

What Else Lurks By The Fire

A Horror Short Story By Nathan Segeberg

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Chapter One

The Arrival

The car was silent for only a moment before Andrew spoke again, “I think this will be a great trip!”

“God dammit,” Ryan groaned from the back seat of the car, “you don’t have to keep convincing us. We are already an hour from home!”

“I know, I know,” Andrew took his hands off the steering wheel and raised them in surrender, “I’m just happy that all of us are here. Just a couple of buds heading up to the mountains.”

“Buds and Jamie,” Zack quickly interjected.

“Yes,” Andrew looked in the rearview mirror and flashed a polite smile to the woman sitting next to Ryan, “buds and Jamie.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, am I crashing your guy’s man time?” Jamie spoke up.

Ryan began to agree, but Andrew spoke before anyone’s feelings could get hurt, “Not at all! I think it’s fun that you are coming with us.”

Zack sensed the tension in the SUV and attempted to change the subject, “So, where are we going? Your aunt’s house?”

Andrew chuckled nervously, “It’s my aunt’s sister’s something or other,” he paused for a second to think, “Maybe a family friend. Who knows! Bottom line is, we are going into the mountains to camp out on some land that is owned by someone my family knows.”

“I didn’t come on this camping trip to stay in some fucking cottage dude,” Ryan’s dark brown eyes tried to make eye contact with Andrew through the rearview mirror, but Andrew wouldn’t let him.

“We aren’t staying in the house. The house is on a lot of acres and we can get lost somewhere in the backyard,” Andrew tried desperately to keep the group’s consent to go camping. It had been a long time since Andrew had woken up outdoors and he was willing to do almost anything to keep his friends in the car.

“We’ll be so far away from the house you won’t be able to see its lights,” Zack chimed in.

“I don’t think being by the house is a bad thing,” Jamie spoke up cautiously.

Ryan turned to her with an evil grin. “What? You aren’t scared of the dark, are you?”

“Of the dark? No,” Jamie replied, “Of you three? Maybe.”

“Hey! If we start fighting now, the rest of the week is going to be a living nightmare,” Andrew interjected. “We are going to have a great time, no matter where we choose to camp.” Andrew drummed on the steering wheel and drove with a wide smile.

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Gravel crunched under the bald tires of Andrew’s old SUV. The extra ground clearance that his car provided was the only reason why the group of friends had decided to take his car. Other than that, it was by no means roadworthy; Andrew was grateful that the car had made it up the steep slopes of the mountain pass.

They had veered off the paved road a couple of minutes ago and a windy dirt road escorted them through the thick green trees of the American east coast. Everyone in the car was quiet as they intently watched the scenery go by.

The dirt road offered one more turn before presenting a magnificent house in the middle of a clearing. A large gate stood between them and the horseshoe driveway that bowed before the massive mansion in the woods. Jamie let out a gasp when the house came into view.

“Maybe staying in the house wouldn’t be so bad,” Zack agreed as he leaned over the dashboard to get a better look at the house.

“Yeah, I was told they were rich, but I didn’t know they were *that* rich,” Andrew noted as he pulled the car off the dirt road and nestled it between a couple of bushes.

Ryan was quick to point out the ten-foot-tall chainlink fence that surrounded the entirety of the house, “The hell are they trying to keep out?”

Andrew shrugged, “I don’t know. Bears or something.”

“That’s a little overkill for bears, don’t you think?” Zack questioned as he opened the passenger door and stepped out.

“Bears can climb, can’t they?” Andrew responded, but his mind was preoccupied with getting the backpacks out of the back of the car.

“Bears can climb?” Jamie sounded surprised.

Ryan huffed, “You don’t get out much, do you?”

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“I go in the forests as often as you take a shower.” Jamie’s tone adopted harsh qualities as she shot a glare at Ryan and waved her hand in front of her nose.

“Guys, guys,” Andrew stepped between his two friends, “Let’s get our packs and head out. We are running out of daylight.”

Jamie spun on her heels and strapped her backpack to her back in silence. Ryan’s six-pack of beer rattled as he unburied it from the inside of his bag.

“Great, we are all participating in underage drinking as well?” Zack sighed as he came around the back of the car.

“We? All this beer is for me and me only.” Ryan laughed.

Andrew was quick to dispel any tension. “Ryan promised he would keep it under control, right?”

“Yes, Mom,” Ryan sighed as he threw his pack over his shoulder.

“I brought a can of bear mace, but I’m beginning to think it wasn’t enough,” Jamie mentioned under her breath.

“For the bears? Or for drunk Ryan?” Zack replied and his humor was rewarded by a cute laugh from Jamie.

“Alright!” Andrew announced with his key fob in his hands, “I am locking the doors to the car. I hope that everything you need is on your backs.”

The car’s lights flashed and a loud honk announced their arrival in the woods as the doors locked with a click. Andrew confidently placed the keys in a pocket on his backpack strap and began walking along the fence of the house.

Viewing the house from the front was like admiring the craftsmanship of a beautiful safe. The outside was magnificent, and one could only wonder what was inside. The house hid most of its features behind the silhouette of the front entrance, four-car garage, and steep roof. As the group of friends passed by the side of the house, they noticed that a pool worthy of a swim team and an outdoor kitchen and dining area nestled comfortably beneath the shade of the house’s steeples.

“Are you sure we couldn’t spend a night inside the gates?” Jamie asked innocently.

Andrew stopped walking for a second to talk. “I’m not even sure they are home. My mom called them to ask if it was alright if we crashed in the backyard, but they didn’t answer. I figured that if they weren’t answering, they were probably out of town and wouldn’t even realize we were here.”

“Come on guys, there is plenty of wide-open wilderness for us to conquer! You don’t want to be trapped in that fence!” Ryan said as he took the lead.

“Does anyone have any stories to pass the time while we hike?” Andrew said.

