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For my father, Jim Sutter –
the guy you want around in the apocalypse.

1

Chain-link clawed at clothes as we ducked through the hole in the fence. Ahead, the old factory cast late-afternoon shadows across an overgrown field, broken windows yawning with glass teeth. Wind-waved grass turned the building's stillness into threat – a predator waiting to pounce.

"Oh, *hells* yes." I rested the collapsed tripod against the ground and got some B-roll.

"It sure *looks* haunted." Holly's agreement came with noticeably less enthusiasm.

I pointed to a patch of buckled pavement shot through with lines of dandelions. "We'll do the intro over there."

Holly frowned. "Why not here?"

"Wrong angle." I pointed at the sun, then at my nose.

Holly rolled her eyes so hard her whole head lolled back. "Your nose looks *great,* Cara."

"'Great' as in 'Great Wall of China': Massive. Astonishing. Visible from space."

"Fact check: the Great Wall is not, in fact, visible from space."

"Unlike my nose."

Holly sighed but followed. Around us, the paper mill sprawled like a box of dumped LEGOs, all smokestacks and boilers and crumbling warehouses. Off to the right, pilings held part of it out over the burbling Snoqualmie River.

"Perfect." I framed the scene, checked the sun again, then stepped in front, leaving room for Holly in the shot. "See? Much better."

Holly leaned in to check Camera One, which was really just my dad's old smartphone. "Your nose looks exactly the same."

"Like a tanker ship, and twice as oily. But now less obvious! Gotta get the shadows right."

"You gotta get *therapy*."

Easy for her to say – Holly's flat nose fit her face perfectly, completing her whole round-cheeked pixie thing. Plus, she had the luchador mask.

"Just roll camera," I said.

"Not until you agree I'm right." Holly's Bantering Face softened into the giant puppy eyes of Concerned Face. "Seriously, Cara. You look like Robin from *Stranger Things*."

"So I look like the weird one?"

"You said she was the *hot* one!"

"Also true." I'd let Maya Hawke explore my Upside Down any day. And I *did* kind of look like a redheaded version of her. In the right light. If you forgot your glasses.

Holly gave a triumphant grin. "So you admit you're a total snack."

There was no stopping Holly in Mom Mode. The wrestling mask wasn't just a disguise – she was merciless in her friendship, taking you apart in the Emotional Support Octagon.

"Okay, fine! I'm gorgeous and confident and *definitely* don't have a giant zit I'm gonna edit out in post. Now will you *please* hit record?"

Holly gave me one last evaluating look, then pulled on her mask. She tapped the screen and ran over to stand next to me.

The thing is, I *was* proud – mostly, at least. While only sociopaths are *completely* proud of themselves, at eighteen, I'd spent plenty of years learning the hard way not to give a shit what anyone else thought of me. And while I might not love my nose, my outfit today was as snatched as always: form-fitting maroon coveralls that matched my

cherry Docs, unzipped to the waist to flaunt a black-and-white-checked top and a black bandana. Plus my signature white shorty moto jacket.

I might not be the best ghost hunter on YouTube, but I was damn sure the best-*dressed.* I gave the camera a wide smile.

"Hey there, hunters! Welcome back to *Caranormal Activity*. I'm your host, Cara. And with me as always, ready to provide spiritual security, is the Catholic commando herself – the one and only Masked Exorcist!"

Holly grinned through red-and-gold polyester and did a bicep curl with her Bible.

"Today we're at the old Stossel Paper Mill. Founded in 1926, it was shut down in the eighties. While it was operating, the mill was a nightmare of acid burns, dust explosions, crushings by giant logs – all the sorts of traumatic deaths primed to generate hauntings."

I made my face go somber.

"Sadly, not all the death is historical. A little over a year ago, local high school senior Aiden Reyes lost his life in one of these buildings, leading to renewed calls for the site to be torn down." I paused respectfully, then grinned. "Which is why we're investigating while we still can! Now let's go find some ghosts!"

I held the pose, giving myself padding for the edit, then relaxed.

Holly ran back to the phone. "Got it!"

"All right, let's move in." I slid my backpack off my shoulder.

Holly picked up the tripod and grimaced. "Do we *have* to go inside?"

