

Hiding, Haunting

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Hiding, Haunting

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Summary

“I don’t believe in ghosts,” she tells them, and in the light of day, her voice is steady and strong.

Mia realizes real fast why she and Dom are always the ones who choose where they run to, because when Brian gets to do it, they end up freezing their asses off in Canada. *Canada!* In the middle of winter. Because there is anything about that which sounds like a good idea.

“Canada,” Dom grumbles, arms crossed over his chest. His signature intimidation stance is undermined by the puffy winter coat and the hat with ear flaps that he wears. She bites back a laugh. Maybe that’s why Brian chose somewhere cold. Dom’s not nearly as effective all bundled up; instead of a grumpy badass, he looks more like a petulant kid. She manages to make it to the bathroom before she reacts to that thought, and there she laughs until she cries.

There’s an edge of hysteria to it. She knows what panic looks like. Knows how to push it into other emotions rather than give in to her fear.

When she’s calmed herself down, she washes her hands and face at the sink, wipes herself dry with paper towels. She has heavy, shadowed bags under her eyes and her lips are chapped. She licks them reflexively, tastes a bitter metal like blood. Her gums aren’t bleeding, and she hasn’t been cut anywhere. Her nose is fine, but it feels like a nose bleed in her sinuses, down the back of her throat. Slight, but there with every breath, every swallow.

Mia goes back to the guys, grabs Brian’s beer, finishes it in one big gulp. It’s cheap beer, lukewarm, and tastes like watered-down piss, but it washes her throat clean.

*

The cold has settled into her body, making her skin burn and her bones ache. Even in a Jeep jacked for the cold weather, they couldn’t make it all the way up the mountain in the storm. They left the Jeep on the side of the road, hiked up a gravel driveway. Mia’s not sure what she expected to be at the other end of it -- though when she gave it any thought at all, mostly she pictured an old white mountain man with a shotgun, pissed his off-the-grid living had been disrupted -- but what they get is a dilapidated old Victorian. Everything is weathered, many of the details worn away, but it stands in the middle of the snowstorm, somehow, inexplicably, real, the pink and yellow paint on the outside still visible, if faint.

All the windows on the first floor are boarded over, and so is the front door, but the boards over the back have already started to peel away, and they’re able to force their way through.

It’s only marginally warmer inside the house than outside, but at least they are no longer standing in the snow and cold wind.

The rooms inside are small, the hallways narrow and dark. It’s clear that no one has lived there for a long time; there’s no power and dirty everywhere with no sign of footprints or anything being moved. What’s weird, though, is how much furniture is left behind. And not just broken junk pieces, which would still be crappy to leave, but understandable. There are chairs in the kitchen, though no table. A long, narrow sofa in a small living room, cockeyed in front of a fireplace. Two arm chairs, the fabric torn but the frames solid, in what could *also* be called a living room. No dust covers anywhere, and twigs and leaves on the floor, but intact furniture.

“We need wood,” Brian says, poking at the fireplace. “I think the flue is clean enough to build a fire here.”

Dominic has his hat in one hand, and is rubbing the other over the top of his head. He’s several days past time to shave, and she can hear the scratch of stubble against his glove all the way across the room.

“What do you know about cold weather survival?” he grumbles. “You grew up in California just like us.”

Brian laughs, and, somehow, still has the energy to flash that bright smile of his. It makes her toes curl in her boots, makes her want to beam back at him, silly and giddy and happy.

“But my mom’s family was from Montana,” he says. “I learned a thing or two.”

Dom grumbles something, but tugs his hat down over his ears again, and they head back out into the storm.

Mia watches them go, fondness warming her through. Not enough to push away the terrible, visceral cold, but enough that she feels energetic enough to explore further.

The stairs look solid, but when she reaches the third one, the whole thing starts shaking and creaking. She leaps back to the main floor, light on her feet, and leaves it, and the upstairs, alone. The other side of the house has yet another room that could be called a living room (no fireplace, one chair, one couch), a dining room (long table, boarded over fireplace, no chairs), and a music room (upright piano, one leg broken so it lists to the side, half the keys missing). No blankets hidden away, no pillows that don’t look like they’ve been gnawed through by rats and squirrels and other creatures. Just dark, empty rooms off shadowed, narrow halls.

She catches the edge of movement out of the corner of her eye and spins toward it, stepping from the music room into the hallway. It is long, and dark, and empty, but she could have sworn that as she’d started through the doorway, something had taken a fast step back, out of sight. Except there is no out of sight, not in that direction. The hallway continues a few steps past the music room, but ends with no other doors.

Mia’s chest is tight, and she forces herself to take a long, slow breath, deep enough to fill her body with oxygen. No shallow breathing in her unnecessary fear.

As she turns to head back to the living room, breath controlled and intentional, she swears she hears a sigh behind her.

When she looks back, again, nothing.

Mia wipes her hands on her hips. Hurries back to the main room. Very carefully doesn’t let herself run.