“I have a story!” Ryan announced as his eyes lit up with a devilish glow, “Ever heard of Troop 307?”

Each of the friends shook their head and Ryan took that as an invitation to continue his story. The group of friends traveled into a grove of pine trees and were immersed in the shade. Cool air hit the back of each hiker’s spine and it was as if the forest around them humbled for Ryan’s story.

Ryan cleared his throat before speaking, “They say that Troop 307 was a Boy Scout troop that would go on backpack trips frequently. They always were camping here and there, and they loved going out into the middle of the forest and camping with no tents, no food, or any of that shit. They wouldn’t bring anything but a hatchet.”

“The troop set up camp one night, deep in a pine tree forest. Each boy dug his trench and made their shelter, but as night fell, something strange began to happen.”

Jamie’s face was visibly upset, and her attempts to calm her demeanor only made her look more uneasy.

“One of the boys began sleepwalking uncontrollably,” Ryan continued. “At first, he would wake up in places away from the campsite. Other nights, he would wake up and find himself hovering over his troop mates.”

Zack began to look around nervously as he listened. Andrew walked slower as he paid more attention to Ryan’s story, preparing himself to shut it down once Ryan’s story became too intense for their friendly get-together.

Ryan’s voice adopted a grim quality, “One night, the boy woke up in unfamiliar territory. In his right hand, he gripped a knife, and in his left hand, he held the throat of his troop leader. His arms were covered in blood to his elbows and his clothes were torn to shreds. The sleepwalker had killed everyone in his troop that night but had no memory of doing anything except crawl into his ditch to sleep.”

“Is this actually true?” Jamie’s sassy tone interrupted the spooky atmosphere that Ryan had worked hard to cultivate.

“Look it up! It’s in the news!” Ryan quickly responded, “Some people say that the boy had been planning it. I think the forest made him go fucking mad.”

Jamie raised her phone over her head and grumbled, “I don’t have any service. I can’t find the stupid news story.”

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“I guess you’ll just have to believe me,” Ryan announced proudly.

“Well,” Andrew began speaking as he stopped walking and turned towards his friends, “You can thank Ryan for not only passing the time while we walked but also for putting us unnecessarily on edge.”

Andrew looked around at the clearing he had stopped in and realized it looked great for a campsite. With trees separating them from the rest of the forest, the circular patch of dirt and foliage seemed big enough for their tents and gave them enough room to relax and bask in the shade. It was as if someone had camped here before, and Andrew even noticed a makeshift firepit toward the center of the clearing.

“I think we’ve found our campsite!” Andrew continued, “Let’s set up camp.”

Chapter Two

The Darkness Breathes

It had been a mad dash to find out whose tent was placed where. There were too many factors to consider. Where the sunset was, how close you were to other people's tents, and how level the terrain you placed your tent on all played a vital part in selecting the perfect location.

Jamie staked out the most private spot while Zack got the most level spot. Ryan didn't care where his tent was as long as he had his six-pack of beer beside him. Andrew took a spot with a great view of the horizon.

Ryan quickly set up his tent and instead of relaxing in his canvas castle, he decided to wrestle with Zack and Andrew every chance he got. Laughing and shouting filled the campsite as the three boys battled each other with sticks they had found on the ground.

After they had settled into their campsite, Ryan approached Zack and Andrew with a cheeky smile on his face, "Check this shit out, guys."

Andrew finished setting his sleeping bag out and turned towards Ryan, "What's up?"

Ryan pulled a large hunting knife from its sheath and presented it like it was an antique, "My brother gave it to me. He said he killed a bear with it."

"He killed a bear?" Zack's tone sounded skeptical.

"Well, he said that he defended himself from a bear, and then the bear never came back. So I'm pretty sure he killed it." Ryan grabbed the knife by the handle and slowly twisted it around so Andrew and Zack could admire every angle.

"That looks awesome," Andrew commented as he held his hand out. "May I?"

Ryan chuckled as he happily passed the blade, "You may!"

Jamie smiled as she watched the boys gingerly pass the blade to one another. "Seems like boys are always playing with some sort of toy," she mocked from the entrance of her tent.

"It's not just any toy, it's a sharp toy!" Andrew responded while still transfixed on the blade.

"Oh brother," Jamie moaned sarcastically and giggled at Andrew's boyish grin.

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“Are you telling me you don’t have any appreciation for a well-made blade?” Zack questioned her.

“Not really,” she replied with boredom.

“I bet you’re into reading and shit huh?” Ryan turned to her and jeered, “Arts and crafts?”

Jamie spoke in a calm and curious tone, “I just don’t like knives. If I’m being honest, I’m still trying to find out what’s so appealing about camping. Don’t get me wrong, I wanted to come, but why do you guys like sleeping on the ground and watching wood burn?”

“It’s about being one with nature. Going back to our primal roots,” Ryan said as he gestured to the trees, “Humans are just animals, and the spirit of the forest speaks to our carnal nature!”

“I don’t sleep on the ground,” Zack announced proudly, “I have a cot.”

Ryan laughed and gave his friend a shove. “You sleep on a cot when you camp?”

Zack’s expression suddenly changed and he spoke much softer, “If I’m uncomfortable while I sleep, I am more likely to sleepwalk.”

Jamie’s eyes grew large. “Sleepwalk?”

“Like Troop 307!” Ryan whispered under his breath while smiling.

“It’s not like that!” Zack defended himself, “but the story you told on the way here didn’t help.”

“You aren’t going to go in our tents while you sleep, right?” Jamie asked as she stepped away from the group of boys.

“Oh my god,” Zack moaned in embarrassment, and he buried his face in his palms. “It’s not that bad. At home, I just wake up somewhere in my room. You guys are safe.”

Jamie still looked standoffish but decided she wouldn’t press any further into the subject. After all, she had bear mace. “One of you guys knows how to make a fire, right?” she asked as she rubbed her hands together.

