

## The Chase

The scenery whizzed by like in an old movie when they would run the projector beside the stable prop vehicle, giving it a detached appearance. Anyone watching that movie knew it wasn't real, but our minds have an uncanny way of filling in the blanks. The real sometimes becomes indistinguishable from the unreal.

She found it difficult to concentrate on the road, as the bare tree branches and postcard blue sky were easy distractions for Natalie. With hands planted firmly on the wheel, she urged her red Focus onto her destination while peering out the window. It was time to get to the office. Visiting Oliver's grave early in the morning had become part of her daily ritual. She missed the way they would flirt back and forth. He pursued her in the beginning, loving the chase. The possibilities between them seemed promising. How sad that their story ended.

Natalie's life had felt like that for almost a year after losing Oliver. It wasn't just losing him the part that stung; it was losing a part of herself. Hit head-on by a drunk driver on a day, not unlike today. Oliver had died on impact. He'd been lucky.

Natalie had overcome a coma of two months, suffering severe head trauma. Events were hazy now. Dates and times were troublesome. She was able to recover somewhat with therapy and an arsenal of pills that helped her seem barely normal. The

job gods had smiled on her, with a boss that had enough empathy to keep her position open.

She knew she wasn't doing well there though, as the whispers of her other co-workers continued to grow. How long would it be until she finally exhausted their good graces? At times, she would find her blue eyes just staring at her computer. Seconds, perhaps minutes went by until she snapped back to the task.

That particular afternoon had been unnerving, as she'd stirred from a haze to discover Ollie, Ollie Ollie... typed repeatedly across the computer screen. She pushed back her chair from the computer with a gasp, spilling coffee all over her notes.

"I'm okay." She choked out, motioning the others away. "I'm fine."

Some of their concern was fake. She knew they wished she'd just quit, but she needed to keep this job to keep her apartment, however meager. Missing the quaint Cape Cod she'd shared with Ollie certainly wouldn't bring either of them back. Now she was fortunate to have found a small apartment over the coffee shop just down the block from the advertising agency. At one time, the graphic design department of Fine and Briggs welcomed her. After moving to Pittsburgh to be closer to Oliver, she found the job rather quickly, despite the sparse job market. Her grades and business experience made her a perfect candidate for success. Now she could barely complete a project on time, despite all the extensions Mollie Fine granted her.

Natalie smoothed a strand of her long red hair behind her ear and returned her focus to the keyboard, deleting the screen before anyone could see her handy work. She swore she didn't remember typing his name but it was there in spades.

Frustrated, she hit the delete button. Mollie came up beside her unexpectedly, driving another gasp from her.

“Nat,” She whispered. “Can I take you for a coffee? Let’s get out of here for a while.”

Natalie nodded her head and shut down her computer, before grabbing her purse from the desk drawer and following Mollie to the coat rack.

“We’ll be back in about an hour or so,” Mollie called out to the other five girls on the floor. “We are going to discuss the Taite campaign.”

Muffled groans greeted them, as she realized Mollie was trying to save face for her. She knew she needed a break, but was afraid to ask for one as she was already so behind. Looking down at her watch, she realized it was only eleven-eleven. It seemed so much later in the day.

“Come on,” Mollie said, “My treat.”

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“Thank you,” Natalie said, blowing into the teacup before taking a long sip of the lavender brew, feeling its warmth as it went down. It was good. “I needed this.”

“I know,” Mollie said with a slight smile. “Nat, we do need to talk about the Taite account. I can see that you’re struggling so I am going to offer you some help.”

“Help? From the boss?” Natalie asked, fumbling with her pill bottle. “Why? Why don’t you just dismiss me? I know I’ve been a failure lately.”

Mollie shook her head, her blonde bob moving softly. Dressed in an impeccably cut grey suit, she was a beautiful woman of forty-five. Natalie knew she'd never make it that far as she downed a few of the pills with a sip of her tea.

