

What you chase, sometimes you catch

“Thanks for coming out here with me,” Amy said as she adjusted the tab on her rear-view mirror.

“No problem, Babe,” Cody said cheerfully from the passenger seat of the old civic they shared. “Honestly, these youtube dudes sound kinda sketchy anyway. I still think that name of theirs has to be a typo or something.”

“Oh, ‘Ghost Shitters?’” Amy laughed. “You didn’t get a chance to watch their other stuff. They are theoretically legit. If the cell service out here wasn’t such trash, I’d tell you to watch them on your phone.”

“Eh, not that it would have made a difference,” Cody said looking out the window purposefully. “I might have let the service expire.”

“Fuck, Babe, really? You tell me this now?” Amy said, letting her head fall back and bounce off the ratty headrest.

“I’ll have it back on in a couple days, I promise. My last few clients have been slow to pay me. You know how that is.”

“You are too fucking nice, Cody. We clearly have bills to pay.”

“Yeah, but if I push too hard, they won’t hire me again. Besides, the gas station pays on Friday. I’ll have the phones back on by then.”

Amy sighed heavily. “When were you gonna tell me?”

“After the gig tonight. I figured if this ‘Zane’ dude paid cash in hand like he promised, it would kinda mellow the news.”

“Yeah, yeah. I suppose.”

“That’s the other reason I came. That way, if things went south, I would be right there anyway.” Cody said sweetly.

“I swear, boy, if you weren’t cute.”

“But I am. I know my job.”

“All right, all right. Well, your job now is to help me find this place. It’s been nothing but trees since we left the city and it’s getting spooky.”

Cody gazed out at the interlaced wall of trees that lined the road the couple had been traveling for close to two hours. “Are we actually supposed to see it from the road?”

“Yeah. It’s the only thing out here besides trees and bears.” Amy said.

“Wait. I think I see it.” Cody pointed towards a break in the tree line.

The break in the trees showed an old, derelict building surrounded by wide open, but

very overgrown fields. They could just make out a pair of vehicles from the road. A large van and a black SUV, both with white GS logos on the side. The pair found their turn off, nestled into what probably had once been a picturesque copse of trees moments later.

As they pulled up, they found the building was an old, abandoned hospital. Its age wasn't as obvious as its lack of upkeep. The paint on the hewn stone walls was cracked and peeling and numerous windows had surrendered to the elements. Weeds and wild roses had conquered most of the facade, giving the building distinct, lost world feeling.

"Okay. This place is creepy as fuck," Cody muttered.

"Well, at least these guys know how to pick their locations," Amy said, throwing the car into park.

No sooner had they parked were they greeted by a slim, short woman in jeans and a white shirt with a stylized 'GS' over the right breast. She wore a slightly concerned expression as she jogged over to the car.

"Are you the sound?" She asked as Amy and Cody exited the car.

"Yeah. Is everything okay?" Amy asked.

"Maybe?" The girl laughed nervously. "Come on over before you unpack. I'm Jen, by the way. I'm camera."

Amy and Cody shared a look before following Jen towards the building. Even before they rounded the van, voices could be heard that, while not loud and heated, certainly weren't calm or relaxed.

"Zane, for real, Dude, this place isn't to be fucked with."

"I really think you are just going CYA on us because you couldn't get permission, James. C'mon. Admit it."

Past the van, two men were arguing in front of three other people in similar clothes. One of the men was a tall, heavyset black man in a black and teal bowling shirt and jeans. The other was a conventionally attractive white man in a black T-shirt and jeans.

"This ain't about covering my ass," The black guy said. "This is about protecting yours. I'll admit I couldn't get permission. I own that. But I couldn't get it for a reason, Zane. This place is dangerous. People have gone missing here recently. Like, within the last year recently."

"That just makes this more perfect, J," Zane said. "I can see the viral chatter now. 'Team calling themselves 'The Ghost Shitters' film illegally at old[a] hospital. What they found will shock you!'"

"God, I hate that crap," a punkish looking woman dressed like Zane said.

"Yeah, but it works," another black-shirted man said.

"Excuse me," Amy spoke up. "Is there a problem here? Are we not doing whatever we came out for?"