Ryan stepped forward and puffed out his chest, “All men should know how to make a damn fire. I brought just the thing to light a fire in a split second. Let me grab my butane torch.”

With that statement, he dashed to his tent. Andrew sheathed Ryan’s knife and set it on a stump nearby. Frantic noises came from Ryan’s tent, and the chilling air agreed with Jamie that it was time for a campfire.

“Alright! Let’s grab some firewood!” He drummed his fingers on the stump before picking a direction to search.

Zack poked his head out of his tent, “I’m still setting up my stuff. You guys go without me.”

Ryan bolted from his tent, dropped off his butane torch, and began searching the forest without another word.

“Mind if I stick with you?” Jamie asked Andrew, “I figure I’ll be safe if I choose to travel with a guy who likes knives.”

Andrew blushed. “Yeah, I can show you around.”

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Shimmering flames cast long shadows across the landscape. Exhaustion had gotten the best of them and they all sat silently. Andrew continued to promote fellowship between all of them, but even he was beginning to tire.

They each had their own tent and staked them an equal distance from the center of the campsite. Andrew noted that each tent’s unique differences mirrored the owner: Jamie’s tent was brightly colored and brand new; Ryan’s tent was worn, patched, and certainly a hand-me-down from his older brother; Zack’s tent was a low-profile backpacking tent that hid well in the shadows of the trees.

Andrew looked at his tent and smiled. He had purchased it a couple of years ago, and he had specifically looked for a tent that could hold his two friends. He had met Zack and Ryan in junior high, and the moment they met, they became inseparable. Their loud music, boisterous roughhousing, and knack for trouble had made sure that every elderly woman in a ten-mile radius knew their names.

High school was a different beast. Andrew looked at Ryan’s and Zack’s faces in the dancing light and he was beginning to see strangers. What started as different classes became different friend groups. Ryan fell in with the type of kids that would sneak cigarettes onto school grounds, and Zack fell away from everyone and buried himself in his studies. It truly saddened Andrew to see the boys he had grown up with turn into men he didn’t recognize.

Andrew had met Jamie a couple of weeks ago at work and had grown close with her. After she overheard Andrew talking about the campout, she demanded that she be invited, and he reluctantly agreed. By the fireside, she asked the boys plenty of thought-provoking questions as she tried to get to know everyone. While the group laughed and bonded over the silly questions they asked each other, eventually, they collectively chose to turn in for the night.

Zack was the first to go to bed, followed by Jamie and then Ryan, leaving Andrew by himself at the fire. *“It was nice to be back outdoors,”* Andrew thought to himself before turning his water bottle

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over the fire and watching the coals spit and die down. He blindly wandered back to his tent and slipped into his sleeping bag.

Before Andrew was able to shut his eyes, the sound of rustling grass caught his attention. He rolled over in his sleeping bag to get a better look out of the mesh window, but the firelight had been extinguished and rendered his eyes useless. Footsteps approached his tent, which wasn't surprising because all of the tents were so close together, but the footsteps didn't leave.

He could hear the others settling in their beds, and Andrew swore that he heard the three other campers zip themselves away in their tents. Nonetheless, the heavy breathing of someone just outside his tent persisted. Andrew propped himself on one elbow and listened for a second longer before he decided to say anything.

Andrew suspected that it was Ryan or Zack trying to squeeze in a prank before bedtime, "Hey man, go to bed," he spoke into the darkness.

Nobody moved or responded, but the heavy breathing continued. Whoever was outside breathed slowly, but they exhaled with such great force that it sounded like a cow was hovering over him. "*Perhaps an animal wandered into the campsite*", Andrew thought to himself.

In an attempt to scare the animal away, Andrew made as much noise as he could by flailing his arms and legs inside his sleeping bag. The breathing continued.

Slowly, the breath receded into the darkness, and heavy footsteps walked away from Andrew's tent. Shrugging, Andrew rolled over and went to sleep.

Chapter Three

Search for the Beast

The chirping of happy birds woke Andrew from his sleep, and the wind between the leaves eased him from his slumber. There was nothing he loved more than being woken up by nature. The outside air was just crisp enough for him to appreciate the warm environment inside his sleeping bag. Andrew took a deep breath in and held the sensation in his lungs. He wasn't sure how many more camping trips he would experience and treated this like one of his last. His determination to be the first one awake convinced him to slip out of his sleeping bag and get dressed for the day.

Unzipping his tent's door showered Andrew in warm rays from the young sun. Each sensation Andrew experienced reminded him how much he loved the outdoors. He stepped out of his tent and pushed his feet into his shoes. After grabbing some necessary items to relight the fire for breakfast, Andrew turned towards the firepit and began his morning march. He gasped as his ankle rolled out from under him, toppling his body onto the hard dirt.

Landing on his knee and wrist, he dropped everything he was carrying. Andrew reached for his ankle and squeezed it; It felt warm and sore, but he hadn't heard any popping. He gingerly flexed his ankle and didn't feel any additional pain.

Jamie giggled from her seat by the fire, "That was quite the spill. You alright?"

Not only had Jamie witnessed Andrew's spectacular fall, but she added insult to injury by being the first one awake.

"I've been wondering what made those," Jamie continued while gesturing towards the ground behind Andrew. "That has to be one big deer. And the tracks just circle Ryan's tent."

The pain in Andrew's ankle was beginning to subside and he looked to see what he tripped on. Pressed into the dirt were large hoof marks. It looked as if a herd of deer had come trampling through the campsite only to circle around Ryan's tent. Andrew noticed another strange detail; there were no tracks leading to or from the circle.

"That's odd. I've never seen anything like it," Andrew commented as he limped towards the firepit. "You're up early."

Jamie smiled politely before looking back at the fire. "I couldn't sleep."

"Once you lay down for the night, you find all the rocks under your tent," Andrew commented before joining her.

"It's not that," Jamie sighed as she struggled with her next words.

