

The Nightmare of Moxie Gore

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CHAPTER ONE

The wails echoed through the rows of moldy headstones. The ghastly dead clawed confusedly at the air, their wispy outlines frayed and electric with irritation. They were awake when they should have been sleeping. And so the hunt began for who or what had made the mistake of disturbing their unsettled dreams.

The target of the ghosts' ire was Moxie Gore, a girl far more ancient than her 16 years would suggest, or so she told herself. She was old enough to know better than to break the rules about waking sleeping ghosts yet too young to think such a rule applied to her.

Moxie sat cross-legged on the warm summer grass near the entrance to downtown Boston's Granary Burial Ground. She stared at the open book in her lap. The wrong book, she now realized. She glanced up at the ghosts darting their hideous forms around the gravestones and wondered if now would be a good time to run.

The wind picked up and blew out the covered candles she'd placed in a circle around her. She turned on her smartphone and squinted at the book's spine in its weak light. "*Diogenes' Compendium of Curses*," she loosely translated. "You do a really good impression of *The Book of Dispersal*," she said.

It turned out accidentally cursing a cemetery stuffed full of tired ghosts makes them angry. She should've paid closer attention in her Language of the Dead seminar. The dead were one thing. The grumpy dead were another.

Shrieking ghosts blurred in front of her. They plunged into her chest, dive-bombed her head, and then just as quickly streamed far away from her, angry or panicked, Moxie couldn't tell. Otherworldly static blew her

light brown hair into a perfect circle of frizz. Her t-shirt puffed out like it'd been sealed and pumped full of gas. A wet tongue of air was squirming through Moxie's fingers into her ears, questing for a way into her head. "Look, I didn't mean it!" she shouted. But she knew it was useless. Ghosts couldn't hear or see the living in any direct sort of way.

And yet there they were, attacking her.

Clearing a cemetery of tired old ghosts was supposed to have been an easy assignment. That's why first-year interns in the Order of Aldred began the summer in the cemetery division. It was a nice, calm introduction to the Order's sometimes dangerous work of convincing the rest of humanity that ghosts existed and were probably breathing down their necks at that very moment. Not that the rest of humanity ever paid attention.

Now the dead were bombarding her and might suck her soul out in the process. Even worse, there was the inconvenient fact that she wasn't, technically speaking, supposed to be here tonight in the first place. Mr. August, her internship advisor, would probably kick her out of the program because of this screw-up. This was one mistake too many. Well, each of the last three mistakes was also one mistake too many. Thankfully, Mr. August was a cheerful, forgiving sort of guy who could be counted on to forget all sorts of things.

Maybe I shouldn't have insisted I could do this on my own, Moxie thought. Mr. August was supposed to have joined her at the cemetery tonight, but he got a summer cold and had to cancel. He didn't know Moxie was here at this moment trying to clear the cemetery on her own. He probably thought she'd have listened to what in retrospect seemed very clear instructions to under no circumstances go to the cemetery on her own. "Look, listen to me for once and wait, all right?" he'd said. "We'll try it next week when I feel better. Please, please, please tell me you'll wait." Even Moxie struggled to find wiggle room after that pleading.

She didn't wait. And why should she? Clearing a cemetery looked easy. You read a few lines from the *Book of Dispersal*, exactly as she'd seen Mr. August do three times this summer. Three. Times. That's more than enough to get the gist of it. Then you toss a few grains of sacred soil into the air, soil obtained at great cost from the underworld, and the ghosts would feel compelled to follow the trail from this world to whatever realm they go to after this.

There are all sorts of reasons why ghosts stick around in the realm of

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the living. They might be lost. They might be afraid of what comes next, whatever that is. They might be too comfortable roaming the halls of an old familiar house. They might have unfinished business to attend to, like tracking down their murderer. Revenge seemed to be a big motivator to stay behind and haunt the living.

Cemetery ghosts were a different sort. Most of the dearly departed who'd been buried here had woken up shortly after death to find themselves in freshly dug graves. They promptly took in the scenery and settled in for a century-long nap. No seeking of vengeance or haunting the living for this sorry group.

