures, props, and decorations that would transform the orchard into a realm of Halloween horrors.

Two days after he met Heather, the work on the haunted ranch project was in full swing. Jack took a break to catch up with his older brother, Roy. They sat on a couple of overturned crates amidst the hustle and bustle of construction, and Jack decided it was a good time to discuss the progress and some important matters related to Hidden Creek Orchard.

"Roy, things are really coming together for the haunted ranch, don't you think?"

Roy smiled. "Without a doubt, Jack. It's amazing to see how far we've come with this project already. I'm proud of what we're creating here."

Jack glanced around, but his smile slowly faded away as he realized something he should've done already.

"You know, Roy, I've been thinking. We should probably reach out to Colton Spangler about the haunted ranch. He's the owner of Hidden Creek Orchard, after all."

Roy nodded in agreement. “You’re right, Jack. Colton should be in the loop. He might have valuable insights or resources that could help us make this even more amazing. And if he doesn’t sign off on it... You should’ve thought ahead and asked him before all of this. You spent how much?”

“I... got a little ahead of myself, I’ll admit,” Jack said sheepishly.

“I honestly thought you already spoke to him,” Roy said. “If I realized you hadn’t, I would’ve told you to.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jack mumbled.

In this aspect, Jack was almost a klutz himself.

Jack quickly scheduled a meeting with Colton to discuss the haunted ranch project, seek his input, and ensure that they were aligned with the orchard’s owner on the venture they were embarking upon. He recognized that Colton’s support and collaboration would be invaluable if they wanted to continue to bring their Halloween vision to life.

Unfortunately, Jack had too many chores as a cowboy for the meeting to be anytime soon. It would be after he finished his work for the day, and he worked hard, the hours melting away in no time.

Jack arrived at the office right on time. Colton invited him in, and Jack refused the offer to have a seat, too anxious but still excited.

“Colton, I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me today.”

Colton snorted. “Why are you being so formal? What’s on your mind?”

Jack chuckled weakly. Colton was only three years older than he was, but he had always looked up to him as another older brother.

“I wanted to talk to you about something we’ve been working on here at the ranch. It’s a project we’re really excited about.”

Colton lifted his eyebrows, clearly curious. “Of course, Jack. I’m always interested in new ideas. What’s this project you’re mentioning?”

Jack took a deep breath and began to lay out the details of the haunted ranch project. He described the concept, the planned attractions, and the charitable aspect of the endeavor. Colton listened intently, his interest growing as he learned more about the ambitious Halloween project taking shape on his property.

Colton leaned back in his seat and slowly nodded. “Jack, this sounds like an incredible undertaking. I’m impressed. I had no idea you and your brothers were working on something like this. It’s innovative, and I can see the potential for it to be a fantastic addition to the orchard’s offerings.”

Jack felt a sense of relief as Colton expressed his support for the project. He continued to provide more details about their progress and vision for the haunted ranch.

“Thank you, Colton,” he said gratefully. “We believe it can be a memorable experience for our visitors and a way for us to give back to the community. We’re dedicated to making it a success.”

Colton and Jack discussed the logistics, resources, and potential benefits for Hidden Creek Orchard. During their meeting, Jack shared the project’s concept, layout, and progress made so far. He explained how they were transforming various parts of the orchard into haunted attractions, the involvement of volunteers, and the vision for an immersive and spooky experience.

“You’ve already started to get the ball rolling, huh?” Colton asked.

“Oh, yes.”

“How’s everything coming along with the haunted ranch project?”

“It’s progressing well. We’re putting a lot of effort into creating a unique Halloween experience for the community while raising funds for charity.”



“I’m all for that.”

“We want to make this a Halloween event like no other, Colton,” Jack said passionately. “Our goal is to create lasting memories for visitors and give back to the community that has supported us for so long.”

Colton listened attentively, clearly impressed by Jack’s dedication and vision for the project. “Jack, I appreciate your enthusiasm and commitment to this project. It aligns with our values of community involvement and creating memorable experiences here at Hidden Creek Orchard.”

Jack felt a sense of relief as Colton expressed his support for the haunted ranch project. “Your support means a lot to us. We’re striving to ensure this event enhances the orchard’s reputation and provides a positive impact for everyone involved.”

As their meeting concluded, Jack and Colton had established a clear line of communication and collaboration. Colton’s endorsement and encouragement further fueled Jack’s determination to make the haunted ranch project a resounding success. With Hidden Creek Orchard’s owner on board, they were one step closer to achieving their Halloween dreams while giving back to the community they both cared about deeply.

## CHAPTER 6



**D**espite her wrist injury, Heather's determination and commitment to the Haunted Harvest project at Hidden Creek Orchard were unwavering. She might have had physical limitations, but her creative spirit and enthusiasm knew no bounds. Heather found a way to contribute by focusing on tasks that didn't strain her injured wrist.

Using her computer and specialized software, she set to work creating eye-catching flyers and digital ads to promote the Haunted Harvest. Heather poured her artistic talents into the designs, ensuring that they captured the spooky essence of the event while conveying its charitable purpose. Her creative flair was evident in every detail, from the eerie fonts to the haunting imagery.

Heather's flyers and ads for the Haunted Harvest at Hidden Creek Orchard were designed to pique the curiosity and excitement of potential visitors while conveying the event's spooky yet charitable nature. They featured compelling visuals and compelling copy to entice people to attend.

Her favorite flyer read: "Hidden Creek Orchard Presents: The Haunted Harvest Join Us for a Spooktacular Night of Thrills and Chills! Get ready for a Halloween experience like no other! Hidden Creek Orchard is transforming into a haunted wonderland to raise money for a great cause. Explore eerie corn mazes, embark on ghostly hayrides, and encounter spine-tingling surprises around every corner. It's a night of frights and delights for the whole family! Bring your loved ones and create unforgettable memories."

She made sure to list the date, time, and location, as well as that all proceeds went to the Harvest Hope Foundation and how their support helped them make a difference in their community.

Jack had picked the charity, and once Heather learned what it stood for, she heartily agreed. The foundation was dedicated to providing food, resources, and support to individuals and families in need within the Shooting Star Canyon community and surrounding areas. The Haunted Harvest project aimed to raise funds for the worthy cause, contributing to Harvest Hope Foundation's mission of alleviating hunger and making a positive impact on the lives of those it served.

At the bottom of the flyer, she added, "Don't miss out on the Haunted Harvest—a Halloween event with heart!"

Heather's flyers and ads effectively conveyed the spooky and charitable aspects of the Haunted Harvest, enticing potential attendees with a night of fun, frights, and community support. Her creative designs and compelling copy contributed to building anticipation and generating buzz for the event, making it an irresistible Halloween attraction for the community.

As she worked on the visuals, she collaborated closely with Jack, seeking his input and feedback to ensure the promotional materials aligned with his vision. Despite her physical limitations, Heather's dedication and artistic skills played a crucial role in generating excitement and anticipation for the upcoming Halloween event.

Her determination to contribute in any way she could not only demonstrated her commitment to the project but also showcased her resilience and creative problem-solving. Heather's flyers and ads became powerful tools to attract visitors to Hidden Creek Orchard for a spine-tingling and memorable Haunted Harvest.



It didn't take long for Heather's involvement in the Haunted Harvest project to bring her into contact with Jack's brothers—Roy, Parker, and Ronald. It was during one of their project meetings at Hidden Creek Orchard that Heather had the opportunity to meet them for the first time.

As she arrived at the orchard, she was greeted by the enthusiastic and friendly cowboys, who were working diligently on constructing some of the haunted attractions. They introduced themselves with warm smiles, eager to get to know the talented makeup artist who had joined their team.

“Hi there, I'm Roy. I'm the oldest of the Griffin bunch.”

The grinning one said, “I'm Parker, the middle brother. Nice to meet you!”

“And I'm Ronald, the youngest, but don't let that fool you. We're a close-knit team,” he joked.”

“It's great to meet all of you!” Heather said warmly. “I've heard a lot about your dedication to this project.”

The Griffin brothers immediately made Heather feel welcome and part of the team. They were intrigued by her makeup and special effects skills and were eager to collaborate on bringing their haunted ranch vision to life.

Throughout the project, Heather continued to work closely with the Griffin brothers, forging bonds and friendships as they worked tirelessly to create a memorable Halloween experience for the community. Their shared passion for the Haunted Harvest and their commitment to the charitable cause strengthened their connection and made every meeting and planning session a collaborative and enjoyable experience.



As word of the haunted ranch project spread throughout the community, volunteers from Shooting Star Canyon and neighboring areas expressed their interest in participating. Jack, Heather, and the Griffin brothers welcomed their support

and enthusiasm, assigning roles and responsibilities to ensure a smooth operation.

With each passing day, the haunted ranch project gained momentum, drawing together a dedicated team of volunteers and creative minds. Jack's initial vision was evolving into a collective effort that promised to deliver an unforgettable Halloween experience while raising funds for a charitable cause.

The construction, makeup, and special effects work continued, and the excitement in Shooting Star Canyon grew, and anticipation for the haunted ranch's grand opening reached a fever pitch. The Halloween season was approaching, and everyone involved was determined to make it an extraordinary and spine-tingling celebration.

As the days passed and the Haunted Harvest project at Hidden Creek Orchard continued to take shape, the collaborative efforts of Jack, Heather, and the Griffin brothers began to yield impressive results. They worked tirelessly to construct eerie attractions, design spine-tingling scenes, and plan a night of thrills and chills that would leave a lasting impact on the community.

The orchard gradually transformed into a haunted wonderland, complete with sinister corn mazes, ghostly hayrides, and creepy scenes that promised to send shivers down visitors' spines. Volunteers from Shooting Star Canyon and neighboring areas joined the team, further enhancing the project's scale and creativity.

Heather's makeup and special effects skills were put to excellent use, as she collaborated closely with the Griffin brothers and other volunteers to bring haunting characters to life. Her creative touch added authenticity and spine-tingling realism to the actors' appearances, making the experience even more immersive.

Promotion for the Haunted Harvest continued to gather momentum, thanks to Heather's captivating flyers and ads, which drew the attention of locals and Halloween enthusiasts

from afar. Social media buzzed with anticipation, and ticket sales began to soar, ensuring a robust turnout for the event.

As the grand opening of the Haunted Harvest drew near, excitement and a sense of accomplishment permeated Hidden Creek Orchard. Jack, Heather, the Griffin brothers, and the dedicated team of volunteers looked forward to sharing their vision with the community and raising funds for the chosen charity.

With every passing day, their efforts were driven by a shared passion for Halloween, creativity, and giving back. The Haunted Harvest was on the brink of becoming a spectacular reality, and everyone involved couldn't wait to unleash its spooktacular delights upon the eager visitors.

## CHAPTER 7



**W**ith the Haunted Harvest event drawing closer, Jack and his brothers, Roy, Parker, and Ronald, rallied the support of their fellow cowboys at Hidden Creek Orchard to help with the decoration efforts. They were joined by Colton Spangler, the orchard's owner, as well as his brothers, Lawrence and Myles, who were enthusiastic about contributing to the project.

Together, this dedicated team of cowboys embarked on a creative adventure to transform Hidden Creek Orchard into a chilling and immersive Halloween wonderland. Armed with a variety of decorations, props, and a shared passion for the project, they set to work.

Jack was as energetic as ever. "All right, everyone, let's get started! We need to create an atmosphere that'll give our visitors the spooks. Roy, help me with those eerie lanterns over there."

Jack and Roy began hanging lanterns, their flickering lights casting ghostly shadows across the orchard's paths. Meanwhile, Parker and Ronald focused on placing strategically designed tombstones and eerie signs to guide visitors through the haunted mazes.

"These tombstones are almost as old as we are, Ronald!" Parker said playfully.

Ronald laughed. "Well, that's the charm of it, Parker. Authentic spookiness!"

Colton, Lawrence, and Myles worked on constructing the entrance archways and eerie structures that would serve as focal points for the haunted attractions. Their craftsmanship and dedication to detail ensured that every element would be both safe and frightening.

As the decoration efforts continued, the orchard began to take on a haunted life of its own. Ghostly apparitions, creepy creatures, and eerie sounds filled the air, promising visitors an unforgettable Halloween experience. The camaraderie among the cowboys and their shared enthusiasm for the project made the process both enjoyable and productive.

With each decoration carefully placed, Hidden Creek Orchard became more and more transformed, setting the stage for the Haunted Harvest's grand opening. Jack, his brothers, and their fellow cowboys were determined to create a Halloween event that would thrill and chill visitors while making a positive impact on their community through the funds raised for the Harvest Hope Foundation.

After days of dedicated effort, Jack, his brothers, and their fellow cowboys at Hidden Creek Orchard, including Colton, Lawrence, and Myles Spangler, successfully completed the haunted corn maze. The transformation of the orchard's cornfields into a spine-tingling labyrinth was a remarkable achievement that promised to be a highlight of the Haunted Harvest.

The haunted corn maze featured winding pathways, eerie surprises, and a sense of disorientation that would challenge even the bravest of visitors. Jack and his team had meticulously designed the maze to provide a thrilling and immersive experience while ensuring the safety of all who ventured through it.

“Well, everyone, we did it!” Jack said proudly. He lifted his cowboy hat to wipe some sweat from his brow. Even in October, in Texas, you could always work up a sweat. “The haunted corn maze is ready to give our visitors a good scare.”

Roy smiled. “It looks fantastic, Jack. I can already imagine people getting lost in here.”



As dusk settled over the orchard, the team gathered to do a walkthrough of the maze, testing the eerie effects, hidden scares, and chilling surprises they had prepared. The rustling cornstalks, flickering lanterns, and ominous sounds created an atmosphere of anticipation and suspense.

Lawrence chuckled. “I think we’ve outdone ourselves with this one, fellas. It’s going to be a scream!”

The completion of the haunted corn maze marked a significant milestone in the preparations for the Haunted Harvest. With every detail carefully crafted and every scare strategically placed, the team was confident that visitors would be in for a spine-tingling adventure when they entered the maze on the night of the event.

As they stood at the entrance, surveying their creation, a sense of pride and excitement filled the hearts of Jack, his brothers, and their fellow cowboys. The Haunted Harvest was shaping up to be a truly memorable and hair-raising Halloween experience, and the haunted corn maze was a testament to their hard work, creativity, and dedication to bringing their vision to life.



The next day, as soon as they had finished up their chores, Jack was thrilled when Myles, the youngest Spangler, took on the role of crafting spine-tingling ghost stories for the ghostly hayride for the Haunted Harvest project. With his vivid imagination and passion for creating eerie tales, Myles embraced the task with enthusiasm.

“I already have a tale,” he said.

“Already?” Jack was impressed.

And he was even more thrilled that just about everyone was willing to gather around a campfire, eager to share Myles’ first ghost story draft.

Myles clapped his hands a few times. “All right, folks, gather ‘round. I’ve got the first ghost story for our hayride.”

As the group settled in, Myles began to narrate a tale that was sure to send shivers down the spines of those who embarked on the ghostly hayride.

“Picture this,” Myles said, holding his hands out wide. “It was a moonless night in Shooting Star Canyon, and the wind howled through the orchard like a ghostly lament. The hayride slowly crept along the darkened path, and our passengers were bundled up, clutching their loved ones tightly.”

Myles’s storytelling skills brought the scene to life, drawing in his audience.

“Then, as the wagon passed by the old, gnarled apple trees, they heard it—the faint, mournful wail of a ghostly figure known as the Orchard’s Keeper. Legend has it that he’s been haunting these orchards for centuries, guarding a long-lost secret.”

As Myles continued to weave his ghostly narrative, he painted vivid images with his words, describing eerie encounters, mysterious apparitions, and chilling moments that would unfold during the hayride.

“And as the wagon approached the heart of the orchard, they say the Orchard’s Keeper himself might make an appearance, revealing the dark secret that has kept him bound to these grounds.”

The group sat in silence for a moment, captivated by Myles’s storytelling.

Jack was thrilled. “Myles, that’s fantastic! It’s going to add a whole new level of fright to our hayride.”

“I can already imagine our visitors on the edge of their seats, hanging onto every word,” Colton declared.

Myles’s ghost stories became an integral part of the ghostly hayride experience, promising to immerse visitors in a world of mystery and suspense as they ventured through the haunted orchard. His storytelling skills would undoubtedly contribute to making the Haunted Harvest a Halloween event to remember.

Everyone started to depart, but Ronald hung back.

“Do you think I can handle the task of organizing pumpkin-related activities for the pumpkin patch?” he asked.

Jack beamed. With his enthusiasm and imaginative spirit, Ronald was the perfect choice. Jack knew his brother was eager to craft memorable experiences centered around the beloved autumn symbol—pumpkins.

“You got it!”

The next morning, Ronald gathered them before they settled into their chores. Under the warm autumn sun amidst rows of ripe pumpkins, Ronald began brainstorming ideas for the pumpkin patch activities.

“Everyone, let’s make our pumpkin patch the heart of autumn fun! I’m thinking we need a mix of traditional and unique activities.” As the team members listened attentively, Ronald started outlining his ideas for the pumpkin patch. “First, we’ll have classic pumpkin carving stations where visitors can choose their pumpkins and carve spooky or silly designs. We’ll provide carving tools and stencils for inspiration.”

“Great start, Ronald! Carving is always a hit.” Jack nodded.

“And we can have a pumpkin decorating area for the younger ones who might not want to carve,” Parker added.

Ronald nodded. “Exactly, Parker, but here’s where it gets exciting. Let’s set up a pumpkin maze! We’ll create pathways using pumpkin arches and have hidden surprises along the way. It’ll be like navigating through a pumpkin wonderland.”

Lawrence grinned. “That sounds like a-maze-ing fun!”

Jack groaned.

“And how about a pumpkin painting corner?” Myles asked. “Visitors can unleash their inner artists and paint their pumpkins with spooky or whimsical designs.”

As the brainstorming continued, the ideas flowed, ranging from pumpkin-themed games to contests like the “Largest Pumpkin” and “Best Pumpkin Costume.” Ronald’s creative

leadership was instrumental in shaping the pumpkin patch into a vibrant and engaging attraction for visitors of all ages.

With a clear plan in place, Ronald and the team set to work, determined to bring their pumpkin-related activities to life. The pumpkin patch was poised to become a hub of festive creativity and autumnal joy, adding to the magic of the Haunted Harvest and ensuring a memorable experience for all who attended.

## CHAPTER 8



**H**eather's morning began with a sharp reminder of her wrist injury. Despite her best efforts to manage the pain, it persisted, causing her discomfort and concern. She reached for the prescribed medication and took it, hoping it would bring relief.

However, as time passed, it became evident that the pain wasn't subsiding as much as she had hoped. Heather knew that it was crucial to address the situation, especially given her upcoming commitments to the Haunted Harvest project.

Worried about the impact of her injury on her ability to contribute effectively to the project, Heather decided to contact her parents' doctor for guidance on managing the pain and potential adjustments to her treatment plan. Her dedication to the Haunted Harvest and her desire to support the team kept her motivated to find a solution, even in the face of adversity. Since she didn't have her own doctor in the area, reaching out to a trusted healthcare provider was the most sensible course of action.

Heather made the necessary arrangements for the appointment, ensuring that she could receive proper evaluation and treatment for her wrist. She was determined to address the pain and discomfort promptly, as she understood the importance of being in good health, especially with her commitments to the Haunted Harvest project and her desire to contribute her creative talents.

With the appointment scheduled, Heather looked forward to seeking expert advice and exploring potential solutions that

would allow her to continue pursuing her passions and supporting the charitable event she had grown so passionate about.

Thankfully, due to a cancellation, she was able to get in that afternoon. Driving there wasn't easy, but Heather managed, and she entered the medical clinic in Shooting Star Canyon for her scheduled appointment with her parents' doctor.

The receptionist smiled warmly and welcomed her. "Good morning! How can I assist you today?"

"Good morning," Heather said politely. "I have an appointment with Dr. Anderson."

"Great! Let me check you in. Can I have your name, please?"

"Heather Carter."

"Ah, yes," the receptionist said, typing away on her computer as she quickly located her appointment details in the system. "Thank you, Heather. Please have a seat, and I'll provide you with the necessary paperwork to complete."

Heather followed the receptionist's guidance and took a seat in the waiting area.

A few moments later, the receptionist returned with a clipboard and a set of forms for Heather to fill out. "Here are the forms you'll need to complete. They include some basic medical history and consent information. Please take your time, and let me know if you have any questions."

"Thank you so much. I'll fill these out right away."

Heather began filling out the paperwork, ensuring that she provided accurate and complete information. As she did so, she couldn't help but appreciate the welcoming and efficient service provided by the clinic's receptionist. It helped put her at ease as she prepared to address her wrist injury and seek medical guidance for a swift recovery.

Once she handed over her paperwork, Heather settled into the waiting area, surrounded by other patients. She knew that

seeking medical attention for her wrist was the right decision, even though it meant taking time away from her involvement in the Haunted Harvest project.

After a brief wait, a nurse called her name, and Heather followed them to an examination room. She patiently described her wrist injury, the pain she was experiencing, and the circumstances that led to the injury. The nurse then recorded her medical history and vital signs.

Soon after, the doctor entered the room, and Heather explained her situation once again.

During Heather's appointment with Dr. Anderson, Dr. Anderson was clearly committed to accurately assessing the extent of the injury to determine the best course of treatment for Heather's condition.

"Heather, let's start by taking a closer look at your wrist," the doctor said professionally. "I'm going to conduct a thorough examination to evaluate the extent of the injury."

Heather extended her wrist as the doctor carefully inspected it, noting any visible signs of swelling, bruising, or tenderness. Dr. Anderson gently palpated the area around the wrist joint, asking Heather to describe any pain or discomfort she felt during the examination.

"It's tender right here, and I've been experiencing a persistent ache."

Dr. Anderson listened attentively to Heather's description and continued the examination, testing the range of motion in her wrist and assessing its stability. To gain a more detailed understanding of the injury, Dr. Anderson recommended additional tests and scans.

"Heather, I'd like to perform some imaging tests, an X-ray and possibly an MRI, to get a clearer picture of what's happening inside your wrist. This will help us identify any fractures, ligament damage, or other issues that may be contributing to your pain."

Heather agreed to the suggested tests, recognizing the importance of an accurate diagnosis for effective treatment.

Dr. Anderson and the medical team promptly arranged for the necessary imaging studies, ensuring that Heather's wrist injury would be thoroughly evaluated.

Throughout the examination and diagnostic process, Dr. Anderson's expertise and commitment to Heather's well-being were evident. He aimed to provide her with the most accurate and tailored care plan to support her recovery and enable her to resume her creative work on the Haunted Harvest project.

"Will I have to wait a week for the results of the X-Ray?" Heather asked when the doctor returned after the imaging had been taken care of.

"I know that waiting for test results can be challenging, Heather, especially when you have commitments."

She flushed. He had overheard her talking to the nurse about her involvement in the Haunted Harvest project.

"Given the importance of your wrist's condition," the doctor continued, "I'm going to expedite the X-ray reading so we can discuss the findings together."

"Thank you so much."

Heather appreciated the doctor's consideration and watched as Dr. Anderson retrieved the X-ray images. With a trained eye, he examined the X-ray to assess any visible abnormalities or fractures in her wrist.

"Let's take a look here. Ah, yes, I see it." As he studied the X-ray, Dr. Anderson carefully explained his observations to Heather. "Heather, it appears that you have a small hairline fracture in one of the wrist bones. This is likely the source of your pain and discomfort."

Heather listened attentively, relieved to have a clear diagnosis.

"It doesn't seem to have worsened from when the injury first occurred. However, it is possible that you have inflammation and tenderness because of overdoing it."

"That's certainly possible," Heather murmured.



“Now that we have a better understanding of your condition, we can discuss our next steps and develop a treatment plan tailored to your needs.”

“Great!”

“Heather, I understand how important your work on the Haunted Harvest project is to you,” he said, his kind nature shining through. “Let’s discuss your treatment options while keeping your commitments in mind.”

“Thank you, Dr. Anderson. I really want to contribute to the project, but I also want to heal properly.”

