

ZOINKS!
Chapter 6. Haunted House

CASPER

Zoinks! contains mature language and themes of addiction and neglect, and is intended for all you beautiful, sensitive fucks who played with ninja turtles upstairs while your childhood friends watched their first horror movie in the basement ... true story.

(The Stratemeyer Estate.)

Nolan Blackwell wasn't sure.

That's the only thing that can be said for certain.

She wasn't sure that she was awake.

Maybe this was one of those light dreams you have, in the minutes before your alarm goes off, drifting in and out, both under your covers and somewhere else. Or maybe she was awake and her eyes were just too heavy to open.

She wasn't sure how much time had passed, if any time had passed. Perhaps the hit, had she been hit?, had come just a fraction of a second ago.

She wasn't sure where the pain was coming from. She could feel it everywhere: the back of her head, her temples, the muscles in her back, even her calves ached.

She wasn't sure where the crying was coming from. But someone was crying. Somebody else was in this room, sitting off on the edges, cries coming in slow, even whimpers.

So many unknowns.

But Nolan Blackwell wasn't trying to solve anything right now. She just needed to lie there: her eyes closed, perfectly still, for just a while longer.

Of that she was sure.

Cousin Craig - remember cousin Craig? - cousin Craig lived out in the country. Not the "Country" country. The walk-in-pantry, "why is your internet so slow?" country.

Cousin Craig lived there with Uncle Terry and Aunt Diane in this big ranch-style thing: above-ground pool and a drive lined in fruit trees that, as far as Nolan could tell, didn't produce shit.

CASPER (cont.)

It seemed, to her, that their whole life was engines: an old riding mower and a gas-powered leaf blower, a chainsaw and a tiller. Uncle Terry would go off to a neighbor's house in his pickup truck and show back up with a wood chipper or a post hole digger.

Cousin Craig had a little four-wheeler that he would sometimes take Nolan out on.

Everything had pull cords and keys that had to be turned to multiple, confusing positions. Chokes that had to be pulled out and that little bubble you have to press three times.

Uncle Terry shouting: "Ho-Ho-Ho, you're gonna flood it, you're gonna flood it!"

If Nolan was pressed to explain how she felt in this moment, the closest she would be able to come is that of an engine, struggling to tick over. Yanking a pull cord, a quick "fluddah-fluddah" and then dying again. A slow, burping idle, and then being a little overeager, pulling back on the throttle a little too quickly and losing it all again.

It can be so frustrating when an engine, or a body, doesn't behave the way you need it to.

Nolan lied there, fading in and out of consciousness, pulses of pain traveling her body.

But the body is not an engine. And even the weakest idle is enough for it to be actively working on its continued survival.

The first thing it honed in on was the crying. Only it wasn't crying, but Nolan's own barely-audible voice, coming out in low moans with each exhale.

She could feel her cheek lying on a hardwood floor.

And sleep claimed her again. There was another rip of the pull cord and she was back, a little stronger this time.

Could hear boots pacing, nervously.

And then a voice:

<< Hell, I don't know who she is, only ever saw her for the first time the other day. >>

A pause, like someone else was talking, only she couldn't hear them, and then:

<< I guarantee don't nobody know she's here. >>

Another pause, and:

CASPER (cont.)

<< I got a way we can bring her around. By morning she'll go along with anything you want. >>

And sometime later, the deep resonance of movement from the basement, something heavy being drug across a concrete floor.

And now you might be wondering, wasn't she scared? Trapped in that house with no one to come to her aid ...

Oh friends, this wasn't Nolan Blackwell's first haunted house.

Not by a longshot.

This is *Zoinks!*, a summer soundtrack so perfect it can only be conveyed thru a playlist, gifted to you on a burnt CD-R for teen detectives and their dogs.

(THEME SONG)

(The crazed whine of an engine as wind whips past.)

NOLAN

I'm sitting on the back of cousin Craig's four-wheeler, my arms wrapped tight around him. My cheek is pressed against his back as the machine bucks and dips along the deeply rutted maintenance road that runs behind his house, bordering a sod farm. His shirt is wet from sweat and even in the fast-moving wind, he smells terrible.

