

Haunted Ground

The Ghosts of Laskin's Farm

by

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Advance Reader Copy

One

Kat Lundquist felt an inexplicable unease.
Something was wrong.

The warehouse was dark, silent. Dank and disused. A rusty remnant of a bygone industrial era. The perfect spot to do the deal.

The cops didn't patrol this area much. Almost like they had an unspoken agreement.

No gunfire? No homicide? We'll leave you alone.

Besides, they didn't have the will or resources to tackle the drug cartels, and it was easier to chase the little guys.

Per their arrangement, the black Tahoe pulled through the open door, lights out, and crept forward until it reached the point where she stood. Kat was a regional distributor for the Campo brothers, a smaller cartel that controlled parts of Wisconsin and Illinois—though calling it a cartel was generous. She waited with two dudes, Theo and Mike,

her trusted bodyguards and muscle. They would handle the actual product transfer.

They weren't alone. Jesús lay up in the rafters with a sniper rifle, ready to handle any unexpected issues. Stefan and Paul, armed with AR-15s, had slipped into dark corners of the warehouse. Harven, her boss, had sent them as backup, but she expected no trouble. Tony Roberts, the buyer, was a regular, reliable customer—though this was an unusually large transaction.

It all went like clockwork—

Until it didn't.

Tony stepped out of the SUV with a wave. "Hey, Kat."

Something about him felt off. She didn't understand it. She and Tony had concluded plenty of deals and she trusted him—as much as you could trust anyone in this business, especially when dealing large quantities of coke, meth, heroin, and other sundry items. Everything but fentanyl. Kat refused to touch the stuff. It was simply too dangerous and killed too many people. Dealing it would draw unwanted attention to her operation.

As they walked toward her Yukon, she knew. Tony didn't make eye contact when she asked how he was. Firm eye contact was his thing. Instead, his gaze slid away.

Fuck!

A moment later, two armored SWAT vehicles flew through the open bay door and converged on their location. Tony and Mike dropped to the ground. Theo pulled his gun while Kat dropped her Glock in the shadows and sidestepped away, raising her hands. She was not getting killed over a drug deal. Theo followed suit as helmeted cops swarmed into the building with assault rifles and night vision gear.

Cops appeared behind them and rounded up the dudes

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lurking in the shadows. Other cops with flashlights spotted Jesús in the rafters. He surrendered without a fight.

It played out in seconds, like watching a movie on an IMAX screen. Dazed, Kat stared into infinity. She knew this moment might come. But she had operated successfully for so long, it had become a minor worry, one rarely examined. Nobody planned for this. How could they?

A cop cuffed her and shoved her toward a waiting squad. Kat felt a powerful hankering for a fat line of coke.

That wasn't happening. She was going to prison forever.

Ha!

That was the least of her worries.

Cut off from an endless supply of cocaine, she was about to detox the hard way.

Unless Harven killed her first for blowing the deal.

Two

Five Years Later

Kat smiled.

A tight, joyless expression.

The place looked perfect. A sanctuary. A haven away from the world and the people pursuing her.

She discovered the farm after hours spent poring over satellite images and a plat map of individual land parcels on a library computer.

Standing in the shade of an oak, the farmhouse was a silhouette beyond the dense brush. It was invisible from the road. Mischievous crows bickered somewhere nearby. Kat wrinkled her nose at a whiff of manure as the branches overhead creaked in the stiff south wind. It was hot but tolerable with the breeze.

The house was a half mile from the next farm in any direction and surrounded by untamed trees and shrubs.

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The driveway had disappeared beneath wild brush. On a little used road a mile from the nearest highway, it was too far from town to attract teens looking for a party shack. Kat had run a search on the property and learned only one detail. The owner, Adam Laskin, lived in California and paid the property taxes yearly in advance.

But how bad was the house? Was it truly empty?

Only one way to find out. Kat pushed her bike, an old Trek splattered with mud, deeper through the thick brush. One hundred feet in, she broke through into the open, standing amid long grass waving in the breeze. The surrounding fields had reverted to wild prairie with stands of second-growth trees, some over forty feet tall.

It looked sound. The roof was old and weathered but otherwise intact. The finish on the wood siding had mostly peeled, a rough grey surface flecked with remnants of white paint. That was fine. More surprising, the old double-hung windows looked undamaged. Not a broken pane anywhere in sight. How was that possible? Trees had fallen over the years, but somehow the house had been spared. The barn was less fortunate, a ruin that may have collapsed in a windstorm. No matter. She didn't need it.

Kat scanned the yard for watchful eyes and pulled up to the porch, leaning the bike against the railing. Pushing her way through the tall grass, she circled the house, assessing the structure while keeping a wary eye open for hidden hazards in the grass. The house looked sturdy: the doors, the windows, the foundation. She saw no evidence of recent visitors or maintenance, nor an alarm system of any sort.

