



Ryan is entering a stage in his adolescence that his mom simply doesn't understand. Initially, Ryan doesn't like the fact that his mom begins to date Randy. As time goes on, he and Randy begin to form an unbreakable bond.

Love Can Be Scary

By Kristopher Paul

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Kristopher Paul

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CHAPTER 1—STARTING AT A NEW SCHOOL

Ryan looked down at his sneakers as he made his way to his new school. It was the first day of the new school year. He was starting his first day of sixth grade. He and his mom had just moved to this town back in early August. His mom and dad had gotten divorced the past summer, and he'd opted to stay with his mom. He didn't have any siblings, so it was just he and his mom now. Things hadn't been easy for them since the divorce, but he really loved his mom. He wanted her to be happy. It was his first day of school in a new town, and he was nervous. He had no idea what his teachers or classmates would be like. It was a warm and sunny morning. He'd never walked to school before, but then he'd never lived so close to a school he was attending before. Most of the people living along the streets seemed to have already headed out for work. There weren't any cars in the driveways of the houses he passed as he walked along. Every now and then, he'd see a small dog barking at him from inside one of the houses. *At least they don't have to go to school*, he thought to himself glumly. He couldn't deny that his new neighborhood was very pretty. None of the houses looked very old. It was also very pedestrian friendly. The town they'd lived in before wasn't pedestrian friendly at all. He'd ride his bike around on the narrow strip along the side of the road to go see his friends, but there were no sidewalks. There were sidewalks everywhere in his new neighborhood. That part he didn't mind. Since he'd moved here, he'd seen a lot of pretty girls walking on the sidewalks together. Many of them looked like they were in high

school, so they were too old for him anyways. He'd never been popular with girls his own age for that matter. He didn't expect that would change at his new school. Just then, his new school came into view. He winced when he saw all the other students piling out from the buses that were arriving. It was his first day at a new school, and it was his first time attending middle school. Boys who were bigger and looked older than him were horsing around with one another. He saw one boy slap another boy really hard on the back of the neck. They must have been friends because the boy who got slapped didn't even get angry. He just turned around and started horsing around with the boy who'd slapped him. Ryan walked as far behind the rowdy group of boys as he could, without making it obvious that he was trying to avoid them, as he followed all the other students to the front entrance of the school. He didn't want them to think he was afraid of them. That would almost certainly draw their attention, and he didn't want that. He knew he was to report to the auditorium with all the other sixth graders, but that's all he knew. Once inside the school, he found himself in an enormous hallway, with all the other students. There were older boys walking in front of him with one of their arms around a pretty girl. The girls seemed to enjoy the attention. It dawned on him that all the pretty girls were already spoken for in this school. As he followed the other students around a corner, he noticed some of the students began turning off to the left to go through a set of double doors. They appeared to be his age. He tapped another boy on the shoulder, before he'd walked through the set of double doors.

"Are you headed for the auditorium?" Ryan asked.

"Yeah, the auditorium is right there. The other students will report to the cafeteria, until it's time for them to go to their homerooms. That's where we're supposed to go tomorrow morning," the boy explained. Ryan nodded and followed the boy through the set of double doors. The auditorium was almost like a movie theater, without a large movie screen. All the seats were faced towards a stage. He glanced around at all the

other kids who were starting sixth grade as well. They had all taken a seat and were talking and laughing while they were waiting. He took a seat and waited with everyone else. Several minutes later, a tall blond-haired man wearing glasses stepped onto the stage and began speaking into a microphone.

“Hello and good morning to all of you. I’m Mr. Kendrick. I’m your new principal. If you can all just hang tight for a few more minutes, your teachers and I will figure out which homeroom each one of you is in, and you will come up and stand with your homeroom teacher when they call your name,” Mr. Kendrick said. All the other students exchanged nervous glances. Ryan could tell they all felt the same way he did. They had no idea what this day was going to be like for them. There was a brownhaired girl sitting next to him. He’d noticed her glancing at him out of the corner of his eye. He turned towards her.

