



Into the
slaughterhouse,

We march

Written by &

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Chapter 1

Logan felt the pressure building in her skull, the tightening of her throat would follow, then the tears would finally fall. She hoped the diminished light of the evening would mask her embarrassment at crying in public because she couldn't fight the urge any longer. She pushed back her hair that had fallen in her face, black as night and wildly unkempt as it was, the effort proved fruitless. She blotted some of the tears with her jacket sleeve as she continued her walk home.

"Hey you, help me, he's going t-!" A voice said urgently from a blackened alley as Logan walked past. 'Sure and get kidnapped and sold into sex slavery,' Logan thought to herself as she hesitated to move forward into the comfort of the next street light ahead of her. The voice did not repeat itself, or call out again, which gave Logan pause, causing her to stop her walk abruptly. She quickly glanced around the street, noticing that it was devoid of life but had plenty of character. Empty storefronts neatly on display for the next prospective tenant to sell their goods or services. The only store open was the corner shop, its windows covered in advertisements so old they could collect social security. The blinding interior light leached out of the corners of the displays but otherwise patrons inside had no visibility to the outside. She was truly alone, did she really want to walk down this dilapidated alley in the middle of the night to rescue her potential future murder?

Yes, yes she did. Logan was ready for death at this stage in her life, why not make it happen tonight, the night she found out her most beloved relative, her grandfather, had passed away months ago, leaving her a substantial inheritance that her parents had been trying to steal from underneath her since before he passed. She was full of rage, not even sad anymore, just frustrated at how humanity was driven to fail one another. 'What's one more death in the endless ocean of society', she thought as she

bravely turned her feet toward the pitch black alley and was engulfed in darkness.

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“...and so on...Now for the next piece of business we should go over the...” Logan squeezed her eyes shut hard as the lawyer in front of her droned on and on about things she could not even comprehend. The technical terms fell out of her head immediately, she just wanted to sign her life away, get her inheritance and move forward with the restoration.

Months had passed since Logan found out about her grandfather and the farm she was set to inherit. The incident in the alley which turned out to be completely empty was long forgotten between the endless phone calls and meetings with the lawyer she was recommended by her professor. He was delightfully ruthless in the way you'd expect a good lawyer to be and really hounded her parents with so many legal terms and statute numbers they relented and let Logan have what was rightfully hers.

Logan didn't want to dwell on the past with her parents, she didn't want to dwell on the past of any part of her life. The farm would be her way to completely change the trajectory of her livelihood, and it could not have come at a better time. “...so just sign here, here, here, here....” the lawyer continued to point, Logan dutifully signed and nodded along, pretending she was paying attention the entire time instead of caught up in her own thoughts.

Finally after more paperwork than Logan had ever seen in her life, the

lawyer stood up to shake her hand, "Congratulations Ms. Long on standing up for your rights and on inheriting a very valuable piece of property...if you ever...want to sell, I would be happy to recommend a property lawyer." Logan shook his hand numbly and nodded her head, taking the business card from his hand and her copies of the paperwork plus the key to her grandfather's old gate and house.

Stepping out into the blistering midday sun from the front of the office, Logan sighed heavily, continuing her vocalization in sheer frustration of the entire ordeal. There had been a pressure building in her head ever since the day she found out about the death and subsequent attempted theft of her property and it continued to sour her mood. She hoped now that the situation was resolved, now that she disowned her parents, not even bothering to inform them, she figured they would get the hint, that the pressure would subside but it remained ever present, pushing her to seek solace as she rode out the wave of pain. Maybe a change of pace, life outside of the city, away from college and the vapid people it attracts, would be beneficial for her health.

She got into her car and started driving, her mind distracted by the past. Before her conscious mind was capable of reacting, Logan found herself at the gates of her grandfather, no, her property. It wasn't too far away from town but just far enough to see a hint of the milky way on a clear night. It was late September and the cold, windy season had arrived on the farm. Logan surveyed her new homestead from her car and couldn't help but notice the discrepancies between her memories and the reality in front of her. Pulling into the gate she clearly remembered brick structures, but here was just an iron fence, sturdy but no stone to be seen. She unlocked the gate, opened it and noticed it moved easily. The old gate grandpa would sometimes have to bash with a sledgehammer to get it to

move. The fence didn't look new however, surely her cheap elder wouldn't have wasted time on a new gate just before his death.

Logan shut the gate behind her car and continued on her way. The house was barely visible from the road, but what you could see was grand. The house stood three stories tall, full brick face, four white columns lined the front, the front deck covered by the roof which neatly pointed straight toward the interstate. As Logan approached in the present moment however, she noticed the little details her brain had conveniently forgotten from her childhood; how bumpy the dirt road was on the way up, how rusty the well looked at the side of the house and how the sides of the house were completely....gone?

Getting out of her car and blinking her eyes with the wind biting her in the face, Logan rushed around to the side of the house. Indeed from the front it looked regal and inviting, although the windows had yellowed with age and the paint around their frames was beginning to peel. Both sides of the house however, were gone, totally gone and the back wall barely stood on its own, with most of it gone along with the sides. Sitting right in the middle of the farmhouse Logan remembered growing up in, was a mobile home, clean and unassuming in comparison to the hollowed out building of her childhood. Logan shook her head for a long time as she wandered around the remains. She believed her eyes but couldn't at the same time.

After some moments of hesitation, Logan mustered up the courage to open the trailer door, the key she was given fit perfectly into the lock and twisted smoothly, betraying the rust surrounding the exterior of the building. Logan pushed the door open and took one big breath before stepping inside.

Logan let out her breath and watched it fog up in front of her before dissipating into the atmosphere. The trailer was uneventful, boring, like any old trailer a functioning member of society would own. Everything was neat, no trash lying around or dirty dishes in the sink, just as Logan remembered her grandfather to be. Now, looking through his things, Logan could recall his voice as if he were speaking directly behind her, "Now kiddo, this here is a cast iron skillet, go ahead and try to lift it." He'd get a kick out of watching Logan struggle with things that she could not reasonably push, pull, or lift. Logan in the present, picked up the skillet that she had made countless meals on, the weight was still substantial but movable, the memory of her first time trying and failing to raise it came flooding back as she recalled the tensing of her throat, the tears building behind her eyes, why was it so amusing to him that she struggle like that? Logan put the skillet back down on the stove as she continued to investigate this new dwelling.

The mystery still remained of why the trailer was here at all and what happened to the house. Logan looked around the trailer some more, it was not very large, the front door led into the kitchen with the counter and sink then fridge to the left of you as you walked in, the dining room table directly in front, one room to the left past the fridge and a small hallway to the right that appeared to lead to three doors. Logan couldn't place this location in her memory at all, but the trailer looked lived in, not brand new, not even a few years. The formica on the counter tops in the kitchen was beginning to peel off, the floor looked heavily scuffed from the chairs, well one chair looked more used than the rest at least. Logan inspected the windows and found them to be aged as well, needing new sealant soon and a good bit of cleaning.

Logan inspected the room to the left, found it to be an office with her grandfather's old desk and chair, how did that survive whatever happened here? The doors to the left were a closet, bathroom and the bedroom, all neat and clean, well organized and yet had an air of desperation about them, like grandpa had spent all of his time trying to maintain his life rather than just let it fall apart and fix the broken pieces after they fell. Desperate to appear as normal as you can in a single wide trailer placed inside the ruins of a burned out brick house.

Logan explored the rest of her new homestead after departing the trailer. The barn that once held ruminating animals now covered their carcasses and waste. The fields were dry, useless, and hardened by overuse of one plot in particular, closest to the house. The decaying slaughterhouse was finding its way back to building heaven as the ceiling was close to collapse, giving the exterior a feeling of inevitability.

In short, the entire place was an utter mess, a disaster, complete chaos and unmanageable. Logan felt her throat tightening again as the severity of the situation hit her. This was not a nice valuable property, it was a money pit that a new grad with no life skills could not possibly manage. Logan swallowed several times as she walked back to her car, drove to the gate, out of the property and back into town.

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“Dude this place looks wicked spooky.” Carl said, handing Logan back her phone after he viewed the pictures and videos of the homestead. Logan had run into him as she was packing up her things in her apartment. They had been classmates for years and neighbors for one before they

became friends, although Logan often felt like Carl's guide dog in the big scary world of "Doing Adult Things" like paying bills and getting to places on time. They both graduated and while Logan was beside herself on what to do with her inheritance, Carl was happy to coast through life, moving back in with his parents and getting a job as a dishwasher in a lab. The work seemed beneath a business major but Carl insisted it was a stepping stone to becoming someone important and Logan wasn't going to correct him.

Carl abruptly stuck his hand out in front of Logan, who was awkwardly holding an overstuffed box filled with decorations. "Oh dude, what if we throw a Halloween party there? We could charge a cover and make some money that way?"

"Since when do we go to parties, who do we even know?" Logan said in rebuttal. They were full time students with part time jobs, not popular college kids who made a name for themselves draining their parents bank account.

"We can advertise it to the public, make a maze, some spooky tours, that big building is scary enough from the outside, or oh!" Carl tripped over himself as he followed Logan to her car where she placed her belongings, stuffing the sedan to the brim. "What if we let a haunted house company rent the space, they'll hire the actors, set up the whole place, we just provide the locale and parking space!" Carl was so excited at his idea he was actually jumping. Logan watched him, stoic, as the alleged man in front of her jumped for joy as his own genius, it would be cute if it weren't pathetic.

“You know what? Why not, you plan everything, I'll take 20% for being the landowner, we can figure out parking and refreshments. Let's destroy my grandfather's farm even more!” Logan threw her hands up, almost joking but realizing as she ranted that it wouldn't be a terrible idea. The land was worthless without something that could make money on it, it wasn't fertile, the house was...gone, and the structures were beyond salvageable. What else was left to do but allow drunk Americans to act dumb alongside the dilapidated ruins of her family's legacy.

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'It was a great idea after all', Logan thought as she watched patrons of the hastily devised attraction depart her property. They easily made several thousand each by the end of the season and promised to rent the property to the company again next year.

As he approached, Carl swung out in arms in triumph, “Not bad for a last minute gig!” He grinned but stopped short of touching Logan. “High five?” He offered gently raising his hand and she accepted it without a change in facial expression. “That big slaughterhouse in the back could be an all year round attraction, a lot of the customers wanted to know more, the history of the place, who lived here, why...” Carl trailed off as he looked toward the trailer situated inside the remains of the old house, “...that exists. It's really weird, I thought you always said your grandfather was a hard working, typical rural farmer? What happened?” Carl asked as he leaned against the haystack Logan had herself sprawled out on.

She thought for a moment. This property had so many unanswered questions, it was a mystery to her why the trailer existed, what happened

to the barn, to the abattoir, to the family graveyard she couldn't find. "Yeah, if only he had left me a small loan of a million dollars, I could do something with it. I can't afford to fix this place up, we just graduated, and I have no experience in fixing anything or running a farm. I thought I'd be a manager or have a boring office job, not this." Logan said as she pushed herself up and jumped off of the haystack. "It's not like I have any other option now though, do I? He gave me this property, I had to fight my parents for it, I should do something with it. Tours sound like a lot of work and I am not sure that many people would be interested in visiting a destroyed family farm." Logan said as they slowly walked up the hill toward her new residence.

"I think I could help with funding, don't ask me how but if I can seed the project, do you think you could manage it into a successful roadside attraction?" Carl said as he walked with Logan, skipping around with too much energy for one human.

Logan paused her camber and looked at Carl. He was always dirt poor, there was no way this six foot tall, dirty blond, skinny as a rail, vagabond appearing young recent graduate could get the funding needed. "Okay...but if this is money laundering I know nothing." Logan said, and for emphasis grabbed Carl by his shirt and repeated, "Nothing." He only smiled in return.

Logan blinked at him for a beat too long, then gave him a limp high five, more of a symbolic gesture than one of shared joy. She wasn't mad, not exactly. She was just... tired. Tired in a way that even success couldn't shake. Her breath fogged again in the cold evening, and for a moment she thought of the skillet, the house, the ghost of her grandfather's voice. She imagined him watching this scene from some recliner in the afterlife,

muttering with a smirk, “Well kiddo, didn’t think you’d turn this place into a carnival.”

“Let’s not forget,” she said finally, dropping her hand and staring out at the dark silhouettes of the ruins beyond the trailer, “this was built on something I didn’t get a say in losing.”

Carl shifted uncomfortably beside her, unsure of how to respond. His triumph deflated a bit.

Logan rubbed her arms and nodded toward the car. “C’mon, I need something greasy and bad for me. You buying?”

He perked up immediately, grateful for the shift. “Absolutely. Tacos or fries?”

She gave a small, genuine smirk. “Why not both? Let’s destroy my insides too.”

As they drove away, Logan looked in the rearview mirror one last time that night. The trailer light glowed dimly in the distance, an eerie ember in the middle of wreckage. The land hadn’t been saved, no, but maybe it wasn’t about saving it anymore. Maybe it was about learning what could grow in the ashes, even if it wasn’t wheat or livestock. Even if it was just... survival.

Chapter 2

Logan remained ignorant of the source of Carl's income during the entire rehabilitation process. The sum totaled six figures but it was paid in cash and Carl became a silent co-owner of the Long Family Farm. By the end of it the old barn was burned down, the trailer was moved to outside the ruins of the house, the family graveyard was finally found and a nice walking path was installed to meander through the woods on the way toward it. The biggest investment however, was fixing up the ancient slaughterhouse that once employed about a dozen men to now house a very interactive and if you asked Carl, entertaining tour.

"And here, we will lock them up like the animals they are!" Carl gestured to the retrofit ski lifts they installed to move patrons from one room to another. He was very proud of his vision, with Logan's input from her family history the decaying structure now housed a whole fun house of infotainment.

Logan wandered around silently. She had been present for the restoration but only in her physical form. She answered questions when needed, signed whatever documents they wanted, but Logan still felt that this wasn't exactly right. She had left the city to get away from people and try to recover from the increasing migraines that have plagued her ever since that first day, the day she nearly got herself killed in the alley after finding out about her grandfather's death. The situation had really only just begun to improve with the rehab nearly finished. 'Maybe now,' Logan thought to herself as she gave herself a private tour of the building, 'maybe I'll start feeling better now with less stress.'

“Well Carl, I owe you a lot. This is pretty nifty.” Logan said as she fiddled with a big red button in the middle of the room. They were at the beginning of the tour, Logan was to press the button to get the chairs to begin moving, Carl had suggested she come up with an exciting script...and hire someone more personable to deliver it. “Perhaps you want to stay and be the guide too?”

Carl shook his head immediately, “Oh no, I am going to move to Thailand and marry my online girlfriend, Becki, you remember her right? I am counting on you,” Carl emphasized as he moved closer to Logan and placed his hand above the ominous red button, “to pay out dividends on this project so I can spend the rest of my life in semi-retirement!” Carl pressed the button and the room went dark.

Logan was not afraid of the dark, but standing in the room surrounded by it, the pain in her head began to increase. She could feel her entire body caving into itself, tightening around her bones. Her head throbbed and her chest began to flutter. Logan took some deep slow breaths, trying to contain herself. She hadn't informed Carl of her condition since she attributed it to her new homestead and stress, but this whole body ordeal was brand new to her. Logan almost felt like something was extending out of her, reaching from and toward her at the same time, like her body existed in two locations in the universe but hadn't realized that fact.

The lights suddenly reset and the room flooded with a pale yellow hue. Logan was hunched over, hand on her chest, trying to breathe. Carl was too busy looking at the natural light impeding on the eerie yellow glow of the artificial light to notice her condition.

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Carl had made good on his word, he moved to Thailand the next week and promised to keep in touch. Logan would be surprised to ever get a text from him again. The business end was all automated, as long as the property made money, Carl would be set, so there would be no reason to contact him unless she went out of business or sold.

Logan had warmed up to the idea of providing a cheesy roadside attraction. The more she thought about it, the more it made her feel like she was honoring her family history by sharing it with the world, and with the over-development of the nearby city, the farm provided a reprieve to the smog filled lungs and weary concrete worn soles of the city dwellers. So she set upon making the grounds as pleasant as possible, as relaxing as land can be that is connected to decades of death, be it animal or human.

She had fun creating designs for the project, an old hobby from her high school days. She maintained the website, did the physical maintenance on the ride as much as she could, cleaned the place herself as well. If it weren't for the steady stream of visitors, Logan would have occupied her time with just upkeep, not interacting with another human for weeks, but she had tried and failed to hire a tour guide that suited the needs of the property. Plus visitors preferred the legacy of having the grandchild of the former owner as their tour guide.

That's how Logan sold the place at least, at first as an artistic installation of the physical manifestation of our decline as a living thing. Tried as he might, grandpa could not stop himself from watching his world around him collapse and be taken back by nature. It was supposed to

inspire a sense of melancholia but the feedback Logan got was that it just made folks feel uneasy, installed an odd sense of urgency and they didn't like that. Logan failed to communicate that the point was just that, to invoke those feelings, but didn't want to disappoint her family or Carl so she changed the theme a few times before settling on the current iteration; informative and interactive murder porn.

One season turned into two and then three and Logan found herself still at the farm, alone, maintaining the property dutifully. She still lived in the trailer that she moved closer to the woods, away from the main attraction. She installed a gazebo and contemplated building a new barn but after seeing the mess of remains in the old one, decided against it. The first time Logan had seen the barn when she returned it was full of rotting corpses of the once spoiled animals, but the second time it was full of dust and hay, Logan did not want to press her luck at figuring out that mystery on top of all of the other ones surrounding the farm.

In her downtime Logan had to research her family history in order to make the tour more complete. She couldn't go to her parents so she resorted to using online services which took hours of time and yielded little results. Logan was going to make up some stories just to satisfy the urge for a more well rounded experience when she stumbled upon a grave in the woods one day on a walk.

Logan was patrolling the trail from the main gate to the main graveyard on the other side of the property when she noticed a bit of gray sticking out from a fallen tree. She kept the trail pretty clean so seeing a man made object was surprising to her. She stepped off of the trail, feeling the ground underneath her boots compact as it strained to support her weight. It was all dead organic matter now, not nicely groomed gravel as

the main trail was. Logan made her way over to the object, stepping over fallen tree limbs and large rocks, about twenty feet from the trail.

She peered down at the object, using the stick in her hand to brush away the moss and matter. It was a gravestone, not well kept, but part of the name was still legible, "Lester."

"Who the heck is Lester?" Logan said aloud to herself. She examined the grave for a date, more information, anything, but nothing appeared. Logan sighed and decided that Lester would be the new ghost at the tour and left this mystery for someone else to solve. "Too much, it's too much." Logan said to herself as she found her way back to the main trail, instantly feeling relief as her feet crunched down on the gravel. The softness of the unkempt forest unnerved her.

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Logan was approaching the end of the tour with a lively group. She had changed up a few things since the last time one of the patrons had visited and Logan was secretly excited to see her reaction. Would the girl like the changes? Maybe she'd give some nice feedback, or want to visit more often? Logan debated asking for the girl's phone number, she hadn't had a friend since Carl left for Thailand three years ago but she resisted, she didn't want to play into the creepy gay rural farmer stereotype.

The ski lifts made their descent over the factory floor. The building was designed to look functional but in reality nothing, the drains on the floor didn't even drain anything, if there was a flood they would be ruined. Still Logan did what she could with the place, she had recently opened up

an empty room they were going to add a little display into but ran out of time and ideas. She painted it black, added one blindingly white light, so bright it burned if you looked at it directly, and added a single chair and desk. It looked creepy but seemed out of place in the grand scheme of things so Logan was nervous about the feedback.

“Hey I didn’t notice that last time, what’s over there?” The girl Logan had looked at earlier approached her, pointing to the room. Logan felt the excitement build inside of herself before forcing it down, lowering her expectations.

“That is Lester’s room!” Logan said a bit too forcefully. She hadn’t rehearsed this part as much. “He’s the family ghost, did I not mention him before? He resides over quality control of the facility.” Logan said as she blabbed her way through the speech.

“Was that always there?” The girl asked, tilting her head at what she assumed was empty space last time.

“Oh yes, but he recently decided to spruce up the space, he wanted it to be more ghost midcentury modern, he’s been watching too much HGTV.” Logan tried to joke but trailed off in volume at the end of her statement. The awkwardness was rising inside of her, urging her to remove herself from the conversation.

The girl laughed and walked away from Logan. Logan felt the pressure build in her head again. ‘Stupid dumb,’ She launched a tirade of insults at herself, not one productive thought would happen for the rest of the day.

As the rest of the group slowly drifted out of the small gift shop Logan had recently installed, one turned to face the new room and said, “Dude, that’s a nice little murder room you got there. That’s exactly the kind of room I’d expect a serial killer to have and you’re just showing it to everyone. Very brave.” He laughed and walked out. Logan couldn’t think of a single response to that. She hadn’t considered it a murder room, the whole building was designed for slaughter, why would the one room make any difference?

As Logan locked up the tour that night she made her way over to Lester’s room and in a burst of anxious energy forcefully shut the large barn door to it, shielding it from the public eye.

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The rumors spread anyway. Logan was alarmed at first, frightened that the fake tale of her being a secret mass serial killer would bankrupt her, but visitors kept coming in, some asking about Lester, asking if he’d been fed recently, offering up their own versions of his dark fate. Logan was in disbelief at how wild the rumors spread, so far and wide so quickly. How did her little roadside attraction in the middle of nowhere become a meme overnight? She hoped it would fade and her life could go back to normal. The stress of the rumors had rejuvenated the pain in her body, now widespread, no longer pounding her head and chest but her abdomen and limbs as well.

It was the last tour of the season, before winter blew in too overwhelming to maintain the grounds and Logan hunkered in the tin can trailer for four months. She had enjoyed her short reprieve as an internet

celebrity but was thankful the increased crowds would die off soon. Several patrons had visited multiple times, trying to coax Logan into giving them a more personalized tour, including the new room she had shut off. Her desire to hide the room made it more of a mystery that unintentionally garnered more attention than she had wanted, but business was booming so Logan attempted to do what she could to placate her paying customers.

“S-so, can I see it? I can pay a premium.” A man possibly in his 40s, as tall as Logan, so short, and with sad eyes and a downtrodden expression on his face asked her when the other patrons had finally cleared out.

Logan blinked hard to prevent herself from rolling her eyes. They were always the same kind of people asking her to do this. She hadn't investigated too much on what the rumors or memes said exactly but she suspected someone had turned them sexual because it was always older men with weird tones and expressions asking her for more private tours. Logan walked over to one of the displays holding t-shirts, grabbed a large and handed it to the man, “Buy a t-shirt, get a tour.” Logan said, figuring she could use the extra cash as the season was over and every dollar counts when you make none.

The man hastily paid for the shirt and gleefully walked back into the tour building, turning to see if Logan would follow. She took one long breath, preparing herself, patting the utility knife on her side leg pocket just in case she had to use it, made sure she had her keys in her pocket, and followed the man back into the building.

The tour was quick seeing as the entire building was fake, nothing

real to show him, but he didn't need to know that nor did he seem to care. He made his way over to Lesters room, the final destination for these folks and Logan unlocked the padlock and pushed the door open. He stepped into the room and looked around before taking a seat on the chair, and happily asked, "So are you going to do it now? How does this work?"

Logan was taken aback, she'd never done this and had no idea what was to be expected of her, "What exactly do you think happens here?" She asked as neutral as she could, wanting information but also to run away and lock this guy away before he could try to harm her, she resisted the urge, not every human was bad she had to constantly tell herself.

The man laughed and brought his hand up to his neck, dragging it across, "You know, this is the part where you kill me."

Chapter 3

Logan stumbled out of the building, breathing rapidly, eyes unfocused, she hunched her frame over and powered herself up the hill to get back home. 'Did I lock the door? Does it matter? But did I lock it?' Logan argued with herself but refused to go back to the slaughterhouse. The season was over, no one would need to go back into the building for at least three months, she was safe.

Logan unlocked her trailer, let herself in, locked the door, put one of the dining room table doors under the handle, shut and locked all of the windows and blinds and threw herself on her bed, "I'm safe, I'm safe, I'm safe.' She repeated to herself over and over until her body finally let her fall into an unconscious state.

When Logan woke up her entire body for once in a very long time, felt rejuvenated, fresh and ready for the day. She was pain free for the first time in years. She dragged herself out of bed and into the kitchen, opening the blinds in front of the table. Winter had silently taken over the landscape, covering the entire farm and surrounding area, a complete whiteout.

'Well at least I'll be able to see footprints.' Logan thought as she went about her day, she still didn't feel safe but was determined as always to make life around her as normal as possible. During winter Logan would practice her tour speech, come up with new marketing materials for special events, budget, the boring stuff no one would want to know about a small business. She enjoyed this time more than any other, especially now with the awful rumors and now her paranoia about what happened

yesterday...

She couldn't think about it, 'Just keep moving on.' Logan set her schedule for the next month and remained resolute to follow it. For the rest of the day she followed her plan, occasionally peeking out of the blinds to see if any footprints had made their way into the snow, if anyone would come for her.

There weren't any footprints other than her own all winter long.

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Spring was slowly thawing the ice around Logan's trailer. She had barely left the humble structure for three months, only making determined trips to the family graveyard to maintain the headstones and the pathway. She had purchased enough provisions to last her all of winter and then some, making it approximately three months since she last physically talked to another human being. Logan had an internet connection and used it for socializing but it wasn't the same, and that's what she liked about it. She could be anyone online, and didn't have to be herself.

She had finally given in and looked up the memes surrounding her tours; they thought she was possessed by a hesitant killer, something about her personality made strangers think she was kind, but a little weird. They even had videos of her misspeaking and stumbles of her vocalization. Logan wasn't sure if she was embarrassed, angry, sad, or just indifferent to the taunts. If they wanted to label her a killer, well so be it. She did operate a slaughterhouse after all.

Death was imbued into the land, from the bodies buried in the cemetery to the countless animals raised and culled for consumption. Death operated slightly differently here too, Logan had observed very strange things concerning the dead bodies of animals on her property. She hadn't really thought about it until now, now that bodies would be found under the melting snow and ice, but they tended to disappear a little too quickly. Logan did not make a habit of burying them or cleaning them up, better let nature do that, but nature was a little too hasty at the Long farm.

Logan stepped outside of her trailer, the first time in a week, and walked down the hill and into the tour building. She hadn't been inside in months, the last couple winters she had checked nearly daily but nothing ever changed so she no longer saw the need to babysit it. Now though, it contained a secret, one that Logan had nightmares about all winter.

She walked over to the breaker box and turned on power to the building. The interior illuminated dutifully revealing the truth that Logan knew to be true; nothing had changed since she left. She went about her business, unpacking the gift shop items from their winter homes and setting up shop. She checked the ride, did her maintenance, everything she needed to do to prep the building. Tours were starting again in three days, just enough time for Logan to resolve any situations.

Finally, after hours of work, Logan went to the last room, Lester's room. She had shut it when she left and she had no desire to open it now, but she had to know. She unlocked the padlock, pushed open the doors to reveal the space.

It was as empty as she left it, save for some dust accumulating on the floor. The blinding white light contrasted with the pale yellow of the other rooms. Logan stepped inside, not believing her eyes but letting herself feel awash in relief. The man was gone. He had gone before Logan had left, or so she thought she saw but she couldn't believe it. She hadn't killed anyone, he had left and she was safe, not a murder like the internet may believe.

Logan trained her eyes to the floor, no scuffs, no blood, nothing but the dust. She left the room and examined the rest of the floor to the exit. No signs of departure, but that didn't mean much, she had the proof in the room itself. Logan's mind couldn't stop itself from flashing back to that day, the last day of the tour when the man propositioned her for homicide. Logan had declined, the man shot himself anyway, but he must have hit something noncritical and left in a rush, Logan had been so shocked, the noise startled her so much her entire body had froze then let go of the tension she had felt for so long, like an acoustic chiropractic adjustment. It made her feel a little lighter although with more ringing in her ears than normal. It actually felt good, the startling impact of the gunshot, the man slumped over, 'But how did he leave?' Logan thought to herself, walking between the gift shop and the room once again.

After a few more laps around the building Logan gave up, she had to believe her eyes and all signs pointed to her mind playing tricks on her, trying to scare her, giving into the self fulfilling prophecy of being a killer. She wasn't, she wouldn't, couldn't.

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“So what do you say?” The man asked Logan, after the rest of the tour group had left. Logan had flashbacks immediately to the first time this had happened, she couldn’t have a repeat of that experience.

‘But the extra sales would be nice.’ Logan thought as she looked around her gift shop. Merchandise was not moving as fast as she liked but she did like to offer up some souvenirs, then the idea hit her. She could offer private tours with its own narrative and include Lester’s room, that way these creeps could be screened and vetted beforehand and not cause her stress during the normal tour operations. Logan’s mind was racing with ideas for the more private tour, how she’d run it, what she would charge, she forgot the man was waiting patiently in front of her. “Oh! Yes, sure.”

Logan directed the man around the building, starting with the same path she had used prior, showing some behind the scenes and ground level views of some of the rooms the regular tour merely gets a glance at. They stopped at the final destination, the one the man was most curious about, but Logan hesitated to unlock the padlock. “So, I never got your name?” Logan asked as she fiddled with the wrong key.

The man started to show signs of regret and anxiety, bouncing from one foot to the other. “John, but does it matter?” He waved his hand toward the room as if it were his final destination.

“Well of course, if you come back I’d like to be friendly.” Logan said as she finally opened the padlock, but paused again, drawing out as much tension as possible to avoid the inevitable disappointment. “First however, I need you to take everything out of your pockets and leave your coat by the door. Safety precaution.” Logan said with an air of authority as she

folded her hands in front of her. It made her feel like she was more official, that this was a normal thing to occur in her life and she was in control.

John relented his possessions to the floor and Logan opened the door. He stepped in cautiously and walked the perimeter. "Can I take a picture?" John asked as he put his hand up to cover his eyes from the blinding light above him.

"Sure." Logan said. She waited for him to do his thing and he sat at the desk like the last one, the last huzzah. Logan had been thinking the whole time on how to end this gently for him, that he wasn't going to die today. The room was permeated with an awkward silence as both John and Logan waited for the other to act.

Finally after some moments had passed, John offered up some sound to break the silence, "So...need some help?"

Logan rapidly twitched her head in response, "Sorry, what?"

