

## 8. NEW PUMPKIN TIME

I thought of myself as already damned. My life was over at fourteen. Jan Harris was hanging with a tough crowd. She was on a collision course with oblivion. I figured that I'd hop on board her train.

"We know how to get nasty."

She pulled up her tight jeans so that you could no longer see her thong. She shook her ass for everyone to see; it was so strategic. This was her shining moment. The star needed to burn as brightly as possible before it went out.

She had big juicy lips that she accentuated with a light shade of lip gloss. Her hair was long flowing sandy brown. And the curves of her body were well-defined for a fourteen year old. Everything about her spoke of action. I was ready to go off to the races.

Jan already had a catalogue of moves and a dirty mind to make it all come alive. In her young life, she had chronicled volumes of hair-raising exploits, so many that she barely had time to catch her breath. Today she had on a revealing halter top. She was lucky that they didn't send her to the principal on this one. She pulled closed an open white blouse to make herself more presentable.

"I was giving him head in the living room, and his parents start to come in. They were supposed to be out for the night."

"Miss Harris, I hope your chatter has something to do with Algebra."

She had a quick retort for the teacher, I was just working on the velocity of projected liquids.

Everyone started laughing. The teacher's face got red. She was angry but had already been topped.

"So you want to hang with us tonight," Jan's invitation seemed more like a challenge.

"I'm not sure," I wasn't. I felt that my life was heading in the wrong direction. And I didn't want to make bad into worse.

I couldn't meet them out Friday night, but I agreed to hook up at the mall that Saturday afternoon. I rode over on my bike and caught up with Jan and her friend Cheryl awhile they were trying on jeans.

"Hey, girl." Jan gave me a hug. "You know Cheryl."

Cheryl gave me a wave. "How did you get here?"

"I rode my bike."

Cheryl exclaimed, "That's a little dangerous with the crazy drivers around here."

"I'm careful."

"Next time, I can give you a ride. Here give me your cell phone number."

After I gave her my number, I told her, "I like riding my bike. It's good to get some exercise."

Cheryl gave me a satirical nod, "It wouldn't hurt to lose a couple of pounds."

Jan looked at me sympathetically, "You like my jeans."

"You can see your butt crack."

Cheryl laughed, "Don't you love it when a guy sticks his tongue right in there?"

Both girls stared at me. I pointed to the window.

“That guy is gazing at you butt.”

Cheryl prompted her, “Shake it for him.”

“He looks kind of cute.”

“Motion him in.”

I warned them, “They ‘re mall rats.”

“No biggie.”

I didn’t come all the way over to the mall to hang with mall rats. These two guys were waving their arms and prancing on in as if they were about to hit the stage. One of the sales clerks intercepted them.

“This is a woman’s store.”

“We’re buying presents for our ladies.”

“You guys don’t even look as if you have enough to buy something for yourself. This is a business.”

“Our girls are over there.”

Jan wanted to jump in, but she was hardly close enough. She watched her latest admirers get shooed away.

Cheryl reacted, “We’ve got our own posse to make sure that the riff raff don’t get past the door.”

“That one guy look like he had more than riff raff. I would have liked to give him a ride for his money.”

Cheryl interrupted, “I think that the point is that they didn’t have any money.”

I added, “Like I said. Mall rats.”

Jan had her own come back, “I’ve got the money, if they’ve got the time.”

Cheryl reminded her, “Thank, God, your parents are paying for those jeans.”

“My mother wants me to look better than she did when she was a girl.”

Cheryl had her own version of the truth, “I think that your mother has her eye on some young boys herself.”

Jan got a little defensive, “You know what they say about suburban moms.”

I asked naively, “What do they say?”

Cheryl and Jan looked over at each other and smiled. That was enough for me.

“Do you need panties?” Cheryl was holding up a next to non-existent thong. She threw it Jan’s way and it glance off her face.

“No fair, Cheryl. We’ve got the clothes cops watching our every move.”

“Jan, you just have to be a little daring.”

“How’s this for daring?” Jan used the panties as a slingshot, and they caught on the side of the arm.

“Jan, that hurt.”

“I think that clerk is giving us the eye,” I tried to warn the girls.

“Are, you girls, ready to make a purchase?” The clerk gave us a deadly scowl.

“Let me just get out of these jeans.” And Jan does just that. She pulls off the jeans right in the middle of the store. Luckily her audience wasn’t around.

In the food court, we laughed about it. “If you hasn’t pulled out a credit card at that moment, I think that she would have arrested all of us.”

I wondered, "What would have been the charge?"

Over her chicken squares, Jan perked up, "Decent exposure. Of course!"

