

## Chapter 1

“You okay, squirt?” Joe bounded through her bedroom door. He smelled of sweat and dirt.

“I’m okay,” said Suzie. She sat up in her bed, putting her book aside. “They teased me a lot today.”

“You? My sister? I’ll beat ’em up.” He slapped her on the back playfully, making Suzie slump forward. He leaned closer to her and peered in her eyes. His cinnamon gum stank.

“Tell me honestly.” He lowered his voice to whisper. “What’s going on? You’ve been losing weight since Bumper died. Mom and Dad are freaking out.”

“I’m not trying to scare them, Joe. I’m sure I look anorexic or something, but I keep eating and eating and nothing changes. It must be some disease the doctors haven’t heard about, they’re bringing in a specialist and everything.”

“Suzie?” Joe sat next to her and wrapped his big, muscular arms around her wiry frame. “You’ll be okay?”

“I will be, yeah.”

“Susan,” called Mom from downstairs. A moment later, her head appeared in the doorway. Joe released Suzie and stood.

“How are you feeling honey?” asked Mom.

“I’m fine.”

“Why don’t you both come down for dinner?”

“Okay, Mom,” they said in unison. Joe turned to Suzie and smiled. They headed downstairs and sat down.

“Your father had an urgent call, and won’t be home until late,” said Mom, carrying a steaming dish of delicious-smelling rosemary chicken and potatoes to the table. The doorbell rang.

“I hope it’s not the Mormons again,” muttered Mom, rising.

“I’ll get it,” said Joe. Whenever Dad wasn’t home, Joe tended to act like the man of the house. Suzie wasn’t sure if he was annoying or endearing, or perhaps a little of both. Mom sat down, and Joe opened the door.

“Can I help you?”

A hunchbacked man in a black robe, carrying an immense scythe, stood in the doorway. Something shiny hung around his neck.

“Er, um. H-h-hello. I-i-i-s Su-su-su-Susan here?”

Joe laughed. “Halloween’s not for over a month, man. Why don’t you come back then?” He started to close the door, but the strange man lowered his scythe, propping it open.

“What are you doing?” yelled Joe. “P-p-please. I n-n-need to ta-talk to Susan,” he stammered.

Suzie gasped, remembering where she had seen the strange man. He was the one who opened the door looking out in the strange dream she kept having. Mom touched the blade of the scythe and drew her hand back in surprise.

“That thing’s real,” she said. “Get out. Get out of my house!”

“P-p-p-please,” he started again.

“Wait, Mom,” Suzie said, rising. Joe, Mom, and the strange man turned to her. “I want to talk to him.” Was it the man from her dream?

“Susan, sit down,” said Mom, her voice trembling.

“No, it’s okay,” said Suzie. She walked to the door. The man seemed scared, even a little confused. He was probably her father’s age, but was nothing like Dad. His face was chubby, unshaven, and pockmarked, and his blond hair was uncombed. A golden chain with a charm hung from his neck. He raised his scythe and nodded. Joe held the door, ready to slam it, but Suzie stood in the entrance.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“My n-n-n-name is K-k-k-Cronk. C-Cronk Averill.”

“C-Cronk Averill?” laughed Joe. “Is this guy for real?”

“I’ve c-c-c-come to t-t-t-take you b-b-b-back.”

“Take me back where?” asked Suzie.

“You are a D-d-d-d...”

“What?”

“A Death,” said Cronk. Joe reached for Suzie, but before he touched her, Cronk grabbed Suzie’s arm. His speed surprised her. She yelled, but he raised his scythe and lowered it, cutting the air. Suddenly, the house, Joe, Mom, and the entire world vanished. Colors and smells, noises and strange sensations, flowed past Suzie in a blur.

She opened her eyes. She was standing in a field. Cronk stood in front of her, frowning.

“What did you do?” she demanded. “Where are we?” She looked up. It was sunny. But there were two suns.