These ghosts were open to suggestion. A few lines from a spell of dispersal and a marking of a trail to the beyond were usually enough to convince them to give up the ghost and move to the next realm. That's important. Because when too many ghosts clump together, bad things tend to happen.

Bad things also tend to happen when you bring the wrong book with you to the cemetery and start flinging curses at the afterlife without knowing it. So, with pissed, cranky ghosts flying about her, Moxie would have to improvise.

She couldn't remember all the words from the spell of dispersal, but she knew a couple phrases that could sometimes get a ghost's attention. It was notoriously hard to get the attention of a ghost. They didn't notice much about the living except whatever vague energy they put off.

Moxie spoke in a harsh guttural tongue, sounding like she'd swallowed a thick piece of mucus. Translated, she said something like, "Unlock your gaze from the flesh of the living. Heed these words."

The dance of ghosts slowed. Moxie could make out individual shapes. Some ghosts had pale white faces frozen in time. Others were rotten and decayed. Curses had raised them into a ghostly form long after they'd been buried. Their clothing varied with the ages, but most of the styles looked centuries old. Some ghosts looked even older. They'd found this particular resting ground after roaming the land for who knows how many centuries before Europeans settled the East Coast.

She kept speaking. She hadn't thought she knew the words of dispersal, yet words poured from her as if they were her native tongue. They felt right. She suddenly felt fluent in this strange language.

A dirty smell like ozone filled the air, trailing in her words' wake. Cold blue flames sprouted from nearby headstones like candles. Then the

moaning started. It was low at first, almost too deep to hear. It grew louder, but it wasn't actually a sound. It was coming up through her feet and her butt as she sat on the ground. Soon it wasn't just a rumbling, it was a voice, then many voices, all speaking to her, all trying to stop her from speaking the ancient words.

This wasn't what happened when Mr. August had performed the cleansing ritual. The ghosts had danced in time to his words but hadn't seemed to notice him specifically. They'd fixated on the dark soil of the underworld instead and vanished after only a few moments. They'd ignored him.

They weren't ignoring Moxie.

It was like hundreds of people protesting the alarm clock all at once. She kept reciting the words, ignoring the ghosts' pleas for more time to sleep. Their protests grew louder, higher, shriller. See-through forms began breaking free from the ground, hundreds of them, enough to make her realize the maelstrom of a few moments ago was only the smallest fraction of the phantasms soaking up this hallowed ground. The rising dead were fighting her commands of dispersal, shaking their heads, pouting, dragging their feet in the graves. Finally, a few of them snapped free from the ground and floated up above Moxie. The few became dozens, then hundreds, until pale shapes of ghosts crowded over every gravestone in the cemetery.

Moxie stopped reciting and waited a beat.

She reached into a tiny sack and delicately, with two fingers, pinched a few grains of soil, black as a grave. She was careful. The member of the Order who'd obtained this batch of dirt had lost his sanity on the return trip from the underworld and was now well-cared for in a convalescent home. She threw the soil lightly into the air in front of her and waited.

The ghosts stormed her from all sides. They danced around her, through her, popping in and out of her head, her chest, wailing at the injustice of it all. They seemed to know her, all her dreams and hopes but especially her fears. They amplified those fears, pointed out how horrible she was at this sort of thing, how she really didn't belong here, how she was just a no-good fake and she'd be found out for what she truly was sooner or later.

She believed them. She believed every accusation they threw her way, how her parents and therapists and discarded friends were right about her, how Moxie saw things that weren't there, how she was imagining this

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night in the cemetery and these ghosts before her, how she couldn't be trusted by anyone because she would always let them down, let everyone down whenever she opened her mouth and talked about the dead she saw at night, their grotesque forms running from her, how it's crazy enough to believe you're visited constantly by ghosts but even crazier to believe that it's not you who's afraid, but the ghosts, how they're afraid of you, how they run from you.

Kneeling in the cemetery, hands covering her ears, she believed she should surrender to them, be carried away by them, out of this sorry Earth where she didn't belong.

