



CHAPTER ONE

Macy

The cypress trees look like finger bones with the flesh stripped off, and the fog feels alive, electric with something—maybe just the ear-ringing buzz of insects in the swamps, but something else too, something unsettling and eerie.

“Ethan!” I shout when I see it, but he can’t hear. He’s inside, unpacking our supplies. We took a ratty wooden boat from the mainland and rowed across the glossy swamp water to this cabin that was very misrepresented on the Airbnb listing and looks like it hasn’t been inhabited in years. We could have driven, but the area really requires four-wheel drive, and Ethan’s Corvette would never handle it. I’m already regretting coming here.

Even though pinpricks of anxiety climb my spine and I should just leave it alone and go inside, I stare at the strange

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objects hanging from a dripping Spanish moss tree at the water's edge. I walk over and gaze up, trying to figure out what I'm looking at. A small leather pouch, a checkered cloth wrapped in a tight bundle, and tiny paper boxes are all suspended by wires and strings tied around the boney branch. A lock of stringy red hair hangs from a long black thread, and a tooth is wrapped in twine. *Are those from a human*, I wonder, disgusted at the thought. It looks like a psychotic baby mobile. I reach up to touch one of the boxes, and when it opens, a splash of blood spills out onto my face and into my open mouth. I scream bloody murder and drop to my knees.

"Jesus Christ!" I spit and gag, desperate to get the vile liquid out of my mouth. The cabin door slams, and hurried footsteps approach.

"Hey." Ethan kneels next to me and puts his arm around my shoulders. His eyes widen when he looks at my face. "Jeez, Mace. Is that blood? What the hell happened?" I can't answer.

"Macy! Hey, look at me. Christ, are you okay?"

I point to the tree, wiping my tongue on the inside of my shirt and repeating "Oh my God" under my breath about a hundred times.

"Oh. Well, shit, babe. You're not supposed to touch it," he says with a smirk. It's gris-gris."

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“It’s what—what?”

“It’s a talisman around here. It’s supposed to protect you from a curse—like black magic stuff. You’ll see that all over,” he says casually, like he’s explaining the local wildlife. “Probably don’t mess with it next time.”

“Are you laughing?” I snap.

“No. I’m not laughing,” he says, trying to keep a straight face.

“There is *blood!* In my mouth, Ethan! God!”

“Come on.” He puts a hand out to help me up. “It’s just old animal blood. You’ll be fine.”

“Oh, well if that’s all,” I say.

Inside the cabin, I brush my teeth four times and then crack open a beer, ignoring its spearmint aftertaste. It’s room temperature, but the heat is too relentless to be picky, and the AC just makes a knocking sound and dribbles yellow water on the floor. I sit cross-legged in front of a box fan and scroll on my phone, looking for the contact info for the woman who rented us this place, because clearly we can’t stay here. The photos online must have been from years ago, before the wood rot and overgrown cross vines that almost swallow the place whole. The counters are a shit brown-colored vinyl, and the floor in the tiny kitchen is chipped linoleum in a hideous yellow floral pattern. It’s like going back in time. I had to have Ethan take the deer head

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off the wall because my vegan heart could not handle looking at it, its dead eyes staring right back at me. The antlers over the fireplace are pushing it. Plus, there's an old shotgun leaning up against the wall like that's normal. Or legal. The only thing I like about the place is the kitschy singing fish on the wall—Big Mouth Billy Bass—that opens its mouth and sings “Take Me to the River.” Overall, it's a very unsettling place.

In this small, coastal parish, there is no shortage of ghost stories and tales of curses and evil lurking. People here still lay stacks of nickels and paper flowers in front of Marie Laveau's tomb so she will grant their wishes. We visited her tomb once for an episode of our true crime YouTube channel. The voodoo priestess is thought to grant wishes from beyond the grave. If you ask her for something and you get it, you have to go back and thank her. They don't let people touch her tomb anymore, but that doesn't stop folks from leaving offerings, turning in circles three times, and making X motions to show their gratitude.

Some believe in the old spells of chicken feet warding off evil, graveyard dust—which you can conveniently buy on eBay now—to put a hex on someone, or sprinkling gunpowder in your bathwater for protection against spirits. Voodoo dolls and pins are actually still a thing. It's part of the inherent creepy charm of the area, I suppose.