"Um, yes . . . ? Obviously?" I pulled out my Maglite. A headlamp would leave my hands free, but it was literally impossible to look cool in a headlamp.

"Yeah, okay." Holly still didn't sound happy.

I took a closer look at her. "You're scared."

"No!" She made an offended face, then snorted. "I mean, okay – *yes.* It's just . . . that guy *died* here."

"Yeah, and if it turns out he's an angry ghost, you can go all Matthew, Mark, and Luke on his ass. Just not until I've recorded it."

I wasn't *quite* as cavalier as I sounded about tromping through somebody's tragedy. It was one of two reasons I'd agreed to put off hunting in the mill for this long, despite its convenient location.

But then yesterday I'd gotten the letter.

Dear Cara,

The admissions committee has reviewed your application, and unfortunately . . .

That had cinched it. Finding a ghost was now officially my only ticket out of Stossel's suburban purgatory, and there was no time to waste. If that meant dancing on some upperclassman's grave, then lace up my fucking pointe shoes.

Holly wouldn't want to hear that, of course. A part of me wanted to tell her anyway – to remind her that this wasn't just a hobby for me, that *some* people didn't have their perfect life all laid out and humming along, ready to carry them away after graduation.

Instead, I looped an arm around her shoulder.

"Besides," I said, "wouldn't laying his spirit to rest be a good deed?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Yeah, because that's *totally* why we're out here. Your subscriber numbers have nothing to do with it."

I spread my arms. "It's a virtuous cycle."

Holly crossed her own arms, still holding the tripod. "Whatever. I'm not worried about *ghosts.* I'm worried about *becoming* one – falling

through the floor into some rusty chemical vat. Nobody even knows we're out here."

"Again: obviously." I softened. "Look, people hang out here all the time. We'll just take a peek, okay?" I tapped her arm gently with the flashlight. "Besides, what're the odds we'll *both* fall into a rusty vat?"

"You're so comforting." But she began walking toward the factory, using the tripod as a makeshift Steadicam.

A trampled-down path through the grass skirted the big buildings with their concrete foundations and yellow-brown brick. Glassless windows with rotting frames offered glimpses of arcane machinery – tangled pipes and mysterious tanks squatting in darkness. I shoved my phone inside to capture what I could. It might not be ghosts, but it was still atmospheric as *shit*.

Next to a particularly moody section, I raised a hand. "Hold up – let's get a wide shot of us in front of this."

Holly dutifully hauled the tripod out into the field, then ran over to stand next to me. The two of us clowned for the camera, me pretending to try to climb through one of the windows while Holly held me back.

And that's when the other reason I avoided the factory came sauntering around the corner.

Sophia was *supposed* to be at track practice. I hated that I still memorized her schedule every year, but it made it easier to avoid her – except for today, apparently. Two boys and a girl followed, weed stench rolling off them like a roadkill skunk.

Sophia froze at the sight of us, a Disney-villain smile spreading catlike across angelic features.

"Making more videos, Cara?" Her words oozed false innocence.

I ran for the camera, but they were closer – stupid wide-angle shot. Sophia grabbed the tripod, tossing it back to her boyfriend. Brandon Hamm might be a barely sentient sack of creatine, but you didn't need

to be a National Merit Scholar to play flying monkey to Sophia's wicked witch. He lifted the tripod up over his head, miles out of reach. "Oh," he crooned, "did you want this?"

I stopped short, refusing to give them the satisfaction of watching me jump for it. "Give it back." A distant part of me took pride in managing to keep the whine out of my voice.

It didn't matter. The sharks smelled blood and spread out, circling me.

"Dance for us, Scarf Girl!"

"Release the kraken!"

"Don't get too close now – she's feisty!"

My hands clenched into fists at my sides, but there were four of them, and Crony Girl had her phone out, meaning anything I did now would be all over school tomorrow. Nothing to do but stand there, watching Sophia's poison smile while her pet meat-mountain looked to her with a doglike hunger for approval.

Holly came running over, yanking off the luchador mask. "Knock it off!"