"Hello there," Zane said, boiling over with enthusiasm. "Are you Amy? The sound engineer?"

"Yeah," She replied hesitantly. "You guys are the Ghost Shitters?"

"That is us. That is we. We are they," Zane came over and shook Amy's hand eagerly. He turned to Cody and shook his hand as well. "I'm Zane, the face and executive

producer of this little group. The big man is James, our location-manager-slash-producer. The two in black are Xarah, with an X, and Laz, my co-hosts and the two in white are Ben and Jen, our cameras. You are?”

“Cody. Amy is my girl, but I’m assisting her tonight,” Cody said.

“Ah, gigger couple. I like it.” Zane turned back to James. “We are totally doing what we came here to do. James is just being a mother hen.”

James grunted and folded his arms.

“He’s a pretty big mother hen,” Cody said, giving Amy a small nudge.

“I technically pay him for that,” Zane said with a wink. “Though he’s being more strenuous than normal today.”

“Well, you haven’t really let him explain what spooked him so bad,” The punkish woman called Xarah said. She turned to James. “Why don’t you share, Big Guy.”

James eyed her for a moment. “Fine,” he said with a sigh. “When I tried to get permission from the city, they told me that the building and the land around it had been bought by a John Smith.”

“Clearly not a real name,” Zane said with all the aplomb of a detective crack a case.

“Fucking duh,” Xarah said with clear agitation. “Stop interrupting.”

Zane held his hands up defensively.

“Anyway,” James began again, “I tried to reach out to this guy and was actually able to talk to him. He’d bought the land a couple weeks back and said that he was going to tear the old hospital down to build a big aquaponics farm. Straight tried to talk me to sleep about it. When I asked if we could look it over before then, he told me that we absolutely could not. He said it wasn’t safe and that he didn’t want bored urban explorers getting hurt out here. I offered him a contract to promise we wouldn’t sue. He shot it down. Offered to pay him. Dude would not budge an inch. I told him who we were and what we did and that was when the Dude got a little bit weird.”

“Weird how?” Xarah asked.

“Like I’d just told him I was gonna stick my dick in an anthill. He got real serious. Told me there were safer ways to get famous on the Internet that made more money and then he just hung up.”

“Suspect,” Zane said.

“I kinda felt the same way, so I did some digging. I started to find evidence that the rumors that this place was haunted were being actively suppressed. Then I started to find evidence that a lot of folks have vanished here in the last year and a half. At least seventeen I could find. All with the same creepy M.O.”

“Whoa, Zane, you never said anything about people disappearing,” Ben said as though waking up from a nap.

“Well, that part is new,” Zane conceded. “The rumors just said haunted and,” Zane gestured lovingly to the derelict old building, “fucking look at it.”

“Dude, you know you can’t fuck that building, right?” Laz said with a chuckle.

“If people can fuck cars and helicopters, who’s to stop my love?”

Xarah’s face scrunched up like she’d stepped in something. “How the-”

“You ever heard of Edward Smith?” Zane said with unbridled glee.

“No. Fuck you,” Xarah said holding up one hand. “James, please.”

“Right. The disappearances. Each one was the same. Folks came out here for reasons. Urban explorers, ghost chasers, whatever. They came here and went poof. Cars found out front, untouched. Sometimes with valuables inside so it doesn’t look like normal foul play. No bodies were found. No clothes. No nothing. The police would comb the place and then jet. Nothing was found. And the whole time I’m finding this stuff? It looks like the information about the disappearances and their connection to this building was being suppressed as well. I had to dig and dig hard just to find what I did. There could be more. I just can’t find it.”

“So what I’m hearing,” Zane said, “Is that we have stepped in the middle of a clearly well-orchestrated conspiracy surrounding a location with a secret that may, in fact, be that this place is haunted?”

James stared at Zane in silence for almost thirty seconds before blinking slowly.

“Yes.” He said finally.

“You are a godsend.”

“Um,” Amy said, “I think I don’t feel comfortable going in there now.”

“Not gonna lie, Zane, I’m feeling pretty shaky too now,” Ben said.

“Same here,” Jen said meekly. “I watch too many of those ‘missing without a trace’ shows to take this too lightly. I have rabbits to care for.”