But underneath the accusations, she felt something more. There was an edge to them, almost panicked. These ghosts were deeply afraid, and for a moment Moxie got the distinct impression they were afraid of her.

Soon the wailing grew softer, the protests less vehement. The phantasms started circling in a more regular fashion, slower, deliberate. One by one they aimed for the few specks of dust from the realm beyond, squeezing into them like they were being sucked into the eye of a needle. The ghosts picked up speed, more and more of them hurtling around her and jamming themselves into a tiny point right in front of her chest.

And then, as fast as they'd come at her, they disappeared.

The tantrum had ended.

Moxie collapsed on the ground, relieved, and shaking, and wanting to cry, and so she did.

CHAPTER TWO

Moxie returned to her cramped dorm on Monday morning, anxious after spending a rare weekend with her parents. They were at home for a few weeks in between a Caribbean cruise and a month-long driving tour through Italy. It was odd. The second she got accepted to the internship, her parents suddenly got the travel bug. They'd never traveled with her before. It seemed like they'd never left the house. Moxie's being away at internship apparently gave them some newfound freedom they'd been secretly craving. It made Moxie feel even more like a deadweight daughter whose sole job in life was to weigh down her parents and destroy their hopes and dreams.

All that luxurious travel, though, didn't stop her parents from spending all weekend complaining about how strapped for cash they were and oh, what a shame it was about Moxie's pathetic college fund. And Moxie didn't seem like college material in the first place, they'd said, what with all the incidents and the questionable grades. So why should she worry about such boring things like college funds that may or may not exist? There's nothing more important to a successful life than learning how to lower your expectations. *Parental lessons were always so valuable*, Moxie thought.

It was almost a relief to be away from them again. Moxie paused at the Order's front door. The members had their hearts in the right place, but their building gave off an earnestly creepy vibe. The Order's headquarters

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was fronted by a cafe and bookstore in Boston's Back Bay. Moxie walked in the cafe, and two Order members behind the cash registers instantly looked up, ready to swoop down on fresh meat. As soon as they saw it was Moxie, a first-year intern of questionable origin, they didn't even try to hide their disappointment. Moxie sighed and continued to the reading area at the back of the shop, passing racks and racks of books definitively proving the existence of ghosts and most other conspiracy theories. Here, Order members would eagerly hover near unsuspecting patrons hoping to sway them to the cause. And the higher-ups wondered why the Order rarely received second visits.

Moxie opened the door in the back that led to the bureaucratic heart of the organization. She gritted her teeth at the thought of explaining to Mr. August what had happened Friday night and entered.

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The hardest part about being a member of the Order of Aldred was telling people you were a member of the Order of Aldred. Sure, the Order was a deadly serious organization charged with making sure the ghouls and ghosts of the afterlife didn't overrun the living. But anyone who saw the Order's painfully sincere late night infomercials (or, even worse, the stuff they threw up on YouTube) would find it hard to believe. It'd be easier to take seriously the Bigfoot hunters on basic cable (Bigfoot hunters, by contrast, were members of the Order of Red Eyes, and without them there'd be no telling how many small children would have been taken from their bedrooms in the dark of night by the foul, tick-covered beasts from the forest).

Without the Order, though, humanity would be in deep shit. Here's the thing about ghosts. There are too many of them, and there aren't enough places for them to stay. This wasn't always a problem. Back when everyone believed in ghosts, a good haunting was the sign your ancestors were still interested in you beyond the grave. Ghosts found it easy to find places to haunt and hang around awhile. If a ghost felt compelled to haunt a particular family or house, then the ghost knew the family would believe in it and be receptive to the haunting. In other words, the family would be properly afraid and freaked out. The ghosts might not have been aware of the humans they haunted, but they were aware of the fear running through a properly haunted house inhabited by a properly fearful family.

Then people stopped believing. The Order is unsure when or why this happened, but it probably had something to do with people looking for more reasonable explanations for the unknown. They might be mildly afraid after hearing strange things go bump in the night, but most people would eventually settle on a more obvious explanation, like tree limbs brushing against a window or the house settling.