Dr. Anderson explained the treatment options available to Heather. He suggested wearing a wrist brace or splint to provide support and limit the movement of the injured wrist. This would help prevent further damage while allowing her to use her hand for less strenuous tasks. The doctor recommended physical therapy sessions to promote healing, strengthen the wrist, and improve mobility. He emphasized that a skilled therapist could tailor exercises to Heather’s needs and work on minimizing any impact on her project involvement.

To address pain and discomfort, the doctor discussed pain management strategies such as over-the-counter pain relievers and prescribed medications.

“Be sure to take regular breaks,” he added, “and avoid activities that put excessive strain on your wrist.”

Dr. Anderson also suggested modifying her tasks or responsibilities for the project, focusing on areas that were less physically demanding while her wrist healed.

Heather appreciated the doctor’s guidance and recognized the importance of prioritizing her health. She knew that by following the recommended treatment plan and making necessary adjustments, she could contribute her creative talents to the Haunted Harvest while allowing her wrist to heal effectively.

“I’ll follow your recommendations, Dr. Anderson,” she said, determined, “and work closely with the project team to

find ways to contribute without overexerting my wrist.”

“Good. We’ll monitor your progress, and I’m here to provide guidance and support throughout your recovery. Your health is our top priority.”

“I appreciate that,” she said. “My mom wanted me to tell you ‘hi,’ by the way.”

“Oh, tell both of your parents that I asked about them. They are doing well?”

“Very,” Heather assured him.

“Wonderful.” His smile faded. “Heather, I want to emphasize that the small hairline fracture in your wrist requires careful attention,” he said, his tone turning cautious. “If you’re not cautious and don’t allow it to heal properly, there’s a risk that the fracture could worsen instead of getting better.”

She gulped. “I understand, Dr. Anderson. I want to get better, and I don’t want to make things worse.”

“It’s crucial to avoid activities that could put unnecessary strain on your wrist, especially during the initial stages of healing. Follow the treatment plan, use the wrist support as recommended, and let your physical therapist guide you through exercises that won’t exacerbate the injury.”

“I’ll be careful, and I’ll communicate with the project team about any adjustments I need to make. My health comes first.”

“That’s what I like to hear, Heather. With proper care and attention, your wrist should heal well, and you’ll be back to full strength in no time.”

Dr. Anderson’s warning served as a reminder of the importance of balancing dedication to one’s work with the need for self-care and recovery. Heather left the clinic with a newfound commitment to following her treatment plan diligently. Her health and well-being were paramount, both for her own sake and for her continued contributions to the Haunted Harvest project.

Still, she was ready to get back to contributing her creative talents to the charitable event. She was determined to prioritize her health and ensure that she could continue contributing her creative talents to the Haunted Harvest project in a way that was safe and sustainable.

Above all, she was eager to face the challenges of her wrist injury while continuing to be an essential part of the Haunted Harvest project.

As she drove to her parents' house where she was staying as she recovered and was between jobs, a deep sense of determination and a recognition of the need for divine guidance washed over her, and Heather took a moment to offer a heartfelt prayer to God. She sought strength, healing, and wisdom, asking for assistance in her journey to recover from her wrist injury and navigate her commitments to the Haunted Harvest project without overexerting herself.

“Dear God, I humbly ask for Your guidance and healing grace. Please help me mend my wrist and grant me the patience and wisdom to follow my treatment plan diligently. I pray that I won't overdo it in my eagerness to contribute to the Haunted Harvest project, but rather find a balance that allows me to be of service while taking care of my health.”

She smiled to herself as she could feel peace come over her.

“I am grateful for the opportunities I've been given, and I trust in Your divine wisdom to guide me through this journey. Please watch over me and bless my efforts so that I may use my creative talents to make a positive impact on others, just as You have blessed me.”

With her prayer offered, Heather felt a sense of reassurance and inner harmony. She knew that her faith would provide her with the strength and resilience needed to face the challenges ahead. As she continued on her path to healing and contributing to the Haunted Harvest project, Heather carried with her a profound sense of purpose and the belief that with God's help, she could overcome any obstacle that came her way.

## CHAPTER 9



**I**n the midst of preparations for the Haunted Harvest at Hidden Creek Orchard, Jack was hard at work, tending to some of his daily chores on the farm. He carefully examined the rows of apple trees, ensuring they were healthy and ready for the upcoming event.

As he worked, Jack's older brother, Roy, approached, his boots crunching on the fallen leaves beneath them. Roy, who was also deeply involved in the orchard's operations, seemed to have something on his mind.

"Hey, Jack, got a moment?" Roy asked.

Jack looked up. "Of course, Roy. What's on your mind?"

Roy leaned in, speaking in a hushed tone. "I wanted to talk to you about the Haunted Harvest. With everything going on, I think we need to have a chat about the logistics."

Jack paused for a moment, wiping his hands on his jeans. He knew that organizing such a large-scale event required careful planning and coordination.

"You're right, Roy. It's getting closer, and there's still a lot to do. To think I hoped it would be open for more than one weekend... We're almost ready, though. What's on your mind?"

The two brothers began to discuss the various aspects of the Haunted Harvest, from the decorations and attractions to the logistics of ticket sales and visitor safety. They knew that working together and addressing any potential challenges was crucial to the event's success. Jack recognized the need for comprehensive planning and organization to ensure the event's

success while prioritizing visitor safety and the charitable cause.

“Jack, let’s go over the decoration plan again,” Roy said. “I want to make sure everything is in place for that eerie ambiance we’re aiming for.”

Jack nodded, his cowboy hat shifting slightly. “Absolutely, Roy. We’ve got the lanterns, tombstones, and eerie signs set up throughout the orchard. The entrance archways are ready too. The haunted corn maze is complete, and Myles has been working on some spine-tingling ghost stories for the hayride.”

As they discussed the decorations, they touched on details such as the placement of props, the arrangement of spooky scenes, and the lighting effects that would create a truly immersive experience for visitors.

“Don’t forget the fog machines and the creepy sound effects. Those can really heighten the atmosphere.”

Jack grinned. Roy could be very detail-oriented at times.

“Right, we’ve got those strategically placed. And we’ll have designated safety staff keeping an eye on everything to ensure visitors have a safe but spine-tingling time.”

Their conversation then shifted to logistical matters, including ticket sales, visitor flow, and parking arrangements.

“We need to make sure the ticket booths are well-staffed,” Roy said, “and we’ve got a clear system for managing lines and ticket sales. Oh, and we can’t forget to have a lost and found area set up.”

“Agreed. We’ll also need signs directing visitors to the parking areas and ensuring there’s ample space for everyone.”

Visitor safety remained a top priority, and they discussed emergency procedures and first-aid stations to address any unforeseen situations during the event.

“We should have a clear plan in case of emergencies, like a lost child or a medical issue,” Roy said. “I’ll coordinate with the safety team on that.”

“Good thinking, Roy. We want this to be a fun and safe experience for everyone.”

As they talked, their commitment to the charitable cause and their shared passion for making the Haunted Harvest a memorable experience for the community shone through. Jack and Roy were determined to overcome any obstacles that came their way and ensure that the event went off without a hitch, all while supporting the Harvest Hope Foundation.

Throughout their discussion, Jack and Roy’s dedication to the Haunted Harvest project and their commitment to the charitable cause shone through. They knew that meticulous planning and attention to detail were key to creating a fun and safe event for the community while raising funds for the Harvest Hope Foundation. With their combined efforts, they were confident that the Haunted Harvest would be a resounding success, benefiting both the visitors and those in need.

“You know... for the finishing touches... we might want to talk to Beverly,” Roy said. “Since she’s a construction worker and all.”

Roy’s suggestion to seek assistance from Beverly Young made perfect sense given her expertise. However, Jack couldn’t resist the opportunity to tease his older brother, knowing that Roy and Beverly were in a romantic relationship.

“Her construction skills could really come in handy for some of the setup,” Roy added.

“Ah, I see what you’re getting at, Roy,” Jack said playfully. “Are you just trying to impress her with your project management skills?”

Roy chuckled. “Well, you know, it’s all about teamwork, Jack. Besides, we make a great team on and off the construction site.”

Jack laughed heartily, acknowledging the strength of Roy and Beverly’s relationship and their ability to work well together, whether in the context of construction or the Haunted Harvest project.

“You’re right, Roy. Let’s bring Beverly on board. Her expertise will be invaluable. Just make sure she doesn’t put you to shame with her construction skills.

The brothers shared a lighthearted moment, knowing that Beverly’s involvement would only enhance the success of the Haunted Harvest. With teamwork, dedication, and a touch of playful teasing, they were determined to make the event a memorable one, both for the community and for their own family.

“Since we’re going to have Beverly involved, how about we contact Emily?”

Emily Hughes had a lot of experience in volunteer work.

“That’s a great idea, Jack.” Roy grinned. “Emily’s passion for volunteer work is undeniable, and she could help us with organizing and managing our volunteer teams.”

“Exactly, Roy. She knows how to rally people together for a good cause, and it doesn’t hurt that she’s dating Lawrence. They make a dynamic duo.”

Roy nodded again. Emily would definitely have a positive impact on things. Her and Lawrence’s combined efforts could help recruit and coordinate volunteers effectively, ensuring that the Haunted Harvest ran smoothly and that visitors had a fantastic experience.

“Let’s reach out to Emily and see if she’s on board,” Roy said. “With her and Beverly’s help, we’ll have an even stronger team for the Haunted Harvest.”

The Griffin brothers were united in their commitment to making the charitable event a success, and by bringing in Beverly and Emily, they were confident that their collective efforts would have a meaningful impact on the community and the Harvest Hope Foundation.

As the discussion about involving Beverly and Emily in the Haunted Harvest project continued, Jack’s thoughts began to drift, and he found himself reflecting on his growing feelings for Heather. While he had initially seen her as a friend

and valued her creative talents, he couldn't deny that there was something more brewing within him.

Jack appreciated Heather's dedication to the project, her kindness, and her warm presence. He admired her creativity and how she had used her skills to contribute to the event, despite her recent wrist injury. Their conversations had become increasingly meaningful, and he enjoyed spending time with her both at work and outside of it.

*Heather is something special. She's not just a talented makeup artist. She's an incredible person. Lately, I've been feeling something more than friendship.*

He couldn't help but smile to himself as he recalled their conversations and the moments they had shared. Jack knew that he wanted to spend more time with Heather and get to know her better, whether it led to a deeper connection or simply a strong friendship.

*Maybe it's time to take a chance and see where this could lead, but for now, the focus is on the Haunted Harvest and making it a success.*

With a newfound sense of determination and a growing sense of affection for Heather, Jack decided to let their connection develop naturally while keeping the charitable event and their shared passion for it at the forefront of his priorities. The Haunted Harvest remained their shared mission, and he was ready to give it his all, both for the community and for the possibility of something more with Heather.

Maybe, though, they could celebrate the success on Halloween night, and he could ask her out then...

"Jack, you've got a far-off look in your eyes. What's on your mind?" Roy asked, eyeing his brother curiously.

Jack cleared his throat. The question interrupted his moment of reflection about Heather, but Jack quickly shifted his focus back to the practical aspects of organizing the Haunted Harvest.

"Oh, just some ideas for the Haunted Harvest," Jack said idly. "But speaking of ideas, do you think we should have



flowers as part of the decorations? Colton's girlfriend, Susan Green, has that flower shop, and she might be able to help us out."

Roy rubbed his chin. "Flowers could add a nice touch, especially if we use them strategically in certain areas. Susan might have some great ideas for incorporating them into the spooky ambiance."

"Precisely. I'll talk to Colton about it and see if Susan is willing to collaborate with us. It could be a lovely addition to the Haunted Harvest."

With their discussion shifted to practical matters once more, Jack decided to keep his growing feelings for Heather to himself for the time being, resolving to wait until Halloween night to take any steps in that direction. The Haunted Harvest remained their primary focus, and Jack was determined to make it a memorable event for the community and, perhaps, a special night for himself and Heather.

The two brothers got back to work, and that night, all of the Griffin brothers continued their preparations for the event.

They spent the following days coordinating with Beverly and Emily, finalizing the plans for volunteers, and making sure all the attractions, decorations, and safety measures were in place. Colton and Susan from Hidden Creek Orchard's team were also consulted about incorporating flowers into the decor, and Susan eagerly agreed to provide floral arrangements that would add a unique and elegant touch to the spooky atmosphere.

As the event's date drew closer, the excitement in Shooting Star Canyon grew. The community buzzed with anticipation for the Haunted Harvest, and the Griffin brothers were determined to make it a night to remember.

Jack and Heather continued to work closely on the project, their friendship deepening with each passing day. They shared laughs, creative ideas, and moments of camaraderie while supporting each other in their respective roles. Jack patiently waited for the right moment to express his feelings to Heather,

knowing that Halloween night would be the perfect backdrop for such a heartfelt revelation.

In the midst of all the planning and preparations, Jack's heart beat a little faster each time he saw Heather, and he couldn't help but look forward to the moment when he could finally share his true feelings with her, making the Haunted Harvest a truly special night for both of them.



A few nights before the first night of the Haunted Harvest, Jack was in his bedroom, and he found a moment of quiet solitude to offer a heartfelt prayer to God. He looked up at the starry sky and sought guidance and blessings for the upcoming event and the path ahead, especially regarding his growing feelings for Heather.

“Dear God, as the Haunted Harvest approaches, I humbly ask for Your guidance and blessings. Please watch over our efforts to make this event a success, to bring joy to the community, and to support those in need through the Harvest Hope Foundation.”

Jack's voice was filled with determination and hope.

“And, Lord, I also pray for guidance in matters of the heart. Heather has become an important part of my life, and I'm grateful for the friendship we share. I pray that as we move forward, our paths align in a way that brings happiness and fulfillment to both of us.”

He closed his eyes briefly, taking a moment to reflect on the journey they had embarked on together, both in organizing the Haunted Harvest and in their blossoming connection.

“Please grant me the wisdom to recognize the right time and the courage to express my feelings when the moment is right. I trust in Your divine plan, and I know that whatever the future holds, it will be guided by Your grace.”

With his prayer offered, Jack felt a sense of calm and reassurance. He knew that the Haunted Harvest and his

evolving relationship with Heather were in good hands—both his and the hands of God. As he gazed at the stars above through his window, he couldn't help but feel a sense of hope and anticipation for the events that awaited him.

## CHAPTER 10



**O**n the night before the first day of the Haunted Harvest, Heather gathered her makeup supplies and set up a makeshift makeup station in a well-lit area in the barn. She was eager to do a trial makeup run on the Griffin brothers to ensure that their spooky looks would be perfect for the event. Roy, being the first volunteer, took a seat in the chair, ready to be transformed.

“All right, Roy, let’s start with you,” Heather said, excitement coloring her tone. “I’m going to give you a hauntingly good look.”

Roy grinned, clearly looking forward to the transformation, and Heather began her makeup artistry. She carefully applied makeup to create ghostly pale skin, darkened eye sockets, and eerie facial features. Her skilled hands worked with precision as she added subtle details that would make Roy’s character truly terrifying.

“Heather, you’ve got some serious talent. I already feel scarier!”

She smiled. “Thanks, Roy, but we’re just getting started. Wait until you see the final result.”

After finishing Roy’s makeup, Heather admired her work and showed him a mirror so he could see his ghostly appearance.

“What do you think, Roy?” she asked proudly.

Roy gaped, clearly amazed. “Wow, Heather, this is incredible! I’m going to haunt some dreams for sure.”

Heather chuckled, pleased with the positive response.

Her artistic talent had transformed Roy into a hauntingly eerie specter. With her makeup artistry, she had created a chilling ghostly appearance.

Roy's skin was given a pallid, almost translucent complexion, resembling a supernatural apparition.

Darkened eye sockets and sunken cheeks gave him a gaunt and otherworldly look.

She added subtle, ghostly gray streaks to his hair to enhance the spectral effect.

Roy's lips were painted with a cold, ashen hue, completing the eerie transformation.

The result was a ghostly visage that sent shivers down the spine, perfectly suited for the spooky atmosphere of the Haunted Harvest. Heather's makeup skills had turned Roy into a convincing and terrifying ghost, setting the tone for the event's frightful encounters.

Both Parker and Ronald were beyond pleased too, and Heather smiled to herself. Even so, she found herself glancing around. Jack had told her that he would be there as soon as he could, but he wanted to do a last-minute walkaround throughout everything. He would be over soon.

It wasn't that she felt out of place around his brothers without Jack around. Not at all. All of them were kind, and they had been nothing but supportive and wonderful to her. Their parents had done a fine job raising them.

No, Heather was feeling something else altogether, something she did not want to be feeling at all.

Pushing her feelings down, she turned her attention to the other Griffin brothers, Parker and Ronald, who were eager to undergo their own makeup transformations.

Now that Roy's ghostly transformation was complete, Heather turned to Parker, the next Griffin brother in line for his makeup makeover. Parker took a seat in the makeup chair, ready to undergo his own spine-tingling transformation.

“All right, Parker, time to see what kind of spooky creature you’ll become tonight,” she said.

Parker grinned, showing a mixture of excitement and anticipation as Heather prepared her makeup supplies. Her skilled hands began to work their magic once again, as she carefully applied makeup to create a terrifying and supernatural look for Parker.

As the makeup session progressed, Parker’s features underwent a dramatic and eerie change under Heather’s expert guidance. With each brushstroke and detail, she brought out the essence of his chosen character, making him look like a creature from the darkest nightmares.

Parker turned his face this way and that. “Heather, you’ve really outdone yourself.”

She smiled. “That’s the idea, Parker. Wait until you see the final result.”

After finishing the makeup for Parker’s character, Heather showed him a mirror so he could witness his ghastly appearance.

“What do you think, Parker?”

“It’s incredible, Heather! I look terrifying. I feel like I’m straight out of a horror movie.”

Heather’s talent had once again delivered a chilling and convincing look, setting the stage for Parker to become a memorable and frightening presence at the Haunted Harvest. With his transformation complete, the Griffin brothers were well on their way to becoming the spine-tingling stars of the event.

Heather’s expert makeup artistry transformed Parker into a nightmarish creature that would send shivers down the spines of Haunted Harvest attendees. His appearance was that of a malevolent and twisted monster.

Parker’s skin was given a ghostly, sickly pallor, as if he had emerged from the depths of darkness. His eyes were heavily shadowed and surrounded by deep, unsettling dark circles, enhancing the ominous look. Jagged, dark lines and

accents were added to create the illusion of scars and wounds, giving the impression that he had endured horrific encounters. His lips were painted with a cold and menacing shade, completing the transformation into a malevolent figure.

The result was a character that embodied pure nightmare fuel, a grotesque and haunting presence that would be a highlight of the Haunted Harvest's terrifying attractions. Heather's makeup skills had turned Parker into a truly spine-tingling monster, perfect for the immersive and hair-raising experience of the event.

If anything, she might want to scale it back some. There were sure to be plenty of kids that showed up.

With Roy and Parker's terrifying transformations complete, it was now Ronald's turn to undergo a spine-tingling makeover courtesy of Heather's makeup artistry. Ronald took a seat in the makeup chair, a mixture of excitement and curiosity in his expression.

"I can't wait to see what character I'm going to become for the Haunted Harvest," he said.

"Leave it up to me," she said.

"Oh, yeah. I'm not even going to tell you what to do. I trust you."

"Good."

Ronald grinned, clearly ready to embrace the eerie makeover.

Heather meticulously arranged her makeup supplies, preparing to bring her next creation to life. Her skilled hands worked with precision as she applied makeup to transform Ronald into a character that would strike fear into the hearts of Haunted Harvest attendees.

As the session progressed, Ronald's features underwent a dramatic and unsettling change. Heather carefully crafted the details of his character, ensuring that every stroke and accent contributed to the chilling transformation.

"Heather, you've got some serious talent."

“I’m not even done yet,” she protested.

“All I know is that young Ronald would’ve been terrified to see anyone looking like this.”

His brothers laughed.

As Heather continued her work on Ronald’s unsettling makeup transformation, she grew progressively quieter, her focus fully immersed in the creative process. Her concentration was palpable, and her normally lively and cheerful demeanor had given way to a sense of intense artistic dedication.

Her hands moved with precision, carefully applying makeup and intricate details to achieve the desired chilling effect. With each brushstroke, she brought out the eerie features of Ronald’s character, ensuring that every element contributed to the spine-tingling look.

Maybe Ronald noticed her quiet concentration because he said, “Heather, you’re doing an amazing job. You really have a gift for this.”

“Thank you, Ronald,” she said softly. “I just want to make sure it’s perfect.”

Ronald nodded, and she had no doubt that he appreciated Heather’s commitment to creating a truly terrifying character for the Haunted Harvest. The silence in the barn allowed them both to appreciate the gravity of the event they were preparing for, where their makeup creations would come to life and send chills down the spines of those who attended.

As Heather continued her work, her quiet dedication spoke volumes, reflecting her passion for her craft and her desire to make the Haunted Harvest an unforgettable and spine-tingling experience for all who dared to enter.

The night was filled with laughter—on their part rather than hers—as well as creative energy and anticipation as the brothers prepared for the Haunted Harvest’s grand opening.

With Heather’s artistic skills and the Griffin brothers’ enthusiasm, the makeup trial run not only achieved spine-



chilling looks but also strengthened their bond as a team, setting the stage for a truly memorable and haunting event.

Once the makeup was complete, Heather showed Ronald a mirror so he could witness his spine-tingling appearance.

His eyes widened like he had seen a ghost. “I look positively terrifying, like something from a nightmare.”

Heather’s makeup skills had once again succeeded in creating an unforgettable and horrifying look. Ronald’s transformation was complete, and he was ready to embrace his role as one of the most frightening characters at the Haunted Harvest, ensuring that attendees would experience a night of pure terror.

She had transformed Ronald into a nightmarish creature, perfectly suited to terrify attendees at the Haunted Harvest. His appearance took on the characteristics of a malevolent and otherworldly being.

Ronald’s skin was pale and sickly, with an unnatural pallor that made him appear as though he had emerged from the shadows of a terrifying realm. Dark, hollowed eyes with menacing accents created a sinister and haunting gaze. His features were contorted to give the impression of an ancient, vengeful spirit, complete with ghostly markings and patterns. Ronald’s lips were given a cold, eerie shade, adding to the unsettling aura of his character.

The result was a figure that embodied pure horror and dread, a ghastly presence that would haunt the nightmares of Haunted Harvest attendees. Heather’s makeup skills had succeeded in turning Ronald into a truly nightmarish entity, ensuring that he would be a chilling and unforgettable part of the event’s terrifying attractions.

She was smiling at the brothers as they argued over who looked the best when she spotted movement from the corner of her eye. Jack was approaching.

“Whoa! This is insane!” he said. “The eerie and spine-tingling appearances you crafted for Roy, Parker, and Ronald?”

Truly remarkable! Heather, these makeup transformations are incredible! You've really outdone yourself."

Heather offered a faint smile, appreciating Jack's praise, but her subdued demeanor didn't go unnoticed.

"Is everything okay, Heather?" he asked. "You seem a bit quiet."

Heather hesitated for a moment, her inner turmoil evident in her eyes. She finally spoke, her voice carrying a hint of unease. "I'm just... I've been feeling a little unnerved all day. Maybe it's just the anticipation of the event or the spooky makeup we're creating."

She didn't like lying, but she also didn't want to talk about the true root of her feelings.

"It's completely normal to feel that way before an event like this, especially when we're surrounded by all these creepy transformations," he said soothingly, "but remember, we're doing something incredible here, and it's going to be a memorable night for everyone."

Heather nodded, appreciating Jack's comforting words. She knew that her skills were crucial to making the Haunted Harvest a success, and despite her unease, she was determined to see it through. Jack's presence and encouragement were a source of comfort, and as they continued their preparations, they both held onto the belief that their hard work would result in a night of spine-tingling fun and charitable contributions to the Harvest Hope Foundation.

She would be able to move past her troubles. She had to. The only way for her to ever be truly and completely happy again depended on it.

## CHAPTER 11



**A**s Jack admired the spine-tingling transformations that Heather had crafted for his brothers, his excitement and appreciation swelled. He couldn't contain his enthusiasm, and the admiration he felt for Heather's talent and dedication overflowed.

