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**The Watchers**

Tink stood in front of her old high school building at seven o'clock on a humid April evening. It had been two years since the students abruptly abandoned the building and she'd had to go be *Class of '95* elsewhere. Now, she gazed across the front lawn through the dimming twilight, slapping no-see-ums, searching for her on-again-off-again boyfriend, Dan.

The school grounds were kept up to an extent. The grass appeared to have been mowed within the last month but weeds poked through the broken front walk that led up to the ornate gothic building. There, wide concrete stairs led to massive front doors, where two gargoyles leered. The stone beasts had seen everything—kids skipping school, drugs exchanging hands, furtive touches—all clandestine activities. There had been times when Tink had wished they'd lower their snouts and nudge her in the right direction, like a family dog scooting a baby away from a hazard. But they were unmoved to do so, and she was left to move forward on her own.

Someone grasped Tink's shoulders from behind, and she gasped. Dan.

"Scare you?" he asked, grinning.

"Yes. Jesus, Dan."

"Brought some supplies?" he asked, pulling on her backpack strap. It was filled with Pop-tarts and flashlights and a few of her mom's beers she'd snuck from the fridge.

"Just a few snacks."

He stared at the building. "Do you really want to go in there?"

"Sure, why not?"

He gave her a sideways look. "Because . . . you could turn into a demon and go savage."

She rolled her eyes. "Come on. Around back."

Actually, it *was* a reasonable concern. Dan had never gone to this school—had never set foot in it. But she'd been a student here when it happened, had survived the scourge on the school—or whatever it was—and considered herself immune. She thought about that last day all the time, watching all the parents storm in and the kids scramble to leave, how once the rush had passed she'd sauntered into the empty hallway wondering if her mother hadn't gotten the memo (she had) or if her boyfriend would be there to make sure she had a ride home (he wouldn't). Her mother had not felt the same sense of urgency as the other parents to come save her daughter. No buses even came that day, so Ms. Josie, the school administrator, ended up driving her home.

It was about a year later that she returned and started loitering the grounds regularly, inspecting the windows, the doors, running her fingers along the stair railings. One night she ran into a darkly-clad pair of investigators.

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"Hey, did you go to school here?" the broad one with moppy hair asked. They held a receiver fuzzing with static.

"Yep," said Tink.

"No way!" the slight one with a bowl-cut said. "Were you here the day everyone left?"

"Yeah." Tink edged closer to the building.

"We're picking up some pretty wild activity tonight," the moppy-haired one said.

Tink gazed behind her at the school. "You think there's still something going on in there?"

"Oh yeah," the one with the bowl-cut said. "We've petitioned the city all year for access but they won't let us in. Said the best we can do is to take pictures from out here." The pair looked at each other and smiled. "The city thinks all we're getting are photos."

Bowl-cut tapped at the fuzzing meter on the equipment. Tink had watched the examination for a while, but lost interest as they seemed to get overly excited about the smallest blips of the meter.

Now, around back, Tink and Dan stared up at the back of Tink's old classroom. She climbed onto a trash can and jammed her lever into the only un-barred and unlocked window she'd been able to find. Once it was partially opened, Dan climbed up next to her, then gave her a lift. She raised the window the rest of the way and crested the threshold. The scent of the school hit her in the face: insecurity, aloneness, humiliation. Somehow she'd forgotten.

She tumbled inside and helped Dan through.

"Where to?" he asked.

Her feet padded slowly across the grimy carpet, the smell of chalk and musty books clouded her focus. She gripped the straps of her backpack and took a slow deep breath, letting the feel of the place settle into her lungs. "Let's just walk around and see."

She clicked on a flashlight and ignited the long beige hall with light and shadows. The doors to each room were dark and vacuous. Dan stopped at one. "Is this the wood-shop?"

Tink walked back and shined the light over a series of long tables. "Yeah. Look at that sawdust." A thin layer coated the long side bank of cabinets.

"They didn't even clean this place when they left it?"

"You have no idea what it was like."

He shined his own light over the ceiling, as if he might see the traces of the insanity that had happened here.

"But you wanted to come back," he said.