Houses settling. What an unfortunate myth that was. People should be very, very afraid of things that go bump in the night because those bumps are usually made by a type of ghost that's clumsy and particularly nasty when disturbed. Caterwauls, they're called, and one of the first lessons in Moxie's Ghost Identification seminar was that you should never go near caterwauls when they're bumping into things, especially at night.

Ever since people stopped believing in ghosts, the ghosts started bunching up. They didn't feel comfortable in most homes anymore, so they crammed into comfortable places like cemeteries and high-voltage electrical transmission substations. The whole East Coast was one bad day away from catastrophic power failure.

The Order's mission was to convince the general public that ghosts were real. That usually didn't work. The fallback mission of the Order was to get rid of the problematic ghosts to keep them from causing damage. Public Relations on the one hand, curse-removing and ghost-fighting warriors on the other.

Moxie didn't want to get anywhere near Public Relations. That'd mean working on a bad mix of YouTube videos and responding to rants on Facebook posts. She'd done everything she could this summer to impress people with her ghost-conquering chops. Clearing out a cemetery all by herself would look great, assuming Mr. August didn't kick her out of the program first.

§

Moxie successfully avoided eye contact with anyone as she slipped through the main level. The Order did a bad remodeling job back in the 60s and had been too broke to update since then. The inside looked like an office building from the time when bureaucrats first discovered the wonders of the cubicle. Cramped. Outdated. Badly wired. Frequent power outages. The smell of cheap printer toner and reheated burritos. Most

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office buildings, though, probably didn't have empty spaces above their dropped ceilings that served as temporary playgrounds for homeless ghosts. That probably accounted for all the power outages.

Mr. August had one of the only offices on the floor. Moxie didn't want to face him yet, so she ducked by his window, headed to the elevator, and pressed the down button.

The interns' dorm room was one level down. In the Order's headquarters, everything went down, down, down. Somehow they'd managed to secretly dig out a huge cavern in between the subway lines. Rumors said they'd used untrustworthy vanishing spells to remove all the debris. This part of Boston had once been underwater, so Moxie half expected to wake up drowning in the middle of the night from a bad leak.

She got to her windowless dorm room, threw her bag on one of the desks, and collapsed on the bed. She shared the room with two other girls. There wasn't nearly enough space for two of them, much less three sixteen-year-olds who were expected to stay there the entire summer.

One girl was from the Boston area, Jenny Lee, a first-generation Korean-American who lived in Jamaica Plain with her mom, dad, and two brothers. Like all the members of the Order, Jenny's right shoulder was marked with a constellation of five tiny birthmarks. All the members except Moxie, that is. Jenny had known what the marks had meant ever since she was five. Her mom was a member of the Korean branch of the Order and had the same marks. Jenny, though, much to the disappointment of her mother, always had a problem seeing ghosts. Until she went through the branding ceremony in March, Jenny had been only partly attuned to the spirit world. She'd had a vague sense ghosts were bumping around her house, but she hadn't been able to truly *see* them, and seeing is everything.

It was one thing to know in a theoretical way the world was overrun by spirits; it was another to walk through a dead eighteenth-century farmer on the way to the shower.

Moxie's other roommate was Inez, a quiet girl from New Mexico. Her parents had left the Order years ago to focus on their paranormal photography business, but they still provided a foster home for ghosts who were awaiting more permanent placements. Inez had been weak in the vision until receiving the Order's brand. She was still weak, sometimes having trouble seeing the ghosts brought into class, and she doubled down on her books because of it.

Both were out of the dorm room already, probably preparing for the morning's seminar on what to do in cases of accidental possession (Lesson One: Don't get accidentally possessed).

Moxie was gathering her books when the hair on her arms stood up.

"I see the powers that be have continued to let their internship standards slide," came the clipped, professorial tone of Thornton Crelling. Thornton wasn't a teacher in the strictest sense. He was a third-year intern—the last year of internship—who seemed to be gunning for her, spreading all sorts of nasty rumors. She'd barely passed the internship's qualifying exams, he kept telling people, or she didn't have the telltale birthmarks members of the Order were born with.