"Heather, you are absolutely amazing! Look at my brothers! They look like they've walked straight out of a horror movie. I can't thank you enough for all your hard work and creativity."

Heather's smile brightened at Jack's effusive praise, his words warming her heart.

"You know, Heather, meeting you and getting to work on this project together has been such a blessing," he continued sincerely. "I can't believe how lucky I am to have you on board and to have you in my life."

His words were heartfelt and genuine, reflecting not only his appreciation for Heather's skills but also the growing connection he felt with her. Jack's joy and gratitude for the path their friendship was taking were evident in his every word and expression.

"You've brought so much to this event, Heather," he said with gratitude, "and I'm truly grateful. I can't wait to see this Haunted Harvest come to life with you by my side."

As they continued their preparations, Jack's excitement and appreciation for Heather remained unwavering. He knew that the night of the Haunted Harvest would be one to

remember, not only because of the spine-tingling makeup transformations but also because of the special bond that was growing between them.

Despite his words, though, Heather kept quiet. She hadn't said one word, and he didn't know if he had said something wrong. He certainly hoped not.

Sensing that Heather was possibly overwhelmed, Jack decided to engage in an act of camaraderie that might help her feel more at ease. He offered to be the canvas for her makeup artistry, not only as a way to demonstrate his trust in her skills but also as a gesture of solidarity.

"Heather, how about you use your incredible makeup talents on me?" he suggested, trying to be supportive. "It might help you relax a bit, and I'd love to see what you can come up with."

Heather's eyes brightened at the offer, appreciating the opportunity to focus on her craft and perhaps regain her sense of ease through her work.

"That sounds nice, Jack. Thank you."

"But that's only if your wrist isn't hurting you."

"It's been..." She wrinkled her nose.

"If you're hurting—"

"I took some medicine."

"I don't want you to risk overdoing it. You really don't have to—"

"Trust me. If it was too much, I wouldn't be willing to do it. I have to do it again tomorrow. I can and will do this."

"If you're sure..."

She nodded.

As Jack took a seat in the makeup chair, he trusted Heather to create a character that would fit right into the spooky atmosphere of the Haunted Harvest. It was a moment of connection and understanding between them, a way for Jack to

show his support and appreciation for Heather's artistry and a chance for Heather to express herself creatively.

With Jack as her canvas, Heather's quiet unease began to dissipate as she channeled her energy into her craft, giving Jack a truly memorable and spine-tingling transformation. The longer he sat, the happier he became. It served as a reminder of the unique bond they were building and the exciting journey they were on together as they prepared for the Haunted Harvest.

As Heather began to work her makeup magic on Jack, Jack found it challenging to contain his excitement and enthusiasm. He couldn't help but engage in conversation and share his thoughts as she meticulously applied the makeup.

"Heather, this is so fascinating! How do you come up with these amazing makeup ideas?"

Heather sighed. "I can't do your makeup if you keep moving."

"I'm not moving!"

She lowered her arms and lifted her eyebrows. "Every time you talk, your lips move."

"Oh."

"Yes."

"Well... I'll try to stop."

She shook her head and glanced away. "It's a combination of creativity, inspiration, and a love for the art. I draw inspiration from all sorts of things, from movies to nature. It's about bringing a character to life through makeup."

Jack nodded, eager to learn more and engage with Heather in the midst of her artistic process. He was genuinely fascinated by her work and couldn't contain his admiration.

"You're like a magician with makeup! I can't wait to see the final result." He held up his hands. "Don't worry. I'll stop talking."

"Sure..."

But she gave him a small smile, and he hoped she appreciated his continuous encouragement and enthusiasm. He wanted his presence and conversation to help her ease into the makeup application process, and he especially wanted their shared moments to allow her to regain her comfort and confidence.

Heather continued to work on Jack's makeup, and he kept quiet even though he wanted to talk about various different aspects of the Haunted Harvest, their favorite Halloween memories, and the excitement of creating an unforgettable event together. More than anything, he wanted to grow their friendship and for their connection to become more profound. More than anything, he was certain that the Haunted Harvest would be a night to remember for both of them.

As Heather meticulously completed Jack's makeup transformation, the time seemed to slip away unnoticed. Jack had been engrossed in Heather's artistic process, and he was so absorbed in the moment that he didn't realize that his brothers had quietly left the area.

It wasn't until Heather delicately applied the finishing touches and showed Jack his spine-tingling reflection in a mirror that he realized they were alone.

"There you go, Jack," Heather said quietly but proudly. "Your transformation is complete."

Jack was momentarily taken aback by the chilling character he had become. The makeup had turned him into a haunting figure, perfectly suited for the Haunted Harvest.

"Heather, this is incredible! You've turned me into something straight out of a nightmare."

Her smile was small. "I'm glad you like it, Jack. You make a terrifying addition to the Haunted Harvest."

They shared a moment of shared satisfaction, appreciating the artistry and creativity that had brought Jack's character to life. As Jack looked into the mirror, he couldn't help but be amazed by the transformation, and his eyes eventually met Heather's in the reflection.

“Heather, thank you for not only making me look the part but also for being here tonight. It’s just you and me now.”

The realization that they were alone in that moment seemed to carry a special significance, as they stood together in the quiet aftermath of their creative collaboration. The Haunted Harvest was almost ready to begin, and Jack and Heather were united in their excitement for the unforgettable night ahead.

As Jack admired his reflection in the mirror, he was captivated by the transformation that Heather had crafted for him. He had become a cowboy zombie, a chilling and haunting figure that perfectly embodied the eerie spirit of the Haunted Harvest. Jack couldn’t help but be enthralled by the makeup’s intricate details, from the rotting flesh to the ghostly pallor, all blending seamlessly with his cowboy attire.

“Heather, this is amazing!” he said, impressed and delighted. “Who would’ve thought of a cowboy zombie? But it’s absolutely perfect.”

Heather’s smile widened. “I’m thrilled you like it, Jack. You make an incredible cowboy zombie.”

Jack’s excitement was contagious, and he couldn’t resist showcasing his newly adopted character with a playful, zombie-like shuffle and a growling moan.

“Argh, brains...” he said, playfully pretending to be in character. “I mean, candy! We’re coming for your candy!”

Heather laughed, the lighthearted moment adding to their growing camaraderie. “You’re going to be a hit at the Haunted Harvest, Jack.”

With their preparations complete and Jack’s transformation into a cowboy zombie a resounding success, they stood together in the quiet barn, sharing a moment of satisfaction and shared accomplishment. The night ahead promised thrills, chills, and unforgettable memories, and Jack and Heather were ready to embrace it all with their newfound friendship and the creative energy that had brought them together.

As Jack stood there in full zombie makeup, ready to embrace his role at the Haunted Harvest, he couldn't deny that something entirely different was stirring in his heart. Despite the eerie appearance he now wore, his emotions were far from zombie-like.

In the quiet of the moment, with just him and Heather in the barn, Jack's heart was filled with a sense of warmth and connection. The bond they had been building, their shared laughter, and the genuine conversations they'd had throughout the evening had stirred something within him that was far from lifeless.

Jack couldn't help but feel a deep sense of fondness and admiration for Heather. Her talent, her dedication, and her infectious enthusiasm had made a lasting impression on him. The more he got to know her, the more he found himself drawn to her, not as a spooky cowboy zombie, but as a man with a genuine connection and growing feelings.

As they prepared to face the thrills and scares of the Haunted Harvest together, Jack couldn't help but wonder about the future and the possibility of something more between them. The night was filled with anticipation, not just for the event but also for the unexpected twists and turns that life might have in store for both of them.

Summoning his courage, Jack decided that he couldn't wait any longer. The moment was right to ask Heather out. With a smile, he turned to her, the eerie cowboy zombie makeup doing little to hide the sincerity in his eyes. He noticed that in a glimpse in the mirror.

"Heather, I've really enjoyed getting to know you, and I was wondering if... well, if you'd like to go out with me sometime. Maybe after the Haunted Harvest?" he asked nervously.

There was a brief pause, and for a moment, the barn seemed quieter than ever. Jack's heart raced as he waited for Heather's response, hopeful for a positive answer.

"Jack, I appreciate your offer," she said gently, "and I've enjoyed our time together too, but I have to be honest. I'm not



ready for a romantic relationship right now. My focus is on my work and other commitments.”

Jack’s heart sank at Heather’s response, disappointment washing over him. However, he respected her honesty and appreciated that she had been forthright with him.

“I understand, Heather. I’m glad you were honest with me. Our friendship means a lot to me, and I hope that won’t change.”

“Jack, I value our friendship too,” she said warmly, “and I hope it continues to grow. I’m sorry if I’ve disappointed you.”

Though he felt a twinge of sadness, Jack managed a small smile. Their connection was important to him, and he was determined not to let this moment of vulnerability affect their budding friendship.

“You haven’t disappointed me, Heather,” he said sincerely. “I’m just glad we can continue to be friends. And who knows what the future holds?”

Heather returned his smile, her warm and genuine demeanor reaffirming the bond they shared. “Thank you, Jack. I’m glad to have you as a friend too. Let’s make this Haunted Harvest a night to remember.”

With their friendship intact and their focus on the Haunted Harvest, Jack and Heather prepared to face the thrilling event ahead, knowing that their connection would continue to grow, even if it wasn’t taking a romantic turn for now.

## CHAPTER 12



**A**fter Jack left the barn, giving Heather space to gather her supplies, a mix of emotions welled up within her. She appreciated his understanding and his commitment to their friendship, but the moment still weighed heavy on her heart.

As she packed up her makeup supplies, Heather blinked back tears that threatened to spill. It wasn't easy for her to turn down Jack's romantic advances, especially when she could see the sincerity in his eyes, but she knew that her current focus on her work and commitments needed her undivided attention.

Plus, there was one other thing...

"I hope he understands," she whispered to herself. "I hope I haven't hurt him too much."

With a sigh, she took a moment to compose herself, reminding herself of the importance of her work and her dedication to her craft. The Haunted Harvest was fast approaching, and her makeup artistry would play a crucial role in making it a memorable event for everyone.

Determined to put her emotions aside and focus on the task at hand, Heather wiped away a stray tear and took a deep breath. She knew that, no matter what, she could count on her friendship with Jack to support her through the challenges and excitement of the night ahead.

Heather's emotional turmoil became increasingly difficult to contain as she made her way to her car. The weight of the moment and the complex feelings that had surfaced were

overwhelming, and she found herself unable to hold back her tears any longer.

With trembling hands, she unlocked her car, quickly got inside, and closed the door behind her. Alone in the confines of her vehicle, she allowed her emotions to flow freely. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and her sobs echoed in the quiet interior as the full extent of her feelings washed over her.

She cried softly. "It's just... so complicated."

She gripped the steering wheel tightly, taking solace in the solitude of her car where she could release her pent-up emotions without reservation. It was a moment of vulnerability, a release of the conflicting emotions that had been building up throughout the evening.

As the tears flowed, Heather knew that she needed this emotional release to process her feelings and find the strength to carry on. She took comfort in knowing that she had a supportive network of friends and a meaningful purpose in her work at the Haunted Harvest, and with time, she hoped that the intensity of the moment would ease, allowing her to face the challenges of the night ahead with renewed determination.

What she needed most of all was a girl friend.

And she used to have several.

But Heather had left them all behind. She had pushed them away.

All for the sake of David Williams, her boyfriend.

She had been so gullible. When David wanted her to spend more and more time with him, she never thought twice about it. She did start to miss her friends, and the one time she mentioned that to David, he became all hurt and bothered, so she stopped.

So instead of hanging out with her friends, she would call them when David wasn't around, but gradually, that stopped too.

Jessica Turner had been the one who tried the hardest and longest to keep Heather in her life, but even she eventually

gave up, and Heather couldn't blame her. Heather had stopped being a good friend. Friendship was a two-way street.

For the first time since Jessica Turner stopped trying to connect with Heather, Heather decided to call Jessica, expecting Jessica not to answer. She felt a mixture of apprehension and hope as she dialed Jessica Turner's number. It had been a long time since they had last spoken, far too long, and she feared that their friendship might have been irreparably damaged by the past. Nevertheless, she needed to reach out, and she couldn't suppress the glimmer of hope that Jessica would answer after all.

After a few rings, just as Heather had expected to be met with voicemail, Jessica's voice came through the phone.

"Hello?" Jessica said, sounding surprised.

"Jessica. It's me. Heather," she said softly even though she hoped she was still a contact in Jessica's phone.

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the line, and Heather held her breath, waiting for Jessica's response.

"Heather? Is that really you?" Jessica asked cautiously.

"Yes, Jessica, it's me," Heather said tearfully. "I... I know it's been a long time, and I understand if you don't want to talk to me, but I needed to reach out."

Jessica's voice softened, and a hint of emotion crept into her tone. "Heather, I've missed you," she said, her tone warming slightly. "I never wanted things to end the way they did. What's been going on?"

Heather felt a rush of relief and gratitude. Despite the painful past, it seemed that Jessica was open to reconnecting.

"Thank you, Jessica. I'll explain everything, but it's a long story. Can we meet up sometime soon? I'd love to see you in person."

"Of course, Heather. I'd like that too. Let's catch up and mend things between us."

"I just... I'm not near you anymore," Heather said. "It's gonna be a few weeks until I'm back in California. I've also

been in Atlanta for a bit.”

“Oh, really?”

As they made plans to meet and rekindle their friendship, Heather felt a renewed sense of hope and healing. It was a small step toward rebuilding what had been lost, and she was grateful for the chance to reconnect with someone who had once been such an important part of her life.

“We can catch up when we get together, of course,” Jessica said, “but we can talk now for as long as you want. What’s going on?”

As Heather spoke to Jessica about her past and the difficult experiences she had gone through, she found herself opening up about the painful truth she had been carrying. Her voice quivered with emotion as she shared the details of her abusive relationship with David Williams.

“Jessica, I need you to know that I didn’t understand what was happening at first.” Heather sniffed, trying not to cry again. “David... he changed, and I didn’t see it until it was almost too late. He isolated me from everyone, including my closest friends. I lost touch with you and so many others because of him.”

Heather honestly expected Jessica to say, “I told you so.” After all, Jessica had said that David was no good for Heather. Jessica had been right, but it had taken Heather far too long to learn the truth for herself, and by that point, Heather threw herself into her work to try to eat up the loneliness and the far too many hours to herself that she then had. If it hadn’t been for David, Heather might not have ever gotten hired for a few movies, but that had been the only good thing about their failed relationship.

“Heather, I’m so sorry to hear what you’ve been through. It’s not your fault. Abusive relationships can be incredibly manipulative, and it’s difficult to see the signs sometimes.”

“I know, Jessica, but I blame myself for letting it happen,” Heather said emotionally. “I lost all my friends, and I felt so alone.”

“Heather, please don’t blame yourself. I’m here for you now, and we can work through this together. You’re not alone anymore.”

Heather’s tears continued to flow, but they were no longer tears of isolation and despair. They were tears of relief, knowing that she had someone who cared about her and was willing to support her on the path to healing.

“Thank you, Jessica. Your understanding means the world to me.”

As Heather and Jessica reconnected, they found solace in each other’s company and a renewed hope for the future. Heather was no longer alone in her journey to heal from the past, and with Jessica’s support, she could begin to rebuild the friendships that had once meant so much to her.

With tears still in her eyes and a heavy heart, Heather confided in Jessica about the deep scars left by her abusive relationship with David. The pain and trauma she had endured had left her with a profound sense of distrust and fear when it came to romantic relationships.

“Jessica, I don’t know if I can ever trust a guy again after what happened with David,” she said, feeling more vulnerable than ever. “The betrayal, the manipulation... it’s left me so scared to let anyone in.”

Jessica listened attentively. “Heather, it’s completely understandable that you’re feeling this way after what you’ve been through. Rebuilding trust takes time, and it’s okay to be cautious,” she said, her voice full of compassion.

“But what if I push away someone who genuinely cares about me because of my fear?” she asked tearfully, thinking about Jack of course. “I don’t want to be alone forever.”

Jessica sighed. “I wish I could give you a hug right now. Heather, you won’t be alone forever. Take your time to heal and find your strength again. When the right person comes into your life, they’ll understand and be patient with you. You don’t have to rush into anything.”

Heather appreciated Jessica's words of comfort and encouragement. She knew that the journey toward healing and rebuilding trust would be challenging, but having a friend like Jessica by her side gave her hope for the future.

"Thank you, Jessica. I'm so grateful to have you back in my life.

As they continued to talk and reconnect, Heather took comfort in knowing that she had someone who understood and supported her, even as she navigated the complexities of healing from her past and building a brighter future.

"Heather, I want you to know that there are good guys out there. I understand your fears, but not all men are like David. I can speak from experience. I'm in a relationship now with a guy I truly adore, and he's been nothing but supportive and kind."

"Really?" Heather grinned and felt her eyes turn drier. "If anyone deserves to find. Great guy, it's you. You're amazing."

"Thank you."

"Tell me more about him."

"His name is Matthew, and he's been an absolute gem."

Heather grinned to herself. She could hear the smile in Jessica's voice.

"We met through mutual friends," Jessica said, "and he's shown me what a healthy and loving relationship should be like. He's patient, caring, and understanding, and he's helped me heal from past wounds."

Heather couldn't help but feel a glimmer of hope as she listened to Jessica's story. The fact that her friend had found happiness in a healthy relationship gave her a new perspective.

"Maybe someday, I'll meet someone like Matthew, but for now, I think I need to focus on healing and rediscovering myself."

"Healing is so important," Jessica said.

Heather laughed slightly. “I hurt my wrist, and so many people have said that healing should be my top priority, health... It’s true, but it’s not just about physical healing.”

“So true! When the time is right, you’ll know. And until then, you have friends who care about you and will be there every step of the way.”

Their conversation reassured Heather that there was hope for the future, and with friends like Jessica by her side, she felt more optimistic about the possibility of trusting and loving again when the time was right.



## CHAPTER 13



The next morning, as Jack went about his morning routine, he was taken completely by surprise when he heard a knock at his door. It was early, and he couldn't fathom who might be visiting at this hour.

With a sense of curiosity and a touch of excitement, he quickly made his way to the door and swung it open. To his amazement, standing there on his doorstep was Heather, her presence bringing a smile to his face.

"Heather? What brings you here so early?" he asked, surprised and delighted.

He had tossed and turned all night long, afraid that he had ruined their friendship and that things would be terribly awkward between them. His feelings hadn't changed in the slightest. More than anything, he wanted them to be together, but only if that was what Heather wanted too.

Heather looked a bit hesitant but determined as she met Jack's gaze. "Jack, there's something important I need to talk to you about."

Jack could sense the urgency in her tone, and without hesitation, he stepped aside, inviting her into his apartment.

"Of course, Heather. Come on in. Let's talk," he said warmly, still hoping that this would be a good talk.

As Heather entered Jack's home, the atmosphere was filled with a mix of emotions—surprise, concern, and a hint of anticipation. Whatever was on her mind, Jack was ready to

listen and offer his support as their friendship continued to deepen and evolve.

Before she had a chance to speak, Jack took a moment to address her, his expression sincere and regretful.

“Heather, before we get into anything else, I want to apologize for everything. I never should have put you on the spot like that, and I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable with my earlier request. Our friendship means a lot to me, and I shouldn’t have pushed you into something you weren’t ready for.”

Heather smiled and nodded. “Jack, I appreciate your apology, and I want you to know that it means a lot to me. I understand that your intentions were sincere, and it’s okay.”

Their exchange of understanding and forgiveness set a positive tone for their conversation. With the air cleared, Jack hoped Heather felt more comfortable sharing whatever it was that had brought her to his doorstep that morning. He hoped she knew that he was a true friend who would listen and support her through whatever challenges lay ahead.

Heather smiled. “Jack, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, and I realized that I want to give this a chance. So, what do you say? Would you like to go out with me?”

Jack blinked a few times. He couldn’t have predicted this turn of events, but a sense of happiness and excitement welled up within him as he heard her invitation.

His face lit up with a joyful grin, his heart filled with a sense of exhilaration. “Heather, I’d love to go out with you!”

Heather’s smile grew wider. “Great! How about we celebrate with breakfast right now? There’s a charming little café not far from here.”

Jack couldn’t contain his excitement as he agreed to her proposal. “Breakfast sounds perfect, Heather. Lead the way!”

As they embarked on this unexpected adventure, Jack and Heather knew that this breakfast date marked the beginning of a new chapter in their friendship, one filled with the potential for something more. With smiles on their faces and

anticipation in their hearts, they left Jack's apartment together, ready to enjoy a delicious meal and each other's company.



Despite the initial excitement and their shared desire to explore a potential romantic connection, Jack and Heather's breakfast date turned out to be surprisingly awkward. As they sat across from each other in the cozy café, an unexpected tension seemed to hang in the air.

Their conversation was stilted, with pauses and forced smiles punctuating their attempts at small talk. It became evident that the chemistry they had shared as friends didn't automatically translate into a smooth romantic interaction.

"So, Jack, tell me more about your work at the orchard," she said, sounding nervous.

"Uh, yeah, well, we grow apples, pumpkins, and, um, have the Haunted Harvest event," he said awkwardly.

He winced. Why did his tongue feel like it was taking up too much room in his mouth? Why was he so nervous? They used to talk all the time, but now, their words seemed to stumble over each other, and even the usually lively atmosphere of the café couldn't dispel the unease that had settled between them. Both Jack and Heather were acutely aware of the shift in dynamics, and it left them feeling self-conscious.

Their breakfast dishes arrived, offering a temporary respite from the awkward conversation. Yet, even as they picked at their food, the silence between them spoke volumes.

"Jack, I know this is kind of awkward, but I appreciate you giving this a shot with me," she said, breaking the silence.

He nodded. "Yeah, Heather, me too. I think we just need a little time to adjust to this new dynamic."

He recognized that the transition from friends to potential romantic partners was bound to be challenging, and he was

willing to give it a chance, and he hoped she was too. He had the feeling that his asking her out had taken her surprise.

Then again, her asking him out this morning had been a surprise too. They had a huge night ahead of them tonight. Maybe some of their nerves now stemmed from that?

Their breakfast date, while not the smooth start they had hoped for, was a step forward in their journey, a testament to their willingness to explore what the future might hold for them. As they finished their meal, he knew that building a romantic connection would take time and effort, but their shared history and genuine friendship provided a strong foundation to build upon.

As the breakfast date continued, Jack couldn't help but notice Heather's growing reluctance. He felt an increasing pressure to ease the awkward atmosphere, and in his attempt to do so, he found himself overcompensating and making the situation even more uncomfortable.

"So, Jack, what do you like to do in your free time?" she asked, a little hesitant.

"Oh, you know, I love, um, watching horror movies, hiking in the woods, and, uh, trying new recipes. Enough about me." He waved his hand and worried he was overcompensating too much. "How about you, Heather? Any hobbies you enjoy?"

He could sense Heather's patience, but he also felt her hesitation. His eagerness to salvage the date had the opposite effect, accentuating the awkwardness.

"Jack, it's okay," she said, clearly trying to ease the tension. "We don't have to force it. We've been friends for a while, and maybe we're just not meant to be more than that."

Her words struck a chord, and he realized that his efforts to make things work had backfired. His face fell. His eagerness to make the date work had backfired.

"Heather, you're right. I'm sorry if I'm making things more awkward. I just... I really wanted this to go well."

Heather reached out and placed a reassuring hand on Jack's, a comforting gesture, yet Jack could barely force a smile in return.

"Jack, I appreciate your effort, I really do, but maybe we should take a step back and give ourselves some space to figure things out."

They shared a moment of understanding, both acknowledging that transitioning from friendship to romance wasn't as simple as they had initially hoped. It was a challenging process that would require time and patience.

He was more than willing to put in that time and patience, and he hoped she was too.

"I'm going to go to the bathroom," Heather said.

Jack nodded and remained seated at their table, waiting for her return. As he idly traced patterns on the tabletop, a regular customer sitting at the counter nearby struck up a conversation with him.

"Hey there, buddy. I couldn't help but notice that your date looks a bit... awkward, if you don't mind me saying."

