

The hum of a car crossed over a sunny desert road. Inside, a young man sat crossed-legged in the driver's seat, letting cruise control carry him as far as it could. He took a sip of his coffee and glanced down at his phone.

"Forty more miles of peace and quiet," he hummed to himself tiredly. His head rested back, his eyes focused the best they could on the road in front of him.

Every time he felt his eyes close for too long, he would take a sip of his coffee or smack his hand against the steering wheel a couple times.

His phone vibrated in his lap. Picking it up, he saw a notification flash over the GPS.

"Hazard reported ahead," the automated voice stated, although it was filled with much more static than he was used to.

He scrolled through the map, looking to see what it could be. While he didn't see any of the usual symbols for animals or broken down cars, he did see a building only a couple miles from where he was. Assuming it was a rest stop, he thought it good to stretch his legs before hopping back into this final bit of his cross-country drive.

Once he looked up from his phone, however, the building was already in view. It was an old concrete building, with posts around it where he assumed fences once stood. He saw a path leading to the building's front, and decided he should still stretch his legs. Maybe he'd even find a way inside. When he pulled his car up the path, he noticed the front door was already open.

The open door was made out of very thick metal, and Zane could make out guard towers set up in the corners he could see. The building before him was an old prison.

He pulled out his phone, quickly dialed a number, and put it to his ear. After two rings, the person on the other line picked up.

“Zane?” the woman on the other end asked. “What’s up, did you get lost?”

“No, nothing like that,” he replied, unable to stop himself from walking up to the open door. “But I’m going to be late getting to Modesto.”

“Not too late, I hope?” she half-begged. “You know we need this story. Even if it’s just another stupid haunted house.”

“I’ll be there with plenty of time left. My tour is at ten, and I’m only a couple hours out,” he explained. “But I think I might’ve found something better than that. I’ll let you know.”

“No details?”

“What’s with all your questions today? I’ll call to tell you everything tonight. I won’t leave you hanging, I promise.”

“Just stay safe, please. Don’t do anything stupid,” she asked of him.

“No promises,” he teased. “Love you, Alex. See you in a couple days.”

“I love you too. I’ll see you then.”

Zane hung up the phone, turned his notifications off, and stepped into the old building. Once inside, the sounds of desert wind were replaced with full silence. His eyes scanned the hallways to either side, lit up by windows crossed with metal bars.

Ripped bits of cloth and wooden splinters littered each hall, but this central lobby seemed almost entirely untouched. A metal door stood firm and pristine, with a clean plaque reading “Warden Sheppard” drilled into the center.

“Looks like a good enough place to start,” Zane whispered, walking up to the door and pulling on the handle. It was locked. “Why did I expect anything less?”

When looking down the halls to his left and right, every other door was either wide open or in different states of disarray. Something clicked in his mind, telling him that something important hid behind this door. He started down the left hallway, in search of a way to open it.

Every cell that Zane passed was made up exactly the same. Beds sat on their frame, bare down to the mattress, but in place.

“Had to be bolted to the ground,” he thought aloud.

He met with a sharp turn and stopped to look down the hall. With the sound of his own footsteps now gone, he could hear the faint sound of heels clicking behind him from the lobby.

“It’s an old building,” he whispered in an attempt to motivate himself. He went to take another step, but froze when the clicking started getting louder. It sounded as though it was closing in on him.

Is someone else here? he thought. *But, with how quiet this place is, I would’ve heard a car door shut.*

The clicks continued to grow louder, echoing closer and closer until he was certain the owner of the shoes was right behind him. Finally, he glanced behind him. To his surprise, he was met with nothing but an empty hallway.

“No way...” he mumbled, pursing his lips together excitedly. He took his phone out from his pocket and took two pictures, one down each hallway. “Alex is going to freak when I tell her about this.”

He then continued his path, though stepping quieter now as to allow himself to hear if he was being followed. For the first couple minutes, there was nothing. It wasn't until he was over halfway down the hall when the clicks of heel against tile began anew. This time, he didn't stop, instead checking to see how long he would be followed.

Zane stopped when he found something that may do what he needed. The destroyed remains of a wooden janitor's closet door. Even as he stopped, the clicking grew louder, just as they had before.