"It's not your fault Nat. None of this is. I hired you because I recognized your untapped potential. I want to do anything I can to help you reach it."

"This has been hard, you know," Natalie said. "Living without Oliver has been tough, but there are things that have been so much worse. I feel like I lost more than just him that day, you know. Every day is just so damn hard. I get out of bed and think that it will be better, but it isn't. My mind, who I was...All of it's changed. I never used to miss deadlines or forget what time it was or where I parked my car. It's scary."

"What does your family think about you being here alone?" Mollie asked.

"They don't like it, but there isn't much they can do aside from committing me and I'm not there just yet."

"Nat, should I be more worried for you? You seem like you are spiraling even more than before."

"Headed in that direction I'm afraid," Natalie answered playing with the rim of her tea cup. "I swear I saw him today, walking the path near his grave. The closer I got to Ollie though, the faster he moved. I found myself far from my car and all of the other graves, almost near the edge of the cemetery where the deer graze. I smiled at him Mollie and he smiled back. I couldn't walk and I couldn't speak. I just knelt on the ground and waited for him to claim me."

"You're here Natalie," Mollie said reaching across the table and taking her hand.

"You made your way back."

"Did I?" Natalie asked. "I only feel like I am half here most of the time. Just look at me. I'm a mess."

"How is your therapy going? If you'd like me to, I'll go with you sometime."

"They ask me the same questions over and over again. The answers are always the same. Usually, the session ends with them prescribing me some new dose of meds that they think will solve all of my problems. They can't save me from the inevitable."

"The inevitable?" Mollie asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Death of course," Natalie answered. "You see Mollie. I believe I was to die that day as well. It's approaching the anniversary of the accident. By the end of this week, you will have to turn my accounts over to one of the other girls. Give them to Helen. She's worked hard this past year and is most deserving of them."

Mollie squeezed her hand tighter and shook her head. It seemed she wasn't getting through to her. Perhaps she didn't believe it herself.

"We've made contact, Mollie. Not just at the cemetery."

"Where else have you seen him?" Mollie asked, rising in her seat.

"In my bedroom," Natalie answered softly.

"By your bedside?" Mollie suggested.

"More like in my bed." Natalie offered. "Inside of me."

Mollie looked around the coffee shop, ushering the waiter away as he approached.

“Natalie, you were dreaming. It is natural to dream about the dead. Many people do. I know it probably seemed and felt real but you are on a lot of meds.”

Natalie slowly took off her coat and unbuttoned her blouse to show Mollie her shoulder.

“What is that?” Mollie asked pushing back some of the fabric so she could get a closer inspection.

"A handprint," Natalie said. "It's where Oliver gripped my shoulder."

Mollie stared in surprise as she examined what was indeed a perfect masculine-sized handprint.

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Mollie granted Natalie the rest of the week off. This was provisional, however, as she agreed to visit the therapist, call in twice a day, and allow her to check in on her. As suspected, she endured the same routine at the therapists, including another prescription. It feels like more of the same, always costly and never hopeful.

"I won't need the scrip," Natalie told Bailey the receptionist, leaving the slip of paper on the counter. She didn't feel the need to explain to her that her dead boyfriend was coming to claim her.

“Your co-pay for today is fifty dollars.” She half yawned in a monotone voice.

"Bill me," Natalie said with a wry smile as she put on her coat.

As she neared the parking lot, she discovered that she'd left her purse back at the therapist. She swore, going back to collect it. A bird swooped overhead, just missing her. She squealed as she hunkered down behind another car, hearing his footsteps. Once

things were clear she scurried back to the office and shut the door behind her. Hair long red hair fell into her eyes as she panted, leaning against the wall.

"Natalie, are you okay?" Bailey asked, rising from behind the desk inside the service window.

"I'm fine," she said, retrieving her purse. "I'm just going to sit here in the waiting room and rest a second." She used to love making him wait. Was this fear she was experiencing or excitement?

