Haunted trail. Missing bracelet. Slashed tire. Justine thought she was just tagging along with a singles club. She didn't expect to become a pawn in someone else's game.

THE MYSTERY OF THE UNHALLOWED TRAIL

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I had joined a singles club. Uncle Francis said I needed to get out of the apartment and meet more people my own age. He was in Chicago for the weekend, smoking cigars at a jazz bar or listening to jazz at a cigar bar. What he did at work with computers allowed him to travel. I wasn't sure exactly what his work was, because we never talked about it—just like we never talked about what my plans were now that I'd dropped out of college with only one semester remaining. In the beginning, he had broached it. I had cried. Neither he nor I knew what to do with me, so he was as nice as he could be considering my orphan state (divorced father deceased, divorced mother on a permanent holiday off Highway 1 in a camper with a what's-old-is-new-again boyfriend). Thereafter, my conversations with my uncle revolved around the latest releases, celebrity scandals, and the state of his sourdough starter.

My college friends had graduated months ago and gone on to Chicago, Los Angeles, and Elyria, Ohio. I was living off the rest of my student loans in our college town of Griffin City, Indiana, until I was forced to find a job, which I had not yet found it necessary to do. So it was that I was waiting outside the Drip, a popular coffee shop near campus on a Friday night in mid-October, about to give a ride to a girl I'd never met before to a haunted trail for a Halloween outing with the singles club.

It was a chilly fall. I nestled my chin into my scarf and thrust my hands into the pockets of my jacket, which I'd gotten at the Army surplus store. The full moon over the campus clock tower shone in the cloudless sky like a silver mirror. Just as I was about to head into the Drip to buy their cheapest menu item for the privilege of warming up,

I heard footsteps. They cut across the strip of grass beside the coffee shop and onto the asphalt.

"Justine?" The girl's voice was high and soft.

"Beth?"

"That's me." She went in for a hug. I held out my hand. Hers was thin, pale, and freezing. She must have been even colder than I was, although she was dressed in a hoodie and denim jacket, her fried, straightened hair with sideswept bangs jutting out from a newsboy cap. She probably loved Halloween. "Thanks for giving me a ride."

"No problem."

After waiting for another five minutes, we determined that we were the only people carpooling. I turned the heat on full blast. For the next fifteen minutes, as my dented yellow Civic wound towards the farm in Bedford where the haunted trail was, I squinted against the high beams of the cars winding from the opposite direction and smelled whiffs of Jergens lotion from Beth.

"Is this your first time coming out with the club?" I asked her.

"Yeah. I saw the ad in Ryder magazine."

"Me too. Well, my second. The first time I showed up to the Wren for lunch but nobody else came. It was embarrassing."

"I don't think that's embarrassing," she said softly.

We were right on time pulling into the small roped-off area of grass that served as the parking lot. Two boys, their hands tucked under their armpits, were scuffing their feet in the grass. When Beth and I got out of my car, the shorter one waved languidly and the bigger, taller one approached us both with outstretched hands as if he would palm us like basketballs.

"Beth and Justine, right?" Under the light of the moon, I saw his big, square teeth flashing a grin in his broad face. He had a blonde soul patch and a beanie. "I'm Corey."

"That's right," I said. "I'm Justine. And this is Beth." I introduced her as if she couldn't speak for herself.

"Nice to meet you," she whispered.

Corey stared at her for a few moments. "You too."

The other guy emerged from behind Corey. He was slim, with long brown hair corralled into a frizzy braid and glasses. "I'm Quinn. But I'm not a doctor." Nobody laughed. "Anyway," he continued, "we're waiting for Robin?"

Corey nodded. "As usual," he said good-humoredly.

Beth and I were the newcomers. Corey ushered us into the ticket barn. There were pumpkins and gourds, bales of straw, dried ears of gem-colored corn tied in bundles by their husks. It smelled musty but sweet. Behind the counter was a girl with her thin hair pushed back by a Jack Skellington headband.