Andrew sat down in his camp chair and began poking at the fire Jamie had already started. Jamie sat in her camp chair with her long, slender legs curled against her body. She pushed a short strand of blonde hair over her ear and wrapped her arms around her legs to battle the morning chill.

“My last camping trip wasn’t the greatest,” Jamie spoke again.

“I’m sorry,” Andrew consoled, “how long ago was it?”

“When I was seven,” Jamie responded, “I haven’t gone camping since.”

“It must have been pretty bad,” Andrew chuckled to lighten Jamie’s serious tone.

“I’ll never forget it,” Jamie hadn’t looked up from the dancing flames, “My dad took me camping, and my mom was going to meet us the next morning. When I woke up my dad had left in the middle of the night and my mom was sifting through divorce paperwork by the fire.”

“Oh my god,” Andrew was shocked. His mouth dried up, and his eyes bulged.

Jamie smiled weakly, and her eyes glimmered with fresh tears before she wiped them away from her smooth skin, “It’s taken a while, but I can finally talk about it without sobbing uncontrollably.”

“All those deep conversations we’ve had, and you never brought up this!” Andrew said as he debated whether he wanted to embrace her or not.

“It’s not really a story I wear on my sleeve,” she giggled with a sad expression. She sat up straight and pretended to greet someone, “Hi, I’m Jamie. I have issues because my dad left me in the forest.”

He felt terrible for laughing, but deep down he felt guilty for letting her come. She seemed like she really wanted to come with Andrew on this camping trip, but why would she want to relive those childhood memories?

Andrew was shellshocked. “Why would you want to come camping with a bunch of strangers after having an experience like that?”

Jamie held back a coy laugh. “You always speak so fondly of the outdoors. I wanted to see camping the way you did. I figured tagging along was my best chance at learning just how great it can be.”

Andrew felt his face turn red. He drummed his fingers on the arm of his camp chair. “Well, I hope this camping trip is a hell of a lot better than your last.”

Jamie broke her concentration from the fire and gave Andrew an endearing smile before speaking softly, “You aren’t bad company.”

The way her lips moved while she talked put Andrew in a trance. He observed her radiant white skin reflect the soft light from the fire and he refused to look away.

“What the hell?” Ryan shouted as he poked his head out of his tent, disrupting the tender moment by the fire. His voice had startled both Andrew and Jamie. “If these are deer tracks, they belong to the biggest deer I’ve ever seen!”

Andrew broke eye contact with Jamie and cleared his throat before chiming in, “I think I heard it breathing outside my tent last night. It sounded massive.”

Ryan’s eyes lit up. “Did you see it?”

“No, I just heard it,” Andrew responded as he placed small sticks and bark on the glowing coals.

“I’ll grab my survival bag,” Ryan said as he disappeared back into his tent.

“For what?” asked Jamie.

Ryan’s eyes were wide with excitement. “We are going to find it, right?”

“I don’t see why not,” Andrew shrugged. “I’m all for some exploration.”

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Ryan happily took the lead as they marched through the woods. He slashed at plants and branches with his hunting knife to clear a path that was already free of obstructions. Since there were no tracks to follow, Andrew treated this as an excuse to wander through the forest and marvel at the splendor of nature. Ryan eagerly searched for more clues.

“Do you really think we’ll find this deer?” Jamie asked. She had avoided the line’s front and back like the plague. Her head was on a swivel, and her short blonde hair sailed in the wind as she reacted to every noise in the bushes.

“I hope so,” Zack answered. “The antlers on this deer must be huge.”

“Hopefully, it doesn’t attack us,” Jamie mumbled under her breath, but Ryan still heard her comment.

“Deer don’t attack,” Ryan said confidently, “And if it fuckin’ did, there’s four of us and only one of him.”

“The deer is probably big enough to see from a distance. We won’t have to get that close,” Andrew attempted to ease Jamie’s mind. “I’m not in the mood to fight a deer.”

Ryan shrugged and continued to clear a path. “Looks like I’m fighting it myself.”

“Looky here,” Jamie mocked, “Ryan the Fearless.”

“I’m not afraid of a god-damn thing,” Ryan announced confidently.

Andrew smiled. “Everyone’s afraid of something. The fact that you don’t know what scares you puts you in danger.”

“How so, Mr. Guru?” Ryan challenged Andrew’s belief.

“If you know what you are afraid of, you know to avoid it,” Andrew began. “If you happen to come across the thing that scares you, you know to control your thoughts and not let fear get the best of you.”

Ryan looked back at Andrew with a doubtful look, and Andrew took this as an invitation to continue.

“For example, I am afraid of isolation,” Andrew risked being vulnerable, “therefore I know that if I ever find myself alone, I can expect the fear and control it.”

Ryan laughed, “You’re afraid of being alone?”

“It’s a valid fear! Humans are social creatures,” Andrew said as he tried to justify himself.

Andrew’s humility inspired Jamie and she decided to chime in, “I’m afraid of the forest,” she spoke like she was finally getting something off her chest. “Actually, I guess I’m afraid of being left in the forest.”

Jamie and Andrew shared a special glance in passing as Andrew began to speak again, “Since she knows she is afraid of it, she is not controlled by it!”

“Well, if I was afraid of anything,” Ryan began with a forced somber tone, “it would be the IRS.”

Andrew chuckled. “The IRS?”

“Taxes are nothing to mess around with!” Ryan sprang back to life in his usual boisterous tone, “My uncle got audited, and he said he would rather castrate himself with a fishing line.”

Jamie’s face twisted with disgust. “Don’t ever say those words again.”

The friends laughed for a second before falling into a comfortable silence. Andrew continued the conversation, “Zack, what are you afraid of?”

“You guys can’t laugh,” Zack replied hesitantly.

“We won’t,” Andrew reassured him before shooting a nasty look at Ryan.

Ryan painfully agreed, “I won’t say shit.”