"It's okay, I thought you may be nervous, so I've been pressing my insulin button this whole time, I have a few minutes left until I pass out, that should make it easier." John said with a tight smile before abruptly hunching over. Logan stepped over to him and shook his shoulders hard, he was totally out.

"God dammit not again." Logan could feel her adrenal glands releasing their chemicals, cooling off the interior of her abdomen. Her rib cage was fielding an attack from her heart, its beat overly powerful and distracting. Logan squeezed her eyes shut and turned around momentarily

to collect herself. Surely this was just a prank, she was being teased and he would wake up, have a laugh and leave. She started to feel dizzy and light, like gravity was leaving her body, all of her limbs felt like they were floating yet her head remained powerful in its assault on her nervous system. The sound of the light above combined with her growing migraine was too much, she had to escape, had to go somewhere, leave and recover. As Logan hit her precipice, the sound above snapped out of existence and the feelings rapidly faded. All at once she felt perfectly normal and fine once more.

Logan calmed her breathing and turned around again, ready to call an ambulance and give this guy a talking to about how to treat others. She turned around, foot first, only to find the room empty. She looked to the left, just a wall, to the right, more wall, she was surrounded by walls and no sign of John. Logan turned around and leaped out of the room and looked down at the floor, his stuff was still here, but he was gone. She grabbed his jacket, he had left a wallet with his ID, credit cards, even his social security card along with a house key but no car key.

She jogged outside to the parking lot and found no cars on the lot. Logan was beside herself in confusion, what was the point of this joke? How did he get off on this?

She huffed and went home annoyed but also a little impressed by his dedication and morbid craftiness. She would have to outsmart the next one.

Chapter 4

Logan glanced around her surroundings, she was tempted to abandon her quest but she desperately wanted to know the answers. She had made her way to the library to find information about her predicament. Searching for the answers online would only create a trail of crumbs back to her, so she decided on doing it the old fashioned way.

With black gloves on-yes she was that paranoid-Logan perused the non-fiction section for titles on hallucinations, paranoia, psychosis, anything.

'People don't just vanish, they don't just kill themselves in front of strangers and walk away.' She told herself, fingers tightening on the spine of a book. There was something wrong with her. And she intended to fix it-quietly, alone, and far from the reach of anyone with a co-pay.

'A change in diet or exercise perhaps,' Logan reasoned with herself as she found a chapter on hallucinations and disorders. The men seemed so real, she even went back and verified their payments, the till numbers checked out. Both men had paid in cash for both tours which made sense, no trace that they were there. Both got rides either by the public bus which stopped on the other side of the property, giving the visitors a nice walk through the cemetery and woods before their tour, or they had used a rideshare.

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She was going to need medical intervention. At least according to all the research, that's the proper way to do things. Nothing would really help

her besides professional treatment.

Logan thought about her options as she sat in the library, holding a fictitious book in front of her, playing the part of a normal patron. She could address the rumors online and hope the men would stop, but that may drive away business and make her seem more weird. She could shut the tours down completely, but she had already invested a lot of time and money as it was her only job. She could entertain the men but be more strict about what they were allowed to do, this would give her extra income but would put her at risk for her episodes.

'What to do, what to do.' Logan thought to herself melodically as she put the book back on the to be filed shelf and walked out of the library into the cold spring morning. The sun had barely risen but was already warming her face. Logan almost took off her disposable gloves but thought better of it as she patted her front pocket that contained John's belongings. She was going to mail back the ID, social security card, and credit cards with a note on each that they were lost and go about her life.

Logan stepped onto the street as she headed toward the post office. The town she chose to visit was small, with a downtown approximately half a mile long, dotted with local shops, empty storefronts and a charming gazebo. She took her time, purposefully walking as slow as was possible for her, to try to calm the sour feeling in her stomach. She knew she was doing the right thing, John forgot his things and she needed to return them like any good law abiding citizen. The sun was in full force now, barely breaking even in the still chilly morning air, but the brightness was comforting to Logan, something was reassuring about full sunlight filling every nook and cranny of space around her.

The post office was around the corner, Logan picked up the pace to burn off her nervous energy. She wasn't doing anything wrong, but it all felt wrong. She approached the mailbox and quickly pulled the envelope with John's cards in them out of her pocket. She looked at the mail. She had neglected to write a return address but knew that was permitted, nothing would link the mail to her, she had driven an hour away, not too far but not too close. If anything ever did get back to her, she had done the logical thing to do, a patron whose information she did not have left their belongings, must have fallen out on the ride, it happens.

Logan shoved the letters into the mailbox, double checking that they dropped into the bin and nearly skipped away back to her car.

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"I'm not sure you can afford it." Logan said to the man who stayed behind this time. She really needed to address those rumors. It didn't happen every tour, but at least once a week, usually on Thursday or Friday, a man, and it was always men so far, would stay behind to ask for the extra tour.

"I can, you can take anything, everything!" The man shouted aggressively, desperate for the release. He looked normal enough, tall, sandy blond hair, and a decent jawline. Logan was puzzled why anyone who seemed successful like he did would want to kill themselves.

Logan shook her head, "No, well, you see." She hesitated, she still hadn't figured out what to say, the public tour was scripted and Logan

never went off script. She was good at reciting her scripts but free speech was incredibly difficult for her. “The thing is. It will cost everything, and I mean every single thing. Your cards, ID, your car, gone, house sold, I want...” Logan trailed off realizing she was giving in once again, why she couldn’t say no was beyond her, she was always too agreeable. “No, you couldn’t do it all. It’s okay, don’t worry about it.” Logan said as she stepped over to the exit with her arm out, inviting the man to leave.

He refused to budge, “I can, I will, wh-” He paused, digging into his pockets.

“No! It’s too late now, thanks for coming.” Logan interrupted, nervous that he would just kill himself in front of her like the others, or harm her in some way.

“No just, here!” The man pulled out a yellow packet filled with paperwork. He presented it to Logan who despite herself looked through it. He had sold his house, his car, canceled his phone, he had done everything already. Logan looked at the man who stood before her, desperation in his entire form.

“Why?” Logan asked after finishing her perusal of the paperwork.

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Logan knew what she was doing was wrong, but was it if he was just a hallucination? She couldn’t decide what the best course of action was, this man, Peter, really felt really real. Logan had even forced herself to grab his arm at one point, he felt real too. It didn’t make any sense to her, it was

like she was drifting in and out of reality, she was standing in the gift shop one second and now in Lester's room, empty again after Peter had left.

Logan walked out of the empty room once more, closing and locking the padlock. Peter, or the figment of her imagination, had said he never fit in in his life, he was older but not that old at sixty, didn't lookit for a second yet seemed done with life. Two divorces and two job layoffs later, he was ready to be done but he didn't want to be a burden on his children, having to clean up the mess, or so he said.

She thought about that for a long time, why her mind was presenting these bizarre hallucinations to her. She knew she was lonely, clinically so, but it never really bothered her like it bothered other people. Maybe it was though, and this was her minds answer to not having friends. Logan finished the walk up the hill and looked back down over her land before going inside, it was sparse. She was the only human for at least a few miles and for years she had preferred it that way, but maybe she needed to seek professional help and get rid of these imaginary friends.

What she didn't understand as well, is why they insisted on dying. What was her brain trying to tell her? Logan never felt like she had a death wish but something was definitely off. Every time they vanished, she felt terrific like the worst pieces of her had been airlifted away from her core. But they were all men with manly backstories and lives unlike anything she ever wanted. Married with kids, stressful careers, high aspirations and goals. Her polar opposite.

Making her way back inside the confines of her trailer, Logan set upon the task of clearing up these rumors, that would at least make her feel

better. She opened up her photo editor and went about creating new graphics for the tour that mentioned “NO PRIVATE TOURS” in big bold letters at the bottom, maybe that would help. She uploaded the new graphic to the site and social media, it was a small change, she tweaked some other aspects so it wasn’t obvious as to why she was changing the information.

With business settled, Logan took to researching some remedies to her condition. She would take anything, any pill or herb at this point to make the pain and hallucinations cease.

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Another man was hanging back at the end of the tour and Logan was internally furious. She didn’t want to deal with this at all let alone on a Tuesday after a group of suburban moms had terrorized her property with their massive SUVs and insistent questioning of every detail.

“We are closed now, thanks!” Logan shouted as she shuffled out of the exit with the hallucination still in the shop. She shut the door quickly and tried to walk up the hill but a pounding on the door stopped her.

The hallucination was pounding on the door.

Logan walked back over to the door and waited for the pounding to cease. “Hello?” Logan said loudly as she tilted her ear to the door, the man inside had not yelled, just pounded. A moment passed and Logan repeated herself to no response. She finally gathered the courage to open the door again to reveal an empty space.

“I knew it.” Logan said to herself as she looked around the empty gift shop. The hallucinations were getting worse and worse.

“Hey you locked me-oh god sorry.” The man said as he approached Logan from the outside. Logan yelped and jumped in the air, turning herself around and getting into a poor fighting stance.

“You’re real!” Logan said to herself but the man heard her and raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah, you locked me inside...” The man said, “But I went out through the front door. Sorry to scare you.” He walked away, it almost looked as if he wanted to say something else to Logan but changed his mind.

Logan stood in the building until she heard his car start and drive onto the highway.

Chapter 5

Logan walked along the familiar path, it was nighttime but her body knew the way through the woods so well that she didn't need a light source to navigate. The moon was out in full force tonight, shining through the hemlocks, cutting sharp lines of light through her approach to the cemetery. Logan made her way to her spot, the one closest to her grandfather's grave. She hadn't been to the funeral and before that, hadn't seen her grandfather for years so in a way she was trying to make up for lost time.

"Hey gramps." Logan said as she fell into the chair she had set up for herself. She put the cooler she brought with her on the ground next to the freshly stirred dirt of the grave adjacent. "Sorry Uncle Hershel." Logan said as she tried to push some of the dirt back over him. Some critters had taken to digging up the graves recently and Logan did not want to investigate too deeply, she just brought her .44 revolver in case she saw the culprit and went about her business.

"So." Logan said as she started the one sided conversation with her dead relatives, "I found this new podcast, it's all about missing people and their backstories, like why they went missing or at least maybe why, and where they could be. This one is local, maybe you know him? John Smith, you know, that one, as opposed to all the other ones." Logan took out her phone and started the episode, placing her phone on her grandfather's headstone. She took out some chips and a beer as she put her feet up on the cooler and tried to relax.

"And tonight we are going to talk about John Smith, yes that one, a local from Springfield who was last seen on December 12th 2007. He left

behind an ex-wife and two adult children. The last person to see him was his employer who declined to comment for this podcast. Interestingly, some possibly suspicious activity took place before his disappearance that left authorities wondering if he fled the country. He had sold his house, his car, and had closed all of his bank accounts. Tonight we are going to talk about what could drive a seemingly successful man into vanishing without a trace."

The podcast played for a while, Logan zoned in and out of attention. She couldn't help but link some of the details to Peter, the hallucination that had visited her a few weeks ago. Had she listened to this episode already and manifested him?

Logan paused the episode and looked back at the other ones she had listened to. She had only found the podcast a few weeks ago and hadn't really connected the dots but the three episodes she had listened to, including this one, seemed eerily familiar. She really, really was manifesting hallucinations except for the last one who was thankfully just a creeper. Logan found his credit card receipt later after he had left and chalked it up to coincidence after all.

"Well shoot dang." Logan said to herself as she finished off her beer. She really was going to need professional medical intervention.

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"So they just come along for the tour, but I can't find any records of them after, and then they ask for a private tour and I give them one, then we get to the last room and they kill themselves in it, but I can never find a body, but I have found their possessions after the fact." Logan said as she sat across from the mirror. She felt stupid being here, doing this, but it

was a necessary step in getting help. She fiddled with her hair and shook her head, "Right so the thing is, I keep seeing these very real hallucinations, but I'm not one hundred percent sure they are hallucinations, but I am pretty sure...no that sounds stupid." Logan said to herself as she forced herself to make eye contact with herself in the mirror.

Here she was, twenty eight, had a successful small business that drained her soul, no friends or family but no student loans and was on track to retire at a reasonable time in life if she could continue her investments. By some metrics she was doing well, but it didn't feel like she was very successful. She could barely talk to her patrons outside of her tour, it gave her good ratings, people thought she was playing a part, but she wasn't, that's just who she is.

Logan gulped back tears of frustration and practiced her speech again. She had to get the words right, in the right order and timing or she wouldn't be able to explain the problem. The more she practiced it however, the stupider she sounded. 'Were the men real?' the doctor would ask, 'If you found the jacket then you are actually a murderer, confessed even, and I have to call the police.' She stood up from the bed and walked into the kitchen to make herself a drink, that settled it, if she went to a doctor they'd definitely have to investigate and she would definitely be found guilty of something and go to jail.

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Another Friday, another man looking guiltily at his watch as he waited for the other patrons to exit the gift shop. Logan had thought long and

hard about what to do, she could take the easy way out and run out every time she saw one, but it could be a real person and that would be harmful for business. She could go through the charade every time but that worsened her already depreciated mental health. Logan decided she wanted answers, she was a numbers person in school, she liked data and now was the time to collect.

As the man approached her Logan put on a stoic expression, not letting her nervousness shine though. "Why are you here?" She asked directly, no yes or no questions she had learned that in school, don't make it easy for them.

"Oh I just, you know, would like a shirt." The man was holding a shirt entirely too small for him. Logan let him purchase it and they stared at each other. "Right so I'll be going now, I guess." The man started to walk toward the exit while Logan looked straight ahead, not giving herself any chances to give in or let him see how embarrassed she was. "Unless, you'd..." the man trailed off before awkwardly leaving the building without finishing his statement.

That night Logan decided to investigate online more about the rumors. That was twice now that the men ended up being real, was it a fluke or was there more to this? Why would she hallucinate the men leaving, they paid with credit cards and Logan was able to pull up the transactions, she didn't imagine them.

She went on the darkest sites she knew of and after a couple hours of circling she found what she was looking for. She found hundreds of posts, most seemed fake but a few of the descriptions did sound like the men she

had encountered recently. The rumors about her tour had taken hold in a niche community who were becoming obsessed with killing themselves at the tour and other locations known for high suicide rates. Logan read for hours until she couldn't tolerate anymore. She had found posts by Peter and John, both ending with hopefulness about finally being done with life.

Logan put her computer away and laid down on her bed with darkness surrounding her. She couldn't believe it, the men were real and they had killed themselves. Logan wasn't a murderer, she didn't do anything wrong, she was actually providing a service the men wanted and it was nonsexual and didn't require her to do anything in particular. A sense of relief washed over her as she realized she was in the clear, nothing criminal had happened, she was safe.

Logan enjoyed the bliss for a few seconds before saying aloud, "But what happened to the bodies?"

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The room was empty, for the thousandth time that Logan checked the room where the men had vanished, it was empty. She stomped on the floor, pounded the walls, moved the sparse decorative desk around searching for hundreds of pounds of flesh in the inches of space it protected from view.

Nothing was found. No skin, no bones, nothing. The room was not designed to have any trap doors, it was just a showroom, and it was indeed, showing and not telling its secrets.

Logan paced around the room as she contemplated her next move.

She knew more people would be coming, requesting the private experience. “Okay, if they really do just vanish with all of their belongings I can just make them put everything in the room. But what if it isn’t the room itself, what if it’s a ghost?” Logan muttered to herself as she continued to circle the room. She looked around the room, the air felt heavy, humid and still around her. The black walls and dark floor made the room feel small, oppressively bleak, and sinister.

Flesh does not just evaporate after death, despite what some video games may make you believe. Logan knew this to be true, yet on the entire homestead, bodies of dead animals and now humans seemed to vanish overnight. She did not believe in the supernatural at all, ghosts, ghouls, vampires, or zombies, Logan rejected the premise completely, yet the evidence in front of her could not be denied. Outside she could understand a predator taking a body, but inside the building in a room within a room with her present?

It was too much, nothing made sense and Logan had work to do. She decided against her gut feelings to remodel the room and add a hidden camera to find whatever beast was taking the bodies, if there would be any new bodies after it was all over, and if it ended up being her well...then she had another plan for that.

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The camera was tucked into a corner in the back of the room, Logan knew its location and was training herself to not look at it as she walked around the room. She painted the walls white and put down sheets of stainless steel on the floor, added another fake drain to the bottom and

instead of the desk, was a small podium with a new button on it. The blinding white light was changed to a more yellow hue to match the rest of the building and the room finally had an overall feel of calm. It still looked like a gimmick but Logan thought it would be a funny end if the men did the public tour first. She had rigged the button to turn off the lights and play sounds like the men were being crushed in a meat grinder, then she'd let them free. The noise and lights should distract them enough so they did not kill themselves and Logan could rest easy knowing she helped, and she got a little extra cash along the way.

Finally she was ready for the next desperate man to come ask her for a tour and get shocked into living, hopefully. Logan wasn't exactly against suicide, she felt that people should be able to decide if they want to live in the hellscape that is modern society but she just wanted them to not do it on her property. She had read and listened to stories of people who tried to kill themselves, failed miserably and then went on to live fulfilling lives so it was possible that these men just needed to get close to their precipice but not jump off the cliff.

Chapter 6

“So I’ll take that packet, thank you.” Logan reached across the counter and cross referenced the paperwork with the list in front of her. It was all here, social security card, birth certificate, passport, ID cards, insurance, sale of home, closed bank account confirmation. Every single document was present and accounted for, “Oh, actually where is the flier?” Logan asked the man standing opposite the counter, he patted his pockets and found the folded up piece of paper, handing it over with a determined hand.

“Well that is everything. Now, let’s continue shall we. Meet me at the ground level door of the killing floor.” Logan said to the man as she pointed to the door behind him.

This was the process now, she had smoothed it out over the past two years, she got her speech down and felt more comfortable every time walking alone with the men around the massive space. Logan approached from behind and walked past the man, the name on the paperwork said his name was, “Nate Balter” but Logan liked to refer to them all as just men; nameless, faceless men.

“If yo-you could kindly follow me, I’ll give you a closer look at the process of turning stock into meat.” Logan directed her speech in front of her, not bothering to face the man as her voice echoed through the building. She knew they didn’t care about this portion of the tour, but she needed the formality of it to justify the consequences.

“This is the entrance from the stockyard, while a small operation, this

building supplied enough meat to the local market to feed all of Springfield from 1940 to 1955. The explosion of population afterward rendered my great grandfather's operation ineffective at feeding the populace, he gave up after a larger company built the abattoir that still operates to this day off of I-60." Logan stood at the entrance of the public tour with the man, this is the speech she would give to the public as well but this man had skipped that tour so she felt obligated to give him the best of both tours.

"As you may be familiar with the history of animal slaughter," Logan said as she guided the man into the next room, skipping the automated portion, the private tour was all on foot. "It used to be performed closer to city limits, however the moral, ethical, and health concerns dominated public consensus so these operations moved to outside city limits, where we find ourselves today. Designs of abattoirs have evolved over the years, this particular building was in operation before many laws dictated more humane or ethical methods to cull the animals. Although this particular building also features a unique design for the time." Logan said as she continued to walk the man through the convoluted hallway.

"You've probably noticed that in this hallway, we cannot see what is happening ahead of us, that was an intentional design to reduce the stress of the animal about to be killed and to continue their forward momentum. Animals are not stupid and if they know they are about to be killed, they can clog up the pathways, which causes additional stress to other animals and workers."

Logan pushed open the door to the next room. It was also difficult to assess the operations of the room as the hallway they entered was circular in design. "If we open one of these pens here," Logan said as she walked

through the hallway and opened a door with a three on it, “you can see how it gets more and more narrow, more segregated from each other, in this tiny space only one animal would stand waiting for its moment.” Logan and the man crammed themselves into the small room. It was tight for them and would be incredibly tight for a full sized animal. Logan let them stand a minute longer in the space, feeling the heat from the man, feeling his boredom, he didn't seem to care at all about the process by which his daily sustenance was produced. If Logan got this feeling from the men, she sometimes would drag out the tour longer, making them really feel the anticipation, but today she was tired and wanted the day to be over.

Moving on, Logan pushed the other door open and they found themselves in another circular space partially divided up with partitions and just enough room for animal and human to exist. “If you look up, “ Logan pointed overhead to the hooks dangling from the ceiling, “you'll see the hooks used to move the meat around for additional processing and storage. Here is the bridge between animal and meat, life and death. When the worker was ready they would open a door, kill the animal and hang it and push it toward the bleeding area,” Logan gestured to the opening to the space in the middle of the room. “The blood would have to be drained for quite some time before moving to the slaughter and processing stages. As you may know, live animals have heads and hooves but meat does not.” She walked onto the bleeding area and into the next room. The final destination was close but Logan couldn't stop herself from giving her usual presentation.

“Since it is very costly to grow and slaughter cattle, every piece is used, there the skins would go, edible bits would go here, “ Logan said as she walked along the hallway with the man silent at her side, “and here is the final destination for the meat at this facility, cold storage.” Logan

opened the door to reveal the silver interior. It was no longer cold but it felt cool to the touch, the air a few degrees chillier than the outside air by design. The man did not step inside.

Logan continued leading the man to the promised resolution. Lester's room was located between cold storage and the edible room, which was the final destination for the public tour before exiting into the old office space across the hall. She unlocked the padlock and pushed the door open, probably for the 100th time she felt the door resist the movement but she pushed hard and forced it open. The room was pleasantly bright, the white walls and yellow hue gave off a calming feeling akin to a weekend morning with no plans in sight. The steel floor contrasted with the walls, maintaining the overall sinister feeling of the space with the silver pole containing a blue button right in the middle giving it another air of mystery.

"Here are your belongings." Logan said to the man as she handed them back to him. He looked confused. She stepped out of the room and began to close the door. "Oh, and thanks for visiting the Long Family Farm, enjoy the rest of your day."

Several minutes later, in the control room on the second floor, Logan felt the relief as the sound of the grinding and squealing stopped. The man had pressed the button, as they all did, and vanished, like they all did. She glanced at the tiny security camera screen to her left, it was the hidden camera in the room, low resolution and horrible frame rate, but functional. Logan saw the lights reset and in the diminutive screen saw the room empty once again. She lifted her head up and looked at the door from a distance, she could see the entire layout of the building from her view here. The door to Lester's room was slightly open, as it always was when

they were finished. Logan stood up and made her way to the first floor to clean up and reset the tour for the next day.

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It was the sixth anniversary of the opening of operations at Logan's farm and she declined to celebrate. Carl had called and congratulated her on the consistent success and they talked for a while before he had to go. Logan was not big on celebrating anniversaries or cyclical life events like holidays, birthdays and the like. She could barely bring herself to celebrate milestones like her first 100 thousand earned or her first successful lawsuit against an entitled patron who tried to sue for psychological distress.

Logan sat down with her sandwich and beer at her grandfather's grave, one of many constants in the past several years have been her nightly walks to the cemetery to reflect with her relatives. The ground around her gave off a feeling of stillness, one that only sacred grounds seemed to offer. Logan looked at the fresh dirt on her great uncle John's grave, she had planted flowers at each of their graves rather than kill and let whiter cut flowers as many do, she wondered if they would bloom this year or if she got the season wrong, Logan did not have a green thumb but she was trying to branch out to new avenues of entertainment and occupation of her time. The tours took up a bulk of her day but she had cut back public tours to three days a week, private tours one day and gave herself a three day weekend. It was nice but boredom quickly settled in, Logan was meant to work, she needed the pressure to keep herself sane so she took up gardening around the grounds and was debating on opening a greenhouse on the property as well.

She poked the ground where the recently planted bulb resided, wondering if she should manipulate it, if the seed was in the right direction, had enough nutrients, if she had over-watered it. Logan stopped herself from pulling the seed straight out of the earth to check on it, it didn't need her anymore she reasoned, it was up to mother nature now.

Logan leaned back in her chair and looked up at the sky. It was a full moon which meant she could see her trailer from the top of the cemetery, and the slaughterhouse at the bottom of the hill beyond it. She should be happy to be so lucky, but she wasn't, she felt nothing really, nothing at all for far too long.

“Welcome to Vanished, the podcast where I, Mical McMaster, discuss the men and women who have seemingly vanished from their lives, never to be seen again. If this is your first tim-”

Logan skipped ahead past the ads of the podcast into the meat of the story, she still enjoyed listening to the podcast, it felt like having a friend telling her stories.

“-Night we are going to learn about a respectable young man from Scranton, Ohio, Nate Balter. He was a welder, a father, and a husband although his ex tells us they were never legally married. He vanished without a trace just a few short weeks ago, his last sighting was at his parents home last month who said he had mentioned going on a tour.”

Logan slammed her feet on the ground and paused the audio. Her heart was abusing the inside of her rib cage as she tried to calm herself down. There couldn't be a connection, could there. Logan tried to make it

so clear that the men left no connections, no one to care if they left, nothing of substance to leave behind or be claimed. Somewhere along the way she had seriously erred, but where? She couldn't prevent the men from telling others, she did a good job vetting them or so she thought, but now Logan had to ask herself how many more had mentioned the tour to others, how many more loose ends were there, all pointing in her direction.

Chapter 7

She hesitated before hitting 'play' again. It had been a week since she last listened to the story of the man who came to visit her, causing her to retreat into her trailer, cancel tours, and hide from society. She had to face reality one day, she couldn't just rot away in this tin can of a house while being too afraid to confront her fears.

Surely, it was just a coincidence anyway. The presenter never mentioned which tour after all, if it were hers or any other around the country, Nate had been tight lipped thankfully. Still, whilst weaving threads of empathy through her presentation, Logan was never fully convinced that Nate did want to live or that anyone he left behind felt that same way. His boss called him a, "good worker," and his cousins said he was 'reliable.' No one was in tears, no one despondent, heart broken, not even his mother could find it in herself to shed a tear over the disappearance of her son. That's the kind of men Logan wanted to help. After she relistened to the episode it solidified in her mind that she was doing the right thing.

She hesitated at the entrance to her tour building as if anything would have changed between now and a week ago, that some high level officers were waiting with rifles to take her down for her crimes. The nerves stiffened her entire core, she was immobilized but forced her hand to reach out and open the door. Inside the building, it was the same as always, hollow and sterile devoid of any signs of life.

She went about her day, the motions familiar enough that her mind could wander, would they ever find her, would anyone care, would she ever

be free of this pain? The wishful thinking cut deep grooves of static into her cranial nerves causing the back of her skull to illuminate with sensation, so she stopped thinking about any positive outcomes and went back to her fantasies where she was someone else, somewhere else all together.

That night she took her sleeping pills, one more than usual due to the extra energy she felt that needed to be squashed, and dreamed the dream that was occurring most often now.

She moved along the hall, it was black and gray with a thin line of white light escaping into it. She could see the floor below her, the gray flooring emanating light onto the black walls that absorbed every packet of energy, giving nothing in return. The hall was empty save for her, until she turned her head and found a pile of bones, but still, the hall was devoid of life except for her.

Now she was in the command center on the second floor of her factory. She could see everything from here up close in fine detail. The bodies moved along the lines dutifully, dry and bloodless. The line was never ending, it moved along one end of the factory to the other, weaving all throughout before making its way to the final destination; the incinerator. She watched the bodies move along the lines slowly crawling around the space as guided by the pre-installed track system. It was no mystery to her, she set it up herself, she designed this entire building.

A loud thud broke her out of her thoughts, she stepped out of the command center determined to find the source of the noise, she looked left out over the factory but it was empty. She could not look right, she knew what was to the right of her, she told it to be quiet, and heard chains rattle in response. 'Shut up' she screamed voiceless, not daring to look in its direction.

'Feed me!' it roared back. She was forced to turn and look at it, she could never find its face, it seemed to take up the entire space in the cutout room. There chained to the wall, and the walls were red now, the entire factory was red now, but it remained black, taking in the light from the red walls and giving nothing in return. She stood her ground, fearful that it would backfire, that she would look in the wrong place, but it worked, again. it backed down and was now behind a wall with a metal door, a locked door at that.

Every time she looked, she could manage to tie it up, lock it down, make it retreat just a little bit more, but it was never ending, the effort to remember how many layers of protection between her and it were never ending.

She looked back over the factory only to find it devoid of flesh.

She woke up gently with only the smallest rays of light peeking out behind the blanket she had fortified the window with. Every morning was the same now, she would rise slowly, the stiffness in her upper back preventing her from moving too quickly. She would make coffee and check her finances, check on tour bookings, plan improvements and special events. Come nine in the morning she would head down the slope to the tour building and would set up for the day, unlock the doors, sweep the dust, restock the gift shop, check the tills and do a safety run of the equipment. Every day was the same, it made her feel at peace in her routine, she knew what was expected of her, what to do and say, no surprises.

The days blended together and all at once winter was upon the land again, forcing Logan to shut down and hibernate once again. It was rough the first couple winters, but she was more equipped now with plans and provisions, she had enough things to do all season long that did not involve

leaving her sanctuary.

A few weeks into the season she drove off of her property for the first time to meet with an older gentleman who was applying to take a private tour. In winter when the building was closed she would vet them like this, it gave her something to do in the off season and solidified their commitment which helped ease her mind. His name was Viktor and he had immigrated to the USA from Russia in the 1990s, started a business and met his wife only to be divorced years later and penniless after.

Logan knew it was him before she said anything, she could tell based on how he was standing, looking around at the people passing him on the street waiting for her that he was it, he was the next one. She felt a little lighter knowing this one was a good one. Sometimes the men didn't need her services at all, they just needed someone to talk to, someone to vent to, a therapist more than a solution. She didn't mind fulfilling that role either, they could buy her drinks and talk to her all they wanted, it did not impact her in the slightest, it was only when they wanted more that an issue arose, she offered one solution and only one solution.

Viktor didn't talk like the others, he was past that point in his life. He merely informed Logan of the steps he was taking to rid himself of his burdens and she agreed he was on the right track. They took a slow, silent walk down the street neither saying anything. Once they had eclipsed the block twice they said their goodbyes and arranged another meeting for when Viktor had finalized his ordeals. It was nice, meetings like this where Logan did not have to pretend to be someone who cared, who offered something different.

She drove home in silence, the sound of the highway pushing her eardrums the entire way until she slowed to turn into her property, the slushy gravel road immediately giving way to the weight of the vehicle. The car was getting old so she parked it at the bottom of the hill and walked up the slope in the darkness. She had to get some rest, she had another meeting with another man tomorrow to check on his progress.

