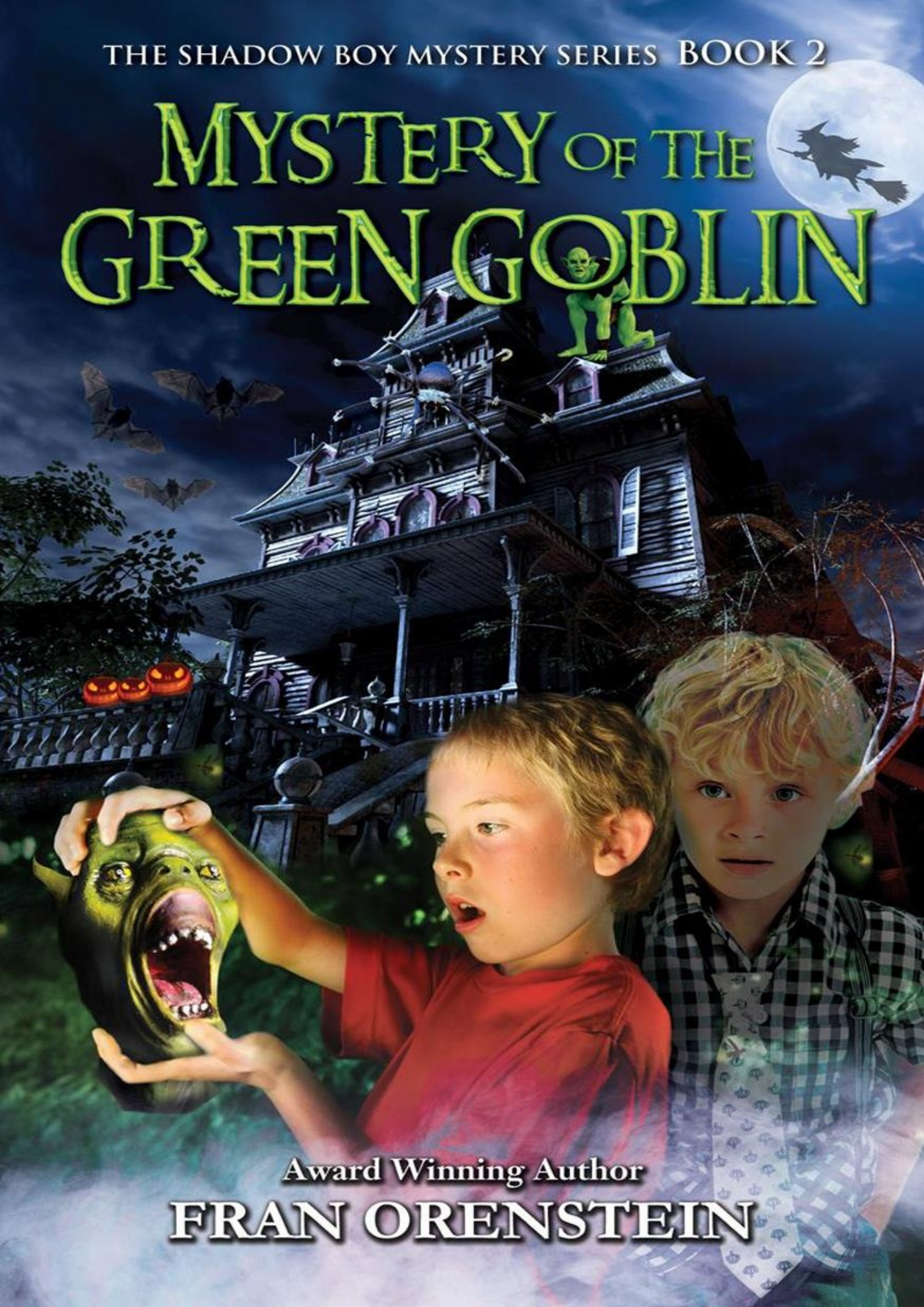


THE SHADOW BOY MYSTERY SERIES BOOK 2

# MYSTERY OF THE GREEN GOBLIN



Award Winning Author

**FRAN ORENSTEIN**

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

MYSTERY OF THE GREEN GOBLIN

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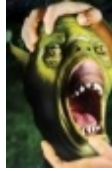
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# Chapter 1



Who is Alex Cooper?

By November 1st, the whole town believed that Alexander Cooper, age 11, had murdered The Worm on Mischief Night. In fact, no one had actually murdered the math teacher, Mr. Wormstead, known as The Worm. However, The Worm's mailbox did blow up and he may have been pushed down the stairs of his front porch on that cold night before Halloween.