Zane’s face fell. He turned to Xarah and Laz, his face pleading. “Guys, this is gonna make us rich. You are with me, right?”

“Doesn’t matter without a crew,” Xarah said.

“I mean, I am, sure, but Xarah has a point. I can’t work a camera and be in front of it at the same time. That found-footage look is too last decade,” Laz said with a shrug.

Zane sighs and turns back to the crew. “How much is it gonna cost me to get you guys to do this?”

Amy looked at Cody. “What do you think, Babe?”

Cody ran his fingers through his hair and puffed his cheeks before letting the air escape his lips. “I don’t know. This is more than I expected. Maybe double?”

Amy stared at the ground for a moment. “Six hundred bucks,” she said finally.

“Upfront. Cash in hand.”

Zane sucked air in through his teeth before looking at Ben and Jen. “I assume you’ll have what she’s having?”

The pair of camera operators looked at each other before nodding.

“You guys really have me by the balls here,” Zane looked at James. “That guy didn’t happen to give a date on the demo, did he?”

“Next week,” James replied.

Zane ran his fingers through his well-coiffed hair and scratched his scalp vigorously. Finally, he opened a pack on his hip and pulled out a roll of bills. He counted off six and offered them to Amy. “I’m paying you, not boyfriend here. You guys gotta work that out on your own.” He then did the same with Ben and Jen.

Amy looked at the six crisp hundred dollar bills she was now holding. “I’ll get my gear,” She said before grabbing Cody and pulling him back towards their car.

“Babe, are you sure about this?” Cody asked as they reached the car.

“No,” Amy said as she opened the trunk, “But you saw how much cash that guy was carrying? Everything about this guy screams ‘trust fund.’ This is some sort of vanity project for him. I’ve met enough guys like that to recognize them.”

“Yeah, but that James guy seemed serious.”

“He’s selling. Ghosts aren’t real, but mysterious disappearances? Conspiracies? That’s gold to a guy like Zane,” Amy said. “Their whole show is based on being edgy and shitting on the idea of ghosts and stuff. That guy is both a producer and location manager. I’ll bet he handles the writing too. If this goes well, we could milk a guy like him for a while.”

“Yeah, but-”

Amy thrust a boom arm into Cody’s chest. “Our phones are off, Cody. We have rent due in a week. We just drove two hours here and it’s gonna be two hours back. I’m not wasting the gas. We need this. So unless you suddenly started to believe in ghosts or whatever, we are gonna take that money and do this job,” Amy closed the trunk. “And if we are lucky, more to follow.”

The pair returned to the group as Laz was examining the front door. “You know, for as beat to shit as the rest of this place looks, the door is in really good shape.” He said puzzled.

“Is it locked?” Zane asked.

Laz pushed the door open easily.

“Guess not,” Xarah said as she strode confidently inside.

The entryway of the old hospital was much as one might expect. It was wide and long and split into two equally wide halls and a pair of staircases at a central point. A large, sturdy, rounded intake counter sat between the stairs. Light filtered in from holes in the walls and ceiling, less as beams and more as a gentle diffusion to stop it from being pitch black.

“God, this place,” Zane said with childlike wonder. “I love these old places. This is why people think ghosts are real. We should start filming here.” Zane looked around the nexus around the intake. “I want to start filming here. How’s the framing?”

Jennifer put down a large duffle she was carrying and held up her hands to make a box to look through. “It could work. We’ll need to do something about the light, but I expected that.”

Zane nodded happily. “Ben, get some atmosphere?”

Ben put down another duffle next to Jennifer’s, opened it and pulled a small case out. He opened it to reveal a small, handheld camcorder. He slid the holding strap on one hand, opened the viewfinder and wandered off down one of the halls, his camera slowly sweeping from side to side.

For the next few minutes, Zane, Xarah, and Laz chatted about their approach as Amy and Cody mic’d them and Jennifer set up the lighting for the opening shots.

“This place has been here since, what, the forties?” Laz asked.

“It’s older than that,” Xarah said. “The last time it was open was the forties.”

“It was a sanatorium built in the early twenties to service the small communities in the area. That’s why it’s so far out,” Zane said smugly.

“You’re all mic’d up,” Amy said. “Just keep chatting so I can check the levels.”

