

“La la la, you are the dancing king! Young and sweet! Only twenty-six! C’mon Jessica, we are almost here.”

Bright sun bearing down on my eyes along with my brother’s uncontrollable need to shout custom ABBA lyrics tailored to his own life woke me up. But nothing could compare to the immense headache that pulsed with every breath. *Oh god, it was another blackout.* This was always my thing when coming up here. It was my first time going without my parents and still this drive gave me blackouts and headaches, even as a kid on our triannual trips to the house. This house just meant there would be a blackout. I could expect it at this point. I thought it was the weirdest thing because it was something more than just what coincidence could explain. But my brother just always blamed it on altitude. Regardless, I dreaded this trip because the debilitating headaches didn’t let me enjoy anything. Yet here I am, fate drawing me to the house again so that my life can torture me some more.

The cobblestones leading up to the house clearly hadn’t been maintained in the past 25 years. Small roots and plants stuck out of the cracks as if they were young kids stretching their arms for the first time. The fence leading into the driveway was all torn and the pieces that remained intact were coated in graffiti. *4 Pembleton Ct* is what the withered sign said. Its rich oak wood no longer held the welcoming quality it once had. I sat up straight in the backseat while my brother, Amir, drove his Ford Explorer onto the uneven path, making our way closer to the house.

I still had no idea why our parents continued to keep this property. It just made more sense to sell it. I hated coming up here so often. Just looking at the thing gave me shivers. At least it was only going to be one weekend.

We pulled into the round driveway. The fountain in the center no longer worked. The car stopped as Amir changed the gear into park and turned it off. “Hey Jess, thanks again for convincing us to come back up here after so long. I know you, Mom, and Dad come up here all of the time. I kind of miss the place you know,” said Amir. *No, I didn’t know. These headaches were hell. But for some reason, there was just something telling me to always come back here. Maybe I found comfort in the predictability of the headache pain in a time where I needed stability. God Jessica, that’s freaking messed up.* I still smiled back.

“Looks like Oscar already likes it,” he pointed towards Oscar who had jumped out of the car and was running towards a rock out ahead of us. Oscar was always a big nature guy, plus he was one of the only people that were there for me during the aftermath of my blackouts last year. The pain was so bad back then and he used to help me out with everything from meeting homework deadlines to just getting food from the cafeteria. Even if his perfectionist nature did bother our siblings, I was glad he was here. I even think he agreed to come because he knew this house was

the cause of my pain. He believes in supernatural stuff so he probably wanted to investigate and find a cause. Whatever.

“Jessica, check out this view!” Oscar had made his way out through the forest and was standing by the bluff’s edge. I opened my door and popped open the trunk to get my backpack. While Amir and his girlfriend Ellena exited the front of the car and walked towards the house, I made my way to Oscar. He was standing there with his signature binoculars and was looking out down the mountainside. “Would you look at this view! Jessica, this place is amazing. Why would Mom and Dad ever consider selling it?” I scoffed as he handed me the binoculars. I grabbed them and gazed around, trying to poke my gaze through the tops of the pines, but all I could see was green. However, there was an opening by the edge of the river that ran through the valley. I lowered myself from the rock to get a better view. There I could see a young deer and her young fawn leaned over to get a sip of the sweet Virginia water. It was a calming scene.

THWISHHHHH...THUNK...THUNK

An black arrow pierced clean through the skulls of both mother and child. *Holy shit.* “Oscar what the hell! I just saw two deer get murdered! This isn’t amazing at all!” Oscar didn’t seem phased. “Jessica, it’s just people hunting. Those deer were unlucky, that’s all. Also, you said that no one had been on this land in forever right? Well, hunters probably just assumed that no one cared since no one said anything. Don’t worry, it’s just a part of nature.” He walked back to the house as if nothing had happened, leaving me in a state of disgust. I just don’t understand why people hunt for sport. I decided to take one last look to see if I could see the awful person who killed them. I want this to stop, at least while I’m staying here. I raised the binoculars to my eyes once again but this time, the bodies were gone. *What the hell? Now that’s weird. Even that black arrow seemed strange. It almost pierced the animals and disappeared. I never even heard it land on the ground.* Quickly, I ran inside the house, unknowing of what was lurking in those woods.