Jack was taken aback by the candid remark, and a flush of embarrassment colored his cheeks. "Uh, yeah, it's our first time trying this out, and, well, it's a bit trickier than we thought," he said uneasily.

The regular customer chuckled and reached over to offer a friendly pat on Jack's shoulder. He grinned. "Hey, don't sweat it. First dates can be a bit rough. Might be worth it. Might not. The only way to know is to try, right?"

Jack managed a weak smile, appreciating the stranger's understanding and encouragement. It was a reminder that awkward moments happened to everyone, and perhaps, in the end, it was just another step on the path to something more meaningful.

"Hopefully she doesn't do what one of my dates did," the guy continued. "It was at a bar, and things were okay. Not quite as awkward with you, but she said she would go to the bathroom and be right back. Well, a few minutes passed. Ten

minutes. A half hour. I asked the bartender to go and check, and yeah, sure enough, my date was gone. She ducked me.”

“Oh, wow,” Jack said weakly. “I don’t think...”

“Nah, probably not in your case. She at least looks at you. I thought back on that date so many times, and I’m not sure she made eye contact much. Now that makes for an awkward meal.”

“Have you...”

“Have I found anyone?” The guy shook his head. “If I had, would I be eating here alone?”

“Ah...”

The guy laughed. “Don’t worry about it, bud. If it’s meant to be, it will be.”

Jack nodded. “I know that,” he said quietly. “I just want...”

The guy wagged a finger at him. “It’s not just about what you want. It’s about what you want and what she wants and the two of you together. Two become one once you’re married, but for now, you’re two separate people. You have your issues, your past, your problems, and so does she. Maybe you can learn hers and she learn yours, and you can help each other. Maybe not. Maybe you’re better off as friends. Maybe you’ll only become friends because of work.”

“Work?” Jack repeated.

“A promotion has you moving, or the same for her. Different life trajectory.”

Jack could feel himself grow pale. He hadn’t thought about that, but eventually, Heather’s wrist would be healed enough that she could return to working on a new movie. After all, she was getting closer every day.

It might be that after Halloween, she would be moving out of the canyon.

Jack didn’t like that idea at all, but he also wanted whatever was best for her.

No matter what, he wouldn't hold her back. He cared for her too much to ever do that.

## CHAPTER 14



**I**nside the bathroom, Heather was gripped by a sense of unease that was growing stronger by the minute. The act of going on a date had unexpectedly triggered memories of her past with David, memories she had hoped to leave behind.

She stared at her reflection in the bathroom mirror, her hands trembling as she tried to steady herself. The room seemed to close in on her, and the memories of past dates with David, marked by his controlling and manipulative behavior, flooded her thoughts.

“You’re stronger now,” she whispered to herself. “You can’t let those memories control you.”

She took a few deep breaths, willing herself to push through the anxiety. The scars from her past were still tender, and the idea of a romantic relationship stirred up old wounds, but Heather was determined not to let those memories define her or sabotage her chance at happiness.

Summoning her courage, she splashed some water on her face and took another deep breath, reminding herself that this date was different, that Jack was different. She had made progress in healing from her past, and she couldn’t let it hold her back any longer.

With newfound resolve, Heather exited the bathroom, determined to face her fears and the awkwardness of the date head-on, ready to give herself the chance to move forward and rewrite her narrative.



But her determination wavered, and a wave of fear washed over her the moment she laid eyes on Jack. Despite her efforts to overcome her past and the anxiety that had gripped her moments ago, the sight of him triggered an unexpected and paralyzing fear.

She stood frozen in place, her heart pounding in her chest, unable to take another step toward him. The memories of her past experiences with David and the trauma they had left behind flooded back, and for a moment, it felt as though she was reliving those moments all over again.

Jack must have noticed her hesitation or maybe he sensed that something was wrong. Visibly concerned, he got up from their table and approached her with a gentle and understanding expression. “Heather, are you okay? What’s wrong?”

Heather struggled to find her voice, her fear making it difficult to articulate her feelings. She desperately wanted to explain the overwhelming rush of emotions that had taken hold of her, but the words remained trapped. Besides, as much as she wasn’t certain what she wanted from Jack and their friendship or potential relationship, she wasn’t ready to tell him about her past. Not yet at least.

She tried to hide the fact that her hands were trembling. “I... I don’t know, Jack. I... I need a moment.”

Jack nodded, his concern deepening, and he gently led Heather to a nearby empty table, allowing her the space she needed to collect herself. It had to be obvious that something had triggered her, and she did appreciate that he seemed determined to be there for her, whatever it might be.

Sitting at the empty table, Heather tried to mentally work through the overwhelming emotions that had suddenly consumed her. The memories of her past relationship with David had been unexpectedly triggered by the date with Jack, and she felt a flood of anxiety and fear that she hadn’t anticipated.

As she sat there, lost in her thoughts, Jack approached the counter to settle the bill.

“I’ll go ahead and pay for the meal,” he told the server.

The server nodded, processing the payment as Jack left some extra for the tip. Heather watched as turned his attention back to her.

“Heather, take all the time you need. I’ll be right here when you’re ready.”

With a gentle and understanding smile, Jack gave her space and respect for her emotions, and she so appreciated that he recognized that she needed a moment to find her bearings. Heather, overwhelmed by her past and present emotions, wanted to say something to him, but she honestly didn’t know what to say. She nodded her appreciation at least before she hurriedly got up from the table and made her way outside, seeking solace and fresh air to calm her racing heart.

Outside, Heather stood by his car and tried to ignore the sounds of the canyon as the town woke up around her. There, she took a moment to herself. With trembling hands, she closed her eyes and bowed her head, seeking guidance and strength from a source that had been her refuge during difficult times.

“Dear God,” she murmured, barely talking out loud, “I’m facing something that terrifies me. These memories from the past are haunting me, and I don’t want them to control my life anymore. Please, give me the strength to move forward, to overcome this fear, and to find the happiness that I deserve. Guide me, show me the way, and help me heal. Amen.”

Her prayer was heartfelt, a plea for guidance and help in navigating the complex emotions and fears that had resurfaced. Heather knew that she couldn’t change her past, but she hoped that with faith and determination, she could find the strength to face her fears and build a brighter future.

As Heather gazed at Jack through the window of the cafe, she couldn’t help but notice the genuine care and concern he had shown throughout their date. His kindness, understanding, and unwavering support had already left a positive impression on her. It was clear that he had the potential to bring happiness

into her life, and she saw in him the qualities of someone she could be genuinely happy with.

Yet, Heather couldn't ignore the unsettling parallel that began to form in her mind. She remembered how, at the start of her relationship with David, she had seen the same qualities and felt a similar sense of hope and happiness. It had been those early moments that had drawn her in, and she had ignored the warning signs until it had been almost too late.

The fear of repeating past mistakes and falling into a similar pattern weighed heavily on her. It was a daunting thought, and it left her torn between the genuine connection she felt with Jack and the haunting memories of her past.

As Heather continued to wrestle with her emotions, she knew that finding a way forward would be a challenge. She needed to reconcile her past with her present, to heal from the scars of her previous relationship, and to determine if she could truly embrace the possibility of happiness with someone who had shown her kindness and respect, like Jack had.

Heather wrestled with conflicting emotions. On one hand, she felt that taking a step back and not seeing Jack at the moment might be the best way to deal with her overwhelming fear and anxiety. The memories from her past relationship had stirred up a storm of emotions that needed time to settle, and she knew that self-care was essential.

However, it was Friday, the first night of the Haunted Harvest event that she and Jack had been working on to raise money for charity. Her desire to contribute to the cause and support the charity remained strong. She had a deep sense of commitment to the project and the opportunity to make a positive impact on the community.

As she pondered her options, Heather realized that finding a balance between her personal well-being and her commitment to the event was essential. She wanted to help the charity, and she believed in the importance of their work. With a determined spirit, she decided that, despite her fears and anxieties, she would attend the event, but she would also prioritize her own emotional health.

Heather knew that facing her fears and embracing the support of her friends and Jack would be key to overcoming the shadows of her past and moving forward into a brighter future, where happiness and healing were possible.

With a strong resolve, Heather made up her mind. She was determined to fulfill her commitment to the charity and their Haunted Harvest event, no matter the inner turmoil she was experiencing. She understood the importance of the cause and the positive impact their efforts could have on the community.

As she prepared to face the evening, she resolved to put on a brave face for Jack and the others involved in the event. She knew that her friends and Jack were counting on her, and she didn't want her personal fears and anxieties to hinder the success of the charity fundraiser.

Heather recognized that, at times, pushing through her own emotional challenges was necessary to achieve something meaningful. She hoped that, by doing her part and contributing to the success of the event, she could find a sense of accomplishment and strength that would help her continue on her path to healing and happiness.

When Jack joined Heather at the car, she made a conscious effort to put on a more composed and cheerful demeanor, despite the lingering unease that had gripped her earlier in the day. She knew that Jack was looking forward to the Haunted Harvest event, and she didn't want to let her personal struggles overshadow the evening.

Jack smiled at her. "Ready for a spooktacular night, Heather?"

Heather returned his smile, though it was tinged with a touch of nervousness. "Absolutely, Jack. Let's make this a night to remember. Not that it's night yet. We still have so much time."

"Everything is just about ready."

"Except for the makeup."

He nodded. "True, but we don't have to get that done yet. I don't want to risk anything happening to your makeup before

the guests arrive.”

“How many tickets were sold?”

He chuckled. “So many. It’s going to be wonderful. Just you wait and see. I, ah, need to get a few things from my place. You’re welcome to stick around so that I can drive you over to the orchard.”

“Nah. I’m going to need to get back to my parents. I have some things to get myself.”

“Of course. I’ll see you the moment you reach the orchard.”

She nodded. She could’ve said that it was a date, but the words got caught in her throat.

As they drove back to his apartment, Heather hoped that her efforts to put on a brave face would not only support the charity they were passionate about but also help her find the strength to confront her fears and move toward a brighter future. She knew that she had a role to play in making the evening a success, and she was committed to doing her part.

## CHAPTER 15



**T**he drive back to Jack's apartment was quiet. Maybe an uncomfortable silence. He knew something was going on, but he wasn't sure if he should ask outright. If Heather wanted him to know, wouldn't she tell him? Then again, if she wanted him to know, wouldn't she have already told him?

During the ride, he thought back on their time together. As they had continued to collaborate on the haunted ranch project, their connection had grown stronger. What had begun as a chance encounter at The Old Ship restaurant had evolved into a genuine friendship based on shared interests, creativity, and a shared vision for their Halloween endeavor. While their focus had been on making the haunted ranch a success, the bond between them had the potential to lead to something more in the future.

Clearly, she thought and felt that too, right? She wouldn't have asked him out this morning if she hadn't felt anything for him.

Their interactions had been marked by laughter, shared excitement, and a sense of camaraderie. Sure, their first date had been awkward, but they had often found themselves discussing not only project details but also their personal aspirations, hobbies, and life experiences. Heather admired Jack's dedication to his family, his creativity, and his selflessness in giving back to the community. She had said so herself. Jack was equally captivated by Heather's artistic

talents, her resilience in the face of setbacks, and her warm and caring nature.

As they had spent more time together, working side by side on the project and occasionally meeting for coffee or meals, they had discovered common values, a similar sense of humor, and an ease in each other's company that was undeniable. Their conversations had shifted seamlessly from project planning to personal anecdotes, dreams, and even moments of vulnerability.

So why had it been so awkward this morning? Were they putting too much pressure on themselves? Could it be as simple as that?

Maybe.

One evening not that long ago, while discussing their respective life journeys, Jack had shared a story of how Halloween had always been his favorite holiday, stemming from cherished childhood memories with his brothers. Heather, in turn, had talked about her passion for makeup artistry and her aspirations to create special effects that would leave a lasting impact on audiences.

In those shared moments, Jack had felt a growing connection that went beyond their collaborative efforts on the haunted ranch. He had been certain she felt it too. There had been a sense of comfort and understanding, and their friendship was marked by mutual respect and support.

Though their focus always remained on the project and their immediate goals, Jack couldn't help but wonder what the future held. Could their friendship someday evolve into something more meaningful? It was a question that lingered in the air, unspoken yet palpable, as they continued to navigate the exciting journey of planning the haunted ranch together.

At least, that was how it was for Jack. After their awkward breakfast, would Heather want anything to do with him once the Haunted Harvest finished? Maybe she would be eager to move on and get back to work, and why wouldn't she? She was amazing at her job.

As they arrived at Jack's apartment parking lot, he grinned at Heather.

"Thanks for the ride."

"Thank you for breakfast."

"At least the food tasted good, right?"

"It sure did," he agreed. "I still enjoyed myself."

"As much as you could." She made a face.

"I'll see you soon?"

"Yes."

He waved and gave her a supportive smile. They both had tasks to complete before heading to the orchard for the Haunted Harvest event.

Jack headed back to his apartment to gather the necessary supplies and equipment for the Haunted Harvest. He was focused on ensuring that everything was in order for the event, as it was a significant undertaking that they had all worked hard to organize.

Jack was beyond ready to prepare for a night of spooktacular festivities at the orchard. He knew he and Heather were both facing their own challenges and hoping for a successful and memorable evening.



A short time later, Jack arrived at the orchard with all the necessary supplies and equipment for the Haunted Harvest event. He was eager to contribute to the project and ensure that everything ran smoothly. Colton, the owner of Hidden Creek Orchard, was already there, overseeing preparations for the evening.

"Hey there, Jack. How's everything looking for the Haunted Harvest?"

"Hey, Colton. We're making great progress. I'm going to double-check everything, don't you worry, but the haunted



corn maze should be ready, the ghostly hayride stories are set, and we've got plenty of pumpkin-related activities in the works.

Colton nodded with satisfaction, seemingly pleased to hear that everything was on track for the event. "That's what I like to hear, Jack. It's our first time doing this, and I'm hoping it'll be a hit with the folks who come out tonight. Let's make sure it's a night they won't forget."

Jack and Colton discussed the event logistics a bit further, ensuring that everything was in order for the Haunted Harvest to run smoothly. Jack was excited to see the project come to fruition and make a positive impact on the charity they were supporting.

Once they finished talking, Jack made his way to the haunted corn maze, one of the key attractions of the Haunted Harvest event. He knew that the scare actors were an essential part of creating a spooky and thrilling experience for visitors. As he arrived at the maze, he found the volunteer scare actors getting ready for their roles.

He approached them. "Hey there, everyone. How's it going?"

The scare actors, dressed in their eerie costumes, greeted Jack with enthusiasm.

Andrew Diaz grinned. "Hey, Jack! We're all set and ready to spook some folks tonight."

James Reynolds grinned. "Yeah, we've been practicing our creepy moves all week."

Jack chuckled, appreciating their dedication. "That's the spirit! Just a heads up, Heather will be here soon to help with your makeup. She's incredibly talented, and I'm sure she'll make you all look terrifying."

Riley Foster brushed back her long black hair. "I thought about dyeing my hair, but I couldn't go through with it."

"Dyeing your hair?" Jack didn't understand.

“Straw... isn’t black.” She laughed. “But I couldn’t go through with it, so I thought about a wig instead, but none of them looked natural, so I figured it was better to just wait for the makeup.”

“You definitely don’t have to dye your hair, but I appreciate the enthusiasm!”

Then, Jack made sure the scare actors had everything they needed. He was confident that their performance in the haunted corn maze would add an extra layer of fright to the event and make it a memorable experience for the visitors. These volunteers were committed to making the Haunted Harvest a spine-tingling experience for all who attended.

After ensuring that the scare actors for the haunted corn maze were ready for their makeup session, Jack moved on to check on the pumpkin patch and the various pumpkin-related activities that had been planned for the Haunted Harvest event.

He found Ronald overseeing the pumpkin patch, making sure the pumpkins were displayed attractively and that there were plenty of options for visitors to choose from. Families and visitors would have the opportunity to pick their own pumpkins, adding an interactive and festive element to the event.

Jack nodded with approval. “Great job with the pumpkin patch, Ronald. It looks fantastic.”

Ronald grinned. “Thanks, Jack. We’ve got pumpkins of all shapes and sizes. It’s going to be a hit.”

Next, Jack checked in with the team responsible for pumpkin-related activities, including pumpkin carving stations, pumpkin painting, and a pumpkin pie contest. It was essential to make sure that these activities were well-organized and that all the necessary supplies were in place.

As he went about overseeing these details, Jack couldn’t help but feel a sense of satisfaction and excitement. The Haunted Harvest was coming together, and he knew that the combined efforts of everyone involved would make it a

memorable event for the community and a successful fundraiser for their chosen charity.

Approaching the zombie transformation station, Jack spotted Heather, who was busy setting up her makeup supplies and getting ready to work her magic on the volunteers who would be transformed into zombies for the Haunted Harvest. Jack was determined to be supportive, professional, and friendly while respecting the boundaries he sensed were important to Heather.

“Hey, Heather, everything ready for our zombie crew tonight?” he asked warmly.

Heather looked up from her preparations and managed a small smile. “Hey, Jack. Yeah, we’re all set up here. These brave souls are ready to become the walking dead.”

Jack nodded, eager to assist in any way he could to ensure the transformation process went smoothly. He fetched some extra supplies and handed them to Heather with a friendly gesture.

“Need any more of these?” he asked. “Just let me know.”

Heather’s tension seemed to ease a bit as they worked together, and Jack’s presence, while friendly, was respectful of the boundaries she had set. They focused on their roles for the evening, both determined to make the Haunted Harvest a spooktacular success and maintain their professional yet friendly connection.

Throughout the afternoon, Jack continued to be kind and sweet to Heather, making an effort to maintain a friendly and supportive demeanor.

When Heather struggled with a heavy box of makeup supplies, her arms trembling under the weight, Jack immediately noticed her predicament. Without a moment’s hesitation, he sprang into action, determined to lend a helping hand.

“Heather, let me get that for you.”

Heather’s eyes widened with gratitude as Jack reached for the box, effortlessly taking the burden from her. She let out a

relieved sigh. “Oh, Jack, thank you. It’s heavier than it looks.”

Jack flashed her a reassuring smile as he held the box securely. “No problem at all,” he said kindly. “We’re a team tonight, right?”

Heather nodded.

Together, they continued setting up the makeup station, and at that moment, their friendship felt stronger than ever, built on a foundation of mutual support and camaraderie.

Jack engaged in friendly conversation with Heather, discussing topics unrelated to their personal lives. He shared stories about the event, talked about the charity they were supporting, and cracked a few light-hearted jokes to keep the atmosphere positive and relaxed.

Jack’s kind and sweet gestures were a testament to his genuine friendship and professionalism, allowing Heather to feel at ease while they worked side by side to create an unforgettable Haunted Harvest.

Bouncing around from point to point to get ready for when the Haunted Harvest would start, Jack made sure to return and check in on Heather and make sure she had everything she needed. He wanted to ensure that she had everything she needed to carry out her makeup transformations with ease and efficiency. He especially didn’t want her to overdo it and make her injury worse. His caring and considerate nature shone through in his actions.

“Heather, do you have enough makeup brushes for the evening? If you need more, just let me know.”

“Thanks, Jack.” She leaned back from creating a skeleton. “I think I’m good for now, but I’ll keep you posted.”

“Please do,” he said. “Even if I’m not around, just call or text me. Your wrist is holding up?”

“I’m good. Thanks.”

“If you need medicine or to take a break or—”

“I’m good.”

“All right. I learned my listen. Not to talk when you’re working so...” He mimed zipping his lips, which earned him a smile.

He couldn’t help but grin back at her. Her smile was so beautiful, but she shone with beauty from the inside out. Not that but Heather had a striking and distinctive appearance that made her stand out in a crowd. She possessed a unique blend of features and a confident, yet approachable aura.

Heather had long, flowing blond hair that cascaded down her back in waves of rich, chestnut brown. Her hair framed her face beautifully, and she often wore it loose, allowing it to catch the light and shine with a healthy luster.

Her eyes were a captivating shade of hazel, a mix of warm brown and hints of green. They were expressive and carried a depth that revealed her inner emotions and thoughts.

Heather had a natural, fair complexion that gave her a soft and radiant appearance. Her skin was smooth and flawless, with a healthy glow. She had delicate and well-defined facial features. Her expressive eyebrows framed her eyes elegantly, and her lips had a natural rosy hue. Her smile was warm and welcoming, radiating kindness and sincerity.

Heather’s style was a reflection of her creative personality. She often wore casual yet fashionable clothing that allowed her to move comfortably while expressing her individuality. She had an eye for unique accessories and makeup that added an artistic flair to her overall look.

What truly set Heather apart was her confidence. She carried herself with a sense of self-assuredness that drew people to her. Her confident demeanor, combined with her striking appearance, made her a memorable presence in any setting.

Heather’s appearance was just one aspect of her magnetic personality, which included her talent as a makeup artist, her kindness, and her resilience. Her unique charm left a lasting impression on those who had the privilege of meeting her.

For the Haunted Harvest event, Heather had chosen an outfit that struck a balance between comfort and style, allowing her to move freely while showcasing her creative personality. Her black long-sleeved top looked comfortable. As far as Jack could tell, the simplicity of the black top allowed her to focus on her makeup work, and the dark color made it so that she didn't have to worry about stains or distractions.

She had paired her top with dark denim jeans that provided both practicality and a touch of casual elegance. The jeans seemed to allow easy movement as she walked from side to side to apply makeup evenly on the actors' faces.

Heather wore a pair of comfortable yet stylish black ankle boots with a slight heel. Hopefully, they would provide the necessary support for hours of standing and working at the makeup station.

She had a silver charm bracelet with tiny makeup-related charms that jingled softly as she moved. She also wore a pair of small, silver hoop earrings that glinted in the event's ambient lighting.

As a makeup artist, Heather's own makeup was always a work of art. For the Haunted Harvest, she had chosen a subtle smoky eye look with a touch of dark eyeliner to complement the Halloween theme. Her makeup showcased her expertise while remaining practical for the event.

Heather's outfit was a reflection of her practicality and creativity, allowing her to comfortably and confidently work her makeup magic on the volunteers who would become spooky zombies for the Haunted Harvest.

In short, she looked stunning, and Jack found himself staring at her more than he probably should.

Later in the evening, as Heather was in the midst of her makeup sessions, Jack approached her station once more.

"Heather, I noticed you were running low on that special face paint earlier. I grabbed an extra bottle for you just in case."

Heather's face lit up with gratitude as she accepted the spare bottle of face paint. "Jack, you're a lifesaver. Thanks for looking out for me."

Jack's attention to detail and genuine concern for Heather's well-being hopefully made her feel valued and supported throughout the event. Their friendship and teamwork continued to flourish as they worked together to make the Haunted Harvest a success.

When she finally took a break, Jack was right there, making a point to engage in friendly conversation with Heather, ensuring that their interactions remained light-hearted and enjoyable. They discussed various topics unrelated to their personal lives, creating a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere.

He smiled at her. "Heather, have you ever been to a haunted house that actually scared you?"

She chuckled. "Oh, definitely. I went to one with some friends a few years ago, and I screamed like a banshee!"

He laughed. "That must have been quite the experience. Any plans for this Halloween?"

"Well, we'll be here, won't we?"

"Yes, of course." He felt sheepish.

"I might just spend some of it with my parents this year, though, outside of all of this. How about you?"

He turned more reflective. "Halloween is my favorite holiday, so I always try to do something fun. Maybe a costume party or a horror movie night with my brothers. We already had one earlier this month."

"Couldn't wait, huh?"

"Nope."

They laughed.

Their conversation flowed effortlessly, filled with shared laughter and anecdotes about past Halloween experiences. Jack's friendly and easygoing demeanor hopefully helped put

Heather at ease, allowing her to enjoy their time together and temporarily set aside her personal concerns.

Their ability to connect on a friendly and non-intrusive level was a testament to the strength of their budding friendship, which continued to grow amid the excitement of the event that would start in just a few hours.



## CHAPTER 16



When Heather had left Jack's house, she had hurried to her parents'. It hadn't taken her long to gather her supplies, but more importantly, she had taken a moment to steady her nerves, knowing that the night ahead would require her to face her fears.

