

A Tale of Two Kitties...and Fluffy

Deleted Scene – the original version of chapter 19

(removed due to overall manuscript length)

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“MALL TRIP”

We picked up Winky just before lunchtime on Saturday morning. Mom and Dad promised us that we could have lunch in the Mulberry Mall Food Court before doing our actual shopping.

Mr. Noonem helped Winky load her matching pink-heart-patterned backpack and duffel bag into our trunk before kissing her head and wishing her to have a wonderful time.

“Call if you need us,” he reminded her.

“I won’t need to,” Winky joked. “Fluffy and I will be having too much fun. But I have my charger, just in case.”

Lucky Winky, I thought. She had her own cell phone, largely because of her acting and modeling jobs, and yet I felt for the first time a real twinge of jealousy as I saw her tucking her phone back into the little pink fuzzy purse that she always carried. If Dandelion had been allowed to have a cell phone, which seemed to make sense for her *safety*, then she and I would have been able to talk to each other so much more, and maybe she wouldn’t have started misbehaving.

And on that note, *I still needed to email her back.*

“Yaaaaay! Let the fun begin!” Winky exclaimed as she slid into the back seat with me and gave me a huge hug, snapping me back to attention. “I can’t *wait* to shop till we drop!”

“First stop is the food court,” Dad reminded us as he drove slowly down the Noonems’ winding driveway. “You girls can eat wherever you like; our treat.”

My parents let us sit at our own table, which made me feel grown-up even though I knew they had eyes on us. Winky and I shared a burrito from MexiBell, and then had soft serve cones from I Scream Queen.

“We have to shop for my clothes first,” I explained to Winky as my parents collected us and led the way to Harlow’s Department Store. “Then we’ll be allowed to go off on our own for a bit and do our Halloween shopping while my parents buy...whatever it is they need to buy this week.”

I could hardly believe that my parents were *still* buying stuff to furnish and decorate our home! And yet, here we were, at the mall again. I practically had the directory memorized at this point, which is likely why they had decided to trust Winky and me on our own for a little while. (That, plus Winky had her phone...and they had her number.)

“I’m excited to help you shop,” Winky said. “My parents told me I can buy some clothes too, if I want.”

“What allowance did they give you?” I asked.

“I have one of their credit cards,” Winky replied. “It even has my name on it. Wanna see?”

“Winky, maybe leave that in your purse until we’re checking out later,” Mom suggested gently.

“Can I borrow a credit card?” I wanted to know.

“No, but you can have a little cash when you go off on your own,” Dad promised. “I’ll see you three later. I need to buy myself some new shoes.” He kissed Mom goodbye before veering off to the men’s department.

“I want to shop for shoes!” Winky announced. “If we have time, that is.”

“We have all afternoon,” Mom assured her.

And what an afternoon it was. Winky absolutely loved helping me shop for the clothes I needed, and Mom was all too happy to let her act as my personal stylist in the fitting rooms. I had to hand it to Winky: she knew her stuff when it came to style and fashion. She even convinced my mom to buy me just a *few more things* so that I’d have a “well-rounded wardrobe for the season!” – Winky’s words, not mine. But Mom was sold, literally and figuratively.

Once we finished up in Harlow’s, we met up with Dad, and my parents gave Winky and me the ground rules before letting us go off on our own for a little while.

“Stay inside the mall. Don’t talk to strangers, although store employees are an exception. You’re on your honor with your spending money,” Dad said.

“Winky, you have both of our numbers, so text or call if you need anything,” Mom continued. “Please touch base with us in one

hour. We expect to be ready to head home in two hours, so our meet-up will be right back here at this central fountain, by the escalators.”

“Got it,” Winky and I promised. We waved to my parents as they headed up an escalator.

“Where to first?” Winky wanted to know. “My vote is for the Halloween Store.”

“I’m hungry again,” I said. “How about we get snacks, and *then* we can go to the Halloween Store? I can’t think on an empty stomach.”

“You get grouchy when you’re hungry!” Winky said.

“Do not!” I said, laughing.

“Yes, you *do*!” she said. “How about we get something sweet and something salty? That way, we can share.”

“Yes,” I agreed, a thought flashing through my mind about how Dandelion and I would share in much the same manner on mall trips, although she and I had never been allowed to shop on our own. Mrs. Darling had always been against that notion...how ironic, considering that Dandelion was now roving around Flatwick all alone, and her parents didn’t even know.

I shook my head slightly, as if these thoughts would shake out by way of my ears.

“How about hot pretzels?” I asked.

