

Tim crouched to get into the tunnel, saying some nonsense about the dark energy in there. The thin shirt stretched just so over his back. I could see everything. The backs of his arms straining against holding his own weight up in the hovel, his shoulder blades were especially pronounced. *Is it hot in here?*

“Are you feeling something? What’s the thermometer say?”

“Shit, uh-” I pulled out the thermometer to show the camera. I’d said it out loud. What did he even need those arms for?

“No. Temperature holding at 72.6.” He looked concerned.

“Should I come back out there?”

“No, it’s just me,” I bit back. Then he *looked* at me. It was the first time he didn’t seem quite so dense. I could have sworn I’d seen him crack a smile when he dove back in to continue into the chamber. I’d been caught. I didn’t even *want* to find him attractive, it wasn’t my fault he looked like a midwestern football captain and prom king. I wasn’t like the women who fawned over him in interviews. Except to my horror, I was exactly like them. Just as susceptible to his farm boy charm as anyone.

“Bea, come in here, the atmosphere is so heavy.” This is why I started wearing construction pants with doubled material on the knees.

“I’ll need some help with the equipment.” I got on my hands and knees and followed suit. I did enjoy spelunking around in these old buildings without any tourists present. On the other side he helped grab the camera and pull me up into the room. I dusted myself off and grabbed the camera again. “You’re sure it’s not ‘heavy’ here because of the lack of windows or light and the abundance of moisture, *Timothy?*” I did my best not to sound patronizing. I don’t think it worked. I started again. “We have to keep in mind that these places haven’t seen any sunlight or fresh air in maybe decades. There’s probably loads of mold, especially in a literal cave like this.”

“You could be right, but I just want you to feel the energy in here.” I sighed. “No really, just, like, close your eyes and like, *feel* it in here.” There it was again. The tightness. I didn’t believe in ghosts, but for some reason I couldn’t stand the dark now. When I’d signed the contract it had never been a problem before, but for the last few months I’d been sleeping with a nightlight. I was lucky enough to have not been asked

to sit in a room alone yet. I closed my eyes slowly and tried to stay calm. I could smell the wetness seeping in through the porous rocks all around us. The memory of standing at the top of the basement stairs at my grandparents farm, seeing the narrow stairs descending into what I perceived as total darkness. The dark smelled just like this. I used to think that the basement was haunted when I was little. My heartrate picked up.

“It’s just dank.” I opened my eyes again. I watched him as he reached out to the dark with his booming voice, asking for contact. Nothing. Just more bad energy. He spoke to the camera directly.

“This is also where one woman was attacked by an unseen force.”

“She just said she felt uncomfortable, Tim.” He looked at me, incredulous.

“Are you really doing this again?”

“I’m just reminding you. People watching are going to remember what the interviews said. Let the evidence speak for itself.”

“I’m here to do a job-”

“I didn’t say you weren’t, I just want our information to be correct.”

“Are you saying I’m lying?”

“Can you please just be serious for a second-”

“You think I’m not being fucking serious?” Our voices were bouncing wildly off the closed in, arched walls. “You think there’s nothing in here then you stay in here by yourself and find out, then tell me it’s just mold.”

“I’m not doing that.” I don’t know why I thought I could avoid this part. I was, for better or worse, a ghost hunter now. Somehow not my strangest job.

“Why not? We’re here to collect evidence, maybe you can get something alone.” He was mad, but he was also sincere. He wanted me to stay behind in the room.

“No.” I’d seen him force the others into worse situations after asking not to be.

“I think it’s a great idea.”

“Stop. Please.”

“You’re going to do it.”

“I’m not Tim, stop. I’m not doing that.” He was used to how this usually went. Some friendly bickering back and forth with Finley or Simon eventually getting left behind in whatever situation he hadn’t wanted to be in regardless. I prayed that my contract didn’t say anything about doing this. I suddenly thought that I should have read it much more closely. He started to make like he was going to crawl out and leave me behind.

“STOP, please!” His thick eyebrows knit together with a kind of thoughtfulness he usually reserved for frightened old ladies and little girls. “Please.”

“Hey...” I could feel my body working itself into a frenzy, my pulse was pounding against my neck. He reached out to steady me, putting his hand on my shoulder casually, like in a team-mate way. That should have kept it fine. Proper. It’s nothing. I felt my ears turn pink and I tried not to move, relishing in the weight of his heavy palm. How dare he be so gentle. “You really don’t want to?” I tried not to think of all this being on the audio tracks. I shook my head, knowing I probably looked sufficiently pathetic, and thoroughly humbled. The hand stayed. One-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand. In slow motion, it seemed, he ran his hand down the back of my arm. I closed my eyes and tried to stand as still as possible. My voice shook when I added,

“If you say something about me being affected by the energy in here I swear to God.” He actually laughed out loud.

“Okay. Let’s go get the guys, I think we’re done in here. You want to go on out ahead of me and I’ll set up a static cam?”

“I’ll stay until you’re done.” I stiffed stiffly and got the camera back on my shoulder. He went through all the steps of getting it set up and rolling before we both were ready to leave. “Can I go first?” He was unphased.

“Yeah, sure.”

He didn’t mention anything the rest of the night. I was grateful. The other’s were still skeptical of my presence, even with Tim’s consistent enthusiasm that I was a great way to get skeptics watching. This might not be my dream, but I wasn’t about to play the damsel, not after all my bluster and skeptic talk. The rest of the night was typical. Some bangs and taps, screams that were certainly seagulls, growls that were certainly frogs, sensations that couldn’t be monitored through any of our instruments. Around 5AM we started to go around gathering equipment that had been left to record. I followed Finley around and listened to him ramble on about how messed up this place was while I sleepily agreed. We were rescued at the gate by the groundskeeper who made sure we made it to our pick-up. The hotel was a good half-hour outside of town, and one by one the others fell asleep, dropping like flies. Tim was in the front seat with our driver. He was only ever this quiet after an investigation. Usually he’d be bouncing off the walls.

Something about him started to compel me. It was embarrassing.

He had this habit of using his hands a lot while he talked, gesturing and gesticulating as he interviewed and narrated. He was this brick-shit-house of a guy but he was perhaps the most boyish person I'd ever met, and it was becoming annoyingly endearing. I started to feel this gnawing guilt about it. I was of course embarrassed to seemingly have been swept up in this C-List celebrity's persona, but it was something else. It was an old feeling, ancient in my body. Skin-crawling embarrassment had come to rest at the bottom of my ribs. If I had been any pretty little thing I could forgive myself for looking.

I watched so many women interact with him on a daily basis, old ones, young ones, thin and beautiful ones who were into the same weird bullshit. They were all swept up in him by the time they were finished talking. And he knew it too. He wasn't gross about it, but you could see how he shifted and smiled, accepting their quiet adoration. This was a person that was *looked at*. It made me feel gross to suddenly not just be a co-worker but somehow getting pulled into being a fan. Everything I've ever done to make myself feel smart or important crumbled away when I was looking at someone truly beautiful, because then I was just that same sad teenager bathed in blue light crouched in front of her laptop, scrolling through images of actors, pathetically dreaming of being a part of something, of mattering to someone who mattered to others.