

Calling Mr. Zimmerman

by

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It all started when my mom dropped the news on me that I had to take my eleven year old brother, Cameron, trick or treating. Quite the bombshell as she had always insisted on taking him herself and, like any normal fifteen year old boy, I had already made plans with my best friend, Caleb.

Of course I protested. "What! Why can't you take him?"

She gave me a steely look. "Because, tonight, it's your job."

"That's not a real answer."

She gave me another scorching look, this one with a raised eyebrow. From years of dealing with my no nonsense, single mother, I knew arguing further would cost me my entire night out.

I lightened my tone. "So, guess you just want to hand out the candy this year, huh?"

"Your sister's going to do that."

She was giving me so little information, I was suddenly suspicious. "You have a date." The words came out like I was accusing her of murdering the baby next door.

She frowned hard, but fessed up. "Yes, I do. A first date."

"What kind of guy picks Halloween as a first date?"

"The kind of guy who wants to have a date for the Halloween dance he has to chaperon at the middle school where he works."

I recoiled. "You're dating a teacher?" My mind flashed through the staff at the only middle school in town. All the male teachers I knew were married except ... "You're dating Mr. Zimmerman? He's got to be at least ninety!"

Her mouth dropped open. "I'm not dating Mr. Zimmerman, and I couldn't even if I wanted to. He died a few months ago."

Now my jaw dropped. "Really? How come nobody told me?"

"The same reason we don't tell you a lot of stuff. We know you don't care."

Maybe that was true, but I persisted. "I think I need to meet this new guy. What time is he picking you up?"

Her frown changed to a patient look. "Six thirty, but you will already be out, escorting your precious baby brother from house to house while he begs for treats." Good that her sense of humor was still in tact.

Enter my "precious baby brother" who, by the way, is pretty decent as far as younger brothers go. His eyes lit up. "You're taking me tonight, Wyatt?"

"Looks that way."

Mom's gaze met mine in a silent command. *Be a good big brother. Keep my baby safe.* Out loud, she said, "Be home by ten."

Cameron's eyes followed her as she left the room and then he threw himself at me, his skinny arms encircled my equally skinny waist, hugging me hard, his head pressed against my sternum. "Thanks, Wyatt! You don't know how embarrassing it is to have your mom take you trick or treating when you're a sixth grader."

Actually, I did. "Um ... yeah ... she means well, I guess." I gave him an awkward pat on the back and pushed him away. "So, you know the reason Mom isn't going with you is because she has a date."

He nodded. "Yeah. She's going to chaperon the eighth grade dance with Mr. Hawk."

"Do you know anything about him?"

He blinked his eyes as if he couldn't fathom why I'd want to know anything about Mr. Hawk. "He teaches eighth grade shop class so I don't have him yet. He seems like a nice guy. Oh, and I heard Ms. Weber, the librarian, talking to the ladies in the office. They all say he's dreamy."

I frowned at the word 'dreamy', but my mind stuck on 'shop class'. "I had Mr. Zimmerman for shop. Did you know he died?"

His blond head bobbed up and down. "Yeah. Last summer. They had a moment of silence on the first day of school for him."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

He shrugged. "Didn't think you'd care."

I frowned. "Why does everybody think I'm such a slouch when it comes to stuff like this?"

Cam didn't answer, but Jasmine's voice came from the doorway on the other side of the fridge. "Because everybody knows you don't give a crap about anybody but yourself."

I fixed her in a bored stare. "That's stellar news, especially coming from someone who won't even give her brother a ride to school because there's not enough room in her car because she has to pick up all her idiot friends."

She gave me a snotty glare. "The school is only five blocks away. You don't need a ride."

"If we're following that logic, you don't need to drive either."

"Whatever." She turned her attention to Cam and her face softened. "Guess what, squirt. I'm done with your nerd costume." She held up a smock-like brown robe. "Want to try it on?"

Cameron didn't bother to answer, just snatched it out of her hand and slipped it over his clothes. He cinched the cord around his waist, then grinned at her. "It's perfect." He launched himself at Jasmine and hugged her just as hard as he had me. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" He looked up at her with adoration. "You are the best sister ever!"

I rolled my eyes, but I knew he meant it. Cameron was sweet to the core.

Cam let loose of Jasmine and turned to me. "I have a Darth Vader mask and cape if you want to dress up, too, Wyatt."

"Uh, no thanks."

"Okay. I have to get my Yoda mask and walking stick and then I'll be ready to go." He ran out of the kitchen toward the stairs.

I looked out the window. It was barely dark. "Take your time," I yelled after him and pulled my cell from my back pocket.

Jasmine squinted her eyes at me. "Don't you dare ditch him."