The broad stone doorway was in a surprisingly solid state. I was greeted by a mangled “welcome” mat. I walked through the double doors into the shabby and gloomy foyer. The carpet was frayed. The chandelier held more spiderwebs than actual bulbs. The windows were stained with some mystery yellow goop. It was always like this when I came up. I just don’t think we ever got around to cleaning it up since we had the intention to sell it. “Hot hell, Jess. When you said it was in bad condition, I didn’t know you meant the 16th Century.” hollered Amir from the kitchen. “Funny, Amir. I know that I’m the only sibling that has consistently been coming up so I’m used to it. You guys would be too if you came too.” I retorted.

“Ouch, F**K!” Oscar’s voice echoed through the house. Amir, Ellena, and I ran to the library to find him kneeled over, clenching his knee. “Oscar, are you okay? What happened?” He got up and revealed to us a bloody knee. He pointed to a sharp pencil that had oddly been jammed the

library door. It looks like it might have been planted there, as a means to hurt anyone who came into here. *This house didn't like us, or maybe it just didn't like me.* Regardless, Oscar must have caught his knee on the door. "We really ought to be more careful in this house. It's always been in this condition. Who knows in what other ways this building has broken down since my parents last repaired it. Hold up Oscar, I'll go and grab a bandaid from the first aid kit in the car."

As I quickly scurried my way outside and opened the passenger side door, I couldn't help but find that pencil placement strange. I dismissed it. In the glove compartment, I pulled out the first aid kit and grabbed a couple of bandaids and an alcohol cleaning wipe. I shut the door and turned around. As I walked back to the house, something caught the corner of my eye. I turned towards the rock Oscar was standing on just moments before. Nothing. I kept going until I heard the bushes rustle. *The hell?* Deer never came this close to the house. I stood still, keeping my eyes hard-locked on the bush by the rock. I couldn't see anything yet I felt like I was staring straight back at something, or someone. Suddenly, a black figure jumped and ran straight out of the bush. "Aaaah!" I let out a loud scream. The human figure turned around and ran back into the woods. *Who the hell was that? Could there be someone else on the property? Were they watching us?* "Jessica, Jessica! Are you okay?" called Amir as he and Ellena left Oscar to run outside and see what was going on. "I-...I-...there was someone right there," I trembled, pointing to the bush where the hooded figure had been watching her from. "Jess you might just be seeing things. Let's go inside and unpack. Then we can head to that diner you told us about for dinner." replied Ellena. "I guess you're right. I'm probably just tired from the drive and my headaches. Let's go."

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We had decided to take out a few of the bikes that Dad had in the garage from back when he and his friends used to do races out here. The three miles down the mountain to the Diner felt like a breeze for us. Our ride was down a picturesque empty mountain road and was perfectly complemented by lively conversation and amazing views of the Shenandoah River. That night we returned from a trip to the Famous Freddy's Diner. Dinner was pizza and drinks, something Oscar figured out too soon he was allergic to. He is definitely an odd guy. Growing up he never tried the soy milk I bought during my vegan phase. Today was his first time having anything soy so that soy flour pizza crust did not suit him well.

Regardless, I was glad I had convinced my siblings to finally make their way up here after all of these years and spend the weekend together. For the past like six years it was always just me, Mom, and Dad. Now I got some real sibling bonding time. It meant a lot since I hadn't had real support since sophomore year in college, which was when the blackouts began. I guess someone who always feels pain after trips to the house wasn't a person people wanted to be friends with.

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After we had settled down with our stomachs all full, Amir had the idea to sing campfire songs and tell scary stories. I was kinda surprised at first because I probably hadn't been around a campfire since my 7th-grade girl scout trip to the Appalachians. It was such a classic Amir idea too. I had no complaints. It could probably help this terrible headache. I could tell Oscar was a little bit hesitant, probably because he wasn't a scary story kind of guy. You could tell from the second you met him. I convinced him to join us and we began.

The campfire pit in the backyard was a little small but it did the job. There was a well-built wall in the shape of a circle all around the pit. It was an open fire with stick stands for roasting marshmallows, except one of them was missing. Someone had probably stolen it while out here. I wouldn't be surprised if I found more stuff missing. "Hey Jessica, did you grab the smores stuff from the car?" asked Amir. "Yup, I got them right here." We all took a seat around the campfire as Oscar, the family wilderness expert, got the fire started with the firestarter he packed with him. Amir wrapped his guitar strap around his shoulder and began to tune his guitar with Ellena leaning on his shoulder. This evening was coming together.