Thus her winter proceeded in a new fashion, one where she kept herself busy by keeping tabs on her newest clients. Once they met all of her requirements they could schedule a private tour, no longer would they take her by surprise and leave her with questions, they had to earn it and prove it to her that they deserved it.

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Winter was fading, the snow was melting creating little streams down the slopes of her land getting her boots muddy and challenging her balance. She had thought about installing stairs but no one ever climbed the hill but her so what function would they serve? She stumbled to get into the car slipping on a small ice patch hidden between the rocks. She steadied herself and got into the car, set up her audio and backed out. She had a long drive today to meet a new client, but she enjoyed driving so she did not offer to meet him halfway.

She turned the podcast on, the last several episodes all featured men and women unknown to Logan. She felt a little relief each time she did not know the strangers and a little sad knowing she could have offered them assistance if they were still around.

“In today’s episode we are going to do something a little different. A Q and A with myself and my partner Allison, who you are all familiar with if you’ve listened for long enough, she helps me a lot with this little production, don’tcha babe?”

[Alli] Yes I do, hello!

[Mical] So the first question, and we took these from instagram, you can follow us at vanished pee cue. First question is from Derek who asked, “Where do you get your information from?” Well Derek we get it from public sources, a lot of people nowadays are very easy to track online to find connections, we reach out to relatives, ask questions and go from there. Sometimes I do add some artistic flair and I know I’ve been criticized for that in the past but this is for your entertainment, are you not entertained!? [Mical and Alli laugh]

[Alli] The next question is from BigChungo420 [Laughs at name] “Has anyone ever been found due to your podcast? Any positive stories?” Well from what we know, no, no one has been found but we have been trying to find more recent cases in order to help facilitate finding these missing people rather than cold cases that are more likely to stay cold. I know everyone wants a happy ending but the reality is the sooner we can share with you about a missing person, the better their chances at survival.

[Mical] Correct, which is why I made a post and want to reiterate about my brother who went missing a month ago. We were very close, spoke every day and now he is gone. I still feel like he is alive, we had no enemies, he has a temper but for him to go this long without communicating is a really bad sign.”

Logan zoned out of her drive while the podcast played on. She had not participated in asking any questions, she couldn’t, it would be too awkward. She played a fantasy in her head as she drove on, one where Alli

was asking her questions and she had an adoring audience who wanted to know more about her. Why yes Alli I am a successful small business owner, I have a Masters degree and no debt, thanks so much for asking. She played out the fantasy over and over until Alli no longer wanted to ask questions for an audience but wanted to truly know Logan and she would not allow herself to delve that deep, it would only break her focus on her goals today, she'd be in her head all day.

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On the drive back from her meeting, Logan played the next episode, she was a little behind so she had downloaded them to listen to for this trip, she didn't even glance at the title before starting her drive and starting the episode.

“Hello I’m Mical McMaster and this is Vanished, today’s episode is going to be a little different than the others, we are going to do a deep dive into the rumors surrounding locations where people have vanished most often, some of these have hard data and some are just rumors but we thought it would be a good chance of pace to examine the circumstances behind how and why these locations received their reputation...”

Logan tuned the podcast out for a while, letting her mind drift in and out of reality. She had no plans the next week and was struggling with finding something to fill the time with. She wasn't interested in going anywhere or visiting any of the locations Mical was talking about, she reached over to turn the podcast off and play some music when she heard a word that set her nerves on fire, “...tour outside Springfield...”

She hit rewind and listened more closely, her hands shaking the

steering wheel, *"Once heralded as a popular children's attraction, this tour outside Springfield used to delight residents young and old until a more sinister purpose was discovered after hours. During the day the tour operated like any other but at night once the regular patrons had long left, the owner would provide more exclusive access to a highly vetted group of patrons. Of course the goal wasn't murder, not at first, but rumor has it that when a patron tried to go to the police after being assaulted during one of their parties, the owner killed her and threw her body into an incinerator on sight. Worse yet, the owner found a new fetish and began slaughtering unsuspecting patrons after they thought they had finished for the night. Of course what is real and what is fiction is hard to separate with rumors such as these."*

Logan relaxed, there was no way they were talking about her tour anymore, she had no fetishes about throwing anyone into an incinerator. She unclenched her hands, driving with just one to alleviate the pressure in the other and continued listening.

"...of course there is a new rumor now about a new tour outside of Springfield, one where you get to experience the world of cattle on the last day of their lives just before ending yours. [Mical laughs] But that's a story for another day, not a lot of information about that yet but we are working on it..."

Logan did not slam on her brakes, although she felt like she should have. She did not veer off the road nor did she lessen her grip on the wheel and cause any alarm to the other drivers on the road. She made it to her turn, pulled into her property, got out of the car and up the hill before letting the dread finally hit her.

Chapter 8

“Stupid, stupid, stupid.” Logan stumbled along the gravel path back to her trailer, her mind spiraling, words lashing at herself. The air felt too thin to breathe, but she couldn’t stop. She no longer felt safe, even on her own property. How could she have been so careless? Letting strangers on her land, thinking everything would be fine? She had let her guard down, and allowed it. The panic churned in her gut.

She tripped over a fallen branch, her knees buckling to the ground, the pain in her back sharp and biting. She paused, struggling to rise, trying to stretch her hips, hoping for some relief—nothing came. The pain in her spine was unrelenting, and she cursed herself again. Each step felt like a punishment as she limped back to the trailer, berating herself every inch of the way.

That night, Logan lay in bed, her body aching, her mind racing. The past few weeks replayed like a film she couldn’t turn off. The people she had met—hundreds of them, all in search of something better, a new life. She’d worked so hard to make sure they were truly seeking a fresh start. But now... now everything felt wrong.

She remembered a moment from a month ago, one that had lingered in her mind but hadn’t fully settled—too unsettling to confront. She had dismissed it then, chalked it up to her overactive imagination. But tonight, it wouldn’t let her go.

Logan sat in the control room, staring at the tiny security monitor as the hours dragged by. The man hadn’t pressed the button yet. It had been

at least ten minutes. Too long. She stood up, unease crawling down her spine, and went to check. The door to the room was open—more than usual. She stepped out, listening. Footsteps echoed in the hall, not hers, not his—no one was there.

“Thanks!” The voice echoed from behind her, deep, familiar. It was a man’s voice. But when she turned, the shadow that had passed by the gift shop was gone. She must have imagined it. She checked the rooms—everything was as it should be. Clean. Empty.

“Maybe I’m just losing it,” Logan muttered to herself. “It was just one time.” Her breath was shallow, but she tried to rationalize it. It wasn’t a big deal. One man who slipped through the cracks, one voice, maybe it wasn’t what it seemed. But it was too close. She couldn’t shake it.

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The next day, the routine continued, but something about the woman and her companion unsettled her. The interaction felt heavy, marked with a tension she couldn’t explain. The woman was too familiar, her voice a clue Logan could almost grasp but couldn’t fully pin down.

“Have you ever seen this man before? He’s my brother, I am looking for him, he went missing about two months ago.” The words slipped from the woman’s mouth like a casual question, but Logan’s blood ran cold. The photo she handed over was of the same man she had just recalled in the control room. The same one. She’d let him slip through her fingers once. Would it happen again?

Logan didn't make eye contact, didn't want to. The conversation felt wrong, forced, like the pieces didn't fit. Her gut churned. She moved away, tried to focus on the tour, but her thoughts kept pulling her back. The sharp pain in her back, the unease in her stomach, and the eerie feeling of being watched. She tried to suppress it, to bury it under the routine, but the weight kept pressing down on her.

Her voice was a tight wire as she continued the tour, her movements stiff, slow. She couldn't stop feeling like everything was unraveling, but she forced herself to smile, to act normal, to bury it. She was too tired for this. Too tired to feel what she didn't want to feel, and yet, it was there. Always there.

As the woman stood at the counter, Logan couldn't stop herself from rambling. Her words tumbled out, a mix of uncomfortable honesty and forced detachment.

"Sausage is not on here, yet! I, I like the idea of sausage cause aren't we all just mushed up bits of our former selves jammed into a predefined space and cut for size to suit the needs of an end consumer."

The woman looked at her with wide eyes, but no response. Logan mentally cursed herself. It wasn't supposed to sound like that, wasn't supposed to feel like that. Her words hung in the air, awkward, jagged, like a cracked mirror.

And then, it hit her. That was them. Mical McMaster. Alli Hart. The voices from the podcast she'd listened to. Missing persons. Logan froze.

Her pulse quickened. If they knew anything about her, about what happened here, she was done.

She shut down the gift shop as quickly as she could, the adrenaline coursing through her, her heart pounding in her chest. She didn't know if she could escape what was coming next. But she knew one thing for sure: she wasn't safe anymore. And she would be alone in this, just like always.

Chapter 9

Logan checked her watch again as she brushed her teeth and got ready for the day. She had cut her hair last year and it was slowly inching out into a discombobulated mess as if every strand had decided to stick out in its own direction without any regard for a sense of style or discretion. Usually she would brush it into a redeemable mess but today she could not be bothered. It had been a week since Mical and Alli had visited her farm, it was the day of a new episode if they were going to stick with their schedule and Logan was terrified to see if they mentioned her.

'There are no bodies, I have done nothing wrong and there is no proof anyway.' Logan told herself as she finished putting on a button down shirt and plain black pants. She dressed like this every day and had no reason today to change anything, it was a day like any other.

After shutting and locking her trailer Logan made a resolution to herself, she would give the farm one more year but after she needed to make a change, either add on to the property with something more mentally stimulating or sell. Her obligation to Carl was fully weaned, he hadn't called or responded to her in almost a year, if she sold she could buy him out and call it done.

What could she do after years of being a small business owner? Logan thought about it nearly every day. What she could do if she were closer to other people, would they give her a chance to get all of her words out before interrupting her, would they mind if she practiced her casual conversation. She couldn't boss anyone around, but maybe manage property or investments. The farm had made her feel dead inside but she

wasn't ready to let go just yet, after all it did make her plenty of income and gave her the only social interaction she had had for the past six years.

Caught up in her thoughts, Logan failed to notice the small crowd outside the door of her tour. She checked her watch again as she unlocked the door and stopped short of opening it when she heard someone call out to her.

"Miss Logan Long?" A man said behind her with an authoritative voice. Logan turned around to see a police officer standing in front of a small army of backup. She should have been afraid, felt the cool rush of adrenaline, the heat of blood pumping in her ears, but she felt nothing, internally she was completely still and for the first time in a long time, slightly relieved. She had nothing to hide and now was her chance to prove it once and for all.

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"So this right here is the problem." A man in a blue shirt and denim jeans said as he pointed out the crack in the wall. "It goes from here, all the way down and over there." He pointed it out to Logan as if she hadn't noticed the crack for the past six years. She never had concerns about it, everything ran safe and smooth, no one had complained.

But someone had indeed complained that the tour building had cracks and was unsafe for public use. The city was here to condemn the building until Logan could get it fixed. Her heart had made itself known the longer they lingered in the building, pumping oxygen to Logan's empty head. She had really thought they were here to arrest her, she knew she

hadn't done anything wrong. Cracks in a foundation was Carl's fault, he had been in charge of restoration, she was an innocent victim of poor masonry.

The bill to fix the building would be astronomical. Logan had asked if she could still do on foot tours but they said no public admittance allowed. They taped their official papers to wherever they needed and Logan let out a sigh of relief as they began to filter out of the building. She was standing at the exit with her hand on her hips contemplating moving up her timeline by a year, selling the property and giving Carl a piece of her mind, when she noticed the men begin to hover around one man in particular.

She didn't want to act suspicious so she stood there awkwardly holding her position for entirely too long before one of the officers came over to her. She thought police force was unnecessary here, she was innocent though, they had been through the building for hours and had nothing to show for it.

Except she noticed now that the man approaching her had something in his hand. A wallet. 'Well shoot dang.' Logan thought as she grimaced at the sight. She had been so, so careful.

"Ma'am, do you know the owner of this wallet?" The officer said as if Logan kept neat documents detailing all of the missing items she had recovered over the years. She had, but that was when she had found them and besides the point now.

"No but I imagine if we open it up we can find the answer together." Logan said cheekily, it was a stupid question and it deserved a stupid

answer. "I find missing things all the time, people drop things from their pockets every day. I usually find them but I guess I didn't find that before you did." Logan continued, not wanting to test her luck too much. Her heart was making a valiant attempt to remove itself from its cavity as her skin, its slow attempt to drown her in sweat.

The officer ignored her remarks and opened up the wallet to show the name. Logan could not recall the man, he seemed familiar but they all did, they all looked the same, dressed the same, talked and acted the same. She could never tell the difference from Peter to Paul to Patrick. Logan shook her head and shrugged at seeing the photo ID of the man whose wallet had found a new home on her property.

Another official came behind the other and whispered in his ear, he nodded and looked at Logan fiercely. "Seems like the owner of this wallet went missing a few months ago, I don't suppose you have time to accompany us to the police station for questioning about that."

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Logan did not have time to accompany them, but she found herself not arrested but being driven to the station anyway. She had regretfully canceled the 9am tour, made an update on the website reflecting the tours closure and sent Carl a string of incoherent curse words all before being allowed her phone in the back of the vehicle. She wasn't being arrested, they said, just in for questioning they said.

"Should I get a lawyer?" Logan said out loud on accident and was informed requesting one would only take up more time, which was fair. She

would like to leave quickly and did not want to delay any longer.

“So.” A very broad man said as he entered the room Logan found herself in. “You say you don’t know this fellow. A Mr. Tom Lund. Doesn’t ring a bell?”

“I don’t make a habit of befriending every patron of my tour. I’m sure if I looked I could find a receipt for the day he visited, unless he paid in cash. Would you like to let me go and do that?” Logan asked although very certain she would not have a receipt for a Tom Lund on her public tour registrar.

“After we are done here I’m sure we would love that record. It seems Mr. Lund here went missing...about three months ago. Do you mean to tell us you let this wallet sit in a room for all to see for months without noticing?” The man asked although his line of questioning confused Logan.

“Would I have put it there more recently?” She asked him.

“Well would you have? Perhaps you were cleaning up and it fell out in the process.”

Logan furrowed her brow, what was he trying to accuse her of. “I’m sorry I don’t understand.”

He rolled his eyes and sat forward in his chair, placing his forearms and hands on the table, “We know about the rumors, hell everyone in the city does. Says you like to kill and eat these men, you keep them in a secret underground cold storage, that the slaughterhouse isn’t just for

tours.” He said as if talking to a child about a bad report card.

Logan could not stop herself from laughing boisterously. The idea she would kill and eat the men and just hand their dead clothed bodies was absurd. “Sorry, this is serious, sorry, sorry.” Logan tried to calm herself down, “I don’t kill and eat anyone, that’s just disgusting and wrong. What room did you even find the wallet in, most of the tour is off-limits, for aerial view only, I don’t go into every room every day. You can go search the entire building if you want, I’m sure you’ll find a few more missing items left by careless people.”

The man felt victorious, “So you are giving us permission to search the premises?”

“Yeah, if you find a new cold storage room with dead bodies let me know, that would be news to me.” Logan shrugged and folded her arms. She had never heard his version of the rumors ever, there was no truth to them, she had done nothing wrong, there were no bodies.

Chapter 10

Logan sat patiently in the holding cell. She was confident the officials would come back any moment to tell her she was clear to go, nothing was found, it was all a coincidence. She hummed to herself as she felt the cold sting of the hard metal seat below her. She hadn't moved an inch in an hour at least, but any moment now, she was sure of it.

She swayed her head, feeling the strain in her neck, it felt like it had been hours now, but surely they would be done by now. Logan finally stood and paced around the room as her legs were becoming numb. She kept the faith that any moment she would be released.

Hours later in the overly bright room she had given up hope of leaving for the night. She felt exhausted yet calm and self assured that things would be alright in the morning. She would have her justice and be proven innocent.

Logan woke to pain and hunger. She wasn't hungry for food but release from the gnawing in her gut that was emanating through her limbs. She put her glasses on, they had fallen from her face when she passed out, and looked around but no one was around to call for help. She tried to stand but couldn't find the strength, she hadn't felt this sick in years, she had been so good for so long.

'When was the last time one of them came to visit?' Logan wondered as she tried to recall the last private tour. It was near winter, tours were still going but dying off slowly. It had been maybe a month since a private tour, no big deal for Logan, that was just an act of public service, she didn't

need to do it. 'But I do.' She remembered now, it had been years ago that she last felt this pain, and the relief that followed when she would give in.

Logan laughed at herself as she grimaced in pain, she really thought she had the ability to assimilate herself back into society, as if she deserved it, as if she could handle it.

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She was released by mid morning after an exhaustive search found indeed, nothing. She bit back the pain in order to stand tall as she was let go and walked out of the police station. They had driven her in but did not offer to return her to her home and she was in no mood to ask.

Logan stepped fully onto the sidewalk and contemplated her choices. The thought of the nearest bridge came to mind but she suppressed that. Just as she went to turn to her left, Logan felt a hand on her shoulder, she turned her torso around to find the woman, Alli, looking at her perplexed. "Hey, you may not remember me, I-"

"Alli Hart, your girlfriend has a podcast where she accuses me of being a killer. Yeah, I remember you." Logan said too cheerfully for the subject matter. She really liked Alli, or at least the Alli she heard on the podcast, and as bitter as she was she knew she was just vindicated by the police. "You can tell Mical that the police just searched my property and found nothing by the way. I assume she reported the building, well it's condemned now so congrats I'm out of business!" Logan shrugged aggressively, her dysregulation rippling through her and went to step away from Alli.

"I um, I know there was nothing there. I'm sorry, she gets these ideas in her head and she won't stop even when she is proven wrong. I personally didn't think you did anything wrong. Wait, is that why you were just inside the police station?" Alli asked as she moved to walk with Logan who was subtly increasing her pace, testing the taller woman.

"Yeah, they found a wallet of some missing guy and the detective said I had some secret cold storage full of dead bodies that I would eat. Just really stupid stuff, I can barely stomach steak." Logan said as she walked along the path with no real destination in mind. She realized she didn't mean to walk this direction but now was too proud to turn around so they walked onward into downtown.

Alli walked silently alongside her for a few moments before adding, "So no more tours? I know she complained to someone about something but I thought she was making something up in order to get the police in the building. I should have said something, I'm sorry."

Logan shrugged again, "You don't know me and the building was unsafe which was a good thing to find out because I would feel awful if someone got hurt due to the negligence of the contractor." That reminded Logan, she had to inform Carl he would no longer be receiving dividends from her company. "Listen, I have to go, I have to figure out how to get back home and what I'm going to do next. Thanks for coming to talk to me but I just need to get some things done." Logan tried to wave and walk in the other direction but Alli grabbed her arm and stopped her.

"I can give you a ride back if you want. I'm not, just don't tell Mical

and I can help you, I feel really bad about what happened, let me help.” Alli pleaded with Logan who had fixated her sight on Allis hand on her arm. Alli let go and put her hands up, “Only if you want, I would understand if you don’t want to talk to me anymore.”

Logan thought about it for a minute. She did need a ride home, she hadn’t had a human companion to talk to in years and probably needed the socialization but the pain in her stomach was growing and she needed to be alone, but going with Alli may be the fastest way to get home, thus Logan was torn but there was only one logical decision.

“Okay, how close is your car?”

&&&

Alli tried to make small talk with Logan on the way back, “So what type of music do you like?” She had asked casually in an attempt to find a station Logan may like.

“Why?” Logan was immediately defensive, she’d never had someone ask her about her interests without using that information later to make fun of her or forget completely in order to talk about themselves.

“Because if you don’t tell me I will turn on show tunes for the entire way back.” Alli held up her phone in a mock threatening manner but Logan nodded along.

“Go ahead, I like show tunes.” So the car was filled with random bellowing of theater hits only true nerds would recognize and Logan didn’t

have to talk about herself.

It took about an hour to get back to Logan's trailer. She invited Alli inside and apologized for the mess. "If it smells at all I'm sorry, I can't smell it. My grandfather died in here." She pulled out a chair for Alli to sit down on and went about rummaging through her things.

"Okay the tour was morbid enough but that was really pushing it." Alli responded and sniffed the air, "It smells normal in here, no weird scents, kind of like laundry actually. It looks like someone died in here though."

"Thanks." Logan said from her office as she opened and closed drawers. She didn't know why she had invited Alli in, she had so many things to do right now, socializing was always at the bottom of the list yet she found that she did not mind having company in her embarrassing living space. It was a huge reason why she never wanted to invite anyone over, old friends from college or around town had wanted to come visit when the tours were first starting, but all she had to offer them was this trailer that she had moved out of sight, out of mind from the rest of society.

Finally after searching every drawer Logan found what she was looking for and went back into the kitchen. "Oh, do you want a drink or something?" Logan tried to remember how to be hospitable, she opened the fridge, "I have water, some beer and that's it." She looked back over at Alli who shook her head.

"What were you looking for?" Alli asked as she looked at the piece of paper in Logan's hand. Logan showed it to her, it was a business card. Puzzled, Alli took it and read the card, "A real estate lawyer?"

Logan took a beer from the fridge for herself and nodded, "I'm going to sell the property. I get offers all the time from developers wanting to put down those cheaply built but expensive townhouses or condos that no one wants but are forced to purchase for lack of options."

"But you said in your tour your family has owned this property for over a century! You can't just give it up because of one setback." Alli threw the card on the table, clearly disappointed in Logan's approach. Logan was taken aback, she hadn't had anyone challenge her opinions in years, she wasn't sure how to proceed with external input after only having herself to talk to for so long.

"I just...need a change." Logan said after a moment, not finding the correct words to explain herself.

"Well I'm sorry again that Mical did this to you. It seems like you have a good thing going for you here but it's your life, I can't tell you how to live it." Alli stood up and wrote her number down for Logan, "I am probably the last person you want to talk to but if you need help or anything you can text me."

After Alli left her number on the table, Logan sat there for a few seconds, staring at the small piece of paper, her thoughts fragmented. She wasn't sure how to process the offer—part of her felt touched, but another part of her felt hesitant, unsure whether to trust it. For the first time in years, someone had reached out without asking anything in return. It felt almost alien. She had always been the one to offer help, not receive it.

Alli stood at the door, her hand resting on the knob, pausing as if she wanted to say something else. The silence between them hung heavy, filled with things unsaid.

"Look," Alli began, turning back around, her voice softer now. She wasn't sure if she should be the one to push. She knew how much it took to break through Logan's walls, but that didn't stop her from trying. "I know I don't have the right to tell you what to do, but I just... I don't want you to make a decision based on this place. It's not just about the building, right? You're carrying something heavier than just the weight of all this stuff." She gestured toward the trailer, but the words hung between them, like a balloon tethered to an unspoken truth.

Logan's eyes flickered briefly with emotion. "What do you mean?" Her voice was almost too calm, betraying the storm beneath. She wasn't sure if she wanted to hear it, but Alli's willingness to speak freely pulled her in.

"I mean...", Alli hesitated, her lips pressing together as if gathering the courage to put into words what had been building in her own heart for a while. "I know you're independent. I know you probably don't want help or anyone in your business, but... I see you. And I get why you want to keep things to yourself. I see that you've built a life from nothing, but I don't want you to cut yourself off completely just because of this property. There's a bigger picture here, Logan." Her gaze softened, almost tender. "And it's not just about selling or keeping the property. It's about how you're living your life, too."

Logan's throat tightened, and for a moment, she couldn't breathe.

Alli's words struck a nerve she didn't want to face—she had spent so long buried in this isolation that even someone like Alli, with her complicated past and desperate need for independence, could see it. She wanted to argue, to shut her out, but she couldn't find the words.

Alli took a slow step forward, her voice quieter now, more careful. "I get it. You want to make your own way, without the family baggage. I'm... trying to do that, too. I don't want to be tied to my past. But... you don't have to keep living in the shadows. Not when there's this—" She gestured to the space around them again. "This place, this potential. You can't keep running away from people forever."

Logan turned her eyes down to the table, gripping the card that Alli had left behind. "Maybe it's easier this way. People leave, anyway." She whispered the words, but the sting in her chest made it clear they weren't just about the property. They were about everything she had built her life on.

Alli's gaze softened, and there was a brief, flickering sadness in her eyes. "I get that," she said quietly. "But don't make decisions when you're already exhausted. If you need someone to talk to or just... sit with, text me. I'll listen, I promise."

Logan nodded, the weight of her thoughts thickening. She felt something stir inside her, an unfamiliar warmth at the thought of someone actually listening to her without an agenda, without expectation.

"I'll think about it." Logan said softly, finally looking up at Alli. The briefest moment of connection passed between them before Alli gave a

short nod, turning to leave.

"Just think about it," Alli said again, her voice low. She hesitated by the door, before adding, "I'll be here if you need me."

With that, she stepped out, leaving Logan alone once more.

Logan's gaze shifted to the card again, the simplicity of the numbers on it almost taunting her. She didn't know what to do with it. The quiet in the room felt heavier now, filled with the unspoken possibility of change.

But she didn't feel ready to embrace it. Not yet. She needed time. Time to make sense of everything.

She glanced toward the door, half-expecting to hear the sound of the car starting, the tires crunching on gravel, but instead, the silence seemed to fill the room, suffocating her.

&&&

Logan sat down at her kitchen table and found herself alone once more. Briefly she wondered if she had imagined Alli's presence but the car ignition and sound of the tires on the gravel pulled her back into reality. Was Alli right, did she have a good thing going here? Logan had to look at all the data.

She had made good money, but now with having to restore the building again, her savings would take a huge hit. Also she had built up a terrible reputation for herself as some cannibal even though that was so

far removed from the truth, she didn't eat people. She also was isolated and while she managed it, in the past hour of being near another human, one she didn't need to provide a service for, the pain radiating through Logan's body had subsided tremendously. She didn't need to do the private tours or the public tours, having friends and being in a community could help her, it would be hard at first but she could do it again.

"If I sell I can make a quick few million and live on returns." Logan said to herself, "If I keep the property I'll take another ten years to get the same return and potentially kill myself in the process." She pulled out her computer and did the math, it checked out, and selling made more sense. Just as Logan made up her mind, the pain increased in her head, she curled up and groaned, "But what do I do about you?"

Chapter 11

“And here are the jack and jill sinks.” The real estate agent waved her hand into the bathroom as if revealing a room full of gold bars. Logan peered into the room but took no notice of any details. She wanted to find a new home quickly so she could get back into doing what she did best, being alone. “Through this door is the other bedroom.” The agent walked through the bathroom into the other room while Logan pretended to look around. It was modest, three bedrooms, a main kitchen and living area with a den down a few steps to the side of the kitchen. It had a garage and a small yard and was entirely too close to the neighbors but Logan had scoped out the area and found the neighborhood to be very quiet.

“I’ll take it.” Logan said as she looked into a closet in the other bedroom, she didn’t really care for the mcmanion aspect of the property, the weird window placement and extra crown molding but she could not be bothered to look at another property and spend any more time with this agent who insist on trying to get to know Logan.

The agent stumbled, “Are you sure you don’t want to see the backyard first?”

“No thank you.” Logan mumbled as she made a transfer with her phone.

&&&

Logan closed on the house the same day she called Carl to inform him their relationship was formally over. They had never signed any documents,

it was actually an informal deal but Logan drafted up a document and had it notarized and sent to him anyway along with a cashier's check for his portion of the sale. He could try to sue but he would know better, he knew her and how far she could push in order to get her way, Logan would be surprised to ever hear from him again.

Suddenly she found herself standing among a sparse selection of boxes haphazardly placed inside her new living room. She hadn't taken much, just her clothes and electronics, nothing else had any value or was worth keeping as a memento of how she was the inevitable end of her family's century long ownership of that piece of land. After years of living there all she had to show for it was the proof of sale and her memories.

It was overwhelming and underwhelming at the same time, Logan was in the unique position to be simply whelmed. She felt nothing, just the pain that had come back in full force since her brief detainment and hadn't left her since. At the same time she was completely drowning in the details of setting up an entirely new life for herself, had hadn't the slightest clue how to get her water connected, whom to contact for internet, what day trash day was, she had relied on the land at her farm, it provided water via a well and she burned her trash, internet was cellular but now she had options and she couldn't keep herself settled enough to enact a plan of action.

"Calm down Logan!" She yelled at herself as she moved through her new house, exploring but still not taking in the surroundings. To her it was all white noise, white walls upon walls and bland decorative choices designed to suck the personality out of the nearest inhabitant. She had so many things to do yet no responsibilities at all, she could do nothing for a very long time and get away with it.

She pulled out her phone and found the number she had saved earlier in the week. Her messages app was devoid of content, no one contacted her and she had no one to parley with, well she didn't before, but she went to open a new message and found the contact she was looking for; Alli Hart.

She hadn't meant to call anyone tonight. Wasn't even sure she knew how to want company anymore. But the house felt cavernous. Dead air and too many white walls. She needed something.

Her thumb hovered over the name. Thought better of it. Tapped it anyway.

Alli picked up fast, her voice tight—like someone who'd been holding her breath for days.

“Logan?”

“You busy?”

A short exhale. “Kind of. Why?”

“I moved.”

A pause. “New place. No furniture yet. But it's... quiet.”

It sounded less like an invitation and more like a confession.

Alli was silent. Logan didn't fill the space.

Then, with a shift in tone: "Mical's out cold. Early shift."

Logan said nothing, already knowing what was coming.

"I could come over for a bit."

Logan didn't say yes. She didn't have to.

"I'll text you the address," she murmured, then hung up before the conversation could ask for more than she was willing to give.

&&&

Alli whistled as she stepped inside the foyer, it was nighttime, after Mical had gone to sleep early for her five am shift so she said to Logan before she came over. "This is fancy."

"I guess, I don't know, it has everything I need, too much really." Logan looked at the floor as Alli gave herself a tour of the house.

"You move really quick, you said you wanted to sell last week and you already did, how is that even possible?" Alli asked as she opened the closet door in one of the spare bedrooms.

"I told you I get offers all the time. Money makes things move." Logan said as she stared into the empty closet with Alli. She had barely begun purchasing furniture, she had contacted Alli to help her with that and the

decorations.