Now, as she worked, Jack would occasionally swing on by, and she knew he was trying to be helpful, and how could she not appreciate his encouraging words? As she worked on transforming volunteers into zombies, Jack occasionally offered words of encouragement. He would say things like, "You're doing an amazing job, Heather," or "The zombies look terrifying thanks to your talent."

Jack periodically checked in on Heather to ensure she had everything she needed. He asked if she was comfortable or if she required any additional supplies, demonstrating his genuine concern for her well-being.

Finally, she turned to him. "Get dressed in your attire," she instructed.

"My turn?" he asked.

"Yes."

He hurried off in the direction of Colton's office, and it didn't take him long to return. Her wrist was bothering her a little, so she was glad that he had to change instead of plopping right down in her chair.

As Jack transformed into a cowboy zombie for the Haunted Harvest event, he embraced the spirit of Halloween

and the role with enthusiasm. He now donned a tattered and weathered plaid flannel shirt that had seen better days. The shirt was strategically ripped and torn in various places, giving it an eerie, worn-out appearance. Stains and patches of fake blood were added to enhance the zombie effect.

He wore a pair of old, faded jeans that were also torn and muddied. Fake dirt and grime were applied to make them look as if he had been wandering through the haunted orchard for years.

On his feet, Jack wore a pair of cowboy boots that had definitely seen their fair share of wear and tear. They were scuffed, and bits of faux grass and leaves were glued to them, suggesting a long journey through the haunted terrain.

Completing the cowboy look, Jack had a battered and dusty cowboy hat perched on his head. It was decorated with cobwebs, giving it a creepy and abandoned feel.

To add a finishing touch, Jack wore a faux leather belt with an oversized, tarnished buckle and a bandana around his neck. He carried a toy shotgun that was broken and worn, a prop to complete his cowboy zombie look.

Jack's costume was a testament to his commitment to making the Haunted Harvest a memorable and frightening experience for all who attended. As a cowboy zombie, he would certainly bring a unique and spooky character to life for the event.

Immediately, she set to work her makeup magic on Jack, giving him a deathly pale complexion with sunken eyes and fake wounds that oozed with fake blood. His face was strategically painted to give the impression of decay and zombification.

Once Heather finished Jack's makeup, transforming him into a convincing cowboy zombie, Jack gasped. He visibly couldn't contain his excitement. He gazed at his reflection in the mirror, his jaw dropped, and his enthusiasm was palpable.

"Wow, Heather, this is incredible! You're so talented! This is even better than the trial run!"

As Jack praised her work, Heather blushed modestly. She was both embarrassed and secretly thrilled by Jack's appreciation for her makeup artistry.

"Thank you, Jack. I'm glad you like it."

The moment was a testament to their growing friendship and the mutual respect and admiration they held for each other's skills and talents. Jack's delight and Heather's artistic prowess combined to make the Haunted Harvest an even more memorable and engaging experience for the visitors.

As the Haunted Harvest's first night got underway, Jack stood. "Well, Heather, it's time for me to go welcome our guests. You're going to do amazing at the zombie transformation station. I can't wait to see how many brave souls you turn into spooky zombies tonight."

"Thanks, Jack! I'm really looking forward to it. Have a great time welcoming everyone, and I'll see you later."

With a friendly wave, Jack headed off to greet the guests, leaving Heather eager and excited about the prospects of the evening. She couldn't help but wonder how many people would line up at the zombie transformation station, ready to experience her makeup artistry and become part of the Haunted Harvest's spooky fun.

At the zombie transformation station, Heather prepared for the first visitors who would be transformed into spooky zombies. Her makeup skills were in high demand as people lined up, eager to become part of the haunted experience.

Heather's first guests at the zombie transformation station were a group of excited friends who were eager to embrace the Halloween spirit. They approached the station with a mix of anticipation and enthusiasm, ready to undergo their spooky makeover.

"Welcome, brave souls! Are you ready to become the living dead?" Heather asked.

"Absolutely! We've been looking forward to this all night," the first guest said.

Heather got to work, applying her makeup artistry with precision and creativity. She turned their once-normal faces into pale, decaying zombies with sunken eyes and ghastly wounds. The friends watched in amazement as their appearances transformed before their eyes.

The second guest looked amazed. “Wow, this is incredible! I look terrifying!”

The third guest laughed. “I never thought I’d say this, but I make a pretty convincing zombie!”

Heather’s guests were thrilled with the results, and they left the station with a newfound sense of excitement, ready to join the other spooky characters in the haunted orchard. As they ventured into the night, they were a testament to Heather’s talent and the immersive experience that the Haunted Harvest offered to all who attended.

As the evening continued, Heather’s parents arrived at the Haunted Harvest, their presence filling her with a sense of warmth and nostalgia.

Heather gasped. “Mom, Dad, I didn’t expect to see you here!”

Her mom smiled. “We wanted to surprise you, sweetheart. We heard about the amazing makeup work you’re doing, and we couldn’t miss it.”

Her dad puffed up his chest. “Plus, it’s been a while since we had a family Halloween outing.”

Her mom nodded firmly. “That’s right. We wanted to come and support you and experience the Halloween festivities together.”

Heather’s heart swelled with gratitude as she realized how much her parents cared about her and her passions. She hugged them both warmly before gesturing to the zombie transformation station.

“Well, if you’re up for it, I can turn you both into spooky zombies. It’s the perfect way to get into the Halloween spirit!”

“Oh, I don’t know. Do I really want to see what I’d look like as a zombie?” her mom asked, turning toward her husband.

Heather’s dad grinned. “Come on, dear. It’s all in good fun.”

With a shared chuckle, they agreed to Heather’s proposal.

As Heather began applying makeup to her parents’ faces, she felt a sense of joy and unity. Together, they embraced the Halloween festivities, making memories they would cherish for years to come.

## CHAPTER 17



Jack didn't want to bid farewell to Heather, even though it was only temporary, but he was thrilled for all of their hard work to pay off. The Haunted Harvest was going to be four days in total—this night, Friday night, Saturday, Sunday, and then Wednesday night, which was Halloween night.

As the Haunted Harvest's first night got underway, the orchard began to fill with eager visitors looking for a spine-tingling experience. Jack, in his cowboy zombie costume, played his part as the welcoming host, creating an atmosphere of anticipation and excitement. If he did say so himself, he was dressed as a convincing cowboy zombie, and he certainly took on his role as the welcoming host of the Haunted Harvest with gusto. His eerie appearance and charismatic personality added to the event's immersive atmosphere, creating a sense of anticipation and excitement among the visitors.

"Howdy, folks!" he called with great energy. "Welcome to the Haunted Harvest at Hidden Creek Orchard! I reckon you're in for a spooktacular time tonight!"

The visitors were greeted by Jack's enthusiastic and slightly menacing demeanor, setting the tone for the thrilling Halloween experience that awaited them. Jack made sure to give each guest a hearty welcome, ensuring that their anticipation continued to build.

"Watch out for them zombie cowboys wanderin' these parts," he said playfully. "Y'all might just run into one when you least expect it!"

With a devilish grin and a twinkle in his “undead” eyes, Jack encouraged the visitors to dive headfirst into the haunted festivities. His captivating presence added an extra layer of excitement to the Haunted Harvest, making it an unforgettable evening for all who attended.

As Jack continued to welcome guests to the Haunted Harvest, a couple approached him, catching his attention. The woman bore a striking resemblance to Heather, the talented makeup artist who had been working tirelessly at the event.

And the woman who was never too far from his thoughts to boot.

“Howdy there!” he said as friendly as could be. “Welcome to the Haunted Harvest. Are y’all ready for a frightful night?”

The man he thought might be Heather’s dad smiled. “We sure are, lad. We’ve heard great things about this place.”

Jack couldn’t help but notice the uncanny resemblance between the woman and Heather, which piqued his curiosity. The more he looked at the gentleman, the more he thought he saw Heather’s nose too.

“Say, you wouldn’t happen to be related to Heather, our amazing makeup artist, would you?” Jack asked curiously.

The woman chuckled. “You’ve got a keen eye, dear. Heather’s our daughter.”

Jack’s eyes widened in surprise and delight as he made the connection. “Well, ain’t that somethin’! Heather’s been doin’ some incredible work here tonight. You must be real proud of her.”

“Oh, we are, indeed,” her dad said proudly. “She’s always had a talent for makeup, and it’s wonderful to see her doing what she loves.”

The conversation continued as Jack welcomed Heather’s parents to the Haunted Harvest, sharing stories and laughter. It was a pleasant surprise for Jack to meet Heather’s family, and it added an extra layer of warmth to the event. Heather’s parents, just like their daughter, were now part of the spooky festivities, ready to create lasting memories together.

As the night at the Haunted Harvest progressed, Jack's responsibilities shifted. Colton, the owner of Hidden Creek Orchard, came over to take over the role of welcoming guests, allowing Jack to explore other aspects of the event. Jack decided to start by checking out the scarecrow alley area, curious about how the spooky displays had come together.

As he strolled through the alley, Jack couldn't help but admire the creativity and attention to detail that had gone into the scarecrow decorations. Each scarecrow had its own unique theme, from creepy clowns to ghostly specters, and they were strategically placed to surprise and startle visitors as they wandered through the eerie alley.

He was very impressed as he said, "These scarecrows are somethin' else. They're sure to give folks a good scare."

Jack took a moment to appreciate the craftsmanship that had gone into making the scarecrows look both terrifying and entertaining. The Haunted Harvest had truly transformed Hidden Creek Orchard into a Halloween wonderland, and Jack was eager to see how the rest of the event had come together.

The zombie cowboy noticed that some of the guests were actively engaged in creating their own scarecrows. Intrigued by their creativity and enthusiasm, he decided to strike up a conversation with them.

"Howdy there, folks! Looks like y'all are havin' a blast creatin' your own scarecrows. Mind if I join in on the fun?"

One of the guests smiled at him. "Not at all! The more, the merrier."

Jack grabbed a burlap sack and some straw and joined the group of guests who were busy fashioning their scarecrows. They chatted as they worked, sharing stories and laughter while they brought their scarecrow creations to life.

"We're making a scarecrow that's gonna look like it's clawing its way out of the ground. It's gonna be epic!" another guest said, his eyes gleaming in the moon's light.

"That sounds downright spooky! I can't wait to see how it turns out."



Jack's friendly and approachable nature made it easy for the guests to strike up conversations with him. They exchanged ideas, admired each other's creativity, and bonded over their shared love for Halloween and the Haunted Harvest event. It was moments like these that made the event not only scary but also a whole lot of fun.

"Hey, Jack, do you have a favorite scarecrow here?" yet another guest asked.

Jack turned thoughtful and eyed some of the closest scarecrows. "Well, I reckon I'm quite fond of ol' Scarecrow Sam down at the end. He's got a real spooky grin, don't he?"

The very first guest who spoke to Jack grew all excited. "We saw Scarecrow Sam earlier! He gave us a good jump. You're right. He's got that eerie charm."

Jack's engaging conversations and shared enthusiasm for the scarecrow displays made the Haunted Harvest feel like a welcoming and communal experience. Visitors enjoyed interacting with him as they explored the eerie and entertaining atmosphere of the event.

Throughout the night, Jack's interactions with the guests added a touch of friendliness and camaraderie to the spooky festivities, creating memories that visitors would carry with them long after the Halloween season had passed.

Soon enough, Jack made his way over to the ghostly hayride attraction.

The moon hung low in the night sky, casting an eerie glow over Hidden Creek Orchard as the ghostly hayride prepared to set off on its haunting journey. Families gathered around the old, weathered wagon, anticipation in the air as they eagerly waited for the adventure to begin. As the families climbed aboard, the wagon creaked and swayed, adding to the eerie ambiance.

He noticed a family nearby. Parents were trying to convince their young daughter to board the ride, but she seemed apprehensive and scared. Jack approached them with a

friendly and reassuring demeanor, well, as much as he could in his cowboy zombie costume.

“Howdy there, little miss,” he said as kindly as he could. “It looks like you’re thinkin’ ‘bout takin’ a ride with us ghosts and ghouls tonight.”

The young girl looked up at Jack with a mixture of curiosity and fear in her eyes. Her parents smiled gratefully at Jack for trying to comfort their daughter.

“That’s right, sweetie,” her dad said. “Mr. Jack here is one of the friendliest zombies you’ll ever meet.”

“And it’s all just for fun, honey,” her mom encouraged. “You won’t be alone. We’ll be right there with you.”

Jack kneeled down to the young girl’s eye level, making himself less intimidating in his zombie costume. “You know, even us zombies like a good laugh and some spooky stories,” he said gently. “I promise we won’t do anything too scary on this hayride.”

The young girl considered Jack’s words, and slowly, her fear visibly began to subside. She gave a hesitant smile. “Okay,” she said softly. “I’ll try it.”

Her parents and Jack exchanged relieved smiles as they helped her onto the hayride.

“Wait! Mr. Jack, you’ll come too?” the young girl asked.

Touched by her request and wanting to ensure she felt safe and comfortable, Jack grinned at her. “Well, how could I say no to such a polite request? Count me in!”

He climbed onto the wagon, settling in next to the excited little girl. With Jack’s reassuring presence and the promise of a fun adventure, the young girl’s initial fear turned into excitement and anticipation.

As the hayride set off into the haunted orchard, the family, along with Jack, embraced the thrill of the ghostly enterprise, creating a heartwarming and memorable moment at the Haunted Harvest.

The hayride ventured deeper into the haunted orchard, and Jack became part of the young girl's adventure. He engaged in cheerful conversations with her, sharing spooky stories and pointing out the eerie sights along the way. His friendly and reassuring presence made the ride an enjoyable and memorable experience for the entire family. The young girl, who had initially been hesitant, was now filled with excitement, her eyes wide with wonder.

The young girl's initial fear had transformed into excitement, and she clung to Jack's presence as they navigated the ghostly hayride together. It was a heartwarming moment that highlighted the magic of Halloween and the sense of community that the Haunted Harvest brought to all who attended.

The wagon itself was adorned with flickering lanterns and tattered burlap sacks, adding to the spooky atmosphere. The seats on the wagon were made of rough-hewn wood, offering a rustic charm that transported visitors back in time.

The journey through the haunted orchard was a mesmerizing experience. Jack engaged the passengers with ghostly tales, sharing the legends and lore of the orchard. Along the way, eerie apparitions and spooky scenes came to life, sending shivers down the spines of the riders.

Glowing pumpkins, flickering lanterns, and ghostly figures in tattered clothing all contributed to the immersive Halloween experience. The orchard's trees rustled in the cool night breeze, adding an extra layer of mystery to the adventure.

As the hayride continued its winding path through the orchard, the passengers were spellbound by the sights and sounds of the Haunted Harvest. Jack's reassuring presence, along with the thrill of the spooky tales, transformed the hayride into an unforgettable journey of frightful delight for all who embarked on it.

The ghostly hayride ventured even deeper into the haunted orchard, and Myles took on the role of storyteller. He had a knack for spinning chilling tales that sent shivers down the spines of the passengers.

“Gather ‘round, folks,” Myles said in a mysterious tone. “It’s time to delve into the legends of Hidden Creek Orchard. You see, long ago, this very orchard was said to be haunted by the spirits of farmers who toiled tirelessly among these trees.

As Myles spoke, his voice was a haunting whisper that carried through the night air. The passengers huddled closer together, their faces lit by the dim glow of lanterns and the eerie moonlight.

“Legend has it that the ghost of old Farmer Johnson still tends to these apple trees, “ Myles continued, “ensuring a bountiful harvest each year, but beware, for he doesn’t take kindly to trespassers...”

The passengers listened with rapt attention, hanging on to every word of Myles’s tale. As he wove the stories of ghostly apparitions and eerie encounters, the orchard around them seemed to come alive with spectral possibilities.

The young girl, still seated next to Jack, clung to her newfound friend, the thrill of the ghost stories blending seamlessly with the spooky atmosphere of the hayride. Myles’s storytelling added an extra layer of haunting delight to the Haunted Harvest, leaving passengers with goosebumps and unforgettable memories of the night.

Once the ghostly hayride returned to the beginning, Jack helped the young girl down first.

“Did you enjoy it?” he asked her.

“I did! What should we do next?”

“Well, I have a friend you could meet. Her name is Heather, and she does makeup. She can turn you into a ghost or a zombie or anything you like.”

The girl’s eyes widened. “Yes, Mom, please?”

“Sounds good.”

“I wanna be a mermaid!”

Jack lifted his eyebrows. A mermaid? He was going to blame the darkness all around them for his not realizing she was wearing a mermaid costume until now. Not all of the

guests had come in costumes, but it was secretly thrilling when he spied some.

With a grin, Jack pointed the family in the right direction, and off the happy trio went.

With the ghostly hayride adventure behind him, Jack made his way to the haunted corn maze, another attraction at the Haunted Harvest. The moonlight filtered through the rustling cornstalks, creating an eerie and suspenseful atmosphere. As Jack approached the entrance, he noticed his neighbors from the apartment complex, Samantha and Felix Sanders, along with their young daughter, Corrine.

“Jack, you’re here too?” Samantha asked. “Of course you are. You work here! We’re about to enter the maze. Want to come along with us?”

Jack grinned. “Well, I’d be delighted to join y’all. Let’s see if we can find our way out of this spooktacular maze.”

Samantha and Felix exchanged smiles with Jack, clearly pleased to have him join their group for the maze adventure. Corrine, their young daughter, clutched a small flashlight in her hand, her wide eyes filled with both excitement and trepidation.

As they entered the maze, the twists and turns of the corn walls loomed over them, casting eerie shadows. The group navigated the maze’s intricate pathways, occasionally encountering spooky surprises and hidden scares.

“Watch out for those lurking creatures, folks,” Felix said playfully. “They might be lurking just around the corner!”

Corrine squealed with delight as they ventured deeper into the maze. Jack’s presence added an extra layer of fun and camaraderie to the experience, making it an enjoyable adventure for the entire group.

Jack, of course, knew which way to go, but he refused to spoil their fun and allowed them to come across dead ends, most of which had a scare actor waiting in them.

As they journeyed through the haunted corn maze, Jack, Samantha, Felix, and Corrine faced challenges, laughed at

surprises, and bonded over their shared excitement. It was another memorable chapter in the spooky festivities of the Haunted Harvest, and the maze's twists and turns kept them all on their toes as they searched for the exit.

Throughout the evening, the orchard came alive with the sounds of laughter, screams, and eerie music. Visitors explored the haunted corn maze, ventured into the ghostly hayride, and enjoyed pumpkin-related activities, all while trying not to be too spooked by the eerie atmosphere.

Jack and Heather both played crucial roles in making the event a success. They continued to work diligently, ensuring that the Haunted Harvest provided a memorable and thrilling Halloween experience for all who attended. The night was filled with frights and fun, setting the stage for an exciting season of spooky festivities and charitable giving.

## CHAPTER 18



**W**hile overseeing the zombie transformation station at the Haunted Harvest, Heather was approached by a young girl who looked up to her with big, hopeful eyes. The girl was dressed in a colorful mermaid costume, complete with shimmering scales and a seashell tiara.

“Um, excuse me, Miss Makeup Artist,” the young girl said shyly. “Can I have some makeup to make me look like a real mermaid?”

Heather couldn’t help but smile at the adorable request. She kneeled down to the girl’s level, her gentle demeanor putting the young mermaid enthusiast at ease.

“Of course, sweetie!” Heather said kindly. “I’d be happy to help you look like the most enchanting mermaid in all the seas.”

She carefully selected some makeup colors that resembled iridescent scales and shimmering ocean hues. With a delicate touch, she applied the makeup to the young girl’s cheeks and forehead, creating a magical mermaid transformation. As she worked her makeup magic, the girl’s eyes lit up with excitement and wonder.

The young girl giggled. “Thank you, Miss Makeup Artist! I look just like a mermaid now!”

Heather smiled. “You’re very welcome, dear. Have a fantastic time swimming through the Haunted Harvest!”

The young mermaid twirled around in delight, her costume and makeup bringing her fantasy to life. Heather’s willingness

to make the young girl's Halloween experience special was just one of the many ways the Haunted Harvest brought smiles to the faces of its visitors, both young and old.

As Heather continued her work at the zombie transformation station, a young boy approached her with a unique request. He had a determined look on his face and seemed excited about the prospect of a spooky transformation.

“Hey, can I be a skeleton instead of a zombie?” the boy asked eagerly.

Heather, always accommodating and enthusiastic about helping children realize their Halloween dreams, nodded with a grin. “Absolutely! Skeleton it is!” she said cheerfully. “Let's make you the spookiest skeleton this side of the Haunted Harvest.”

She selected a palette of black and white makeup and set to work. With her skilled hands, she carefully applied the makeup to create the appearance of bones on the boy's face and hands, turning him into a convincing skeleton.

“Wow, this is awesome! Thanks so much!”

His mom shook her head. “He's a skeleton every year for Halloween.”

“It's a classic costume,” Heather said. “When you find something you like, why change it up?”

“See, Mom!” The boy grinned.

The mom sighed, but it was clear that it held a playful one.

Heather beamed at them. “Have a bone-chillingly good time out there, Mr. Skeleton.”

The young boy, now transformed into a grinning skeleton, dashed off with newfound excitement, ready to join the eerie festivities of the Haunted Harvest. Heather's willingness to adapt to his request made the event even more enjoyable for the young participants, allowing them to embody the Halloween characters of their dreams.

As Heather continued to her magic at the zombie transformation station, she noticed a little girl who had been



standing nearby with her family, quietly observing the spooky makeovers. The girl's eyes were fixed on the transformation process, but she seemed hesitant to step forward. Heather, ever attentive to the needs and preferences of the event's attendees, approached the girl with a friendly smile.

“Hi there, sweetheart. Are you enjoying the spooky makeovers?”

The little girl nodded, her fascination with the zombie transformations evident in her gaze. However, when Heather offered to give her some makeup, the girl hesitated and shook her head.

“No thank you,” she said softly.

Heather respected the girl's decision, understanding that not everyone felt comfortable participating in the makeup transformations. She gave the little girl a warm smile and a nod, assuring her that it was perfectly fine to simply enjoy watching.

“That's okay, dear. You can always join in if you change your mind. Just have fun and enjoy the Haunted Harvest!”

The girl's family, appreciating Heather's kindness and consideration, continued to watch the transformations with their little enthusiast, knowing that the event offered something for everyone, whether they chose to participate or simply soak in the spooky ambiance.

As time passed at the zombie transformation station, the little girl who had been quietly observing the makeup transformations finally mustered the courage to approach Heather. She had a determined look in her eyes, and it soon became clear that she had a special request.

“Um, can I try putting on the makeup myself?” the girl asked.

Heather couldn't help but smile at the girl's eagerness to take part in the transformation process. It was evident that the little enthusiast wanted to learn and be a part of the Halloween fun in her own way.

“Of course, you can!” Heather encouraged. “Let’s turn you into a makeup artist for the day.”

She selected the makeup colors and brushes needed for the little girl’s desired transformation. With patience and guidance, she showed the girl how to create the spooky zombie look, explaining each step along the way.

“You’ll want to apply this black makeup here to create shadows, and this white makeup for highlights,” Heather explained. “Blend it just like this, and you’ll have the perfect zombie effect.”

The little girl listened attentively, her eyes wide with fascination as she followed Heather’s instructions. With each stroke of the brush and each dab of makeup, she gained confidence in her newfound makeup skills.

As the transformation progressed, the girl’s face began to take on the appearance of a spooky zombie. Heather watched with pride as the little enthusiast’s creativity and determination shone through. This special moment of mentorship and shared Halloween spirit added an extra layer of magic to the Haunted Harvest, leaving both Heather and the little girl with unforgettable memories of their makeup adventure together.

Heather, still overseeing the zombie transformation station at the Haunted Harvest, continued to help young enthusiasts and visitors embrace their spooky alter egos. As she guided a young boy through the makeup application process, she suddenly sensed a familiar presence approaching.

Turning her attention toward the approaching figure, Heather couldn’t help but feel a rush of happiness as she saw Jack, the cowboy zombie, heading her way. His eyes sparkled with excitement, and a wide grin adorned his face, making her heart skip a beat.

“Heather, you won’t believe the turnout tonight! The Haunted Harvest is a hit!”

