

SCARED SILLY

VAMPIRES RUIN EVERYTHING

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SCHOLASTIC INC.

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Darius Washington is being choked.

Yep. I'm not wasting any time getting right to it. No need to dip our toes into the terrifying water, we're just diving right in headfirst. Need I remind you that you were warned. Like, for the first two pages.

So yeah, Darius grabs at his throat, trying to lessen the tightening so he can breathe. A bead of sweat drips down his forehead as he paws. He can't even swallow. This is pure torture.

"Stop fidgeting," Darius's mom orders under her breath as she plasters a smile on her face. "And smile."

Darius drops his hand and tries to smile, even though it's so not fair. Everybody else in the Cauldron's Cove Community Center gets to wear costumes—there's ghosts, princesses, and superheroes in the packed audience—but Darius is stuck wearing a boring old suit and way-too-tight tie. He spots Sofia and Bennett Norland-Vargas, the newly minted stepsiblings, across the aisle. Bennett's dressed up as a baseball player, and Sofia . . . well, Sofia is just dressed up as Sofia

in her usual black T-shirt and jeans because of course she is. Darius usually gets to wear fun costumes for Halloween events, but since his mom's up for reelection in a couple weeks, he's got to look "presentable." Which to adults means super, *duper* boring and uncomfortable.

Adults, am I right?

Oh, wait. I probably need to remind you that Darius's mom is the mayor of Cauldron's Cove and it's three days until Halloween. You should be aware of how far away we are from Halloween throughout this book. I'll be sure to give you reminders since I'm such a generous and benevolent narrator.

Now, for a town that loves everything witchy and ghoulie—as long as it's fake and rakes in money—Halloween is the busiest time of the year. And this year even more tourists have flooded the town. All eyes are on Cauldron's Cove.

And this is only the beginning. I mean, *obvs*, we're only in chapter one.

The lights go down onstage as Diego Norland-Vargas, the head of the Cauldron's Cove Visitors Center as well Sofia and Bennett's dad, walks across. He's wearing a black cape, his black hair is slicked back, white makeup pales his usually light brown skin, and he's wearing fake fangs and has fake blood smeared around his mouth.

"Welcome, one and all, to the senior center's Halloween show!"

he says into a microphone as he channels . . . I've got to be honest, he sounds like the Count on *Sesame Street*. "I vant to suck your blood."

Not very scary, Mr. Norland-Vargas.

"We are excited to have so many newcomers at this official kickoff to Halloween!" He beams widely as flashes go off from photographers stationed in front of the stage, along with camera crews and dozens of journalists. "Now, I'm sure many of you think we can't possibly top our little Zombie 5K stunt, but we'll sure try. Oh, and let me take this opportunity to wish my blushing bride a happy two-week anniversary."

Here's something you should know if you didn't get through the last book: There was no zombie "stunt." That's what Darius's, Bennett's, and Sofia's parents—along with Regan Charles's, who had to miss the show, and you'll see why in the next chapter—told the town. No, what actually happened was that zombies from Regan's family (I'll get into that later) came back from the dead and literally crashed Sofia's dad's and Bennett's mom's wedding. Now, of course, our four young heroes tried to warn their parents *again*, but the adults didn't listen to them *again*, so it was up to the kids to save the day *again*. And that involved lots of zombie brain-bashing.

(If you're reading this and thinking, *That sounds awesome, I should*

really go back and read *Zombie Wedding Crashers*, go ahead! I can wait for your return . . .

Done? Wasn't it awesome and gross and scary?

You're welcome.)

But here's the thing about the parents' lie: It worked. Even though there were witnesses to the zombies' ruining the wedding, the adults got away with it. They released the videos people took during the ceremony and said it was to promote the ill-timed (or perfectly timed?) *Zombie 5K*. Everybody went crazy for the videos and they got all this media attention.

So the question on people's minds is: What could *Cauldron's Cove* possibly do next?

Hence the packed audience and the media covering this show.

"All I can tell you is to brace yourself for the senior center's ghoulish and frightful performance." Mr. Norland-Vargas dramatically flings his cape over his face as he exits the stage.

Now, dear reader, you should also brace yourself for what's about to come. The senior center's yearly Halloween performance is the stuff of legends.

The lights go down as the seniors make their way to the stage. Some shuffle, some walk, some use scooters. Then the music starts.

Dooo-dooooooo. Do. Do. Do.

(Recognize the song? Nope? Let me continue.)

D-doo-doooo-do-d-do.

D-doo-doooo-do-d-do.

D-doo-doooo-do-d-do.

It sort of goes like this for a while. If you haven't figured it out, it's a super old song that people in your life born in the ye olden times—aka the nineteen hundreds (*can you even imagine?*)—would know. It's a super famous song called "Thriller," by Michael Jackson. (Ask an adult.)

Anyhoo, the seniors are dressed as . . . zombies.

Darius sinks in his seat. Bennett hangs his head. Sofia rolls her eyes because of course she does.