"Four tickets?"

"It'll be five, but we're waiting for someone," Corey replied. He put a hand on Beth's back and steered her towards the corner of the barn farthest from Quinn and me, where there was a large green pumpkin with bumpy growths made up to look like a warty face and topped with a witch hat.

"How long have you been in this group?" I asked Quinn.

"Been out with them a couple times." He petted his braid contemplatively and smoothed it onto his brown corduroy jacket. He smelled like cigarettes. The jacket had leather elbow patches. "It's Corey who plans most of the activities. He's the social butterfly. I just tag along."

"It's my first time out."

"Sure," he said. "It's something to do." He turned his attention to a sliver of plastic trash he had pulled out of his pocket. I studied the nearest bundle of dried corn. The kernels were perfect, like colorful glass beads. Corey and Beth were visiting every pumpkin they could find.

After a few minutes, a new girl rushed into the barn breathlessly. She held closed the front of her baby blue suede jacket with white fur trim. A small white leather bag was tucked under her arm. She had chunky highlights and platform Mary Janes.

"Hey, Robin," said Quinn, rising off a bale of straw.

"Sorry I'm late. I had trouble parking next to this freaking yellow car that was taking up two spots."

"I didn't take up two spots," I protested.

"It's a small lot," said Quinn.

Robin gave us both a sideways look. "Where's Corey?" she asked Quinn.

Corey sidled over, bringing Beth with him like a child showing off a new toy to his class. "Hey, Robin. This is Beth."

Robin looked Beth up and down. "Nice to meet you." Then she turned to me. I introduced myself. We shook hands. Hers was soft and cool. A bracelet of thick silver chains with a chunky heart charm rattled on

her wrist.

"Come on," Corey said, pointing to the chalked sign on the counter that said *Last group at 9:45 p.m.* "We're almost late as it is."

We each paid our three dollars and headed out on the Unhallowed Trail.

The full moon illuminated what otherwise would have been a dark trail. There were no signs, only dim solar path lights jutting out from the gravel every so often to show us where to go. I felt nervous. I didn't like scary things. I reminded myself that I was here to make new friends.

"Are you all students?" I asked.

"Anthropology," said Quinn. "You?"

"I'm on a break," I stammered.

"Me too. For a few years actually," Corey said, laughing. "I've been flipping pancakes at Mess Hall. Trying to save up for culinary school or maybe personal training."

Beth perked up. "Have you read *Kitchen Confidential*? I just started and I find that world fascinating."

Beth and Corey fell into a private conversation behind us. I felt a cold gust from Robin or from the wind.

"What about you?" I asked Robin.

"I do hair." Hers looked great.

The first haunt on the trail was a shack that we were meant to walk through. It looked like a long outhouse. The doorway was a tarp with a slit. I drifted into the middle of the pack.

Robin and Quinn entered the shack first through the slit tarp. I gulped and stepped in, determined not to be frightened by whatever lay within. Inside, green Christmas lights strung along the ceiling cast a sickly glow. Floor-to-ceiling plywood partitions created a maze-like effect and obscured the next sections of the shack from view. From the walls hung rusty tools, saws, knives, and wooden-handled metal things that tapered into a stiletto point. I didn't know if these tools were meant for wood or for surgery. Or both. I waited for Corey and Beth.

"Go on," Corey prodded me.

I walked on, fearful of what was behind the first partition. As I walked, I heard Robin's shriek from ahead and it startled me, so I also shrieked. Corey chuckled. To our right was a plastic skeleton sitting on a folding chair. It wore a straw hat.

"It's not that scary," said Beth.

"That wasn't what scared me!"

I steeled myself as we rounded the second partition. We were just in time to witness a woman dressed as a ghoul or drowning victim crouch back down into the corner. We had gotten there too early. As we passed through her section, she shook her scraggly wig and glared at us, the whites of her eyes green in the light. She ignored Corey's high five.