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Ethan is the one from Louisiana and grew up around these swamps, so he's much more accustomed to these local quirks.

When Emily Tremblay went missing a week ago, we both became interested in the story to cover for our channel. We had heard about this place a month earlier when we were filming an episode on the Magnolia Plantation and then realized there was a much bigger story to cover. Everyone around these parts is calling her disappearance a curse, voodoo, black magic.

Our YouTube channel, Ghost Patrol, is focused on paranormal ghost hunting, not real missing people, but we couldn't ignore all the local accounts of an evil presence in this town pointing to this being connected to something beyond your average missing persons case.

We've been in talks with Netflix for a couple months, negotiating a possible season of *Ghost Patrol*. We never thought we'd go from a tiny YouTube channel to having this opportunity, and now that it's being dangled in front of us, Ethan and I both feel like we have a lot to prove with this investigation.

"There's a Hilton seven miles north," I say to Ethan as I walk onto the rickety front deck perched on stilts over the murky water. I flop down on a dusty couch, because of course this place has a couch on the porch to class things

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up. I look at him as he fiddles with the AC unit sticking out the front window, trying to get it to turn on.

“We can’t do that,” he says, distracted, turning a rusty metal piece with a wrench and wiping his sweaty forehead with the back of his hand.

“Why not?”

“This place is right where it all happened. Emily was last seen walking home from a restaurant half a mile thataway, and Elizabeth Brockton lives six cabins down the swamp that way. We need to be in the heart of it, not at a Hilton miles away,” he says.

Two disappearances. One is everyday news, sadly, but a few weeks after Elizabeth Brockton, Emily went missing just a mile away from where Elizabeth was last seen, under very strange circumstances. Elizabeth had been sitting in a chair at the water’s edge of the property where she and her husband lived with their young daughter, right across the water from our cabin, and vanished. No screams or struggle heard. Her car and phone were at home where she had left them. No money has been accessed from her bank or credit cards. No footprints up the muddy embankment to the house that drizzly night. It’s like she dissolved into thin air. Same with Emily. Yes, the walk from the Crawfish Hut where she was last seen was a mile from her house, and anything could happen

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in that stretch of cypress trees and gator-infested water, but the strange thing is that her mother reported that Emily was paranoid and had stopped leaving the house not long before her disappearance. We don't know all the details yet and are trying to get her mother to meet with us, but it's all suspicious.

So Ethan's not wrong; we should be close to the story, but I don't know if I have the stomach to stay. Two women just vanished. I feel the weight of it like a stone in my chest. We may have come for the Netflix deal and fame of cracking this case, but now it's so real. It feels different. Important. Urgent.

When I first heard about Elizabeth, a pain gripped my chest. She has cancer and was given a few months to live, as reported in the paper.

When I was fourteen, my mother died from lymphoma. A couple decades later, I still see her as weighing eighty pounds, curled up in a hospital bed, her neck and chest covered with golf-ball-sized tumors. The lumps looked more like horror movie stage makeup than part of an actual person. It seemed impossible that someone could be that sick and still be living. In an effort to shield me from the trauma of it all, my dad took away my final days with her, not allowing me to visit her in the hospital. I think about Elizabeth's little girl—the small amount of time they had

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left together on this earth and how it was robbed from her. From them both. What kind of monster would do that?

I can still taste the bitter iron in my mouth from the blood, and it makes me want to scrape my tongue with a butter knife, but nothing helps. I blow the air from my cheeks and pick up a can of bug spray, making an insect-repelling mist around myself before sitting on a red aluminum chair and trying to catch a breeze that doesn't come.

It's dusk, and the sky burns orange above the trees, making them look like they're on fire. A low rumbling starts up, like the cabin is about to take off into space, and I whip my head around.

"Yes!" Ethan shouts, pointing proudly at the AC unit, which has hummed to life.

"Thank God," I say, cracking open another beer from the cooler and handing it to him. He sits in a rocking chair next to me, and we stare out into the dark trees.

There's a crunching sound like feet on twigs maybe. I tense and hold perfectly still, listening.

