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Hexum

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

HEXUM

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Natalie Satakovski

2022

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Natalie Satakovski, and entitled Hexum, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Donna Weir-Soley

Lynne Barrett

Lester Standiford, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 16, 2022

The thesis of Natalie Satakovski is approved.

Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2022

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

HEXUM

by

Natalie Satakovski

Florida International University, 2022

Miami, Florida

Professor Lester Standiford, Major Professor

HEXUM is a psychological suspense novel about two house flippers who get in over their heads when trying to restore an allegedly haunted pub.

The story follows Australian YouTubers Laura Russo and Katherine Liu as they move to a remote but soon-to-be-revived historic town to restore the Hexum Hotel. While Katherine's out, Laura finds a skeleton in the cellar, and to prevent project delays, she secretly buries it in the bush. But this isn't quite the easy fix she was hoping for. Instead, she becomes paranoid about a murderer on the loose, growing increasingly unhinged.

When project problems turn deadly, Laura doesn't know whether to blame local saboteurs, angry spirits, or her erratic state of mind. And the only way to solve the mystery of the bones and get them out alive is by lying to her partner and committing more crimes of her own.

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Chapter 1

There was a time when it felt like opportunity landed in our laps—not due to cold luck, but a reward for the creative and open energies that Kat and I fountained into the universe. But since our last flip flopped and we’d found ourselves with no next gig, my desperate outstretched arms seemed to make anything worth grasping flit away.

So, as I languished in our cheap sublet, on a balcony the size of a broom closet which overlooked the desertscape of a supermarket carpark, every ping of my phone was irresistible.

Ping—a new ad posted to domain.com. Uninspiring and out of our price range.

Ping—a new comment to our YouTube channel. Praise for former work that only churned my dread that we’d never hear such words again.

Ping—another email to our business account. Another sponsorship we weren’t yet ready to facilitate.

Ping—notification after notification after notification...

The glass sliding door dragged open, got stuck halfway, and Kat slipped sideways through the crack. She tried to close it behind her, failed, and gave up.

“Did you make me one?” she asked, referring to the gin and tonic icing my fingertips.

“Hello to you too,” I said.

She snatched a kiss to distract me from her hand slipping the tumbler out of mine.

“Had a good day, then?”

She didn't answer but sculled the remainder of the drink until ice and lemon clattered down to meet her lips. Although she hated working for anyone but herself, the sale of our last flip for ten grand less than we'd paid for it had forced her to resume subcontracting for a mate's electrical business. We had no choice but to say yes to extra cash where ever we could. We'd even negotiated a speedier settlement on the last joint to bump the price by five—hence the sublet.

Another ping of my phone...

Kat said, "You would not believe the rewiring mess at this place. The owner had tried to do it himself, fault-finding was a nightmare—"

"Sorry," I interrupted, looking down at my phone. "I'm keen to hear all about it but you've got to listen to this first."

It was a new email that had caught my attention, from a man called Darren Powell. His little Google photo showed a white man in a business suit.

I read the email out loud.

Dear Laura and Kat,

I've been a subscriber of The Real Makeover for a couple of years now and I absolutely love the work you did on the Grace Darling. I have to admit, when you first introduced us to that run down art deco home, I had little faith in your vision to restore it to its former glory. But now, with those white and blue walls, that established palm tree out front, I feel transported to the golden days of ocean liners. And what a great time it was to go through the journey with you.

Let me introduce myself, I'm an investor based out of Melbourne with an opportunity that I'd like to present.

I've just purchased an old pub in a country town that is about to boom. I need talented influencers such as yourselves to lead the restoration. It's a tight turnaround job but it comes with guaranteed profits.

Would love you show you the joint, buy you lunch and discuss details.

How about Friday?

Let me know.

Darren

Once I'd finished reading, I couldn't help but go back to the top and silently skim over the words again. But on second read, my eyes latched onto the words *guaranteed profits*.

"A pub huh?" Kat said, breaking me out of my fixation. She shrugged like it was an unlikely, but interesting, proposal.

"It's a bit of a leap from home restorations, isn't it? But—" I glanced back down at the email--"A short turn around job like this could be a quick cash injection."

When I looked at Kat again, she seemed distracted by the stuck sliding door, which had just admitted a moth into the claustrophobic excuse for a living space.

"There's a picture attached." I sidled up to her so we could both take a look.

When I tapped on a Jpeg at the bottom of the email, the preview unfolded at half-size on screen. It was a small bluestone pub in the symmetrical no-frills Georgian style.

"Bluestone pub," Kat said brightly, like she was playing a guessing game on Sesame Street.

I did the reverse-pinch to zoom, but the file size was too small and the picture too blurry to let us see much more.

“Who is this guy anyway?” Kat asked, impatiently tinkling the ice in circles around the boozeless glass.

“Clearly someone who is familiar enough with our content to know not to call you Kathy. Did you notice that?”

“Mm,” she hummed, like she was tasting something new but pleasant. Our subscribers would occasionally call her that in the comments, causing her to complain the name was meant for an old lady’s pet tabby.

“He’s clearly got suck up skills, but let’s see what else he’s good for.”

I used his email address to pull up his LinkedIn, which had a slightly bigger profile picture of mid-thirties, about our age. Given that he was fairly young, his page was unusually long, listing what seemed like achievement after achievement. Domestic and Commercial builder 2010-2012; Project Manager at Builders It 2012-2016; Director at Adroit Construction 2016-Present...

“He seems like the real deal,” I said. “He’s been in construction for longer than we’ve been flipping.”

“If that’s the case, why does he want us, two heritage home flippers, on the job? A pub is pretty big, wouldn’t he be better off using an architect or developer?”

“Well, he did say that he wanted—” I used air quotes—“*talented influencers*. He probably wants us for the same reason big brands come to us for sponsorships, because we’re authentic and our audience trust us. We could generate some hype around this pub.”

“Sure, but, of all the DIYers out there, why choose the ones that have just failed to sell for a profit?”

“Maybe he recognizes that it wasn’t our fault? And, you know, he must face the same risks every day in his job. He probably sympathizes.” I tapped back to the email for another preview of the Jpeg.

She nuzzled into my shoulder to take another look, and we took a moment to consider this grey building, that despite the image’s low resolution, still managed to send out stately imposing vibes.

Kat murmured, “It looks like a prison.”

She got me with that one, and I had to chuckle. “It’s no fancy boom style dealio, that’s for sure. Now that you mention it, looks about the right period to have been built from convict hewn stone.” Even this pixelated little square that took up a third of my screen couldn’t soften the building’s gloomy pioneer-era austerity. But I said, “Maybe with a clean modern interior to offset the creepy convict vibes, could be a nice spot for Sunday roasts.”

Slipping off my shoulder, Kat said, “Maybe. But I bet it’s got a great big hole in the roof and fifty years’ worth of water damage through the foundations. It’d cost a fortune to fix.”

“Fair. But this Darren guy seems to have the credentials to identify a sound business opportunity, so maybe it’s not too far gone? Besides, he’s already bought it, and we would only be doing it up, so that offloads most of the risk.”

I turned to face her now. Despite what I thought were persuasive points, she looked no more interested than she did yesterday when I showed her the call out for contestants on The Block. But of the few sparks that had lit up the night dead of opportunity, this was the first to settle in my palm, and burn...