Outside the shack, Robin had her hand clasped to her chest. "She scared the bejesus out of me."

"I think she was trying to reset when we came in," said Beth.

"Unfortunately," I added bravely.

The shack receded. I wished I could hold onto someone, but I didn't know any of them well enough. Nobody else seemed scared, so I had no excuse to cling to them in the guise of offering them support. The sky had generated a few wispy clouds which now filtered the moonlight. The trail grew darker and colder. We heard a far-off scream.

We started to climb a hill. Trees lined either side of the path, their branches twining dimly overhead. My companions' shoes crunched the gravel as they walked, fabric rubbed, metal tinkled. My heart pounded from exertion, I told myself, as we climbed the hill. Finally, as the path flattened out and I slowed to catch my breath, it happened. Robin started to say something but she was interrupted by—

Two giant rabbits, ten feet tall. With faces lit from below by hellfire, they leapt out at us, raising chainsaws over their heads. The chainsaws roared. I screamed. Corey and Beth turned around at my scream and Quinn bumped into me from behind. The rabbits bore down on me with their chainsaws. I saw they were wearing masks. Their human eyes deep inside the plastic holes glittered. I fell into a fetal position and covered my head. From the ground, I saw that the rabbits were on stilts. My terror provoked them, and they crowded closer around me and brandished their chainsaws. This separated me from the last of my reasons. I clamped my eyes shut.

I felt a hand hook into the bend of my elbow. I was lifted up.

"Come on," hissed Quinn. "You're making it worse for yourself."

He was surprisingly strong. I let him drag me up and forward. As we passed, the rabbits lowered their chainsaws and melted back into the trees. I stumbled along with Quinn's wiry hand clamped around my elbow until

we were away from the site of my humiliation.

The wind blew the moon out from behind the clouds and it lightened again. We had only been out walking for fifteen minutes but I was ready to go home. I heard another cry in the distance.

Beth slowed down to walk beside me. "Are you ok?"

I nodded and tried to laugh. "I just startle easily."

Corey said, "They picked on you because you were scared. The middle of the pack is a dangerous place to be."

Quinn nodded. "That's why I pulled you up."

"We didn't even see them in the front," said Beth. "They waited until we passed."

"And I saw them coming up to you," said Quinn, "so I wasn't really scared."

"Does that mean I was the only one who was scared?" I felt annoyed. "What about you, Robin?"

Robin didn't hear me. She was patting herself all over. "You guys, I lost my bracelet."

She held out her slender, bare wrist to us. I remembered her chunky Tiffany charm bracelet from when I had first met her in the barn. I'd never seen a bracelet like that outside a magazine before.

"Damn," said Quinn.

"When was the last time you had it?" Beth asked.

"I don't know. No, I had it when we were in the house with the skeleton."

"So all we have to do is retrace our steps," Beth said.

I didn't want to go back. I wanted to get to my car.

"I'm not sure Justine is up to a second round," Quinn said.

"Don't feel bad," said Corey. I wasn't sure if he was speaking to me or to Robin. "Can't your dad get you another one?"

Robin started to whimper.

"It's okay," said Beth. "I'll come with you to look for it. The rest of you go on ahead."

Corey looked uncertain. "Maybe I'll come too," he began to say, but Robin cut him off.

"I'm sure us girls will be fine," she said, sounding offended. "Go on, now." She waved us away as she and Beth started slowly back the way we had come, heads down, eyes scanning the ground.

"Stick together, ladies," yelled Corey after them.

Corey, Quinn, and I continued down the Unhallowed Trail. The white shape of Robin's jacket moved farther away from us while Beth, who was wearing black, had already become invisible.

Corey grew quiet. Earlier he had kept up a stream of conversation with Beth, but now the three of us walked on without speaking to one another. Quinn marched grimly towards the finish line, ignoring me after having rescued me earlier. I didn't deserve that. He didn't know me or know what had happened to me as a child, in the chainsaw accident.

There had been no chainsaw accident, but what if there had?