“What’s your name?” Ryan asked.

“I’m Clarissa,” the girl answered.

“Where do you live?”

“I live on Sheffield Lane.”

“That’s the same street I just moved to.”

“Did you walk to school this morning?”

“Yeah, I walked to school. Why are you asking me that?”

“We could walk to school together if you want to.”

“Sure.”

“By the way, my name is Ryan,” Ryan said, introducing himself. Just then, he heard his first and last name being called. He looked towards the

stage and saw a brown-haired man with a moustache on the stage. He was looking around the auditorium. He called Ryan's name a second time.

"Here!" Ryan called, raising his right hand. The man spotted him and motioned for him to come up and stand with him.

"Well, hopefully we'll see each other later," Ryan said to Clarissa, before getting up from his seat to go stand with his new homeroom teacher. Clarissa gave him a little wave, when he looked towards her from the stage. She was later called by a different teacher, so he knew they wouldn't be in the same homeroom. He'd sort of been hoping they would be. At least they lived on the same street. He hadn't made any friends since he'd moved here. It would be nice to have someone to hang out with. He just had a feeling they would get along really well and become good friends. He'd never been friends with a girl before. All his friends back home had been boys. The rest of his morning was spent mostly getting acquainted with the students in his section and meeting all his new teachers. He didn't see Clarissa again until lunch. He spotted her sitting by herself when he walked into the cafeteria. He sat down next to her after he'd stood in line to buy his lunch.

"How are you enjoying the sixth grade so far?" he asked.

"It's okay. I get the feeling that we're going to be assigned much more homework from now on."

"Tell me about it. Maybe we could study together, to make sure neither of us falls too far behind."

"I would, but my dad would never let me have a boy in my bedroom. He's become extremely protective of me ever since my mom ran out on us to move away with a boyfriend she'd had on the side. My dad's never been the same since."

“That’s awful. My mom would never do something like that. My dad might have been capable of running off with a girlfriend before he and my mom got divorced. It sounds like my mom is more like your dad than she is your mom, and your dad is more like my mom than he is my dad. That just seems like a weird irony. We can study at my house as long as my bedroom door stays open the whole time.”

“Okay, but I don’t think we’re going to be assigned any homework today since it’s our first day. We’ll probably get our first homework assignments tomorrow, and I can walk to your house with you after school.”

“Awesome,” Ryan said, as he began eating the pizza square on his tray. The rest of the day was uneventful. When dismissal time came, he searched for Clarissa, and spotted her walking by herself in the direction of Sheffield Lane. He ran up to her.

“Slow down! Wait for me!” he called, as he came running up to her. Clarissa stopped and waited for him. They began walking beside each other once he’d caught up to her.

“It seems like this school isn’t too bad.”

“It’s seems okay. The seventh and eighth graders seem a little rowdy though.”

“I’ve noticed that. I’m going to have to watch out for the older boys. You’re lucky because you’re a girl, and girls don’t get bullied.”

“I don’t know where you’ve been, but girls do bully other girls, maybe not in the same way that boys bully each other, but girls do get bullied.”

“What do you like to do for fun?”

“I enjoy reading. I like going roller skating at the roller-skating rink. I like spending time with my cat, Katrina.”

“I thought you’d say you liked going to slumber parties with your friends and staying up and talking about boys or something like that.”

“I’ve never been invited to a slumber party, and I don’t have any friends. You’re the first person who’s ever wanted to be my friend,” Clarissa admitted. Ryan couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He’d always had at least one friend every year he’d been in school. He’d started having overnight sleepovers with his friends starting back in third grade. His mom had originally thought third graders were too young to be having sleepovers, but she’d finally relented after he’d begged and pleaded to be allowed to have sleepovers with his friends.

“Well, you have a friend now,” Ryan declared. Clarissa smiled at him. She suddenly turned into a driveway and turned around to face him.