"I'm not going to ditch him." I wasn't, though I was planning on running through our neighborhood at record speed. She continued to stare at me with her arms crossed the same way my mother always did when she expected me to do something. "I promise, I'll make sure the kid has a good time."

"Not your kind of good time. His kind of good time." She raised her eyebrows at me to make a point, then flounced out of the kitchen. I stared after her. *What kind of guy was I if my completely self absorbed sister thought I was even more self absorbed than she was.* I shrugged it off, and called Caleb. "My mom just stuck me with taking Cameron trick or treating."

"No problem. I'll come over now and go with you guys."

"You want to go trick or treating?"

"Hell, yeah."

We waited on the back porch for Caleb because he usually entered our yard through the alley that ran behind our back fence. Cameron sat on the second step down, wearing his Yoda mask which wasn't a mask at all, but a complete Yoda head. That's another thing about Cam. When he loves something, he goes all in. He happily passed the time by tapping out his favorite songs on the bottom step with his walking stick. I paced up and down in front of the door. After twenty minutes and eight

Where the hell are you? texts, I decided Caleb had found something better to do and was totally ghosting me.

I thumped Cam on the top of his fake noggin. “Looks like Caleb’s a no-show. Let’s get going.”
“Finally!” He jumped to his feet and snatched up the large, canvas grocery bag beside him.

We circled around toward the front and crossed through the side yard to the McKinley’s house. I stayed under their big elm while Cameron waddled in his best Yoda impersonation to the door and rang the bell. I heard him yell Trick or Treat and in a minute, he ran back toward me, Yoda walk completely forgotten. He waved a full size Snickers bar in the air. “Jackpot!”

“Awesome. Maybe I should have dressed up.”

Cam dropped his bag and walking stick to the ground and pulled off his head. “Great idea!” He thrust his Yoda face into my hands. “Be right back.” He hightailed it back across the side yard and disappeared around the back of the house. A few minutes later, he reappeared, clutching the Darth Vader get-up and another grocery bag to his chest. He grinned and held them out to me.

I almost refused. I mean, I’m in high school for God’s sake, way too old to trick or treat.

Cameron’s face was lit with excitement. “It’s so cool that you’re hanging out with me on Halloween!”

That, plus the thought of a full sized Snickers bar followed by many more snack size treats, sealed the deal. I handed him back his Yoda head and donned the Darth Vader mask and cape.

Luckily, I am not a super tall kid so nobody even thought to make a fuss about a teenager trick or treating as we made our way up and down our own street and then on to the next. We laughed and joked along the way and on the corner of 5th and Spears, we took off our masks and rummaged through our bags to see what we’d ended up with.

Someone yelled Cameron’s name. As two kids ran across the street, Cam explained to me that they were Gary and Evan from his homeroom. Cam pointed at me and said I was his brother, then the three of them loudly conversed about all the fun they were having.

“Hey, Cam,” Gary suddenly yelled. “Why don’t you come with us?”

Beside him, Evan’s head bobbed enthusiastically.

Cam looked up at me. “Can we go with them, Wyatt?”

I looked the two over. Evan wore a Ghost Buster’s jumpsuit and Gary was dressed like Harry Potter. Complete nerds and, in my opinion, unlikely to get up to any Halloween mischief. Besides that, it would free me up to go find Caleb. I gave Cam my most sincere big brother smile. “You and I have already had such a great time, I don’t mind if you ditch me.”

Cam’s mouth dropped open. “Oh, Wyatt, I don’t want to ditch you. I thought you would come with us.”

“Naw, this is the kind of night you should be hanging out with your buddies.” I grabbed the Yoda head off the sidewalk and handed it to him. “You’ve got your cell, right? Just be home by ten or Mom will kill me.”

“Sure, but...”

I gave him a little push. “Go. Have fun.”

Cameron broke into a grin. “Okay, Wyatt. Call me if you need me.”

I chuckled to myself at the thought of me needing to solicit help from my tiny kid brother as I watched the boys head down 5th Street, chatting with giddy excitement. I pulled my phone from my pocket and dialed Caleb’s number.

He answered before the second ring, gasping for breath between words. “I ... can’t ... talk ... now.”

“Dude, are you running?” I’d never seen Caleb run before, not even in gym class.

“I’ll be ... at your ... house ... in like ... five minutes.”

He hung up before I could say anything else, so I snatched up my Darth Vader mask and jogged home. I had just reached the sidewalk leading up to our front door when I spotted Caleb jump the

McKinley's back fence and drop into our yard. He sprinted behind the thick Spruce in the back corner. I followed and found him bent forward, hands on knees, gulping air like a fish out of water.

"Dude, are you okay?"

He stayed stooped over, but shook his head. After a couple of minutes, he finally caught his breath and straightened up. "You know I have to pass the middle school on the way here?" When I nodded, he went on. "Tonight, I waved at Mr. Zimmerman when I saw him standing out in the parking lot and..."