"Did you hear that?" I ask.

"Could be a Squatch," he says, standing and angling a flashlight across the water and into the junglelike brush. "Just my luck we finally catch a Squatch, and I don't have the camera rolling."

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“Please stop saying ‘Squatch,’” I say, grabbing the camera, placing it on the tripod, and pressing record. This is our usual drill when any action is sensed: We roll. I stand next to Ethan, my face in the frame as he flashes his light around, commentating.

“Here we are in the spot where Emily and Elizabeth went missing only a few weeks apart,” Ethan says over his shoulder to the camera. “Macy heard something out here, and we’re checking it out. Not many Sasquatch sightings in this area, sadly. Only thing ya gotta worry about over here is gators.”

“And actual potential murderers on the loose, but you know . . .” I add. That’s my role—the skeptical cynic who doesn’t believe any of this paranormal bullshit. It makes for great on-camera chemistry.

“Tomorrow, our trusty sound guy, Max, will be joining us, so we’ll have a better quality update for you then, but we wanted to let you know we’re here and lots more to come,” he says. The video is garbage. It will be posted to our channel for all the world to see with thirty seconds of nothing to really share besides a distant sound in the trees that could be anything, but content, content, content. That’s what people want—an authentic experience with us “in the moment.” In the thick of it. A video that will have fifty thousand views by tomorrow. It’s a bizarre world we live in, but it’s working for us.

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“And,” Ethan continues, “we’ll be interviewing Elizabeth’s husband, Shane Brockton, on a live stream tomorrow night, so don’t miss it. Details in the show notes.” I stop the camera.

“What?” I snap. “You didn’t tell me that.” I can’t mask the smile across my face. This is huge.

“I told you I had a big surprise for ya,” he says.

“I thought it was running water and AC?” I ask, and he laughs.

“You said you’ve camped a bunch of times. This is nothing compared to that.”

“I said I *glamped*. Which comes with a rain showerhead, AC, a mint on my pillow, and bottomless cucumber martinis. How did you get an interview with Shane?”

“He wants to find her. He talks to the press a lot, so he’s open, and he thinks these types of channels can help get the word out. He said he’d do whatever he can to help bring her home. That means talking to us, I guess.”

“Wow. That’s . . . amazing.”

“It’s worth staying here for, right? The AC is on now, and I’ll call the landlady to get the water sorted. Maybe she can get someone out here tomorrow.”

“I know Max would brave the yellow water and mosquitos and all that, but Tasha is coming with him, so we’ll see how that goes.” Max and Tasha, who do the sound

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engineering and editing for our videos, have been good friends of ours for years, and I know her well enough to know she likes turndown service and a good spa as much as I do.

“There’s prosecco in the cooler and a hot tub. She’ll be fine,” he says.

I look over to the very questionable hot tub to the side of the cabin. “Ew.”

“I’m gonna post this video and get the camera equipment ready for tomorrow,” he says and heads inside.

I sit for a while and take in my eerie surroundings. The symphony of nighttime swamp sounds—croaking, from bullfrogs with their low-pitched drone and narrow-mouthed toads that sound like sheep to the chirping and stridulation of cricket wings electrifying the heavy air. I think of Emily and Elizabeth and wonder if they’re out here somewhere. Seems like you could get lost forever if you wandered too far. Is that what happened? It would be so easy to do—one wrong turn and suddenly you’ve lost your footing. You could die of dehydration, a snakebite, quicksand. Is that a thing? Drowning, heatstroke. Gators—for sure there are gators. Jesus, so many things. I try not to think about Grunch, the cannibalistic creature rumored to roam these swamps. But the thought is there now, and all I can envision is it sucking out my organs.

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Ethan and I had talked about starting a true-crime podcast long before we were married and long before we actually started anything serious. It feels like destiny though because even in our early dating years, discussions of serial killer documentaries and *Dateline* episodes punctuated our dinners out or pizza nights in, as did our mutual fascination with wives who poison their husbands with antifreeze and men who murder their wives for the life insurance payouts (and think they won't get caught even though they were dumb enough to update the policy merely days before the murders). This stuff bonded us, but our podcast started slowly.