“This is where I live. Meet me here tomorrow morning.”

“You got it,” Ryan promised. Clarissa waved at him and turned back around to start walking up to the front door of her house. Ryan watched her go inside and then kept walking towards his house. He was relieved that he had made a new friend. It had been kind of boring not having anyone besides his mom to hang out with since he’d moved here. When he got home, he used his set of keys to let himself inside and went upstairs to his bedroom to wait for his mom to come home from work. He played video games in his bedroom until he thought he heard his mom in the kitchen. He turned off the video game console and his television before running downstairs. He found his mom in the kitchen. She had obviously just gotten home and looked tired from another long day at the office. She perked up when she saw him.

“Hey, how was your first day of school?”

“It wasn’t too bad. I made a new friend. Her name is Clarissa.”

“Ooh, so you made friends with a girl named Clarissa. Is she pretty?”

“Sort of, but she’s strictly a friend. I don’t think of her like that. Her parents are separated too, so she knows how I feel.”

“Oh, that’s a shame. I hope she and her mom are getting along okay.”

“She doesn’t live with her mom. She lives with her dad now.”

“Oh, I wonder how he’s handling the separation,” his mom said, thoughtfully. Ryan sensed his mom was suddenly curious about Clarissa’s dad. *She’s probably wondering if Clarissa’s dad is a hunk or not*, he thought to himself. He realized he didn’t like the idea of his mom being curious about Clarissa’s dad. His mom pulled a box of rotini pasta down from one of the kitchen cupboards and sat the box down on the countertop. She then took a bag of cheddar cheese and a carton of milk out of the refrigerator and sat them down next to the box of rotini pasta on the countertop. He realized she was getting ready to start making macaroni and cheese for dinner.

“Do you want any help?”

“Shouldn’t you be working on your homework right now?”

“I don’t have any. I guess they didn’t want to overwhelm us on our first day.”

“Well, I guess that makes sense. In that case, go ahead and start the pasta,” his mom instructed. Ryan pulled a large saucepan off the hook rack where his mom kept all the saucepans and frying pans hanging. He filled the saucepan with water and placed it onto the stove. He measured out three cups of rotini pasta and poured the pasta into the saucepan one cup at a time before turning the stove on. He occasionally stirred the pasta

with a long wooden spoon, so the pasta wouldn't stick to the bottom of the saucepan. Ryan helped his mom finish preparing dinner and they sat across from each other at the dining room table when they were getting ready to eat.

"Halloween isn't too far away. I need to think of a really cool costume. Maybe Clarissa and I could go trick-or-treating together."

"You were in fifth grade last year, and going trick-or-treating still seemed acceptable for someone your age, but I must tell you, I think you're approaching the cutoff point to be going trick-or-treating. You can go this year, but I don't want you going next year. I can just buy you some candy next Halloween if you want candy so badly."

"Then please let me go trick-or-treating wearing a really cool costume this year. You've always wanted me to wear dorky Halloween costumes every year I've gone trick-or-treating."

"I thought your pirate costume last year looked really cute on you."

"I didn't want to look cute. I wanted to look scary."

"We'll see what costumes are available when it's closer to Halloween, but you're not going out wearing some really horrific-looking costume. I don't care how much you complain," his mom said. Ryan felt frustrated with his mom. He didn't know why she always had to be so strict in certain areas. He'd wanted to get his left ear pierced last year, and she'd told him he couldn't, even though some of his friends already had their left ear pierced last year. It was no wonder the pretty girls in his grade had never had any interest in him. His mom was always babying him. He couldn't even wear clothes he wanted to wear without getting her approval. He'd asked for weights last summer, so he could start getting ripped for all the middle school girls, but his mom had told him weights were too expensive. After dinner, he went back upstairs to watch

television in his bedroom. He still felt a little annoyed with his mom, and he didn't really feel like being around her for the moment. He watched television in his bedroom until it was time to brush his teeth and begin to get ready for bed. The next morning, he hopped out of bed when he woke up to get dressed. He wanted to make sure he was ready in time to meet Clarissa in her driveway, so they could walk to school together. He took out the milk from the refrigerator and had a bowl of cereal for breakfast. After breakfast, he combed his hair and grabbed his backpack.

