

I stared at the white wall in front of me, my eyes wide open, feeling heavy from lack of sleep. Dark bags sat under them, like I hadn't rested in days. My finger tapped against the wall, making a soft, dull sound. The house felt colder than usual, and my face was pale, my hands sweaty and red from nerves. The ticking of the clock on the wall was the only thing I could hear, each tick making the silence worse.

I turned my head toward the window, watching the rain come down in sheets. It was coming down so hard it blurred everything outside, like the world was being erased. Ron had gone to see a movie with his friends hours ago. He told Mum and Dad that he'd come home as soon as it ended. But that was three hours ago. I tried calling him, but he didn't pick up. Dad called one of his friends, but they hadn't seen Ron since the movie ended. No one knew where he was. The thought of him just... being gone was terrifying, making my stomach twist. Mum was on the phone with the police, talking quietly but quickly, and Dad had already gone out to search for him.

Wherever Ron was, he had to be freezing. Even inside, with the heater on, I was shivering. My room felt like a freezer. I could hear Mum's footsteps coming down the hallway, her shoes squeaking on the wooden floor.

"Kev, I'm going to the police station. Please stay here. We don't need to lose another kid," she said, peeking through the door with a worried look on her face.

I nodded, then looked back at the wall as she shut the door. Everyone in town was already out searching for Ron, but something told me they were looking in the wrong places. I turned my head toward the window again, staring out at the tall pine trees swaying in the rain. There was one place I knew no one would go looking for him, especially not at 5 p.m. in the rain—the forest behind our house. It was dark and creepy, and people usually avoided it, but if Ron was anywhere, it could be there. I couldn't just sit here doing nothing.

Ignoring Mum's words and the bad feeling in my gut, I grabbed a flashlight and my rain jacket. I zipped it up, pulled the hood over my head, and walked quietly out of my room. The house creaked as I opened the front door, the cold wind hitting me in the face. I stepped outside, the rain immediately soaking my shoes, and started walking. The road was empty and the streetlights flickered. I crossed the road and stepped into the mud, the wet ground squishing under my feet. The forest stood tall in front of me, the trees reaching up like claws into the darkening sky. My face felt frozen and my fingers were stiff, but I kept moving toward the trees.

After what felt like an hour of walking, I started to hear crickets chirping in the distance. I looked up and realized the sky had turned completely black. I needed to head home. But when I turned around, all I could see were trees—no path, no sign of where I came from. I was lost.

Dad always told me that if I ever got lost, I should stay put. Don't wander, don't panic. So, I stopped and looked around. To my right was a dead bush, and nearby, a big branch had fallen off a tree. I grabbed the branch and started digging a small hole next to the bush. When it was deep enough, I sat down inside, placed my flashlight on the ground, and used the dead bush to cover myself. My teeth chattered, and I curled up into a ball, thinking about Mum and Dad, and how worried they must be. The rain had stopped, and the forest was eerily quiet now. All I could hear was my own heartbeat pounding in my chest.

I tried to keep my eyes open, but eventually, I drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, I pushed the bush off me and stretched my arms. My clothes were wet and muddy, but I didn't care. I stood up and yawned.

"Kevin!" I heard Dad shout. He rushed over, grabbing me in a tight hug.

"Where's Ron? Is he okay?" I asked, my voice shaky.

"Yes, we found him, but then we lost you," Dad said, holding me even tighter.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, feeling bad as Dad hugged me like he was never going to let go.