*

Once they have a fire going, it’s not terrible in that first living room. She pushed the furniture out of the way, and the three of them settle on the floor in front of the fireplace, leaning

against their bags and each other. They have plenty of water, still, and energy bars. It's not real food, but it will keep them going.

For awhile, at least. Mia's not prepared for a blizzard. She's not prepared for Canada at all.

(She's not prepared to be on the run. She's supposed to be at home, finishing her degree, finding work at a hospital. She held herself safe, even while everything exploded around her and her family disappeared. She puts her hand on Dom's arm. Reminds herself he's there with her. Brian, too. She still has them, if no one else. She's not alone. She won't let go of the last of her family, not ever again.)

Mia dozes awhile, curled against Brian, her head in his lap, her legs pressed against Dominic. She thinks maybe they fall asleep too, because when she wakes, they're still, unmoving but for deep breathing, though Dom comes awake fast when she sits up, Brian only half a second behind.

"What?" Brian asks, and reaches for her immediately.

She shrugs. Listens. Because she didn't just wake up, something woke her. She can't tell what it was. The crackle of the fire is loud in the silence of the room, the wail of the wind outside distance, but noisy. She can hear herself breathe, and Brian and Dom with her.

And then, faint, a rattle and creak on the stair.

Someone taking a step.

Adrenaline crashes through Mia, and she leaps to her feet. She's fully dressed, including her boots. Her steps are loud as she throws herself at the door, wrenches it open. Stares, wide eyed, at an empty hall, an empty staircase.

An empty house, but always, at the corner of her eye, movement.

*

"I don't like it here," Dom says after she finally tells them what's up. It surprises her, a little, that he would admit his discomfort, but at the same time, it doesn't. He's always been just a little more superstitious than she is. Just a little more open, when it counts. That's why people come to him, circle him, drawn in by his gravity.

He can show his weakness, let himself be vulnerable, because he's the center of their world, and he calls the shots. She can never let a crack in her armor show.

"It's just one night," Mia tells him. Tells herself. She's not superstitious. She's science and medicine, rational and logical. She doesn't believe in ghosts, or haunted houses, or walls carrying the weight of all the lives lived inside them.

But alone here, only the firelight and their flashlights to push back the darkness, it feels like maybe she should believe.

"Just one night," Brian echoes. Puts his arm around Mia. Watches Dom close.

“One night,” Dom agrees at last. He has to agree. There’s nowhere else for them to go.

*

Mia doesn’t think she’ll sleep again. Someone has to keep the fire going, after all, and though they’re supposed to take turns, she imagines she’ll sit up all night, watching and listening, no matter whether Brian or Dom is the one with her.

To her surprise, when her first shift is over, she’s asleep the moment she pillows her head on her arm. Her dreams are shadowed, but she can’t remember them when she’s jolted awake sometime later.

The fire burns low. There’s no sound from Dom or Brian; when she glances for them, for a long, terrible moment, she can’t see them, and thinks she’s alone. In the room, at least, because this time, she knows what woke her.

She can hear music, pleasant at first, a faint echo of a beautiful song. When her hand touches the door handle -- when did she get up? When did she cross the room? -- the metal is cold, and there’s a discordant jangle of sound, the wrong keys hit, a minor chord breaking apart.

Shadows flicker at the bottom of the door. Her chest is tight. She’s holding her breath. Her hand moves to open the door even though she hasn’t told it to, actively does not want to see what’s on the other side. The door cracks as it moves, the sound of brittle bones breaking.

“Mia!”

Brian’s voice is loud in her ear, his arms tight around her. She blinks in the sudden brightness; Dom is there, too, holding a flashlight on her. He doesn’t aim it at her face, but even the edge of it is bright enough after all that darkness that she squints in pain.

“God, that was close.” Brian’s really clinging to her. “What are you doing up here?”

“What?” Mia asks, the only thing she can say. As her eyes adjust, she realizes she’s upstairs. The top floor of the house is all open, any walls that had been there once gone. There are holes in the floor, and the room beneath it looks very far away. She’s almost at the edge of the biggest hole, and she thinks, from the way Brian is tugging at her, that she was right at the edge when he grabbed her. Right at the edge and ready to take another step.

“You were dancing,” Dom tells her. His voice is rough. Sleep, maybe. From the flash of white when he looks at her, at the hole, across the room, she thinks, more likely, fear.

“Dancing,” she repeats, because she doesn’t know what else to say. She doesn’t remember dancing. She doesn’t remember anything, really, but the faint clash of a terrible chord, broken open and bleeding sound.

*

Brian keeps asking her what happened, what she was doing, did she remember her dreams. Dom lets her be silent. Gives her a hug. Makes her eat and drink. Promises to keep watch while she sleeps, but there’s no way she’s closing her eyes again.

The night is long, but eventually, morning comes. The storm is over. They make their way out of the house and back to the Jeep. Get it started, dig it out of the snowdrift. Load their bags again, get ready to leave. It's almost warm inside by the time they get it back on the road. Mia very carefully, very intentionally, does not look back at the house as they leave, not once.

"I don't believe in ghosts," she tells them, and in the light of day, her voice is steady and strong.

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