“Got it,” Zane said as he straightened. “Ghost shitters. Shittin’ on yo ghosts!” He said dramatically.

“Ghost, spirits, monsters, we piss in there cereal, so you don’t have to,” Laz said.

“Guys,” Ben’s voice came from the hall.

“What’s the matter?” Xarah called back.

Ben came out of the hall with the pace of a man walking away from a loose dog. “I found something you all need to see.”

Amy and Cody shared a nervous look as they joined the others huddling around Ben’s little camera. The video was clear but dark as it swept slowly around before settling on something in a pile on the floor. After a moment a slim stick, clearly a broken piece of wall support, came into view and poked at the pile, lifting up strips of various colored fabrics before the camera swung to look at the floor.

“What was that?” Jennifer asked.

“Fabric?” Zane said, more question than answer in his voice.

“I looked at them closer and they all look like shredded clothes,” Ben said. “I saw some collars and denim seams and stuff. All in that big pile.”

“Okay, that’s spooky,” Laz said with a nervous chuckle.

“Yeah, not spooky enough for your grabby hands to scare me,” Zane said, a hint of annoyance in his voice.

“The fuck you talking about, Zane?” Laz said, equally annoyed. “I’m not touching you.”

Zane stepped back and looked at Laz, who while next to him and was clearly keeping his hands to himself. He then looked down and touched his sides, his eyes getting wider. He snapped the pack off his hip and looked at it and touched his side again.

“What’s the matter?” Xarah asked.

“I thought-” Zane started before stepping back with a jerk and dropping the pack.

“Zane?” Xarah asked again, alarm and anger mixing in her voice. “Quit trying to fuck with us. You aren’t good at it.”

“I’m not,” He said, mild fear in his voice. “Something is touching-” his body jerked backwards violently and he landed on his back.

Everyone stared at him for a moment.

“Zane,” Laz said, his voice neutral. “Get up.”

Zane seemed to struggle for a moment. “I can’t,” he said almost on the verge of tears.

No sooner had the words left his lips than he began to slide rapidly on his back away from the group. He clawed uselessly at the air around him and tried to drag his heels on the floor. He slid, faster and faster down the hall opposite the one Ben had walked before, finally vanishing around a corner.

“What the fuck?” Xarah stammered.

“Zane!” Laz shouted before breaking into a sprint.

Ben raised his camera and rushed to follow with Xarah hot on his heels.

Jennifer began a soft chant of swears under her breath, rhythmically repeating them as her legs gave way under her.

“Are we being trolled,” Amy said softly.

“Either way, I’m good,” Cody said in a strained whisper as he pulled Amy towards the door.

Suddenly the sound of a door slamming violently shut echoed from the hall. Seconds later Zane began to scream. It was high and filled with desperation. A loud, abnormal sound that burrowed into a listener’s legs and demands action.

“C’mon,” Cody snapped as he dragged Amy by her arm towards the door.

Then, mixed with the screams came another sound that seemed to come from the walls in all directions. A wet, vulgar sound, filled with the sound of tearing and crunching. Zane’s screams grew higher before abruptly halting. The other noise, however, continued for a few more seconds before stopping.

“Amy!” Cody shouted as he spun her around to face him. “Fucking move, woman.”

“What’s happening? What was that?” She said, her body shaking violently.

“I don’t know, and I don’t want to know,” Cody said as he tried to yank open the door. He paused with confusion as the door refused to give. He pulled harder and still it denied him. “Fucking thing is jammed. I thought he said the door was fine?” He said as he slammed his shoulder into the door with all the effect he might have gotten from doing it to the brickwork.

Another scream pierced the air rapidly followed by another loud slam.

“Was that Zane again?” Amy asked.

“No,” Jennifer said, as she began to cry.

Another shriek of terror rang out from the depths of the building, followed by the sound from the walls.

“That was Xarah,” Jennifer choked out between sobs.

“We have to get out,” Amy said, snapping to her senses. “We have to get out now. Let’s go the other way. The buildings collapsed on the side, there should be an opening. Cody, help Jen up. Let’s go.”

Cody nodded and helped Jennifer to her feet. Amy stooped as she ran and snatched up her mix board and the pack Zane had dropped. The trio ran down the hall, away from whatever horror had claimed Zane and Xarah, even as the sounds stopped and seconds later resumed anew.