At first we decided the true crime space was too saturated and we could gain a quicker following by reporting sense-tingling, bizarre stories like the woman whose tongue swelled up so big in her sleep it asphyxiated and killed her. When they lanced her swollen tongue in the autopsy, dozens of maggots swarmed out and spilled onto the steel table, causing the medical examiner to throw up right on top of the body. It was all linked back to an envelope from a thank-you card the woman licked days earlier. Apparently, flies are attracted to the adhesive, and the tiniest little cut from the envelope must have allowed the eggs to hatch inside her tongue. We thought the story was gold, that people would tune in just for the shocking news we brought them each

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week. We even interviewed the man the thank-you card was sent to. He told us the victim was his coworker and he wished he'd never scraped the snow off her car that day so she wouldn't have had a reason to send that thank-you card, but we only had nine subscribers listen to the podcast episode.

The woman who swallowed her wedding ring during a carjacking so it couldn't be stolen and then was gutted for it anyway, the rat mistakenly baked into a loaf of bread at Deli Rios, the kid from Michigan who bit down on something rubbery in his Arby's roast beef sandwich only to find a partial human finger one of the workers had lost in the bun slicer—no one cared.

So we shifted our focus to ghosts, and what do you know, it worked and grew fast. Ethan the believer and me the eternal skeptic. Apparently, Netflix thinks our opposing views on the topic make the show charming and binge-worthy.

What I won't admit to Ethan though is that it feels wrong. I'm thrilled all this success is happening, and maybe I'm wrong and we can really do some good here, but it seems so out of our jurisdiction. This is not the Island of the Dolls or Lizzy Borden's house where she was suspected of murdering her parents over a century ago. This is real women currently in danger, and it gives me a knot in the pit of my stomach.

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Maybe it can be good for us too. Sometimes I feel like I'm losing him to his work. The late nights shooting footage, poring over video clips, obsessing over getting every detail just right. It takes a toll. We bicker over nothing, lose patience with each other all the time. Maybe this deal could take the load off—a whole team of producers and a crew. No more grunt work. Maybe.

Once it's dark, I go inside and we do our nightly routine.

"The gun and car keys and kitchen knives are all accounted for, and the alarm is set," Ethan says, fiddling with the motion sensor alarm he has attached to our bedroom door.

"Did you check everything—under the bed, drawers?"

"Nothing sharp, nothing dangerous."

"Thanks," I say slipping under the patchwork quilt that smells like the inside of an old church. If we don't set that alarm that will howl if the bedroom door is opened, anything could happen. My sleepwalking has caused countless problems over the years. I could stab Ethan in his sleep, thinking he's the monster in my dream; I could take the car and drive into the black swamp water, or just decide to go for a swim with the eels and gators. It's horrifying to think about what I could do, all the close calls that have already happened. So the best way we found to control it is to make

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sure the alarm sounds if I get up and try to leave the room. It works, but every night, setting the alarm, talking through the checklist, is this constant reminder of my disorder—a reminder I'm not normal and not safe, and I hate it.

I try to sleep, but it's no use. I'm awake for hours, wishing I never came here, thinking about the missing women. How does a person disappear? It's not an image in a news report on a screen anymore. It's a whole person with a vivid, complex life—decades of memories, fears, ambitions—and in an instant, all of it is over. Am I fooling myself, thinking we can really help find them when trained detectives have no leads? Are we doing this for all the wrong reasons? I blow out a deep breath and close my eyes, willing myself to sleep.

Sometime in the small hours of the morning, a sound wakes me up. A knock or a door slamming. I can't tell if I dreamt it or if the sound lives somewhere between sleep and dream. Maybe it was just a tiny creak in the wood of the cabin that only sounded deafening in my twilight state. I'm disoriented. It's dark. But then I'm sure I smell cigarette smoke. I sit up and am paralyzed with fear, too shocked to release the guttural scream rising in my throat.

There is a man standing over our bed. He's holding a hammer. It's Ethan who screams. The alarm he set is

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wailing, and I'm frozen in place. He scrambles to his feet and grabs for the shotgun leaning in the corner and aims it at the intruder, shrieking, "Get out of here, motherfucker!" But the man doesn't move.