I sped up to catch up with Corey.

"Hey, Justine. Some trail, huh? Spooky."

"A little. Is this the first time you guys have been here?"

"As a group, yeah. I was here with Robin once before. Same haunts last time, too."

"Oh." The dynamic between Corey and Robin made more sense to me now. "Well, what's the next haunt?"

Corey laughed. "No spoilers!"

I resolved again to be unafraid, as if it were within my power. Quinn sniggered behind us, and I turned to reproach him. But it was not Quinn.

Behind me was a different man, white-faced in the moonlight, with an exaggerated widow's peak carving down his forehead. He wore dark clothing and a dark cloak. I jumped and gave an involuntary yell. So much for my resolution. The man followed Corey and me in total silence. His feet made almost no sound on the gravel. Behind him, I saw Quinn, who really was laughing now.

The vampire followed us, or specifically me, silent all the while. Several times I thought I saw him out of the corner of my eye open his cloak as if to envelop me in it, but I couldn't catch him in the act. When I sped up, he sped up with me. When I slowed down to let him pass, he slowed down. I couldn't shake him until we rounded a corner and saw the light of the barn shining brightly like a beacon. The vampire ceased following me and turned away.

Although the barn wasn't heated, the yellow flickering bulbs inside gave off the sensation of warmth. How friendly it was. I accepted with relief the paper cup of hot cider handed to me by the girl with the Jack Skellington headband, who was still there, looking bored.

"I just told her we're waiting for a couple people to finish," Corey said with a big smile. The girl with the headband yawned.

Ten minutes passed. Robin, disheveled, dejected, and huffing, stomped back into the barn. She was alone.

"What happened?"

"No luck," she said, dropping onto a bale of straw. "I looked everywhere that we walked."

"Where's Beth?" asked Corey.

"I don't know. She went off somewhere." Robin put her bag in her lap and fiddled with the clasp. The Jack Skellington headband girl handed her a cup of hot cider. She warmed her hands on it. "My dad will kill me."

"Still waiting on one more," I apologized to the girl, who pursed her lips and sat back behind her counter.

It must have been getting on eleven. I wished I was in bed. I still had to drop Beth off at the meeting point.

After another period of waiting, Beth burst into the barn. Her face was flushed and triumphant. "I found it!" She waved at us, clutching the silvery prize in her fist.

Corey jumped up and clapped her on the back. "Eagle eyes! Where was it?"

"Just past the rabbit guys at the top of the hill. It was sitting right there in the middle of the trail."

"Wow," I said to Robin. "You must be so relieved."

Robin looked incredulous. "Where did you say?"

"At the top of the hill, past the rabbit guys. It had fallen right onto the middle of the trail," Quinn repeated.

"I could swear I had been over that area already."

Beth handed Robin the bracelet. Robin took it and wound it back around her wrist while pinning the bracelet to her chest, slipping the toggle into place.

"I combed every inch of that trail on the way back," Robin said. "Especially after you left."

"I didn't know where you went," Beth replied.

"Well, I'm thankful that Beth found it. Great work, eagle eyes!" Corey said.

Robin said no more. The Jack Skellington headband girl ushered us out of the barn.

We exchanged goodbyes in the parking lot, but there was still one more surprise in store for me.

"Oh, no," exclaimed Beth as she went to open my passenger side door. "You have a flat." Very appropriate for Friday the 13th.

Corey leapt to the rescue. "You got a spare?"

I nodded. He offered to change the tire for me, which I gratefully accepted.

As Corey dug the necessary equipment out of the trunk and got to work, the rest of us milled around in the parking lot.

"You don't have to wait for me," I said.

Quinn shrugged. "Won't take long."

"Well," Beth replied. She started to pace.

"I mean," I said to her, "sorry."

"It's just that I have to get home and let the babysitter go."

"You have *kids*?" Robin squealed, incredulous.

"Just one. He's four."

I stared at Beth in awe. She seemed so much older.