It started with Fillipe Montego, who tried to strangle a teacher. He'd always been the sweetest kid, a demure smile and perpetually pushing his

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bangs back. When he hopped on Ms. Grant's desk like a spider, the other kids whooped and scattered. But he bore down on her, grabbed her throat, and started shaking her.

It took all four Jennifers to bat and shriek at him to knock him loose. They carted Fillipe away and everyone thought it was a shame, but they moved on. Until Tommy Dansen, the homecoming king, did something similar with the lunch woman who refused him a second biscuit.

Three months and twelve kids later, the parents stormed the building. That girl Tamra with the 80s bangs was sitting next to Tink when her mom literally yanked from her seat. Half the kids had already been pulled for homeschooling over the prior month. Apparently the night before the parental invasion there'd been a phone tree messaging system urging parents to make a statement to the school board by busting through the doors and taking their kids. After the insurrection, the few remaining students whose parents had not heeded any of these measures were left sitting alone and wide-eyed. Most finally just got up and left.

Tink had hung back, still hoping someone would come for her. When she was the last one in her classroom, she wandered out into the hall. Backpacks had been jerked off and left for good. Paper spilled from folders and littered the floor. At the other end of the long hall, one of the kids with mohawks leaned against the concrete block wall smoking. When Tink caught his eye, he lifted the cigarette in acknowledgment, then took a long drag.

Now Tink led Dan toward the principal's office. The dank chilled air ate at her bones. Unexplained sounds sent jolts of adrenaline—a drip of water, a whoosh of air, a plinking noise from somewhere in the building.

"Babe, you know I'd do anything for you," he said, "but until they figure out what happened to all those kids, I wonder if we should be in here."

"I'm telling you, I'm immune."

"Yeah, but what if I'm not?" He raised one eyebrow wickedly.

She gave him a playful shove. "Knock it off." In the dark his eyes looked briefly like her old classmate's, Tayvon, whose hooded brow had cast a shadow on the tops of his cheeks the moment before he burst into flames.

The principal's office was right off the front entry hall. "Can you believe those assholes actually snuck out when the parents stormed in?" Tink said. "They saw them coming, hid under their desks, and when the parents raced past, they ran out the front doors."

"How do you know that?" asked Dan.

"Ms. Josie told me. The front desk lady."

That day after everyone vacated the high school, Tink had stopped at the principal's office to ask what she should do. The place had not been the same since the week prior when the assistant principal had left poison peppermints in the candy tray. The secretary had been rushed to the hospital for detox and many of the staff had refused to return. But Ms. Josie

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continued to greet students every morning with her blush cheeks and curled hair and outrageous animated earrings.

“Hello?” Tink had called inside the principal’s office. “Anyone here?”

There was short clipped breathing. Tink walked around behind the front desk. Two blue flats attached to two doughy pale legs emerged from underneath.

“Ms. Josie?” Tink asked.

The blue flats started to wag their way out, then Ms. Josie’s bum, then the brightly patterned scarf she had draped over her shoulders, and finally her curly-headed hair. She sat back on her knees. “Why are you still here?” she asked, smoothing her scarf. “Don’t you think you should go on with the rest of them?”

“What about you?”

Ms. Josie adjusted her daisy earrings. “Well,” she looked around. The blinds were askew to the principal’s office, through it you could see a chair jerked to the middle of the room. “Someone in charge needs to stay on the grounds. The press might come. Everyone but me left.” She walked to the mini-fridge in the corner and pulled out a drink. “Coke?” she asked, handing one over to Tink.

Tink took it, cracked it open, and felt the release of the pressure inside. “That’s fucked up,” she said.

“Yes, dear, it is.”

Tink and Dan stopped briefly at the office to survey the remnants of the administration and continued down the hallway. “Aren’t they going to raze this building?” Dan asked.

“Can’t. The Historical Society is having a fit about it.”

He shined his light up on the ceiling and a swath of cobwebs swung in the subtle movement of the air that they were stirring up. “It just seems dangerous to have this old building sitting here empty.”

“Why do you care?”

His voice flicked down a notch, a tone she didn’t recognize. “Bad things happened here, Tink.”