Can we slow down!

CASPER

<< This ain't even full speed, Nolan. >>

(The four-wheeler's engine revs and they speed up, NOLAN wincing.)

NOLAN

Cousin Craig loved nothing more than making other people wish he would drop dead. If you've ever wondered what kind of a person enjoys making donuts in a church parking lot or smashing mailboxes or pissing in places where you're generally not supposed to piss - the answer is cousin Craig.

Even this maintenance road is someplace we're absolutely not supposed to be.

And if all this has got you thinking, "god, what a dumbass ... " well, that's exactly what Cousin Craig wants you to think. Because, like almost everyone else, it's just a mask that he wears,

NOLAN (cont.)

covering up how insanely smart he is, how inquisitive he is by nature, and - believe it or not - how caring he can be.

There's something he wants me to see. Something, he claims, that will help make sense of things. Something the adults aren't talking to me about.

And it's all just one quick, terrifying, ride away.

CASPER

It was three summers ago and an eleven-year-old Nolan Blackwell had spent late spring and most of her summer camped out on family couches or in guest bedrooms.

A three-month rehab program and the promise of a family vacation when it was over. The beach, maybe. But three months, had come and gone ...

NOLAN

At the time, I didn't know what rehab was - only that Mom was sick, that she was going somewhere to get better, that sometimes things like this happened.

I suppose it's natural to want to hide the whole story from kids, to tell yourself that it's better not to have the whole truth, that it's the right thing to do. But adults forget - just because someone is in the next room, doesn't mean they're not listening.

Kids know when you want to change the subject. They catalog all the questions you dodge. They lean in when they hear hushed tones.

Has it ever happened to you where your parents are going out for dinner and tell the babysitter they'll be back at nine? And then 9:15 rolls around and you're certain: They're dead. They're dead in a ditch somewhere. You're an orphan now.

Well, imagine that, only it's April and everyone says your mom will be right back and now it's July.

Not only is she dead in a ditch but, "kid, we can't find that ditch."

CASPER

The maintenance road meets up with a paved road and cousin Craig takes it, heading towards a newer development. Neighborhoods and cul de sacs are going in, sidewalks are being built, but the houses just haven't turned up yet. Street lights blink on as dusk approaches, keeping a watchful eye on all the nobodies walking towards nothing.

NOLAN

He stops at the side of the road.

NOLAN (cont.)

A stucco mailbox sits outside a large set of metal gates. A wooden fence outlines a large yard. A row of trees, barely larger than saplings, line a long drive towards a newly-finished house.

It's large and feels out of place. A detached, three-car garage facing the street and a trampoline off to one side. It's got a stone facade complete with accent lighting because some people really crave the "we're rich, just look at our vinyl-siding castle!" look.

Cousin Craig stares at it and then back at me.

CASPER

<< That whole house was made out of pills. >>

NOLAN

What does that mean?

CASPER

<< Bethany Davis lives there, she's in my grade. She told me. >>

<< She didn't mean to, at first, just showing off. Her family's got money, our family hasn't, that kind of stuff. But I kept asking her questions. She'd tell me enough to shut me up, but then I'd start in the next day. >>

<< I'm pretty good at getting shit out of people if I want it. >>

NOLAN

Oh. Okay.

CASPER

<< You know how much you can get out of a bottle of pills? Five, sometimes ten, thousand dollars. >>

NOLAN

Just regular pills?

CASPER

<< Pain pills, Nolan. Prescription pills. >>

NOLAN

And then he outlined how it worked.

Bethany Davis's mother: a woman who found addicts in need of relief. People in pain who couldn't afford the doctor's visit. Paying for them to see the doctor, paying to have their prescriptions filled, giving them enough for a day or two and keeping the rest of the bottle.

CASPER

<< 3 pills a day, a 30-day prescription, that's 90 pills. >>

NOLAN

Bethany Davis had explained the math to him.