"Dude," I interrupted, "you're full of it. My mom told me Mr. Zimmerman died a couple months ago."

Caleb squinted at me. "I'm sure it was Mr. Zimmerman because he shook his fist at me and yelled, 'I know what you did, Caleb Hutchison, and I'm coming to take back what's mine.'"

"You just saw a guy who looked like Mr. Zimmerman and he decided to mess with you."

He frowned. "How would he know who I was?"

"Just because you don't know him, doesn't mean he doesn't know you. Let's face it, you kind of have a reputation around here."

He grinned. "Yeah, I do." The grin faded. "Why would a guy I don't know mess with me?"

"It's Halloween. People mess with each other just for the hell of it."

Caleb blinked. "But, how would he know the rest?"

"The rest?"

"That I stole that weird birdhouse thing Mr. Zimmerman always had on his desk."

"Oh, yeah. I forgot you did that. Do you still have it?"

"Naw. I took it over to Ms. Sheely's house a long time ago and nailed it onto her tree."

That was a weird thing to do, even for Caleb.

"Why?"

"Because she's a spinster, dude. She needed some excitement." When all he got from me was a confused shake of the head, he went on. "I put a note in it that said 'I think you're hot' and signed it with Mr. Zimmerman's name."

I burst out laughing at the thought of the gray haired English teacher's face when she read that note. "Classic, but it doesn't change the fact that Mr. Zimmerman's dead."

"He's not dead. I saw him."

I puzzled over this. My friend might be a bit of a slouch when it came to doing anything an adult wanted him to do, and he was prone to stealing things, but he wasn't a liar. At least not to me. Then again, my mom wasn't a liar either. She wouldn't have told me Mr. Zimmerman was dead if she didn't absolutely believe it was true. Out loud, I said, "Cameron told me they announced at school that Mr. Zimmerman died. They even had a moment of silence for him."

Caleb's eyes grew round. He knew Cam was absolutely incapable of lying. A second later, his eyes grew even wider and he gasped. "Then I saw Mr. Zimmerman's ghost!"

I guffawed. "Ghosts aren't real."

His voice shifted to a whisper. "This is All Hallows Eve. The veil between the living and the dead is lifted."

"All that bullshit is just made up to scare stupid people." I thumped him on the forehead. "Don't be stupid."

He slapped my hand away with a frown of annoyance, but a second later, his face drained of color. "What if you guys talking about him tonight somehow made him come back to life? You know, like in that Bloody Mary thing where you stand in front of a mirror and say her name three times to make her appear."

"That's absolutely the craziest thing you've ever come up with."

"But, after he yelled at me, he chased me and he was like super fast. I swear there were times I could feel him breathing down the back of my neck."

“The fact that the guy chased you in the first place, let alone kept up with you, proves it wasn’t Mr. Zimmerman. Don’t you remember? He hobbled around because he got shot in some war and his leg didn’t work right after that.”

“If he was a ghost, he could have done it.”

I was tempted to thump him again, but didn’t. I crossed my arms instead. “So, if he was a ghost, why didn’t he catch you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did he chase you all the way here?”

“No, only a block or so. Then a long black car stopped on the street beside him. He talked to the driver for a minute and then he got in the backseat.”

I frowned. “So, they just drove away?”

Caleb’s voice rose an octave. “I don’t know because that’s when I started jumping fences and running through peoples’ backyards.” He started pacing frantically behind the tree. “He’s going to come after me. I’ve got to hide until Halloween is over and the veil goes back to being normal.”

I’ve known Caleb since forth grade. Usually, he’s the cool dude who makes fun of people who act like this. Seeing him this scared was a bit disconcerting.

He wrung his hands. “You’ve got to hide me, Wyatt, until Halloween is over. How about your basement? He probably wouldn’t think to look for me there.”

“Naw. We can’t get to the basement stairs without passing Jasmine. If she sees me without Cameron, she’ll rat me out for sure.” I racked my brain about possible hiding spots. Finally, it dawned on me that the answer was literally in my hands. I shoved the Darth Vader mask at him, then untied the cape and swung it around his shoulders. “Dude, I’m a genius. We’ll hide you in plain sight. The guy who’s looking for you won’t expect you to be wearing a costume or roaming the streets with little kid trick or treaters.”

Worry lines popped up all over his forehead. “Yeah, that would work *if* this was a normal day and we were dealing with a normal person instead of a...”

“Stop right there! You did not see the ghost of Mr. Zimmer...”

Caleb clapped a hand over my mouth. “Quit saying his name!”