“Laz,” Jennifer said without stopping, tears streaming down her face.

At the end of the hall, they found a large dining area with wide windows facing the front of the building. Old broken tables and chairs littered the room and the light from the clear night sky streamed unimpeded through strangely clean windows. The ceiling was partially collapsed, allowing a view of the second floor, but the roof above was visibly intact.

“The walls were broken down here, I was sure of it,” Amy shouted.

“It’s fine,” Cody said as he strode towards the window. He grabbed a chair and flung it with full force at the window, only to have it bounce loudly off and onto the floor. “Bullshit!” He shouted as he ran to check to see if he had done any damage.

Jennifer sank again to the floor. She’d stopped crying and was just staring dumbly at the ground.

“Well?” Amy asked as she ran to Cody’s side.

Cody had one hand on the window, staring out it silently. “I can see James and the cars,” He said softly.

“Okay, but what about the windows, Cody,” Amy said.

Cody took her arm and placed her hand on the window. As she touched it, she realized it wasn’t a window. It was solid. It was a wall. There was a papery covering on it that appeared to be a window. It looked so perfect that even up close it looked real.

“What?” Amy said.

“It’s like wallpaper,” Cody said. “It’s just super realistic wallpaper. This thing is playing with us.”

“That can’t be right,” Amy said as she stepped backward. “That’s stupid. This whole thing is stupid.” She spun on her heels and ran over to Jennifer, who sat unmoving on the ground. “What is this? What are you all doing to us? Is this some sort of social experiment? Is this funny?”

“Kinda,” Jennifer said with a chuckle. “I mean, we were shitting on ghosts and now it sounds like we are gonna be ghost shit.” Jennifer lifted her head. Her eyes were dull. “My poor babies,” She said ruefully.

Amy dropped back on to her rear, her mix board and Zane’s satchel dropping to her sides. Cody had walked up next to her and knelt down, wrapping his arms around her as the cruel reality set in.

The silence was broken by the sound of running footsteps. Seconds later, Ben flew through the doorway, camera in hand. He stopped, looked at the three on the floor and then scanned the room.

“I thought the building had collapsed over here,” He said softly.

“So did we,” Cody said.

“It got the others,” Ben said sadly. “I don’t know why it didn’t take me yet, but-” He stopped and his eyes suddenly widened. “No,” he almost sobbed as he hit the floor, his camera rolling towards the group with a clatter. He vanished from the doorway and began to scream. Nearby a door slammed and the sounds returned, punctuated by Ben’s sharp shrieks.

Jennifer fell back and grabbed Ben’s camcorder as it had rolled just within reach. She sat up and stared at it as the sound from Ben’s screams halted as suddenly as the others had.

“I wonder if we are gonna just be one of those found footage videos that everyone says is fake,” Jennifer mumbled. “I wonder if they’re all fake now. Maybe some are real.” She turned the camera on and looked up at Amy and Cody, her face sad. “You

seem like a nice couple.” She placed the camera on the ground, lens facing herself. “I’m sorry.”

“Jen?” Amy said, reaching for her.

Jen tumbled sideways and slammed headfirst into the wall with a crack. Her body then rapidly slid up the wall, across the ceiling and through the hole to the second floor.

As the sound of a door slamming echoed through the building again, as new sound joined the gross cacophony that followed. It was a hollow booming noise that seemed to shake the building. It was rapid and sounded through the halls.

“I think that’s coming from the front door,” Cody said.

“God, do you think it’s James?” Amy said, hope growing in her voice.

“He’s big enough,” Cody said, grabbing the camera. “C’mon, grab your stuff. Let’s get up there before that thing finishes with Jen.”

The pair rushed to the entryway, desperately trying to ignore the sounds of whatever was happening to Jennifer bleeding through the walls. As they grew closer, the booms grew louder until it was clear the sound was indeed coming from the heavy front doors.

Just as they hit the main entry hall the doors burst open. Standing in the shattered remains of the once sealed doors was James with a pair of women. One was tall and lean, with short messy hair. The other way short and petite, with a wealth of black hair and a red lock at her temple.

“Where are the others?” The tall woman barked.

“Gone,” Cody said.