Zack’s voice was hushed, and it was hard to hear him over the rustling leaves. “Ghosts and demons scare me to my core. My mom is crazy into spirits and she was constantly reminding my siblings and me to be weary of negative spirits. I guess I learned to be terrified of spiritual entities.”

Jamie nodded, “I’m scared of that too. I’ve never had a ghost encounter, but I don’t want one.”

“My mom would tell me this story,’ Zack continued, “of a creature that fed on sadness, fear, and anger. She would tell me that if enough evil spirits got together, they would form an abomination that fed on negative energy.”

“That’s a pretty messed up thing to tell children,” Andrew commented. “Why would she tell you that?”

“I think she thought it would discourage me from being angry with my siblings, but all it did was make me afraid at night,” Zack shrugged.

Jamie’s voice broke through the conversation, “Ryan, what’s wrong with your tent?”

All thoughts about spirits and ghosts were diverted. The group of explorers had doubled back some time ago, but as they walked towards their camp, each of them discovered what Jamie was talking about. Something had trampled Ryan’s tent. The frame was destroyed, and his belongings were strung around the campsite.

“No!” Ryan shouted as he began running to his tent, The disappointment was evident in his voice, “That mother fucker broke my tent! My brother gave this to me!”

“Looks like the deer knew we were looking for it,” Zack said as he circled the tent.

“Well, that’s fuckin’ great,” Ryan sighed before looking at Andrew with pleading eyes. “You wouldn’t have room in your tent, would you?”

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Twigs snapped in the distance, and Andrew sat up quickly. Perhaps it was the animal that kept wandering into the campsite. After all, Andrew had heard breathing outside his tent the night before.

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The snapping continued and seemed to circle the campsite. Slow footsteps waded through the foliage around them. Andrew thought that he heard the breathing once more but second-guessed himself. He didn't know what noises he was hearing or what was in his head. And with that thought, he was determined.

Andrew grabbed his phone and unzipped his sleeping bag. Ryan's snoring covered up the sound of Andrew slipping on the clothes he had worn the day before. He poked his head out of the tent and squinted to try and make out an image in the dark, moonless night. All he could see were the faint silhouettes of Zack and Jamie's tents.

He reached for his shoes and slid them on, not bothering with the laces. Andrew figured that he would most likely scare the creature off before actually seeing anything, but it didn't kill his curiosity. The phone's flashlight was bright enough to maneuver him through the campsite. Branches, bushes, and tents shielded the forest from Andrew's gaze. He could see the nearest tree trunks, but what lurked beyond that remained a mystery.

Loud cracks echoed from branches breaking in the distance, providing Andrew with clues to the whereabouts of this animal. He flashed his light into the nearby trees, but the stationary landscape gave away no animals. Andrew looked back at his tent and realized he had forgotten to zip the tent closed.

A shiver went up his spine as the leaves crunched directly behind him. He whirled around to look at whatever animal had snuck up on him, but by the time his light illuminated the potential stalker, it was gone. In a panic, Andrew swept his light from side to side. He could hear the heavy breathing once more, but he couldn't tell where it was coming from.

Andrew couldn't find any creature responsible for making these noises, and he wondered, yet again, if it was one of his friends trying to play a prank.

"This isn't funny man," Andrew called out into the dark forest and he hoped someone would respond, but no one did.

When Andrew first used the flashlight to help him find an animal, the light was helpful. Now, it had a reverse effect. Andrew winced as he looked around with his phone because he was afraid something would be there. Andrew desperately hoped that one of his friends was messing with him.

Ryan's snores could be heard from where Andrew stood, so the next logical prankster was Zack. Andrew quietly inched his way over to Zack's tent. Footsteps followed him in the brush just out of view. Once Andrew could confirm that Zack was not in his tent then the noise wouldn't be as frightening, but until then, Andrew refused to shine his light anywhere but at his feet.

Crouching next to Zack's tent, Andrew tilted his light up just enough to see the canvas door. To Andrew's relief, the canvas door was unzipped and waved in the breeze; Zack was nowhere to be seen. This gave Andrew more confidence and he decided to meet his prankster head-on.

Standing up straight, Andrew confronted the dark wilderness in front of him. “Zack! I know you’re out there! Show yourself!”

The footsteps halted, but the silence remained.

Andrew held the phone above his head to act as a spotlight into the bushes, “Zack. Let’s go back to bed. This isn’t funny.”

The crunching of branches began again, but much slower this time. Zack was sneaking up on him.

“I can hear you!” Andrew shouted louder, “I’ve heard you this entire time! You aren’t sneaky.”

“In my defense, I thought everyone else was sleeping,” Zack spoke from behind him.

Andrew jumped out of his skin as he whirled around to thrust his flashlight at Zack. “What are you doing out here?” Andrew shouted with surprise.

“Taking a leak, man,” Zack pointed his thumb over his shoulder. “I figured I’d find a tree away from the campsite and mark my territory while I was at it. Was I that loud?”

Andrew looked over Zack’s shoulder. That hadn’t been where he had heard footsteps. Even with the aid of his flashlight, he still couldn’t see past the trees.

“No, you-” Andrew’s mind was distracted. He swore that the footsteps were coming from the opposite direction Zack claimed to come from. Andrew shook his head and returned to the conversation. “You were peeing over there?”

Zack nodded silently.

“I need some sleep,” Andrew sighed. “Goodnight, man.” He held his fist towards Zack.

“I guess I’ll invite you next time I have to take a leak,” Zack snarked as he fist-bumped Andrew and headed for his tent.

Andrew’s head was spinning, and he knew he needed rest. Climbing into his sleeping bag, he rolled onto his stomach to fall asleep. As his body submitted to slumber, he ignored the fact that he still heard the heavy breathing outside of his tent.