Alli wandered out of the bedroom and made her way into the den, it was in an awkward location, in the hallway to the main living space yet had a small door and was three steps lower than the rest of the house. “The previous owner tried to make this into a theater, entertainment area space but it just feels like a giant closet to me.” Logan said as they both stepped down and into the room. The window was covered up by a poorly cut piece of drywall and the ceiling light had been gutted to make way for a projector that never saw the light of day. Standing in the empty room, Logan could not picture it being an inviting space.

“Yeah dude this feels super creepy, who put up this drywall?” Alli mocked the embarrassing job and Logan felt a sort of pity for the poor family man who probably spent hours trying to darken the space and make it worth spending time in. Logan had talked to so many men like that, who tried and failed, who just didn't quite understand how to live life normally, just as she was experiencing herself.

Logan lingered at the edge of the room. Alli stood in the middle, arms crossed, taking it all in like a critic at a gallery she didn't want to be at.

“You ever want to make it into something else?” Alli asked, glancing at the drywall again, almost grimacing.

Logan hesitated. “I think I just want it to be... not this.”

Alli laughed under her breath. “That's how I feel about most things right now.”

The laugh was brittle. Logan didn't join her.

"I mean it," Alli added. "My professor doesn't care that this guy's been stealing my lab work. And Mical's just... she's always on one lately. Like it's my fault she got written up for pulling someone's records."

Logan didn't know how to respond to that, not directly. She didn't do well with complaints—especially not ones that mirrored a life she thought she had narrowly escaped.

She looked around the room again. "Some spaces don't change, no matter what you put in them."

Alli blinked. "Yeah. Like people."

That one hung there. Quiet, too quiet.

"Do you want to see the backyard?" Logan asked, voice sharp, sudden, like she'd slapped the air between them. The room did give off a creepy vibe, the more she stood in it the more the pain came back into her stomach. She gestured for Alli to leave and was grateful to close the door, moving the new house tour along.

They stepped out of the den like it had breathed them back out, relieved to leave its stale, artificial dark. Logan slid open the back door, letting the night air roll in. A single porch light flicked on above them, casting a pale dome across the cement patio and the rough, unshaped yard beyond.

“You ever come out here?” Alli asked, stepping past the threshold. Her voice was looser now, a little more herself. She hugged her arms over her hoodie and peered into the overgrown grass.

Logan followed her, barefoot. The patio was cool under her feet. “Not really. I think the last owner had a dog or something. Or kids. It’s uneven. Full of holes.”

“That explains the weird slope,” Alli said, kneeling slightly to press her fingers into the dirt near a scraggly weed. “Could grow something out here. The soil’s not bad.”

Logan shrugged. “I don’t know what to do with it. I keep Googling ‘backyard landscaping’ and everything looks like a hotel. Fake and expensive. I don’t want a tiny vineyard or a water feature with frogs shipped in from another climate.”

Alli laughed, genuinely. “God, thank you. I thought I was the only one who hated those yards that look like they come with HOA bylaws.”

Logan smirked. “They probably do.”

They stood there in silence for a moment, the sounds of distant cars and wind nudging through leaves the only soundtrack. Logan glanced at Alli from the side. Her posture had softened. She looked less like someone holding tension and more like someone exhaling into the dark.

“You’re good with plants?” Logan asked, almost reluctantly.

Alli looked at her, surprised. "Yeah. I mean, yeah, I like them. They're kind of like... non-verbal roommates. Less mess, more honest."

Logan nodded. "That's what I like about outside stuff. Plants just... do their thing. They don't ask you to define yourself to match them. They're just there."

Alli tilted her head. "So why haven't you started?"

Logan looked out at the dark, uneven earth. "I guess I don't know what I want it to be. Not a project. Not a performance. Just something real. But that feels... hard to design."

Alli was quiet. "Yeah. I get that."

Another pause. Then Logan added, "I don't like things. Not really. Furniture, decorations. It's all just... stuff. Dead weight. I used to like books, but I gave most of them away before the move. I didn't want anything following me."

"Except Lester," Alli said without thinking. It came out dry, not mocking, just real.

Logan blinked, surprised. Then she smirked. "Yeah. Except Lester."

They both looked out into the yard again, their laughter barely brushing the surface of something heavier.

“I should get going,” Alli said after a moment, checking her phone. “Mical’s probably spiraling because I didn’t answer for an hour.”

Logan didn’t say anything, just nodded and walked with her back inside.

As they reached the front door, Alli paused. “Hey... thanks for inviting me. I needed a weird night like this.”

Logan looked at her, really looked. “You can come back. If you want. There’s probably more creepy drywall somewhere.”

Alli grinned, but her eyes lingered longer than her smile. “I might take you up on that. Actually, I will! This will be my submission to HGTV, maybe I can get famous for my taste in style.” Alli joked, qualifying her desire to assist her new friend.

The door closed behind her with a quiet click, and Logan stood there for a moment, the silence rushing back in like a tide.

She walked to the back again and stared out at the yard one more time, the porch light still glowing. It looked wild, but not dead. Just untamed. Like it hadn’t been told what it was supposed to be yet.

Like her.

The next day Alli came over after Mical had left and her work with school was over. They sat across from each other on the floor, a takeout container of cold noodles between them and Logan’s laptop glowing dimly.

The house still echoed with every movement—no rugs to absorb sound, no furniture to give it shape. Just the ghost of possibility floating in drywall and silence.

Alli had taken Logan's phone earlier, insisting on calling the utility companies herself after Logan fumbled through two failed attempts. "You're on hold for like twenty years," she'd said, rolling her eyes but not unkindly. "Let me."

Now she tapped Logan's laptop screen with the end of a pencil, pushing open a browser tab labeled mid-century modular sectional with chaise. "This one isn't terrible. And it's in stock."

Logan stared at it, brow furrowed. "It's so... couch-y."

Alli snorted. "What did you think you were buying? A space shuttle?"

"No," Logan said, lips twitching, "just... everything looks like it's trying so hard. You know? Like it's trying to be some aspirational lifestyle. And I'm just trying to... exist."

Alli tilted her head, considering her. "Okay, fair. So what does feel like you?"

Logan shrugged and pushed the laptop away. "I don't know. Food, plants, pens, bedsheets. Functional things. I used to like things. But now it all just feels like clutter waiting to become rusted with regret."

There was a long pause. Alli reached for a container of tea and took a

sip before saying, “You know, I feel like I’m always surrounded by stuff. Mical has junk everywhere. Half of it isn’t even hers. I think I kind of forget that having a space that’s yours means you get to say no to that.”

Logan looked at her sharply, surprised. “That’s exactly it. I don’t want to fill my house with other people’s ideas of comfort. I want... I don’t know. Stillness.” Logan woozed but caught herself before the collapse of relaxation took over her frame, threatening the release of the burden of following society. There was an endless sea of curiosity under that supposed stillness, the modern illusion of man in her era, blanching the richness of a life well lived.

Alli nodded slowly. “Stillness is underrated. Especially when everything else feels like noise.”

They sat in quiet again, the laptop humming. A fly buzzed lazily by the empty window frame.

“Okay, so here’s the deal,” Alli said finally. “We go to the store together. I help you find stuff that doesn’t scream ‘Pinterest mom with wine magnets.’ And you buy me a coffee and let me take plant cuttings from your yard once you figure out what you’re growing.”

Logan raised an eyebrow. “That’s a weirdly specific trade.”

“I’m a botanist’s daughter,” Alli said proudly. “We’re always stealing plants.”

Logan let out a quiet laugh, genuine and unexpected. “Fine. It’s a

deal.”

She looked down at the notebook beside her, where she’d scribbled names of utility providers and circled one. Her handwriting looked foreign to her lately—like someone else’s life, someone else’s home.

It did make her feel stupid, needing help like this. Like she’d wandered into adulthood too late and too alone. She could run numbers for investors and manipulate the stock market for sport, but she didn’t know how to pick a couch without losing her mind.

But Alli hadn’t laughed at her. Hadn’t patronized her or gotten that glazed look people get when they’re pretending not to be embarrassed for you.

Instead, she was here. Cracking jokes. Making tea. Acting like any of this made sense.

Logan didn’t know what that meant yet. But it meant something.

&&&

That night Logan lay on her new mattress on the floor of her new master bedroom and stared at the ceiling fan blowing cool air onto her face. The house was quiet, the neighborhood lights didn’t shine through the window just like the Realtor promised and Logan could pretend she was still miles away from civilization.

Chapter 12

In the weeks following the move, Logan slowly regained control of her surroundings, but the pain persisted and only increased in magnitude. She knew what the solution was but she couldn't, she couldn't go back to doing that ever again. She had to find another way to satisfy the deep unrelenting hunger that pulsed through her nerves and she would persist until she found a new solution.

Logan stepped outside of her house for the first time in a week, she had an endless chain of strangers coming in to set things up which caused her to hide in her room for the past three days. Like the lord she would rise again and decided an evening walk was in order, she had yet to explore the neighborhood on foot but in the cover of darkness she felt safe to do so.

She waddled along, holding her heated water bottle to her stomach to try to ease the pain. It relieved a bit of the tightness in her muscles but the pain had spread to the most distal regions of her person rendering her efforts mostly useless. She took slow steps as she inhaled deeply, determined to derive some form of enjoyment out of her former favorite pastime.

The neighborhood was a congregation of squares with smaller and larger ones folding into each other, on the map there didn't seem to be a good reason for so many lines but as Logan walked she realized the reason, retention ponds were nestled between each little neighborhood, small and big ones, all filled with water and wildlife. The one closest to Logan veered off onto a dirt path that looked underutilized compared to the sidewalk, so Logan followed it. She was quickly engulfed in a little bit of mother nature,

back into a forest and immediately her mind transported her back to the farm on the walk toward the cemetery.

It was peaceful for a moment, until Logan sat down on a metal bench facing the pond. She realized too late the bench was wet and was too out of breath to get up or care. The pain was crawling back into her head, converging at the back of her skull, making her want to jump into the pond and never return. She tried to sit up right with proper posture to loosen the muscles that were tightening in response to her hunch. It didn't help.

After a minute of feeling the pain move through her body, Logan decided it was time to go back home. She was about to stand but looked down to her left instead, something felt off and as she looked down on the ground she saw a corpse of a duck who had perished in the woods. Logan was never particularly interested in dead animals but thought it odd for the duck to die when there was plenty of food and a safe environment for it, she reached down and realized it was a fresh kill, actually not a kill at all as the animal still had enough energy to gasp and convulse. The duck looked to be pierced with a bb gun, through its neck, it would pass soon enough. Logan went to pick the duck up to remove the body less a neighborhood child find it and be scarred for life but found herself reaching toward nothing.

The body had vanished.

The ground where it had just been was dry. Not a feather, not a spot of blood. The silence around her pulsed like an airlock sealing shut. Logan blinked. Once. And it was gone.

She knew she had seen it, felt it—it wasn't a figment of her imagination playing tricks on her. Yet the evidence now pointed to the contrary, the duck was gone and looking around would be foolish, Logan already knew this.

She stood up and made the mock effort of trying to find the duck for proper burial but it was gone, just like the others.

She remembered the kittens, the goat, even the crow she'd found curled like a comma by the barn. They all vanished too. No blood. No bones. Just gone.

She could justify the occurrence when she lived alone, the bodies vanishing from the farm as quickly as they passed as some unspoken fact of nature, but this was the suburbs where supernatural things didn't happen, couldn't happen.

Maybe it wasn't the farm. Maybe it never had been. The logic she used to blame the land cracked beneath her like old tile.

There was no point in trying to deny it any longer, Logan knew the truth as sure as the pain was subsiding in the back of her skull. It wasn't the farm that had anything to do with the vanishing animal corpses, it was her influence that caused their disappearance.

"Maybe I really am throwing them in cold storage and eating them," Logan whispered to herself. She wiped her sleeve along her mouth and checked for blood. Nothing but sweat and some cheese leftover from her dinner.

On her way back home Logan had an epiphany that stopped her in her tracks. The pain was gone, completely gone. It hadn't merely subsided or dulled, it had vanished back to the deepest corners of her bones, sated for the time being. She felt light on her feet for the first time in months.

Logan went to her car and drove to the store with her newfound lightness. She approached the store from the side. She had parked away from others and hoped to be in and out as quickly as possible. She felt flexible, but anxious—a strange pairing, like having bendable bones but frayed nerves.

As she neared the entrance, a man called out to her.

“Miss, miss.”

He looked homeless—scruffy, weather-browed, eyes wild in that particular way. Probably asking for money. Logan pretended to check her phone, refusing him eye contact. She kept walking. Her breath shortened.

Inside the store, she grabbed a cart and moved with surgical intent, trying to follow the most efficient path through the aisles. But it seemed like the whole town had decided to use the grocery store as a gathering place. Children shrieked and ran ahead of carts. Couples stood in the middle of the aisles debating soup.

Logan dodged and weaved through them all, eyes fixed on the floor whenever possible. It wasn't just about avoiding people—it was about avoiding the reflection of herself in their stares.

At checkout, she placed her items on the belt and kept her head down.

“Did you find everything okay?” the cashier asked.

She grunted in reply.

“Oh, are these any good? I haven’t seen them before,” he continued, gesturing to a frozen entrée.

She mumbled, “Haven’t tried them yet.”

As she reached for the bagging area, another worker stepped in.

“Paper or plastic?” they asked, already halfway done.

“Doesn’t matter,” she replied.

She watched the point-of-sale device flicker as she scanned her credit card. The screen asked her to confirm the total. Her finger hovered a little too long over the green button.

“Do you need help to your car today?” the bagger asked, friendly, too friendly, holding both bags.

Logan shook her head quickly, avoiding contact as she grabbed them and rushed out. The air outside felt heavy, like it had been holding its breath.

The man was still there.

“Hey! Hey miss! Hey—”

She ignored him again and loaded the bags into her car as quickly as her stiff hands allowed.

Once inside, Logan didn’t bother with her seatbelt. She backed out and sped through the parking lot like something was chasing her—because something was.

Her heart raced, her hands cramped around the steering wheel, her face sore from the tension it held. What should have been a simple errand had taken all her energy and left her with none of the reward.

Her knuckles were white as she gripped the wheel, and she had to steady her hands so she wouldn’t jerk it to the side. A thought flashed through her like lightning across a dark field—just drive over the bridge, onto the interstate, keep going.

But she didn’t.

She made it home safely. Parked. Sat.

The groceries stayed in the bag on the counter. She wasn’t hungry anymore, despite the store run being solely about dinner. She sat motionless at the breakfast bar, gaze fixed on nothing.

You can’t avoid people forever, she thought. But you can’t trust yourself, either.

Not with this.

Not yet.

Maybe never.

She was too afraid of what she could do.

Too scared to tell anyone.

No one would believe her anyway.

But if she couldn't look at anyone... she could still message.

Logan pulled out her phone and typed a short message to Alli.

It would be days before she got a response.

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&&&

Logan didn't understand.

She thought Alli wanted to be her friend.

But three days passed without a response, and Logan hadn't been able to leave the house since.

She was lying on her new couch, half melted into it, her eyes unfocused and glazed over, soaking in the silence like it might offer her some kind of apology.

Then—

A sound, sharp and strange, broke the spell.

Her phone.

She hadn't heard it ring in over a year.

She startled, fumbling between cushions until her fingers hit glass and plastic. Her thumb swiped reflexively.

"Hel—hello? Hello."

She repeated herself a few times, startled by the tremble in her voice.

"Hey," Alli's voice crackled through.

Logan's heart tightened, confused. It was like a wave pulling her back to shore after she'd already accepted drowning.

"Alli?"

And then a flood—relief and fury and shame and need all tangled up. She hated how much she needed this voice, this person, this maybe-friend.

But Alli sounded breathless, already mid-explanation.

"I'm so sorry I didn't get back to you sooner. Everything's been a mess—Mical's been unraveling, Patrick's still sneaking around the lab, and honestly, it's been like this for months. Not just this week. I just... I didn't

have the capacity.”

And Logan froze.

Months.

Logan had known Alli was busy. She had said things were hard. But Logan hadn't heard it. Not really. She'd wrapped herself so tightly in her own ache that she'd forgotten how heavy the world was for anyone else.

A familiar heat rose to her cheeks. Shame, yes—but this time, it didn't curl inward.

Instead, Logan took a breath. A long one. It shuddered on the way out.

“You know what's fucked?” she said finally, voice low but steady. “I was sitting here making your silence about me. Like you were trying to avoid me, like I did something wrong. Like I was the center of the goddamn universe.”

Alli was quiet.

Logan paced. Not to burn energy—but to stay upright.

“I forgot,” she said. “I forgot how hard things have been for you. That you've been holding all this for longer than I've been paying attention. And I hate that I did that. But I'm also not gonna drown in guilt about it, because then I'd just keep making it about me again.”

Alli made a soft noise—surprise? Agreement?

“So,” Logan said, pulling a throw blanket tighter around her shoulders like it was armor, “instead of sorry, can I say... I see you now?”

Another pause.

Then: “Yeah,” Alli said, her voice softer than before. “Yeah, that’s good.”

Logan felt something shift in her. Not like a gear turning—more like a gate creaking open.

“Good,” she whispered. “Then let’s try again. From this place. The place where I see you, and you see me, and we don’t have to carry each other’s weight, but we can sit next to it. Side by side. If you want.”

After the call ended, Logan stayed where she was for a long moment, phone in hand, like it might ring again if she held it just right. But it didn't.

She exhaled through her nose and tucked it into her hoodie pocket.

Patience, she thought. Not like a punishment, but like a muscle she could stretch. If she wanted to be friends with Alli—for real, not in the hungry, half-hoping way she'd clung to before—then she had to meet her where she was. Not chase her.

The silence swelled again, but this time it felt different. Less like a void, more like a blank page.

Logan paced through the empty room, each step a tiny declaration: I'm still here. The space echoed with potential, but what she wanted to do here wasn't safe anymore—not this close to other people. Not after the last time. Not after the fallout.

She paused beneath the broken light, squinting at its jagged edge.

Whatever came next would have to be different. Not just survival. Not just ceiling-staring. Something quieter. Slower. Less visible maybe, but more real.

The ache behind her eyes was returning—slow and familiar, like rot with manners. But she didn't lie down. She didn't numb out. She stayed standing. Let it come. Let it find her changed.

Chapter 13

The frustration was beginning to bubble in her throat, straining her vocal chords, causing her to wince as tears formed in her eyes. Logan hated being vulnerable yet here she was practically begging Alli once again to come over. When did she get so needy, when did she want human contact so badly?

“I should get a cat.” Logan said to no one as she paced around her house holding her phone in front of her, waiting for Alli to message her back. It had become her daily routine, she'd wake up and text Alli who would respond sparingly throughout the day. She'd almost convince her to come over and see the new setup, the backyard furniture or the raised flower beds she was installing but Alli would bail at the last minute and apologize.

Logan tried to hold out, she really did but she couldn't stop herself from texting Alli, “Should I get a cat?” She felt so helpless, this was so unlike her and she had no idea how to stop. How do you stop wanting to see someone who seems to barely care for your company, why would you want to be around someone like that at all. Logan deleted her texts, knowing they went through anyway but looking at them, reading the messages made her feel disgusted with herself.

A few hours later she got an enthusiastic reply, “Yesss!!!” Logan's face hurt after staring at the text for a few minutes.

&&&

The next day, Logan found the humane society and walked inside. She'd scrolled through the website the night before and bookmarked a few cats she was interested in—Bowie and Butterscotch had stood out. They had a certain... elegance. The kind of cats that belonged beside a velvet armchair, not a rusted-out pickup.

“Hi, how are you today?” a bright voice called from behind. Logan turned to see a young woman decked out in no fewer than five mismatched patterns, red hair pulled up in a scrunchie that could double as a satellite dish, and blue glasses that looked like candy.

The colors nauseated Logan. She turned toward the cat enclosures and said, “Okay. I wanted to meet a couple cats I saw online. Bowie and Butterscotch?”

The woman's face dimmed just slightly. “Oh, those two were adopted earlier today. But we have so many more kitties looking for their furrever homes!” she chirped, already opening the door to the cat area. “Come on in—you can meet anyone who strikes your fancy.”

Logan stepped into the room, the air thick with dander and hopeful meows. Row after row of wire kennels lined the walls, each with its own occupant: gray tabbies, muted tortoiseshells, a few shy black cats tucked into corners. They all had the same look to them—scrappy, soft-eyed, with that lingering air of outdoor survival. She didn't say it out loud, but they reminded her too much of the stray cats that used to prowl the family farm, darting between the hay bales and chicken coops like smoke.

She wanted something different this time. Something more refined. A

creature that hadn't clawed its way through barbed wire to survive. A cat that could cross a hardwood floor without looking like it expected to be kicked.

"Are these all the cats you have today?" Logan asked, trying to keep her tone neutral, but the disappointment seeped in like cold.

"For now, yeah—but they're so sweet once you get to know them." The woman leaned down to coo at a gray tabby rubbing against the bars.

Logan nodded faintly, stepping back. "Thanks anyway," she said, already turning toward the exit. The woman opened her mouth, maybe to suggest another shelter, but Logan was already gone.

It was pointless, she thought as she slid into the driver's seat and shut the door a little too hard. She didn't need another animal to care for. She didn't even know how to care for herself most days.

And besides, if she brought home a cat like that—half-stray, farm-dirt in its blood—she was afraid she'd name it Lester by accident.

&&&

"So did you get a cat?" Alli asked as she stepped through the threshold into Logan's house. She looked around trying to see signs of a new inhabitant.

Logan shook her head, "They only had ugly ones." She handed Alli a drink and a plate with two slices of pizza on it. It was one am and Alli had

pulled a late night at the lab, ensuring Logan that Mical would be dead asleep thus it was safe for her to come visit.

Alli snorted as she accepted the provisions, "That's hilarious, were they all three limbed and one eyed or something?"

"No they were those ugly ones with the multiple colors."

"Calicos?"

Logan sighed in frustration on having to have this conversation twice in one day. She pulled out her phone and found a picture of the cat type in question and showed it to Alli. "Oh my cat looked like that! Miss Princess, she died last year." Alli did not say it in a mean or judgmental way but Logan felt like a jerk anyway.

"Anyway, I don't think I can handle a dependent right now. I still am not sure what I want to do with my life next." Logan said, trying to move the conversation forward.

"I understand. I'm not where I thought I'd be in life right now. Thought Mical would have asked to marry me already and we'd have a house, not my tiny apartment, and I seriously doubt at this pace I'll be able to graduate from college, ever." Alli said.

"Do you need help with school?"

"No, it's that classmate I told you about, but if I can finish my work and submit my assignment early I'm hoping the teacher will take my work

first and know he cheated. “

“I still feel like you should tell the teacher or an administrator.” Logan said and took Alli’s empty plate, getting them both another slice.

“If you keep feeding me I’ll get fat again!” Alli still took the extra slice. “Mical keeps saying the same thing, says she will go down there in an, “ Alli put up air quotes, “official capacity.”

Logan looked down at her plate, she only knew Mical as a podcaster, someone with no legal authority, “Umm, what does she do? Besides the podcast?”

“She’s been quiet about it, but... she works for the police station. Not as a cop, more like... background research or something. That’s how she gets all the dirt for her show. She got in trouble last year—her boss caught her leaking details. That’s why she shifted to ‘theory-based’ stuff lately.”

Logan raised an eyebrow.

Alli continued, “By the way, you shouldn’t listen to the next episode. She’s planning a whole fake reenactment of what she thinks happened at your place.”

Logan didn’t reply. Just followed the drop of cheese that hung from her crust like a comet tail and fell silently to her plate.

“I have to go,” Alli said abruptly, checking her watch. “If I don’t sleep

now, I'll be wrecked for my nine a.m. Thanks for the food."

She was out the door before Logan could respond.

The house fell back into its usual hush. Logan stared at the empty space where Alli had been, then down at the untouched second slice. So Mical did have some access, some reach. Not a cop, but close enough. The fact that she hadn't had Logan arrested must mean they still didn't have anything solid.

It must eat her up inside, Logan thought.

She decided, right then, that she would listen to the next episode. And she'd enjoy it. Not because she was innocent—but because she knew the truth: she'd never hurt or killed anyone. Well—except maybe a duck. But that was an accident. Probably. Maybe she'd be a morbid magician next. Make things disappear. Start with birds. Work her way up.

&&&

Two days later, Logan checked in with Alli, who'd come down with a cold and couldn't visit.

"Do you want me to bring you some soup?" Logan asked. She had plenty of free time, and she'd timed her call for when Mical would be at work.

"No, Mical's taking her lunch break to get me something," Alli croaked, her voice thick and raw.

Logan let her go soon after and sank into her couch, staring at the TV. It was off. In the blank black screen, her reflection stared back.

Her hair had grown longer—she could see the outline of it, expanding from her head in every direction like a soft aura. She rolled her shoulders, and the reflection moved in perfect synchrony. She lifted her arm; it followed.

She had been alone for a long time. But she'd never really felt alone. Not like this. She'd never really looked, either. Never looked deeply into her reflection, or into her life, to ask how she got here. Or why.

The reflection blinked. Logan didn't.

Her reflection was the only thing that mirrored her anymore. That was the truth. Not a feeling, not a belief—a fundamental law of her universe.

As much as she tried to build something with Alli, she would never be needed. Barely wanted. Tolerated, maybe, for her usefulness. But not chosen.

And then the pain came back—sharp, familiar, unwelcome. Like it had never left. It folded her in half for a breath, and she steadied herself.

But this time, she refused to let it win.

She had let it run her life for years. Given into it. Built a bad reputation around it like a shell she couldn't peel off. But not anymore.

Today, it would end.

Even if it killed her.

&&&

She hadn't looked at her phone in three weeks.

Every window in the house was covered with cardboard or blankets. Logan pressed herself against the walls as she moved from room to room, hugging the shadows like they offered protection. She was determined to fight the urges. They had never been this strong. She had never been this weak.

Light scorched her eyes now. Her body could barely process food or water. She had to chew crackers slowly and sip ice-cold water between bites just to trick her system into accepting the nourishment.

The couch was her next battleground. The TV remained off—its noise would've been unbearable, a thousand cymbals crashing against the pounding in her skull. She propped herself up with pillows, hoping the living room's dull grayness might offer a different shade of misery from the pitch black of her bedroom.

She hadn't checked her phone, not because she didn't care, but because she already knew: there'd be no messages. No missed calls. No evidence that anyone remembered she existed. No family. No real friends. No one to miss her if she withered away right here, bones soaking into the

fabric of the cushions.

The temptation to check, to confirm the absence of care, curled in her gut like smoke. It begged her: Prove it again. Prove how alone you are. Prove the point you've built your whole life around.

But that wasn't the only urge. There was another one—darker, more insistent. Whispering to her in blood rhythms. Telling her to leave the house. To do the thing. The one she never spoke aloud.

She'd lied to herself for years. Called it a public service. A necessity. But maybe it wasn't. Maybe it was just indulgence. Maybe the pain didn't subside after—it just... changed shape.

Her breath slowed, each one heavier than the last. It took effort. Intention. Maybe this was how it would end: not with a bang, but with a fading. A wilting, like a cut flower left too long in stale water. Maybe the universe would simply let her vanish.

But no. She knew better.

It wasn't cancer. It wasn't mystery.

She knew what it was.

Even if she never wanted to look it in the eyes.

She could feel it, always. Like it was wearing her skin from the inside.

It wasn't her.

It was—

“Knock knock! Hey Logan, are you in there?” Alli's voice rang out through the front door, too bright, too real.

It was noon. A weekday. Not a usual time for a visit.

Logan tried to sit up. Nothing moved.

More knocking. Louder now.

She forced her voice out, raspy and dry, yelling just enough to make it stop.

With every ounce of effort she could muster, she threw herself against the wall, using it to guide her trembling body toward the door. One slow slide at a time.

The door creaked open.

Alli rushed inside, her eyes squinting against the dimness. “What the hell, Logan? I've been trying to get in touch with you for weeks. I finally talked to my professor about Patrick and—what the hell happened here?”

As her vision adjusted, she took in the room, the air suddenly heavier with realization.

It wasn't just messy. It was a collapse.

Trash had overtaken the corners of the room like mold, cups of stale water scattered across every surface, and prescription bottles stood sentinel near Logan's nest of blankets and pillows. Not a mess, but a system of entropy. A chaos designed for survival.

Logan had lost a shocking amount of weight. She'd never been thin to begin with, but now she looked malnourished—because she was. Dehydrated, too. And utterly unprepared for company.

"I didn't think you'd come," Logan said, voice hoarse.

Alli didn't answer. Her jaw was tight, her fingers twitching at her sides. She hadn't meant to come here. Not really. Something had pulled her.

"I think—something's happening to me," Logan whispered, almost choking on the words.

A long, aching silence cracked between them.

Then Logan began to cry. Not polite tears. Full, snotty, chest-wracking sobs that made her curl tighter into herself like a crumpling paper doll.

Alli moved without thinking. Crouched down, hovering just close enough to feel the heat of Logan's breakdown. She reached a hand out but paused mid-air. Her vision blurred.

The room—

Shifted.

Not physically. Not obviously. But something bent.

Like gravity stuttered. Like light forgot how to land on the furniture.

Alli blinked. The edges of the room seemed to swell and contract like a breath she couldn't hear. Something—a presence, a pressure—moved in the space just behind Logan.

Her gut clenched.

Her pupils dilated.

She saw something move—not shadow but more than shadow—like the dark was watching her, pressing itself into her brain through her retinas. It slid just out of sight when she tried to focus on it.

Logan didn't notice. She just sobbed harder, her frame echoing in the space, the sound of the internal pressure within to suppress herself in Alli's presence painted the walls of the room with a sea of vibration, disrupting Alli's balance. Alli swallowed thickly. Every nerve in her body screamed wrong, but she said nothing. She didn't know what to say. What to ask. It was like trying to scream underwater.

So instead, she laid down next to Logan and touched her shoulder to shoulder, hovering next to her. “Hey,” she said, barely more than a breath.

Logan looked up, eyes raw and vulnerable. Their gazes locked. And suddenly, Alli couldn't think. Couldn't remember the strange bending of the room. Couldn't ask the questions bubbling in her throat.

She kissed her.

Soft at first. Then harder. Desperate.

Logan didn't pull away. She let it happen. Let herself dissolve into Alli's heat, into the kiss, into something that felt like safety—or maybe just distraction from the overwhelming intensity of her relief as the last vestiges of her internal compress of shame oozed out of her as Alli moves herself to on top of Logan, gyrating her hips against the helpless frail frame of her friend, trying to distract her from the pain with the movement of her hips against her intimate space.