“Come,” The smaller woman shouted.

“Yes!” Cody shouted and took a step forward, his hand gripping Amy’s arm.

Amy did not move.

“Baby?” Cody said as he turned to the sound of Amy dropping her mix board.

She gazed back at him and shoved Zane’s pack into his arms even as she hit the floor.

“Amy!” Cody said as she slid rapidly up the stairs.

Before he could react, Cody felt the air pressure as the tall woman rushed past him. She bounded up the stair in large strides, with a speed beyond human.

Next came the smaller woman, but unlike her companion, she wasn’t running. She was flying. Her hair flaring as she glided a few feet off the ground.

“Follow,” She said as she ascended the stairs.

“You heard the woman,” James said as he ran past.

As they mounted the stairs, they saw the tall woman braced in a door just at the top, holding the door open with one arm and Amy’s arm in her other hand. The smaller woman flew through the gap and as she did, the tall woman released Amy and the door, staggering back as it slammed shut.

She turned to look at the two men as they caught up. “Oh, so you can follow these directions, huh?” She said with mild annoyance.

“Who are you?” Cody asked.

“You can call me Don,” She said. “The little one is Allie. You idiots are lucky we got here when we did. Weren’t you denied access to this place? Weren’t you told that there

were safer ways to make more money?”

“You-” James started.

“Yeah?” Don said coolly.

“I tried to convince Zane not to do this,” James said. “He wouldn’t listen. He was positive this was going to make us.”

“Yeah. Make you dead,” Don said with a snort.

“Is Amy going to be okay?” Cody asked, his face a mask of concern.

“Okay is a relative term, Dude,” Don said. “She probably won’t die. Allie is very good at what she does.”

“Shouldn’t you be helping her?” Cody said.

The building shuddered and a howl of pain and rage came from the walls.

“I’d just get in the way,” Don said. “Better to keep you guys safe since we aren’t a hundred percent if there is just one whatever this is.”

The building shuddered again and the howl rose to a scream before halting.

“Oh?” Don said. “Sounds like she’s finished.”

The door creaked open and Allie popped her head out. Her wealth of black hair filling the door around her. “Good. They’re with you. Can you help me here for a sec?”

“Sure,” Don said as she entered the doorway. “You boys be good and wait here, okay?”

The door clicked shut, leaving James and Cody to wait.

James looked at the pack Cody was carrying. “Is that Zane’s?”

Cody looked down at the pack Amy had shoved into his arms. “Yeah,” He said.

James nodded. “That’s fair.”

The door creaked open and Don and Allie walked out with Amy in Don’s arms. Her hair had gone white and was starting to fall out in strands. Her face was lined, but she appeared to be half asleep.

“Let’s head outside and have a little chat,” Allie said, a dangerous edge in her voice.

Outside, Don placed Amy in the passenger seat of her and Cody’s car as Allie and the others watched.

“She’ll sleep through the night and probably most of the day tomorrow,” Allie said. “When she wakes up, she is going to think she had a really bad dream.” She turned to Cody and James. “You are all stupid. You were told to stay away from this place by the other, weren’t you? You were warned you could get hurt.”

“I went over that with them already,” Don said gently.

Allie turned with a look of white-hot rage.

“Hey, we could have waited twenty more minutes and it wouldn’t have even mattered.”

“Is this a joke to you?” Cody snapped.

“Is it to you?” Allie fired back. “You. Were. Warned. You should be kissing my boots for saving your girlfriend and you from an unknown fiend of that magnitude. You have no idea what you were fucking with and you did it for money.” She turned to James. “At least you had the good sense to stay outside.”

Cody shrank back, his face a mask of anger and self-recrimination.

“Now,” Allie said as she pushed her hair away from her face. “I’m going to offer you a favor. If you want to lose what you learned here tonight, I can help you do that, but you have to want it. I mean, you really have to want it. I can’t force it without hurting you and you are too traumatized to trick. Do you want to lose all this?”

“Yeah,” James said.

Cody nodded his head. “How?”

“The less you know the better,” Allie said. “Now close your eyes, lower your heads, and go to your happy place. And remember, don’t go chasing this. Not the world you saw tonight. Not these memories. Because if you do, I promise, you’ll catch it.”