We spent the first 10 minutes just staring into the fire. While our bodies remained still, we watched as the dancing flames represented everything we were going through inside back home. This trip was more than just a weekend off, it was an escape from the stresses of life. Maybe this is why our parents like to spend so much time up here and keep dragging me along. I find three trips a year kind of unneeded, but hey, a vacation is a vacation.

"Okay, enough of this silence shit, who's up for some songs?" said Amir, breaking the silence. We all nodded and broke from our trances. We spent the next 30 minutes singing some sweet rock throwbacks from the '80s and some peak 2014 pop music. Oscar told us about his eagle scout project about improving water quality in valley towns. Ellena told us about how she was a final candidate for this job at corporate Walgreens. Amir told us about how his band had just booked some local venues and were finally getting off of the ground. I just told each of them how much it meant to me that it wasn't our parents that were up here with me. Whether I liked it or not, this house was probably my second home and I was glad I had my siblings here. Afterwards, Amir said that it was time for some scary stories. I grinned and his eyes immediately darted to Oscar as I saw a feeling of discomfort creep up on his face. He looked back at me and in that instance it was as if my returning glance told him that there was nothing to worry about.

"Have you guys ever heard of the story of the Creak?" We all shook our heads saying no. Amir began his story.

"'Creak', a sound, faint, distant, but still heard.

‘Crack’, something snapping, or being trampled on.

The man sits in his room, reading. The room is silent except for the quiet fire burning.

‘Creak’... Just the house settling, nothing more.

‘Crack’, Perhaps some small animals outdoors.

‘Whoosh’, Was that the wind?

The man stands up and peeks out the window. A clear night is all he sees, the full moon brilliant in the sky. Laughing at his nervousness, he returns to his book.

‘Creak’, the man now silently chuckles at the sound.

‘Crack’, how could he have been scared of some sounds.

‘Whoosh’, must be breezy out tonight.

‘Thump’...did that come from within the house?

The man stares into the fire, trying to calm his jangled nerves.

‘Creak’...

‘Crack’...

‘Whoosh’...will the sounds never cease?

‘Thump’...’Thump’...’Thump’...

Closer, he thinks, the sounds are getting closer. He shuts the book and closes his eyes, and thinks of something besides his wild imagination.

‘Creak’

‘Thump’

‘Crack’

‘Thump’

‘Whoosh’

‘Thump’...’Thump’...’Thump’...a pause? The man moves quietly, slowly, towards the door with a nervous gait. ‘Thump’...a step back...’Thump’...yes, it’s getting closer. ‘Thump’...he stares at the door, trying to somehow see through it...’Thump’...he reaches slowly for the doorknob, hand shaking, no longer able to take not knowing...’Creak’, a loose floorboard, near the door outside...’Thump’, he slowly opens the door...

‘A scream’

...silence...”¹

“Holy shit Amir, that was insane. I’ve got shivers already, you didn’t have to make them worse.” replied Ellena. We all chuckled.

Amir continued. “Wait, wait. I have another one. Except this one is really freaky because it’s about our parents.”

“Ew Amir I don’t want to hear about that. That sounds like a terrible story,” echoed Oscar.

“No, what the hell, it’s not about that. That’s gross. It’s a real story about what happened on a trip up to this very same house.”

My interest peaked. A story about this place that I didn’t already know? We all nodded curiously.

“Ok, let’s begin.

27 years ago, Mom and Dad had come up to this exact house on a weekend getaway with their siblings. This house has been in the family forever so they used it too.

So, one one trip, they had come back from a trip to Freddy’s and Aunt Amirah decided to stay outside and get some fresh air because of some chronic head pain. No one suspected anything strange until they heard loud rustling footsteps outside and then a thud. Mom was confused but the others just told her to continue their game of poker. They didn’t do anything until 15 minutes later when Mom went to go check on her. Aunt Amirah was gone.

¹ <https://www.ultimatecampresource.com/campfire-stories/scary-campfire-stories/creak/>

They all desperately began to search and they couldn't find anything. When the police came, Mom told them everything, even about the rustling outside. However, they couldn't find her.