. He tried his best to stand perfectly still until it stopped, as to not scare the person away. Finally, it did, with the final click being barely a foot from where he stood.

Zane could feel eyes on him, more prominently than earlier. He knew he was being watched. He couldn't tell if it was an observation or an unwelcoming stalking, but he chose to believe the former.

After a prolonged period of silence, he slowly leaned down and picked up a sizeable piece of wood.

“Well, I don't have to think about possibly unscrewing a bar from one of the beds now,” he hummed. A young woman's voice chuckled, seemingly at Zane's words.

The man froze, his eyes glancing around. There was nobody there, but he knew the laugh came from where he heard the last click.

“I’ve never heard stories of a spirit having a sense of humor,” Zane noted loudly in an attempt to address the woman directly. He received no response.

Once more, Zane started back down the hallway. He figured he would keep going the way he was, and he would eventually be back in the lobby. Through everything he’s experienced today, the excitement was clear in his eyes. He made no effort to walk any faster than he had been, hoping to get a full view of the prison in his mind.

At the next turn, he took his phone out once more, and captured two more pictures of the hallway.

“Two turns... I should be at the far end of this place right now...” he observed quietly.

Looking up, he saw what looked like an old guard station. The plexiglass surrounding it had cracks in it, but it wasn’t broken. The inside was empty, barren of even a chair or desk. Stepping inside, the cold air dropped in temperature even more. Enough to the point where Zane walked out after only a moment.

Connected to this small room was what looked to be the mess hall. This room was just as neatly set up as the cells, with each table seemingly untouched, aside from a layer of dust. As Zane walked inside, he couldn’t help but feel as though he was being watched.

This time, however, Zane was certain of the type of gaze he was receiving. The eyes on him felt menacing, made worse by the fact that whoever noticed him couldn’t be seen.

“Please stand behind the line,” a man’s voice came from right beside him. It was sudden, but unmistakable.

Snapped out of the sudden fear, Zane looked down to a yellow line labeled “VISITORS” at his feet, and noticed that he was over it almost entirely. He was quick to step back, and the uneasy feeling of eyes on him dissipated just as suddenly.

In disbelief, his head slowly turned to face the location of the voice, but only saw the small side-room. He even went as far as to step into the guard station.

He was met with a feeling of safety, mixed with a strange bitter cold. He stepped back out of the box after soaking in this feeling for as long as he could bear the temperature.

“I’m a visitor...” Zane said towards the empty booth, amazed at the contact he’d received. “Alright. I apologize.”

He didn’t know who he was apologizing to, only that he broke a rule and quickly rectified it.

After giving the two rooms another quick once-over, he turned on his heels and resumed his tour of the prison.

Once he had made a third turn and started down the final unchecked hallway, the clicking of heels behind him resumed. However, it was now paired with the firm steps of work boots walking at the same pace. He had learned the first time not to stop and check the noises, only to accept that they were there and continue on his way.

“Three years of visiting supposedly haunted places, and the one place where things are actually here is a prison I stumble upon on the way,” he said in disbelief. “I don’t know who you are, but I assume you don’t mind what I’m about to do, as you’ve made no effort to stop me.”

No response, as was expected.

The final hallway was filled with nothing but more cells. Most, as with the others, had their doors hanging off of the hinges. However, two at the very far corner closest to the lobby were closed. Painted in black against the white wall between them was the word “Solitary”.

Unlike the rest of the doors, these had no bars to see through. Zane also had no interest in opening them. If the solitary confinement doors were closed, and there were certainly spirits here, that was surely for the best.

After the final turn, Zane was met with the short walk back into the lobby. He positioned himself in front of the door, raising the piece of wood over his head.

As he was getting ready to break the knob, another aura of bitter cold surrounded him. He lowered the plank and waited a beat, thinking he would hear the same clicking heels as before.

Instead, a man’s voice whispered to him, much older than the presumed guard from the cafeteria.

“I will not stop you, but behind this door lies my shame. Please, do not judge those still here for my mistakes.”

For the third time in Zane’s short time in the prison, he froze.

I thought I’d be used to the contact by now, he thought judgmentally of himself.

He turned behind him to where the voice was. As he expected, he was met with nothing but the empty lobby. Still, he chose to speak.