Heather’s heart swelled with pride and joy as she met Jack’s infectious enthusiasm with her own smile. “That’s

fantastic to hear, Jack! It's all thanks to the amazing atmosphere you and your brothers have created here."

As Jack shared the details of the event's success, Heather couldn't help but admire his dedication and passion for making the Haunted Harvest a memorable experience for everyone. She felt grateful to be a part of this adventure and to have found such a wonderful friend in Jack.

At that moment, amidst the spooky makeup transformations and the thrilling Halloween festivities, Heather and Jack shared a connection that transcended the Haunted Harvest. Their friendship was blossoming, and the excitement of the event only deepened their bond, setting the stage for more adventures to come.

As Jack continued to share his vision for the Haunted Harvest, Heather listened with rapt attention, her admiration for his creativity and determination growing with each word.

"Heather, can you imagine it?" Jack asked passionately. "The Haunted Harvest becoming a cherished annual tradition for our community, with even more attractions and surprises each year. It could be a month-long celebration of all things spooky!"

Heather's eyes sparkled with excitement as she envisioned the possibilities. The prospect of turning the event into an annual tradition and expanding it to include multiple weekends in October, as well as Halloween itself, was an exciting one. She was already deeply involved in this year's event, and the thought of being a part of its future expansions filled her with anticipation.

"Jack, that sounds absolutely incredible! I'd be honored to be a part of it all, helping to make each year even spookier and more unforgettable."

The two friends stood amidst the Halloween festivities, their shared enthusiasm for the Haunted Harvest binding them together. The future looked bright, and the prospect of making this event a beloved tradition brought a sense of fulfillment to both Heather and Jack. Little did they know that their shared

dreams would lead to many more adventures and cherished moments in the years to come.

But Heather listened to Jack's exciting plans for the Haunted Harvest, her mind began to wander to her own future and her career aspirations. The festivities of the Haunted Harvest were undeniably thrilling, but they also made her reflect on her path as a makeup artist. While her wrist had been healing well, she couldn't help but consider her long-term goals.

She knew that her true passion lay in the world of movies, where she could bring characters to life with her creative makeup artistry. However, the reality was that Shooting Star Canyon wasn't a hub for the film industry, and opportunities for her career were limited in this small town.

"Jack, these festivities are amazing, and I love being a part of them, but I've been thinking about my career and how it's tough to pursue my dream in a place like Shooting Star Canyon.

As she shared her thoughts with Jack, she hoped he would understand her desire to explore new horizons and chase her dreams in a larger and more film-centric location. She valued their friendship immensely and wanted to be honest about her aspirations, even if it meant making difficult decisions about her future.

## CHAPTER 19



“Oh, right, of course,” Jack stammered.

His heart fell, though. The thought of having the Haunted Harvest without Heather around just didn't sit right with him. She had been such a huge part of it all, and she was back to smiling, and things were no longer awkward between them.

Until now.

When he was going to lose her.

Not that he had ever had her.

He gulped. “Your career is more important of course.”

“Charity work is important too,” she hedged.

“If you're around and free, we would love to have you, but you're right. You have to go where the work is.”

She nodded.

Jack realized a line was starting to form for Heather's services, and he waved to her and left her to it.

With Heather's words about her career aspirations weighing on his mind, Jack decided to check in on his brothers. He knew that the success of the event largely depended on their hard work at Hidden Creek Orchard, and he wanted to make sure everything was running smoothly.

Jack started with his older brother Roy, who had been a vital part of planning and executing the Haunted Harvest. As

he approached Roy, he noticed his brother overseeing the pumpkin patch area.

“Hey, Roy! How’s everything going over here?”

“Jack! It’s going great.” Roy smiled. “The pumpkin patch is bustling, and folks are having a blast picking out their pumpkins.”

Jack and Roy exchanged a few words about the event’s progress, and Jack couldn’t help but feel grateful for his brothers’ unwavering support. Roy’s dedication to making the Haunted Harvest a success was evident, and Jack appreciated the strong bond they shared as siblings.

Jack’s visit was filled with a sense of admiration and pride. Roy had always been the reliable and responsible one in the family, and his dedication to the Haunted Harvest was no exception.

Jack looked around with appreciation. “Roy, you’ve really outdone yourself with the pumpkin patch. It looks fantastic.”

“Thanks, Jack. It’s a real team effort,” Roy said modestly. “Parker, Ronald, Colton, Lawrence, Myles, and the others have all been putting in their hard work.”

Jack couldn’t agree more. It was the collective effort of the Griffin brothers and their friends that made the Haunted Harvest a reality. As he watched Roy interact with visitors, helping them select the perfect pumpkins and sharing stories about the orchard, Jack couldn’t help but feel a deep sense of family pride.

“You know, Roy, seeing you here with the folks, it reminds me of why we do this,” Jack said slowly. “It’s about bringing our community together and creating memories.”

Rod nodded. “Absolutely, Jack. That’s what it’s all about.”

The two brothers shared a moment of brotherly connection amidst the Halloween festivities. They may have had their differences and responsibilities, but their shared love for Hidden Creek Orchard and their commitment to making the Haunted Harvest a cherished tradition bound them together in a special way.

After his visit with Roy, Jack made his way to find his brother Parker, who had been overseeing various aspects of the Haunted Harvest. As Jack approached, he saw Parker coordinating the scarecrow alley area, where families and friends were creating their spooky straw-filled companions.

Jack smiled. “Parker, how’s the scarecrow alley looking tonight?”

“It’s a hit!” Parker said enthusiastically. “People are getting really creative with their scarecrows, and there’s a great atmosphere here.”

Jack couldn’t help but be impressed by Parker’s enthusiasm and ability to engage with visitors. Parker had a knack for making people feel at ease and helping them tap into their creativity.

“That’s awesome, Parker. You’ve got a real talent for this,” Jack said proudly.

Parker grinned. “Thanks, Jack, but I couldn’t do it without the folks who come here and make their scarecrows. It’s their enthusiasm that makes this place come alive.”

As the two brothers exchanged a few more words about the event’s success, Jack was reminded of how each of his brothers brought their unique skills and personalities to the Haunted Harvest. Parker’s warmth and creativity were a vital part of the experience, and Jack was grateful to have him by his side in this Halloween adventure.

With visits to Roy and Parker behind him, Jack continued his rounds to check in on his younger brother Ronald, who had been tasked with managing the pumpkin-related activities in the pumpkin patch. As he approached the area, Jack couldn’t help but notice the joyful laughter of children and families enjoying the festivities.

Jack smiled. “Ronald, looks like you’ve got quite the crowd here at the pumpkin patch!”

“Yeah, it’s been a blast. Kids are loving the pumpkin decorating and carving stations.”

Ronald's energy and enthusiasm were infectious, and it was clear that he was having a great time engaging with the event's youngest attendees. He helped children pick out the perfect pumpkins and provided guidance as they got creative with their pumpkin decorations.

"You're really nailing it here, Ronald. Families are making some fantastic pumpkin creations. You should be proud."

Ronald grinned even if he looked a little embarrassed by the praise. "Thanks, Jack. It's all about making sure everyone has a spooktacular time."

As Jack and Ronald shared a moment of brotherly camaraderie, they watched as families enjoyed the pumpkin-related activities. The sense of togetherness and community that the Haunted Harvest fostered was heartwarming, and Jack knew that their efforts were making a positive impact on Shooting Star Canyon.

After ensuring that all his brothers were doing well with their respective tasks, Jack made his way to Colton.

"Colton, this year's Haunted Harvest is a hit. I think we might have made quite a bit for the charity already."

"That's fantastic to hear, Jack." Colton looked pleased. "I'm glad we could make this happen. We sold a lot of tickets in advance, but we've had a number of people come and pay at the door."

Jack grinned. That was wonderful to hear. The Haunted Harvest was going to have a huge impact on their community, not only as a fun Halloween event but also as a means of raising funds for a good cause.

"You know, Colton, I've been thinking," Jack said, his tone one of deep contemplation. "What if we make this an even bigger event next year? Have it every weekend in October leading up to Halloween?"

Colton rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "That's an ambitious idea, Jack, but I like it. We should see if the other cowboys are on board with it too. It would take a lot of effort, but I think it could be worth it. We might want to see about maybe theming



the weekends and having different activities so that people will want to come back again and again.”

“Mix it up! Of course!

The prospect of expanding the Haunted Harvest was an exciting one, but it would require the dedication and support of everyone involved, including the Griffin brothers and the other cowboys at Hidden Creek Orchard. Jack and Colton were both passionate about the idea, and they knew that if they could rally their team, the Haunted Harvest could become an even more significant tradition for Shooting Star Canyon in the years to come.

Jack’s rounds to check in on the other cowboys continued, and his next stop was to see Lawrence, who had been involved in overseeing various aspects of the Haunted Harvest. As he approached Lawrence, he noticed him conversing with a group of volunteers who were helping with the event.

Once Lawrence didn’t seem busy anymore, Jack approached. “Lawrence, how’s everything going over here?”

Lawrence shook Jack’s hand and then clapped his back. “We’re making good progress with the ghostly hayride preparations. These volunteers have been a tremendous help.”

Jack was impressed by Lawrence’s ability to lead and coordinate volunteers effectively. The ghostly hayride was a significant attraction at the Haunted Harvest, and it was crucial to have someone like Lawrence overseeing its setup.

“That’s fantastic, Lawrence. You’ve got a real talent for this.”

“I know how to wrangle a crew,” Lawrence said modestly.

He should Lawrence wasn’t just a cowboy. He was also a volunteer firefighter.

“Everyone’s been putting in their best,” Lawrence added.

As they talked about the event’s success and the positive atmosphere it had created in Shooting Star Canyon, Jack couldn’t help but feel a sense of pride in his brothers and their friends. The Haunted Harvest had truly become a community

endeavor, and Lawrence's leadership played a crucial role in making it a memorable experience for all who attended.

"Keep doing what you're doing, and text or call me if you need anything," Jack said.

"I'll keep that in mind, but don't plan on my bothering you!"

Jack chuckled and continued his rounds to ensure everything was running smoothly at the Haunted Harvest. His next stop was to check in on Myles, who had taken on the responsibility of creating ghostly stories for the haunted corn maze. As he approached the area, he saw Myles engaging with a group of scare actors and volunteers.

"Myles, how are the ghost stories coming along for the corn maze? The one you told when I was onboard was great!"

Myles rubbed his hands together. "Jack! We've got some spine-tingling tales ready to send shivers down our guests' spines. It's going to be a real scream! I've been trying to come up with different ones because I noticed at least one family come back for a second ride, and I don't want to have the same stories today and tomorrow and Sunday and on Halloween." He tapped his temple. "I'm gonna keep them all straight! Don't you worry!"

Jack laughed. "I don't doubt you at all!"

Myles's enthusiasm for crafting eerie stories was infectious, and Jack couldn't help but appreciate the effort he and the scare actors were putting into creating a memorable experience in the haunted corn maze.

"All of this is fantastic to hear, Myles," Jack added. "I'm sure our visitors will love it."

Myles beamed proudly. "Thanks, Jack. We're all in this to make the Haunted Harvest the best it can be."

As they discussed the success of the event and the anticipation it had generated, Jack felt a deep sense of gratitude for Myles and his creative contributions. The haunted corn maze was a central attraction, and Myles's dedication was

helping make it a spine-tingling adventure for all who dared to enter.

By the time Jack made his way back to Heather, he couldn't help but feel a mix of exhaustion and fulfillment. The first night of the Haunted Harvest had come to an end, and it had been a resounding success. He was eager to see how the event would continue to grow in the coming days.

Jack approached Heather. "Hey, Heather, it was an incredible night, wasn't it?"

She smiled. "Absolutely, Jack. I couldn't be happier with how it all turned out.

Jack noticed that Heather was leaving most of the setup in place.

"Need a hand with cleaning up?" he asked, wanting to be helpful and also try to ensure she didn't overdo it. "I'm here to assist if you do."

"Thanks, Jack, but most of this will stay here tonight. We start early tomorrow for day two, and it's easier to leave everything set up."

The Haunted Harvest had a demanding schedule, with back-to-back days of spooky fun, and Heather was well aware of the logistics needed to make it run smoothly. Jack respected her dedication and decision to prepare for the next day's festivities.

"Got it, Heather." He nodded. "Well, if you need any help tomorrow or during the weekend, you know where to find me."

"Thanks, Jack. I appreciate that. See you bright and early for round two!"

With their shared commitment to the Haunted Harvest, Jack and Heather parted ways for the night, looking forward to what the upcoming days would bring as they continued to work together to make the event a tremendous success.

As the night came to a close at the Haunted Harvest, Jack took a moment to say goodbye to the people who had been

part of this thrilling event. He had forged connections, strengthened friendships, and witnessed the joy it brought to their community. With a warm smile on his face, he bid farewell to everyone who had made the first night of the event so memorable.

“Thank you all for being part of our Haunted Harvest tonight! It was an incredible start to our Halloween festivities. Have a safe trip home, and we’ll see you bright and early for another hauntingly good time tomorrow!”

As the visitors and volunteers dispersed, Jack couldn’t help but feel a sense of accomplishment. The Haunted Harvest had not only been a success in terms of raising funds for charity but had also brought the community closer together, and Jack was excited to see what the next night would bring. With a final wave and a thankful heart, he made his way to his apartment to get some much-needed rest before the next busy day.

As Jack made his way to his car in the parking lot, a woman approached him with an inquisitive look in her eyes. She seemed to be looking for someone.

“If you’re here for the Haunted Harvest, I’m afraid you’ll have to come back tomorrow,” he said regretfully.

“Oh, no. I... Well... I’m looking for Heather. Heather Carter.”

“I’m not sure if she’s still here or not.” He shook his head. “She’s so incredibly talented. Have you seen her work up close? And she’s so sweet and kind and...”

“Is that right?” She crossed her arms.

“Yes.” Jack wasn’t even embarrassed. He stood by everything he said.

“I’m Jessica Turner,” the woman said.

“Nice to meet you, Jessica,” he said. He couldn’t help but be curious about her sudden appearance.

“So you and Heather... You’re friends.”

“Yes, we are,” Jack said slowly, wondering if that was still true or not. The first date had been awkward, but maybe that had been partially because of nerves about tonight. Now that they had the first night under their belt, things should be smoother between them.

But that didn’t spell the end of their troubles, considering Heather’s job and the location of said job...

“Do you want me to see if she’s still at her station?”

“I’ve been looking around, and I don’t see her car,” Jessica said. “Maybe she left already and I missed her.”

“Is there anything I can help you with?”

Jessica smiled. “Heather and I used to be close friends a while back, and I was hoping to reconnect with her. It’s been a long time.”

“Do you live around here?” Jack asked. “I didn’t think she... I mean her parents are here, but...”

“No. I live in Louisiana. Heather and I went to school out there, and we lived there for a time. We... We lost touch, unfortunately.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, but I’m sure Heather would love to see you tomorrow.”

“Her parents retired here. All of us are from outside of New Orleans.” Jessica shrugged. “It’s unfortunate, what happened. Heather... I can see she means a lot to you.”

“She does,” Jack agreed.

“She lost friendships due to a toxic relationship,” Jessica said bluntly, “and maybe I shouldn’t be telling you, but she’s been through a lot. That’s why I wanted to reach out to her. I’ve heard about the hardships she faced, and I just want to be there for her as a friend, like we used to be.”

Jack nodded, realizing that Jessica’s intentions were genuine. It was clear that she cared about Heather and wanted to rekindle their friendship.

“Do you want me to call or text her?” he asked, wanting to help facilitate their reconnection, knowing that it might mean a lot to Heather.

With a newfound sense of hope for Heather’s rekindled friendship, Jack took out his phone to send a message to Heather to inform her of Jessica’s presence and willingness to reconnect. He hoped that this unexpected encounter would lead to a positive chapter in Heather’s life.

“No, please don’t,” Jessica said. “I’ll surprise her tomorrow.” She eyed him thoughtfully. “You have a crush on her, don’t you?”

Jack stiffened. “I think my feelings are a little deeper than just a crush,” he said.

“I just don’t want Heather to have to go through loss again,” Jessica said.

As Jessica explained her intention to reconnect with Heather and expressed concern for Heather’s fragility, Jack listened attentively, understanding the significance of their renewed friendship. He recognized now that Heather had been through a difficult past and had been hurt in the past.

With a determined look in his eyes, he made a heartfelt vow to Jessica. “I promise you that I’ll never hurt Heather. She’s an amazing person, and I care about her deeply. I’ll do everything in my power to protect and support her, just like you want to.”

“Thank you, Jack. I’m glad to hear that, and I’m sure Heather will be too. I hope we can all be there for her and help her heal. I... I hope you have a good heart and Heather’s best interests at heart.”

“I do.”

With their shared determination to support Heather in mind, Jack and Jessica exchanged a nod of understanding. They both wanted what was best for their friend, and this unexpected meeting was a step toward creating a supportive and caring circle around Heather as she continued her journey to healing and happiness.

## CHAPTER 20



**A**s Heather drove home from the successful first night of the Haunted Harvest, her mind was filled with a mix of emotions. She couldn't help but feel a sense of fulfillment and pride for what she and the team had accomplished. The event had brought joy to the community, raised funds for charity, and given her a purpose she cherished.

However, there was also a hint of sadness that crept into her thoughts. She reflected on her future and the uncertainty it held. Heather had dreams and ambitions, and being in Shooting Star Canyon, even for such a meaningful event, reminded her that her ultimate goals might lie elsewhere.

*It's been an incredible journey, and I'm grateful for this opportunity, but what's next for me? Can I really leave all this behind?*

The thought of not being in Shooting Star Canyon for the next year's Haunted Harvest, or even the possibility of pursuing her career in a different place, tugged at her heartstrings. The town had become a part of her, and the people she had met, including Jack, had left a mark on her life.

As she pulled into her parents' driveway, Heather couldn't help but wonder about the choices she would have to make. She knew that whatever path she chose, it would be a significant step in her journey, one that would determine her future and the kind of life she would lead.

Heather entered her parents' home with a mix of exhaustion and anticipation, not expecting to find them still

awake at this late hour. However, she was pleasantly surprised when she walked into the living room, and her parents were sitting there, beaming with excitement.

“Heather, that Haunted Harvest was so well done.” Her dad gave her a huge smile.

“Yes! Your father and I enjoyed all of it.” Her mom rushed over to hug her.

“The entire town is talking about it!”

“We’re so proud of you!”

Heather’s heart swelled with warmth. Their support and pride meant the world to her, and it was a reminder of the strong bond they shared as a family.

“I’m so glad you both enjoyed it,” she said. “It’s been a labor of love, and seeing the community come together like this has been incredible.”

Heather’s parents continued to gush about their experiences at the Haunted Harvest event, eagerly sharing their favorite moments and the attractions that had left a lasting impression on them.

“That haunted corn maze was something else! I haven’t been that scared in years. Those actors did a fantastic job!” her dad said.

“And the ghostly hayride!” Her mom touched her chest. “The way Myles told those spooky stories had us on the edge of our seats. I thought I saw a real ghost!”

As Heather listened to her parents relive their adventure, she couldn’t help but smile. Their enthusiasm was contagious, and their presence in her life meant more to her than words could express. It was heartwarming to see them so engaged and excited about the event she had poured her heart and soul into.

“I’m so glad you had a great time,” she said with a grin. “It means so much to me that you were there to share in this experience. The community coming together like this is what



it's all about. I can see why you decided to settle down here in the canyon.”

Her parents nodded in agreement, and their pride in their daughter's accomplishments shone through their expressions. It was a moment of pure joy and connection, reminding Heather of the importance of family and the bonds they shared.

As they continued to talk, Heather felt a renewed sense of purpose and determination. She knew that no matter what the future held, the support and love of her family would always be a source of strength and inspiration in her life.

“I can't wait to see just how much the Haunted Harvest is going to impact Shooting Star Canyon,” her dad said.

Heather's grin shrunk. She wouldn't be around to see that. Still, she couldn't help but feel a deep sense of pride and contentment. The event had not only brought the community together but had also made a significant impact on the town.

“It's amazing how an event like this can bring so much joy and excitement to our little town,” her dad continued. “People from all walks of life came together tonight, and it was truly something special.”

“Absolutely, dear,” her mom agreed. “The Haunted Harvest will become a cherished tradition, and it's heartwarming to see how much it means to everyone.”

Heather knew that the success of the event was a testament to the hard work and dedication of the entire team, including her own. It reaffirmed her belief in the power of community and coming together for a common purpose.

“Having you both here tonight made it even more special,” Heather said.

“Did you really think we wouldn't come out and support you?” her mom asked.

As they continued to discuss the evening's events and their impact on the town, Heather felt a sense of fulfillment and gratitude wash over her. The Haunted Harvest had not only brought joy to the community but had also strengthened the

bonds between her and her parents. It was a night they would cherish and remember for a long time to come.

Heather's parents' joy was infectious, and it eased some of the uncertainty that had been weighing on Heather's mind. The support of her parents, along with the love of the community, gave her the strength to face the choices and challenges that lay ahead in her journey.

"You know, Heather, that Jack Griffin seems like such a nice young man," her mom commented, her tone seemingly innocent, but there was a knowing look in her eyes. "He's been such a support to you, hasn't he?"

Heather's cheeks flushed slightly. It was clear that her mom had noticed the connection between Heather and Jack, even if they hadn't openly discussed it.

"Yes, Mom, Jack has been a great friend." Heather wasn't sure if she could really call him her boyfriend yet. They weren't going to have to talk about so many things, and now, she wished she hadn't brought up her fears to him about her career earlier. She cleared her throat and added, "He's been there for me through all of this."

Heather's mother smiled warmly, her eyes filled with understanding and affection. "Well, dear, sometimes great friendships can lead to something more. Follow your heart and do what makes you happy."

Heather appreciated her mother's supportive words. She had been through a lot in her life, and her mother's guidance meant a lot to her. It was a gentle reminder that sometimes, the best things in life came unexpectedly, and it was okay to embrace them.

"Thanks, Mom. I'll keep that in mind."

Her dad grunted. "I did like him," he said.

Heather laughed. "Thanks?"

They all laughed.

"I'm off to bed," Heather said. She stifled a yawn.

"Yes, of course, dear. Goodnight!"

“Goodnight, Heather.”

As Heather headed upstairs to her bedroom, she couldn't help but feel a twinge of sadness wash over her. She knew that despite the successful evening and the support of her family, there were scars from her past that still lingered, both on the outside and on the inside.

As she changed into her pajamas and stood in front of the mirror, her gaze fell upon the scars that marred her skin, a painful reminder of the abusive relationship she had endured. Makeup had become her armor, concealing the physical scars with skillful precision, but it couldn't erase the emotional wounds that ran deep within her.

“Makeup can hide the scars on the outside, but it can't heal the ones on the inside,” she whispered to herself.

She took a moment to reflect on the journey she had undertaken to heal and rebuild her life after leaving her abusive ex. It had been a challenging path, one filled with moments of strength and resilience, as well as moments of vulnerability and pain.

As she climbed into bed, she knew that healing wasn't a linear process and that the scars, both visible and hidden, were a part of her story. What mattered most was the love and support she had received from her family and friends, and the newfound strength she had discovered within herself.

“I'll keep moving forward, one day at a time, healing both on the outside and on the inside.”

Before drifting off to sleep, Heather bowed her head in a quiet moment of reflection and prayer. It was a nightly ritual that brought her a sense of peace and solace, allowing her to connect with her faith and find strength in her beliefs.

“Dear God, thank You for the blessings in my life, for my family's love and support, and for the opportunities I've been given. Please continue to guide me on this journey of healing and help me find the strength to overcome my past. Amen.”

Heather knew she had to face the challenges of her past and contemplate the uncertainties of her future. Her prayer

was a moment of surrender and trust in God, seeking guidance and protection for the path that lay ahead.

With her prayers offered and a sense of calm washing over her, Heather felt determination and hope for the future. She closed her eyes, ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead and continue her journey toward complete healing and happiness. With a slight smile on her lips, she settled into the embrace of sleep, hoping for a restful night and a new day filled with possibilities.

