



CAROUSEL

CAROUSEL by Sarah McKnight © 2024

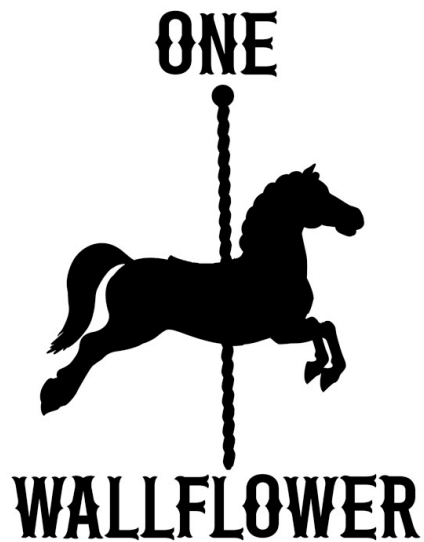
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CONTENT WARNINGS

Blood
Gore
Suicide
Mentions of Self-harm



Strobe lights transformed the living room into a stop-motion frenzy, and for once, eighteen-year-old Laura Fitzpatrick was feeling it. The red plastic cup in her hand was almost empty, the liquid courage giving her just enough bravery to get up from the couch, where she had been making friends with the family dog, and insert herself into the crowd of dancers.

Laura wasn't much for dancing, but the rhythmic beat was strong, the lights were colorful and bright, and the hastily thrown together Halloween costume of her favorite killer somehow helped her feel like she could step outside of herself for a while. She clutched the cup in her hand as she swayed her hips to the beat, feeling the remnants of the fruit punch and alcohol monstrosity someone had mixed together sloshing around inside. If she finished the drink, she'd be tempted to get more, and the tips of her ears were already warm, her fingers and toes already tingling pleasantly. She may have been doing her best to feel brave, but she wasn't about to risk overdoing it.

Nobody paid her any attention as she stood rooted to her spot, letting the music guide her subtle movements. All around her were

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classmates she recognized, but she didn't know most of their names. Some were already well past drunk, leaning against friends for support as they struggled to remain upright. Others were dancing close enough to get pulled apart by chaperones had this been a school function.

Even though she hadn't really talked to anyone yet, Laura was still glad she'd decided to come after all. Andrea, the evening's host, always invited Laura to her parties even though she never came. Laura always thought Andrea did it as a courtesy more than anything, an offering of friendship despite having drifted apart after middle school, as so many often do. Now that Laura standing in the host's crowded living room, she could see that Andrea just invited everyone.

But the circumstances of the invitation didn't matter. All Laura cared about was that she was actually here. And now, with a little alcohol buzzing inside of her, she could finally suck it up and do what she came here to do. She only had to find her target first.

Throwing caution to the wind, Laura threw her head back and took the final gulp from her cup. It went down easy. She had already resolved not to have any more, but still, a refill of something a little more tame was an excuse to head into the kitchen and look around. She pushed herself out of the crowd of gyrating teens and ran her free hand through her ashy brown hair, tucking a few wispy strands behind her ears. Then, with a deep breath, she squared her shoulders, the stiff leather of her jacket providing a comforting safety blanket, and walked into the kitchen.

It was much quieter in there, and the lights were on. Laura had to blink a few times to adjust to the sudden brightness. Most people were gathered around the island counter, ladling up the last drops from the punch bowl and engaged in one-on-one conversations. A quick scan told her that the person she was looking for wasn't here, and she began to worry that her lab partner hadn't shown up to the party at all. If that were true, then this little excursion would be for

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nothing, and Laura had wasted Halloween night forcing herself to get out of her comfort zone instead of wrapped up in a blanket watching slashers like she'd originally planned.

"Great," she mumbled to no one in particular as she turned her back to the punch bowl and rummaged through the cans of harmless soda someone had dumped into a plastic bucket. Her mom had been so excited that she was "getting out of the house" for once, she couldn't just leave and go home now. She didn't feel like being labeled as a recluse again. The life of an introvert was not an easy one.

Making her selection, Laura popped the tab and leaned against the counter, taking small sips of the bubbly liquid. She decided she'd go home when she finished the soda and just drive as slowly as possible to make it seem like she'd spent more time at the party.

Fixing her eyes on the archway that led into the darkened living room, Laura watched the strobe lights flicker and swirl. Every few seconds, an enlarged shadow could be seen frozen in the throes of a dance on the wall. It was a cool effect, and she admired the confidence of the silhouetted dancers.

As she watched, a figure slipped out of the darkness and entered the bright kitchen. Laura blinked, breath caught in her throat for a moment as she battled with disbelief and then acceptance. So, her lab partner and crush had come to the party after all, and she'd been blending in with the crowd of dancers the whole time. The night wasn't wasted. Now all Laura had to do was conjure up enough bravery to actually approach. Her stomach churned at the thought. It was so easy at school, but then again, at school they only talked about science and lab assignments with occasional bouts of small talk sprinkled in. She swallowed hard.

Maddie wore a V-neck, cap-sleeved black dress that swished around her knees. Laura recognized it as the same dress she had worn to the homecoming dance a few weeks ago. Laura hadn't attended the dance, of course, but she saw plenty of pictures on social media.