“I will be respectful to whatever I find, I promise. I always try my best to do so in places where spirits might be. It’s sort of the first rule of this.”

Zane raised the piece of wood once more and smacked it hard against the doorknob. After three hard hits, not only did the wood in his hand splinter, but the knob clanked against the floor. With the lock now gone, the explorer pushed the door open.

The warden's office was covered in dust, but otherwise untouched from the events that happened within this prison. The window, the only unbarred one in the entire building, stood tall and untouched. When Zane's eyes fell to the desk, though, everything around him went cold.

The desk looked as though it belonged in an old detective movie. Wooden, sturdy, and nearly untouched by time. The one thing that stuck in Zane's mind the most, however, was the machine on top of the desk. A very old computer, covered in dust just like everything else. Taped over the computer screen was a formally written note.

The boy carefully pulled the note from the computer, afraid that the frayed paper would turn to dust in his hands. He started reading it aloud to himself.

"The current date is the thirteenth of August, nineteen ninety-three. I would, first and foremost, like to apologize to the families of those who work here. A riot has broken out, and I know not many of us are left," Zane read, things starting to piece together in his head. "I have locked myself in my office, though that hasn't stopped the inmates from banging on the door, calling my name. Screaming obscenities. They want my head, that much is certain."

Zane had to stop for a minute. The air had grown thick around him, and he felt someone glancing at the note over his shoulder. Once he relaxed himself and accepted the presence alongside him, he continued.

"I should have seen this coming. The signs were there, but I did nothing to change the course. The deaths of my friends, those who I saw as my family, are firmly on my shoulders. As

such, I've elected to take the path of cowardice. So many of those I care about die around me, and by my own hand, I will join them."

Taking another pause, Zane lowered his head. He silently apologized to the presence he still felt looming over his shoulder.

This time, he didn't dare look, not wanting to scare them away.

With a somber frown, the explorer finished the note.

"Once more, I am deeply sorry for failing all of you. I truly hope the inmates, at the very least, leave the families of those who worked here alone."

Zane placed the note back on the computer, and lowered his head.

"You did what you could to give everyone here enough time to get out. I'm certain some of them were able."

When he looked up again, Zane noticed the clear figure of a woman in the doorway. She was no older than himself, and had her hair tied back in a neat ponytail.

"I'm sorry, sir. Visiting hours are ending soon," she told him politely. "The nighttime is when the inmates roam freely. It would be best if you left, and came back another day."

Zane looked at her, his mouth open as he tried to process what he was seeing.

"You're... Were you the one following me earlier?"

"Of course," she smiled. "I escorted you to make sure you were respectful to those that are left here. Though, that was hardly necessary, as you seem to carry yourself rather well."

Zane blushed, rubbing the back of his head. It felt a bit weird, being complimented by a spirit, but he took it.

“I assume you’ll escort me out, then?” he asked, to which he received a nod in return.

He was led out of the warden’s office, and was met with a dark-skinned man in a guard’s outfit, who tipped his hat to Zane. His nametag read “C.O. Adam Valeska”.

“Sorry if I scared you before,” the older man chuckled. “We all have our schedules, even now. Right before sundown, the inmates eat. If they see someone they aren’t used to in here, they might get a little uppity.”

“No worries,” Zane replied, still in shock at everything going on around him. “Thank you for keeping me safe.”

“It’s my job,” came the simple response.

The ghostly woman led Zane to the door, and held out a hand.

“It was a pleasure to have you here. My name is Andrea,” she offered.

The man reached out a hand, and to his surprise, the hands connected and shook.

“Zane. Likewise, it was nice to meet you,” he said, his head then turning to Adam. “Both of you.”

“Please come again soon,” Andrea asked of him. “There are still a few of us you haven’t met, including Warden Sheppard. And we do love when people from the outside visit.”

Zane looked to the warden's office, and saw that the door was open, however the formerly displaced knob was back on. In addition, the splintered wood was gone from the floor, leaving the lobby as spotless as it was when he had entered.

"I should be back on this road within a couple days. I'll make sure to stop by."

The woman gave a kind smile and ushered him out the door. Once outside, he turned back to say goodbye, but both spirits were gone from his view.

Zane pulled his phone from his pocket to take one final picture of the open door. Then, he walked to his car and drove back onto the main road.

END