“Sure! And...Candy Corner?” Winky suggested. “We can buy bags of mixed candies that will last us till tomorrow! Sweet treats whenever we want, all day and night!”

“Yes!” I exclaimed.

After filling our bellies with a buttery, salty hot pretzel, we loaded a bag each at Candy Corner, and then finally headed to the Halloween Store.

“Tell me about Halloween at Mulberry Academy,” I requested. “Butternut Borough Elementary did a costume parade around the outside of school, and then class parties after. But we weren’t even allowed to come dressed in our costumes, which was lame. We all had to change at school.”

“Dumb!” Winky said. “Mulberry Academy doesn’t do it that way. Everyone comes dressed, although you’re not allowed to wear a mask during learning hours early in the day. Students are pretty cool about that rule, though, since masks can be added later. Principal Sincci loves Halloween so much that he treats it like a school-wide holiday. Gym class is suspended for the day; the cafeteria serves Halloween-themed food; teachers are *expected* to dress up – otherwise they’re not showing school spirit, he says.”

“Really?”

“Really! And we do a costume parade for our parents, and then a costume *contest* run by the office staff, and finally, class parties.”

“Cooooool!” I breathed.

“There are three costume prizes per grade, plus a grand prize for best costume in the school,” Winky finished. “I say we aim high. Best costume in the school or *bust*.”

“Are we...matching?” I suddenly realized.

“Of course!” Winky said. “I mean, you *want* to do a duo-costume...right?”

“Of course!” I echoed. “And hey, no pressure, right? Best duo costume in the whole school or bust!”

“Exactly!” said Winky. “We can do it, Fluffy; you and me. I’m sure of it. I’ve never done a duo costume before, and I never won with any of my solo costumes. It always seems to be a pair or group of students in the upper grades who win the grand costume prize.”

“What’s the prize, exactly?” I asked.

Winky shrugged. “Not sure. It’s more about the bragging rights, really. The winners’ photos go onto the big bulletin board in the Mulberry Academy lobby, and they usually stay up until December.”

“I see,” I said. Having our photo featured on that big bulletin board *would* be pretty awesome!

My head began spinning as I browsed the racks of costumes. Winky told me not to even bother with costumes-in-a-bag.

“Generic and boring and cheap!” she explained. “Those will never win.”

“Got it,” I said.

But it wasn’t just because of this new challenge that my head was spinning: I was also busy thinking about how I *hadn’t* assumed that Winky would want to buddy up for costumes, but she *had*. And there was nothing wrong with that!...Right? She had

no idea that costume-twinning had been Dandelion's and my *thing*. Besides, Dandelion wasn't here this year, and Winky had never buddied up with a friend before, so...

I probably wouldn't be able to come up with a stellar solo costume of my own, anyway. It was better for me to hop on board with Winky's ideas and help her win the grand prize, which would be crazy-cool if we could pull it off.

By the time we circled back to the fountain to meet my parents and head home, however, Winky and I were frustrated and uninspired. Despite all the costumes we'd looked at or even tried on, all the other stores we'd gone into hoping for ideas...nothing seemed right for us. None of the ideas we tossed around screamed *grand prize* material. In fact, all that I ended up buying with my allowance money – aside from the snacks – was a little purse of my own, from an accessories store; plus a new purple grapes eraser, purple bow, and purple bracelet, mainly for the fun of having something to put inside the purse.

"Did you get ideas for Halloween, girls?" Mom asked as we helped her and Dad load their mountain of purchases into the trunk of the car.

"Nothing good," Winky reported. "We need a costume idea that's spectacular enough to win the grand prize in the Mulberry Academy costume contest."

"And we have yet to come up with anything that will be grand prize winning material," I added.

“Inspiration sometimes crops up from the funniest places,” Dad said. “You still have plenty of time. I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

Winky and I kept busy in other ways once we returned to my house. First, she helped me put a few Halloween decorations up around my room – these were a surprise from my parents, who had gone a little nuts buying Halloween decorations for the whole house and yard. I could see them from my window as I lined up a set of little rubber jack-o-lanterns on the sill: they were on a ladder down below in the front yard, hanging fake cobwebs from our maple tree.

“This will help set the mood for Halloween brainstorming,” Winky explained as she placed some fuzzy spiders on the shelves of my desk. “Hey...who’s this?”

She had spotted the photo of Dandelion and me from last Halloween.

“Dandelion. My friend in New York,” I reminded her.

“Oh.” Winky’s blue eyes seemed to stare a laser beam at the photo for a second before she went back to spider placement. “You should put up some photos from *this* year.”