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Tonight, though, Maddie had added a black headband with pointed cat ears into her auburn curls, and she had drawn a little black triangle on her nose and black whiskers on her cheeks. The costume was classy, with a studded choker adding a touch of sexiness to the look. It was enough to make Laura chicken out, just like she knew she would.

She turned her back, ready to slip out the back door and escape to her car, but that night, it seemed like luck was not on her side. Some cruel cosmic force must have been plotting to make her face her fears, and she froze in place as Maddie's musical voice rang throughout the kitchen.

“Oh my God, Laura! You actually came!”

With no other choice, Laura turned to face her lab partner and plastered on a smile that she hoped didn't show her discomfort. “Hi, yeah, I just figured...I should come to one of these eventually. Andrea always invites me.”

“It's about time!” Maddie reached into the bucket and pulled out her own soda. She grinned as she opened it and took a long drink. “Man, it's hot in there. Um, what are you supposed to be?”

Laura glanced down at her clothes – bits and bobs from her closet that probably looked like a normal outfit to the untrained eye. Black sneakers, dark jeans, a navy T-shirt, and a brown leather jacket. “Oh, I'm Jason. You know, Voorhees? I had a mask – crap, where did I put it?” She waved a hand over the top of her head, where it had been resting after it got too hot to have her face covered. She groaned and Maddie glanced over her shoulder into the living room.

“If you lost it in there, it's probably gone forever.”

Laura groaned louder. “My brother doesn't exactly know I borrowed that from him. He's going to kill me.”

“Older or younger?”

“Older.”

Maddie nodded solemnly. “Oh yeah, you're dead.”

Somehow, the ice had broken, and the two girls burst into laugh-

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ter. Feeling a bit more at ease, Laura rested against the counter and sighed.

“I really wasn’t planning on coming, so I just kind of grabbed what I had around the house to wear.”

“What made you change your mind?” Maddie peered at Laura over the top of her soda can as she took another sip.

Now was not the time. Not standing in the kitchen with so many other people around to listen in and laugh when she inevitably got shot down. Laura decided a lame explanation was better than the truth, and she shrugged as casually as she could. “I just figured it’s senior year and all. Might as well come to at least one of these things.”

“Well, I’m glad you finally came.” Maddie’s red lips stretched into a smile, revealing perfectly straight, gleaming white teeth that no doubt took years of expensive orthodontic work. “Having fun?”

Laura shifted, her own smile turning sheepish. “Not really.”

“Not surprised. I never took you for the party type.”

“I’m really not. I was actually thinking of leaving soon.”

Laura mentally kicked herself, and she couldn’t hide her grimace. How could she go and admit that she wanted to leave when she finally had a chance to talk to Maddie outside of school? She really was a coward.

“Aw, really? You don’t want to hang out a little longer? It’s still pretty early.”

Was that actual disappointment on Maddie’s face? Laura couldn’t be sure. The expression was likely just wishful thinking. But still, it sounded like Maddie wanted her to stay, and she was right. It wasn’t even ten o’clock yet, and Laura’s mother had graciously given her a curfew of midnight. It wasn’t like she actually had to go anytime soon. If she played it cool and kept herself calm, she might get to make her confession that night after all. At least then she’d get it off her chest, no matter what Maddie’s response might be.

Laura swallowed a nervous, shaky sigh with a sip of soda. “I guess I could stay a while longer. I’m really not big on dancing, though.”

“Yeah, it’s too stuffy in there now,” Maddie said. She set her

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empty can on the counter near the overflowing recycle bin. “I heard Travis Wilcox is breaking out a Ouija board in the dining room. Want to go talk to some ghosts?”

Despite all of her jumbled nerves, Laura snorted back a laugh. “Uh, no. I’ve seen enough horror movies to know where that’s going to go.”

Maddie raised a brow, tilting her head to the side, and Laura couldn’t help but watch as the corner of her mouth turned up in a playful smirk. “Oh, you’re a horror fan?”

“Yeah.” Laura gestured to her so-called costume as if that made it obvious. “They’re pretty much all I watch.”

“Hmm, somehow, I’m not surprised.”

“Really?” Usually, whenever someone found out about Laura’s love of the supernatural and macabre, they lamented how someone with “such a sweet face” could like something so grotesque. Then again, it was usually family members or her mother’s friends who made comments like that. Laura realized outside of her small group of friends, no one actually knew what kind of things she liked.

Maddie smiled again, and the corners of her mouth twitched with a playfulness that was almost flirty. “Nah. I mean, it’s always the quiet ones, right?”

“That is what they say,” Laura agreed, and she took another drink to soothe her jangled nerves. So far, this was going better than she expected.

It was then that Andrea, the party host herself, breezed into the kitchen from the living room, her Greek goddess gown billowing behind her. She cleared her throat, catching the attention of her guests, and pointed toward the hallway. “Truth-or-dare upstairs,” she announced. “A lot of people have been asking to play. Come up if you want in.”

She tossed everyone a glamorous smile and glided out of the room before anyone could respond.

Maddie glanced at Laura and offered her a shrug. “Want to play?”

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Anything was better than going back into that stuffy, crowded living room, and Laura figured truth-or-dare was a lot safer than messing around with a Ouija board – not that she *actually* believed in that stuff, but still. She crumpled her empty can and set it beside Maddie's. "Sure. Why not?"