I smacked his hand away. “For God sake! There are no such thing as ghosts coming through the veil when you say their name three times. I’ll prove it to you.” I reared back my head and shouted into the air, “Mr. Zimmerman, Mr. Zimmerman, Mr...”

“No!” Caleb clamped his hand over my mouth again and hung on. “There’s only one way to fix this, Wyatt. I have to go get that birdhouse and give it back to Mr. Zimmer...” He stopped himself from saying the name. “Mr. Z,” he finished, then gave me a pointed look. “From now on, he will be known only as Mr. Z. Okay?” When I nodded, he dropped his hand from my mouth.

“How,” I asked, “do you propose to get it back to him since he’s dead and buried.”

“We have to take it to the graveyard.”

“And then what? Just leave it next to his headstone like a bunch of flowers?”

He blinked at me. “Yeah, that doesn’t seem right. I guess we’ll have to dig up his grave and toss it in with the coffin.”

“No.” Cemeteries are not my favorite places. Not because I’m scared of ghosts, but because the thought of bones and decaying flesh laying underneath the lawn creeps me out.

“C’mon, Wyatt, please? If I don’t give him back what’s his, he could haunt me for all eternity.”

I still wasn’t buying the ghost thing, especially since Caleb said the man he’d seen had gotten into a long, black car after having a friendly chat with the driver. Not a particularly ghostly thing to do. And maybe, the guy hadn’t really shook his fist. Maybe, he was just waving back, and since Caleb had a guilty conscience, he saw it as a fist instead. After that, his worried mind had filled in a threat.

Yeah, that was it. It had to be.

Or, maybe, it was something completely different. I squinted my eyes at my friend. Could Caleb be pulling my leg, executing some kind of Halloween prank on me he'd cooked up with somebody else while he'd been ignoring my texts? I scrutinizing him for clues to tell me he was fibbing.

I couldn't find any. In fact, the clues seemed to be telling me the exact opposite; he was breathing a bit too rapidly, his hands shook slightly as he held the Darth Vader mask in them, and his eyes darted wildly around the yard like he was expecting Mr. Zimmerman to jump out from behind a bush at any second.

"Fine," I announced. "But we're going to need a couple of shovels. I'll go get the one in the garage, then we can get the one from your house."

"We don't have to go all the way back to my house. I saw one in your neighbor's yard when I ran through. We'll just borrow that." He headed toward the McKinley's backyard, but paused to slip the Darth Vader mask over his face before he jumped the fence.

Caleb was quiet the whole way, a definite sign that he was worried because normally, he'd be yakking a mile a minute about how we were going to pull off whatever scheme we had planned. We made our way through the neighborhoods, keeping off the main streets and walking in the shadows. Caleb wore the Darth Vader get up the whole time and kept throwing nervous glances around him.

We stopped across the street from Ms. Sheely's little, ranch style house which was set in the middle of a grassy, unfenced corner lot. The door was painted bright blue and jack-o-lanterns lined the front steps. Cars were parked all over in front of it, and a couple of people got out of one and made their way up the sidewalk. When the door opened, bright light, thumping party music, and laughter spilled out. I caught sight of Ms. Sheely in a fringy, old timey looking dress and heard her yell, "Happy Halloween." She held up a martini glass and saluted the newcomers.

I raised an eyebrow at Caleb. "So much for your theory that spinsters never have any fun." The door slammed shut and I concentrated on the two leafless trees that grew in the front yard. "Which tree did you put it in?"

His voice was a little muffled through the mask. "It's in the back."

He ran across the street and I followed.

We slithered along the side of the house until we could peek into the backyard. I had expected the party to overflow out here, but the yard was completely clear even though the neat brick patio had obviously been set up for entertaining. Strings of lights crisscrossed over it and cast an orange glow on the tables and chairs. Jack-o-lanterns flickered from the table tops.

I scanned the trees in the backyard. "So where is it?"

Caleb slipped off the mask and squinted into the big tree on the other side of the yard. Its thick branches hung over the edge of the patio.

He suddenly pointed. "Right there."

I followed the line of his index finger and spotted the little house perched in the crook where the lowest branch grew out of the trunk.

He tossed his shovel and the mask toward me and ran across the patio. I stayed where I was and watched as he reached up and gave the birdhouse a mighty tug. It didn't budge. He tugged again, and this time the birdhouse came loose. He grinned and started my way, holding it up like a trophy.

In that split second, the backdoor swung open and Ms. Sheely stepped out just in time to hear him yell, "Got it!"

If she was surprised to find Caleb standing on her patio, looking like a deer caught in the headlights while holding a weird, little birdhouse in its hooves, she didn't show it. She smiled and walked his way, weaving only slightly.

"Ah, you found it," she said as if she'd assigned him the task. She stared at the birdhouse for a long time before continuing in a tipsy slur. "I made that for my good friend, Mr. Zimmerman."