CASPER

<< You're getting a dollar a milligram and some of these pills are 80 milligrams. >>

NOLAN

Eighty dollars a pill?

CASPER

<< Eighty dollars if it's cash ... >>

NOLAN

Then he explained what really made all this so lucrative. You need pills but you have no money. So you steal from the big box stores, Wal-mart, Lowes, Home Depot. Return the stolen goods for store credit and bring them the gift card.

CASPER

<< Show up with a two hundred dollar gift card and walk away with a hundred milligrams worth of whatever you want. Nolan, that entire house was built outta Lowe's gift cards. >>

NOLAN

That's awful. Why don't they get caught.

CASPER

<< Because it ain't them going to the doctor, ain't them standing in line at the pharmacy. They ain't getting caught stealing shit. And ain't nobody turning them in. >>

<< So. You ever wondered why your Mom is the way she is. People like that. That's why. >>

NOLAN

It was weird, hearing the truth, knowing that what he was saying was the absolute truth, because it sounded so different from what everyone else was saying.

I felt like breaking down and crying.

And for a moment, I wondered, is that what he wanted? Was cousin Craig just trying to get under my skin like he was everybody else?

And then there was an explosion from his wrist and a lanky, sloppy middle finger shot out towards the house.

CASPER

<< Fuck those people, Nolan. >>

NOLAN

The four-wheeler's engine kick started alive and Craig squeezed tight on the throttle. We rode back, moving even faster than before. I hugged Craig tight, my face buried in his t-shirt. I'm not scared of the ride. I don't mind the stench. I'm just so ... relieved.

Aunt Liz came to pick me up that Friday. I was supposed to stay with Uncle Terry for another week, but the youth group at Aunt Liz's church was holding a lock in and nothing says "making new friends" quite like "hanging out with strangers while wearing your PJs."

CASPER

Nolan had been longing to go back home for so long. She missed her house, her bed, her mother. She felt like if she could just see it once, maybe she could offload some of this sadness she had been carrying around, like emptying your luggage into a hamper after a long trip.

Aunt Liz lived on the opposite side of town from Nolan and her mother, mostly because Aunt Liz could afford to. Aunt Liz's neighborhood was newer, cleaner. Had Nolan wanted to sneak away and get back home, it would have been all but impossible.

But Aunt Liz's church was another matter, more than half the distance back.

And it's not like that actually lock you in.

And so, late one Friday night, while teenagers sat around open bags of marshmallows, trying to see how many they could stuff into their mouths ...

NOLAN

<< Now remember, a boy at Hollow Oak Baptist died two years ago playing Chubby Bunny, so just ... be careful. >>

CASPER

Nolan Blackwell found an open bathroom window and quietly slipped out.

(MUSIC.)

NOLAN

"The Nolan Blackwell Teen Sleuth Girl Detective Casefiles #2: The Mystery of the Crying House."

CASPER

Nolan's darkened house sat on a quiet street. Normally, her mother would have left on the porch light, or kept a lamp on in the front room, but now this house sat abandoned.

NOLAN

The car was gone. That felt odd. Hadn't Aunt Liz said that Mom had no car where she was?

CASPER

A key tucked under a flower pot on the back porch. A twist of the lock, but before she could turn the knob.

(CASPER makes a low, dark moan.)

Something from the night? The wind, an owl?

(NOLAN creeps inside.)

Before a house can become haunted, it first has to become warped.

NOLAN

Burger King drive-thru bags masquerading as trashcans. A coffee cup with a secret double life as an ashtray. An overflowing kitchen sink.

(the low, dark moan.)

CASPER

Was it coming from in the house? It sounded almost like... crying.

She walked from room to room: the growing mountain of evidence was clear: the house hadn't been vacant.

NOLAN

Cigarette burns in Mom's bedspread and a mountain of dirty laundry. A bathroom with every drawer and cabinet standing open.

(That low, dark moan...)

CASPER

Again... the crying. She couldn't pinpoint it, but it electrified her – ripples of fear running from her shoulders down to her fingers.

(NOLAN pushed on.)