"See you later, mom!" he called loud enough for his mom to hear him wherever she was in the house, before he walked out the front door. The morning was bright and warm, but he knew autumn was just around the corner. That meant Halloween was approaching. Halloween was his favorite holiday, even more than Christmas. There was just something about autumn and the thrill of Halloween approaching that worked its way into every fiber of his being. He loved autumn more than any other time of the year, and he especially loved Halloween. Autumn meant his mom would be bringing home pumpkin pies from the grocery store for them to share for dessert. The leaves on the trees would be turning brilliant hues of orange, red and yellow. The leaves would gradually fall off the trees and be carried across the ground by the gentle breezes of the fall, and he loved every bit of it. He thought of Clarissa. He wanted to include her in his fall activities. Maybe they could carve pumpkins together or watch a Halloween marathon on television, but he definitely wanted her to go trick-or-treating with him on Halloween night. It only took him several minutes to reach Clarissa's house. She was standing in her driveway waiting for him. She seemed to brighten up when she saw him walking towards her.

"Hey, Clarissa!" he called, as he gave her a wave. She quickly walked up to greet him.

"Good morning, Ryan. Are you looking forward to school?"

“Not exactly, but it’s good to see you this morning. You can help me pick out a scary Halloween costume this year.”

“Halloween is still a little, ways off, Ryan.”

“Ah, it’ll be here before you know it. This year I’m going to wear the scariest costume I can find.”

“You’re planning on going trick-or-treating, are you?”

“Of course, I am. What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing’s wrong with that, other than the fact that you’re a bit old to be going trick-or-treating.”

“Who says? Didn’t you go trick-or-treating last year?”

“No.”

“Well, you’re going trick-or-treating with me this year whether you want to or not!”

“Oh, calm down. I think it’s a little silly, but I have no objections to going trick-or-treating with you. It might even be fun,” Clarissa said. Ryan and Clarissa began walking in the direction of their school.

“How long have you lived here?” Ryan asked.

“I’ve lived in the house I’m living in now my whole life.”

“I’m still getting used to living here, but it doesn’t seem like such a bad place to live, especially now that I have someone my own age to hang out with. I’ve never been friends with a girl before, but you seem pretty cool for a girl.”

“Why thank you. I’m glad you think so,” Clarissa said, pretending to be insulted. They walked on in silence until they reached the school.

Everything was chaos, just as it had been the previous morning. The same group of older boys who'd been horsing around the morning before were now trying to push each other off balance.

"Don't walk too fast. I don't want to walk too closely to them. They don't exactly seem friendly," Ryan said. Clarissa nodded and made sure she walked at the same pace Ryan was walking. They made sure to allow the group of boys to stay fairly far ahead of them, so not to get too close and possibly draw their attention. Once inside the school, they followed all the other students to the cafeteria. The cafeteria at Ryan's elementary school had actually been the gymnasium. During his lunch period each day, the gymnasium had been filled with long folding tables that the table and benches were all attached together and could be folded up and moved when the gymnasium needed to be cleared. The cafeteria here was filled with round tables and plastic chairs with metal legs. He and Clarissa found an unoccupied table and each of them pulled out a chair and sat down. The noise of all the students talking and laughing was deafening. Ryan noticed a guy and a girl making out right in front of everyone around them. A bell rang, and everyone stood up and began heading to their homerooms. Ryan tried to walk with Clarissa, but he quickly lost her in the momentum of the moving crowd. When the students moved together, it was like trying to keep up with a herd of bison. Ryan was almost worried of being trampled to death if he ever tripped and fell around here. His second morning attending middle school wasn't as warm and friendly as it had been the day before. His teachers were beginning to make it very clear that they expected the sixth graders to get their parents to buy them 3-ring binders with dividers to keep everything inside their binders neat and organized. The dividers were supposed to have colored tabs with labels inside the tabs for each subject. Today was also his first day of gym class, and he was currently sitting on the gymnasium floor listening to the male and female gym teachers taking turns talking to the students in his section.

