

FRIGHTVILLE

NIGHT OF THE MASK

BY MIKE FORD

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Special thanks to Donna Lowich

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Tucker opened the small gold envelope that had his name written across the front in perfectly printed letters, and removed the pink card from inside. Instead of having ordinary writing on it, it was engraved like a fancy invitation.

COME CELEBRATE SASHA'S BIRTHDAY! it said.

“It’s Saturday,” said Sasha, who just moments ago had handed Tucker the envelope and was still standing in front of him, smiling widely.

Before Tucker could even read the rest of the card, she continued. “It starts at two o’clock. You don’t *have* to bring a present, but I won’t be mad if you do. Oh, and it’s a costume party. Well, sort of. Everyone is going to wear masks. I thought that would be fun.”

“What kind of masks?” Tucker asked.

“Any kind really,” said Sasha. “Superheroes. Animals. Monsters. Whatever you want. And don’t worry about being able to get around in your chair. The hallways are super wide, there are ramps to the doors, and there’s even an elevator that goes between floors. You’ll have no problem.”

“Cool,” Tucker said. He tried to sound like it was no big deal, but going to Sasha’s house was actually a *huge* deal. She didn’t just live in a house—she lived in a mansion. It sat on a hill

overlooking the town, and had a long driveway that circled the hill five times before reaching the top. The mansion was very old, with lots of pointed roofs, and seven chimneys, and probably hundreds of windows. It even had a name—Stormwatch House. Tucker had always wanted to see the inside of it. Now he was going to.

“So, you’ll come?” Sasha asked.

“Definitely,” said Tucker.

Sasha grinned and bounced on her toes. “Yay,” she said. “Okay, I’ve got to hand out the rest of these invitations. I’ll see you later.”

She darted off. Tucker looked at the invitation again, thinking about what kind of mask he might want to wear. There were so many possibilities. As he was considering them, his mother pulled up in their minivan. The side door slid open, and the ramp extended. Tucker

expertly maneuvered his electric chair up it and into the van.

“How was your day?” his mother asked as the ramp retracted and the door slid shut.

“Great,” Tucker said. “I got a ninety-three on my science test, and my audition for the musical went really well. I’m pretty sure I’m going to be either the Tin Man or the Cowardly Lion.”

“That sounds like a pretty great day,” his mother said as she pulled out of the school parking lot.

“Maybe that’s what I should be for the party,” Tucker said, thinking out loud. “A lion.”

“What party?” his mother asked.

Tucker told her about Sasha’s birthday party.

“You’re going to get to see the inside of Stormwatch House?” his mother said. “Maybe I should call Sasha’s mother and volunteer to help.

I'm dying to see the inside of that house. It would be the perfect setting for this idea I have."

Tucker groaned. His mother wrote horror novels, and she was always having ideas. So far, she'd published four books. She wasn't as famous as some other writers, but her books were great. At least, Tucker assumed they were. He hadn't actually read any of them, because he didn't like to be scared. But lots of people had told them how good they were.

"This party isn't for you!" he objected.

His mother laughed. "Okay," she said. "But I want you to take notes on how the rooms look."

"Mom!" Tucker said, making a face at her in the rearview mirror.

"I'm joking," his mother said. "Well, mostly."

"Anyway, I need to get a mask," Tucker said,

hoping to distract her. “It’s kind of a costume party.”

“I know just the place,” his mother said. “I saw a new store the other day when I drove to the cemetery to get ideas for character names from the old gravestones. It’s called Frightville.”

“Frightville?” Tucker said. “That sounds—”

“Scary,” his mother interrupted. “I know. That’s why I want to check it out. It looks like some kind of antique shop or something. I bet they’ll have masks.”

Tucker started to ask her why an antique store would have masks, but he knew better. His mother wanted to check out Frightville, and she was using this as her excuse. He would go along with her, and when it turned out the store didn’t have anything for him, he would ask

her to take him to Party World in the shopping center. Then maybe he could talk her into getting a ham and pineapple pizza at Pie in the Sky for dinner, since it was right next door.