"I don't think that there going to allow us in that store again."

"I spent over five hundred dollars."

"How did you manage that, Jan?" I asked.

"Let's just call it an early birthday gift."

"Or Santa Claus sliding down that chimney."

All in all our exploits still seemed pretty tame.

"You've given a guy, the hot lips before?"

Cheryl gave Jan that look.

"You load up on an eucalyptus cough drop. Then you give him a rim job."

"That must hurt like hell for him."

"At first, he jumps. But after that initial pain, it's such a rush for him."

"You would know all about that thing," Cheryl reminds her.

"It's not like something that you don't try."

"I've never done the cough drops. But I do like the banana flavored condom."

This was seeming all over my head. I was trying to swim along with the conversation. I wanted to pretend that I was sophisticated. If this what it took to get a guy, I was willing to learn from my new teachers..

"Haley, you coming with us tonight," Cheryl looked straight at me.

"Yeah, of course."

"Give me your address. I'll come get you."

Cheryl had just turned sixteen, and her parents bought her a new Mustang first thing. She was already a terror on four wheels. I was ready to jump into the thrill mobile.

If Bill and Hazel had watched me on the way out, they might have sent back to change. I had taken notes from the experts, and my lessons had not gone to waste. If I was going to snare a man, I was ready to follow their directions. The key was to expose as much as possible even if the night was cooling down.

Now, all of this seems really naive to me, but I wanted to fit in. Just somewhere. Part of me just felt shitty all the time. And I wanted to get rid of that feeling for good. I understood that once Cheryl let loose on the road, that I would kiss my troubles good by. So long, Bill and Hazel.

When I jumped in Cheryl, car, I wondered where was Jan.

"She told me to come get you first. She's taking a while getting ready."

"Nice wheels!"

"Thanks. I wish that I could tell you that I worked for them. But they were a gift. My parents want me to go in style."

"Aren't they afraid that you might wreck a new car? How long have you even been driving?"

"My dad used to take me to the mall to drive when I was fourteen. On long trips, they'd even let me take the wheel."

"Before you had a license."

"Yeah. Law are made for squares. That's what my dad said."

“Wow!”

“What took you so long in there? I honked a few times.”

“I had to go to the bathroom. Sorry about that.”

Jan still wasn't ready when we got to her place.

“I think that I have to go to the bathroom again.”

Cheryl tried to embarrass me, “It's not that time, is it?”

“No, I just had a couple of glasses of juice before I left.”

“Gin and juice, girl?”

“No, just juice.” Maybe I should have gone along with her joke.

I rang the doorbell at Jan's place. Her stepfather answered.

“I'm just waiting for Jan. I'm Haley”

“She'll be right out.”

“Do you mind if I use the bathroom?”

“She's in the upstairs room. There's one just off the family room.”

I didn't see Jan's mother around. I'd heard stories, but still never met the woman. Her stepfather was another thing all together. Sure I was wearing hardly anything, but he was staring at my breasts. I was all of fourteen, but he was giving me that nasty stare.

While I was in the bathroom, I kept getting the creeps. I made sure that the door was locked. It just seemed as if he was trying to peek in.

He was waiting by the door when I got out.

I was startled, “Have you been standing her all this time?”

“No, I got myself a snack.”

Sure enough, he had a sandwich in his hand.

“So have you done babysitting to make money?” he asked me. The question seemed to come out of nowhere. It wasn't as if Jan needed a babysitter her own age.

“Now and then, I don't really like to deal with kids. I mean I like kids. But I'm not really all that in for baby sitting.”

“You have a really pretty face. Don't let the world bring you down.”

I wasn't sure what to make of that comment.

In the car, Jan quizzed me, “You weren't talking to the monster, were you?”

“Yeah. What's the big deal.”

“He's a pervert. I don't know why my mom married him. I try to keep him away from my friends.”

It all seemed like exaggeration on her part. But he did seem weird.

“Just don't let him near you. Don't let him touch you. Or I might have to kill him with my bare hands.”

That seemed extreme.

Cheryl had made the car her own. She took the corners like a race car driver. If this was a preview of the night, I was feeling really uneasy.

I wasn't not sure how we ended up here. I imagined that we had been wandering in the woods for days and came upon signs of civilization. In fact, one of Jane's friends told us to meet her at the Waffle House in Alpharetta. I figured that this was one of the stupidest things that we ever did. Even though I was fourteen, I was a lot more worldly than the kids that we were

meeting. And I thought that I had my wits about me. But before I knew it, I was swimming upstream.

We pulled up next to Jan's friend Sissy. Sissy opened the door of her SUV. There was a cooler with beer inside.