"Sure," Bailey said. "Take your time."

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It was nearly eight o'clock by the time Natalie left the therapist's office. She'd fallen asleep in the chair and Bailey had woken her. Nothing like making yourself look overmedicated.

She went through her purse, deciding it was time to clean it out. Full of receipts and used tissues, they scattered onto her bed like leaves. Suddenly there was a rush of sound as various pieces of change began to fall in a stream beside them. How many could there be? It took her a while to count them, as they totaled fifteen dollars. Fifteen...like the fifteenth. Oliver collected change in a mason jar that he would cash in from time to time to buy her small treats. She pushed the change into a pile on the bed and backed away. Her tiredness was wearing on her. She'd had no dinner and was finding herself wanting to go out. Why would she want to do any dishes when her days were numbered?

She rifled through her closet and found his favorite green dress to wear out tonight. A few blocks down the street was one of their favorite Italian places. She ordered and sat alone in the brightly colored restaurant eating her gnocchi without distraction. Oddly enough this was the first time she'd felt clarity in quite a while. The bottle of wine she'd ordered wouldn't set well with her pills, so she decidedly left them in their case. Why ruin this perfect evening by ingesting that garbage?

The walk home was blissful as the fall air kissed her body. She swung her purse, appearing just as happy as the girls walking beside her. It was the first time she'd carried this bag. It was new and she wanted to enjoy it at least once. Staring down at her watch, she realized it was late, eleven-eleven. Suddenly she felt a pebble in her shoe, an interruption she didn't desire at this point. Stopping to lean against the railing of a bookstore, she pulled her foot out of the pump to reveal not a stone but a penny. Slowly she put it in her coat pocket and slid her foot back into the shoe, wondering if Oliver was watching her. She practically skipped back to the apartment, suddenly feeling the urgency to get back. Was he waiting there for her?

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“Ollie! Ollie!” She called out, swiftly opening the door of her tiny apartment. Tossing down her purse and coat, she turned on the hallway light. With no answer, she slumped, having scoured the apartment for any sign of him. Defeated, she sat on the edge of the bed and began to play with the belt of her dress. This was going nowhere.



Suddenly, her attention turned to the Mason jar full of change on the corner of her nightstand. The mound of coins that she'd dumped onto the bed from her other purse was gone.

"Ollie!" She called out. "I know you're here. Please answer me."

A noise came from the corner of the room and she remained seated pensively on the edge of the bed as a shadowy figure came towards her. He was just as good-looking as she'd remembered him. The smile was unearthly but welcoming as she held up her arms to receive him. Pulling him down onto the bed beside him, happy tears formed in her eyes.

"I'm awake. I'm not dreaming. This is real. Tell me, Ollie, that this is real."

He nodded his head before dropping his lips to hers.

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"Please just open the door for me!" Mollie pleaded with Natalie's landlord, as they stood outside her door. "It's been over a day and all my calls are going to her voicemail. She hasn't moved her car. I told her that I'd check in with her. I was so caught up in work that I couldn't leave the office. We have a big account brewing right now that needed my attention, but now I feel she needs it more."

"This is a gross intrusion lady. I could get sued for this." The landlord shrugged. "If you say she's in trouble I have no choice, right? You'll vouch for me."

"Just open the damn door!" Mollie yelled at him, as he hastily played with the lock.

The apartment was partially dark, save for the lights in the hall.

"Natalie! Nat, are you in here?" Mollie called out, moving towards the bedroom.

Upon discovering her, she dropped down on her knees.

"Natalie." She whimpered staring at her naked body fanned out on the bed.

With her face lifted upwards, her eyes closed in the most angelic fashion; she looked at peace.

Empty pill bottles were scattered on the nightstand along with a Mason jar filled with change.

"I'll call 911." The landlord stammered, fumbling with his phone.

"It's too late," Mollie said, stroking Natalie's long red hair. "The chase has ended."