Chapter Four

A Thief Among Friends

Sharp words startled Andrew from his sleep, and he sat up quickly, but his brain was still foggy. He listened to the voices outside of his tent and could hear Ryan rampaging through the campsite. Andrew grumbled, slid out of his sleeping bag, and threw on pants and shoes.

Unzipping the tent, Andrew poked his head out into the morning sun. “What’s going on?”

Ryan’s face was beginning to turn red with anger as his fierce eyes met Andrew’s. “Did you take it?”

“Take what?” Andrew knew this was a conversation he needed to mediate and he dove back into his tent to find a shirt.

“My six-pack,” Ryan jabbed with his words, “my beer, it’s gone.”

Andrew returned and fumbled with a shirt around his neck. “Animals could have made off with it, dude.” After slipping his arms through the T-shirt, he noticed Zack standing at attention, still recovering from Ryan’s interrogation, “What’s going on?”

“It couldn’t have been an animal. That six-pack was next to my fucking sleeping bag,” Ryan turned to face Zack once again, “I think that punk took my alcohol.”

“No one took anything, Ryan,” Andrew rubbed his eyes.

A shriek from Jamie’s tent made the three men jerk their heads in that direction. Zippers opened and shut before Jamie shouted from her tent, “While we are finding the thief among us, who took my bras?”

Zack held his hands in surrender. “Don’t look at me! I’ve been sleeping all night. I have no need to steal beer or women’s underwear.” It was obvious he was still wiping the sleep from his eyes.

Andrew knew that Zack’s statement wasn’t completely true. After all, Andrew and Zack’s meeting last night proved that Zack had been slinking around in the darkness. Peeing at night, however, wasn’t enough to condemn a man of stealing.

Ryan turned to Zack and began approaching him, “You know, you’re a real fucking creep dude.”

“Hey! That’s enough,” Andrew shouted and positioned himself between Zack and Ryan. “Zack, did you steal anything last night?”

“No, I didn’t,” Zack maintained eye contact with Ryan’s harsh glare with defiance.

“You are my friend,” Andrew said calmly but firmly, “and I trust you.”

“Well, I think you’re lying,” Ryan interjected.

“Some friend you are,” Zack replied before Andrew pushed them apart.

“Guys, enough!” Andrew persisted, “Let’s just get some breakfast in us, and we will feel better.”

As Andrew walked over to his tent, he continued to talk to them, “I left the camp stove in the car. I’m going to go hike back there and grab it real quick.” Andrew grabbed his bag and began looking for his keys, but they weren’t in their usual place. He continued talking, “While I’m gone, will you guys promise not to kill each other?”

Andrew jostled his backpack around and began to search more thoroughly. His keys were in his bag the night before, but now they were gone.

“Did Zack steal something from you too?” Jamie was now out of her tent and had her arms crossed angrily.

“No,” Andrew quickly replied, “I just don’t know where I put my keys. I thought I had put them right in this pocket.”

“Well, be on the lookout for a raccoon running around with your keys, my beer, and Jamie’s bras,” Ryan said sarcastically.

Andrew sighed before throwing his bag into the depths of his tent. “We’ll eat breakfast over an open fire.”

Jamie looked at Zack and scoffed before heading back into her tent. Ryan continued his blazing stare at Zack, who appeared to be unaffected. Andrew grabbed his hatchet and approached his friends.

“Come on Zack, we are going to get more wood,” Andrew waved an open hand, “Ryan, hold down the fort. Start getting breakfast around.”

“If that thief tells you where my beer is,” Ryan jabbed a finger at Andrew, “you better tell me.”

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Andrew struggled to find the right words to break their silence. He and Zack had been walking for a while and picked up sticks and branches silently. Clearing his throat Andrew began to speak, but Zack quickly shut him down.

What Else Lurks By The Fire

“I didn’t steal anything. I woke up to take a leak, and that was it,” Zack said firmly.

“I believe you, man,” Andrew responded. “Why does Ryan think you stole his beer?”

Zack scoffed. “I don’t know. Probably because he is an inconsiderate asshole who doesn’t care about anything but himself.”

“Hey,” Andrew cut him off and let out an exasperated sigh, “What happened to us, man?”

“What do you mean?” Zack asked.

“We used to be close friends! What happened to the boys who ditched school to play video games at Ryan’s house? Rummaging around his older brother’s room and finding his secret stashes!” Andrew was expressive as he spoke. He thought fondly of these memories and it hurt him to see Ryan and Zack act like distrusting strangers.

Zack reflected on old times and chuckled, “We always knew Ryan’s brother would kill us after he got back from boot camp.”

The two of them exchanged forgotten memories and laughed together like they were once again twelve years old. It had been a while since Andrew had seen Zack with a genuine smile. Eventually, they ran out of experiences to relive, and they fell into a comfortable silence.

“Hey, that’s pretty dark,” Andrew began, “What your mom would say to you about that creature.”

Zack waved a hand at him. “That isn’t even the worst of it.”

“Really? What could be worse than that?”

“My mom went through a hard time. She hasn’t recovered, but she’s a lot better than she was,” Zack said slowly, as if he was methodically placing his words to protect his mother’s name.

Andrew didn’t know how to respond without prying, so he let Zack take the time he needed.

“She got into some crap,” Zack cleared his throat, “hallucinogen crap. She started seeing demons everywhere. I told her to stop taking them, but she felt like she needed to take them to be safe. ‘How can I protect myself if I can’t see the enemy of God,’ she would say.”

“Wow,” Andrew said as he blew air out of his lips, “You weren’t lying.”

Zack’s voice began to break, “My mom believed that Sam, my older brother, was possessed. She locked him in his room, threw Bibles at his head, and shouted prayers into his room at all hours of the night. She thought she was healing him,” Zack began to talk like he didn’t believe the words coming out

of his mouth. “It took Sam three days to break out of his room, and he’s eighteen, so he moved out. He left all of his stuff and won’t even talk to any of us.”