"You always meet here?" Jan asked.

Sissy laughed, "You've got a better place."

I was thinking somewhere less conspicuous.

"Last week, that woman in there. We call her Madge. Madge called the cops on me. They were going to take me in for drinking underage. But then I just started balling. They just looked at me and told me to run along home.

"So you're back here this week," I wondered.

"Where are we going to go?"

"Maybe a Wal Mart. It's bigger," I muttered.

"They've got security."

I thought that I spoke too softly for her to hear me. I felt like she could read my mind. Sissy prodded me, "A beer?"

"No, thanks." After her story, I thought that I knew what I was doing.

"There's a lot in here."

"Cool. So what else do you do besides drink in a parking lot?"

June had been silent all this time. She piped up, "We wait to get drunk!"

Jane tried to go along. I just gave them that clueless look. I imagined that this was the sort of thing that you could include in your college portfolio under *learning how to become well-adjusted*.

If this was going to be the summit of the evening, I was glad that my parents never moved to Alpharetta.

"There might be some guys coming."

Oh great, we were going to make out with some prime choice Alpharetta boys.

Cheryl took her turn, "This is going to be a blast."

Sissy added, "Josh text-messaged about a half hour ago."

"They may not even show up!"

I wasn't going to hold my breath.

"Haley, you want a beer." Cheryl handed me one.

"I'll pass for now. Save me one for later."

Sissy informed me, "There may be no later. Not with these guys."

"I just don't want to feel light-headed."

Cheryl's driving had set me in a bizarre mood. I could feel that I was losing control.

The guys pulled up in three vehicles. Two cars and a pick up. They all seemed trashed.

"Who brought the child?" They were looking at me.

"Sissy, is this how you earn babysitting money when you party?"

I could feel my face getting red. Jan tried to cover for me, "Sissy never told me that she was sending out for some elementary school boys."

"We've all got licenses."

"Licenses to be ass-holes."

“You’ve got a lot of lip for a hot chick.” Jim had his sights set on a feisty one and was ready to go.

“So what do you have in mind?”

“I don’t know. Do you have any tricks?”

“I’m not going to give it away without a little in return.”

I still hadn’t said a thing.

“So the cat got you tongue.”

“I’m Haley.”

“I’m Mike.” Mike was Sissy’s boy. And she wasn’t going to let some newcomer interfere with her action.

She walked over to him and put her arms around him. “Long time, no see. Give me a little kiss.” She poured on all her charms. Like Cheryl, Sissy was also sixteen. I felt way out of my depth.

I looked around for reinforcements. Jan was sitting in Jim’s car. And Cheryl was talking to Jim’s friend Adam. I felt a little hopeless.

I got pawned off on Bud. He hadn’t said much. Just stood in the back. He was a little taller than the four other boys. Maybe a little menacing. He had a brush cut and was well-built. Almost a farm boy.

“Here, get in.” He motioned me toward his light blue Chevy pick up. He burned rubber as he pulled out of the parking lot.

Bud didn’t go to Roswell High. I don’t even think that he was in school. Someone told me that he was all of seventeen.

“This used to be my territory.”

“Huh?” I had no idea what he was talking about. He sounded like a gunslinger from the Wild West.

“I used to deal pot around here!”

“Used to?”

“I’ve moved on.”

“What?”

He laughed, “Bigger and brighter things.”

“Sure!”

“Do you smoke?”

“Weed? I tried it. It did nothing for me.”

“Really.”

“I didn’t want to become pothead.” I looked twice at him after I delivered that line.

He smiled.

“I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“No offense taken.”

He seemed to be loosening up. I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing.

“Where do you know Sissy from?”

“I don’t. She’s Jan’s friend. This is the first time that we met.”

“Sissy can be a bitch. We went out. But I couldn’t take her moods. I think it’s all her drinking.”

I felt strange all alone with him in the truck. I knew that I was in for some fast times, but I had no idea that I would be on my own. Just paired off without a chance to catch my breath. And we seemed like an unlikely couple. Jan may have been used to this kind of thing. For me, it seemed all of crazy. If I couldn't really talk to a boy, why would I want to hang out with him.

At least he was opening up to me. Maybe that was a good first step.

He handed me a bottle, "Do you want a wine cooler?"

Who did he think I was? Some kind of ten year old. I was used to drinking fine scotch. This was going to be a real let down.

"Thanks!" I supposed that I needed something to get me numb. At this time of night, Main Street hardly had a car on it. It was just this path of inviting open road. He gunned it, and his truck just sailed along almost leaving the ground and flying in the air. He was in heaven. Up ahead. I saw a traffic light ahead change to yellow. There was no way that we could make it before the red. But I had no idea if he could stop in time. I imagined that I saw headlights emerging from the shadows. My stomach tightened. I held my breath.