NOLAN

My bedroom, spotless, except for the bed. Someone had been sleeping here.

(moan)

CASPER

From just down the hall, she was certain. The guest bedroom...

(moan)

The floor creaked under every step. The foundation settled. A branch tapped against a window. But nothing that could muffle the crying of the house.

(NOLAN opens the door to the guest bedroom.)

(CASPER, younger, is crying in pain.)

NOLAN

It was so unexpected that it took a moment to realize:

A puppy. In the middle of the room.

Crying so badly I was afraid to go near it.

Gnawing at a brand-new cast on one leg. A doggy cone that hadn't been put together and an empty prescription bottle from a veterinarian. Cans of dog food that never quite got opened.

All clues... Pieces snapping together, forming an image:

A mother in need of pain pills who finds a stray and then breaks its leg. A woman who meant to care for the animal she broke, but got a little too high and forgot.

It might have been here for days, starving, in pain.

Burdens fall. Someone has to take up the slack.

[to CASPER:] Hey puppy. It's okay.

No, no. I'm not going to hurt you. You're okay.

Shh... it's okay. Does that hurt? Oh, I bet it does. Here, don't put any weight on it. Better?

CASPER

She held the animal until the crying stopped.

She named him.

NOLAN

Casper.

CASPER

The first ghost she ever unmasked.

She cared for the broken animal.

(CASPER'S stomach growls.)

NOLAN

Oh! Was that you or your stomach?

CASPER

Food. A bowl of water.

NOLAN

There. Good as new.

And then, like all puppies. He peed on the floor.

CASPER

In the morning, Nolan went to a neighbor's house and called Aunt Liz.

She was livid. A frantic call from the youth group leader. Searching the church. The lock-in canceled, kids sent home. Calling the police.

And then, seeing the dog, the cast, the trashed house.

NOLAN

I give Aunt Liz a hard time. Sometimes I think we hate each other. Sometimes I think we hate each other because we're the only ones left to hate. But sometimes she can have so much ... grace.

She loaded Casper and I into her SUV, found us some breakfast, found an emergency animal clinic that would write a new prescription on a Saturday. And then we headed back to Aunt Liz's house. There was never any question about keeping the puppy.

Burdens fall. Someone has to take up the slack.

(The Stratemeyer Estate.)

CASPER

The next time consciousness found Nolan, she was being drug out of the house. She could feel her heels cracking against the front steps, could feel weeds and tall grass brushing up against her legs and face as she was pulled round to the side yard.

CASPER (cont.)

And then, the sound of digging, and the smell of wet earth.

She saw the wooden box leaning against the side of the house and an image formed in her mind.

(NOLAN reaches for her satchel.)

Her green satchel was still around her neck. She fumbled for the clasp, tugged it open and reached inside, groping frantically.

NOLAN

My hand finds what I'm looking for and wrenches it free of the satchel.

(The sound of a metal tin opening up.)

And then the gravedigger turns and sees me.

(The gravedigger kicks NOLAN'S hands with a grunt. She screams out in pain.)

CASPER

<< If I knew what was good for me, I wouldn't fucking move again. >>

NOLAN

And now a pain in my hands, but I keep my fist clenched tight.

CASPER

The gravedigger wraps his hands around Nolan's ankles and tugs. She tries to struggle, despite the pain, but it isn't long before her movements are too restricted to do much good.

NOLAN

And now, more shoveling and -

(NOLAN gasps in quick bursts of air as the thud of soil hits a wooden surface.)

CASPER

Fifteen minutes later, his work done, the gravedigger put the shovels back in the bed of his truck, so happy that he remembered the empty, seventh coffin in the basement.

(end of episode.)

CREDITS

Zoinks!

Written by Trey Tatum

Directed by Bridget Leak

Starring Jordan Trovillion as Nolan Blackwell and Trey Tatum as Casper

Part five: Do Not Enter was recorded by Grayson Halonen

Zoinks! is produced by Queen City Flash out of Cincinnati, Ohio.

More information, including transcripts, can be found at QueenCityFlash.com