“I am so sorry,” Andrew put a hand on Zack’s shoulder, “Why didn’t you tell me? I could’ve helped!”

“You were living your life, preparing for college! Ryan was living his life,” Zack was holding back tears in his eyes, “Everyone I talked to always gave me the same advice: ‘Call the cops, your mom needs an institution.’ I didn’t want to do that. She’s my mom. I’d never forgive myself.”

“Zack, after this camping trip, I want you to call me if you need help,” Andrew pleaded. “I want to help.”

“Let’s just grab these sticks and go.” Zack sniffed in and rubbed the tears from his eyes. He plastered a fake grin across his face and looked at Andrew, “We have breakfast to cook, right?”

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Andrew snapped out of his thoughts and realized that Ryan was snoring again. Usually, he would have woken up immediately, but Andrew hadn’t even fallen asleep. His keys were missing. The thought of being stranded in the mountains plagued his mind and prevented him from closing his eyes. His mantra for the night was: *“I misplaced my keys. I’ll find them in the morning,*”. He repeated it to himself over and over to gain some shut-eye.

The sound of a zipper in the darkness caught Andrew’s attention, and he stopped his breathing so that he could hear better. The sound was slow like someone was trying to slip out of their tent undetected. Andrew sat up, put his ear closer to the tent wall, and listened.

It sounded like Zack was getting out of his tent. Andrew tried his best not to think back to Ryan’s comments about Zack being a thief. Unlike Ryan, Andrew believed all of his friends were trustworthy individuals. Zack had been through enough, and he didn’t need “thief” written on his forehead.

Someone in the distance exited their tent, and Andrew was certain that Zack was on the move. Andrew tried to reason with himself, *“Maybe Zack is finding a spot to pee,”* but his mind was starting to get the best of him. He slipped on clothing and exited his tent quickly. He needed to talk to Zack and get everything squared away.

Using the flashlight from his phone once more, he scanned the campsite, careful not to shine it in Jamie’s direction. Andrew began moving towards the black tent nestled in the darkness while keeping an eye out for any lights in the distance when suddenly a sound behind him made Andrew pivot.

Soft footsteps stepped into the underbrush, and the eerie sound of leaves dragging against jeans sent shivers down Andrew’s spine. Hesitantly raising the flashlight over his head, Andrew spotted Zack stepping through a large bush and exiting the camp’s perimeter.

Zack's movements were slow and careful. He seemed to place his feet where the least amount of noise would be made. Andrew called out to him quietly, but Zack showed no sign of hearing him.

Andrew began to pursue quickly, "Zack, can I talk to you?" he asked in a loud whisper.

His friend still walked silently through the brush, and once he cleared the growth, Zack stopped moving. He paused for only a moment before abruptly turning right and continuing to walk at a slow and steady pace through the dark.

While Zack had been nimble through the bushes, Andrew was anything but silent. Regardless of his efforts to stay hidden, the loud crunching and snapping of his feet produced scared any bird, rat, or rabbit in the near vicinity. Still, Zack did not turn around.

"Zack, where are you going?" Andrew tried again. Zack's pace quickened, and he disappeared into the void of darkness before him.

Traveling quickly, Andrew tried his best to match his friend's pace. Keeping an eye out for ankle-breaking terrain, Andrew continued to call out for Zack's attention. No matter how loud Andrew whispered, Zack never slowed his pace. *"Was this one of the sleepwalking incidents that Zack spoke about when they first got to camp?"* Andrew thought to himself.

The sound of wind softly whistling through bare branches whispered through the darkness as Andrew walked swiftly through the forest. He hadn't felt a breeze when he first exited his tent, but the weather might have kicked up during his chase. Andrew heard his footsteps echo off of the surrounding trees, and it sounded as if three people were dashing through the dark woods. He prayed that Zack was still in front of him and hadn't diverted from the game trail.

Suddenly, Andrew's light crept up on Zack as he reached the end of the trail. Zack stood a few paces in front of Andrew and remained motionless in the middle of a small crater in the ground. It looked as if they had come across a type of den for an animal. Sticks, twigs, camping chairs, and other pieces of garbage circled the nest.

Andrew began to step toward his sleepwalking friend, but he stopped in his tracks when he heard the slow and heavy movements of an animal in the dark. The footsteps that he had thought were his own must have been an animal following the two men. Andrew assumed Zack was standing in its home.

The beam of light from Andrew's flashlight still illuminated Zack's trespassing, and once again, Andrew feared what his flashlight would reveal. He made a list of all the animals that might be in the forest with them. Bobcat. Bear. A psycho-murderer. The thought of any of those things creeping through the bushes and eyeing his throat made it hard for Andrew to breathe.

Opening his mouth to call for Zack was rendered useless as all of the saliva disappeared from Andrew's throat. They were done for. Andrew remained in a paralyzed stance and waited for the claws of a wolf to shred through his body.

Zack continued his statuesque appearance as if he wasn't aware he was in the forest in the first place. His head looked straightforward and remained undistracted by the garbage and trinkets that lay around him. The sound of the creature's heavy movements came closer to Zack's unsuspecting body.

Light from Andrew's phone revealed the nest in its entirety. It was big enough for two bears to lie down in, with enough pine tree branches and leaves to keep them comfortable. Camping equipment left behind by previous campers littered the circumference of the nest and created a wind barrier. In an attempt to distract Andrew from his impending doom, his eyes wandered around the edge of the nest.

At first, he spotted a ratty camp chair, a rusty camp stove, and shredded cardboard that once held a six-pack of beer. Andrew's frightened eyes became wider. That was Ryan's brand of beer that he had brought to the campout. Scanning quicker, Andrew was able to pick out the six bottles of beer that belonged to the packaging. Upon further evaluation, he found a couple of women's bras tucked beneath branches and debris. Regretfully, Andrew did not know what Jamie's bras looked like, but he could imagine he was looking at them now. Maybe his keys were somewhere in there as well.