"Great brakes," he screamed out.

His tires screeched. The rubber burned a path of smoke behind us.

I could have yelled out that we might have been killed. I figured that Bud didn't need anything more to make him crazy.

He seemed to settle down the more that we drove. I had had enough, and we were just started. I don't know how long we drover for. It seemed like forever. All these strange turns.

It was the middle of October. The sky had this absurd yellow haze even though it was already dark. He pulled off a side road.

"Get out," he barked.

I obliged. I had no idea what was going on.

The brush was still built up at the side of the river. Goldenrod and wild flowers. There was this heaviness from the humidity in the air since we were so close to the water. He threw a twig in the river, and it floated with the current.

"Do you see that? You could weigh down a body and no one would ever find it."

"Wow, I never thought about something like that."

"I think about it all the time?"

"So that's what happens to people who don't pay up for their drugs?"

"I don't deal anymore."

"That's what used to happen."

"I don't like to think about that anymore."

I didn't want to know about any of the horror stories. I just thought about a weighed-down body dropping all the way down to the bottom of the riverbed. I prayed that wasn't going to be my fate.

In the darkness, I could see him smile. The city lights and the moonlight.

"You don't have anything to be afraid of."

I'm glad that he was trying to set me at ease. It was the deep of night. I was out her alone with a loose canon. And my new friends were making it with some strange boys from Alpharetta. And I had nothing to worry about! That wine cooler was hardly doing the trick.

"Let me get you another wine cooler."

“Of course!”

Kissing was next. Or maybe not. I needed to keep my wits about me. I could always run.

“If you tried to run around here in the dark, it would be so easy to trip.”

I felt as if he was reading my mind.

“What are you talking about?”

“I came out here one night, and I thought that I heard something. I tried to hightail it back to the truck. And I tripped on some of this underbrush. As I said, you have to be careful.”

I didn’t want to ask what had brought him out this far. I let him talk on.

“Maybe we should get back,” I tried to remind him.

“I think those girls have some business to take care of. We don’t want to interrupt them.”

There was a weird irony his voice. I felt that it was beyond my experience to explore any more. His silent world was a mystery better left for a world-weary psychiatrist.

On the other hand, I felt that maybe he was becoming a little kinder under my influence. I just wished that was enough to make up for his past crimes and maybe prevent any future ones. He waved me on back to the truck. We had been out her long enough.

He popped open another beer when we got inside the truck. We sat there for a few minutes.

“You want to listen to music.”

“I don’t know.”

“Sometimes, I just like the quiet out here. Away from all the crazy screaming and yelling.”

“You can hear the crickets out here.”

“You know what I got in there? He was pointing to the glove compartment.

I shook my head.

“My gun. I could make anyone do anything I wanted.”

Did he mean me? He could force himself on me. I was locked in the car with him. I wanted to check to see if I could get out on my own.

He laughed, “You have nothing to be afraid of. I can protect you.”

From what? From himself. I couldn’t ask. It was too late. The inside of the truck was a little like a cell. It would be difficult to escape even if it wasn’t locked. There was this reminder of how small I was.

Bud hardly meant me any harm. There was just something about his manners that were intimidating. I could feel this wave of hurt pass over me. Even though he was sitting next to me, I felt like he wasn’t there.

“Let’s get back.”

“I just want to finish my beer.”

He seemed very mellow, but I didn’t want to cross him. A boy and his beer. That was just enough for now.

“Do you like Halloween?” The question seemed to come out of the blue.

“A little. I like costumes.”

“I’m not so into costumes. I like horror movies. And it’s fun to scare people. Nothing too radical. I just like practical jokes and that.”



I had this vision of him sneaking into people's houses. Maybe hiding in a girl's room.

"I mean nothing too illegal. Firecrackers and shit like that."

Was that all?

"I guess down deep I take all that stuff for real."

If he really was a little psycho, it might not have been a good idea to reveal too much to him. I didn't care.

"Real how?"

"I just think that it's based on things that really happen to us."

For the moment, I was thinking about Jan's stepdad. Bud seemed to have that same creepiness. Maybe a kind word could help Bud from ending up the same way. I was reminded about his comments about the weighted-down body and the gun. All this was more than mere speculation. I could taste that fear.

"We should get back."

We didn't say much on the way back to the Waffle House. After he parked, he came around and helped me out.

"The door handle sticks sometimes."

The girls were all sitting on Jim's car as if nothing had happened. On the way home, they cackled in glee about their conquests.