Logan let Alli lead, too weak to call the shots. Every touch lightened her frame, her body feeling stronger, more capable, more relaxed. "Thank you..." she coos at Alli, who somehow made her way between Logans legs a long time ago. Where was Logan?

In Lester's room in her head, her place of calm, of course. Where she always was, until Alli brought her back into her body.

"Just let me take over for a while," Alli mumbled against Logan's flesh, trying to console her friend with the impassioned pressure of her tongue on Logan's intimate folded flesh.

& so she did.

& when Logan let out a sigh of relief at her orgasmic release, Alli felt a contraction in her spine so rapid and potent that it made her twist her neck, a loud pop cracking a part of her long forgotten back into place.

Chapter 14

Alli drove home in a state of shock, she did not feel any different nor did the world look different. The sky retained its endless blue, the trees were still technicolor green, the houses all blended together with acceptable shades of white, off-white, brown, and the occasional daring blue. The suburbs that Logan resided in fell way to the middle outer city with its rougher brick exterior, and patchwork asphalt, that Alli had to focus on to avoid the never ending potholes.

She parked on the side of the road near her apartment and headed inside, it was two o'clock now, Mical would not be home for another couple hours, she had time to try to prepare her apology, to make her girlfriend see she was trying to do the right thing, that Logan was actually innocent...but how would she explain the thing, the thing that if she stared off into the distance for long enough she could see out of the corner of her eyes, its amorphic inky projections waiting for its next target.

&&&

The world around her dimmed, and Alli felt her eyes change. Shadows thickened, color drained—the world took on a haze of black and gray. Something inside her shifted. She knew what she had to do: break up with Mical, stop Patrick from stealing her work, graduate clean, and carve out a life she could live without looking over her shoulder. She knew Logan would help her, even if whatever they had wasn't meant to last. That didn't matter. What mattered was the light flickering in her chest.

A subtle shimmer caught her attention—a glint on a nearby path, silver under moonlight, guiding her softly like a whisper. She followed it, instinctively. It felt right. The forest stretched before her, glowing in the moon's glow, velvet moss painting the path in deep greens that looked almost too lush to be real. The air felt charged, like it had been waiting for her.

She walked in a dreamstate, the forest strangely warm, her feet confident. The playful mood of the night blurred her usual wariness. Then—dots. Bright, strange dots burst across the face of a nearby stone, like spores or boils. They pocked the rock where Lester's grave once was, though she didn't know how she knew that.

Alli stopped. Something in her body turned. She faced the dark stretch ahead, wide-eyed.

"I should be afraid," she said aloud, soft but clear. "But I'm not. I trust Logan. I don't know why, but I do. I know she won't hurt me. She only ever hurts herself."

Her words fell into the forest like a gift.

A crack split the silence. A tree behind her, its branch suddenly snapping under the pressure of stillness. No wind, no movement, just that sharp rupture, and the silent pull of something unsaid. Alli moved without hesitation, her feet taking her down the path of most comfort—the one lit by nothing but the moon and a feeling.

The forest opened all at once. A field spread out in front of her,

flattened for construction, heavy equipment standing idle like beasts at rest, waiting for orders to destroy. Her eyes dropped to her feet. A branch. A firepit. A rusted chair. Headstones, lined and still. Logan's old hangout spot—untouched, waiting under the full moon like a scene preserved in wax.

Alli knelt, drawn in. The metal chest was still there.

Inside: the red radio. Beer cans. Notebooks. Pens. Snacks. Oh—and weed. Sweet. She pocketed that first, along with the lighter, her fingers moving with the ease of habit. But it wasn't the thrill of scavenging—something about the arrangement of these objects told a story.

Logan's story.

There were no knives. No guns. No signs of violence. No “evidence” of anything, really. Just signs of a life lived quietly, intentionally, alone. A soul in retreat, not hiding—just tired. And human.

Alli pulled out the notebooks, flipping through them for clues, some glimpse into Logan's interior world. They were all blank.

Totally, painfully blank.

She ran her fingers over the empty pages, the silence roaring around her. There was something intimate about it. Something sacred. The absence of writing felt like a confession. Like Logan didn't need to write it down—because maybe she was trying to forget. Or maybe she knew no

one would ever understand it anyway.

Alli flipped through the pages again, faster now, almost desperate. As if somewhere inside there had to be a scribble, a map, a piece of Logan's soul explaining why this all felt so necessary. Why this pull to her, to this place, was growing louder than the messy ties to Mical.

But there was nothing.

Just blankness. Just absence.

Her head buzzed.

And yet—it still felt right.

It felt holy. Heavy. Alive.

It felt necessary.

Alli stuffed the notebooks into her bag, the weight of them heavy with a new understanding she couldn't name yet. She stood up, disoriented, the branches of the trees seeming to move with her, bending to accommodate her presence as though the forest itself was reacting to her disquiet.

She heard it then—the faintest of sounds. A rustling behind her, too subtle to be a human, but too deliberate to be the wind. Something—or someone—was watching. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up. Alli turned sharply, but there was nothing. Only the emptiness of the field and the broken trees, gnarled and twisted like remnants of an old nightmare.

She shouldn't be here.

She should be home with Mical. Her stomach churned at the thought—a sick, guilty pang. Mical, who had filled her life with tension and demands. Mical, who had never let her breathe, who always expected her to hold her emotions in a cage of rage and helplessness. Mical, who had made Alli feel so... small. So dependent.

But Logan? Logan was different. Her presence didn't press in on Alli, didn't make her feel like she was suffocating under the weight of constant emotional labor. There was a calmness in Logan's support, something steady but distant. Something that didn't demand, but gave—a hand offered without question.

But did she trust Logan?

The question settled heavily in Alli's chest as she turned to face the firepit again. The flames from the scattered remnants of past nights danced in her memory. The stillness of the night didn't seem right. It was as though the universe was holding its breath, waiting for her to make some kind of declaration, some definitive choice.

And yet, there she was—floating in a fog of uncertainty, tethered to a world of silent gestures and unspoken words. She couldn't reconcile her loyalty to Mical, her guilt, and this undeniable pull toward Logan—the stillness that now filled her veins like a quiet promise, something buried deep beneath the surface of her mind.

The wind picked up just a little, carrying a chill with it, as if the earth itself was trying to shake her from this dreamlike trance. Alli shook her head, stepping back from the firepit, wiping her hands on her jeans as though trying to clear the heat from her skin. The items in her bag felt heavier now, as though they were not just physical objects, but burdens she was being forced to carry. She glanced up, hearing a distant noise in the night—faintly familiar, but far too distant for comfort.

Suddenly, she felt the urge to leave. To walk away from the open space and back into the forest, where the weight of the choices might sit lighter—where the darkness felt protective rather than suffocating.

But something stopped her.

It was the faintest echo of a whisper in her mind—something she hadn't fully recognized until now. The sensation of trust she felt toward Logan had a different ring to it now. It wasn't blind faith. It wasn't something easily explained. It was an internal knowing, a resonance with something buried deep inside her that she hadn't let herself acknowledge before.

Logan wasn't offering her answers. She wasn't offering promises. But somehow, that was exactly what Alli needed.

She turned on her heel and headed back toward the forest path, her mind humming with the weight of unspoken decisions. This wasn't a clean break, and she knew that. But it didn't need to be.

Not yet.

The forest swallowed her again, the flickering of the moonlight above her, the rustling of unseen branches in the distance, and all the while, the weight of her thoughts grew heavier, just enough to feel like a gentle shift toward something bigger, something beyond the narrow, painful walls of her current reality.

As she walked, she felt something strange stir inside her chest, a flicker of hope, wrapped in the quiet uncertainty of what was to come.

Chapter 15

Alli dimmed the lights at 5:45 p.m. She turned off the music and the TV, set the A/C to low, and drew the curtains in. If Mical came home to loud noises and bright lights, she would chastise Alli to no end.

“I’ve had to deal with lights and noise all day at work so we can survive,” she would say, always reminding Alli who brought home the bacon.

Alli sat on the couch, waiting for Mical’s return. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary after her afternoon nap, but she had been restless—thinking about Logan, about Patrick, and how many more secrets she was willing to keep from Mical.

She already knew the first thing Mical would ask when she walked in the door: what her professor said about Patrick. Mical had remained firm in her belief that Patrick should be shown the “real” justice system, but Alli disagreed. Unfortunately, the professor had simply told her that if she submitted her work first, she’d be in the clear—but beyond that, there was little she could do, given Patrick’s family’s ties to the university.

It would have been easier if Alli had actually been staying late every night working in the lab. But she wasn’t. She was going over to Logan’s, or crying in her car alone in the parking lot before slowly making her way home to lie beside Mical—who wouldn’t acknowledge her until morning, if at all.

Their relationship had always been tumultuous, but Alli had no real

grounds to leave. Mical paid the bills while she finished her post-grad degree, and Alli barely made enough to cover her phone plan and car insurance.

At 5:50, Mical entered the apartment loudly, sighing with theatrical purpose so Alli could hear just how frustrated she was. She slammed the door, gave Alli a perfunctory kiss on the cheek, then went straight to the freezer for the bottle of rum. When she poured herself a full glass—no ice, no mixer—and threw herself onto the couch, Alli knew she was in for a long night.

“What did your professor say?” Mical asked, just as expected.

Alli opened her mouth, hesitating. If she told the full truth, she’d never hear the end of it—how unjust it all was, how unfair. “She’s on my side,” Alli said, carefully. “She just wants me to submit my work as soon as possible so she can show the faculty before Patrick turns in his version. Once he does, he should be expelled.”

It was a lie. But a convenient one.

Satisfied, Mical launched into her rant about work. Alli sat in silence, watching her. She looked no worse for wear than usual—her long black hair brushed straight and pulled back like always, her skin pale from avoiding sunlight even on her days off. In all the years Alli had known her, her weight and physique had stayed the same.

But now, something felt different. Logan looked like she was actually sick. It affected her presence, her posture, her spirit. Mical, meanwhile,

complained like every day was a crisis, yet somehow looked untouched by it all—unchanged, unbothered.

“...then he says, Do you know who I am?” Mical laughed, snapping Alli back into the room.

She had been so caught up in watching Mical that she hadn’t been listening. When Mical glared at her for not laughing, Alli offered a weak smile.

“You’ve been weird lately,” Mical repeated, her voice sharper now, staring at Alli over the rim of her glass.

“I guess I’m just... tired,” Alli said softly.

She wasn’t lying. But it wasn’t sleep she needed—it was release. Escape. Resolution.

Mical leaned back, grumbling as she kicked off her shoes and took another gulp. “It’s always something with you lately.”

Alli didn’t respond.

Instead, she watched Mical’s legs stretch out on the couch, watched the rise and fall of her chest under the worn-out tank top. There had once been something magnetic in those lines.

Now, they just looked like faded memories, bleached by the daily ritual of the rising sun on a billboard, the call to attention to consume lessening in urgency with each daily commute up the hallway of ritual

affairs. So Alli reached over and touched her thigh lightly.

Mical glanced over, skeptical. “What are you doing?” she asked, voice flat but not yet closed.

Alli leaned in. “Just... trying,” she whispered, squeezing the flesh gently.

Mical smirked. “Trying what?”

“You know what.”

Mical hesitated. Then shrugged. “Fine. Bedroom, or here?”

“Here.” Alli whispered, taking action to her knees in an instant, read to busy her with anything other than hearing Mical drone on. Maybe the release of her lover would reignite the passion for their bond, for their future. The life Alli wanted to live. A family, a house, a career, the usual, nothing special. Normal. Her feminine submission to Mical's masculine aggression. The way the patriarchy likes it. Alli was happy to fall in line in her own way, she justified to herself, unbuttoning Mical's pants.

She told herself this wasn't submission—it was compromise. A choice. An offering. She could justify it all. Even as she unbuttoned Mical's pants.

“You know what I like,” Mical said, already pulling her shirt up over her head.

“I know,” Alli answered. But the moment her lips touched skin, she felt it. That split-second of dissociation. Not from trauma—but from performance. As if she’d walked onstage for a role she didn’t audition for and forgot the lines halfway through.

Mical groaned and tilted her hips up. “Don’t make me guide you.” That voice. That tone. Alli used to think it was sexy. Used to get off on being told what to do. But now it sounded... tired. Recycled. Something Mical said because she thought she had to. Because that’s what this was now: a loop. A power play with no tension, no spontaneity. Just mechanical roles passed down like hand-me-downs from a culture neither of them wrote but both had memorized by heart.

Mical was rougher than usual. Not cruel—but insistent. Like she had something to prove. And Alli? She let her. She played along, even as her body began to tense instead of melt. Even as her mind pulled away inch by inch, like fog retreating from a rising sun.

She sat up slowly, wiped her mouth, and looked at Mical with eyes that no longer held the script. “I’m not into it tonight,” she said.

Mical scoffed, grabbing her shirt. “Seriously? What the fuck was that?”

But Alli didn’t answer. She wasn’t even in the room anymore. She was in a future that no longer had a place for this version of love. And this version of herself?

She’d already begun to walk out of it.

&&&

It was Saturday morning, which meant no work for Alli, so she took her time waking up. She reached for her glasses, fumbling in the dimness, still half-asleep. But when she finally slipped them on, she realized it wasn't the early hour keeping things dark—the entire apartment had turned pitch black. That same inky void she'd seen in Logan's house.

She blinked. Once. Twice. The darkness didn't budge.

Alli turned toward Mical—and froze.

A demon was leaning in, whispering into Mical's ear. Mical lay motionless, oblivious to the danger curled up beside her.

Alli shoved off the bed, heart pounding, forcing her body through the heavy dark toward the far wall of their tiny efficiency. The apartment wasn't big, but the deeper she moved into the space, the more the demon resisted—its presence dragging like a shadow behind her until, without warning, it turned toward her and vanished.

Not today, Satan, she thought, yanking on her clothes. She didn't waste time explaining. She just left.

It was Saturday. No professors would be on campus to help with her project, but she had a key to the lab. No one could stop her from getting in and getting her head back in the game. She needed to focus. She needed to finish her sequencing and upload it to the BLAST site. If she could do

that today, she could finalize the project and turn it in by Monday—maybe even beat Patrick by a few days.

She made it to campus in one piece and went straight for the lab. Unlocking the door, she flipped on the lights and headed for the freezer where her samples were stored.

But someone was already there.

Patrick Frock.

Headphones on. Bag of popcorn in hand. Standing in front of the freezer like he owned the place.

Alli's stomach sank. So this was the itch she'd felt, the pull to come in early. Not demons. Just intuition. Her brain, screaming at her to get here before he stole more of her work.

He hadn't noticed her yet—too busy rifling through the fridge, checking out everyone's samples. It wasn't just hers he was stealing from.

Alli held back. She wasn't ready to speak. Not yet. She wanted him to feel her presence before he saw her. She wanted to rattle him.

Then the lab door slammed behind her.

"Alli, what the hell? Why'd you run out like that?" Mical's voice rang out. She'd followed her.

Patrick turned, headphones still half-on, popcorn in hand. When he saw the two women, he didn't flinch. He just smiled, smug, unfazed.

"Oh," Mical said, catching Alli's glare and putting it together. "Are you the asshole who's been stealing from my girlfriend?"

Patrick shrugged and popped another kernel into his mouth. "Not sure what you mean."

He placed a few vials on the counter—clearly someone else's work.

"These are Glenda's," he said, mouth full. "She always misspells 'protein.'"

Mical stepped in front of Alli, hand discreetly sliding over the gun holster beneath her shirt.

"And where are your samples?" she asked, cool and hard.

Alli sighed. Mical was at least six inches shorter, barely a threat physically—except for that pistol she always carried. She didn't need to escalate things. Patrick was a dick, not a danger.

Still, Alli didn't stop her. Not yet.

This wasn't just about science anymore.

It was about power. And who still had it.

Patrick shook Glenda's samples in front of Mical's face like a trophy, then turned back to his business.

"Not so fast," Mical snapped, stepping in front of him.

She was trying to be intimidating, but it didn't work.

"Sorry, Receptionist McMaster," Patrick sneered. "Is there some reason you think you have authority here? Or are you just playing cop again?"

He knew exactly how to hit where it hurt. Mical's spine stiffened, but she didn't move. Her silence simmered.

Alli watched the exchange, caught in the middle. Mical was wound up tight—way too tight—and Alli knew what could happen if she didn't defuse things soon. But if she stepped in now, would it only make things worse?

"Mical, stop," she said carefully. "Let him do what he wants. I still have work to do too."

"Oh, good luck with that!" Patrick shouted from across the lab, smug as ever.

Alli rolled her eyes and opened the freezer. Her sample box was empty.

Patrick had taken the bait—decoy samples. Either he'd tossed them

or was planning to use them. Alli wasn't worried. Her real work was split between other boxes in the main freezer and a stash in the back-room storage unit.

"Oh no," she said flatly. "Whatever will I do."

Mical didn't catch the sarcasm.

Before Alli could stop her, she charged at Patrick again.

"Mical, no!" Alli shouted.

"You're a real piece of shit, you know that?" Mical growled, getting right up in Patrick's face. She looked like a tiny puppy trying to bite a tank. Inches from him now, she glared, fists trembling. It was like she was trying to summon vengeance through sheer willpower.

Nothing happened.

Alli crept closer, hoping to grab her before things escalated again.

Then the room went dark.

Alli gasped, but the others didn't seem to notice. They kept bickering as if the lights were still on.

"You'll never become anyone by stealing!" Mical shouted. "Using your parents' money—"

Her voice faded into a strange echo, distorted.

“...if only I could, I could...”

Alli whimpered.

The darkness grew thicker, heavier, pressing on her chest like smoke. And then the demon appeared—right where Mical had been. Grinning. Watching.

Alli stumbled back, heart pounding.

And just as quickly as it came, the demon vanished.

The lights snapped back on.

And Mical was screaming.

Chapter 16

They drove home in silence, the blinding midday sun casting everything into sharp, punishing light. Neither reached for the sunshade—both too tense, too afraid that any sudden movement might jolt the other, might crack the fragile quiet holding them together. The car followed the familiar path like it knew the way better than they did, like some divine machinery was ushering them to safety after coming face to face with hell itself. Alli let herself believe that—just for a moment—that the car was sentient, that God had possessed it to rescue her from the devil she now carried inside.

They entered the apartment wordlessly. Mical shut the door, locked it, then methodically closed every blind. She turned on the A/C to fill the space with white noise, a dull roar to silence the day.

“Are there cameras at school?” Mical asked, voice flat but urgent.

“What?” Alli blinked, confused. Her mind was still tangled in the sensory sludge of everything they’d just survived.

“Cameras, idiot. Are there any cameras that would show us at school today?” Mical hissed, still keeping her voice low even as frustration made her vibrate with it.

“In the hallways, but not in the lab, I don’t think—”

“You don’t think,” Mical snapped, nails now digging crescents into her arms, “You never think. Think about it!”

Alli flinched but bit her tongue. She saw the hallway cameras in her memory, uncertain if they had mics that might've caught Mical's scream. She wanted to call her out for that, for screaming loud enough to raise the dead—but what was the point? Alli swallowed her pettiness, reminded herself she no longer had any ground to stand on.

“Okay, okay—no!” Alli finally remembered. “No cameras in the lab. Professors use it for research and didn’t want anything recorded—said it felt invasive. I remember my professor ranting about it.”

Mical's shoulders dropped just slightly. “So the hallway cameras will show us entering and leaving, but not him...” She let the silence finish her thought. Patrick wasn’t leaving that lab.

Then, her gaze shifted. Piercing. “You wanna tell me where you got that new superpower from?”

So Alli confessed.

To Logan. To the hookup. To wanting—needing—to make her own decisions, to feel her own feelings. Her words fell out hot and breathless, tears streaking down her cheeks, and Mical never once looked at her.

“She’s not that bad,” Alli said in a small voice. “Just... a sad person infected with whatever that thing was.”

“What thing?” Mical’s tone had gone sharp and strange, her face red with fury.

“The monster. The demon that ate Patrick.” Alli motioned with her hands like it should be obvious. “It wasn’t me, it was that.”

Mical stared at her in disbelief, then let out a bitter laugh. “I didn’t see a demon. I saw your eyes go black. I saw you look at Patrick and he dissolved. It looked like you ate him.”

“No, it was the thing that’s been haunting the slaughterhouse. The killings you thought Logan did—”

“Logan Long is a serial killer,” Mical snapped. “You’re just a killer. For now.”

She downed the rest of her third glass of rum and staggered slightly as she reached for the bottle again, only to find it empty. She made a show of it—slamming the glass down, sighing, dragging her hand over her mouth. She turned to Alli like she was considering her options, putting on a performance for the ghosts in the room.

Then, softly, almost sweetly: “I think there’s a way you can redeem yourself though, honey. Just let me take care of you like always.”

Alli stiffened. That phrase used to feel like a balm—now it landed like a trap. Her instincts screamed at her to run, to abandon Mical before she could be dragged any deeper. But now Mical knew. About Logan. About Lester. About her. The version of herself she couldn’t unsee. The one with black eyes and hunger in her bones.

She wanted to leave, but part of her knew—Mical wouldn't let her go. Not after this. And worse—some small, scared part of her didn't want to leave either. Not with everything falling apart. Not when control felt impossible.

From the corners of her vision, Alli saw tendrils of black smoke curling inward, creeping like the monster was trying to reach Mical again. Her breath caught. She squeezed her eyes shut and fled to the bathroom, needing the smallness of solitude, the cold porcelain of the sink beneath her hands.

Could she do this? Would she do this? Did she even have a choice anymore?

She composed herself the best she could. When she stepped back out, the room was dim, quiet, and expectant. Mical stood like a priest at the altar.

"All right," Alli said, her voice quiet but steady. "What do I need to do?"

Patrick was gone. The project was done. Her mind buzzed with terror. And in that moment, she didn't want to be responsible for any of it. She didn't want to think. Didn't want to feel. She wanted to be told what to do. So she let go.

She handed the reins to the only person on this planet who had ever tried to protect her, however twisted that protection had become.

She gave herself to Mical.

&&&

Mical had comforted Alli in a way she hadn't in years. Then, without ceremony, she pulled out a list of addresses and names. Alli should've been shocked—but she wasn't. Not really.

Mical had always considered herself an investigator, even though she'd failed the entrance exam multiple times and wasn't allowed anywhere near the force. Still, proximity had its privileges—her foster father, George Barnes, just happened to be the chief of police. He had overlooked Mical's misuse of department resources for years. But once her podcast gained a large enough following, the pressure mounted. He had to curb her access before it led to departmental scrutiny. So Mical adapted—kept a physical list of perceived enemies instead—and doubled down on what her fans loved: the embellished stories about missing persons.

The fabricated tales caught fire. Her audience grew. Logan had become an unwitting scapegoat—a living landmark in the fiction—driving curious listeners to her food truck. The traffic turned into business, but also exposure. Now that chapter was over. The listeners wanted something new. A fresh sight. A fresh body. They assumed Logan and Mical were collaborating. The hunger for novelty was insatiable. So Mical picked a new location, a new villain—and fed the masses. Quite literally.

Alli found herself beside the truck again, waiting for the next name on the list. It had been a week since the Patrick incident. Mical had sent her

to two different locations since then, both times with the same instructions: consume someone who had abdicated justice. The crimes were always vague to Alli. She was never given much context, only that these were men who had twisted the broken justice system to their own benefit. It wasn't her responsibility to question—just to act.

Each time it happened, it never felt like a decision. It was like a switch. Mical would kiss her goodbye, whisper something cryptic into her ear that Alli couldn't quite understand, and then she'd go. Just like with Patrick, the world would go dark. The figure would emerge from within her, mouth opening wider than should be possible, and then the world would snap back into place—reset. Finished.

It made her sick. All the time. But maybe that was the guilt. Now she fully understood what Logan had endured—why she always looked haunted. She had tried to isolate herself, pull away from society, just to keep the monster contained. Alli hated her for keeping the truth hidden, but she also admired her restraint. Maybe Logan had tried to protect her after all. Maybe this was love in its ugliest form.

She wasn't sure they were still friends now. She wasn't sure of anything. But she was sure Logan had tried to push her away to spare her this fate. Alli had walked toward it anyway.

Tonight's mark approached the food truck with a small child in tow. Mical had already told her—he's not her father. CPS would come after. The child would not be returned to either parent. That was all Alli knew. No details, no dossier. Just enough not to hesitate.

She held out the blue glittery bear that Mical had given her. A distraction for the child.

“Hey, I found this bear. Is it yours?”

“Umm... no,” the little girl said, stepping forward cautiously. “But I can watch it for you.”

Alli smiled and stepped back, pretending to trip and fall just out of sight of the other patrons. The girl gasped, tugging at her arm with all thirty pounds of earnest effort.

“You can have it,” Alli said, handing her the bear. Just like that, the man followed into their corner. Out of view. Isolated. Contained.

“Angel, don’t talk to strangers. What have I told you?” His deep voice vibrated through the narrow alley between trucks. Alli turned to look at him—really look. Something inside her recoiled. He radiated something rotten.

The world blackened.

She snatched the bear from the child, desperate to keep her attention from what came next.

“No! It’s mine now!” the girl screamed, pulling the toy back. And by the time her tiny hands closed around it, the man was gone. The air was still. Alli’s vision returned.

“Hey. It’s okay,” she whispered. “You’re safe now.”

The girl looked toward where the man had stood, then toward the crowd. No scream, no panic. Just quiet acceptance. She walked back to Alli and waited, hand outstretched. Alli called CPS, just like Mical had instructed. She stayed there, holding the girl’s hand until they arrived.

Strangely, this time, Alli didn’t feel like a monster. She felt like she had done a public service. Removed a predator. Protected someone. Maybe Mical was onto something.

Maybe this was her new path. Maybe she’d get discovered. Paid. Maybe someone would option her life into a movie—one woman’s mission to eat the physical manifestations of hate and evil before they could consume the world.

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Mical had comforted Alli in a way she hadn’t in years. Then she pulled out a list—names and addresses—something that should’ve shocked Alli. But it didn’t. Not really.

Mical always saw herself as an investigator, even though she’d failed the academy entrance exams multiple times and wasn’t allowed on the force. Still, she hovered close, sanctioned in shadow by her foster father, Chief George Barnes. He’d turned a blind eye to her misuse of police resources for a long time. But as Mical’s podcast swelled in popularity, the pressure to make her stop abusing the system grew too loud to ignore. He clipped her wings—publicly, at least. But Mical adapted.

Now she kept a physical list of her “enemies.” On the podcast, she embellished missing persons cases, reshaping the narrative, building tension, inciting fear. Somehow, the stories—fictional as they were—drew in more listeners than ever. Logan became the scapegoat. The attention drove business her way at first, but that era had passed. Audiences needed new monsters to hunt, new crime scenes to pose in front of. They believed there was a partnership between Mical and Logan. Tourism and true crime had fused into one greedy, bloodthirsty pilgrimage.

So Mical picked a new destination. And led them straight to slaughter.

Alli waited by the food truck, watching for tonight’s target. It had been a week of killing. Two men gone already, each presented to her by Mical, each guilty, according to her. Crimes unclear. Context murky. Alli never got the full file—just enough to believe she was doing justice. They were men outside the system, using it to hurt women and children. That’s what Mical told her.

It never felt like a choice, what happened next. Mical would kiss her goodbye, whisper something indecipherable into her ear. Then Alli would wander toward the mark, and just like Patrick... darkness. The world would snap off like a light switch. She’d return to awareness moments later, the figure gone, a shadow left behind, and a slick nausea under her skin.

She hated it. But she understood now why Logan always looked so sick. Containing the thing was a full-time job. Alli used to think she was just being dramatic. Withdrawn. But now... now she admired Logan. Pitied her, even. She tried to spare Alli from this. Tried to protect her.

Too late now.

Tonight's mark approached the truck with a little girl by his side—not his child, Mical had said. CPS would need to be called after. The girl wouldn't be returned to her parents, but that was all Alli was told.

She held out the glittery blue bear Mical had given her to distract the child.

“Hey, I found this. Is it yours?”

“Umm... no.” The girl stepped closer. “But I can watch it for you.”

Alli stumbled back, pretending to trip. She landed out of view from the other customers. The girl gasped, reaching toward her. Thirty pounds of pure empathy tugging uselessly on Alli's arm.

“You can have it,” Alli said with a tired smile, handing her the bear.

Then the man came around the corner.

“Angel, don't talk to strangers. What have I told you?” His voice cracked through the moment—sharp, possessive.

Alli met his eyes. Something twisted inside her—revulsion. Then: black.

She grabbed the bear back from the girl, tried to distract her.

“No, it’s mine now!” the girl screamed, tugging it back.

By the time she had it in her arms again, he was gone.

Alli blinked. The world returned.

“It’s okay,” she whispered, kneeling to the girl. “You’re safe now.”

The girl didn’t cry. Didn’t even search the courtyard for him. Just stood there, small and still. She took Alli’s hand without question. Alli called CPS and waited, holding her until they arrived.

She didn’t feel like a monster this time.

Maybe Mical was right. Maybe this was a public service. Maybe there was a market for this. A future. A movie deal.

Maybe she’d get paid to eat the physical manifestations of hate.

But then came the others.

The next few made her feel worse than ever. They didn’t look like monsters. They looked like survivors—battered, cast off, chewed up by life. Mical insisted their crimes justified it, but Alli couldn’t bring herself to ask for details.

She was afraid of the answer.

Mical had changed, too. Softer. More affectionate. Clingy, almost. Where once there had been space and dry banter, there was now touch. So much touch. Kisses. Sex. Long stares. Too long. Too much.

Was it love? Or was it grooming? A manipulation tactic to secure Alli's silence?

It was always men, she noticed. Always ones accused of hurting women or children. Alli knew Mical had unspoken trauma—dark corners from childhood she never let anyone into. Her brother Mat had handled it differently. Escaped into drugs. Blamed Mical. Got clean. Then disappeared.

He visited the slaughterhouse once, then was gone forever. Mical had always hated Logan for that. For letting him in.

But now that Alli had seen the monster firsthand, she wondered... what if Mat wasn't innocent?

Three weeks had passed since she'd seen Logan. She hoped she was recovering. Healing. Free.