“All of you are going to have to ask your parents to buy you gym uniforms to participate in gym class! If you have an older sibling who still has their old gym uniform, it’s perfectly fine if you use their old one, but it must be the same uniform that we wear at this school! You’ll also need to ask your parents to buy you a combination lock for your gym locker! The same goes with the locks, if you have an older sibling who still has their old combination lock, it’s perfectly fine if you use their old one! We’ll be selling the gym uniforms and combination locks during gym class the next time you’re scheduled for gym class! Make sure to bring in enough money to be able to purchase everything you’ll need to begin participating in gym class! You should also each get yourselves a stick of deodorant to keep in your gym locker!” the female gym teacher spoke loudly, as if to make certain everybody understood her perfectly. The rest of his gym period was spent discussing safety precautions while playing sports. Just like the day before, he didn’t see Clarissa until their lunch period. She was sitting and eating by herself again. He went ahead and took a place in the lunch line. Today’s lunch was chicken nuggets with a serving of mashed potatoes and a small carton of chocolate milk. He set his tray down next to Clarissa once he’d paid for his lunch.

“You should come over to my house after school today. We can help each other with our homework,” Ryan suggested.

“Okay. I guess I can leave a note on my front door, so my dad doesn’t get worried when he gets home from work.”

“Sounds like a plan. I can’t believe how much homework our teachers expect us to do. Even if one of the students in my section points out to a teacher who’s in the process of giving us a lot of home work to do that our other teachers have already assigned us a lot of homework, they never care that we’ve already been assigned a lot of homework. They’ll just say something like ‘Well, you can do some more homework for me.’ I really hate that.”

“I know what you mean. I got straight A’s all through elementary school. I could get my homework done well enough to get an “A”, and still have plenty of free time to do what I wanted each evening. I don’t think I’m going to have much free time in the evenings after my homework is done anymore. Fifth grade is beginning to feel like the good old days now.”

“We have that science project to do by Friday that we have to collect different types of leaves and pin them to a large sheet of cardboard. I haven’t seen that many varieties of trees around here. I don’t know how I’m going to fill up an entire sheet of cardboard with different types of leaves.”

“I know where to find all kinds of different leaves. There’s thick woods way behind some of the houses on the outskirts of our neighborhood. We can go there after school, so we can start collecting leaves for our science project. Completing that assignment will be a cinch, you’ll see,” Clarissa assured him. Later on, when school was being dismissed for the day, Ryan found Clarissa and they began walking together. Clarissa took a different direction when they were leaving the school that Ryan wasn’t familiar with. He didn’t recognize any of the houses they passed as he followed Clarissa. She led him to an area of the neighborhood where the streets and houses came to an abrupt end. All that lay beyond was undeveloped tracts of land. He could see that the undeveloped tracts of land were surrounded by thick woods in the back. “We’re here. Follow me.”

“Have you gone into those woods before?”

“I’ve wandered through those woods a couple of times.”

“Why?”

“Summers can get really boring for me. I’ve come here just for something to do when I was bored.”

“Those woods look creepy.”

“You’ll be alright. Come on,” Clarissa urged him, as she began walking towards an area of the surrounding woods. Ryan was a little hesitant to go into the woods, but he followed Clarissa. Once they had entered the fringe of the thick woods, Clarissa grabbed a long branch from the ground. She used the branch to bend the lowest branches of the trees down far enough that she could pick the leaves. She began pointing out the different types of trees.