Fine, so they weren't exactly *false* rumors, but he still shouldn't have been spreading them.

Moxie let out an impatient breath and said, "Yes, Thornton, can I help you?"

"You had some fun Friday night, it appears."

"Whatever I did involving fun is none of your business."

"It is when I have to clean up your mess."

"There's no mess. I cleared them all. An entire cemetery, all by myself."

"Yes, I'm sure you did," he sneered. "Just one problem, though. One of the ghosts you cleared wasn't, in fact, a ghost. It was a ghoul."

"No. Couldn't have been," Moxie said, worried now.

"And you didn't send it merrily on its way to the next realm. You released it from its prison beneath the cemetery's chapel. That must have been some sort of powerful, unapproved incantation you used to free a fourth-level ghoul. Why, you could get kicked out for that sort of thing. The Curse Squad spent the whole weekend tracking down the ghoul. They're not pleased with you."

"No, please no." She instinctively shook her hair across her face to hide, but still felt her ears poking out. Moxie had what most people would consider a striking face when seen at a quick glance, all angular and Instagram-ready, but she knew all the parts were slightly off if you looked closely enough. Ears that stuck out, a slightly bent nose, unnaturally blue eyes that were just a smidgen too far apart, a chin that looked too long from the side. It was like she'd been assembled by someone who'd had a picture of a beautiful young woman to work with yet had been supplied with defective parts.

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“Yes,” Thornton said. He was enjoying this far too much.

“Tell me you’re kidding.”

“I don’t kid with children, especially children who faked their way into the organization.”

“I didn’t fake anything.”

“Did Aldred bless you with his mark?”

“No,” Moxie said petulantly. “Although it turns out I didn’t need the stupid birthmark. I could see ghosts just fine without it, and the Board of Standards had no problem searing the burn into my shoulder.”

He smirked. “Perhaps that’s because the Board doesn’t have all the information about you it needs to make a proper decision. August has a secret file on you he’s kept from the Board.”

“He does not,” Moxie said. *Oh shit, what if he does?* she thought.

“I’ve seen it. On his desk. Who knows what information lurks therein? Is he hiding something from the Board? Speaking of, the old man asked me to tell you to come see him as soon as you got in. Consider yourself told.”

§

Moxie trudged to Mr. August’s office.

She’d spent too many moments standing like this, head down, hand on the doorknob to an authority figure’s office, waiting for the courage to walk in and face yet another radical change in her life. Kicked out of another school or rejected by another therapist or sent for more behavior modification at a special place for special girls.

Incidents, her teachers called them. Moxie had so many incidents. It began to sound like some sort of disease. Other kids had the measles or tonsillitis. Moxie always came down with a bad case of incidents.

But for some reason, it was a lot harder this time. It seemed more was at stake. Mr. August was supposed to be on her side. He was supposed to understand.

The courage came, and she opened the door.

Mr. August sat behind a cheap plywood desk in his cluttered office, facing the door. He looked tired and red-nosed, fully in the grip of whatever illness had kept him from the cemetery on Friday. “Ah, Moxie,” he said as Moxie walked in. He didn’t look up but kept writing in his journal.

He had a full, unkempt beard and thick glasses. He was wearing a short-sleeved collared shirt with his Snoopy tie, which confirmed that it was, in fact, Monday. Moxie was glad he was sitting down. Mr. August was a big guy, and he looked less intimidating behind a desk. He was formal, but goofy, and almost always blissfully cheerful, unlike his dour colleagues who'd seen one too many ghosts over the years. The worst part about making Mr. August mad was that he wasn't meant to be mad. He was meant to be happy, like a puppy, and there was nothing worse than making a puppy unhappy.

He didn't look happy now.

Mr. August gestured for Moxie to take the one other seat in his office. It was fake leather but plush, and she sank into it, hoping she could sink all the way down into some other reality where she hadn't accidentally freed a ghoul.

"So," he said. Moxie hated when he began with "So."

"I'm sorry, I really am," she blurted out.

He wiped his face with his hands, stretching out his wrinkled skin. "Moxie, what am I going to do with you?"