“I need one of those photo printers,” I said. “We used to have one, but it broke last spring. And I hate printing photos on regular printer paper.”

“Understandable.” I caught Winky giving the Dandelion photo a second look of mild disgust before she turned her attention back to the spiders.

Maybe she thought the costumes were dumb?

In any case, I didn't want to spoil our fun by asking her about the face she had made.

My parents ordered Chinese take-out for dinner, since they'd been too busy Halloweening our house to cook, and they let Winky and me eat picnic-style on the living room floor while we watched a movie. After we finished our movie and took showers – Winky complimented my purple-themed bathroom! – we got to work in my room, planning the Halloween party for our class. We made lists of ideas for music, food, games, and activities – including some educational activities, like making posters about the history of Halloween and its symbols.

“We should get Mr. Mank in on this,” I suggested. “I bet he could turn this into a cool class-wide activity.”

“And then maybe *everyone* could make a poster, and we'd share them on Halloween!” Winky said.

“You took the words right out of my mouth!” I laughed.

“That's because we think alike,” said Winky. “My mom says I've finally met my match.”

“Funny!” I said.

By the time my dad drove Winky home early Sunday afternoon, we had a *fantabulous* plan for our class party in the works, but still no costume ideas. We had even tried making lists, but nothing we wrote down rang a bell for us.

“Ah, there's my beautiful daughter and her beautiful friend!” Mr. Noonem greeted us. I suddenly felt shy. I was usually

labeled *cute*, not beautiful, and I knew that I didn't have the movie star good looks that Winky did. Still, though, she and her parents had a way of making everyone in their orbit *glow*.

"Come on in," Mr. Noonem invited. "Stay for a beer?"

"Sure!" I said, which made the dads crack up.

"I think he means me," Dad said, grinning. "Sure. I'll stay for a beer."

Dad and Mr. Noonem headed off somewhere with their beers, leaving Winky and me alone in the kitchen.

"Let's try one more time to come up with a costume idea," she begged. "We can walk all around my house. Your dad said inspiration can come from anywhere, so maybe if we just look around, no pressure, no pen and paper..."

"We'll think of something," I said, realizing that I had just finished Winky's sentence.

I felt funny for just a moment, recalling that I *still* owed Dandelion an email. *First thing when I get home*, I promised myself.

Winky and I roved around all the floors of her home, yelling out things like, "LAMPS! We can be lamps!" or "Ketchup and mustard!"...but even as we rifled through her mom's closet, caressing the gorgeous gowns and swooning about how we could dress up as Old Hollywood Starlets, not even *that* seemed quite right.

"There's usually a *humor* element to the winning costumes," Winky explained, closing her mom's closet door. "Old

Hollywood is like...so close, but not quite. There would have to be something *funny* about the costumes.”

“Where is your mom, anyway?” I wanted to know.

Winky shrugged. “Out doing stuff. She mentioned she might actually pass by your mom’s flower shop on her way home. It’s the only place she’ll buy flowers now.”

We wound up downstairs in Mr. Noonem’s den, figuring the beers would have probably run out, but instead we found our dads on round two.

“Dad!” I scolded. “You have to drive me home!”

“Eventually,” he agreed. “Look! Mr. Noonem has a can crusher.” Dad took his empty beer can, and squished it within the jaws of the crushing device.

“Fascinating,” I said. “I’ll tell Mom to buy you one for Christmas.”

“That would be great!” Dad said, smiling. *Was he serious?* I wondered.

“Golf again?” Winky asked, gesturing to the TV – the biggest TV I’d ever seen outside of an electronics store. “Why did you buy the deluxe satellite channel bundle if all you ever watch is Golf Planet?”

“So that you and your mom have nine hundred ninety nine channels of non-golf,” Mr. Noonem replied, which made both him and my dad chuckle.

Winky and I rolled our eyes together.

“I’ve always wanted to ride around in a golf cart,” I said. “They look like more fun than the golfing itself. I mean, mini-golf is fun, because of all the little obstacles and stuff, but regular golf involves too much walking and – ”

“FLUFFY! THAT’S IT! YOU’RE A GENIUS! I’M A GENIUS! WE’RE GENIUSES!” Winky suddenly screamed.

“I am?...We are?” I stammered.

“AND WE’RE GOING TO WIN THE MULBERRY ACADEMY COSTUME CONTEST GRAND PRIZE!” Winky shouted even more loudly.

“GREAT!” I yelled. “But...can you explain, please?”