Kat marveled at her apparent good fortune.

This search could have taken weeks. Visits to dozens of potential sites. Miles and miles on the bike. Plenty of

frustration. Instead, she found the house in two days after a painstaking search on Google Earth for places just like this: an old farmstead where the fields were no longer plowed or cultivated.

It seemed perfect in every respect. Maybe she should question that.

Until her recent parole, the previous five years had been difficult. When anything went well, she viewed it with suspicion. This seemed too easy. What was she missing? What were the hidden problems or dangers?

Clearly, the inside had to be a disaster.

After looping the house, she stepped gingerly onto the wood-framed porch. It felt solid. Not a wiggle or shudder. She opened the screen door, surprised to see only a residential-grade keyed doorknob. No deadbolt. She peered through the dirty glass but the interior was too dark to visualize.

On a whim, she gave the knob a twist. Locked of course. What did she expect?

She pulled a screwdriver from her backpack, shoved it between the jamb and door, then pried and shouldered the wood in a practiced move. The door popped open with the whine of a creaky hinge.

The interior was funereal, the windows covered with heavy blinds. Her eyes took a moment to adjust.

Holy shit!

It was still furnished. Old-fashioned stuff though. It looked a little like her grandmother's house. A couple of recliners and a sofa. A bookshelf. Some kitschy decor. An old TV, console style, maybe a Zenith. To the left, a half bath and a narrow staircase running up the wall.

A thick but pristine blanket of dust covered everything, including the floor. Spider webs crisscrossed the room. Kat

brushed them aside, unfazed. Her shoes left prints in the dust like a walk through freshly fallen snow. She walked toward the back into a dining room. The layout was basic with a dining table and sideboard.

Someone had set the table for three. The silverware lay in casual disarray. On the plates, clumps lay beneath the dust. Old food? Curious, she grabbed a fork, poked around, finding old bones from a steak or pork chops. Two wine glasses had a black residue. Remnants of red wine?

Creepy.

A family dinner with a peculiar twist. Almost like those stranger-than-fiction tales where the people fled and disappeared. But she sensed no urgency to leave—as if they finished dinner and just wandered off into the night. In the kitchen, two dirty kettles sat on the grates of an older gas range. Dirty dishes lay in the sink. An empty bottle of burgundy on the counter. No one had attempted to clean up. Weird.

Inexplicable.

But nothing more. She wasn't superstitious. Didn't believe in alien abductions. It was just odd. And there might be a rational explanation. Staged maybe? A prank to scare off intruders? An abandoned set from some low budget horror movie? Kat shook her head. It wasn't important.

Walking full circle, she peered out the front door, her hypervigilance an ingrained trait. Still no evidence she had been observed or followed.

A creaky staircase led to the second floor. Kat found three bedrooms, all furnished. She saw no water damage on the ceilings. In two of the bedrooms, the beds were made and grey with dust. Identical tallboys stood in each room, one covered with toy cars and trucks—a boy's room

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— the other a blank slate. A flag from Arizona State University hung next to it.

The third bedroom looked like the master. The furniture was dark, heavy, and old. Dated, but not yet retro. A suitcase lay open on the unmade bed. Here she sensed urgency, a scramble to flee.

The closet stood open, half-filled with clothes in drab greys and blacks. The dresser drawers were open and partially emptied. Clothes lay scattered across the floor, covered by the ubiquitous layers of dust, mostly work clothes in denim and flannel. Someone left in a hurry and didn't return. The mystery deepened. Kat couldn't imagine a scenario that fit the situation. Unless they left for some mundane reason and were killed in an accident. Still, why no clean up?

Did it matter? They were gone now.

She walked downstairs and peeked out the window again.

All clear.

Kat shook off her unease. Despite the eerie presentation, the house was perfect for her needs. A place to escape Harven and his henchmen.

Here, hidden from the world, she could relax. Feel safe again.

Stay alive.

Three

The rest of the day was arduous.

Kat rode two miles to a bike trailer hidden in the woods that held her worldly possessions. Hooking the handle to a latch under the seat, she pedaled back to the farm. She rode on secondary roads to stay out of sight, limiting her exposure to the observant or the curious, but mostly to hide from Harven and his men.

The kitchen was large. A window over the sink looked out to the back yard. Wood-stained cabinets mounted over the countertops reached to the ceiling. They looked like hickory. Good quality stuff. An old gas range sat in the middle of the west wall, a small breakfast table in the center of the room. The fridge sat opposite on the east wall. Kat opened and closed it quickly. The smell wasn't terrible, but the interior was black with old mold and looked disgusting. It had to go. Next to the range, cafe doors led

to a pantry that was stocked with food. Mice had pilfered most of it, but some canned goods that might be salvageable—soup, beans, and vegetables—remained.