Sophia did an exaggerated double take, as if noticing her for the first time. "*Holly . . . ?* What are you *wearing*?" As if she hadn't hate-watched my channel plenty. When it came to researching your enemies, Sun Tzu had nothing on Sophia Franklin.

Holly ignored her, focusing instead on the Auxiliary Jock, a less beef-tastic dude with spiky hair. "Noah! Is *this* who you are? What would Cammy think?"

Noah the Arkless Wonder shrank under Holly's flood of disapproval, but Holly was already rounding on the other girl. "And Madeline – you want your mom to find out you're smoking weed?"

"I didn't!" the girl protested, but she took a step back.

Sophia squared up to Holly. "Nobody would believe you."

Holly crossed her arms. "Wanna find out?"

The two stared each other down – the popular girl vs. the girl people actually liked.

At last Sophia gave a sniff and reached back without looking. Brandon deposited the camera in her hand.

"Here." She handed it over, tossing a final smirky side-eye in my direction. "It's nice you're here to chaperone, Hol. We wouldn't want Scarf Girl recording anything . . . *inappropriate.*"

"Don't call her that!" Holly snapped.

But Sophia was already flouncing away, douchey ducklings trailing behind her.

Holly waited till they'd disappeared back along the trail, leaving me my pride, then put a hand on my arm. "You okay?"

My stomach quivered, muscles spasming with the strain of containing my shame. Hot tears pricked at the backs of my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. Not for Sophia. Never again.

Holly squeezed. "We could come back a different day . . ."

"No." The word came out sharp, but I couldn't help it. Holly didn't *get* it. Perfect, lovable Holly, who always came so quickly to my defense – she didn't understand. We didn't have *time.*

Because in four months she'd be gone.

And I'd still be right here.

"Sorry." I turned back toward the factory, blinking with purpose, scrubbing my eyes dry by force of will. "Just keep recording."

Holly still looked concerned, but she pulled her mask back on and followed, camera at the ready.

The trail came to an entrance, its door long gone save for a single rusty hinge. I took a deep breath, then forced a cheerful smile and turned, giving a thumbs-up for the camera as we headed inside.

The ceiling here had collapsed, sunlight illuminating a carpet of

splintered wood and broken bottles. Graffiti covered the walls in a thousand shades of dick: Big spray-painted dicks. Small Sharpie-scrawled dicks. Dicks with pitchforks, dicks with faces, dicks proclaiming that Trump won or all cops are bastards.

"I'm sensing a theme," Holly deadpanned.

"Welcome to the Phallus Palace." I looked into the camera. "I've gotta say, I'm disappointed. Half of these are barely recognizable." I motioned for Holly to zoom in on a particularly underwhelming example. "Like, what is this? A sad elephant?"

"It kinda looks like a croquet mallet," she offered.

"There we go, then. Gentlemen, if you're gonna draw a dong, take some pride in your craft."

"You'd think a bunch of guys getting together to draw genitals would be less homophobic, too." Holly leaned in to examine a scrawled message. "They didn't even spell 'Leviticus' right."

"Do better, people." I moved through an archway guarded by a long, serpentine penis with scales and wings. *Dongles & Dragons.*

The next few rooms were all stained concrete floors studded with asymmetrical platforms and rusted bolts. Eventually we found ourselves in a chamber with its ceiling still intact. A row of small windows sloped rays of light like a Renaissance painting down onto a stained mattress ringed by burger wrappers and empty forty bottles. *Still Life with Crabs.*

I swept my hand out dramatically. "And here we have the honeymoon suite. Complete with bottle service."

Holly covered the nose of her mask. "Please tell me that smell is *animal* pee."

"Humans are animals." A doorway at the other end led on into darkness, and I shined my flashlight through onto a stout tree of ductwork. It would have made for a creepier backdrop, but Holly was

already clearly uncomfortable. I waved to a spot beneath the windows. "Let's set up here."

With the tripod positioned, I handed Holly our compass, then addressed the camera, holding up my own phone to display its screen.

"The Masked Exorcist will now use this compass to look for magnetic anomalies, while I scan for abnormal electromagnetic frequencies. You can see here I've got the EMF Detective app, but there are plenty of others out there – hint hint, sponsors!"