## CHAPTER 21



The next morning, as Jack went about his routine, he heard a familiar knock at his apartment door. He couldn't help but be amazed when he opened it and found Heather standing there, her makeup transforming her into a remarkable likeness of the Swamp Thing.

His jaw dropped. He couldn't be more surprised or impressed. You would think that he would have realized she was a master already, but she had outdone herself yet again.

"Heather, you look incredible! That makeup is unbelievable."

She grinned. "Thanks, Jack! I thought I'd surprise you today."

Jack was genuinely overwhelmed by Heather's makeup artistry. The intricate details and the way she had transformed herself into a swampy, otherworldly creature were nothing short of astonishing.

"You're like a master of disguise. How did you even come up with this idea?" He smacked his forehead. "Come in, come in!"

She laughed and followed him into his place. He shut the door behind her and gestured toward the couch.

Heather sat. "I felt a little left out since everyone else looked so amazing, and I wanted to do something too. I figured since it's the Haunted Harvest, I should get into the spirit of things. Plus, I wanted to see if I could top my zombie makeup from last night."

Jack chuckled, appreciating Heather's creativity and dedication to the event. He smiled as he said, "Well, you've definitely set the bar high. I'm looking forward to seeing the reactions from the visitors today."

"Maybe I'll have to give you a spooky makeover too, Jack."

He laughed. "I'd be up for it if you're willing to turn me into something terrifying."

Their lighthearted banter filled the room, and Jack couldn't help but admire Heather's talent and enthusiasm. It was another reminder of the unique and remarkable person she was, and it warmed his heart to have her in his life.

"Seriously, though, you're amazing at what you do, Heather. I'm lucky to know you."

She blushed. "Thank you, Jack. That means a lot."

As they shared a moment of appreciation and camaraderie, it was clear that their connection was growing stronger, and the Haunted Harvest was bringing them closer together, both professionally and personally.

Seeing Heather's surprise visit and her incredible Swamp Thing makeup had brightened Jack's morning. He decided to seize the opportunity to make their encounter even more special. Instead of making his usual eggs, he decided to whip up a batch of delicious pancakes for them to enjoy together.

He grinned and rubbed his hands together. "How about some blueberry pancakes to start our day? Or did you already eat?"

"I hadn't eaten yet," she said softly. "I was hoping for a redo of yesterday... but I hadn't thought about all of this and going out so eating here suits me just fine!"

He chuckled. "You could've been a walking advertisement for the Haunted Harvest, though," he teased.

"Nope! You mentioned blueberry pancakes, and that sounds fantastic, so let's go with that."

He laughed some more. "You got it!"

With a spring in his step, Jack set to work in the kitchen, mixing the pancake batter, and adding plump blueberries to create a mouthwatering breakfast. The sizzle of the pancakes on the griddle filled the air with a delightful aroma.

Heather came into the kitchen and watched with curiosity and a hint of anticipation as Jack expertly flipped the pancakes, making sure they were cooked to perfection. It was a simple gesture, but he wanted to let Heather know that he appreciated her. He truly wanted to make the morning memorable. They only had a few hours before they had to head over to the orchard, although she might have to it spoke volumes about Jack's thoughtfulness and his desire to make the morning memorable.

Soon, a plate piled high with golden-brown blueberry pancakes was set before them, accompanied by a jar of maple syrup and a pat of melting butter.

"Here you go, Heather," Jack said proudly. "Freshly made blueberry pancakes, just for you."

"Jack, these look incredible! Thank you so much."

"I can say a prayer or..."

"Go ahead." She nodded.

He bowed his head and closed his eyes. "Dear God, thank You for this food and the chance to come together before we embark on day two of the Haunted Harvest. Thank You for letting the first night go so well. Please help us to be able to help others and always serve You. Amen."

"Amen," she echoed.

He opened his eyes, and they shared a grin before digging into their pancakes, savoring each bite and sharing casual conversation. It was a breakfast filled with laughter, good company, and the promise of a new day together.

As they enjoyed their meal, Jack couldn't help but think that sometimes, the best moments in life were the unexpected ones, like sharing blueberry pancakes with someone who had become more than just a friend.

“What time do you need to head over?” he asked.

“I have about an hour,” she said. “The makeup for the actors and everyone will go much faster now that I have it down pat.”

“Do you need to buy any more makeup supplies? You had to go through a ton yesterday.”

“I already have enough for today, but I’ll be sure to get more tonight for tomorrow and then Halloween.”

“We can pay—”

“What part of charity are you forgetting?” she asked lightly.

“I know, but—”

“No buts,” she said firmly. “That’s my contribution.”

“You’re already giving so much time—”

“It’s fine.”

“Thank you,” he said warmly.

As they savored their delicious blueberry pancakes, Jack and Heather found themselves immersed in conversation. With an hour to spare before they needed to be at the orchard for the Haunted Harvest, they enjoyed the leisurely pace of their morning, relishing in each other’s company.

Jack, ever the considerate host, engaged Heather in lighthearted discussions about their favorite movies and music and even shared some amusing anecdotes from their pasts. He wanted to keep the conversation light, not wanting to bring up topics that might remind Heather of her uncertain future.

He grinned. “So, Heather, have you ever pulled off a Halloween prank that you’re particularly proud of?”

She laughed. “Oh, you have no idea, Jack. Let’s just say I may have been responsible for a few spooky surprises over the years.”

Their laughter filled the room, and it was evident that their friendship was growing stronger with each passing day. Jack



cherished these moments, and even though the thought of Heather leaving weighed on his mind, he chose to focus on the present and the connection they were building.

“You know, Heather, it’s moments like these that make life truly special. I’m grateful for our friendship and all the laughter we’ve shared.”

“Me too, Jack. You’ve been an amazing friend, and I appreciate having you in my life.”

As they continued to talk and share stories, it became clear that their bond was something worth holding onto, even in the face of uncertainty. For now, they would enjoy the present and the time they had together, making the most of the hour before their next adventure at the orchard’s Haunted Harvest.

After finishing their breakfast, Jack and Heather found themselves with some extra time before they needed to head to the orchard for the day’s Haunted Harvest event. Jack, always one for a bit of fun, decided to show Heather his collection of old costumes.

He grinned. “Want to see some of my Halloween costume classics?”

Her eyes widened. “Absolutely! I’m sure you’ve had some interesting choices over the years.”

Jack led Heather to a closet filled with an assortment of costumes from Halloweens past. As they sifted through the eclectic collection, they couldn’t help but tease each other about which costume Jack should don for the Haunted Harvest that day.

She chuckled. “How about the pirate costume? You could be a haunted pirate searching for buried treasure.”

“Arrr, matey!” he burst out playfully. “That’s not a bad idea, but what about the mad scientist? I could concoct all sorts of eerie experiments at the orchard.”

Their banter continued as they pulled out costumes ranging from superheroes to classic monsters. Each outfit brought its own set of playful suggestions and laughter.

“What about... a giant banana?” she asked, her tone mock-serious. “You could be the most fearsome fruit in Shooting Star Canyon!”

He burst out laughing. “A banana? Well, that would certainly be a-peeling!”

She grinned. “All right, Jack, what do you think? Pirate or mad scientist?”

Jack considered the options as he stroked his chin. “How about both? I’ll be a mad scientist who’s also a haunted pirate. It’s a Halloween mashup!

They both laughed at the absurdity of the idea, but it was decided. Jack would be a mad scientist pirate for the Haunted Harvest, a unique and unforgettable choice that perfectly captured the spirit of the event.

Their playful interaction served as a reminder that sometimes, the best way to deal with uncertainty was to embrace the present and create moments of joy and connection with the people who mattered most.

## CHAPTER 22



**A**s Jack headed to his bedroom to transform into his chosen costume, Heather patiently waited in the living room. She knew that their time together that morning was running short, but she couldn't help but think of the possibility of Jack joining her at the orchard for the day's Haunted Harvest preparations.

Heather pondered the idea, recognizing that having Jack by her side during the event could be both enjoyable and beneficial. She valued his company, and involving him in her work seemed like a perfect way to get to know each other better.

Although that might make things more complicated for her...

Jack reemerged from his bedroom, now transformed into the mad scientist pirate, complete with a tattered lab coat, pirate hat, and a vial of mysterious "elixir" in hand.

He grinned. "Ready for some Halloween hijinks, Heather?"

She smiled. "You look fantastic, Jack. And actually, I was thinking... would you like to come with me to the orchard when I need to go over? I know you probably don't need to be there that early, but you could see what it's like behind the scenes and maybe lend a hand."

Jack's eyes lit up at the invitation. "Sure, that sounds great. Lead the way, Captain Heather!"

Heather and Jack exchanged smiles. They were eager to face the day's adventures as a team.

"Not that we have to leave right this second," she said, looking at her watch. "There's still twenty minutes yet."

"Good." Jack grinned at her. "By the way, Heather, I met your parents last night at the Haunted Harvest. They're really nice people. They seemed pretty excited about the event, and they had some great things to say about you."

Heather couldn't help but smile. It was heartwarming to know that her family had such positive impressions of her new friend.

"I'm glad they got to meet you, Jack. They've been a big support in my life."

Their conversation flowed naturally, and even in these simple moments, Heather and Jack continued to strengthen the bond they had formed. As they prepared to leave for the orchard, the prospect of spending the day together filled them with anticipation and excitement, eager to see what adventures awaited them at the Haunted Harvest.

"Did your parents come to the event last night, Jack?" she asked, curious.

He shook his head. "No, not last night, but they're planning to come on Halloween night."

Jack's eyes sparkled with fond memories as he spoke about his family's Halloween traditions. It was clear that this holiday held a special place in his heart, and he was looking forward to sharing it with his parents.

She smiled. "That sounds wonderful. Halloween is your favorite holiday, after all."

He nodded. "I can't wait for them to see what we've all put together at the orchard. And speaking of which, we should get going. The Haunted Harvest won't run itself!"

"If you want, but we still have some time."

"You aren't in a rush to get over there?"

“I... I’m enjoying myself.”

“Good!”

He looked so very pleased that she stifled a laugh.

But then, a hint of nervousness seemed to hang in the air. Jack, typically full of enthusiasm, seemed to be concerned about something.

“You know, Heather, I can’t help but feel a bit nervous about today,” he admitted before she had the chance to ask him what was wrong. “What if everyone in town already came last night, and today is a total flop?”

His candid confession revealed a vulnerable side to Jack, as he grappled with the uncertainty of the event’s success. After all, the turnout on the first night had been impressive, and he was clearly worried that they might not be able to replicate that energy, the complete antithesis of yesterday when he had been talking about expanding the event to be throughout the entire month.

“Jack, it’s completely normal to have some jitters,” she said, “but I have a feeling that today will be great too. We’ll put on a fantastic show, and people will keep coming back for more.”

Heather’s reassuring words were hopefully like a warm embrace, and she watched Jack carefully. From the slow nod and slight curl of his lips, it seemed like she had helped to alleviate some of the anxiety that had been building in Jack’s mind.

“Thanks, Heather. You always know how to put my mind at ease. Let’s make today unforgettable!”

“We will!”

Jack started to gather a few things, but after a moment, he turned to Heather, his brow furrowed with concern.

“Heather, I can’t help but think about Halloween night. It’s a special night for us, but with all the trick-or-treating and other events in town, I’m afraid our Haunted Harvest might not draw as big a crowd as we hope.”

She nodded. “I get it, Jack. Halloween night is a big deal, and there’s always a lot of competition for people’s time, but you know what? We’re putting on something unique and special at the orchard. I believe in it, and I believe in us.”

Heather’s unwavering faith and support seemed to reassure Jack once again. Her optimism and determination were like a beacon of hope in the face of uncertainty.

At least as far as the harvest went.

“Thanks, Heather. Your confidence means a lot to me. Let’s make Halloween night at the orchard an unforgettable experience, even if it means competing with trick-or-treating.”

“We could always cut off Halloween so that it ends shortly before trick or treating so that way there isn’t any competition,” she suggested.

“That might be a good idea. Thanks for the suggestion! I’ll talk to Colton and see what he wants to do. It’s going to take some time to tear everything down and get the orchard back to rights once all of this is done and over with.”

“True,” she murmured.

As the minutes ticked away, and their departure time for the orchard drew nearer, Heather felt a growing urgency to share something deeply personal with Jack. She knew that opening up about her past was a significant step, one that required courage and trust. Maybe now wasn’t the best time, but she felt compelled to say something now, and she didn’t want to lose her nerve.

“Jack, there’s something I want to talk to you about before we head to the orchard,” she said nervously. “It’s about my past, and I think it’s important for you to know. Her voice trembled slightly, but she locked eyes with Jack, her determination to be honest and transparent shining through.

“Of course, Heather. You can tell me anything. I’m here for you.”

Jack’s reassuring words provided Heather with the encouragement she needed. With a deep breath, she began to

share her story, unveiling the painful chapter of her life that she had kept hidden for so long.

As Heather shared the painful details of her past, her voice trembled with the weight of the memories she was bringing to the surface. She spoke about the abusive relationship she had endured, how it had ensnared her in a web of fear and control, and how it had ultimately isolated her from her friends and loved ones. Her words were a testament to the emotional scars that still haunted her, scars that ran deeper than anyone could see. It was a difficult and emotional conversation, but she trusted Jack enough to confide in him.

“I’ve been through a lot, Jack,” she added, “and it’s left me with scars, not just on the outside but on the inside too. I wanted you to know because you’ve become such an important part of my life. That’s... That’s one of the reasons why our date was so awkward. I... I haven’t been on a date since...”

Jack listened attentively, his empathy and understanding evident in his eyes. “Thank you for sharing this with me. You’re incredibly brave, and I’m honored that you trust me enough to let me in. You’re not alone in this journey, and I’m here to support you, no matter what.”

She nodded, a lump in her throat making it impossible for her to talk.

“I can’t even begin to imagine how difficult that must have been for you,” he said softly. “You’re incredibly strong to have come through such a challenging ordeal.”

Heather nodded, appreciating Jack’s understanding and support. Opening up about her past was a significant step toward healing, and Jack’s presence made it feel less daunting.

“Thank you, Jack. It means a lot to have someone like you who listens and understands.”

Their conversation was marked by a profound sense of trust and vulnerability, strengthening the connection between them. Heather’s past was a part of her, but with Jack by her

side, she felt a renewed sense of hope and resilience as they prepared to face the day together at the orchard.

Jack hesitated. “Heather, there’s something I should tell you. Jessica came up to me in the parking lot last night at the orchard. She was looking for you and realized... well, she realized how much you mean to me, and she mentioned about your past...”

Heather’s eyes widened in disbelief, and her heart raced at the revelation. She hadn’t expected Jessica to share such a personal part of her life with Jack, especially without her knowledge.

“Jessica told you about...”

He nodded. “She wanted to make sure I understood what you’ve been through. She cares about you a lot, Heather.”

Upon hearing that Jessica had taken it upon herself to share her deeply personal history with Jack without her knowledge or consent, Heather’s initial reaction was not one of understanding or gratitude. Instead, a surge of emotions—shock, betrayal, and a sense of violation—washed over her like a tidal wave.

“Jack, I can’t believe she did that. It’s my past, my story to share, and she had no right to disclose it.” Her voice quivered with a mix of anger and hurt, and she felt a deep sense of violation at having her private experiences laid bare without her control.

“Heather, I’m so sorry,” he said frantically. “I didn’t know she was going to do that, and I never intended for you to feel this way. I didn’t want to keep it a secret from you, especially since it’s such an important part of your life, and I want you to know that I’m here for you, just like Jessica said.”

But before Jack could even attempt to explain or console her, Heather, overwhelmed by the emotions and the breach of trust, made a swift decision.

In a rush, Heather abruptly stood up from the table, her chair scraping against the floor. She cast one last glance at Jack, a tumultuous storm of emotions in her eyes, before



turning and hurrying out of the apartment without another word.

## CHAPTER 23



Jack sat there, stunned and remorseful, watching Heather's hasty departure with a heavy heart. The unexpected turn of events had left their friendship hanging in the balance, and he knew that repairing the trust he had inadvertently damaged would be a difficult and delicate task.

Her presence and unwavering support were a source of strength for him, and how had he repaid her? Maybe he shouldn't have mentioned Jessica, but he hadn't wanted to keep anything from her. He appreciated Heather's willingness to trust him with her painful past, but now, he had hurt her terribly, and he felt just awful.

Jack couldn't let Heather walk away, feeling hurt and betrayed. As he rushed out of his apartment and into the parking lot, he was determined to catch up with her and address the situation head-on. His concern for their friendship and his desire to make amends drove him forward.

"Heather, wait!" he called.

He caught up to her just as she was about to get into her car, his breath slightly labored from his hurried pace. He stood in front of her, his eyes reflecting a mix of regret and genuine concern.

"Please, Heather, let's talk about this," he said, his tone urgent. "I never wanted to hurt you. Jessica just didn't want you to get hurt."

Heather looked torn, her emotions still raw from the shock of the revelation. She hesitated, her hand on the car door, and

he could tell that she was torn and felt betrayed.

“Jack, I just...” she started tentatively. She lowered her head and sighed. “I need some space to process all of this.”

He nodded. “I understand, Heather. Take all the time you need, but please know that I value our friendship, and I’m truly sorry for any pain this has caused you.”

Heather just stood there, her head still lowered.

With a heavy heart, Jack recognized that their friendship was at a crossroads, and he couldn’t bear the thought of losing someone as important as Heather in his life. Determined to bridge the gap between them, he decided to open up about his own past, hoping that it might help Heather understand him better.

“Heather, I want you to know that I’ve faced my share of heartbreak too. I was in a relationship where I was cheated on, not once but twice.”

“Jack...”

“If you don’t want to hear, you can go,” he said.

“I’m sorry you went through with that.”

“I thought I loved her, and I believed her when she apologized and said it was a mistake, so I took her back. We had been dating for almost two years before she cheated on me for the first time. The second chance? Two months. That was how long our relationship lasted. It hurt so deeply that first time, but I chose to forgive her, believing that people could change, but the second time? Unfortunately, she betrayed my trust again, and it shattered me. Or maybe I should say fortunately because there is zero chance that I would have wanted to marry her in the end.”

Heather’s expression softened as she heard Jack’s own story of pain and betrayal. In opening up about his past, he hoped to convey that he understood the complexities of relationships and the scars they could leave.

“I share this with you because I want you to know that I’ve been through my own struggles, and I believe in second

chances. I value our friendship, Heather, and I'm willing to work through this with you. I hope that, in time, we can rebuild the trust between us."

Heather eyed him but remained silent.

While their paths had been marked by different experiences, their shared vulnerabilities were beginning to bridge the gap that had briefly separated them.

"You were also the first woman I asked out after everything with...Gabriela," he said.

Hm. He had expected the old rush of pain to wash over him as it always had before whenever he said her name, but no, that didn't happen now.

He truly was finally over Gabriela, and he knew that was largely in part because of the woman standing before him.

Now Heather was someone who would never hurt him.

She might also not give him a chance to show that.

"Thank you for sharing that with me, Jack," Heather said softly. "It means a lot, and I appreciate your willingness to understand."

Their conversation would hopefully mark a significant step in the healing process, as they both acknowledged the complexities of their pasts and the hope of a renewed friendship.

Jack found himself opening up even further, sharing his thoughts and feelings with a depth of honesty he hadn't experienced in a long time. He wanted to convey just how important their friendship had become to him.

"Heather, I need you to understand something. After those painful experiences in my past relationships, I haven't dated anyone since, but being around you and spending time with you makes me genuinely happy, and I don't want to lose that."

Heather's gaze met Jack's. "I... Thank you for telling me all of this."

His heart broke, but he still aimed to give her a warm smile. “Heather, I don’t know where this path will lead us, but I want you to know that I’m willing to take it one step at a time. I hope we can rebuild our trust and continue making each other happy, whatever form that takes.”

“We... We’ll see,” she murmured.

Jack sensed that Heather needed some space and time to process everything they had discussed. He respected her need for reflection and understanding, knowing that healing and rebuilding trust would take time.

“Take all the time you need,” he assured her. “I’m here whenever you’re ready to talk or when you feel comfortable. Our friendship means a lot to me, and I want you to know that I’m willing to be patient.”

She nodded, smiling slightly, and he hoped that she knew that their friendship was built on a foundation of trust and respect that could withstand the challenges they faced.

“I should go,” she murmured.

He backed up, and she climbed into her car and drove away, leaving Jack standing in the parking lot, hoping that time and open communication would eventually mend the rift that had formed between them.

Jack watched her car disappear from view, and a sense of hope and determination filled his heart. He knew that they were on a journey to mend their friendship, and he prayed silently, hoping that Heather would find the clarity and peace she needed during this time.

“Dear God, I pray for Heather. Grant her the strength to find healing and understanding in her heart. Guide us on this path of rebuilding our friendship, and may it become stronger than ever. Amen.”

With his heart uplifted by the hope of reconciliation, Jack headed back to his apartment to gather the supplies he needed for the Haunted Harvest event. He knew that the days ahead would be filled with challenges, but he was determined to

make the event a success and, in time, help rebuild the trust and friendship that had meant so much to both of them.



Jack's thoughts remained focused on Heather as he went about his preparations for the Haunted Harvest at Hidden Creek Orchard. His concern for her well-being and their friendship took precedence over any other considerations, including whether or not she would be able to join him at the orchard for face painting or any other activities.

As he set up the event, welcoming guests and ensuring that everything ran smoothly, he couldn't help but think about Heather and the journey they were both on. While he hoped she would eventually be a part of the Haunted Harvest, he understood that her healing and comfort were of utmost importance, and he respected her need for space and time.

With each passing moment, he sent silent prayers for her happiness and well-being, knowing that their friendship had the potential to endure and grow stronger, no matter what challenges they faced.

As Jack continued to oversee the Haunted Harvest event at Hidden Creek Orchard, he made sure to check in with his brothers and the Spangler cowboys who were all integral parts of the event's success. The collaborative effort of their team was essential in creating a memorable experience for all the visitors. It was clear that they were all dedicated to making the Haunted Harvest a success.

"How's everything going, guys? Are we on track with the schedule? Any issues or concerns we need to address?"

"The haunted corn maze is looking great, Jack," Roy said confidently. "Visitors are in for a spooky experience."

"The pumpkin patch activities are all set up and ready to go. Families are already having a blast."

Jack grinned to himself. He didn't think that he had ever heard his brother sound so enthusiastic before.

“Myles has some fantastic ghost stories lined up for the hayride. It’s going to be a hit,” Ronald said.

“Oh, I try,” Myles said modestly before he adopted a mysterious tone adding, “The ghost stories will give everyone some chills and thrills.”

Colton nodded, looking more than pleased. “Everyone’s doing their part, and the atmosphere here is perfect for Halloween.”

Lawrence smiled. “We’re getting a lot of positive feedback from the scare actors and volunteers.”

Jack listened to their reports with satisfaction, grateful for the dedication and teamwork of his brothers and the Spangler cowboys. Their combined efforts were turning the Haunted Harvest into a memorable and successful event.

Even better than all of that, though? All of them had their faces full of scary makeup. Heather was here.

“Thanks, everyone,” Jack said proudly. “Let’s keep up the good work and make this event a night to remember. And remember, it’s not just about the scares. It’s also about giving back to the community.”

With their shared commitment to the event’s success and their charitable goals in mind, they continued to work together, ensuring that the Haunted Harvest would be a fun and memorable experience for all who attended.



As the Haunted Harvest event continued, Jack found himself at a crossroads, unsure whether he should head over to the zombie transformation station or remain where he was. He had been contemplating whether his presence at the station would be welcomed by Heather, given the recent conversation they had shared.

Jack knew that Heather was still processing their discussion about their pasts and their feelings. He wanted to respect her need for space and didn’t want to make her

uncomfortable by approaching the makeup station. At the same time, he genuinely cared about the success of the event and wanted to contribute to its festivities.

After a moment of contemplation, Jack decided to approach the station, albeit cautiously. He wanted to show his support for the event and the cause it represented, all while remaining respectful of Heather's feelings and boundaries.

As he made his way toward the zombie transformation station, he hoped that he would find a way to assist and be of service without causing any unnecessary tension. The future of their friendship weighed heavily on his mind, but he remained hopeful that they could navigate this challenge together.