In fact, no human actually blew up the mailbox or pushed him. The Worm wasn't even pushed down the stairs, exactly; but an old man plodding along with his old dog, thought he saw a goblin on the porch just before the mailbox exploded. Then Mr. Wormstead ran out, tumbling down his long, steep front staircase.

Alex wore a goblin costume for Halloween; exactly like the goblin seen at The Worm's house that night. So, naturally, everyone immediately thought of Alex Cooper. Especially, since he'd just had a fight with the teacher in front of 30 other students. No one knew that Alex happened to be somewhere else when the goblin blew up The Worm's mailbox. Well, at least one person knew but that comes later.

The week before, an early October chill frosted the northern Arizona morning grass, turning it silver and shiny. Leaves blazed orange, yellow and red as they floated down from the almost naked, shivering trees. Alex dawdled along the street, stopping every so often to stomp on a particularly crunchy pile of dried, brown leaves. He wasn't in any rush to get to school. It just meant he had to worry all day about his last class with The Worm. Most days he couldn't concentrate on anything else.

By lunch, his stomach churned so much it felt like his mom's food processor. Alex pictured his lunch whirling around in his stomach trying to escape out his mouth. Sometimes it did. That was so gross.

Alexander Cooper wasn't the most popular boy in town. He could have had friends if he'd just tried to be a little friendly. Some of the kids in his class actually seemed to like him but he didn't care. At least, that's what he told himself. So, when the other kids said hello, Alex just nodded. He didn't join their games or play sports. Nobody took him to the little league tryout or the soccer sign-up. He wasn't in the band or the art club.

Alex pretty much kept to himself, except when he was with the town lowlifes, Matthew Murdock and Thomas Ashe, otherwise known as Mungo and Trash. They were a year older than Alex and he thought it was cool they wanted to be his friends; or so he thought. Actually, they used him as a cheering section for their small crimes and dangerous adventures.

Trash wanted him as a lookout when they shoplifted at the variety store. Alex knew it was wrong but there was a delicious excitement too. He figured if he didn't take the stuff,

it was OK. He would just stand by the check-out counter, looking as if he couldn't make up his mind which candy to buy but really making sure the clerk wasn't checking the store or the video monitor. It was Alex's job to distract the clerk if he happened to get curious about what two suspicious-looking boys were doing in aisle four.

Trash usually tried to give Alex some of the stuff they shoplifted but he wouldn't take it, like last Thursday. Trash had stuffed some comic books in his shirt. "Here, a reward," he said, holding out a glossy book. Alex shook his head and pushed it away.

"Come on, don't be a wuss," Trash said.

"It's OK, thanks. I don't need it," Alex said, looking at the comic book Trash was holding out. He loved X-Men comics but his throat tightened when he thought about sneaking one home inside his shirt. What if his mother found it? Fat chance of that. She never poked through his things. She wasn't around enough. What was the harm? He almost reached out but, at the last second, shrugged and shook his head. It didn't feel right. Overhead, in the oak tree, a branch shivered and acorns rained down on Trash's head.

"Hey," he yelled.

"Who did that?"

Mungo laughed. "Musta been the giant squirrel monster from outer space."

"Shut up," Trash said, brushing off his hair. Trash also needed someone to tell him how great he was, besides Mungo, who wasn't very bright anyway. Alex was perfect for that job. He thought Trash was cool and Trash loved it. So, everyone assumed Alexander Cooper also lurked at the bottom of the pond feeding on the slime along with Trash and Mungo.

By this time, Alex had reached the hardware store. School was around the corner. Kids passed him on the street as if he were invisible. Wouldn't that be a hoot? Alexander Cooper, the Invisible Boy. He could stand up in front of the classroom and jump up and down, waving his arms and making faces. Old Wormy wouldn't even know he was there. If he wrote nasty things on the board, the chalk would be moving by itself. Alex giggled, thinking about the things he would write. "Wormy is an old..."

"Pssst," a voice hissed from the alley between the hardware store and the bakery. Alex stopped short. His heart beat like a bongo drum.

"Hey, over here," the voice called.

Alex peered around the corner of the alley. Trash and Mungo lounged against a wall behind the dumpster.

Alex breathed again and walked toward them. "What are you guys doing here?"

"Scared you, didn't I?" Trash laughed.

"You did not," Alex said.

"Did too, did too," Mungo said.