"Go then, nobody's stopping you," said Robin.

"I gave her a ride," I replied.

Robin looked stunned. "Oh." She turned away.

"I can give you a ride," Quinn said. "My girlfriend has a kid. I get it."

"You have a *girlfriend*?" Robin cried.

Beth went off in Quinn's car while I sat down miserably on the grass, waiting for Corey to finish. Robin kicked the pebbles, fiddled with her bracelet, and waited by her own car, a white SUV. She clutched her bag like she was afraid she might lose that, too. I didn't ask why she didn't go home herself.

Finally, my car groaned down off the jack and Corey stood up and dusted his hands.

"Justine, you might want to look at this."

Robin and I walked over to my car. Next to the mini-jack and wrench, my front tire lay flabbily on its side in the grass. Corey pointed to the tire's sidewall near the rim.

"I didn't want to say anything until I was sure." By his finger were two holes. "You hit the curb on the way here?"

I shook my head.

"Well, something pierced the tire," he said.

"Or some*one*," said Robin.

Corey and I both looked at her.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Words tumbled out of Robin's lips. "I think *she* did it. Beth, I mean. There's something off about her. I've been noticing it all night. I think she stole my bracelet, too."

"Stole?"

"Finding it in such an obvious place after I already looked there. I don't know. She must have picked it up somewhere and would have kept it if I hadn't said anything. She's the one who ran off when we went looking together. She must have stabbed your tires, Justine. She probably hates us both. Didn't you notice, Corey? She glommed onto you right away. And did you know," Robin choked, "she has *kids*? Kids!"

"Just one kid," I said. I didn't know how else to respond to her tirade. Beth stealing her bracelet and slashing my tire seemed impossible. It made no sense. But she *had* separated from Robin looking for the bracelet—she claimed. And why had she taken so long to get back to the barn? Maybe Robin was right. Maybe her hysteria was contagious.

"Robin," said Corey, "Don't be crazy. Justine probably hit a curb."

"I didn't," I insisted.

"I'm not crazy," Robin cried. "I'm telling you it was Beth. We shouldn't let new people join the group unless we vet them."

My unvetted face felt hot.

"Rob," Corey said soothingly, "let me give you a ride home."

Robin nodded and nestled her head into his chest. Corey patted her hair with an absent expression.

"But my car," Robin said.

"Maybe you shouldn't drive right now. We'll come back in the morning."

She looked up at him with appealing eyes. "Thank you."

"Um," I said, "and thanks for changing my tire. I owe you a drink next time."

Robin turned her nose up at me.

I drove home. I fell asleep as soon as I hit the pillow.

As I brushed my teeth the next morning, looking at my crusty eyes and bedhead in the toothpaste-spattered mirror after a night interspersed with visions of rabbits carving up a pile of car tires with chainsaws, Uncle Francis called.

"It's so early," I mumbled through a mouthful of minty suds.

"Just wanted to make sure you got home safely." He sounded

hoarse.

"How's the jazz?"

"Smoky," he said. He coughed and excused himself. "How was the trail?"

I told him everything that had happened. After a long silence, he started humming a tune.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Sorry. The new Chucho Valdés. Well, it sounds like Robin got what she wanted."

"What do you mean? Because she wanted Corey?"

Francis mm-hmmed through his hum.

"But at what cost? She seemed to have an even worse night than I did. It's going to set me back at least $60 for another tire, and I embarrassed the hell out of myself with those rabbits. But Robin couldn't even drive herself home."

"It cost her nothing." Francis chuckled. "She's very clever. Unscrupulous, though. You should probably avoid those people if she's going to be around."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you should find some new friends." I had just found these.

"No, what do you mean by saying she's clever?"

"Oh," said Francis, like it was the simplest thing in the world, "she did it all herself. I'm sorry to tell you, but Robin was the one who punctured your tire. And she stole her own bracelet."

I sat down on the floor of my bathroom.