Ferretting around, she found a broom and dustpan, a mop, and other cleaning supplies in a cabinet.

She swept the countertops, amazed to find quartz beneath the dust. This was looking less and less like an ordinary farmhouse. Someone had done a fairly expensive renovation in the kitchen.

Stepping outside, she unloaded the contents of the trailer onto the porch. A Yeti cooler—her refrigerator. Two pairs of Silver jeans, a flannel shirt, and tees from Salt Life, Hard Rock, and a trip to Antigua. Underwear, socks, sandals, Merrill hiking shoes, a winter coat with liner. A TracFone. A can of almonds, beef jerky, and trail mix. Bottled water, a lantern, and a Glock 19 with two magazines and a box of ammo bought illegally from an old friend on the street. A bedroll and pillow. A basic first-aid kit and a small set of tools. A start.

Now she needed supplies.

She slipped three hundred dollars from her money belt into her pocket and hopped on her bike.

The nearest town, the Village of Walden, was seven miles away. A small, friendly community of eighteen hundred people, she had looked it over before biking to the farmhouse. Evidently, crime wasn't an issue. Security cameras were rare and there were no police street cams. Still, she kept her head down in case she had missed one to avoid facial recognition software.

Kat was once almost beautiful. She could be again with enough effort, but she had no desire to stand out. Of average height, she opted for bland clothing and looked older than her actual age, a consequence of a hard life and

purposeful neglect. She had shoulder-length brown hair and no distinguishing marks that suited her need for anonymity. Plain women were seldom noticed. She spoke quietly and seldom made eye contact.

There was a convenience store, Quik Stop, on the edge of town with a steady stream of customers. The teenagers working the checkouts looked disinterested. A perfect store for her basic needs. She grabbed a six-pack of Blue Moon. Cheese. Lunch meat. Mayo. Jerky. Donuts. Some Red Bull until she could figure out how to brew coffee. A small bag of charcoal. Chicken breasts. Ice. It all fit nicely in the trailer.

Riding out of town, she passed a little free library, stopped and grabbed a Lee Child book. She'd started reading the *Reacher* series in prison but hadn't yet read this one.

She unloaded her groceries and packed the ice and perishables in the cooler.

Taking another walk through the house, she opened any windows with screens still intact. The breeze swirled the dust about as she swept and cleaned, uncovering narrow-width maple floors. They looked beautiful, pristine, protected by the dust and a lack of traffic over the years. The house was looking like a gem in the rough and again, she wondered, what was the catch?

Kat took a second walk around the yard. Noted a set of storm doors that probably led into the basement. She thought she had spotted an old-fashioned hand-pump well in the back yard.

Yep, about thirty feet behind the house. The handle barely moved at first, stiff with the inertia of rust and age. As it loosened up, she heard noises and gurgling. A moment later, rusty water burped out: first a few sad drips,

then a steady flow of brown, smelly water. After fifteen minutes of effort, the stream cleared as she flushed the rust out of the system. Another five minutes and the water was cold, crystal clear, and odorless.

She spent the last hour of daylight clearing the master bedroom of dust. She threw everything out the window: clothing, sheets, decor, knick-knacks, shoes, the shitty art hanging on the walls.

The walls were plaster and cracked, but easily repaired. Some drywall tape and mud. Texture. Paint. All skills learned when she and her ex-husband, Josh, had flipped a house early in their marriage. She could make the rooms look new. Despite her hand-to-mouth existence, style still mattered. She had spent almost five years in prison and longed to make something her own again.

This bedroom would be her first project, painted some bright color other than white. Pale blue? Green? Some Florida colors? Yes. She wanted to dream of the beach as she slept. She'd gone to Clearwater with Josh. So long ago. Sometimes losing him still stung. Or was she just lonely? Such was her fate, destined to be a solitary soul, unmoored from anyone in the world.

Kat shook her head. Enough self-pity.

Tomorrow, she would ride to town for ammonia and supplies to start repairs. Maybe buy a grill to cook on. Eventually a solar panel for lights or a coffee pot.

Who was she kidding? Kat didn't even know if she'd be here next week.

Kat was dead tired, and the room grew dark as the western sky faded to black. She spread her bedroll out and quickly fell asleep. Slipped away with a worry that even here, hidden from the world, she would never feel fully safe.

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Somewhat later, she had a dark dream about a beast. A fearsome creature with an enormous head, a snaky body with little T-Rex hands, and a down-turned mouth filled with pointed shark-like teeth. No legs or feet though. It was underground, clawing its way to the surface. Coming for her.

The nightmare was persistent until she startled awake, rolled over, and fell back asleep.

By morning, it was forgotten.