"Um, marvel at how I cleared the cemetery all by myself?"

He frowned. "Isn't that precisely the sort of thing I told you not to do?"

"I suppose," she said quietly.

"You can't keep drawing attention to yourself. The other members are skeptical of you, more than skeptical at this point. And now I have to tell them you performed an unapproved high-level incantation and somehow managed to free a powerful ghoul. The Curse division hadn't been able to figure out what sort of power was trapping that ghoul for years, and here you free it by accident."

"So you don't want to focus on how cool that was?"

"I do not, as a matter of fact, want to focus on how cool that was. Although," he said, with a hint of a grin, "I suppose it was sort of cool, as you say."

"See? Now we're getting somewhere."

"No, Moxie, we're not getting anywhere. What did I tell you when I first contacted you?"

Moxie slumped in her chair. "You said my psychologist contacted you. Dr. Monson. You said I'd been seeing ghosts."

"Dr. Monson and your parents were very concerned about you and

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these ghosts you claimed to see. They didn't believe you. I did."

"And you said you knew why I was seeing them, and that I shouldn't be afraid of them. You said you could help me understand what I was seeing, and here we are. Now I understand what I'm seeing. Ghosts. They're all over, and only certain people can see them."

"And what's so special about you?"

"I can see them even though I've never been given the sight."

"And members of the Order might find that odd. Because all of them have been explicitly marked—chosen—by the entity we presume to call Aldred, though we don't know much about him. We're a very traditional organization, you must understand, thousands of years old. Every one of our members has been born with the same exact birthmark on their shoulders. Every one of them has gone through the branding ceremony, helping them focus the power of the mark. It's only natural they'd view someone like you with suspicion. You neither had the birthmarks nor received any boost from the branding ceremony. If anything," he said, fiddling with the end of his tie, "they're jealous."

"How's that my fault?"

"It's not. But at the very least you should be aware that jealous people are prone to acting out. And if they decide to kick you out of the Order because of little stunts like you pulled on Friday, where would that leave you?"

Moxie nearly welled up. "It'd leave me, well, it'd leave me alone. Out there, where no one believes me. In here, they do. Well, most of them do anyway."

Mr. August looked down at his desk, closed his journal, and sighed. "I guess I don't have to file a report," he said reluctantly.

"Oh! Thank you, you won't regret it, I promise."

"You're off cemetery duty, though, and for now, no longer on the path to removing ghosts, curses, and the like. I'm sorry Moxie, but I can't trust you. There are too many important things going on with the Order right now, and if I don't know you're going to play by my rules, I don't want you on my team."

That was a dagger right through her heart. Mr. August couldn't trust her? He was the only person who *should* trust her, the only person who had faith in her. If he didn't trust her, who could?

She wanted to tell him it wasn't her fault she used an unapproved incantation. She hadn't even been reading from the book. The incantation

sort of flowed through her, unbidden.

That didn't sound like a promising line of attack either. It made her sound like she was possessed, and bad things happened to people who were possessed.

"Got it. No more removing ghosts. For now, like you said. So what track am I on?"

"Public relations."

Her jaw dropped. "Oh no."

"You shouldn't be able to get into too much trouble there. In fact, I don't think they even know what trouble is anymore. You're not going to give them trouble, are you?"

"I most definitely am not," she said, straightening up in her chair. She got the distinct impression this was her last chance, as feeble of a chance as it was. Public relations. Ugh. It was a backwater of a place where she couldn't prove anything about her capabilities as an agent of the Order. She might survive the summer, but she'd have very little chance of getting invited back for the second year. "When do I report?"

"Immediately."

He was really pissed, then. "Thank you," she said. "For the second chance."

"I believe it's about the fourth chance, by this point."

"Yeah, I guess it is," she said, remembering several instances of questionable judgment throughout the summer.

"You know where to go?"

"Yep. It's the, uh, that thing, I guess you'd call it, in the parking lot."

He gave half a smile and shook his head. "Let's just call it the van."

CHAPTER THREE

Moxie dragged her feet to the back door of the office and out to the small parking lot behind the Order.