"Yeah, you shoulda seen your face, like you was scared," Trash said.

“I wasn’t scared. You startled me, that’s all,” Alex said, pulling his hair.

“Yeah, sure. So why you pulling your hair?” Mungo asked, grinning.

Alex put his hand in his pocket.

“Mungo, shut up,” Trash said. “So we were thinking of cutting school. Maybe go down to the river and look for snakes.”

Alex shook his head. “Not today. I have a spelling test.”

“Uh huh, since when is that so important,” Trash said.

“It’s important, OK? I promised my Mom I’d try to do better in school,” Alex said.

“You hear that, Trash, he promised his Mommy. That’s cute.”

“Just shut up, Mungo,” Alex shouted.

“Yeah, shut up, Mungo,” Trash yelled.

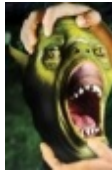
Mungo put up his hands. “OK, OK, don’t get so mad. I was just fooling.”

“Come on, guys, let’s go,” Alex said, backing out of the alley.

“Yeah, I guess,” Trash said, following him. Mungo trailed behind. A shadow followed the boys.



# Chapter 2



## The Halloween Costume

Later that week, Alex made a Halloween costume for himself. Black pants, orange shirt, green cape, and a rubber goblin mask with fake blood drooling down the chin. He saved up the money he earned by sweeping out the hardware store twice a week to buy the mask and cape in the variety store.

Trash laughed when he heard. “Why’d you pay for it? We could have gotten it free.”

“Yeah,” Mungo said. “I would’ve stuffed it under my jacket while Trash talked up the clerk.”

“How do you think we get our costumes?” Trash asked.

Alex shrugged. “It’s OK, guys. I’m cool.”

Later that night, his brother Jessie had another opinion. “That’s a dumb costume, kid,” Jessie said, when he saw it on the bed. “You’re so lame, Alex.”

Alex would later regret not listening to his big brother but now he said, “Get lost. This’ll get me a lot of candy and you won’t get any of it.”

“Is that so?” Jessie knuckled him on the side of the head. “We’ll see about that.”

“Leave me alone,” Alex said, turning away so Jessie wouldn’t see the tears welling up in his eyes. Alex always felt helpless against his older brother and it made him so mad. Now he would have to hide the candy where Jessie wouldn’t find it. Alex hoped he would get a lot of candy this year, especially if he had to turn over some to the creep to shut him up.

Jessie grabbed the mask and tossed it in the air.

“Hey, give that back, Jess,” Alex yelled.

“Yeah, what are you gonna do, baby, cry?” Jessie smirked.

“Come on, Jess, it took me a week to earn the money to buy it.” Alex was close to tears again.

Jessie tossed the mask on the bed. “OK, OK. Don’t wet y’re pants.”

The door swung open. “What’s going on in here?” Susannah Cooper stood in the doorway, hands on hips.

Jessie scowled. “Nothing, Mom, sorry.”

She looked at Alex, then at the bed. “Is that your Halloween costume?”

Alex nodded. “It’s a goblin.”

“Very nice, Alex. Good job.” Then turning to Jessie, she said. “By the way, speaking of Halloween,

I’m sorry, Mr. Peabody asked me to work at the paper that night. So I’m putting you in charge of Alex’s trick or treating.”

“Aw, Mom,” Jessie groaned. “I had plans with my friends. I don’t want to baby sit the kid on Halloween.”

“Mom,” Alex said. “I’m not a little kid anymore. I can go out myself.”

Susannah Cooper looked at Alex. “I know you think you’re grown up but bad things can happen on Halloween. Who are you going with?”

Alex thought fast. “Um, uh...I don’t know yet. Probably some kids in my class, you know, Zayden and Aaron.”

“Not Matthew or Thomas, right?” she said.

Alex shook his head vigorously.

“I’ll tell you what. You tell me in the next couple of days who you are going with and I’ll decide,” Susannah Cooper said.

“But Mom,” Jessie said.

“Discussion is over. I have to leave for work now.” Susannah hugged her sons and shut the door behind her.

“She’s always working,” Jessie said.

Alex pulled at his hair. “Yeah, well it’s not her fault Dad’s gone. Somebody has to make money.”

For a second, a look of anger passed across Jessie’s face. “Yeah, I guess.” Jessie looked down at his feet. “But three jobs? What if she gets sick or something? Then what are we gonna do?”