But Alli wasn't. Not really. The visions, the guilt—they were eating her alive. And Mical monitored her constantly. Forced her to turn on phone tracking, check in after every disappearance.

"Can I take a day off?" Alli asked one afternoon. Mical was scribbling down another name.

She felt weak. Fractured. Not sure who she was anymore.

Mical didn't even look up.

“And let this man beat his wife for another day? Why would you be so cruel when you could stop it, Alli?”

She handed her the address.

Alli took it. Silently.

She knew there was evil in the world. But why this kind of evil? Why not corporate corruption? Political crimes? The slow bleed of systems built to destroy?

Why these men? Why these choices?

No one had given her answers. Only targets.

But tonight... she'd decide. After this one, she would confront Mical. Set her own terms. Draw her own lines. If she was going to be a monster, she'd be one on her terms. Her powers. Her rules.

Chapter 17

She didn't have the courage to confront Mical about it. She chickened out at the last minute when Mical showed her more affection — a weakness rarely exploited, until now. Alli told herself she'd try again after tonight. Every day she let this continue felt like an injustice.

She walked along the street, two blocks adjacent to downtown — the place where the gentrification ended and the real city began. She reread the note Mical had given her:

“Frank Steve. Industrial Park.”

No address. Just a vague location, like always. Somehow Mical knew where they worked, lived, hung out. Alli was beginning to wonder if she was wrong about Mical sleeping through the night while she was out visiting Logan. Maybe Mical knew, the same way she always knew where the targets would be.

They were victims too.

Alli finally let herself say it.

She was causing harm — even if the monster inside her couldn't be fully controlled, she could still make choices. Like Logan did. She could resist. She didn't have the right to unleash this thing on anyone, no matter how guilty they were of something else. The thought made her sick. She didn't want to do this anymore.

She found her target with new resolve: don't feed it. Talk to him. Convince him to leave. Tell Mical he was dead. Just one more secret in an ever-growing pile.

As she approached, she turned her head away — the black tendrils already clouding her vision. The thing had grown greedy, overfed and impatient, barely giving her warning now. It felt... sentient. Like it knew the targets better than she did. What had Mical whispered in her ear before? Maybe it was listening too. Maybe they all were.

Alli was beginning to feel like a helpless vector — a carrier for terror, driven by a corrupted idea of justice.

“Hey, baby girl,” Frank Steve called out, as she approached with her head turned.

“Hey, Frank,” she replied, too casual for someone unraveling inside.

He blinked, exhaling blunt smoke in surprise.

“How you know my name? Do I know you?”

“No. And if you’ve got any sense, you’ll leave town. For good. Forever.” She forced every ounce of threat into her voice.

He scoffed, shrugging. “Ain’t nobody put a hit out on me yet.”

Alli let the silence hold. Her hand stayed in her pocket. She stared past him, into the cracked pavement of the rundown parking lot he’d been camping in.

“Ohhh, you do got a hit on me.” He laughed. “You college kids’ll do anything for money these days, huh?”

He didn’t seem surprised. Like his death was inevitable.

“Go ahead then. Do it.”

Alli froze. He wanted to die? That... she hadn't expected.

“Do it!” he shouted, stepping forward from the fence. “I got nothing to live for. My girl left, took the kids, dragged me through court like I'm some criminal. Got hurt on the job — lost that too. Boss don't care. I ain't got no money. No house. Nobody. You'd be doing me a favor. Help a brother out.”

“I... I think you got the wrong idea,” Alli stammered, backing away. Her vision blurred again, overtaken by black static. The monster was starving, surging forward. She couldn't hear Frank anymore.

“Oh, now you chicken?” he barked behind her.

She didn't look back. Her walk became a jog, then a full escape back toward downtown — back to the safety of strangers. When the tendrils receded, they left a dull ache behind her eyes.

Later that night, Alli found Mical sprawled on the couch, feet on the coffee table, drink in hand, eyes sharp.

“You didn't do it, did you?” Mical asked the moment she walked in.

“He... he wanted it,” Alli replied.

“What? To die?” Mical narrowed her eyes.

“Yeah. So I figured... maybe a fate worse than death would be better. Let him live with his guilt.”

“They don’t feel guilt, Alli! God, you are so innocent sometimes.” Mical slurred, the liquor loosening her tongue. “He was playing you. You think any of them feel remorse? They’re all dirty criminals!”

Alli thought back. He did seem... regretful. Arrogant too. But isn’t that most people?

“And why do I get to be executioner?” she asked. “Who gave me that right?”

“Why are these assholes walking free because of technicalities and backdoor deals?” Mical snapped back.

“And how do you know so much about them?”

Alli’s voice was low, but the question cut clean.

She remembered how George Barnes, Mical’s adoptive father and the chief of police, had let her off easy once — on the condition she never misused police resources again. But Mical knew so much. Things no ordinary person could dig up alone.

Mical laughed and hiccuped. “Please. These idiots post their whole lives online. You think I’m dumb enough to risk George’s wrath again?” She pointed her drink at Alli. “I’m not the bad guy here.”

Maybe. Alli had to admit a lot of them did overshare on social. But still... something didn’t feel right.

She let it drop. Mical was drunk enough that she probably wouldn't remember this conversation anyway.

This happened often. Too often. Alli had learned exactly how much truth she could slip through the cracks when Mical was like this.

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Several days later, after yet another failed attempt at killing a man, Alli found herself facing the full wrath of her partner's rage. She just couldn't do it anymore—give into the monster and let it kill innocent people. Yes, they were innocent. Alli had decided that. Whether the court system found them to be or they hadn't even been tried yet, she had to consider them so. She didn't have the right to play executioner to Mical's judge and jury. It was wrong. And while there was nothing she could do to undo the crimes she had already committed, maybe—just maybe—she could stop herself. And stop Mical.

Mical was laying it on thick, but Alli had learned to gloss over the verbal abuse years ago. It no longer kept her up at night or tormented her throughout the week.

"We do not have the right to do this!" Alli finally snapped, cutting through Mical's rant.

"Yes I do!" Mical shouted back, righteous anger burning behind her words. She really believed she could compel Alli to kill these men just because she decided they deserved to die.

“No. You really do not,” a calm male voice said.

Alli turned, confused. A man stood in the doorway of their apartment—she must have forgotten to lock it when she came home. But it wasn't a neighbor.

It was Mat—Mical's missing brother.

Alli had only met him a few times, always in passing, always busy with school. He never stayed long once Mical moved out of their shared apartment and into hers. But here he was. Alive. And surprisingly well-groomed for a presumed-dead drug addict, standing tall and radiating an anger that matched his sister's.

Alli glanced at him, feeling the rage rolling off him like heat waves—just like Mical when she got angry.

Then she looked past him and saw Logan standing in the hallway behind him. Logan gave her a small wave. Alli exhaled. Relief. She hadn't realized how much she needed to see her. Finally, she could ask her questions—about the monster, about everything. She didn't harbor anger toward Logan anymore. Not after enduring the same torture. It was awful. And while Alli would love to be rid of it, to pass it off to someone else, she couldn't—not now. And especially not to Mical.

Mat stepped further into the apartment, positioning himself between Alli and Mical. It was clear he was here to confront his sister. But how did he know what they had been doing?

“You’ve always been a manipulative egomaniac, Mical,” he said coldly, locking eyes with her. “I’m not going to let you abuse anyone else. You think you’re a god—but you’re just a human like the rest of us. No matter what our elders used to tell you. It was all lies.”

All lies. The words struck Alli. What lies? She didn’t know much about their upbringing—only that Mical had been placed into foster care and adopted, while Mat was too old and thrust out into the world unprepared. And it had taken its toll.

Alli slowly began backing into the hallway as Mat and Mical launched into a full-blown screaming match. Logan touched her gently on the elbow and guided her toward the exit.

“Did you guys plan this?” Alli asked, glancing sideways at Logan, who looked just as shocked.

“No, I met him in the hallway. I came to say sorry to you... I, uh, kind of stalked you online to find your address. Sorry.” Logan pushed open the front door and led them outside. “I gave him mine. He’ll meet us there later.”

And so, Alli found herself a passenger in Logan’s car, quiet the entire way home. She wanted to address the monster, wanted to ask a million questions, wanted to tell Logan how strong she must be to contain such a beast—but the calm of the drive, the silence, the lightness in the air... she just wanted to savor it a little longer.

Logan didn’t disturb her. She turned the radio low and told Alli there

was a seat warmer, if she wanted it.

Alli turned it on, even though it was warm outside. The heat against her back was soothing. By the time they arrived, she had nearly drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 18

The car ride finally ended, and Alli mustered up the energy to open the car door, letting the sounds and sights of the suburbs wash over her. It was nighttime, and the street was awash in a yellow glow from the streetlights. It didn't look eerie or scary, though. There was something calming about the gentle yellow haze covering the gray sidewalks, something comforting, like a scene out of her childhood.

"So..." Logan started, not sure how to have the conversation. Alli looked better than ever—she'd gained some weight, filled out her clothes again. Her hair was still a mess, but it looked intentional now, not like it was just a byproduct of being possessed by a monster.

"So..." Alli echoed, both of them unsure where to start.

"Would you like something to eat?" Logan asked, taking a few steps back toward her front door but keeping her eyes on Alli. The concern was still there, but there was something else too—something that hovered just beneath the surface. Alli decided that food sounded nice and agreed, following Logan inside. They left the door open for Mat, who would be coming by later. Logan made him a plate of food and put it aside, considerate, Alli thought. She mostly came over to vent to Logan, never really taking the woman in and thinking about her too much, but lately, she was all Alli could think about. The monster had done a number on them both, and Alli knew it would only get worse if she didn't give in to its murderous rage. But she was too afraid to ask what would happen when she resisted. Would she devolve into a mess like Logan had been?

"So, how have you been?" Logan asked casually once they had their

food in front of them, her tone betraying a flicker of something more—something like what are we now?

“Besides the demonic possession? Just awful,” Alli said, not letting herself dwell on the recent... events. The hookup felt like a distant dream, too confusing to untangle just yet. She hadn’t even acknowledged it out loud—how could she?

“Still having problems with Patrick?” Logan asked, her tone light but with a thread of concern.

“Oh no, he got eaten,” Alli replied.

Logan looked up at Alli incredulously. “He killed himself?”

“No...” Alli said, blinking in confusion. They weren’t on the same page anymore. “The monster thing ate him.”

Logan’s eyes flickered, her expression twisting as though she was trying to make sense of what Alli had just said. After a long pause, she spoke, her voice barely above a whisper. “It... never ate living things with me.”

Alli felt like she got hit with a semi. Her heart started beating rapidly, the lights in the room flickering, her vision blurring as panic surged through her. Her mind couldn’t comprehend it. Logan’s words didn’t add up, didn’t make sense—it couldn’t be true.

“What?” Alli gasped, her breath quick and shallow.

Logan seemed aware of her panic attack and made no sudden moves. She sat patiently, waiting for Alli to calm herself down again. “It... whatever it is or was... it only made dead things vanish from the farm. It only vanished one living thing that was near death—a duck from the pond near here. That was it. What... what is it doing with you?” Logan asked after Alli gave her the signal that she was okay again.

“It is eating whole-ass grown men!” Alli shouted, her voice rising, frustration bubbling over. She wasn’t just mad at the situation, but at herself now—Logan had used the monster like a trash receptacle, and Alli was a mass murderer. She felt sick.

“How do you know it is eating them?” Logan asked, her voice open, curious, and non-judgmental. She didn’t flinch, didn’t look away.

“It opens its mouth and then they are gone,” Alli said stiffly. “Pretty easy to guess.”

Logan paused, her gaze studying Alli carefully. It lasted uncomfortably long, like she was trying to figure out if Alli had become something else, something more, or if she was just unraveling. “You can see it?” she asked, voice quieter now, maybe even hesitant.

Before Alli could answer, a knock at the door broke their conversation. Logan let Mat in, his energy agitated. He was in a better mood after Logan handed him food and a beer.

“My sister is such an asshole, holy crap. How do you put up with

her?" Mat asked Alli, chugging his beer with irritation.

Alli shrugged, unwilling to dive too deep into Mical's chaotic influence on her life. But deep down, something had shifted in her. "I think it's over now between us. I don't know how I let it go on for so long, but thank you for coming to rescue me," she said after a moment. She wasn't the same person who'd stayed in the relationship for so long—too afraid to leave, too deep in the inertia of the life they'd built.

There was no going back from that. Not with Mical. And... maybe not with Logan either. A warmth flickered under her skin, but it was so tangled in all the other emotions she didn't know where to place it. She couldn't just ignore what had happened between them, that one fragile, confusing moment of connection.

Logan caught her gaze and held it for a beat longer than usual. The unspoken tension between them hung there, quiet but undeniable. Neither of them acknowledged it out loud, but it was there—the lingering taste of something more, something neither of them was brave enough to name yet.

Mat didn't notice the quiet shift, but Alli couldn't stop feeling the undercurrent of it. And neither could Logan.

&&&

Alli woke up surrounded in darkness. Her heart skipped a beat, wondering if the monster was here trying to consume Logan or Mat like it had tried with Mical, but she blinked her eyes a couple of times and

realized it was just Logan's room being pitch black due to the blackout curtains. She switched on the light on the nightstand next to herself and took comfort in the soft white light filling the space.

Logan's room was simple, just her bed with a black frame, a nightstand, and a dresser, no decorations, no clutter—it was visually calming to Alli. Logan had taken the couch, insisting Alli sleep in a bed, that they would deal with the consequences of Alli leaving Mical tomorrow. Well, tomorrow was here, and Alli still did not want to deal with it. She hadn't even technically broken up with Mical, but she had walked out on her—something she promised never to do.

She got out of bed and went into the kitchen. Logan was lightly snoring on the couch, and Mat had found a sleeping bag and was on the floor. She made breakfast for everyone and woke Mat up first, then Logan, who profusely did not want to see sunlight.

"Nooo," Logan groaned as she pulled the blanket over her head. Alli didn't fight her.

"Wait, do I smell coffee?" Logan asked, sitting up after sniffing the air. Alli poured her a cup and handed it to her.

"Thanks!" Logan chirped, taking the brew.

They ate breakfast together. After Mat went to the store to get furniture for him and Alli, Logan had asked them to stay with her while they were processing what to do about Mical—if and when it would be safe for them to separate.

“So...” Alli started once Mat left. Logan was doing the dishes and couldn’t hear her very well.

“What!?” Logan shouted over the sound of rushing water.

“So!” Alli shouted back.

“Why are you sorry!?” Logan shouted, not fully hearing Alli properly. Alli walked over and turned the water off.

“I said so, not sorry. I am sorry, though,” Alli said, trying to get Logan to look at her.

“Why are you sorry?” Logan repeated again. “I’m the one who, who—I don’t even know what I did. I passed on some weird supernatural juju to you just because I felt like crap.”

“How long were you... is possessed the right word?” Alli asked, sitting down at the kitchen island.

Logan sat down next to her and thought for a moment. She seemed to be going through a variety of emotions. Alli noticed the little differences on her face as she recalled her memories. She was far more expressive than before, like her face had been paralyzed by the monster.

“I think, at least six years,” Logan said, her voice quiet.

Alli was stunned. She fought with this for years, telling no one, having

no support, but fighting it the entire time, yet she had caved to the hunger almost instantly.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Alli muttered. “What actually happened on the tour then?”

“Um...” Logan seemed hesitant to reveal her secrets, but Alli needed to know she wasn’t the only evil one, the only killer, that it was just the monster, and not her, giving in so easily. Logan avoided Alli’s eyes as she said, “The men would come to me with everything. They had to submit proof they had left their entire livelihood behind—no family, no friends, no debt, nothing left to tie them to society. Then I left them alone in the room. They would press a button that would cause the lights to flash and noises as if they were being slaughtered to go off—it was supposed to shock them. I wanted to bring them to their precipice and back again. I never checked for weapons. If they wanted to actually kill themselves under the cover of the noise, then that was their business, but I never sent the thing on them. The bodies, if there were any, would just be gone. I could always assume they left with their belongings that I gave back to them, and if they wanted to burn them in the furnace on the way out, it was their choice.”

Alli knew there was more, so she waited, expectant.

“But, I knew they never left the room. Even if I didn’t want to admit it to myself, I knew that the thing—the monster, as you call it—was doing something. I really don’t know if it was killing them alive or if it was cleaning up the bodies, though. Honestly, I removed myself from the process as much as possible. I wanted to remain as ignorant as possible

about my role in it. I didn't even want to help the men—they sought me out. They tried to get private tours at first, then I decided to capitalize on their pain to discourage them, but it only attracted them more. It makes me sick to know what I did, but I tried to justify it by only selecting men who really, really wanted to die. That way I could say I was supporting them and their desires even if I didn't want them to die. Who am I to judge someone else's wishes? Mat obviously survived, but I don't know how many more were left on their own."

Logan finished and glanced over at Alli to see if she was judging her. Alli wasn't sure how to feel about what Logan had revealed. She had been trying so hard to deny the monster's existence, but it was here—manifested in both their actions.

How could Alli judge? She walked right up to her victims, looked them in the eye, and let them die—in front of strangers even. She was cold-blooded, while Logan had tried, tried so hard to make it a choice, to remove herself, take away any guilt of being the host to a murderous force.

"I have no place to judge," Alli said, trying to comfort Logan, who had become increasingly despondent. "You don't even want to know what I have been doing."

Logan lifted her eyes, her expression weary, her guilt palpable. "I wasn't thinking clearly. I just... I didn't even know what I was doing anymore. I mean, after that hookup... I thought I could distract myself, but the demon kept following me. I told myself it was just a bad decision, but..." She trailed off, her face stricken with disgust.

Alli nodded, understanding that even in her own twisted way, Logan had been trying to cope with the monster inside her by creating distractions, and the hookup was just another manifestation of that ignorance—denying the reality of the demon's hold over her. "It's hard to face it, I know. The demon doesn't give you a chance to escape it. I know it seems like you had control, but you didn't, Logan. Not in the way you think."

Logan nodded slowly. "I thought I was free. But I wasn't."

"I'm not happy about being possessed," Alli said quietly, "but I understand how fatigued, how hard it must have been to fight this thing for so long. It blocks my vision; I see it going after people I don't want it to. It's scary, horrible. I'm mad, but I'm not mad at you. Okay?"

Logan's shoulders sagged as she took in Alli's words. She had expected harsh judgment, yet instead, she found a strange kind of empathy from Alli—a kind of understanding that, despite everything, made her feel like she wasn't completely alone.

Logan nodded her head and sat up, letting her shoulder bump against Alli's hand. She reminded Alli of an abused dog; it would take time to build trust between them, but all Alli had now was time. Her future plans had imploded. Instead of being on her way to a new career, she barely scraped by finishing school. Instead of being married and having a house, she was recently single and homeless. She had shelter thanks to Logan, but she no longer had her own sanctuary. Instead of being surrounded by her hostile now ex, she had the woman who gave her a demon and her ex's brother, plus a cold, distant relationship with her parents and no other strong

relationships to lean on.

Alli sighed, her gaze lingering on the empty space before her. “I guess we’re both stuck with this mess now.”

Chapter 19

Mat had come back with his truck overflowing with furniture—hand-me-downs, marketplace finds, a lamp with the price tag still hanging from its cord. He gave Logan her credit card back without ceremony, and the three of them set to work.

Several hours and two misassembled bookshelves later—each failure met with a quiet, frustrated tear from Alli—they finally had the shape of a real living space. Not perfect, not finished, but standing. That was something.

In the den, they ripped out the poorly placed drywall that blocked the only window. The late sun spilled in like it was grateful to be noticed. Mat climbed a ladder and swapped the dusty overhead light for a ceiling fan, the soft whirl of its blades making the room feel less like a tomb. They decided the space would serve better as an office—somewhere to think—rather than the sad excuse for a home theater it had been.

Later, they collapsed onto the couch, a mismatched piece that had already begun to earn its place through sheer exhaustion.

“Alli, are you okay with money since you stopped working?” Logan asked. Her voice was calm, but Alli could hear the scan in it—checking for tremors beneath the surface.

Logan nodded. “I made the developers pay a lot for that parcel of land,” she said, mouth twisting into a faint, frozen smile. “Those are going to be some expensive condos.”

Her expression held for a beat too long, as if waiting for the smile to finish forming on the left side of her face. It didn't. It never did.

"Are you going to find a job?" Logan asked. "Is it safe for you to work... with Mical still out there?"

Alli glanced at Mat. He was already watching her, brow tight, jaw clenched in that way that meant he was running every possible scenario in his head and finding each one slightly worse than the last.

Mical would come. That was certain. She might wait for the numbers to drop—one of them gone, two of them vulnerable—but she was always calculating. Always nearby. And lately, Alli had the gnawing suspicion that Mical wasn't just targeting her. She was watching something else, too. Maybe even feeding it.

"I think I'm okay," Mat said first, breaking the silence. "There's not much she can do to me. I've got eighty pounds on her and I know all her tricks."

He'd mentioned earlier he could get a job welding pretty much anywhere, and—true to form—he'd made some calls and found work that same day. Steady hands, hot metal, quiet focus. It suited him.

"But you—" Mat pointed toward Alli "—should probably hang out with a weapon for a while. Or cut your hair, change your name, move to another country. Something low-effort like that."

Alli huffed a laugh. It felt real enough. She didn't need a weapon. She was a weapon now.

Still, her mind kept returning to Mical—not just her cruelty, but her cunning. It was as if she had been speaking directly to the monster sometimes, bypassing Alli completely. Like she knew. Like she saw. Like maybe this thing hadn't just happened to Alli... maybe it had been delivered.

The thought made her stomach pull tight.

"I'll get something," she said. Her voice came out steady, but Mat's eyes lingered on her a moment longer than normal.

He didn't know about the monster. Not really. He just knew Mical was dangerous. Resourceful. A strategist in human skin.

"And you're done with school?" he asked, shifting gears gently.

"Almost," Alli blinked. "I have to defend my thesis next week."

She sat up straighter, as if the thought itself pressed down on her spine. In all the chaos, she'd forgotten—really forgotten—that her life outside this mess still existed. Her laptop, her notes, half her belongings—they were all still at her old apartment.

"Do you think it's safe to go back? You know, while she's not home, just to grab a few things?"

Mat and Logan exchanged a look. They both knew the answer was no. But maybe they could make it a maybe.

So they came up with a plan.

Mical's work schedule was consistent—dangerously so. Logan would confirm she was at the station. Mat would go with Alli to her apartment, just long enough to collect her essentials. If anything was off—if there were traps, signs, shadows—Logan would stall, or step in.

That night, they went to bed tired, but resolute.

Somewhere in the silence between them, something unspoken flickered. In their own ways, all three of them were battered. Bruised. Haunted.

But maybe—just maybe—together, they could help each other heal.

&&&

The next day, they put the plan into motion.

Mat wouldn't get off work until 3 p.m., which left them less than two hours to accomplish their mission. Logan had been watching the police station since noon, riding her bike up and down the path in front of it, circling like a hawk with nowhere else to perch. She kept her eyes on Mical's car, parked in the same spot it always was, and on Mical herself—clearly visible behind the glass-walled front entrance of the station.

For all her bravado, Mical was just a secretary. She answered phones. Routed calls. Pointed people to the right desk. She had no real power—but you wouldn't know that if you met her outside of work. She carried herself like a general in a war only she could see.

Alli had been waiting on the curb outside her apartment for nearly half an hour when Mat finally pulled up. He parked without a word and joined her on the walk to the building. Her name was on the lease, but Mical had always paid the bills. In the waiting hours, Alli had made calls—canceled the utilities, wriggled her way out of the automatic lease renewal. She wanted nothing left binding her to this place. Nothing Mical could weaponize.

As they reached the door, Mat stepped ahead, holding a steel pipe he'd brought from work. He gripped it with quiet readiness, like it was a natural extension of his arm.

"You really think she'd set a dangerous trap?" Alli asked, watching him twirl the pipe once. "What if we didn't come?"

"She's insane," Mat said, deadpan. "And bizarrely clairvoyant. She knows you'll need your stuff for your dissertation. She's not stupid. Don't be surprised if she trashed your things."

He didn't sound paranoid. Just... prepared.

They entered slowly. Alli held her breath as they crossed the threshold—but the apartment looked the same. A little messier, maybe.

Dishes stacked in the sink. Clothes thrown in piles on the floor. The bed unmade. All the daily details she'd once handled were now conspicuously absent, like a portrait of a life that had quietly fallen apart.

Mat moved with purpose, following Alli's instructions. He pulled the suitcase from the closet and began stuffing her clothes inside with neat efficiency.

Alli drifted room to room. Her eyes scanned corners automatically, looking for the one thing that mattered most—her laptop. It wasn't by the charger, but she grabbed that anyway. Not on the table. Not on the couch. Not on the nightstand either, where she sometimes left it after movie nights.

Her heart began to sink. If Mical had taken it—or worse, destroyed it—she'd lose everything: her notes, her thesis, the evidence of her academic survival. Alli pawed through couch cushions—crumbs and coins. Nothing.

She moved to the bed. One of the pillows was hers, a memory foam one she couldn't sleep without. She ran her hands across them, feeling for that familiar give—when she saw it.

A sliver of silver, peeking out from beneath the comforter.

“Yes!” she breathed, yanking the laptop free. It was intact. No cracks, no water damage. Just hidden. Buried.

“We good?” Mat asked, suitcase slung over his shoulder. His phone

buzzed in his hand—Logan's confirmation.

Alli hugged the laptop to her chest and grabbed her pillow too, doing a little shuffle of victory on the stained carpet.

"Yes," she said with a grin. "We are very good."

They left with ease. Too much ease. No alarms, no traps, no Mical waiting behind the door with a smile like a knife. The simplicity of it all unsettled Alli more than any confrontation would've. Mat had been so certain something would go wrong—but maybe, just maybe, Mical didn't have the time. Or the energy. Or the desire.

Still, as they pulled away, Alli couldn't shake the feeling that this had been too easy.

Like maybe the next move wasn't hers.

&&&

Logan was waiting for them when they got back, with nourishment in hand. Alli could get used to the idea of sharing the responsibility of preparing food and cleaning with others, she had done it for her and Mical for so long she forgot how nice it was for someone to do it for her.

"So no booby traps?" Logan asked as she inspected the pair. Mat shook his head and put down the pipe by the door, "But now we have post apocalyptic weapons?" She commented on the pipe, it was an odd weapon choice given the availability of guns she thought.

Mat shrugged, “It’s what I had closest by at work, they had me practice welding on it and said I could keep it for scrap.”

“Well I guess if a zombie knocks on the door we can whack its head off now.” Logan joked with Mat, he knew she was teasing, they seemed to have an unspoken bond between them, they seemed comfortable around each other without saying a word about it. Alli wished Logan could be that calm with her, but the woman seemed overly cautious, probably still guilty, but Alli hoped they would get to that level of comfort one day.

Alli pulled Logan into the office after dinner, “Are we going to tell Mat about the monster?” Logan thought about it, her expressions running the gamut on her face before settling on agreement. They stepped out of the office and approached Mat who was sitting on the sofa, he looked up at them bemused, “We have something to tell you Mat, something important.”

“Wait wait, let me guess.” Mat didn’t realize they were being very serious, “You are already dating, it’s been three days, that’s a little slow for lesbians isn’t it?” He joked but Logan flattened the expression on her face and shook her head. Alli rolled her eyes and also disagreed, they decided to physically separate with Logan sitting on the chair and Alli sitting next to Mat on the sofa.

“No this is something serious, it’s about the farm, the tour you went on, and Alli and Mical.” Logan started to go into detail about the real purpose of the tour, how Mat was one of few if not the only one who actually walked out of the slaughterhouse alive, but a firm knock at the

door interrupted her. She unconsciously growled at the interruption. The three of them all looked toward the door, Mical was here no doubt.

Mat quickly jumped up and grabbed the pipe then hid behind the wall leading into the kitchen, he signaled for Logan to open the door with Alli behind her, leaving space for Mat to approach with the weapon if necessary. Logan jumped as the person knocked again forcefully, "I'm here, hold on." She shouted and unlocked the door, opening it to reveal two uniformed policemen.

"Are you Miss Allison Hart?" One of the men asked.

"No sorry, my name is Logan Long, this is my home, what, what can I do for you?" Logan said as smoothly as she could.

"We are looking for Alli Hart, we have reason to believe she is staying at this residence."

Alli put her hand on Logan's shoulder to move the woman out of the way, she couldn't let Logan take the fall for her, whatever Mical had accused her of, she had to deal with it. "I'm Allison Hart."

"Ma'am, we'd like to question you about the disappearance of your classmate, Patrick Frock. We are not accusing you of anything but his family has reported him missing and the last person to see him alive may have been you." The other officer said.

"We just want to ask you some questions down at the station, put it on the official record for his case, it shouldn't take too long." The first

officer said, making a trip to the police station sound like getting ice cream on a Friday night with friends.

Alli looked back to Logan and Mat, who had quietly set down the pipe and stepped behind her, “Okay.” She looked back at the officers, she could do this, she could tell them the truth, the last time she saw Patrick, he was alive, technically.

Alli stepped outside to accompany the officers to the station when Logan grabbed her arm and stopped her.

“Sorry, just one second. When was the last time you ate?” Logan asked, her voice low but urgent. She looked at Alli with a kind of quiet plea, like she hoped Alli would get what she meant without needing to say more.

Alli paused. Thought. Days? Maybe. She shrugged slightly and replied, “A few hours ago,” stressing the hours just enough, making a small circle with her finger like a clock looping around and around.

Logan gave her a short, silent nod and let her go.

The station was cold, fluorescent, sterile. The kind of place where time thins out until it barely feels real. The officers questioned her for what felt like hours.

“What were you doing at school on a Saturday?”

“What was your relationship with Mr. Frock?”

“Why was your girlfriend—sorry, ex-girlfriend—there?”

She answered. Then re-answered. Then met someone new and answered again. It was not the casual evening trip to the ice cream joint they tried to make it sound like. It was exhausting. Alli debated asking for a lawyer more than once, but something told her that wouldn't go over well. Eventually—after what could've been minutes or years—they let her go.

Just in time.

Her vision had started to blur, blackness creeping in at the edges. Tendrils of shadow reaching—not for her, but through her. Reaching for the door. The next one. The next victim. She shut her eyes hard and slumped slightly, telling the officer in front of her, “I’m not feeling well. I need to go home. I need to eat.”