Now, remember back at Freddy's when I went aside and started talking to Old Freddy? I asked him about that night. He told me that the rumour was that she had been taken by the spirit of the house. He told me that this house had been in our family forever and that every 25 years or so, it took someone to become the new spirit.

It's our family curse. This house always takes someone in our family. Aunt Amirah. Remember they never explained how Grandpa Khalid's brother died. Even people before that. The house drags our family back to it in whatever way it can so that it can take another victim."

Amir left us in silence. *Could it be? I mean, Mom never really explained how Aunt Amirah passed away. She just told us that she had an accident. Dad told me that she had run away. Also, what was all that stuff about the house always bringing the family back to it?*

"I don't believe it. It's ridiculous. You're telling me that a spirit is in this house and is taking your family members?" replied Ellena.

"I never said I believed it. I'm just telling you the story," said Amir.

We just sat there in silence. Oscar was shit scared. I was so confused. And Amir and Ellena just wanted to go back to their bed, it was getting late.

The bushes behind us began to rustle. Just like if someone was watching us.

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WEAAAAGGGHHHHHHAAAAHHHH!

We all turned around to hear the blood curdling scream coming from the woods. "WOAH, WOAH. What the hell was that?! Everyone inside, now!" screamed Amir. We all ran inside but before we could reach the door, a man dressed in all black flew out from the woods and blocked our path. *No way, was this the guy I saw earlier by the car?!* Ellena clenched Amir's arm. His other arm was in front of me and Oscar. "What the hell! *THE SPIRIT!!!*" shouted Oscar, "Quick, everyone to the car!" We all ran to the front but there was no car to be seen. It had been stolen. But I saw no tire marks. I ran towards where it was parked absolutely puzzled and scared for my life. I turned around.

But no one was there. No Amir. No Ellena. No Oscar. No ghosts. No house. No mountain.

Everything faded into the dark.

Blackout.

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CREEAAK

The sound of the metal door woke me up from the blackout. I heard someone walking behind me. The searing headache threatened to melt my brain. I couldn't stand up.

I laid on the floor, surrounded by stacks of dried hay. I was in a cellar of some sort. In front of me, from a hook in the ceiling, hung the dead body of a deer. Underneath it, in its pool of blood, was a stack of smaller bones. I tried to turn around but I hurt too much.

“Jessica,” whispered a raspy female voice from behind me. I froze. *Who the hell was that? Where were Amir, Oscar, and Ellena? Where am I?* “Slow down with the questions, Jessica. There will be plenty of time for that later.” *Can they hear my thoughts?* “Yes, I can.”

“Who the hell are you?” I weakly shouted.

“As I said, all your questions will be answered. But first, I wanted to tell you how much I admire you keeping your connection to this house. Unlike your siblings, you always kept coming back. This house brought you back. I brought you back.” Oh how I wanted to turn around and punch whoever this was.

“What do you mean? No one made me come here.” I asked.

“Of course I did. Why do you think you have these terrible headaches? That was all me sweet Jessica. With every blackout I drew you closer. I even made your parents help me out by making them bring you back here all those times.”

“But...how? You can force us to do things? Who are you?”

“Jessica, I am much more powerful than you think, and soon all of this power will become yours. After all, who wouldn't want to help out their aunt.”

It clicked. “Aunt Amirah? I thought you were dead.”

“Oh dear lord, everyone loves to spread rumors when they don’t know anything. I’m not so much dead as I am attached to his house. It’s our family curse you know. Every generation, one kid in our family is chosen to succeed into the guardian of this house.”

“Is that what happened to you? What happened to my siblings?”

“Yes it is. And it’s what’s going to happen to you. Now as for your siblings, I have wiped their minds so they just think that you ran off. Exactly like what your Mom and Dad thought happened to me.”

“Was it you that was watching us?”

“Of course it was. If you look ahead of you, you can see my fine hunting skills,” she pointed to the deer corpse.

I was lost for words. *Was this really happening? What about my life?* No one knew where I was and no one was coming for me. My fate was sealed to become the next guardian of this house.

I heard Aunt Amirah walk up to me. “It’s time. Don’t worry Jessica. This existence isn’t as bad as it seems.” She snapped her fingers and I went numb.

Blackout.