Now nearing the zombie transformation station, he observed Heather hard at work, completely engrossed in her tasks. She appeared to be focused and didn't seem to require any immediate assistance or support. Recognizing this, Jack decided to maintain a respectful distance, not wanting to disrupt her concentration or add any unnecessary pressure.

Respecting Heather's autonomy and her dedication to her work, Jack chose to slip away quietly, allowing her to continue her tasks without any distractions. He understood that she had a significant role to play in making the Haunted Harvest a success, and he didn't want to interfere with her responsibilities.

With a sense of understanding and deep respect for Heather's commitment to the event, Jack continued to move through the orchard, ensuring that everything else was running smoothly. The night was still young, and he remained hopeful that their paths would cross again, allowing them to navigate their complex emotions and strengthen their friendship in the process.

Jack's happiness at seeing Heather at the Haunted Harvest event was palpable, and he couldn't help but feel a sense of relief that she had chosen to be a part of the festivities. He wanted her to know that he valued her presence and was grateful for her contribution to the event. However, he also



wanted to be sensitive to her feelings and not overwhelm her with his attention.

With that in mind, Jack decided to send someone over to check on Heather on his behalf. Immediately, he thought of Colton, trusting the older cowboy to approach her with kindness and care, ensuring that she felt supported without feeling pressured.

“Hey, Colton, could you do me a favor? Check in on Heather at the zombie transformation station for me, please. Just see how she’s doing and if she needs anything. I want her to know that we appreciate her being here.”

Colton nodded in agreement and made his way over to Heather at the station. Meanwhile, Jack continued to oversee the event, his heart filled with gratitude for Heather’s presence and the hope that they could navigate their evolving friendship together.

## CHAPTER 24



**F**rom Jack's apartment, Heather immediately went to the orchard. That wasn't even a question. She had committed herself to the cause, so she would see it through, no matter how she felt inwardly.

She did the makeup for the scare actors and Jack's brothers—who clearly had no idea what had happened between her and Jack. Then, she transformed the Spangler cowboys too. Afterward, she settled in, all prepared for the guests once they arrived.

Time passed quickly, and Heather continued to work at the zombie transformation station during the second day of the Haunted Harvest. She soon found herself in a whirlwind of emotions, trying to sort through her feelings and thoughts. The makeup station had become a haven where she could immerse herself in her craft and momentarily set aside the complexities of her personal life.

As she applied makeup to the eager guests, transforming them into convincing zombies, Heather's mind wandered. She thought about the recent conversations she had with Jack, their shared pasts, and the unexpected revelations that had surfaced. It was a lot to process, and she couldn't help but feel a mix of emotions.

*I need to figure this out. Jack's been so kind and understanding, and I don't want to push him away. But these scars from the past... they still hurt, and I'm scared to let someone new in.*

She continued to work meticulously, paying attention to every detail of the makeup application. The process allowed her to channel her thoughts and emotions into her artistry, providing her with a sense of control and focus amidst the chaos of the event.

*Maybe I should talk to Jack again when the time feels right. I don't want to lose what we have, but I need to be sure I'm ready.*

Heather knew that navigating her feelings and fears wouldn't be easy, but she was determined to find a way to move forward, both in her personal life and in her budding friendship with Jack. As she continued to transform guests into zombies, she hoped that clarity and resolution would come with time.

Learning about Jack's own past wounds and scars added a layer of complexity to Heather's emotions. As she processed the revelation that Jack had experienced his own share of pain and heartache, it stirred a profound sense of empathy and sadness within her. The realization that he had also been hurt and scarred in his previous relationships created a deeper connection between them, but it also filled her with sorrow.

*It's heartbreaking to think that he's been through pain as well. He's been hurt, just like me. I wish no one had to go through that kind of pain.*

Heather's heart went out to Jack, and she couldn't help but feel a sense of vulnerability and compassion for him. It was a poignant reminder that they were both survivors of past hardships, and it made her desire to protect and support him even more.

While the newfound understanding of Jack's past brought them closer in some ways, it also added to the weight of their shared experiences. Heather knew that they both needed time to heal and build trust, and she hoped that their friendship would provide the strength and support they needed to move forward together.

As Heather continued to work at the zombie transformation station, her earlier decision to leave abruptly

after learning about Jack's conversation with Jessica weighed heavily on her mind. She recognized that her reaction might not have been fair to Jack, who had no control over what Jessica had shared with him.

*I wish I hadn't run out on him like that. Jack didn't ask for any of this, and Jessica certainly didn't mean to put me in such a vulnerable position.*

Heather now understood that Jessica had likely shared information about her past out of concern and without realizing the impact it would have on her. It was a reminder of the importance of communication and understanding in their friendships.

*Maybe I should have stayed and talked things through with him. We both have our scars, and maybe we can help each other heal.*

While regrets filled her thoughts, Heather also felt a renewed determination to address the situation with Jack when the time was right. She hoped to find a way to rebuild the connection they had, knowing that they both carried the weight of their pasts but also the potential for a brighter future together.

As Heather continued to work diligently at the zombie transformation station, she couldn't help but feel a twinge of sadness as she realized that several hours had passed without Jack checking in on her. Despite her initial concerns and worries about their recent conversation, she knew deep down that Jack was likely giving her the space and time she needed.

*It's been quite a while, and Jack hasn't come around. He's probably busy with the event and giving me the space I might need. That's thoughtful of him.*

The realization that Jack was respecting her boundaries and allowing her to focus on her work brought a small but genuine smile to Heather's face. It was a reassuring sign of his understanding and consideration, and it made her appreciate him even more.

*Jack's a good guy. He's giving me the space I need to sort things out, and I'm grateful for that.*

As she continued to transform eager guests into convincing zombies, Heather found solace in the support and understanding she had received from Jack. She knew that when the time was right, they would have the opportunity to address their feelings and experiences in a way that allowed their friendship to grow and flourish.

Heather diligently worked at the zombie transformation station, she was pleasantly surprised when Colton approached her, smiling.

“Hey, Heather, Jack thought you might appreciate a little help today.”

Colton's presence and the message he carried touched her heart, making her feel appreciated and supported during the Haunted Harvest event.

“That's really thoughtful of Jack.”

Heather couldn't help but feel a warm sense of gratitude toward her friends and colleagues at the orchard, including Jack and Colton, who had all shown care and concern for her well-being during this busy event. It really was nice to know that she had such supportive people around her, especially during times like this.

With Colton's assistance and Jack's consideration, Heather felt a renewed sense of camaraderie and belonging within the orchard's community. It gave her the strength to continue her work with enthusiasm and dedication.

Shortly after Colton left since she was doing just fine and only needed a bottle of water which he grabbed for her, the Haunted Harvest event experienced a rare lull in activity. Heather found herself momentarily free from the busy transformation station. It was during this brief moment of respite that she noticed Jessica approaching her, perhaps seeking an opportunity to talk.

“Hey, Heather! Surprise!”

Heather chuckled weakly. “Hey, Jessica.”

Jessica's smile died. "Jack told you I stopped by last night. I was hoping to surprise you! It was a long drive, and there was traffic. I wanted to get here during the event, but it was shut down by the time I got here, and I figured if I showed up right when it opened, you would be swamped... And speaking of swamped, you look incredible!"

Despite herself, Heather laughed. Jessica sounded like her old self. In some ways, it was as if no time had passed at all.

"Do you think we can talk some?" Jessica asked.

Heather nodded, acknowledging Jessica's presence and the desire to have a conversation. Despite the earlier discomfort caused by Jessica inadvertently sharing personal information with Jack, Heather understood that her friend likely had good intentions.

"Sure, Jessica," Heather said, her tone both friendly and cautious. "What's on your mind?"

"Maybe now isn't the time," Jessica hedged. "I take it..." She looked apologetic as she began to speak, clearly realizing the impact of her previous conversation with Jack on Heather. "I didn't go into detail or anything. I could tell that Jack has serious feelings for you, and I wanted to... I don't know. I guess I wanted to make sure that he was good enough for you, which isn't my place at all! I just wanted to say that I'm really sorry for what happened last night. I didn't mean to share your personal stuff with Jack. It was thoughtless of me."

Heather appreciated Jessica's willingness to address the situation and offer an apology. "Thanks, Jessica. I know you didn't mean any harm. It just caught me off guard."

"I promise I'll be more careful in the future," Jessica assured her. "I don't want to cause you any more stress."

"I appreciate that, Jessica. Let's put it behind us and enjoy the rest of the event."

With their understanding, Heather and Jessica were able to move past the incident. Friendship was so important, and Heather wasn't about to let Jessica go ever again. She had learned her lesson.

As Heather returned to her duties at the zombie transformation station, she noticed that Jessica had decided to stick around. Jessica's presence served as a comforting reminder of their friendship, and it helped Heather regain her focus on the task at hand, which was transforming eager guests into zombies and fulfilling their creative makeup requests.

Heather smiled. "Thanks for staying, Jessica. It's nice to have some company."

Her friend grinned. "Of course! I'm here to support you and make sure everything goes smoothly."

As guests continued to approach the station, requesting a variety of makeup looks, Heather and Jessica worked together seamlessly, using their creative talents to bring the Halloween spirit to life. It was a collaborative effort that not only benefited the event but also strengthened their bond as friends.

Throughout the event, the two friends shared moments of laughter and camaraderie, creating lasting memories amid the excitement of the Haunted Harvest. Jessica's presence added an extra layer of positivity and support to the event, making it an even more enjoyable experience for both of them.

Amid the busy and eventful day at the Haunted Harvest, Jessica showed her thoughtful and considerate side by running out to grab lunch for Heather. It was a gesture of kindness and support that touched Heather's heart.

When Jessica returned, she handed Heather the bag. "Hungry, right? You still like meatball subs, right?"

"Yes! Thanks so much, Jessica. You're a lifesaver!"

Heather had to eat in between working, but Jessica's thoughtfulness had made a significant difference in Heather's day. Sharing a meal and some much-needed downtime allowed them to recharge and continue their work at the event with renewed energy and enthusiasm.

"I don't know what I'd do without you, Jessica. You've been such a great friend today."

Jessica smiled. "It's my pleasure, Heather. I feel like we lost so much time."

“We really did, but that’s already changed.”

“That’s right!”



After the successful conclusion of the Haunted Harvest event, Heather invited Jessica to come home with her so they could have a moment of quiet and solitude, away from the hustle and bustle. Heather definitely felt the need to address certain matters that had been weighing on her mind.

Once they were in her room, Heather started, “Jessica, I want to apologize for something that’s been bothering me for a while. I should’ve reached out to you the moment I broke up with David. I realize now that I should have reconnected with you sooner.”

Jessica, with her understanding nature, listened attentively. “Heather, you don’t need to apologize for that. Life can be complicated, and I’m just glad we found our way back to each other when we did.”

“I know, but our friendship meant so much to me, and it still does, and I should have leaned on you during those difficult times.”

“Heather, our friendship is strong, and we’re here for each other now. That’s what matters the most. I’m here for you because I care about you, not just in tough times but in all times. You’re more than just someone I know. You’re a true friend.”

Their conversation was a moment of reconciliation and understanding, reaffirming the depth of their friendship and the support they provided each other, regardless of the timing. It was a step toward strengthening their bond and moving forward together as friends.

“So... I know you probably didn’t talk with Jack long, but... I wanted to know what you think of him.”

“From what I’ve seen and heard, Jack seems like a genuinely kind and caring person. He’s been there for you



during the Haunted Harvest, and that says a lot about his character.”

“Yeah, he’s been really sweet and understanding, especially when I opened up about my past.”

Jessica winced.

“No, it’s fine,” Heather said. “Intentions matter, and who knows? Maybe I needed that shove to open up to Jake. We tried to go out on a date, but it was so awkward, and I think that was in part because I hadn’t opened up to him yet.”

“Opening up is a big step, Heather,” Jessica encouraged. “It takes courage, and it’s a sign that you trust him.”

Heather took comfort in Jessica’s words, knowing that her friend’s approval and support meant a great deal to her. “Thanks, Jessica. I’m glad you think positively of him.”

“I just want to see you happy and surrounded by good people.”

Heather grinned. Today had been a good day. Yes, it would’ve been better if she could’ve seen Jack, but maybe this time, she could make him breakfast. At his place, though. She didn’t want her parents hovering around.

## CHAPTER 25



The following morning, Jack was pleasantly surprised by a familiar knock on his apartment door. When he opened it, he found Heather standing there, a bag of groceries in her arms and a determined look on her face.

“Morning, Jack!” she exclaimed cheerfully. “I hope you’re hungry because I’m making us breakfast.”

Jack smiled at her enthusiasm. “Good morning, Heather! Breakfast sounds fantastic. Come on in.”

Heather entered his apartment, and together, they headed to the kitchen. Jack’s heart warmed at the thoughtfulness of her gesture.

“You didn’t have to do this, you know.”

“I wanted to. Consider it a thank you for all your help during the Haunted Harvest.”

As Heather began to unpack the groceries and set the ingredients on the counter, Jack couldn’t help but admire her determination and kindness.

“Well, I appreciate it, Heather,” he said warmly. “Especially after...”

“Water under the bridge,” she said with a wave of her hand and a twinkle in her eyes.

He sucked in a breath. As much as he had fallen for her, he would be willing to wait as long as it took for her to heal. He had, and she needed to as well, regardless of whether or not the two of them dated.

“What are we having?” he asked.

“Apple cinnamon pancakes! My specialty.”

Jack chuckled, delighted by her choice. “Sounds amazing. I’ll be your trusty sous-chef,” he said playfully.

“Just don’t get in my way,” she teased.

“I don’t think two cooks are too many.”

“We’ll find out, won’t we?” she joked.

Heather and Jack spent the morning preparing breakfast together, sharing laughter and stories as they flipped pancakes and brewed coffee. It was a simple yet meaningful moment, and Jack couldn’t help but feel grateful for Heather’s presence in his life.

Their breakfast together marked the beginning of another day filled with shared moments and the possibility of building something special between them.

After breakfast, they headed over to the orchard, where the Haunted Harvest continued to be a resounding success, drawing in visitors and creating an atmosphere of excitement and spookiness. Throughout the day, Jack couldn’t help but be impressed by the event’s popularity and the enthusiasm of the attendees. He made it a point to visit Heather frequently, ensuring everything was running smoothly at the zombie transformation station and taking the opportunity to spend time with her.

He smiled warmly. “Heather, this place looks even more incredible today!”

“Thanks, Jack! It’s been a whirlwind, but I’m loving every moment of it.”

As the day progressed, Jack’s visits became more frequent, and their interactions were filled with laughter. He admired the dedication and hard work Heather put into her role at the Haunted Harvest, and he couldn’t help but feel a sense of pride in her.

“You’re doing an amazing job, Heather. The turnout is incredible!”

“Not because of me!”

“Everyone wants to make sure they hit your station, and that is on you.”

She blushed.

Their shared moments were a testament to the growing connection between Jack and Heather. Their friendship was blossoming, and the more they got to know each other, the closer they became.

As the Haunted Harvest came to an end on Sunday night, Jack’s visits continued, and they found themselves reflecting on the success of the event.

“Heather, I can’t thank you enough for being a part of this. It wouldn’t have been the same without you.”

“It’s been an incredible experience. I’m so glad I could be a part of it.”

Their shared smiles and the sense of accomplishment they felt were a testament to the meaningful connection they had forged over the course of the Haunted Harvest. With each passing day, their friendship grew stronger, and they looked forward to the future together.

As the Haunted Harvest came to a close on Sunday in the early evening, the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a dusky glow over Shooting Star Canyon. Jack and Heather found themselves wrapped in the atmosphere of the event they had poured their efforts into, their costumes still adorned.

“Do you want to grab some dinner?” Heather asked, smiling. “We could go in our costumes and maybe get a few more people excited for Halloween.”

“That sounds like a fantastic idea, Heather! Count me in,” he said eagerly. “I was about to ask you out myself!”

The prospect of dinner together in their costumes appealed to both of them, and it was the perfect way to extend their time together beyond the Haunted Harvest.

The evening air was crisp, and the streets of Shooting Star Canyon had taken on a magical quality as Halloween

approached. Heather and Jack, dressed in their costumes as the Swamp Thing and the cowboy zombie, walked hand in hand to a charming local restaurant that had embraced the Halloween spirit with festive decorations and dimly lit lanterns. The sight of the two unique characters drew smiles and curious glances from passersby, adding an extra layer of excitement to their evening.

Inside the restaurant, the atmosphere was warm and welcoming. Dimmed lights and flickering candles created an intimate ambiance. The aroma of delicious food wafted through the air, making their stomachs rumble in anticipation.

She giggled. "It's not every day you get to have dinner with the Swamp Thing."

He winked at her. "And it's not every day you dine with a cowboy zombie. We make quite the pair."

They were seated at a cozy corner table, their costumes garnering the attention of other diners, who couldn't resist striking up conversations about their creative attire. Heather and Jack, both completely at ease with each other, enjoyed the friendly banter and shared their own stories of how they came up with their costumes.

As they perused the menu, they talked about their favorite Halloween memories and traditions. Jack recounted stories of pumpkin carving contests with his brothers, while Heather shared her childhood memories of elaborate homemade costumes and trick-or-treating adventures with friends.

Their laughter and conversation flowed effortlessly, as if they had known each other for years. They discovered common interests, like their love for horror movies and the excitement of creating something unique for the Haunted Harvest.

"Speaking of horror movies, I have this idea for a haunted house room inspired by classic films," she said. "I'd love to hear your thoughts on it."

He leaned forward. "I'm all ears. I think your creativity could add a fantastic touch to our charity event."

Throughout their dinner, they laughed and chatted, relishing the unique experience of dining in costume. As they indulged in their meals, their connection deepened. They talked about their dreams and aspirations, shared their hopes for the future, and discussed the Haunted Harvest's success and potential. Heather's eyes sparkled with enthusiasm as she spoke about her makeup artistry and how it had become her passion.

"Heather, I'm truly grateful that you've come into my life. You bring so much joy and creativity, not just to the Haunted Harvest but to everything you do."

She blushed. "Thank you, Jack. I feel the same way about you. This journey has been incredible so far."

They lingered over dessert, savoring the last moments of their amazing date. They made plans for Halloween night, excited to see their charity project come to fruition and to continue building their connection.

As they finished their meal, the anticipation for Halloween grew, and they couldn't help but feel excited about the possibilities the future held for them, both personally and as a team dedicated to their charity project. The evening reinforced the connection they were constructing, one dinner at a time.

Leaving the restaurant, they once again strolled through the enchanting streets of Shooting Star Canyon, hand in hand, filled with anticipation for the festivities ahead. The date had been more than just a dinner. It was a magical night that solidified their growing bond and left them eager to see where their shared journey would take them.

He spotted a bench, and they walked over there. As they sat on the bench on the dimly lit street, their hands tightly intertwined, they both felt the weight of possibility and the excitement of what the future might hold. Despite the prospect of a long-distance relationship due to Heather's film commitments, they were determined to make it work.

"Heather, I know our paths may take us in different directions at times," he said gently, "but I'm willing to do

whatever it takes to keep this connection alive. You mean the world to me.”

She smiled. “I feel the same way. I value you immensely, and you make me happy. We’ve found something special, and I won’t let distance be an obstacle.”

“So... where does that leave us?”

“Well... shortly after lunch today, I received a phone call. I’m going to have to call him back, but Mark Reynolds, the director of the film that just finished up that I worked on, wants to hire me for his next movie which is going to start after Thanksgiving.”

“That’s wonderful!”

“So we’ll be able to spend through Thanksgiving together before I have to head back to California, but there will be a short break over Christmas—”

“And maybe I could come to you or you could come here. Whichever you want,” Jack said.

Her smile was blinding. “After this movie, I can take a few months off before I take on another one. As best as I can, I’ll have Halloween off every year, and I’ll try—I can’t promise, but I’ll try—to have October off every year.”

“I guess when you want to date a celebrity makeup artist, it’s just like when you date an actor. I wish we wouldn’t have to spend time apart, but we can call and text all the time.”

“FaceTime too,” she said.

“As often as you like.”

“I hope it won’t be too much,” she murmured, “the long distance.”

“Anything that’s worth having is worth fighting for,” he said firmly. “I know how passionate you are about your job, and you’re amazing at it. I would never dream of taking you away from your career. No, I stand by you here and wherever your job takes you.”

“Don’t you worry, though,” she assured him. “Halloween at the very least is a must.”

With their commitment to making their relationship work, they shared a tender and promising kiss under the moonlit sky. The moment held the magic of a thousand Halloweens, and they knew that no matter where life’s journey took them, their love would remain as steadfast as the changing seasons.

As they parted ways for the evening, both Jack and Heather were filled with hope and anticipation. The future was uncertain, but they had found something rare and beautiful in each other—a love that transcended distance and time. Halloween, the season of magic and transformation, had brought them together, and they were ready to embrace every moment, no matter the miles that might separate them.

Their hearts were united, and the promise of future adventures, both spooky and sweet, awaited them on the horizon. With a shared smile and a lingering sense of warmth, they each headed home, carrying with them the enchantment of the night and the promise of a love that would endure, just like the spirit of Halloween itself.



## EPILOGUE



**M**yles Spangler shifted uncomfortably in his weathered cowboy boots as he leaned against the corral fence.

The warm Texas sun beat down on the trio of Spangler brothers, casting long shadows over the dusty ranch. Colton and Lawrence, his older brothers, were in a playful mood today, and they had Myles squarely in their sights.

Colton, the eldest and the most boisterous of the three, slung an arm around Myles' shoulders and grinned. "Hey there, little brother," he drawled, his voice dripping with mischief. "You know, we've been waiting for a wedding invitation for years now. When's it gonna be your turn to settle down and give Mom some grandbabies?"

Myles chuckled nervously, running a hand through his unruly, sun-bleached hair. "Well, Colton, you know I've been busy keeping this ranch running. I don't have much time for courting. It's not like you're married, and you are dating someone!"

Lawrence, the middle brother, chimed in with a sly grin. "Busy, huh? Or maybe you're just too shy to ask a lady out. You know, Myles, the cattle don't make for good company on those long, lonely nights."

Myles rolled his eyes, trying to brush off their teasing. "I'll have you know I've been focused on building a future for all of us here. Besides, I'm waiting for the right woman to come along."

Colton chuckled and slapped Myles on the back. “Well, brother, I reckon you better keep your eyes peeled. The right woman isn’t gonna just wander onto this ranch. You might need to mosey on into town and introduce yourself to some fine ladies.”

Myles sighed, knowing they were right, but he wasn’t about to admit it. “Don’t you two worry about me. When the time is right, I’ll find the right gal. Until then, I’ll keep tending to these cattle and enjoying the single life.”

The brothers continued to tease Myles, their laughter filling the air. As the sun dipped below the horizon and the ranch settled into the quiet of the evening, Myles couldn’t help but reflect on their banter. Maybe his brothers had a point, and it was time to start thinking about settling down, but for now, he was content to be a bachelor cowboy, riding the range and enjoying the simple pleasures of ranch life.



Thank you for reading [A Cowboy’s Halloween!](#) The next holiday is Halloween with [A Cowboy’s Thanksgiving](#), featuring Myles!

Be sure to sign up for [my newsletter](#) to learn when the new book is available!

Until the next book,

~Sierra

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**Oak Spring Acres in Shooting Star Canyon**

The Cowboy's Friend

The Cowboy's Secret

The Cowboy's Second Chance

The Cowboy's Fake Relationship

The Cowboy's Forbidden Love

The Cowboy's Love Triangle

## ABOUT SIERRA GAMBLE

Sierra Gamble has always loved horses. She used to draw them all the time as a little girl even if they were sometimes far too fat or way too skinny. For a little while, she took horseback riding lessons, and she would love nothing more than to get back in the saddle again one day!

Her grandfather used to watch western movies all the time. Sierra never really got into them until he became really sick. Now, she tries to write combine the horses that she grew up loving with the westerns Pop-Pop always loved. Of course, being a hopeless romantic, Sierra has to add romance to each story too!

Sign up for [Sierra's newsletter](#) to learn when her next book is released as well as excerpts, cover reveals, and giveaways!

*For more information*

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