Was Jessie really scared? That didn’t feel right. Alex needed him to be strong. He didn’t really remember his father. He disappeared fighting in Afghanistan when Alex was five. Missing in Action, the army called it. Dead was more like it. Mom had MIA stickers on the car and the front door. On holidays she flew the black and white MIA flag under the American Flag. Every year on Dad’s birthday, she would bake a cake. Nevertheless, Jess was eight and he never really got over it. He still believed their dad would turn up one day.

Sometimes, Alex felt so much older than Jessie.

“We’ll manage. We always do. I can get more hours at the hardware store and you can ask Mr. Levin for extra time after school at the market. Maybe we can get an early morning paper route.”

Silence filled the room. “Listen, Jess, I’ll find somebody to go out with on Halloween. I won’t spoil your fun.”

“Thanks, Alex. Sometimes you’re not so bad. Just remember, you share the candy.” Alex laughed and Jessie grinned, too.

Alone at last with his costume, Alex sat on the bed and thought about his mom. She used to be really pretty, with her thick brown hair and green eyes. Now, her bones stuck out and she dragged around all the time. Sometimes her hair hung lifeless in a droopy ponytail. He wondered *what would it be like to have a real mom, somebody who took us out to movies and pizza. A mom I could talk to.* She worked so much, he hardly saw her anymore. Well, except at dinner. According to Mom's Law, they always had to eat dinner together. The fourth chair always sat empty, waiting for Dad to sit in it.

Like that was ever going to happen. Alex had checked it out on the computer. Another year and the Army would declare his dad dead. He wondered if that would change anything. Maybe mom would get married again. He didn't think Jessie would like that. How would it be to have a man in the house?

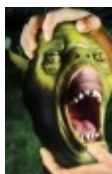
He tried to bring back some memory of his father, but all he could remember was a tall man wearing stiff shirts and big black boots. They had all laughed when Alex put on the huge boots and clomped around, finally falling over. He recalled his father's big hands because they smelled of oil.

Sure, there were lots of pictures of him all over the house, so Alex knew what he looked like. Well, what he could see in a flat photograph in a frame. Jessie sort of looked like their dad but Alex didn't look anything like him. Mom said Alex looked like her father. He never knew him, either. More picture memories.

So there they'd sit, eating dinner, the empty chair staring at them. Then mom would leave for her second job and he would be alone with Jessie, the torturer. Jessie didn't care if Alex did his homework or read any books. He was either on the phone with some girl or playing video games. He was happiest when Alex left him alone. If Alex annoyed him, he got a hard knuckle rap on the head.

Every three months, his mom would sigh when his report cards arrived and try to find out what was wrong. Then she'd have to run to another job and the discussion ended, much to Alex's relief. Industrious when it came to getting money, his interest in school worked just the opposite. He didn't hand in his homework on time, got C's and D's on most of his tests and stared out the window during class. Alexander Cooper became a prime target for Mungo and Trash's little gang of two, or maybe now three.

# Chapter 3



## Shadows and other Strange Stuff

That night, moonlight crept around the edges of the window shades. A shadowy figure pulled the chair out from under the desk next to the bed. The figure moved the desk chair close to the bed and curled up in it, watching Alex sleep. The boy was restless. His eyelids fluttered and he moaned. Once he cried out. *Bad dreams*, the watcher thought, *lost father, war, and a goblin.*

In his dream, Alex wandered looking for his father in the middle of a war torn city. The rubble of bombed out buildings littered the streets. Dead bodies baked in the desert sun. Bullets flew by him, grenades exploded around him but still he searched for a man he couldn't remember.

Alex climbed up the side of a mountain and found a cave. When he went inside, a goblin waited for him, its shining eyes gleaming in the darkness and yellow fangs drooling sticky goop down its green chin.

Alex groaned and turned over. The shadow reached out and touched the boy's shoulder. He quieted down and slept peacefully for the rest of the night.

The next morning, Alex awoke to the sun trying to peek through window shades. He stretched. *Yuck, school again*, he thought. Yeah, but it was almost Halloween. "OK, I can do it. I can make it 'til then," he said.

He jumped out of bed and bumped into the desk chair. "Ouch," he cried, rubbing his leg. "What's the chair doing next to the bed?"

Alex clearly remembered the chair under the desk last night. Otherwise, he would have smacked into it when he got into bed. "OK, what's going on?" he muttered. Then he thought of his mom. Maybe she had come in last night after work and sat by his bed for a while. Yeah, he liked that. Mom watching over him was cool, sorta' safe. Well, it was fine as long as she didn't try to give him wet, yucky kisses and squashy hugs.