We set to work. After several minutes of nothing, I turned back to the camera.

"Okay, no anomalies yet. But don't get discouraged! While unexplained electromagnetic phenomena can indicate a haunting, EM fields can *also* cause hallucinations. So a normal EMF reading just means that if you *do* see a ghost, at least you know you're not trippin' balls."

I traded my phone for my spirit box and began scanning the static between stations, looking for spectral murmurs. Across the room, Holly stared down at the gross mattress with equal parts disgust and fascination. "You think people really sleep here?"

"I think they do more than sleep." My traitorous mind immediately pulled up images of Sophia and her boyfriend. Thanks, brain.

"*Ew.*" Holly wrinkled her nose.

"What, you don't wanna lose your virginity in an abandoned paper mill, surrounded by decaying Arby's bags?" I held the radio up to my ear.

"How'd you know my wedding theme?"

We should really have been doing this in silence, but I figured banter was part of the channel's appeal. Maybe the entire appeal, given that we'd never actually, you know, *found* a ghost.

Holly was still frowning at the mattress. "It just seems so *sad.*"

"Some people get off on sad." I clicked the radio off. "They do not, however, get off on twenty minutes of static. Come on, let's try the scope."

I pulled out the plastic case and popped the latch, revealing a battered thermal imaging scope nestled in molded foam. Dad had been so excited when I'd asked for it for my birthday, even if I hadn't wanted a rifle to go with it.

"Can I use it this time?" Holly asked.

"Sure." I grabbed the tripod.

Holly put the scope to her eye and walked slowly through the rooms, scanning back and forth. I followed, trying for a nice action shot, then got distracted by some rare non-phallic graffiti of a Satanic goat head. I thought it might make for a good closing image: I could fade out until it was just—

"*Cara.*"

Holly stood frozen midstep like a deer, scope trained on the doorway to the unlit sections.

"There's something in there."

I sprinted over and snatched the scope, shoving the tripod into her hands. Through the digital lens, the concrete walls around us were cool purples, broken by the vibrant orange squares of windows. The lightless room beyond the doorway lit up just as bright, a rainbow of temperature gradients.

At the far end, half-blocked by rusting metal, a cold spot danced, blue-black against the warmer background. Maybe two feet wide and six feet tall.

Exactly the right size for a person.

Finally! I yanked out my phone and started recording, holding it up to the scope's eyepiece. I widened my eyes insistently at Holly, who'd totally forgotten about the main camera. When she pointed it at me, I whispered, "Localized drops in temperature can indicate the

presence of spirits." I jerked my head toward the dark room. "Set up the tripod and give me some light."

She hesitated. "Maybe—"

"I can't hold the flashlight, Hol – I mean, Exorcist. Come on." I didn't take my eyes off my phone screen.

Behind me, the tripod's feet clicked into position. A flashlight beam shot past me into the gloom.

I followed it in. The floor here switched from concrete to wood, the old gray boards creaking. I placed each foot carefully, ready to leap backward at the first sound of splintering.

On my phone, the cold spot flickered like an inverted flame.

The flashlight beam bounced and jittered as Holly did her best to angle it from the door's entrance. I felt a burst of irritation that she wasn't following me in – followed immediately by guilt. She was just doing the responsible thing. As usual.

The cold spot was on the other side of what looked like an old boiler. I ducked beneath a flaking pipe . . .

. . . and my heart sank.

There was a hole in the floor beneath my "ghost," leading down several feet into some sort of access space. I put my hand out and felt the breeze blowing up from it, cooled by its subterranean passage.

"It's just a draft." I got a few seconds of it through the scope, then flipped to the front camera and smiled. "And *that*, hunters and haunters, is why we investigate."

I ended the recording, my phone popping up a notification that my battery was almost dead. I shoved it back into my pocket and stared down at the hole.

So close. So close to a new identity as the wunderkind investigator who proved ghosts were real. A new life far from people like Sophia. From best friends who left you behind.

As if triggered by my self-pity, my mind flashed to the boy who'd died here – and how he'd maybe fallen through a hole just like this one.

Okay, so things *could* be worse. Barely.

Holly called from the doorway: "You okay?"

I sighed. "Yeah. Coming."