As she stepped out of the room, she nearly collided with Logan in the hallway. Logan had come to pick her up, likely knowing Mical wouldn't be far behind.

“Where’s Mat?” Alli asked, her voice barely a whisper.

Logan extended a hand to steady her, pointing toward the entrance. “Distracting Mical. She hasn’t told anyone here that you left her—she’s trying to get into the room. We protested, but the cops... they’re kind of wrapped around her finger. They don’t like me much.”

Logan grinned slightly as she said it, too comfortable at odds with authority to care. She never seemed like the kind of person who operated within the law, so their judgment didn’t land. Alli, meanwhile, was still

getting used to being a criminal. Sort of. A little.

She hadn't committed the murder exactly. But still—who would believe demonic possession in court?

No one. No one with a badge, at least.

They passed by the lobby, where Mat and Mical stood in a tense standoff. Logan reached out and grabbed her brother's arm, pulling him away from Mical without a second thought.

"You'll never get what was promised to you," Mat hissed as he was dragged off. "It was all lies. You're just a bitch-ass human like the rest of us. But bitchier."

Logan didn't even flinch. She just kept pulling him toward the car.

They drove home in silence, Logan's hand steady on the wheel while Mat fumed in the backseat. There was nothing to say that would fix what had been broken between them all, and Logan didn't try. She just turned on the TV and loaded up a game when they got home.

Mat played beside her, furious fingers on the controller. It was an unspoken ritual: a shared escape. Something they could agree on. Logan met Mat's rage with calm presence—no comfort, just existence. She showed up, even if she had nothing nice to say.

Alli sat off to the side in a worn-out chair. She didn't game. Didn't care. But she watched. Observed the two of them clicking into each other like a code she hadn't learned. Logan reading Mat's unspoken anger. Mat knowing Logan was trying, in her own jagged way.

And Alli, for once, was just there.

A ghost in the corner of the room. Not left out. Just... orbiting.

Chapter 20

Logan put on a video game and played with Mat when they got home. They had similar hobbies, but Alli had totally different interests, so she felt like the odd woman out. She sat down in the chair and watched them interact. They seemed to understand each other—Logan recognizing Mat's anger and dealing with it through a healthy outlet, and Mat understanding that Logan was trying to help in her own way by simply being there, even if she didn't offer comforting words.

Alli was a talker. She processed her feelings through conversation, but these two just seemed to need time and space. It was something she realized she'd misunderstood about Logan early on—rambling about Mical instead of just hanging out and offering quiet support. Women talked, Alli had always thought, but Logan was different in a lot of ways. It gave her pause and made her rethink how to approach her new roommates moving forward. If she couldn't talk to them about her problems or theirs, would her own needs be met?

Maybe they'd just have to talk about that one day. But for now, Alli was fine playing a supportive role from the sidelines, offering commentary on how well they were playing. It was nice to feel safe, appreciated, respected. No one was making fun of her for not knowing anything about the game, and no one was demanding she get up and serve them. She could just relax.

Logan got up and made them food. It seemed to be both a hobby and a necessity. She cooked fast and often made complex dishes that Alli couldn't keep up with. Alli prided herself on her own cooking skills, but she

always followed a recipe and stuck to familiar ingredients. Logan, on the other hand, would bring home random, exotic foods and whip up something incredible without a cookbook or any instructions. It made Alli a little jealous, though she did her best to swallow the emotion.

The next morning, Alli was woken up by Logan, who stood in her doorway holding something large and feathered in her hand.

“For the demon. Lester,” Logan said flatly, placing the dead duck on the floor before backing out and shutting the door.

Alli stared at it. It just lay there. The tendrils weren’t obscuring her vision. The demon didn’t want the duck. Maybe she’d ruined its appetite by giving it too much human tissue to consume. She watched the lifeless bird a little longer before giving up and getting dressed for the day.

She found Logan in the kitchen, alone, quietly stirring something on the stove.

“Alli,” Logan said without turning. “I just wanted to check in... about us.”

Alli blinked, surprised but not unwelcome to the topic. She leaned against the counter, arms crossed.

“Okay,” she said carefully.

“I don’t know what’s happening between us exactly,” Logan admitted. “I know I care about you. I’m not trying to push anything—but I want to follow your lead. If you want something, I’m here. If not, I’ll back off. I’m just... trying to be honest.”

Alli sighed and looked down at her coffee cup. “I do like you,” she said. “I like being around you. I like how you look at the world. But I can’t really think about romance right now. Not with... Lester.”

Logan smirked slightly at the name, though the shadow in her eyes didn’t lift.

“It’s not you,” Alli added quickly. “It’s just that everything feels too heavy right now. I’m not in a place to be someone’s girlfriend, or to explore this the way I want to. I’m trying to figure out who I am, and I don’t want to lose myself in someone else again.”

Logan nodded, accepting it without a trace of offense. “That’s fair. I appreciate you saying that.”

They stood there in silence for a moment, the simmering food the only sound in the room.

“Maybe we’re just figuring out how to be something,” Alli added. “Even if that’s not romantic.”

Logan nodded again. “Something is good.”

They left it at that.

Mat wandered in not long after, just as Alli poured herself some coffee.

“Lester wasn’t hungry,” she said without prompting, shaking her head.

Mat looked at them both, confused. “Who wasn’t hungry? Did we get a pet?”

“Not exactly,” Logan replied.

“Not exactly?” Mat repeated, raising an eyebrow. “How not exactly can we have a pet? Did you find a stray? I want to see it!” He turned to head toward Alli’s room, but she jumped up to block his path.

“No. No stray. It’s... complicated,” she said, gently pulling him back to the breakfast bar. “If we tell you, you can’t think we’re crazy. Just keep an open mind.”

“You know we were raised in a Satan-worshipping demonic cult, right?” Mat laughed. “I am as open-minded as they come.”

He stopped when he saw the stunned look on Alli’s face.

“She never told you... about our childhood?” he asked, turning to

Logan. Alli shook her head slowly, then looked at Logan, who gave a slight nod.

“That might make this easier,” Logan said quietly.

Together, they explained it all to Mat. The tour. The possessions. The control Mical had over Alli. The demon, the shadows, the way it behaved.

Mat listened, silent. No questions, no interruptions, no judgment.

Finally, he nodded and said flatly, “Why does this keep happening to me?”

Alli and Logan exchanged a glance, unsure how to respond.

“That demon... it sounds like the same one our leader was possessed by,” Mat continued. “We were raided when I was sixteen. Most of the members, including my parents, killed themselves. Mical was...”

He hesitated, but Alli urged him on.

“She was supposed to be consumed by the demon. It was supposed to be a perfect fit. The cult existed to facilitate that event—the demon, which they referred to as Satan himself, was looking for a perfect vessel to replace and walk the earth again. Usher in the end times. I know it sounds stupid, but Mical exists to be consumed by that thing. Which is why it responds to her. Why it reaches for her. We can’t let it get close to her again. Ever.”

“Can we kill it?” Alli asked, but Mat shook his head.

“Can we make it possess a doll, like on Black Mirror?” she suggested.

Mat gave her a look that killed the idea instantly.

“The lies you yelled at Mical about,” Alli said. “It’s not a lie, is it?”

Mat shook his head regretfully but didn’t elaborate.

“I have an idea,” Logan said quietly. “Let it repossess me. Then I’ll leave. I’ll go off-grid, live in the wilderness. She can spend the rest of her days chasing my Insta-travel-girl life with my pet demon, Lester.”

She grinned faintly to lighten the tension, but it didn’t quite land.

“No,” Alli said sharply, startling both of them. “That is not going to happen.”

“It does make sense,” Mat said. “It’d take her time to realize, and by then the distance would be too great. She’s impatient as hell and would rather cry and pout, hoping someone else will do her dirty work.” He gave Alli a pointed look—she had fallen for Mical’s games once already.

“No one else is getting possessed!” Alli shouted, and the kitchen fell silent.

Logan looked down, hands tightening around the counter edge. She hadn’t said it, but Alli knew what she really meant—Logan wanted to go

into the woods and end it all. She wanted to be consumed so no one else had to be.

Alli wasn't going to let that happen. Not ever.

So the trio went about researching other methods of removing Alli from the demon's grasp, but the world was too real. The occult did not exist, at least not in the way they'd hoped it might when they were younger and still believed in secret libraries and hidden spells. Any records left from the cult were locked up in police custody—sealed as evidence in the pending cases against the few members who survived the culling.

They debated whether it was worth breaking into the police station to retrieve them. Would the files even help? Or would it only bring them too close to Mical again, too soon?

Eventually, they agreed to call George—police chief, Mical's adoptive father, and a strange sort of almost-father figure to Mat. Though he'd never officially adopted Mat, George had taken him in for a while during the aftermath. He and Mat had a cordial relationship, if nothing else. Maybe he'd listen. Maybe, if they framed it right—as a plea to help Mical—he'd unlock the files without asking too many questions.

But George wouldn't take their call.

Mat left a message, careful and calm, hoping George would return it soon. For now, all they could do was protect Alli, keep her far from Mical, and figure out how to placate the demon lurking in the background of her mind.

"I don't want to anthropomorphize it too much by calling it Lester, though," Logan said that night after dinner, poking at her noodles with the tip of her fork.

"It's kind of a cute name," Alli admitted, "but yeah—I don't really want to look back affectionately on this time in my life as if I had a pet demonic possession. I'll leave that to the spiritual psychosis girlyies online."

"Did you see that one girl who glued all kinds of crap into her car? Like, her car of all things. It looks insane," Mat said, immediately pulling out his phone. He had a habit of reading the daily viral internet roundup and sharing the worst of it like an unholy ritual. He turned the screen toward them. It was bad. Rhinestones. Feathers. Stickers. A melted Barbie face.

"Do you think she's authentically being herself, like she's just like that," Logan asked, scrolling through with a curious squint, "or is it just a good act?"

"Are any of us authentically ourselves in this society?" Mat asked, deadpan.

"Probably not," Logan replied, just as casually, and they fell into the kind of silence that comes after an answer you can't disagree with.

Chapter 21

George called Mat back a few days later. He said he'd had to fire Mical for her recent behavior—something about daily accusations hurled at him, Logan, and Alli, all without evidence. It had worn him down.

Mat explained the situation carefully, almost like he was filing a report: how Alli had left Mical, how she and Logan had become friends, and how he had moved back to town too. It must have been a lot for Mical to take in all at once—especially without being the center of it, no longer pampered and praised for simply existing.

Alli watched Mat from the kitchen table as he leaned against the hallway wall, phone pressed between his ear and shoulder, hands gesturing absently in midair. He seemed relaxed, even happy to be talking to George—as if reconnecting with an old cousin after years apart. His voice had a rhythmic ease to it, and he laughed with a quiet fondness she hadn't heard in him in a long time.

The house was beginning to change, subtly but noticeably. There were new mugs on the counter that didn't match—each clearly chosen on a different day, with different moods. A plant in the living room that someone (probably Logan) had started talking to. A sweatshirt flung over the back of a chair, a half-finished puzzle on the coffee table. It didn't feel like a crash-pad anymore. It felt... inhabited. Touched. There was life in the corners now.

Mat had adapted surprisingly well. He'd found a job within a week, split the bills without hesitation, wasn't on drugs, and took care of his own

shit without fanfare. He was confident. Assertive, even. Whatever he had gone through after being cast out into society unprepared, growing up in a doomsday cult—he had come out the other side. Somehow, he had healed.

Alli wasn't so sure about herself.

She was job-hunting online, aimlessly scrolling through listings. Every time she found something she might be qualified for, doubt crept in like fog under a door: What if I'm not really capable? What if I get the job and fail? What if Mical shows up? What if I lose everything again?

She didn't want to overstay her welcome. She was the only one in the house not working. When she tried to contribute by cooking or cleaning—habits ingrained from her time with Mical—she quickly discovered that Logan and Mat were entirely self-sufficient. They did their own dishes, folded their own laundry, cleaned their own bathrooms. No performance required. No martyrdom.

It was disorienting. She had to resist the urge to become small and useful. Subservient. To earn her space.

Logan stepped into the kitchen from the office, phone in hand, a smile halfway across her face. It was hard to tell sometimes—was she genuinely happy or just remembering she was supposed to smile around other people? The expression lingered for a moment, then faded like fog off glass.

"I have a job interview," Alli said, almost apologetically, as Logan pulled out a chair and sat beside her.

“I just made twenty thousand dollars,” Logan said, blinking at her phone in a soft daze of delight. Her eyes widened a beat later. “Oh—shit, I didn’t mean to one-up you. That’s rude. Where’s the interview? Congrats!”

Her excitement wasn’t performative. Logan had been investing in the market—not for wealth, exactly, but for the challenge of it, the skill. It wasn’t bragging. It was something more like self-surprise.

Alli shrugged. “It’s at some biotech startup at the big tech incubator across town.”

She didn’t name the company. Logan might know it, might offhandedly mention a lawsuit or a scandal or some catastrophic stock trend that would ruin Alli’s fragile optimism. She did that sometimes—casually clipping the wings off Alli’s hope without meaning to.

Logan nodded, half-smiling again. This time it stuck a little longer. “Nice. Want help practicing? I’ve done a bunch of interviews. I’m good at roleplay.”

Alli met her eyes for a second and saw that same stillness inside Logan she always saw—the kind of stillness that holds back a storm of thought.

“Maybe,” she said. “I’ll let you know.”

Outside, the wind pressed softly against the window. Inside, the

house was still—but not silent. The hum of the refrigerator. Mat's low voice still drifting from the hallway. The scent of coffee someone had made an hour ago. It was a quiet that didn't feel empty.

It was starting to feel like a home.

&&&

Alli got the job.

Logan handed her a small black box with a grin that was half serious, half mischievous. Inside was a 5-shot revolver—heavy, compact, clean.

“In case Mical shows up,” Logan said casually. “Unless you walk through a metal detector at work. Then, obviously, don't bring it.”

Alli blinked. “You're joking.”

Logan tilted her head. “I'm not.”

So she brought the gun to orientation anyway, tucked deep in the lining of her bag, her pulse fluttering like moth wings every time someone glanced at her purse. She didn't need it, not then, but the weight of it grounded her—a cold, reassuring anchor. Some people wore locketts or crystals. She carried steel.

The first few weeks of training blurred past in a haze of corporate lingo and fluorescent-lit conference rooms. But something inside her steadied. Her shoulders loosened. Her voice found rhythm again. By the

end of the month, she could almost believe she belonged.

The house continued its quiet shift. Alli noticed things she hadn't before—the smell of rosemary and lemon from a simmer pot Logan left on the stove; Mat's habit of putting a fresh towel out in the bathroom every morning without being asked; the way the hallway light flickered softly at night, like it was breathing. It was strange how much life could accumulate in such small, human acts. The house no longer felt like a liminal space. It was warm. Lived-in. Theirs.

She had almost forgotten about the demon. Almost.

It still existed, coiled in the periphery of her vision, occupying the same coordinates in space-time, always present but only visible to her. Logan had found ways to keep it fed, sourcing animal corpses from god knows where—roadkill? abandoned butcher shops?—and laying them out in the garage like sacrificial offerings. The thing had begrudgingly consumed the duck, slowly nibbling the carbon out of each carcass. It was never satisfied, but it was... calmer.

Logan was fascinated by it—by her. She asked questions, not out of disbelief but curiosity, like a scientist studying an unexplainable phenomenon. Alli wanted to be curious too, but every time she saw the demon's tendrils slithering against walls that didn't exist, saw its void-mouth stretching across dimensions, she couldn't help the panic that squeezed her lungs.

It was not curiosity she felt. It was terror.

Still, life moved forward.

One night, months into this new life, Alli lay awake. The house was silent except for the soft tick of the hallway clock and the distant hum of Mat's white noise machine. She reached for her phone, an itch pulling at her chest—the kind that came from curiosity laced with dread.

Mical.

She hadn't checked in on her since leaving. She avoided it like a scab she refused to pick, afraid of what it might bleed. But tonight, the temptation won.

She opened the podcast app and searched the title Mical had devoted years of her life to. A fresh episode blinked at her. Uploaded just moments ago.

Alli sat up. Her stomach turned.

Mical always scheduled her releases—7:00am sharp, before the morning commute. But this one had been uploaded at 3:02am. No preamble. No scheduling. Just dropped raw into the feed.

She stared at it.

The title read simply: "The Truth About Logan Long"

Her thumb hovered.

Don't.

Do it.

Let it go.

You won't sleep either way.

She pressed play.

Mical's voice crackled through the speaker—familiar, nasal, precise. The cadence of someone who had rehearsed rage until it sounded righteous.

> “This is Mical McMaster, former employee of the Springfield Police Department...”

[sniff]

“I lost my job after making some accusations that I still stand by. Logan Long, a name familiar to those loyal listeners, has killed hundreds—if not thousands—of men. Innocent people. Fathers. Brothers. Husbands...”

She choked on the word innocent.

> “And the police? They don't care. She made millions selling the property—destroying the evidence. She stole my girlfriend. Yes. She's that evil. She convinced my sweet Alli to leave me and join in her slaughter...”

Alli felt the cold stab of her name. She flinched like it was a knife.

Mical's voice cracked—then twisted into bitter laughter.

> “Folks, I hate to say it but... if you’ve ever believed me, if you’ve ever listened to this show and thought, ‘Wow, she might be onto something,’ then do something. We can’t let Logan Long walk free. Not one more day.”

The rest devolved into incoherence. Rants about deep state conspiracies, coded numbers in license plates, men disappearing from golf courses, private security companies run by witches. It was delusional, unhinged.

And it was public.

But for the first time, Alli wasn’t afraid.

She wasn’t conflicted anymore.

Mical’s words were so absurd, so bitter, so soaked in hypocrisy that they rang hollow. Alli remembered how Mical had once tried to harness the demon’s power for herself, how she’d directed Alli to kill without hesitation. Logan—by contrast—was trying to be better. Trying to atone. She was grounded, sometimes distant, but real. Human.

Alli set the phone down.

She exhaled.

And for the first time since she'd left Mical in the dead of night without a goodbye, she didn't feel guilty.

She felt justified.

She pulled the blanket up around her shoulders and turned on her side. The revolver sat quietly in her bedside drawer. She hadn't needed to use it. Not yet. But she felt safe. Safer than she ever had—with Logan. With Mat. With herself.

And even when the inky splotches appeared again, crawling across the corners of her ceiling like smoke with teeth—she didn't panic.

She just closed her eyes.

&&&

Alli had Logan and Mat listen to Mical's rant the next morning. They both shook their heads incredulously—Mical was twisting the information to vilify Logan when it was Mical who would love nothing more than to have the power to consume the souls of those she deemed appropriate.

It was an awful burden, one that was starting to weigh heavily on Alli. She had been doing so well for so long, she nearly forgot about the demon. But after listening to Mical last night, it made its presence known again—tendrils slithering back into her peripheral vision, reaching, twitching.

“It’s angry,” Alli said flatly, watching the shadows flicker at the edge of her sight.

“It’s weird that you can tell that,” Logan replied, frowning.

They’d talked at length about how they each experienced the possession. Logan’s version was completely different from Alli’s. Where Logan described a crushing pressure, constant nausea, hypersensitivity to touch and sound—overwhelming to the point of debilitation—Alli’s was more detached. It wasn’t better, just... different.

Alli shrugged. She could read its mood based on how it moved, like some grotesque weather system. It was a guess, sure, but it felt accurate. Now she could feel it reaching for Mical. It had never really been listening to her; it was listening to Mical. Whatever they did to try to remove it, they had to make damn sure that union never took place.

Even Mat, years removed from the cult and a full-blown non-believer, was cautious. The idea of the demon merging with Mical was enough to rattle him. Either Mical would end up like Alli and Logan—possessed but still mostly herself—or something far worse could happen.

But Alli couldn’t wrap her head around that. How could Mical being possessed be worse than her own experience? Sure, Mical had a twisted sense of justice, but they could find a way to contain her. She’d probably brag about her new powers and land herself in prison within the week.

&&&

So the trio continued to try different methods to remove the demon from Alli, but nothing worked. After months of failed attempts and thousands of dollars spent on psychics, occultists, and magical scammers, Alli had enough. She told her friends she couldn't tolerate any more of the experiments. Each new "expert" who promised her relief only to leave her feeling more cracked than before wore her spirit thin. Maybe this was it. Maybe she was just... possessed forever.

Logan had become more affectionate with her over time, learning that Alli responded to closeness like a plant turning toward light. It started with stiff shoulder pats and evolved into couch cuddle sessions—though Alli had to be the big spoon because Logan fidgeted too much. Still, she would take it. She needed it. And more importantly, it was given unconditionally. That reassured her of her place.

She wasn't making much money, but Logan never asked her for any. Alli let herself relax into that. It was still hard not to compulsively do chores or earn her keep, but Mat and Logan didn't seem to care. They just wanted her there, as she was, not for what she could do.

One evening, Logan knocked softly on her door and came in holding a steaming mug.

"I know you're done with the rituals," she said gently, setting the cup beside Alli. "But I read about something else. Not an exorcism, more like... a disentanglement."

Alli raised an eyebrow. "Sounds like therapy for demons."

Logan smiled. “Yeah, kind of. The idea is—it’s not in you, it’s with you. Like a tether. A trauma bond, almost.”

The words landed like a slow breath through her ribs. Alli blinked, caught off guard by the accuracy.

“I thought maybe... we could try something different. No magic, no salt circles. Just... be present. Try to ask it to let go.”

Alli was skeptical. “You want me to ask it?”

“Not exactly. Just talk to it. Or maybe... talk to the part of you that let it in.”

That hit deeper than she wanted to admit.

Still, she agreed.

They sat on the floor, cross-legged in the warm hum of the small bedroom. Logan took her hands loosely. Mat came in long enough to light a single candle before stepping out, sensing the need for quiet.

Logan guided her in grounding breaths—inhale, exhale. No spells. No weapons. Just presence. Patience. Stillness.

Then, for the first time, Alli spoke to it. Not as her enemy. Not with fury or panic. But as something that had walked alongside her in pain. Something that had arrived when she needed protection—when she had

no one else.

She didn't cry. She didn't yell. She just spoke plainly, honestly.

"I get it now," she whispered. "You came when I needed something too big for me to carry alone. You were never really mine. But I don't need you anymore."

No answer came. None was expected. But in the soft flicker of the candlelight, the black tendrils at the edge of her vision receded—just slightly.

When it was done, Logan wrapped her arms around Alli from behind. Gently. Not like a protector, but like someone who had remembered softness and wanted to share it.

"You did good," she said, her voice just above a whisper.

And for the first time in a long time, Alli believed her.

Chapter 22

"This calls for a celebration!" Mat cheered, a wide grin spreading across his face as Alli dropped the news. She'd landed a job. "I'm thinkin' pizza and one of those ice cream cakes with those crunchy chocolate bits and caramel. Can't forget the crunchy bits." His eyes glazed over, and Alli couldn't help but laugh. Mat was a tall, rail-thin guy who ate like a starved bear yet never seemed to gain a pound.

Logan nodded vigorously, always the enthusiast when it came to anything sweet. "Two. We should get two."

Alli grinned back, feeling a weight lift from her chest. Her friends were goofy, kind, and everything she needed after so many months of struggle. It had been a long time since she'd felt this normal.

They quickly ran to the store, grabbing what they needed.

"Anyone from college you want to invite over?" Logan asked, her voice casual but curious as they drove back home.

Alli chewed on her lip. "I didn't really have many friends there... besides Mical. I always let her take the lead with everything. And when she moved in... well, the rest sort of faded away." A hint of regret flashed through her mind. The isolation she'd accepted, the life she'd let be dictated by someone else.

"Sounds like you got caught in her world," Logan observed softly, her tone almost sympathetic.

Alli sighed. "Yeah, I think I did. But it wasn't me... I don't even know who I was back then."

They spent the evening picking a movie—Mat wanted horror, Alli opted for romance, and Logan, predictably, went for science fiction. In the end, they found something that suited all three. Half a pizza later, they finally relaxed, if only for a moment. The weight of the outside world, the worries about her job, and the lingering thoughts of what was to come—they all seemed a little less heavy.

The next morning, Alli woke up feeling sluggish. The pizza carbs and sugary ice cream cake hadn't exactly fueled her best sleep. Shuffling into the kitchen, the rich smell of coffee reached her nose, and she felt a small wave of relief. Logan had kept her old-fashioned coffee pot, rejecting the trendy single-cup machine Alli had tried to insist on. Simple, reliable.

"Did you sleep okay?" Logan's voice was soft, always so attuned to Alli's moods, even when Alli couldn't quite figure out her own.

"Yeah... I think so. I'm just... happy to have a job, but the reality of starting tomorrow hit me. No more sleeping in." Alli chuckled, trying to ease the tension that had suddenly tightened around her chest. "I'm just a glorified lackey for now, but... it's something. I'm excited to actually work for once."

Logan raised an eyebrow, a subtle shift in her expression as she turned back to her screen. "How's the market treating you? Pressing any lucrative buttons yet?"

Alli didn't understand much of what Logan had explained about investing, just that there were a lot of acronyms and strategies. "Eh, something about averages and active versus passive... and robots versus humans, I think? It all sounds too fake to me, but she's happy with it."

Mical had always rubbed Alli's face in her lack of financial independence, flaunting her \$20-an-hour job, belittling Alli for being too "dependent." The constant reminders of how much better Mical's life seemed... it had chipped away at Alli's self-worth.

Logan, on the other hand, didn't talk about money. She simply did. Bills were paid. The house was warm. Alli didn't fully understand it, but it felt like a world away from what she had grown up with. She couldn't help but feel... guilty?

"So... now that I have a job, how much can I pay you for rent?" Alli asked, her voice a little tight as she caught Logan in the middle of her work.

Logan didn't look up right away. "It's all good," she said, her focus still on the screen. But then she glanced up, offering a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Mat helps with parking fees. I do the rest."

Alli's stomach twisted. "But—no, I want to contribute," she insisted.

Logan shrugged, nonchalant. "I invest his money for him. Here's his account." She spun the laptop around, showing Alli a graph that might as well have been a foreign language.

"I don't care about that! I want to pay," Alli pressed, a little desperate now, her insecurities bubbling up. She'd always had to earn, to prove herself in some way.

Logan tilted her head. "You're not taking advantage. The house is paid for, the bills are covered. It's fine, Alli. Do you want me to draw up a rental agreement so you feel more secure here?"

Alli stared at her, feeling the familiar knot in her chest tighten. "I don't want to feel like I'm taking advantage." The words tasted wrong, too foreign in her mouth.

Logan didn't seem bothered. Instead, she smiled again, this time a little more warm, but the tension in Alli's chest refused to go away.

&&&

Mat was sprawled on the couch, holding a book titled *How to Slay Your Inner Demons*. Alli couldn't help but laugh—its title was ridiculous, but it also struck a chord with her. A little humor to distract from the dread of her own demon. A real one.

They'd gone to a shady part of town earlier, to someone who claimed to have the power to cast out demons. Alli had paid the \$50 fee. An hour later, she was left with only the lingering smell of burnt sage and no answers. It was supposed to bring relief, but there had been nothing. No demon banishment, no sense of peace. Just the smell.

"Perhaps... we should take a little trip," Logan suggested, her voice cutting through the haze of Alli's thoughts. Logan turned her laptop around, showing her the screen. It was a witchcraft bookstore—one that looked like it came straight out of a low-budget TV network series. Located in a small city about three hours away.

"Surely, one of their bogus claims has to turn out to be true," Logan added with a shrug, already saving the address to her phone.

They agreed to go that weekend—Alli's first weekend off after working non-stop. She was incredibly stressed. The constant stream of new experiences was taking its toll, but she was holding it together better than she had expected.

The weekend passed quickly. Logan set out a sacrifice to the demon, a small offering that seemed to go ignored for days. Eventually, Alli could smell it—the demon finally gave in, drawn to the scent of the flesh. She almost thought she saw it throw a tantrum in her peripheral vision. The demon wanted something more substantial, something to tear apart. But that was no longer an option. The days of slaughtering innocent souls for power were over. Too bad, Alli thought.

After a few hours of winding roads, getting lost, and nearly driving an hour in the wrong direction, they finally arrived. Alli's nerves were fried from the drive—she could feel her muscles tense, her body reminding her of all the stress she was carrying. But Logan, at the wheel, seemed perfectly calm, her cheerful demeanor unshaken. Mat had fallen asleep an hour ago, snoring lightly in the back seat. Alli realized then that the road had become a blur. All the towns they passed felt the same. The roads

stretched endlessly in all directions. The landscape was so vast, so open, that having a destination at all seemed almost disrespectful to the land itself.

Logan seemed happy, though, and that made Alli feel a little better. They might be chasing shadows, but her friend was genuinely enjoying herself. Alli reminded herself that, at the very least, this trip was a distraction from her growing anxiety.

The musty shop finally came into view—nestled between a dive bar and a taco joint. It was easy to miss if you weren't looking for it, the storefront barely visible beneath layers of colorful signage from surrounding businesses.

The door chimed softly as they entered, and a thick, smoky smell immediately filled their noses. Something was burning in the back.

“Oh, hello, hello,” a voice called out.

Alli's gaze shifted to a woman swathed in a deep wine-red shawl, who emerged from the back like she'd been waiting for them. She swirled around Logan first, taking her in with an appraising look before she shook her head, her eyes sharp with intent. “Yes, yes, you need help,” she said, pointing at Logan. “No, no, not her,” she corrected herself, suddenly pointing at Alli.

Logan looked surprised, almost caught off guard. “I'm really fine, honestly. It's her who needs help,” she said, motioning toward Alli. “Ya know, I think we were mistaken. We should go.”

But the woman was insistent, blocking their exit. “No, no, dear. It’s you. You who needs help today. Let me help,” she said, dancing around Logan.

Logan rolled her eyes, clearly uncomfortable with the woman’s attention. She shot Alli a look. “What do you think?” she asked, exasperated. Alli shrugged slightly, already sensing the inevitable. They’d come this far, and now it was just a matter of seeing it through.

Logan sighed and muttered an apology as she turned to leave. “Oh dear, dear me, she needed help,” the woman said softly, watching Logan walk out.

There was an awkward pause before Alli, realizing that she had to follow through on their original plan, stepped forward. “Um, sorry. She’s really opposed to outside influence. We came here for me, actually.”