Alex brushed his teeth and splashed water on his face. Pulling on his clothes, he grabbed his knapsack and ran into the kitchen. Jessie was shoveling dry cereal into his mouth, head nearly in the bowl.

"Good morning, Amazing Alex," Susannah Cooper said, smiling.

"Uh, yeah, Mom, good morning," Alex said.

"It's yes, not yeah." She put out a new box of cereal and the milk.

Alex looked at his mom. "Did you come into my room last night and sit next to the bed? Did you want to wake me up and tell me something?"

“Huh?” Jessie said, looking up surprised.

Susannah looked at Alex. “No, hon, I didn’t sit by your bed last night. I came home very late and decided not to wake either of you. Why, did you think someone was in your room last night?”

“Uh,” Alex tugged his hair. “Not really, I mean the desk chair was next to the bed. I tripped over it. I thought I put it under the desk before I went to bed. I must have forgotten.” Silently he wondered who had moved the chair. Chairs didn’t just walk around by themselves. Maybe Jessie was trying to spook him.

“Oooh, goblins,” Jessie whispered behind Alex.

Alex jumped. “Shut up.” Sure, he thought, probably Jessie.

“Boys, cut it out, now. Be happy and try to get along for the next 30 minutes, please,” Susannah said. “And, Alex, don’t pull your hair, you’ll be bald by the time you’re 21. Come here. Group hug.”

“Aw, Mom,” Jessie groaned but he got up, pulling Alex to his feet. The three Coopers hugged in the middle of the kitchen. Alex squeezed his mother tightly. She mussed his shaggy brown hair.

“Come on, Mom. Now I have to brush it again,” Alex said.

“You need a haircut, young man. Your hair is too long. Next you’ll be getting an earring.” Susannah laughed.

“Well, I’ve been thinking, Mom....” Alex started to say.

“Don’t even go there, Alex,” Susannah said, smiling. They all laughed. It was a happy sound that delighted the shadow perched on the top of the cabinets.

The toaster popped. “Now sit down and eat.” Susannah handed them each a slice.

Alex looked up at his mother. “Mom, tell me about Dad?”

Jessie groaned. Alex figured he had blown it now.

The light went out in Susannah’s eyes. She stared at the empty chair across the table. Then she sighed. “What do you want to know?”

Alex shrugged. “I don’t know. Anything. Did he play sports?”

“He was quarterback on the university football team,” she said proudly. “I never forgot the spectacular throw he made that brought in a touchdown and won the game.”

Jessie grinned. “I wish I could have seen that.”

Susannah hesitated. “You can, both of you. I have a video of the game. I have videos of most of the games.”

“You do? So why didn’t you show them to us before.” Jessie frowned.

“Yeah, Mom. I would love to see Dad play football,” Alex added. “I don’t remember him much at all.”

“Why would you hide them from us?” Jessie stood up so quickly he nearly toppled his chair.

“Sit down, Jessie. I wasn’t hiding them from you. I was hiding them from me,” Susannah said, a tear sliding down her cheek. “It hurts too much to watch them.”

“So don’t watch them. Alex and me can watch alone.” Jessie stomped out of the room, grabbing his backpack and jacket. The front door slammed behind him.

“Alex and I,” she whispered.

Alex went to his mother and let her hug him. “I’m sorry I brought it up, Mom. I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

Susannah hugged him back harder. “No, it’s alright, Alex. You have a right to remember your father. Just because it hurts me, doesn’t mean you shouldn’t learn about him. He is your father, after all.”

Alex wondered why Mom always talked like he was still alive. “So can we watch the videos tonight?” Alex asked, his eyes shining.

“Sure. I’ll leave them out by the television before I go to work. Just please be careful with them.”

“We’ll be real careful, I promise,” Alex said. “This is so cool. Thanks, Mom.” Alex started for the door then turned. Maybe we can get them onto DVDs so they’ll last longer.”

“That’s a very smart idea,” she said. “Now go on before you’re late for school.”

Alex put on his jacket and slung his backpack over his shoulder. It weighed a ton. Then he turned to look at his mother. Her hand was stretched out across the table as though she was reaching for something, or someone. Tears fell silently down her cheeks. I’m so stupid, he thought. Now I ruined her day. He had to make it better somehow. “Mom?” he said. Susannah looked up at him. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Alex.” She smiled and he ran out the door.

The shadow sitting on top of the cabinets listened and watched. Then he thought about soldiers and goblins and an invisible tear trickled down his cheek. He disappeared.



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