It seemed like a pretty formal title she was using for her supposedly good friend, but teachers often refuse to say each other's first names in front of students. I supposed we would always be students to her.

Caleb gave her the smile he used to charm people he was conning. "You don't say? It's really pretty."

She threw back her head and laughed. "It's horrible, and we both knew it, but he kept it on his desk anyway. That is, until it disappeared a few years ago." She looked at him with genuine curiosity. "Where did you find it? And how did you know to bring it here?"

Caleb went into full liar mode. "I was on my way to my friend's house and decided to cut through your yard. I saw it here in the tree and wanted to have a better look at it."

She glanced in wonder at the tree, then back to Caleb. Her face softened. "That old coot," she said tenderly. "He must have put it there to surprise me." She stepped forward and reached for the house, but bumped it clumsily because of her inebriated state.

The roof popped off and a folded piece of notebook paper fluttered to the ground. Caleb snatched it up and stuffed it in his pocket, then tried to deflect attention from it by making a show of piecing the roof and house back together.

When Ms. Sheely realized he wasn't going to voluntarily share it, she held out her palm and gave him her patented teacher stare. Even Caleb had to obey. He reluctantly placed the paper in her hand and shot me an "oh, crap" look.

She unfolded it, and Caleb followed her as she walked over to where light spilled out from the kitchen window. I could see her lips moving as she read it.

She suddenly clutched the note to her chest, threw her head back, and cried dramatically (and a bit drunkenly) into the air, "Oh, Mr. Zimmerman, Mr. Zimmerman, Mr. Zimmerman."

Behind her, Caleb's expression morphed to horrified.

Ms. Sheely spun to face him. With one hand still clutching the paper to her chest, she affectionately patted him on the cheek with the other. "You are such a wonderful, thoughtful boy. Thank you so much for bringing this to my attention." She gently took the birdhouse from his fingers and disappeared back inside.

Caleb watched the door slam behind her, then turned a completely befuddled face toward me. No teacher had ever used the words "wonderful" and "thoughtful" to describe him. "What the hell just happened?" he asked.

I stated the obvious. "Ms. Sheely confiscated the birdhouse you were going to use to save yourself from Mr. Z."

"Oh, crap! I have to get that back!"

He walked toward me, and in the very spot he'd just vacated, an eerie fog began to swirl. Slowly, a human shape took form.

Caleb stopped in front of me. "What's wrong?"

All I could do was point.

He looked over his shoulder, then let out a yelp and dove for cover behind me. He snatched the Darth Vader mask out of my hand and jammed it over his head.

Mr. Zimmerman emerged from the fog, looking completely alive, yet somehow not. Maybe because his face gave off a bluish glow. He wore the same brown sport jacket he had worn to every assembly and parent teacher conference. Only difference was the white shirt beneath it was crisp and unwrinkled instead of rumpled and frumpy.

He was scowling.

Somehow, I found my voice. "Th-they told us you were dead."

"Technically, I am dead," he said, then took a drag on a cigarette that hadn't been in his hand a second ago. The end glowed red as he sucked in. He exhaled a stream of blue smoke but as it circled

around him, it changed to electric green. His eyes met mine. “What are you two doing at Ms. Sheely’s house?”

I decided it was probably best to tell the truth. “Caleb took your birdhouse and he wanted to return it to you by leaving it at your grave. We came here to get it out Ms. Sheely’s tree.” I pointed at the tree for emphasis.

His eyes immediately went to Caleb.

I could actually feel my friend shaking behind me.

“I-I’m s-sorry for taking your birdhouse, Mr. Zimmerman. I just thought Ms. Sheely needed it more than you did.”

Mr. Zimmerman squinted at him as he took another drag on his cigarette. “Graveyard’s aren’t the safest place to be on a night like this.” His gaze shifted to the big tree and roamed the branches. He looked back to Caleb. “So where is it?”

Caleb’s voice shook. “Ms. Sheely took it inside.”

Mr. Zimmerman glanced at the backdoor, then fixed us with a steely gaze. “Why did you call me here?”

“We didn’t call you,” I said quickly. “Ms. Sheely did.”

He eyed me suspiciously through the blue-green haze. “She may have called, but I know, somehow, this is your fault because you two are always up to something.” When I didn’t answer, his glare shifted to Caleb. “And I always knew you were the one who took that birdhouse.”

He looked so angry, my heart started to hammer. Behind me, Caleb gulped.

Mr. Zimmerman lifted the cigarette to his lips again and watched us squirm as he blew out another stream of smoke. It swirled around his head as we waited to see what he would do next. Finally, he gave an amused snort. “Relax, boys. I really don’t give a hoot about that birdhouse. I was happy when it disappeared.”