The van stood there in all its rusty glory.

This was not the glorious career in ghost-extraction and removal she'd imagined. No more hopes of fighting on the front lines, saving humanity from the ghostly terrors awaiting them. She was demoted to Public Relations. The PR team could barely string together a coherent YouTube clip. PR was supposed to convince the general public about how real and threatening ghosts were and how a slobbering, ectoplasmic horror was probably breathing over their shoulders at that very moment. But PR couldn't pull it off because they'd seen too many bad cable shows and copied them. They'd send Order members with terrible acting skills into dark houses with night-vision cameras, turning everything on film green and sickly looking. All the paranormal investigators would run around with bright white eyes, huffing loudly in the dark like the microphones had been stuffed up their noses. It was a joke.

If her classmates at school ever found out, she'd die.

What if she was put on camera? What if she returned to school in the fall and discovered some bully had accidentally come across the show and plastered clips of it across the web? What if she shrieked on camera and someone posted the GIF on, god forbid, Reddit, her scream looping over and over to eternity?

She'd put her head down, do her best work behind the scenes, and get promoted out of this gig as fast as possible, she'd decided. There was no way she was going on camera.

The van was parked in the back of the parking lot, next to a barbed wire fence wrapped around an oak tree. It was an old Winnebago, rusted, blacked-out windows, beige with a slightly darker beige horizontal stripe. The tires needed air.

One crew member was loading gear into the side door near the rear of the Winnebago. Bulky, decade-old cameras. Duct-taped overhead mics. Armfuls of cords. Light meters.

"Um, hello," Moxie said in greeting. He had long grey hair, thinning up top, and a fat gut trying to burst free from a dirty t-shirt and an untucked flannel shirt. He looked like he'd spent a former life as a roadie.

"Dude," he said, not taking his eyes off the cords he was winding.

"Dudette, actually," Moxie said.

"Oh, sorry. Don't get many visitors back this way. Wilfred at your service. You bringing gear?"

"Excuse me?"

"Gear. Your stuff. I imagine you have your own preferred editing workflow. You're probably one of those Apple freaks aren't you, with all your fancy 'software' and your digital cameras." She could almost hear the scare quotes around 'software.'

She had no idea what he was talking about. She was not the most creatively inclined of people, and the last thing she'd tried to edit was a poorly written story freshman year she'd barely been able to knock out in Word. "I'm Moxie," she said, by way of changing the subject. "I'm the new intern."

Wilfred set down a heap of cables. "Intern, eh? I heard we were getting someone new. Didn't tell me it was an intern." He looked her over for the first time. "You seem young. Why'd they send us an intern, again?"

"I wanted to learn, uh, all about the different parts of the organization."

He raised a skeptical eyebrow. "No one wants to learn about this part of the organization. But I'm flattered. Got busted for something, did ya?"

Moxie sighed. "Yeah. Busted is one way to put it."

"All right, then. At least I know what I'm dealing with. Ever appear on screen before?"

"No."

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“Ever pointed a camera?”

“Just the camera on my phone. Not one of those big things over there,” she said, pointing at what looked like a hundred-pound piece of equipment.

“That’s not a camera. Ever sat your butt in an editing bay for days?”

“I don’t know what an editing bay is.”

“So, you’re saying you know nothing, have no experience, wouldn’t recognize a camera if you tripped over it, and in general will have to learn everything from the ground up?”

She wanted to run away. Very far away. “Yes,” she gulped.

Wilfred smiled. “Perfect! There’s nothing worse than getting some know-it-all whose bad habits I have to break. Slows everything down. Much better to start from scratch. Anyway, get in the van and I’ll introduce you to the talent.”

§

The talent, in this case, was Mattie Watkins, a black woman with short spiky hair, a crisp white shirt under a leather jacket, and perfectly faded raw jeans that looked like they cost more than Moxie would make this entire summer. Moxie would have believed Mattie was any age she told her, but she guessed she was in her late 20s. Moxie knew of her only from her reputation. Mattie was always pushing for the slow-moving, bureaucratic Order to get on social media, lobby Congress, or at the very least upgrade to modern equipment. According to legend, when the President of the United States balked at publicly confirming the existence of ghosts—a huge step that would have made the Order’s job much easier—Mattie arranged for a ghost to personally haunt the Oval Office. The President didn’t cave, worried that he’d sink in the polls. The ghost didn’t cave either, eventually taking up residence in the West Wing and pissing off the First Lady.