“There’s a tulip poplar,” she said, before using the branch to help her pick two leaves from one of the lowest branches. She handed one of the leaves she’d picked to Ryan. Over the next thirty minutes, Clarissa identified a sugar maple, an American elm, a white oak, a silver maple, an American beech, a catalpa, a Norway maple, a striped maple, a box elder, a white ash, a black ash, a black gum and a big-tooth aspen tree. She picked two leaves for each one and kept handing one of the leaves to Ryan.

“I think that should be enough. Make sure to keep them pressed flat in a large book until you’re ready to start pinning them to a large sheet of cardboard,” Clarissa instructed. Ryan had been watching and listening to her in awe.

“I can’t believe you were able to identify so many different trees,” Ryan exclaimed. Clarissa shrugged.

“I do a lot of reading,” Clarissa said. They were standing close to a narrow stream. Clarissa pointed out several water skipper insects floating on the surface of the water. Ryan had never seen a water skipper before. He stepped closer to get a better look at them. Just then, he noticed an

old rundown house off in the distance. The foreboding appearance of the old house made him shiver all over.

“Who would want to live there?” he asked, pointing.

“Nobody lives there as far as I know. I think it needs to be demolished. Walking in these woods doesn’t scare me during the daytime, but that old house does.

“You’ve never explored it before?”

“No way, and I never will. Come on, let’s get going. We don’t need any more leaves,” Clarissa said. She led the way back to where they’d entered the woods. They began to cross the tract of undeveloped land they’d crossed earlier to get back to where the houses were.

“Let’s stop by your house, so you can leave a note on your front door,” Ryan suggested. Clarissa nodded in agreement. She led the way and they walked back to where they’d started and then walked to Clarissa’s house. Clarissa took out a piece of notebook paper from her school supplies in her backpack and wrote a quick note to her dad. She taped the note to her front door. She and Ryan began walking towards his house. When they reached his house, his mom was in the garage beginning to unload groceries from her car. They walked into the garage to give her a hand. Ryan’s mom smiled brightly at Clarissa when she walked up to help her.

“Thank you so much for helping carry the groceries inside, Clarissa. It’s very nice to meet you. You’re a very pretty young girl,” Ryan’s mom complimented.

“Thank you. It’s no problem. My dad usually wants me to help him with things around our house.”

“Would you like to help me get dinner started? You’re welcome to stay for dinner if you like.”

“I’d love to help you with dinner! What are you making?”

“We’re having fettuccine alfredo with small chunks of chicken mixed into it.”

“That sounds delicious! I wish my dad made stuff like that for dinner.”

“Your dad doesn’t cook?”

“Not really. We usually just eat frozen meals or he cooks something out of a can. My mom was the one who made dinner before she left us. She was a really good cook,” Clarissa explained. All three of them began carrying the groceries into the house. Clarissa and Ryan made multiple trips to the garage to bring in the groceries while Ryan’s mom put everything away. Ryan noticed that Clarissa and his mom seemed to be getting along really well. He decided he’d give them a chance to talk. He went into the living room to watch television. Clarissa was busy showing his mom all the different leaves she’d picked for their science projects. She and Ryan had set their leaves down on the countertop after they’d brought in the groceries from their first trip. His mom seemed to be very impressed with her knowledge of trees in North America. He could hear them talking back and forth in the kitchen. A minute later, his mom poked her head into the living room.

“You can get started on your homework at the dining room table until Clarissa and I have dinner ready,” his mom suggested. Ryan grumbled to himself as he got up and turned off the television. He heard Clarissa giggling in the kitchen. *I thought she was supposed to be my friend*, he thought to himself. He grabbed his backpack and went to the dining room table to get started on his homework.



Ryan is entering a stage in his adolescence that his mom simply doesn't understand. Initially, Ryan doesn't like the fact that his mom begins to date Randy. As time goes on, he and Randy begin to form an unbreakable bond.

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