“It’s fine. Let’s head to the cafeteria,” she said. “I need a couple more of those plastic trays.”

She’d taken to eating her dinners in these trays lately. They were the souvenirs she’d swiped on her last day at school. Tink often ate alone at night—her mom worked evenings at the hospital. Dan worked nights too, and even when he had the evening off, half the time they were broken up anyway. For dinner she would put frozen corn in the middle top section of the tray, chicken nuggets in the main section, a brownie in the third section, and heated it all up for two minutes. The brownie cooled enough to be both hard and squishy by the time she ate it.

Tink and Dan headed through the double doors at the end of the hall where a set of concrete stairs led to the next floor. As they zig-zagged up,

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Tink glanced down at the underside of the bottom set of stairs, which was always dark and obscured by shadows. She remembered the time during algebra class when she'd taken the scenic route to the bathroom and heard whispers and giggling coming from under there. When she got to the bottom of the steps, she glanced back and saw her then-boyfriend leaning a freshman girl against the back wall of the stairs. His back was to Tink, but she saw the green bill of his baseball cap. He didn't see her, but Tink caught the roving eyes of the girl. The look that passed between them was crushing.

When they got to the cafeteria, it was eerily quiet. Tink grabbed a few mint-green trays and set them down on a table. Sitting across from one another, she laid the flashlight down so that the beam shone straight up at the ceiling.

"Would you live here?" Dan asked. "If you could?"

Tink dumped a bag of Cheetos onto the main section of the tray.

"If you could buy it somehow." He opened a package of pop tarts and put one on each of their trays.

Tink cracked open a now-warmish beer and leaned back in the chair. "I guess so. It'd be better than where I live now. At least there are no asshole neighbors." She crunched a Cheeto.

"You can devote each classroom to something different," he said. "Like one could be a for watching tv and another could be where you lift weights and another could be where you, like, wrap gifts or something."

"Wrap gifts?" Tink snorted her beer.

"Yeah, that's a thing in mansions."

"No it's not. No one has a whole room devoted to wrapping gifts."

"Yes they do!" he snapped.

"Chill out, dude."

Dan took a bite of his pop tart. With a full mouth he said, "Well it doesn't matter. They're probably going to tear it down anyway."

Tink finished her meal in silence. She'd thought by coming back she'd find a different version of herself she'd overlooked. But it was like all the eyes were still watching her, and they all still saw the same thing—a slightly older version of the same girl. She drained the last of her beer and crushed the can sideways, dropping it in her tray. "This was sort of nice," she said. "It's like going out to eat in our private dining room."

"Yeah, real high-end food." He shoved the tray forward a little.

She thought it was perfectly fitting for a place supposedly so grand, but that did so little. After all, they were supposed to have grown up here and be transformed into *respectable men and women*. She thought the building was like a god that couldn't fix them. Tink wanted to ask Dan which was worse — an impotent god, or no god at all. But she knew what he'd say. He'd say, *What the hell's the difference?* or something like that. She thought maybe that at least with a powerless god you'd have good company. You wouldn't be alone.

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She crushed the empty Cheeto bag in her palm. "It is eerie." She leaned forward and smiled, trying to keep the spirit light. "Despite all those horrible things that happened, the building is still here, still trying."

Through the shadows, Tink saw a flicker of satisfaction on Dan's face. "Guess what I found?" He dug a folded-up news article from his pocket, opened it, and turned it around for her. She shined the light on it. The headline read: *Commission Clears City High School for Demolition, Work Slated for the Spring.*

That last day, she'd lingered on the premises for a while. In an odd little show of resistance, Tink, along with the mohawk-guy whose name was Nathaniel and Mrs. Josie, had ambled through the school as if they were the sweepers. Mrs. Josie had suggested they do a walk through to see if anyone was in the building. After searching the classrooms, they ended up in the cafeteria, which was empty too. The kitchen staff had already prepared lunch. Baked chicken simmered in a thick brown sauce, a pile of biscuits rose from the taurine next to it. A vat of green beans steamed down the line and a batch of pineapple soaked in syrup.