Out in the mattress room, the light from the windows climbed the walls, warm with impending sunset.

"Think we've got enough?" Holly asked.

Of course not, I wanted to snarl. It wouldn't be *enough* until I found a damn *ghost.* And the factory was huge – you could search for days and not cover it all. I wanted to go into the collapsed sections. To spend the night here, listening to it creak and groan. To read out lists of everyone who'd ever died here, calling out to their spirits.

But I couldn't snap at Holly – especially after what she'd just done. After *everything* she'd done for me. She'd never cared about ghost hunting, and I could tell from the way she was fidgeting with her phone's Keroppi PopSocket that she'd exhausted any actual enthusiasm and was now burning pure, unleaded friendship. I could always trust her to back me up, but that didn't mean I needed to abuse the privilege.

Especially when I wouldn't have it for long.

"Sure, okay." I put the scope away and pulled my secret weapon out of my backpack's laptop pocket. "Lemme finish up real quick?"

"Cool." Holly smiled in relief and scampered back toward the Gallery O' Schlongs. "I'll wait outside."

I let her go and laid my secret weapon out reverently on the floor.

Somebody who didn't know better would probably have called it a Ouija board, but that's like the people who call all soda "Coke". This was no mass-produced cardboard novelty. Its double-stacked letters arched in beautiful calligraphy across a smooth sheet of lacquered

cherrywood. Beneath the alphabet ran a line of numbers and the words "yes", "no", and "goodbye". It came with a matching planchette – a little heart-shaped piece on rollers, burned with the image of a winged skull. It looked like a relic from the Salem Witch Trials. A blasphemous treasure from the Vatican's secret vaults.

I'd gotten it off Etsy.

I made sure the camera was properly framing things, then sat down cross-legged and put both hands on the planchette. I took a deep breath, trying to clear my mind and open myself.

The way talking boards worked – in theory, at least – was that ghosts could use the planchette like a cursor, rolling it around to point at letters and spell words. It worked best with multiple people, but while Holly's Catholic conscience was cool with helping me ghost hunt, she drew the line at attempts to actually summon the dead.

Which was fine, honestly. The thing that turned talking boards into a party game was that multiple hands touching the planchette made it easy to nudge without being sure who was moving it. Using the board by myself meant that, if it moved, I'd know for sure whether it was me or something else.

Without Holly, the room was silent. I soaked it in, then murmured, "If any spirits be present, please reveal yourselves."

And I waited.

Around me, the building ticked and sighed in the breeze. In the distance, Holly's phone dinged.

Nothing.

It didn't really matter – not to the channel, anyway. I could point to the winning lottery numbers, and people would still never believe I'd actually communicated with the dead. This part was just for me. So far, I'd done it in a dozen different places, and never moved the planchette except for one time when I'd sneezed. Pollen: 1, Poltergeists: 0.

But still . . .

Feeling simultaneously glad and guilty that Holly wasn't here to disapprove, I called, "Aiden Reyes. If you're here, please make yourself known."

More waiting. A plane rumbled past overhead. Somewhere in the distance, a car stereo subwoofed its overcompensation.

All at once, the tears I'd managed to hold off earlier came rushing back, burning up out of my ducts and boiling down across my cheeks. Not for Sophia – *fuck* Sophia. These were for Holly, and the letter, and the future that should have been mine.

I scrubbed a fist angrily across my cheek and gripped the planchette. "Come on, Aiden, you fucker," I husked. "I *need* this."

A puff of cold air brushed across my damp cheek.

I jerked upright, jolted out of my misery as the hairs on the back of my neck rose.

"Hello?" I stretched out with my senses, straining to take everything in. I forced my fingers to unclench, resting them lightly on the planchette, ready to help it move. *Begging* it to. "Aiden?"

I held my breath, willing the breeze to come again.

But everything remained still.

Outside, birds sang to the impending sunset. In my pocket, my phone gave an answering chirp that meant *Okay, but seriously, though, you need to charge me, like,* now.

"Goddammit." I stood and turned off the camera.

You'd think failing every time would make it hurt less.

But you'd be an idiot. Failure is *failure.* You never get used to it.

Ask me how I know.