The lesson Moxie drew was that you don’t cross a person who’s willing to sic the afterlife on the President. Mattie must have rubbed someone the wrong way. That’s the only explanation for why she was demoted to making YouTube videos.

Mattie was reading printouts at the tiny kitchen table behind the driver’s seat. The rest of the living area was stuffed with a rack of monitors and a desk along the Winnebago’s wall. Power cords dangled everywhere,

collected in heaps on the floor. The van still reeked of stale cigarette smoke and take-out Chinese food from whoever had owned it last.

“Hey boss,” Wilfred said. “We got a new recruit.”

Mattie didn’t look up, still chewing on an apple and focusing on the papers in front of her. “Uh hum,” she mumbled. “Put that request in weeks ago when Lorelda bailed and haven’t heard anything since. Why’d it get filled now?”

“Excellent question,” Wilfred replied. “Suppose we could ask her. Moxie, isn’t it?”

“Yep,” Moxie said, stepping up into the Winnebago’s stairwell. It shook under her weight as if it didn’t have any shocks.

Mattie looked up. She set down her half-eaten apple and leaned back on the kitchen bench. “You? You’re even younger than the one who quit. Wilfred, did I not specify that we needed a professional? Didn’t I explicitly inform HR that if we don’t get quality talent, we can’t put on a quality show, and we will remain a joke and thus do our cause a disservice? Did I not say, above all, not to send us another screamer?”

“Screamer?” Moxie asked.

“You got any experience at all? By which I mean, in anything?”

Moxie felt the sweat coming on fast. “I can type.” *Oh my god*, she thought. *I just reduced my whole life to typing.*

“Typing. Wonderful. Wilfred, they sent us another screamer.”

“Maybe, boss. But maybe she’ll learn quick.”

“If I might...” Moxie said.

“Here’s what you’re gonna do,” Mattie said, cutting her off. “We’re gonna walk through dark houses. We’re gonna put ghosts in those houses and film them. You’re gonna look at the ghosts with that pretty little face of yours.” She smiled. “And then, because this is all you’re apparently capable of, you’re going to scream. Loud. Piercingly loud, like a little girl. And it needs to be believable, because we’ve got a mission, and that mission is to make people believe in ghosts. If you can’t do anything besides scream, you’re going to scream like you mean it. That’s your whole job. Got it?”

Moxie, still standing in the Winnebago’s stairwell, looked down at her feet. “Got it.”

“Come up here. Let me look at you.” Moxie obeyed and walked up to the table. “Well, isn’t that something. Wilfred, look at those eyes. You ever see eyes like those?”

THE NIGHTMARE OF MOXIE GORE

“Can’t say I have,” Wilfred said.

“What do you think those beauties will look like on camera?”

“In the infrared, probably nice and bright. Daylight, my goodness, at the right angle she’ll look ethereal, I think. The audience will love her.”

Mattie appraised her, chin in her hand. “Our audience, at the moment, is primarily adolescent boys and unemployed middle-aged men. You’ll help us hold onto that demographic, maybe act a bit flaky, total manic-pixie-girl wish fulfillment sort of thing. But you’ll have to lose that hair, get it out of your eyes.”

Moxie had spent the better part of her life hiding her ears and especially her eyes under that mop of hair. They stood out too much. And they definitely didn’t help with the Order. The rumor was that she could only see ghosts because she had these weird eyes that let in more types of light than usual. Her ability to see ghosts—the main requirement for being in the Order—might be no more than a quirk of biology. Purists like Thornton gave her no end of grief because of it.

And now those eyes were going to be on camera.

She can type. She can scream. And she can open her freakish eyes. Her future college admissions essay almost wrote itself. She’d never felt so dejected.



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