

Chapter 10

Spookacious

Skeeter had no intention of ever growing up, of course, or old, or fat (yugg) but adults were always asking what she wanted to “be” when (not if) she did the first of these.

Yeah—right. Like she was ever going to be five full feet tall, or would ever *want* to be. Grownups couldn’t be buttoncute, or have any authentic fun, or even take a proper bathtub wallow. Forget it.

But the adults kept on asking, and for a long time in pubescence Skeeter would tell these buttinskies she was going to “be” a nurse. For quite a long time she believed it herself. Gramma Otto had been an RN and a good one, leaving no doubt that being a nurse was where it was at. Smoothing fevered brows seemed a decent enough way to make money, and candy stripers got to wear peppermint-stick uniforms besides.

But then Skeeter entered high school, and learned that to become a Health Care Provider you had to chop up worms and frogs and—get this!—*fetal pigs*, which was so completely gross a notion you knew they must’ve made it up as a joke, right? Pukey the Fee-tal Pig, tra la lolly: th-th-th-that’s all, folks.

Where could such a road lead in the end but to morgues and corpses? Skeeter had no problem dealing with the diseased or infirm, but getting involved with The Dead—to the point of slicing them open and groping inside—was just too utterly spookacious. Like being forced to assist your mother in disemboweling a raw Thanksgiving turkey: GROHsss.

Skeeter preferred ham anyhow; it came decently outfitted in tin, and was such a yummy shade of pink to boot.

So in her very first month of high school she managed to divest herself of all professional ambition; and when the kibitz crowd persisted in asking what she wanted to “be,” Skeeter would say a gameshow contestant. Meanwhile there were far more pressing questions to answer, like what to wear to the Halloween dance.

After much biting of knuckle and creasing of brow, she decided to go as a vampire. Skeeter Kitefly was probably the least vampirish-looking creature ever born, but how better to beguile guys than in chalk-white fright makeup and a long black wig, plus a ghoulish gown that by dint of pinning here and unpinning there could be made lowcuttier and skintightier once she was out of parental eyeshot.

This took rather longer than anticipated. Living only seven blocks away from school, Skeeter was ready to walk there and/or back and maybe score some extracurricular trick-or-treat goodies en route; but *AR*nold would not hear of it. He was aghast at the idea of a young girl out alone after dark in that neighborhood of wizening grotesqueries, sure to be laced with razor blades on October 31st.

So good old *AR*nold agreed to drive Skeeter to the dance, together with three of her eighth-grade gang retained on holding-pattern option till they got settled and could strike up high school friendships. *AR*nold approved of this arrangement and called it carpooling; aghast or not, he’d sighed at the idea of driving one girl a mere seven blocks. There was a war going on in the Middle East or somewhere, with a lot of talk about embargoes and shortages, and *AR*nold—normally the sweetest-hearted of stepfathers—was always sending Skeeter back upstairs to make sure she’d turned off her lights or radio or hairdryer.

“Don’t you know there’s an energy crisis?”

“Maybe we should take more than One-a-Day vitamins,” Skeeter would say.

She blew him a Theda Bara kiss as he dropped them off with repeated reminders that he’d be waiting at this same corner no later than the compromised-on 10 PM. Tomorrow, after all, was another school day. Making this a school night, and oh! what a night she’d make it!

Here in the gym—no, not a gym; a fabulous palace ballroom!—well, hardly fabulous; more like an orange-and-black pandemonium. Well anyway: here at the Halloween Monster Masque, where Red Death might be a no-show but there’s freaks aplenty vying with goblins and skeletons and witches and ghosts and Legends of Boggy Creek and Richard Nixon fresh from his Saturday Night Massacre.

Skeeter wondered who everybody was. Some were unmistakable, like that little dribble Droan Webster: a straitjacketed lunatic with hands left free to squeeze and pinch. Must’ve thought it was a come-as-you-are dance. And over there, costumed as a Fifties chick (ha! a Fifties *tease*) in cotton-candy angora and a poodle skirt short enough to qualify as a poodle tutu: Pamela Pillsbury, Skeeter’s archest rival. Talk about your Dainty Baby Bitch-Queen Junes—

All through junior high they’d bristled and bridled and dismissed each other as “funny-looking.” In fact they were assembled from the same compact snookums kit, being equally blue of eye and yellow of hair, damask of cheek (when not whited-out) and short in the leg department. The significant difference was that Pam, though a tad prettier by Lydia Languish standards, made a peevish Fifties chick; while the more comical-faced Skeeter was a cross-your-heart kissable vampire.

“Scuse me. Oh Kelly, *hi-ee*, I didn’t notice you standing there.”

“Why Pam-e-la, same here.”

“Ooh I like you as a brunette. Is that a wig? Looks so much naturaller.”