"How was Bud?"

Cheryl and Jan laughed.

"He seemed nice."

"Is that all?"

"He was trying to get me drunk. But he only made me more paranoid."

Jan had her own take, "He reminds of Jason from *Friday the Thirteenth*."

"So that's why you sent me off with him."

Jan stopped by Sunday.

"Let's go for a walk."

"Where?" I asked.

"Let's just walk."

This seemed hardly standard to this child of the mall. Why would she want to walk if there wasn't anything to buy?

The night was a little cooler than Saturday. I kept thinking about the school work that I had to get done before tomorrow.

"Did you have fun last night?"

"It was OK. Bud was a little weird."

"Did you get his number?"

"I think that he wanted to force himself on me. He told me about his gun and all. And he talked about weighing down bodies on the Chattahoochee. He 's a freak."

Jan confessed, "I hooked up with Jim. He was fun and all."

"So are you two dating now?"

"I just met him last night. And he told me that he wouldn't go out with a girl who put out that soon."

In interjected, "That seems like some kind of double standard."

“I’m tired of meeting guys like that. I just don’t know how to say no.”

“What do you mean?”

I could see tears in her eyes. “I try to be tough. It’s just so hard.”

She wanted to tell me more. But she tried to change the subject, “That guy Evan’s been asking about you.”

“I thought that you and he were an item.”

“He just wanted me for the numbers.”

“So why should I be interested.”

“He is so good if you know what I mean.”

I added my perspective, “This just seems too fast for me. I’m not ready for this kind of thing.”

“You’re young. You got to have fun.”

“But none of these guys care an ounce for you.”

“Sex is sex. You need it to get rid of all the pressure. When he’s inside of me, there’s nothing else in life. I just leave my body. I let all my problems go.”

She talked to me how she used her body to communicate. It was just natural. She never had to say a thing.

“Don’t you feel bad?”

“It’s not like you’re happy all the time!”

It is the Sunday before Labor Day, August 31, 2008. My senior year of high school began a couple of weeks ago. I am driving north on Medlock Bridge Road. I take Portishead’s new album *Thrice* from its case and put it in the CD player. For me it implies a sense of loss, something specific, and something way more general.

As I pass over the Chattahoochee River, I remember my adventure when I was fourteen. I had escaped with my life. Just as I cross over the bridge, I accelerate. I am free, but the phantoms still wander around inside me waiting to threaten me again. That is why I find the Portishead so inspiring. I turn it up.

There was a horror that dominated my early years. It first lived outside of me, but it found a space inside. This only made me more withdrawn. Guys would realize this. They took advantage of it. They made me do all the work. Then I took the blame.

Tonight is my time. It has nothing to do with anyone else. I am driving. I keep accelerating. There are no other cars around.

Sometimes this road is a road of tragedy. There are crosses marking places where kids have lost control of their cars, crashed, and died. Friends still place wreathes and flowers at the side of the road in memory of their loved ones. I can sense their loss, but I carry on.

I have no clear destination. My time is my time. I am off tomorrow. I have no plans.

Summer hangs on longer and longer. The humidity hangs in the air. A foggy haze fills the golf course on my right. All the games during the daytime cannot chase away the phantoms that haunt the Southern moors. Some new monster waits for suggestion from the darker forces of the night.

My doors are locked, and I carry my own ghosts with me. If they have trapped me inside a prison of my own making, I have found sweet revenge by facing each one and giving each a name.

The light is turning to red at Old Alabama Road. The guy in the car next to me looks over trying to attract my attention. I refuse to look him in the eye. I catch enough to see that he has not stopped his game.

I want this to be my night. No interference!

So many of the kids that I know are overwhelmed by the drama in their live. They only seek more of it in the hope to make it all second nature. They are only dulling the pain. Their tolerance level only increases. They need greater stimulation.

Then one day the mountain is too difficult to climb.

The heat of the day is starting to dissipate. With the windows open, I work up a good breeze. It blows through my hair. My car glides along. I am flying.

I slow the car as I reach the curve that has been the enemy of so many teen victims. I am not tempting fate. I only observe others who have traveled in this same lane. I pay attention to the traffic signs. They are my only guide in the darkness. I stare at the lane lines.

Cars whiz past me as they head south.

Everywhere is built up with new strip malls. Subdivision pop up in every vacant field. There are a few farms around, a legacy that this place used to be a refuge from the city. Now the city makes its way up here.

Alpharetta is so much more unforgiving than Roswell. The clear cutting has been much more methodical. There is little to protect the citizens from the inevitable march of progress. I am just as caught up in that relentless wave.