The woman paused, then turned to face her, circling around like she was sizing her up. She mumbled under her breath for a moment before stopping and motioning for Alli to follow her into the back. Alli glanced at Mat, who was distracted, sniffing a candle on a nearby shelf. He waved at her, signaling that he’d keep lookout while she went with the woman. Alli followed, hoping that the demon was at least temporarily satiated.

The room in the back was dark, almost too dark to make out any details. A single dim light overhead cast long shadows on the walls. Alli was surprised to find that the woman didn’t set out crystals or tarot cards like she expected. Instead, the woman seemed to study her, observing her

presence with intensity, as though trying to read her on some deeper level.

“You have a burden,” the woman finally said, her voice soft but firm.

Alli blinked, feeling a cold shiver crawl down her spine. “Yes,” she whispered, surprised by the words.

“I can feel him... but I can’t help you. He’s too powerful for me,” the woman continued, her tone laced with sadness. “His will is too strong.”

Alli’s heart dropped. A part of her had known it was hopeless. This was just another false lead. But she had to ask.

“Do you know anyone who can help me?” Alli asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

The woman shook her head, disappointment and sympathy flooding her expression. “It requires a perfect match. Nothing else will do.”

Alli sat still for a moment, processing the words. This was it—there were no easy solutions. But the woman had given her something else, a clue that maybe Logan’s burden wasn’t as invisible as it seemed.

She stood, nodding quietly. “Thank you for telling me that.”

The woman watched her as she turned to leave, her voice lingering in the air. “You need more than magic to solve your problem.”

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Another week flew by. Alli had gone to work dutifully, kept her living space meticulously clean, cooked when it was her turn, and fed the demon like it was a household pet. Yet, beneath the surface, the feeling of impending doom was creeping back in. The same weight she had grown accustomed to was settling on her chest again, suffocating her. She stared at the dead animal on her bedroom floor, the fresh mark of the demon's influence, and wondered, When would this end, or would it ever? Could she live like this forever?

Alli tried to make friends with her colleagues, but most of them were older and on different paths entirely—married with children or grandchildren, their goals in life worlds apart from hers. She used to think she wanted children, but now she wasn't so sure. She had wanted to settle down, get married, but the costs of living—the endless expenses of homeownership, bills, and the rising price of just existing—made it feel like an impossible dream. Logan had been a lifesaver, letting her stay in her house, but it had taken seeing apartments for herself, remembering the bills Mical used to handle, to realize how lucky she was. And just how much she couldn't afford on her own.

Logan refused to take any form of compensation, not even a thank you. The walls Logan had put up were clear—distant, unreachable—and Alli couldn't figure out if they were conscious choices or if they were just part of her nature. Logan was alone, but was she lonely? That question gnawed at Alli, yet it felt too dangerous to ask.

But one thing Alli could admit: she was lonely. She missed connection. She missed someone new in her life. But who would want to

get involved with someone possessed by a demon? Who would believe her? Who would understand her?

The doubt spiraled, suffocating her in its grip. She had so little to offer, so little to give—no money, no stability, no future. She was a burden. So she closed herself off, retreating into her own mind and heart, living as a hermit in a space surrounded by the green hue of her houseplants. She buried herself deeper, hoping that would bring comfort, but it didn't. The isolation felt suffocating, and she wondered how people could live like this permanently. She didn't want this. She needed people, but the circumstances made that impossible.

Then Logan added another wall—another brick in the fortress—and Alli lost it.

“Do you even want to be my friend?” Alli shouted, her frustration boiling over as Logan tried to walk away.

“I... Whatever you want,” Logan said, barely looking at her.

“That’s not a real answer!” Alli snapped. “What do you want from me?”

Logan froze, clearly thrown off by the sudden eruption of emotion. “I—Nothing. I... I don’t know.”

“You want nothing from me?” Alli asked incredulously, the words tumbling out before she could stop herself.

“I want nothing from anyone,” Logan said quietly, almost fearfully. “I’m a... a Buddhist.”

“Oh,” Alli said, recalling everything she knew about Buddhism—about the lack of desire, the idea of inner peace despite suffering, about not adding to the world’s suffering by becoming entangled with it. She frowned. “Is that why you always want to be alone? Because you think you’re a monk?”

“I’m just... better alone,” Logan stammered, now on the verge of tears. She didn’t want confrontation, but Alli couldn’t hold back. She needed more from this relationship, needed it to move forward.

“You’re good around other people too, you know. When you’re not running away to avoid conflict.” Alli spat the words out, frustration simmering in every syllable.

Logan flinched at the sharpness, her walls crumbling for a moment as she tried to regain composure. The tension hung thick between them.

It took weeks for their relationship to heal. Alli knew she’d set them back at least a few months, maybe more. She couldn’t move at Logan’s pace anymore, not when she was desperate for more. She wanted something real. She was done waiting.

She told herself it was good to push Logan. Maybe this was the push Logan needed to become a better version of herself—to heal, even if it meant pushing through discomfort. Alli couldn’t wait forever, but the guilt crept in, leaving her uncertain whether she was helping or increasing the

suffering she had always feared.

But deep down, Alli knew one thing: she couldn't keep holding it all together on her own.

Chapter 23

Lately, as Alli left work, the demon's presence grew harder to ignore. Logan had kept feeding it the bare minimum, trying to keep it at bay, but it was growing more demanding, like a hungry beast on the verge of breaking free. Alli felt it the moment she stepped out of the office, her vision flickering and throbbing with an ominous pulse. She'd feign a phone call or pretend to search for something she'd dropped, anything to buy herself a few extra minutes to shield herself from her coworkers who unknowingly walked too close to the beast's reach. At work, it stayed subdued, like a leash pulled tight, but the moment she left, it was fair game.

The weight of it was beginning to wear on her. She'd tried to convince herself that she could handle it. Logan had suffered for years, after all. Maybe, just maybe, she could carry the burden, too. But she wasn't as strong-willed. She couldn't even bring herself to pretend it was no big deal anymore. The fresh corpses—whatever scraps she could feed the demon—were never enough. She could feel it growing restless inside her, and that thought twisted at her stomach.

It was getting harder to deny the idea that maybe Logan's twisted plan of disappearing into the wilderness, alone with the demon, wasn't the only way out. But could she just walk away when her life was only just beginning to stretch its limbs?

She arrived home after giving her coworkers plenty of time to escape unknowingly, it delayed her getting home for long enough for Logan to notice, who asked, "Hey, don't you get off at three?" To which Alli fibbed

that she had to stay late and organize some things for the next day. Logan seemed pleased with that answer and continued with her tasks. She was deeply involved in the action on her computer screen, so Alli let her be, going into her room to relax.

She had turned her space into a sanctuary. She added in as many plants as Logan approved, who said just to not stain the carpet and not cause a fire hazard, which was fair. Her room glowed with green highlights as the afternoon sun filtered in through the wall of plants covering the window. The dynamic scenery calmed Alli down; she did not want to burden her roommates by involving them anymore with the demon. It was her decision to keep it, and she felt obliged to keep it from Mical especially. So, here in the privacy of her room, she could relax and dream of a better tomorrow.

She laid on her bed, closed her eyes, and let out a sigh, trying to pull her shoulders from her ears and actually relax her muscles. The stress had tightened up her entire body, but she was becoming sensitive to touch, just like Logan had explained. She could ask her friend for a massage... but no, she couldn't.

After several minutes, she opened her eyes to find her speaker to turn on some music but found she could not see. She tried to check her watch but could not see that either. She reached for her phone to illuminate her surroundings, but it provided no help. It wasn't dark, it was the demon. "Logan!" Alli shouted for help, the demon was usually appeased by her offerings, why was it making its presence known now?

Alli heard Logan slam her door, "What's going on!?" Alli yelled.

Whatever Logan saw or felt, Alli was blind to it. The demon had never just settled into her vision like this before. It was deeply troubling.

A few moments later, still surrounded by darkness, only able to use her sound for guidance, Alli tried to find her way out of her room, but Logan yelled to her, "Stay in your room, Alli!" So she settled back on her bed, helpless. She heard various thuds, rumbles, some shouting from several voices, and clashing noises. After several more minutes, her vision finally came back into view. She slowly walked out of her room and into the main living room. It was torn apart. The coffee table was broken, the couch was flipped over, and the TV was smashed in. Alli looked over to Logan and Mat, who were surprisingly calm for the chaos surrounding them, and said, "Why do I always get left out of all the fun stuff?"

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“Alright, I have a confession.” Alli said after listening to what Logan and Mat had to say. “I’ve been seeing the demon more after work when I leave with my coworkers, I thought it wanted to eat them so I’ve been hanging back, that’s why I’ve been late coming home, but now...” Alli knew they were thinking the same thing, “I guess it wasn’t that it wanted to eat them, it wanted to go to Mical.” Alli cursed herself, how could she have been so stupid to not realize that Mical was following her?

Mical had come to the house, which was why she couldn’t see. Nicely at first, according to Logan, who checked outside and found her sitting in her car. She had come to see Alli, to apologize and try to reconcile, but Logan wasn’t having it. She spoke for Alli, which Alli appreciated just this one time, and stood her ground. Well, Mical did not like that and followed Logan into the house. They fought, Mat came out from the garage, and Mical went ballistic.

“She really accused you of being a part of the illuminati?” Alli asked as Logan recounted the tale. Logan nodded and laughed; it was absurd but pitiful at the same time. Finally, Mat called the police, who came and took Mical away.

They decided they should get a restraining order, not that it would stop her, but it would make it easier to explain to others why she needed to stay away, especially at Alli’s work. She wanted to be drama-free with her coworkers; they did not need to become involved in this. She hadn’t told any of them about the demon, obviously, and had also neglected to mention Mical or even her new living situation. To them, she was just a recent grad looking for a career in research, a good pipetter, and easy to get along with.

A few weeks later, restraining order in hand thanks to George Barnes helping expedite the process, Alli was enjoying the lack of inky black tendrils in her periphery. The demon seemed to have backed off its attempts to reach out for Mical, opting to sit and wait patiently until Alli was unknowingly close again. That was a constant fear she had now. What if she passed by Mical in a car and the demon caused her to crash? Or at the grocery store and Mical decided to lay waste to the random civilians shopping? Would she be so cruel? Alli suspected now that yes, she would. She had never seen Mical be so violent, but the damage in the living room was enough proof that she was no longer the same person Alli knew.

Alli had tried to keep tabs on her via the podcast, but the one she listened to in the middle of the night was taken down, and Mical had not uploaded another one since. Either she was aware of how crazy she was getting, or someone was doing her a favor. But who did Mical have now? Alli thought about it. She had George, but she was on very thin ice with him. She didn't really have friends at the station and was fired anyway. She had some loyal listeners that she would email back and forth with, but other than that, Alli could not recall a single person close to Mical besides herself—and that was long over.

Alli was deep in thought as she walked along the path outside of work on her lunch hour. She was pretty safe out here alone. The building was outside of the town limits with little foot traffic, so if Mical wanted to approach her, Alli could see her coming a mile away. Plus, the demon gave her notice, desperately trying to separate with Alli any time Mical was close by. So she felt safe zoning out while walking along the path.

She walked along, taking in the bright blue sky, the sun behind her for the moment, its rays hitting the grass, causing them to flourish with technicolor green. It was summer, and it was as bright and green as it was going to be all year. Alli loved the colors. The sparse trees dotted the path offering little shade, but it was not that hot out—maybe seventy degrees Fahrenheit. It was a nice, relaxing day. She could finish her work early today and leave, go home, and make dinner. It was Taco Thursday at the house because they always forgot to do it on Tuesday. Everything was going well, and nothing was going to stop Alli from having a good day.

Except she looked up at the sun as she turned around and found she could no longer see. Again.

Chapter 24

She checked her watch again. It was six p.m., well past the time her roommates would be home. She wandered around the house aimlessly, wanting the time to pass as quickly as possible until they returned and eased her worries. The past few months—no, years—had been incredibly stressful, and only just recently were things starting to get better. She didn't need to cry herself to sleep anymore, just one pill, and done. She didn't need to numb herself with pain pills either; a few stretches and light exercise were enough to keep her back flexible. Age had hit her hard—suddenly, lines that hadn't existed before crawled along her face, and the skin holding in her flabby stomach started to sag. Though, that could be attributed to the loss of fat. She had been doing a lot better, filling out with muscle instead of fat, taking her time to use her body rather than abusing it to suit her needs—respecting it and what it could do for her.

She checked her watch again. It was six twenty p.m.

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At seven, Mat came home looking concerned. He said he'd felt off all day, and when she confirmed the worst, he rushed out of the house, only to circle back a moment later to come get her. They were off to the police station to report Alli missing. "Don't wait, that's a myth," Mat said in the car, his tone authoritative.

They met with the officer and explained the situation. They did what they could, but the police seemed distracted, a large number of them

huddled around the far corner of the station. Back in the car, Mat was visibly more frustrated, and Logan was shocked he cared so much, but she didn't say that. She just let him vent.

Once safely inside the house, Logan went to clean up the kitchen and put away the food she had made that would no longer be required for tonight's dinner, only to find an envelope on the counter. "Mat, did you put this here?" she asked without picking up the letter. He came over and said no. "Should we... should we open it?"

"With gloves on," he replied.

Logan found the cleaning gloves in the closet and put them on, then cautiously held the envelope in her hands. She fumbled while trying to open it until she was able to gently tear the opening and slide her finger in to open it up completely. Nothing came out—no powder or ooze—it was just a simple white card. Inside it was inscribed with flowery writing, probably Alli's, although neither of them really knew what her handwriting looked like. The message read: "I have decided to move out, do not come looking for me. It is nothing personal, I just need space. Thank you for all that you have done. Best wishes, Alli Hart."

Logan read the letter several times. It made no sense. Mat went to Alli's room and confirmed their fears. Her belongings were still there; the room was messy, and things could have been missing, but all of her furniture, plants, and even her laptop were still in the room. She wouldn't have just abandoned her things for the sake of getting some space. Something was very, very wrong.

Logan went back into Alli's room and dug around the drawers. She figured Alli would forgive her later. It took a few minutes, but she found a writing sample of Alli's and brought it back to the kitchen. Mat examined it alongside her. Neither were experts, but after a few minutes, they both decided they were close—either Alli did write it, or someone who knew her very well and knew her handwriting had copied it down on her behalf.

“Should we go back to the police?” Logan asked, but Mat declined. The writing samples looked close enough that they probably would dismiss them and close the case instead of actually finding her. Logan kept it to herself, as she often did around Mat, but she believed Alli did write it and had abandoned them. Why would she take anything with her if she was going to do the thing that Logan feared she would do? Take the demon and run into the forest with a loaded gun.

That night, Logan was inconsolable and isolated. She fell into a restless sleep, every bump in the night jostling her from her slumber.

The next day, she did not come out of her room. She didn't want to eat or interact with anyone. She drank water from the faucet in her bathroom and laid in bed, imagining the worst, wondering if she could feel the moment when Alli did it. After a few hours of these thoughts, Logan went to the bathroom to get some pain pills to relieve the headache that had been plaguing her all day. She took two pills and laid back down.

An hour later, the pain had not subsided—it had only intensified—so she took two more pills, this time more deliberately. She waited a few minutes, absentmindedly playing with the bottle in her hands. She poured the pills into the cap and counted them. What was a normal dose, anyway?

Enough to make the pain go away.

Thirty pills fit in the cap, and she counted them. She arranged them into a circle, playing with them like a child would with building blocks. She was in pain, yet playing with something that could make it go away. Mat would be fine without her, she figured. Alli was gone for good; she felt it in a way, and the world didn't need another day trader. Nothing of note would be lost.

She swallowed two more of the blue pills, her tears and mucus mixing with the water in her mouth, making it take two gulps to swallow. She thought about how much time she had wasted on Earth, how nothing of consequence had happened in all of her years of existence, how futile the entire experience had been. Two more pills, and she thought about the first man who had wanted to die, how desperate he had seemed. Another pair, and she thought about the last, how no one had known he would be the last, not even her. Had she done any good at all? Would she meet them in the afterlife? Would they welcome her, or would they shame her for not trying harder to save them?

But she had tried so hard. She had made sure only the ones who really needed it got what they asked for. She pushed herself beyond her limits to befriend them, to listen, to take their stories in with confidence and repeat the horrors of their lives to no one. The cap was empty now, so she laid back down on the bed and waited for the pain to go away for good.

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“Wake up!”

She woke to a strong physical sensation—Mat was shaking her shoulder vigorously, trying to rouse her.

I'm up, she mouthed, no sound coming out. She sat up, feeling remarkably well and pain-free. "I'm up," she cleared her throat and repeated.

"We have to go now. I found her," Mat said, pulling Logan out of her bed. Moments later, they were in the car, with Logan driving and Mat giving directions. He didn't need a GPS—he knew where they were headed by heart.

Chapter 25

Alli opened her eyes with purpose, confirming the movements with force, feeling the rise of her brow. Her vision was no longer stark black, but had patches of light drifting in. It took her a few minutes, but she was able to tell that the light was changing rapidly. The hum of an engine around her confirmed her fears—she was being kidnapped in a car. Was it Mical? If it was, why could she see? Or was it someone who wanted the trade secrets of her company? A dumb move on their part; she knew nothing. They barely let her add samples to the gels she would make on a daily basis.

She debated yelling and letting her kidnapper know she was awake, but that seemed like a bad idea. So, she stayed silent, trying to pay attention to the car's movements or any sounds from outside. The car drove straight on for what seemed like an hour until it slowed and turned left, hitting a dirt road. The car was going too fast for the unpaved surface, jostling Alli around roughly.

The light was fading now, the patchwork of cloth over her head growing darker. It was nearing evening, and her roommates would be expecting her. Would they suspect a kidnapping? She knew Mical could track her phone, but would Logan? Probably not. Logan did her best to give Alli space.

The car door opened opposite her, and Alli was forcefully pulled out of the car and onto what felt like a chair. The bag came off her head to reveal her ex. Alli avoided eye contact, bewildered by the fact that she could still see. Was she no longer possessed? Had she failed in her mission to keep

the demon away from Mical?

“Look at me!” Mical yelled.

So, no, she hadn’t bonded with the demon yet. Alli could hold off a little longer. She looked toward Mical but still refused to meet her gaze.

“Give it to me. It’s mine,” Mical said, quieter now, more determined.

Alli decided to play ignorant. “What’s yours? This chair? Oh, sure, I’ll get up.” She moved to stand but found herself tied to the chair. She flopped back onto it uselessly.

“I took care of you for years. No one else would have paid what I paid to support you for so long while you flitted around college. You can repay me by doing this one thing for me,” Mical tried again, falsely kind.

Alli scoffed. She had done more for Mical in the past six years than most people would have for their partner.

“I’ve done more than enough for you. I owe you nothing. Just because you paid the bills doesn’t mean you have power over me. I cleaned, cooked, and maintained order. I helped you with your podcast, with your emotions when you were weak. If you think I owe you more than that, then that’s your problem.”

Alli remained defiant, stalling, avoiding Mical for as long as she could. In the end, it was inevitable. Alli had put too much faith in the idea that Mical still cared after what Alli had done—or hadn’t done. She had walked

out on her with no word, no contact, just a hard disconnect at the height of their relationship. A sheer cliff.

So, Alli wasn't too surprised when Mical finally grabbed her head forcefully and made her look at her—really look at her.

Then it was over.

The pain she hadn't realized she was carrying lifted, replaced by the dull ache of relief. Her vision brightened, even in the dim light of the moon filtering through the trees. It would have been a beautiful sight if it weren't for Mical, who was now on the ground in front of her, gasping for air.

Alli was helpless, still tied to the chair. She tugged and pulled her limbs, but it was useless. She yelled for help, figuring it was futile, but heard a distant yell in return. Filled with hope, she yelled back, hoping her friends had gone the distance to find her.

A moment later, Mat rushed into the clearing where Mical had parked the car. He saw Alli and rushed to untie her. Once free, Alli looked to where Mical had been, but the spot was empty. The woman was no longer writhing on the ground.

"She's out here somewhere, Mat," Alli said cautiously, glancing around.

They both searched the area around the car but found nothing—no footprints in the damp soil, no trace of her, not even the keys to her car,

which she would have been carrying. It was as though Mical had vanished, just like all the victims.

Mat directed Alli back to the car where Logan was nervously looking around, keeping an eye out. When she spotted them, relief washed over her face. She put down the pipe Mat always kept by the door and went to hug Alli.

“Did we win?” she asked.

“She’s gone,” Alli replied.

“She escaped?” Logan asked, a glimmer of hope.

“No, she vanished—like all of the victims,” Alli said. Logan looked to Mat, who confirmed they could not find her.

The trio drove home, listening to classical music, trying to drown out the silence between them. They arrived home safely, making sure to check all the locks and set the motion detectors outside. Logan made dinner, ensuring Alli had a balanced meal.

“I only got kidnapped, not starved to death,” Alli tried to joke when she saw how many vegetables Logan had prepared.

“You were gone for three days,” Logan said, as though Alli should already know this.

She blinked, looked around, looked at her body, and blinked again. “I...

no. It felt like it was all one day. It had to have been.”

Mat shook his head with Logan. “It was three days. Day one, you didn’t come home, and we called your work and the police, only to find a disturbing note Mical left on your behalf. Day two was radio silence, and on day three, I finally broke into your iCloud account and found your location.”

Chapter 26

Alli was able to take a few days off from work after explaining what had happened to her boss, who had reported her missing when she didn't return from her afternoon break. Thankfully, he was understanding and gave Alli all the time she needed. He also offered the security footage if she wanted it as evidence to press charges. Alli thanked him, feeling the weight of everything slowly lift as she sank into the stillness around her. She lay on the couch in the living room while Logan made lunch.

The living room had brightened since she and Mat had moved in, no longer cast in dark shadows with the sliding glass door blocked by blankets. The space was now a soft, dull yellow, the walls a pale tan—visually unoffensive and calming. Logan had allowed Alli to grow her plant collection in the living room and on the back patio. Alli had filled the space with peace lilies and various succulents, their dark green leaves offering comfort to her overactive imagination.

It had been three days since Mat had rescued her from the forest, and they had neither heard nor seen any trace of Mical since. Surely, as arrogant and vindictive as Mical was, she would show up eventually—make herself known, seek her revenge, and then some. The anticipation of what might come next was starting to wear them down. They were waiting for any sign that it was okay to relax or that Mical was truly gone.

Someone knocked at the door, and Logan immediately stood up to answer it. She had been doing everything she could to support Alli over the past few days, but Alli knew she couldn't keep leaning on her. She gave

herself until the weekend to get her act together, but the pressure of her own expectations continued to dampen her rest.

George Barnes entered the living room, followed by Logan. He greeted Alli and sat down, looking somber, tired. Mat was at work, so George would have to relay the information to just the two of them. "I received the footage from your job," George began. "Mical really did kidnap you. Not just that... and don't go telling anyone else, but an hour before she came for you, she broke into the evidence locker and stole some things. There's a warrant out for her arrest. If she ever shows up here again, call the police immediately."

Logan's expression darkened. "What did she steal?"

George hesitated, his gaze falling to the floor. "Evidence from the trial against the cult she grew up in. That's probably not a surprise. I tried everything I could to help her recover. I know Mat did, too, but she was always so stubborn."

Alli listened, absorbing the weight of the words. She had walked out on Mical, leaving George to clean up the pieces, but it wasn't her fault Mical couldn't control herself.

They caught up with George for a little while longer, but his sadness and weariness were palpable. After George left, Mat came home, and they filled him in on everything.

"Do we still think she's out there somewhere?" Mat asked, his voice uncertain, as if the tension between them all was about to break.

“I think it’s better to pretend she is,” Logan said quietly. “Better to be ready than to get too comfortable.”

With that, they prepared the house—checked all the locks, made contingency plans, and waited. They all knew it was just a matter of time before Mical would show up again to seek her revenge.

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Of course, she never did. Ten months after the incident, Logan began to wonder if there was any point anymore, but she dared not bring it up to her friends who seemed as diligent as ever that Mical was coming back. If Logan missed a check-in, she’d be chastised, and they would plan more checks, more contingencies—always more planning and prepping for an inevitability that would never happen.

She didn’t mind too much. It was nice to know someone cared enough to know if she were dead or alive—even if it was only because they were next if she went down. She liked her life a little more now. It had more stuff in it, more people, more noise—less quiet, less dead bodies, and for once, fewer nightmares. Logan could think clearly around her friends, like all the background noise in her skull was muted while they were present. It made it harder for her to be apart from them as they grew older together.

Mat talked about moving out one day with his new friend Nate—having a bachelor pad and leaving Logan and Alli alone. But they wanted him to stay. Alli had never mentioned wanting to leave, but Logan

would catch her looking at apartments occasionally, knowing that she could not afford living on her own with the current market.

Occasionally, Logan wanted space like she had on the farm. She wanted the feeling of being the only human for miles in every direction. She wanted to see the wide open space, feel the unabated wind blow against her, hear it whistle through the trees. The urge to run away would boil over every now and then, but she would suppress it—just like she suppressed all of her other bad thoughts that ran through her mind daily. She had told herself she would open herself up to Alli, the idea of her, and she had. But nothing substantial had occurred since, not with the ever-looming threat of Mical's return. They had become close, closer than Logan had been with anyone, but the next steps toward intimacy felt like mountains compared to the molehills of what would actually transpire. But she would try. She could try to remain open to the prospects.

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“Do you remember anything that was in them?” Logan asked Mat one day, referencing the notebooks Mical had stolen before she vanished. Before they ever told him what George had said, he knew what Mical had taken—he was a teenager when it happened, so his memory was trustworthy.

“I remember a lot of things. Most of them I don't want to remember or say out loud. I also doubt any of it is practically useful. It was all a bunch of stupid, made-up spellwork and insanely dumb beliefs that had no basis in the real world. Like alien gods talking to them, making offerings to them. Just some random dude's schizophrenic ramblings that ended up

destroying several lives.” Mat responded.

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It was two years after they last saw Mical, and they were almost ready to finally relax—finally not jump at every shadow or be paranoid about every footstep that followed them. The anticipation had begun to rot, exhausting their willpower to maintain their diligence.

“Maybe one day,” Mat added hopefully. He wanted to talk but couldn’t find the words most days to explain the things he witnessed. Even with the knowledge that the demon had been real and had possessed his two roommates, he still couldn’t believe huge portions of what had occurred.

When he was younger, the ideas were like fairy tales. This creature will imbue you with his otherworldly gifts, and he will bring about the end of times, but we who are so loyal to him will be spared. It was a fun horror story, nothing to be taken seriously. As he grew older and saw the lengths to which his community would go to maintain their beliefs, he was horrified. The child’s version was nice and simple, but the adult version had more components—more sacrifices, more mutilation, and abuse. The first time he was asked to witness a sacrifice, a duty he would have to perform regularly for his sister who was to become the new vessel, he threw up. He couldn’t think about it anymore. Wouldn’t.

It was an honest relief to find that when Mical finally fulfilled her duty all these years later, she simply vanished—like the victims did—rather than actually inherit the godlike abilities.

He always assumed she was gone for good, turned to dust like the rest, but the paranoia wouldn't let him rest unless he had a plan. He was the most insistent of the three to make a plan, to check in, to check on the others. His whole life, he had tried to run away from this—from all of his problems—and it worked for a long time. But now, he felt ready to face it if she ever came back.

But she never did.

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Fully five years after he last saw his sister, he finally decided it was time to relax and admit he was right—she was dead. A lot had happened in the last several years, events that would have drawn Mical back into their lives. George retired, and the whole police department, along with most of the community, celebrated. Logan moved Alli's belongings into her room, a small and private act, but would have had Mical at their door within minutes if she knew. He had been promoted, had a steady girlfriend, and was almost ready to move out on his own—an event Mical would have loved to belittle.

Nothing they did, no accomplishment or setback, seemed to draw her back into their lives, which made perfect sense—since she was dead. The world continued to turn. People died, people were born, and the cycle of humanity continued without Mical McMaster on Earth.

Mat felt it in the atmosphere that day—the day he finally decided to let go of the idea that she was still out there. The air was crisp, filled with cold particles of water hitting his face as he walked through the morning.

It was October, and the sun was shining brightly through the fog, giving the morning the feeling of new beginnings. He loved these early autumn mornings—how wet and still the air was before the afternoon winds began, how the warmth of the sun radiated through to hit his face and warm his body. It was going to be a good day. A great day, even.

He arrived back home, determined to accomplish his goals today. He had chores to do, like any adult, and wanted to finish them so he could enjoy his day off. He did the dishes, his laundry, cleaned his room, changed the oil in Alli's car, and watered what felt like a thousand plants she had now. Her and Logan were out of town, so he was in charge of the house. It was too big for him, and he wasn't sure how Logan handled living there alone before they moved in. It made him feel too small living there without a companion, so he called his girlfriend to come over.

The last chore of the day was to check the mail after eleven. He went out while lunch was cooking and grabbed everything from the box. Junk, junk, bill, junk, junk, bill—and a card addressed to Alli, probably a congratulations, but it had no return address. Mat put it in Alli's mail pile and left it for her. It wasn't unheard of for her coworkers to send her mail or postcards, so he thought nothing of it and went about his day.

They arrived back home a few days later with gifts from their trip and matching sunburns. It took them a few days to settle back into their normal routine, with Alli going back to work and Logan continuing her work from home. On Friday, Mat came home after a half day at work to find them sitting on the couch, bewildered and uncomfortable.

"There you are. When did this come?" Alli asked him, holding up the

opened envelope that had no return address.

Mat thought about it. “It was when you were on vacation. Maybe Monday?” He hadn’t given it that much thought, but now his body started responding to the situation. “Wha... why? What was in it?”

Alli held it out to him. It was a simple card with sunflowers on the front and the words “Thank You” in word art. Inside, the handwriting sent an injection of adrenaline straight to his core, in her scratchy, not-quite-cursive, not-exactly-print style:

“Thanks for taking care of me for all of those years. I would have starved to death if it weren’t for you. It took a while, but I finally found a new source of nourishment for my soul. Farewell, so long, and thanks for all the flesh.

-With Love,
Lester”

About the Author

A consciously curious crafter of the Universe

&

Careful about their selection of the stream

&

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Checkout my website for more writing, fiction and nonfiction.