I felt relief wash over Caleb and he returned to his cocky self. He pulled off the Darth Vader mask and demanded, “If you don’t care about it, then why were you giving me crap when I passed the school tonight? And why did you chase me?”

Mr. Zimmerman’s brow furrowed. “I was no where near that place, and I certainly didn’t chase you.”

“I swear it it was you,” Caleb insisted.

Mr. Zimmerman’s frown changed to an out and out scowl. He took an angry step toward us, but before he could take another, he disappeared, green smoke and all.

A minute later, my cell phone rang so loudly that it made both me and Caleb jump. I pulled it out of my back pocket and looked at the caller I.D. I hit the answer button. “Hey, Cameron, what’s up?”

“Uh...this isn’t Cameron. It’s Evan.”

“Evan, why are you calling instead of my brother?”

Hesitation again. “Well ... we sort of lost him.”

In the background, I could hear Gary’s loud voice calling, “Cameron. Cameron, where are you?”

Caleb was leaning close, trying to hear, too. I pushed him back, then hit the button for speaker phone. It amplified Evan’s worried breathing into the air.

“Evan,” I said patiently, “you don’t ‘sort of’ lose somebody. You either do or you don’t. Which is it?”

Caleb and I exchanged a look as we waited for his answer.

“We checked everywhere here. He’s gone.”

“Maybe he just went home to use the bathroom or something, and he’ll be back in a minute.”

There was a slight pause. “I think we’re too far away from your house for him to do that.”

“Where exactly are you?”

“At the cemetery.”

“What!” The cemetery was all the way across town. “How did you get there?”

“We walked for a while, and then we hitch hiked.”

“Hitch hiking is stupid, dude. You’re lucky you didn’t get murdered by some maniac.” I suddenly went stone cold. “Evan, are you sure Cameron got out of the car with you?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. He was standing right next to me when we watched it drive away. He was still beside me when we walked over to Mr. Zimmerman’s grave.”

Caleb’s eyes went round. “Oh no, this is not good.”

I ignored him and asked Evan, “Why were you looking for Mr. Zimmerman’s grave?”

“We thought it would be a spooky to visit a cemetery on Halloween night, and Mr. Zimmerman’s the only dead person we know.”

“What happened when you found his grave?”

“Gary said we should all say Mr. Zimmerman’s name three times. You know, like in that “Bloody Mary game.”

Caleb gasped and began pacing, punctuation his steps with, “Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap.”

Evan continued. “So we did. And then, Cameron was gone.”

“He disappeared? Like right before your eyes?”

“Well, not exactly. I was kind of scared so I had my eyes shut, but when I opened them, Cameron was gone and all his stuff was laying on the ground. At first, we thought he was playing a joke on us, but then we thought that Cameron’s such a nice guy, he would never do that.”

“He wouldn’t,” I confirmed. My heart started hammering wildly. “Listen Evan, you and Gary stay exactly where you are. We’ll be there as soon as we can.”

“I’m supposed to be home by ten and it’s already nine-thirty.”

My mind was calculating a mile a minute. Mr. Zimmerman had to have something to do with this, and if he already had Cam, Evan and Gary probably weren’t safe either.

“Fine,” I said. “Go home, but run as fast as you can, and absolutely do NOT take a ride from anybody.”

“Okay,” he answered meekly. “But what about Cam?”

“I’ll find Cam,” I yelled into the phone. “Just go now!” I punched the off button and turned to Caleb. “I know Mr. Zimmerman has Cam. That’s why he said it wasn’t safe to be at a graveyard on a night like this.”

I threw back my head and shouted the teacher’s name three times into the air.

Again, the swirling blue fog appeared. This time when Mr. Zimmerman stepped out, he rolled his eyes before he glowered at me. “I’m getting damn tired of being jacked around by stupid kids.”

I was too angry and worried to even think that it was a bad idea to yell at a ghost. “Give me back my brother!” I shouted.

Red sparks appeared in the blue mist. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I know you took him because his two friends said he disappeared right after they called you.”

Mr. Zimmerman groaned and the red sparks disappeared. “Let me guess. Your brother and his friends are about seventh grade and were at the Crestview Cemetery tonight?”

“Sixth grade,” I corrected.

He fixed his eyes on mine. “Someone called me to cemetery and when I showed up, I saw three kids dressed in Halloween costumes. One was Yoda, one was a Ghost Buster, and the other one was Harry Potter.”

I glared at him. “Like I said, give me back my brother.”

He returned my glare. “And, like I said, I didn’t take your brother.” His countenance softened. “But if he’s the kid in the Yoda costume, I know who did.”

“Who?” Caleb and I demanded at the same time.