See, when you've faced *actual zombies* who want to eat your brains, some seniors dressed in tattered clothes with their faces painted in white-and-gray makeup dancing and shaking their tushies is just not that scary. In fact, it's sort of hilarious.

Darius covers his mouth. Even though most people come to see whatever delightfully campy skit the seniors have come up with, as the mayor's son, Darius can't be seen laughing at them.

These seniors are living their best lives dancing and shimmying. One senior dude in a red-and-black leather jacket goes to the front of the stage and turns around and sticks his butt out to the audience. A

woman in a red dress twirls around so much, she loses her balance. Another has her mouth open so wide while dancing, her fake teeth fall out.

As I said, legendary.

Once this entertaining performance is finished, the audience gets on their feet to cheer. As the seniors take their well-deserved bow, Mr. Norland-Vargas nods at the mayor. Which is the cue for the Washington family to take the stage. Darius and his older sister, Tiana, follow their parents obediently. For her part, Tiana, in a black dress, has finally gotten off her phone and stands next to her brother. The family is the perfect picture, like the one featured on Mayor Washington's reelection posters.

Mayor Washington shakes the hands of the seniors before going up to the podium at the side of the stage. "Thank you to the Cauldron's Cove Senior Center for kicking off Halloween weekend in such style. As mayor, I'd like to extend my welcome to those visiting Cauldron's Cove for the first time. I hope you—"

"Mayor Washington!" a guy, wearing a MEDIA badge, calls out from the front. "Do you care to comment on the death of Leona Taylor? Her family has questions and city hall is not answering them."

"This is really not the—" Mayor Washington begins, but the reporter cuts her off.

“I’ve confirmed that Leona never went camping, yet we’re supposed to believe that she went on her own immediately after giving a cemetery tour. Her body only showed up after her family went public with her disappearance.”

Okay, I probably need to fill you in on what’s happened in the past two weeks since we last saw our four heroes. You may have recalled five people died in the last book. *Yup*. We’re not messing around here anymore. Leona Taylor led four tourists to the Cauldron’s Cove Cemetery and they ended up becoming zombies. Alas, that wasn’t something the mayor of a family-friendly tourist destination wanted to share. The tourists were easy enough to cover up, but see, Leona had a family in Cauldron’s Cove who noticed things like when she disappeared. After they put up MISSING PERSON posters around town, suddenly Leona’s body was found in the woods—woods that were searched when she first went missing—and it was declared she was killed by a bear or wild creature since her body wasn’t in great shape. (That’s what happens when you become a zombie and the only way to stop one is to bash its head in.)

And I’ll admit, the adults were pretty smug about getting away with it.

“What do you have to say, Mayor Washington?” the journalist presses.

“Yes, Mayor.” A voice comes from the back of the auditorium.

“What do you have to say?”

Darius takes a big gulp when he sees it’s from Damien Hearse, his mom’s opponent for mayor. It’s almost as if the temperature has dropped as he approaches the front of the stage. Okay, here’s a little secret—since we all love secrets, right?—Damien Hearse sort of freaks Darius out. And it’s not solely because he’s after his mom’s job. Dude is a bit spooky looking: Tall, lanky, and looks like he hasn’t slept in days. His skin is paper white, there are purple bags under his eyes, and when he smiles, he reveals these super big canine teeth. *Ah, that’s pretty random, which teeth are your canines?* you may be wondering. The super sharp ones. Ones that could perhaps be described as fangs.

Come to think of it, Damien Hearse looks a lot like Mr. Norland-Vargas dressed up. He’s wearing all black and even has jet-black hair that is slicked back into a ponytail with a white stripe in it. Sort of like a vampire. Maybe it’s a costume?

(No comment.)

Anyhoo, Mr. Hearse shakes a few hands as he gets to the front. He then spins around to address the crowd. “Citizens of Cauldon’s Cove, what exactly is your mayor hiding? You deserve to know the truth about Leona. You deserve to have a mayor who will be upfront. Mayor Washington has blood on her hands.”

“That’s enough,” Mayor Washington says into the microphone. “This is not the time nor place for these accusations. These fine people have come here for an evening of fun.”

But the audience is officially stirred up. There’s loud murmuring among the crowd as all eyes are glued on the mayor. Darius does his best to keep his face neutral but glances at Sofia and Bennett, who look stunned and, perhaps, a little relieved.

Why would they be relieved for this to come out? you may be thinking. See, here’s the thing: None of them appreciated having to keep the truth from their friends. Having to lie. And you know what, yeah, it would be nice to get some credit for saving the town for once.

Other reporters in the audience start talking over one another, asking the mayor to comment, and Darius’s mom does her best to look calm, but there’s the slightest hint of sweat forming on her brow. While Damien Hearse smiles, his fangs—I mean, *teeth*—are on full display.

Hmm. It appears that perhaps the adults didn’t get away with it after all.