Ms. Pillsbury (“The Dough Girl”) had a syrupy singsong voice that Skeeter (“Mosquito Mouth”) could imitate to unkind perfection. She did so now, asking if poor Pammy’d lost her skirt again.

“Why don’t you go suck on something, DracuLETTE?”

And Pam stamped her little saddle shoe before turning on its heel and traipsing away. (She was the sort of girl who traipsed.) Thus the dance got off to a satisfying big bang start, and promised to get even better.

One of the truly aw-reet features of high school life was the presence of men aged sixteen and upwards, who had their own cars and parttime jobs and income above and

beyond allowances; all of which were good and improving things and made your average ninth-grader look really premature.

Pamela Pillsbury was dancing with Malcolm Twist, an average ninth-grader (dressed as a burglar? no, a terrorist) who six short months ago had been an acknowledged catch, but tonight was reduced to a dancin' stand-in while Pam jockeyed for a licensed if not licentious junior if not senior.

What a bamboozle. Skeeter took a dim view of trifling with and stringing along and malicious delusion—as opposed to dalliance, which was almost entirely good-natured. Playful. Recreational. A fun way to spend an evening or an hour or a few minutes between classes or while waiting for the bus or riding *on* the bus or skipping the bus altogether and getting a lift from some guy with his own car.

Skeeter was an accomplished flirt and no shrinking violet in any sense but sizewise. She stalked around the gym acting gaunt and broody over her undead status, and burst out laughing; attempted then to gad about like one famished for a strapping young man's blood, and again was overcome with a case of the cackles. Finally she stuck to one spot and struck a few poses, conscious of being checked out by several eyes—

—at least two of which belonged to a guy (definitely not a preemie) who'd come as Dr. Jekyll *and* Mr. Hyde, having transformed half of himself into each. So COOwull was this combo that Skeeter went right up and asked him/them if he/they wanted to shake it.

They did; and they did.

“Rattle and roll,” said Jekyll & Hyde.

Skeeter wasn't absolutely sure but had a hunch J & H were/was junior Lonnie Fesso, who could shake it without a doubt or pause and seemed to have a thing for Morticias-in-miniature with startle-you-blue eyes. Wicked wicked! At any rate she was reclaimed for dance after dance, for “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy” and “Bad Bad Leroy Brown” and “Frankenstein” à la Edgar Winter and extracts from *Goats Head Soup*.

Sometimes Jekyll led, and sometimes Hyde.

They were semi-through the *American Graffiti* double-album soundtrack, with J & H singing “The Stroll” in Skeeter’s ears and making it sound like “This Troll,” when the Masque’s Monster Mash was announced.

No Midwestern high school Halloween dance could be complete, of course, without the breaking of a Jack-o’-lantern piñata; and one was hung from the gym ceiling awfully close to the more customary glitterball. A space beneath this was now cleared, and lucky contestants’s masquerade names were drawn from a fishbowl disguised as a black cat.

Me me me Skeeter pleaded, *pick me pick me pick me* she demanded of Fate, aching to the roots of her chalk-white teeth for a chance to be the center of ALL eyes, not merely several! A chance that Fate indirectly gave her, as Jekyll & Hyde’s names were called and Skeeter was entitled to squeal and clutch and carry on as though they’d been going together from way the hell back.

Which she did, boy howdy! with open relish, putting Pamela Pillsbury’s nose so out of snubby joint that she quarreled with her terrorist stand-in Malcolm Twist, and to such an extent that Malcolm laid the foundation for years of future psychotherapy by bursting into tears before everyone and running out of the gym.

“Exit smiling,” said the alleged Lonnie Fesso, submitting to the blindfold with half a fiendish grin.

J & H at the piñata plate, taking a couple of leisurely warm-up swings; then a single open-and-shut CLOUT that broke the Jack-o’-lantern’s crown wide open and sent a jillion cheapsweets tumbling down.

No shortages, no embargoes; just an unplanned rush en masse to plunder the Hershey’s kisses and candy corn and saltwater taffy tidbits. And there was shoving and jostling and trampling and squeezey pinchy groping (by Droan Webster) till a regular student riot resulted, Jekyll & Hyde spurring it on with demonic piñata stick.

And all was orange-and-black pandemonium, till sirens sounded and cops arrived and red and blue lights flashed through the high gym windows, revolving and bouncing off the glitterball and making Prince Prospero’s party look really premature.

Th-th-th-that's all, folks. Temporarily satiated, Skeeter Kitefly vamped her way into the night and down to the corner where good old *AR*nold was supposed to be waiting. There instead she found a seedy pumpkin squashed in the gutter.

“Oh my God!” Skeeter cried. “That was our CAR! *Fairy Godmotherrrr! ...*”