Without words, Ms. Josie grabbed a green tray, went behind the line, and started filling her plate. Nathaniel followed, opting for pineapples and biscuits only. Tink put a carton of chocolate milk in a corner of her tray, then filled the rest up.

They sat down at a nearby table. The little orange plastic chairs scooted loudly over the floor, the sound reverberating in all that empty space.

"It's so quiet in here without anyone else," Tink said, stuffing a forkful of beans in her mouth.

"Blessing first," said Ms. Josie. She bowed her head. Her flower earrings swung forward. "Dear Lord, keep us three safe from this terrible scourge on our school. We do not claim to understand your ways."

Tink glanced at Nathaniel, who looked askance.

A smile flitted across Ms. Josie's face. "And thanks for the food. Amen."

"How long have you had that?" Tink grabbed the article from Dan and read the first paragraph that described how the historical society had relented on the grounds of public safety. When she looked back up, his smug smile made her want to punch him.

"I saw it a few days ago."

"Why didn't you tell me? You were being all weird about it."

He shrugged. Tink's fingers were shaking when she set down the newspaper. This building was too historical to tear down. It had gargoyles and shit on the roof line. Sure, it needed a makeover inside. But Jesus, was nothing sacred?

"Let's get out of here," she said.

"Very fickle these days." His eyes looked orange.

She stuffed the trays in her backpack and headed out of the cafeteria. "Tink, wait up," he called. "Why do you even care?"

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Tears burned at the edges of her eyes. She wiped them so Dan wouldn't see. He wouldn't understand, but this place had formed her, and if it had formed her, it had to mean something.

She rushed down the hallway. He gripped the back of her neck as they walked and she had to work to not roll her shoulders and push him away. The scratch of his nail glided across her skin. The smell of rain wafted toward them. It was coming from the classroom they'd entered from, just twenty yards away.

"What's this?" he asked.

On the floor scattered near some open lockers were four glossy photographs. He picked them up and held them beneath her flashlight.

They were black images with blue orbs glowing in the back, the scaffolding of a hallway fading away from the foreground. Tink ran a finger across the shiny surface. "They're new," she said, taking them from him.

They entered her old classroom and she set the photos on a desk. Warm air drifted in from the open window. She shined her flashlight on the pavement outside. "You go first," she told Dan, "so you can help me out."

He stuck one leg through the threshold. Outside, a light rain had started to fall and a hot fog hovered over the asphalt. When he was out and staring at her from below, she said, "I'll catch up with you later."

"What?" he said, the mist matting his hair.

She shut the window and turned the lock. "What are you doing?" he called. Soft rain printed on the window, muffling his shouts.

The room hushed around her in a cottony den. Dan began yelling expletives outside, but she barely registered the words as she picked up the photos. So she wasn't the only one who knew about this open window—the paranormal investigators had made it inside after all.

Her fingers were numb with cold or adrenaline or fear, or maybe she was dematerializing into the shadows of the room. She brought her light close to one of the photographs. In it, one of the lockers was open and she could see a photo within the photo—someone's boyfriend pinned up inside the locker door. Beside that, an apparition. A shadowy figure with a menacing face standing where the girl would have stood when she put away her books.

Dan pelted the widow with pebbles. His shouts were growing louder. In the gray fuzz of the classroom, Tink thought of the gargoyles coated in summer rain. She thought of the empty space beneath the stairwell where she caught her high school boyfriend making out with the freshman. She thought about how she had accidentally caught the girl's eyes, the humiliation.

"Tink if you don't come out, I'm going to find another way in!" Dan yelled through the window. He had climbed on the trashcan and found something to prop him up. His face was torked and red, and he was banging so hard the window rattled.

Tink turned her back to him and stared so hard at the ghoulish im-

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age that she felt her body separate from her bones. Ms. Josie would tell Tink this ghost business was horse manure. She might tisk at the so-called paranormal images and say there was no skill in photography these days. But Tink thought they were beautiful. They captured a fragmented truth—the real things that remain unseen even when you're looking for them, so fragile they can only be caught unaware through a camera lens.

All these clandestine things, all breathing, and all watching. Eyes watching all the while, while she was busy becoming a woman who was worthy of survival.