"It wasn't obvious to you?" Francis asked. "It must be because you're tired. Let me explain. From what you told me, it was obvious that Robin was jealous of Beth for Corey's attention to her. She even grew jealous of you when Corey helped change your tire. Whatever had gone on between her and Corey, I'm guessing she wasn't the one who ended things."

"I figured they had dated. But why would she puncture my tire?"

"Let's start from the beginning," Francis admonished gently. "Are you in the bathroom? I'm hearing echoes."

Chastened, I went into my living room. I opened the window to a bright morning. The Griffin College clock tower in the distance chimed fifteen past.

"We don't know why she was late, but whatever the reason, it played into her plans," Francis said. "She was already worried about Corey meet-

ing other girls on the outing, so she might have had her tricks up her sleeve already—or maybe she's cleverer than I think, and she came up with the idea on the fly. In any case, her jealousy was immediately activated when she saw Corey talking to a new girl, Beth, at the barn. You, she discounted since he had no particular interest in you then."

Francis had a way of putting things that could feel insulting if you chose to take them that way.

"Robin had already come up with the plan of 'losing' her bracelet before the five of you ever made it onto the trail, if only to turn Corey's attention back on herself by being the focus of a minor emergency. When you fell to the ground after seeing the rabbits with chainsaws, it was her opportunity to unclasp her bracelet and tuck it somewhere without being observed. Shortly after, she said she lost it.

"She might have wanted Corey to help her look for it, to get him alone. But when Beth offered to help, that played into her plans too. She could frame Beth. They went back while you, Corey, and Quinn kept going on the trail. It was Robin who separated from Beth, not the other way around. She ran ahead and dropped the bracelet where Beth might easily see it when she caught up. She wanted Beth to find the bracelet so she could accuse Beth of stealing it. The fact that there were some awls hanging from the wall of the shack at the first haunt was a bonus. She grabbed one on her way backwards through the trail."

"All what?"

"An *awl*. You described it as a long, pointed tool with a wooden handle. She grabbed it off the wall, then kept going until she got to the parking lot. She must have run quickly on the grass beside the path to keep her steps from being heard. Then she found your car. Of course, she knew it was yours from the poor parking job that she'd complained of earlier. She used the awl to stab your tire a couple times, which must have taken a good deal of effort. Perhaps she kicked it in. She may have lost balance and fallen onto the gravel, which accounts for her disheveled appearance at the barn. Then, after puncturing your tire, she hightailed it to the barn. Either you, Corey, and Quinn were already there, or Robin got there first but waited in the shadows outside for you to arrive. As for the awl, she might have thrown it into the trees. Or maybe she kept it."

I remembered the purse Robin clutched so fervently in the parking lot. "But why would she do that to my car? What did I do to her?"

"Nothing. She wanted to pin it all on Beth. You see, she ascribed to

Beth all of her own perceptions and ugliness. Robin staged the loss or theft of her bracelet, so she believed Beth would be capable of stealing a bracelet and then 'finding' it to reap accolades. Robin punctured your tire and accused Beth out of jealousy, so she believed Beth was capable of puncturing your tire out of jealousy. It's all projection. Must be hard to live that way."

I mulled it over for a while. I had a final question.

"But why would Beth, I mean, why would Robin think Beth would puncture *my* tire when I was the one who gave Beth a ride to the trail in the first place? Even if Robin believed Beth was a jealous person like herself, surely she would know that Beth would only be inconveniencing herself since I was her ride back to her car at the Drip."

"Ah," said Francis, "but Robin didn't know that. She was late to the barn. She never saw you and Beth arrive together. She thought that everyone drove their own car."

I thought about Robin and Corey, and whatever was going on between them. I thought about Quinn and his strong, wiry hands. I thought about Beth and her young child. I didn't understand any of them.

"Well," I said finally, "how long can I drive on a spare?"

"I'm wiring you money for the new tire as soon as I get off this call," said my uncle Francis. "Happy early Halloween."

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