A cigarette suddenly appeared again in his ghostly hand. He used it to point at us. “This is exactly why people shouldn’t mess around in graveyards.” He sucked on the butt, then blew out a stream of green smoke. “They have no idea how many shadow lurkers are in a place like that.”

Caleb spoke up. "What the hell are shadow lurkers?"

Mr. Zimmerman frowned at him, but his voice settled into a teaching cadence. "Shadow lurkers are wandering souls. They are the ones that won't go to the light because they want to stay in the dark."

"What does this have to do with Cameron?" I demanded

"Shadow lurkers prey on the weak or the innocent. They can influence thoughts, make people do things they would never do otherwise. Sometimes, they can even steal memories." His face suddenly lit up and he turned his attention to Caleb. "That's it! That's why you saw me. A shadow lurker got in your head, stole some of your most guilty memories, then jumped to the man and made him threaten you."

Caleb wrinkled his brow. "But I'm not weak or innocent."

Mr. Zimmerman gave a wry smile. "You may not be innocent, but you are a lot weaker than you think."

My heart clenched. Cameron was the most innocent kid on the planet. "So, you're saying a shadow lurker has my brother."

He was nodding his head as he slowly disappeared.

"We need to get to the cemetery fast." I tossed Caleb his shovel, then sprinted along the side of the house to the front. He didn't catch up to me until I was two streets over, leaning on a light pole, catching my breath.

"Dude, the cemetery is the other way. Where are we going?"

"Back to my house to get the car."

We made it to my backyard in record time. Caleb looked down at the shovel in his hand. "Guess I don't need this grave digger anymore." He tossed it over the fence into the McKinley's backyard, then followed me up the steps and in through the kitchen door.

The only light in the room came from the open microwave. The smell of popcorn hung in the air, and I could hear the TV blaring in the living room. I peeked around the fridge and spotted Jasmine sitting on the couch, polishing off pint sized packets of M&Ms like her life depended on it. I motioned for Caleb to be quiet, then stealthily lifted the car keys from the hook beside the door to the garage. In two seconds, we were in the car and raising the garage door.

Just as the old Dodge roared to life, Jasmine came charging through the door. She pounded on my window with her palm.

"What are you doing?" she screamed. "You don't know how to drive!"

Actually, I did, and I was pretty good at it. I'd had plenty of late night adventures with this car and none of them had ended in anything even remotely close to an accident.

She pounded some more. "Open this window right now!"

I rolled it down six inches and she stuck her fingers in and clutched the pane. Her giant eyes appeared right behind them.

"Where's Cam?" she demanded. "I told you not to ditch him."

"I didn't ditch him. He ditched me. And if you want to keep any of those fingers, I suggest you let go of the window."

I cranked the handle as fast as I could just to piss her off some more. She snatched her hands away at the last second, then pulled open the rear door and jumped in.

She smacked me on the back of the head and demanded again, "Where's Cameron?"

I ignored her, slammed the car into reverse, and stomped on the gas.

She nearly fell into the front seat. "What is wrong with you?"

I paused for a nano second to hit the close button on the garage door remote, then sped off down the street without saying a word.

Since I hadn't answered, Jasmine turned to Caleb. "What's going on?"

I shot him a warning look, but he answered anyway.

“Cameron disappeared.”

She slapped me hard on the back of my head. “You lost our little brother?”

“Ow! Quit hitting me or I will pull over and throw you out of this car.”

She glared at me in the rearview mirror. “I knew it. I knew you would ditch him because you are such a self absorbed jerk you don’t even care about your own little brother!”

I wanted to yell back, but it wouldn’t help Cam. I clamped my mouth shut and concentrated on driving as fast as I could. When we flew around the corner onto Oakdale Avenue, my headlights flashed over a small figure walking on the side of the road.

Cameron!

When we pulled up along side him, he didn’t even look our way.

Caleb and Jasmine rolled down their windows.

“Hey, Cam,” called Caleb. “Where are you going?”

He didn’t answer, just kept walking.

Jasmine tried in her sweetest big sister voice. “Hey, bud, time to come home. We can make hot chocolate and watch a movie.”

This time, Cam’s head turned. He took a step toward the car, and grinned lecherously. “Well, aren’t you a pretty little thing.” The voice was Cam’s, but the way in which the words were said was definitely not. He reached a hand toward the window.

“Don’t let him touch you!” I yelled and hit the gas. A second later, I screamed Mr. Zimmerman’s name three times.

The back seat filled with blue fog and suddenly he was sitting beside Jasmine, looking more than a little pissed off.

She screamed and jumped away.

He shot her an annoyed glance, then his eyes met mine in the mirror. “What is it you want now?”

I slammed on the brakes, cut the engine, then turned in my seat. Through the rear window, I could see Cameron’s body advancing toward us. His face, however, did not even remotely resemble my sweet little brother. The eyes had become dark and cloudy, and his features were set in hard lines. I tore my gaze from him and stared into Mr. Zimmerman’s eyes.

