



INTO THE PIT

The dead possum's still there." Oswald was looking out the passenger window at the gray, furry corpse on the side of the road. Somehow it looked even deader than it had yesterday. Last night's rain hadn't helped.

"Nothing looks deader than a dead possum," Oswald's dad said.

"Except this town," Oswald mumbled, looking at the boarded-up storefronts and the display windows, which were displaying nothing but dust.

"What's that?" Dad said. He was already wearing the stupid red vest they put him in when he worked the deli counter at the Snack Space. Oswald wished he'd wait to put it on until after he dropped him at school.

"This town," Oswald said, louder this time. "This town looks deader than a dead possum."

His dad laughed. “Well, I don’t guess I can argue with that.”

Three years ago, when Oswald was seven, there had actually been stuff to do here—a movie theater, a game and card store, and an ice-cream shop with amazing waffle cones. But then the mill had closed. The mill had basically been the reason the town existed. Oswald’s dad had lost his job, and so had hundreds of other kids’ moms and dads. Lots of families had moved away, including Oswald’s best friend, Ben, and his family.

Oswald’s family had stayed because his mom’s job at the hospital was steady and they didn’t want to move far away from Grandma. So Dad ended up with a part-time job at the Snack Space, which paid five dollars an hour less than he’d made at the mill, and Oswald watched the town die.

One business after another shut down, like the organs in a dying body, because nobody had the money for movies or games or amazing waffle cones anymore.

"Are you excited it's the last day of school?" Dad asked. It was one of those questions adults always asked, like "How was your day?" and "Did you brush your teeth?"

Oswald shrugged. "I guess. But there's nothing to do with Ben gone. School's boring, but home's boring, too."

"When I was ten, I wasn't home in the summer until I got called in for supper," Dad said. "I rode my bike and played baseball and got into all kinds of trouble."

"Are you saying I should get in trouble?" Oswald said.

"No, I'm saying you should have *fun*." Dad pulled into the drop-off line in front of Westbrook Elementary.

Have fun. He made it sound so easy.

Oswald walked through the school's double doors and ran smack into Dylan Cooper, the last person he wanted to see. Oswald was apparently the first person Dylan wanted to see, though, because his mouth spread in a wide grin. Dylan was the tallest kid in fifth grade and clearly enjoyed looming over his victims.

"Well, if it isn't Oswald the Ocelot!" he said, his grin spreading impossibly wider.

"That one never gets old, does it?" Oswald walked past Dylan and was relieved when his tormentor chose not to follow him.