A few minutes later, they pulled up to Frightville. Tucker wheeled himself down the van's ramp, then through the door of the store. As his mother went off to browse on her own, Tucker took a look around. His mother had kind of been right about it being an antique store, but not the sort of antiques you usually found for sale. Everything in Frightville was a little bit creepy. Instead of old tables and lamps, the store was filled with things like real stuffed crows with glinting glass eyes and cases crammed with books that had titles like *Toadstool Soup and Other Deadly Dishes*. There was even a cabinet cluttered with dusty glass bottles and a

sign that read: MAY CONTAIN GENIES: OPEN AT YOUR OWN RISK.

“Good afternoon,” a voice said, making Tucker jump.

A man was standing beside him. He was tall and thin, and he was dressed in a black suit. His gray hair was slicked back, and he regarded Tucker with eyes the same color as his hair. “My apologies for startling you,” he said. “My name is Odson Ends. This is my store.”

“Oh,” Tucker said. “It’s, um, really great.” He looked around, hoping his mother had finished browsing and they could go, but she was nowhere to be seen.

“Is there anything I can help you find?” Mr. Ends inquired.

“I don’t think so,” Tucker said. “I mean, I

need a mask for this party I'm going to, but I doubt you have anything like that."

Mr. Ends smiled. It was like a crack appearing on frozen ice. "Come with me," he said.

Tucker followed along behind as Mr. Ends went down an aisle. They stopped in front of a wall on which dozens of masks dangled from wooden pegs. They weren't the usual plastic or rubber masks like the ones sold at Party World. These looked handmade.

"They're papier-mâché," Mr. Ends explained, pronouncing the last part with an accent.

Tucker knew that papier-mâché was just a fancy word meaning paper mixed with water and glue. He'd made some himself the summer before in art class at Camp Weedpatch. But he'd never seen anything like the masks on the wall. They were weird and wonderful. A few

were scary, like the witch face with a long, crooked nose and the thing that looked like a sea monster. Others were more fanciful, like a big-eared rabbit and an elf.

“The magical thing about masks is that they let you turn yourself into what you want the world to see you as,” Mr. Ends said. “Do you see anything here you would like to be?”

Tucker thought it was a strange way of asking if he liked any of them. He looked at all the faces staring back at him. *Who do I want to be?* he wondered. *Or what?*

He liked a lot of the masks. But which one felt the most like who he was? He considered a cat face, which was kind of like the lion from *The Wizard of Oz*, but it wasn't quite right. Neither were the clown, or the fish head, or the face made out of green leaves and flowers. He

was about to say that none of them were what he was looking for. Then his eyes stopped on a mask. It was shaped like a bat, and the eyeholes were in the middle of its wings. It wasn't as unusual or fanciful as the others, but Tucker liked it.

“That one,” he said, pointing.

“An interesting choice,” Mr. Ends said as he took the mask from its peg and handed it to Tucker.

“What’s interesting about it?” Tucker asked.

“I’m sure you’ve heard the expression ‘blind as a bat,’” Mr. Ends said. “It’s not true, of course. Bats actually see quite well. But they also use echolocation—sound waves—to navigate in the dark and find food. It’s an extraordinary ability, being able to see things that would otherwise be invisible.”

Tucker placed the mask over his face and looked through the eyeholes.

“Do things look any different?” Mr. Ends asked.

“I don’t think so,” Tucker said.

“Hmm,” Mr. Ends replied. “Well, sometimes a mask is just a mask.”

“Sure,” Tucker agreed, although he really had no idea what the man was talking about. He removed the mask and held it in his hands. He still wasn’t quite sure why he liked it so much, but somehow, he knew it was perfect for Sasha’s party. He looked up at Mr. Ends. “I’ll take it.”