“Please. I need to know. How do I get that thing out of my brother?”

He regarded me for a minute, then the side of his mouth lifted in a slight smile. “Take him to the light. Shadow lurkers can’t survive outside of darkness.” He gave me an approving nod. “Nice to see that you really are one of the good guys, Wyatt.”

With that, the backseat next to Jasmine was suddenly empty. She gave a shriek of relief and collapsed back against the door.

I met her eyes. Somehow, she knew exactly what I was thinking. As I exited my door, she jumped out, then ran around the car to me. I slipped the keys in her hands.

“Start her up and keep her running,” I instructed. “Caleb and I are going to grab Cam and get him in the car. As soon as we do, you drive to the first lit up place you can find.”

She nodded and slid into the driver’s seat. I heard the engine roar to life as Cameron approached.

Caleb and I ran toward him, expecting a fight, but he willingly let each of us grab an arm and lead him toward the car. Caleb flung open the back door and jumped in. I pushed Cam in behind him, then slid in myself, still gripping his arm.

Jasmine threw a frightened look our way, then stomped on the gas. “The middle school’s a block away,” she announced. “Since the dance is going on, there should be lots of light.”

I nodded. “Perfect.”

Just as the middle school came into view, Cam suddenly went slack. His head flopped against my shoulder as if he’d fallen into a deep sleep. A second later, Caleb’s left hand slowly lifted toward Jasmine’s long, wavy hair.

“Stop the car,” I screamed, flinging open my door even before she braked. I hit the ground running, circled the back of the car, then pulled Caleb’s door open. I yanked him out and yelled to Jasmine, “Go, go, go! Get as far away from here as possible!”

She peeled out and I was left clutching my best friend who had suddenly turned into something dark and sinister. We were only a few steps from the school’s parking lot which was dotted with lamp posts shining white in the darkness. Only a few cars were left, and I realized the dance was over and these vehicles probably belonged to the people cleaning up. I pulled Caleb hard, thinking the thing inside him would give me some resistance, but he walked willingly. Maybe, I reasoned, it had given up, decided to meet his fate, if you will.

But then, I felt darkness swirling around me. It was so black I couldn’t see the parking lot lights, and it was pushing on me, trying to enter my body through a spot in the middle of my forehead. It felt like a searing black finger trying to poke through my skull.

Strangely, I wasn’t worried for myself. I was worried for all the people this thing could hurt if it got into me – Jasmine, my mom, Cameron. As soon as I thought of Cam, I saw him dressed in his Yoda get-up, holding up a full sized Snickers bar, yelling, “Jackpot!” And then I heard his happy voice say, “It’s so cool that you’re hanging out with me on Halloween!” After that, white fireworks exploded in my head. It jarred me so much that I dropped to the ground.

Caleb squatted beside me. “Dude, are you okay? What happened?”

I searched his eyes to see if the Shadow Lurker had gotten back into him, but there was no cloudy darkness, only the usual gleam in his light green eyes. He helped me to my feet and as I brushed the leaves off of myself, I got a familiar prickly sensation up the back of my spine.

I looked up to see mom heading my way and she did not seem happy. A man in an orange shirt and black Dockers trailed closely behind her.

She stopped in front of me, crossed her arms, and tapped the toe of a black pump impatiently on the pavement. “What are you doing here, Wyatt?”

Best not to tell her the whole story. Or any part of the story for that matter.

I thought fast. “I came to meet your date. What kind of an oldest son would I be if I didn’t keep track of the people my mother is dating?” I reached around her, grabbed the man’s hand, and gave it a firm shake. “My name’s Wyatt. Nice to meet you.”

Mr. Hawk broke into a grin. His face was, in fact, dreamy, but it was a nice face and I could tell instantly that he was a good guy. I released his hand, then turned to my mom who was now looking more confused than angry. I couldn’t help it, I lunged forward and caught her in a hug and held on tight.

“Happy Halloween, Mom,” I said into her shoulder.

She seemed shocked at first, but then her arms snuggled around me.

“Happy Halloween to you, too, Wyatt.” She released me and gave me a pointed look. “I don’t want you boys getting into any trouble tonight so you’re going to come home with us.”

She turned and walked with Mr. Hawk toward the last car left in the lot.

Off in the distance, the big clock in the tower at City Hall bonged twelve times.

I grinned at Caleb. “It’s after midnight. Thank God, the veil is officially closed!”

“Yep.” He took two steps after my mom, then looked back with a mischievous smile. “Who should we call next year?”

I caught up with him and threw an arm around his shoulder. “Not Mr. Zimmerman, that’s for damn sure.”