Movement stirred the bushes at the edge of the nest, and Andrew was reminded of his destruction. A large elk pushed its face out of the leafy green brush and watched Zack's body with intent. The elk's antlers were massive, and Andrew imagined it was hard for him to walk in between most trees. The magnificent deer stood as motionless as Zack and watched the stranger who stood in the nest. Andrew breathed for the first time in forever and sighed with relief. Happening upon an elk was much better than stumbling upon a bear.

Andrew straightened his posture and relaxed his body, which caught the attention of the elk. Like a snake, the elk's head snapped in Andrew's direction. Long shaggy brown fur dripped from the elk's thick neck as the head stayed just as motionless as before, but now with its sights set on Andrew. The elk's tongue poked out of its lips as its breath snorted more aggressively. Andrew's breath quickened as he felt a feeling of dread ooze from his body. The flashlight trembled in Andrew's hand as he watched the elk open its mouth. Unlike a regular deer's teeth, this elk revealed sharp, jagged teeth.

The elk opened its mouth further than Andrew had seen any elk open before. It was as if the deer had the mouth of a dog, and as the creature's lips parted from each other, it revealed more sharp teeth that populated its entire mouth. Bloodshot red eyes cut through the darkness and stared through Andrew's soul. The creature's head looked like an elk at first glance, but with its mouth gaping open like a hyena, Andrew was convinced that this creature was no animal. A demonic elk cry screeched from its pink and fleshy throat and sounded like one thousand rusty hinges being opened against their will. Andrew cupped his hands over his ears to avoid the sharp screeching noise, but his bones rattled in harmony with the creature's call.

What Else Lurks By The Fire

Andrew ran towards Zack, fighting every muscle in his body, and grabbed his arm. Zack's skin felt ice-cold and lifeless. Andrew wrapped his friend's arms around his shoulder and began to run, dragging Zack's ankles down the game trail. The creature clamored and thumped as it struggled to get through the trees, but the further Andrew ran, the quieter the noise became.

As Andrew slowed his pace to catch his breath, Zack stirred, "Andrew, what's going on?"

"Don't tell me you were asleep for all of that!" Andrew responded in disbelief.

"Was I sleepwalking?" Zack shook himself free of Andrew's grasp and walked beside him, rubbing his eyes.

"I can't believe you were asleep that whole time," Andrew responded, "I can't believe you didn't see that thing!"

"What didn't I see?" Zack asked.

Andrew's memory of the creature felt like a dream. "*In no universe could that thing be real,*" Andrew thought to himself. The thought of its wicked gaze penetrated Andrew's thoughts, and the creature's cry echoed in his ears.

"Look, man, I'm tired. You can tell me about it in the morning." Zack held his fist out as he yawned. When Zack noticed that Andrew didn't reciprocate the first bump, he lightly punched Andrew in the arm, "Later, champ. Thanks for bringing me back to camp."

Chapter Five

Jingling at Midnight

Andrew's eyes shot open, and he gasped as Ryan shook his shoulder. It was finally morning, and Andrew's tossing and turning had come to an end. His fingers had been wrapped tightly around Ryan's hunting knife all night. Andrew released the blade and rubbed his aching fingers.

Ryan stood over him with a curious look, "Shit man, are you ok?"

"Is Zack awake?" Andrew blurted.

Ryan poked his head out of the tent before responding, "No, he's still out cold."

"Get your shoes. I have to show you something," Andrew demanded. "Get Jamie too. You guys are going to want to see this."

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"This is a pretty cool trail," Jamie commented as she stopped occasionally to look at plants and rocks around them.

Andrew had led Ryan and Jamie to the game trail just outside of the campsite. There was still the small path he had made through the brush last night. The walk felt much longer than what he had experienced the night before, but Andrew guessed the darkness masked just how much distance he had traveled.

"It's a game trail," Ryan commented from the front of the line. "It's a path that animals create as they walk through the forest."

Jamie gave Andrew a frustrated look as she gestured to Ryan, and Andrew responded with an apologetic look. Her body language told Andrew that she wanted to say something mean, but Andrew's eyes told her to save it for another time.

She took a deep breath before using a faux happy tone, "What are you guys planning to do after high school?"

Ryan jumped at the question. He puffed out his chest and responded proudly, "I'm heading off to boot camp. Life in the army for me!"

"No way! Following in your brother's footsteps?" Andrew commented.

What Else Lurks By The Fire

“Like my brother, my father, and his father before him,” Ryan reassured. “My dad will have no choice but to let me go fishing with all of them once I get into the armed forces.”

“They go fishing, and they don’t invite you?” Jamie questioned.

Ryan shrugged, “It’s a thing they do because they were all soldiers. I’ll finally get to join them.”

“Are you excited to go to boot camp?” Jamie continued.

“It will make my dad proud,” Ryan said, his vigor draining as he spoke.

Andrew picked up where Ryan left off so as to not let silence creep into the conversation, “My mom wants me to go to college, but I don’t know if I’m ready to leave my hometown.”

“Staying in one place makes you soft,” Ryan commented. “Moving to a new place pushes you out of your comfort zone, and that builds character.”

Andrew began to respond but stopped as the words Ryan said began to resonate with him. That was probably the wisest thing he had ever heard Ryan say. Before Andrew could say another word, Ryan spotted the den at the end of the game trail and announced it to the whole forest.

“No way!” Ryan exclaimed with childish glee, “A treasure trove of free shit!”

Ryan began to reach for a multitool he saw buried under sticks, but Andrew placed an arm on his chest, “Wait. Don’t touch anything. Before you get excited, there is something I need to tell you,” Andrew said in a somber tone. “Something weird happened last night.”

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“Slow down Andrew, you are sounding absolutely crazy,” Ryan responded after Andrew retold the events of the night before.

“I know I sound crazy,” Andrew reasoned, “but I swear I saw some sort of creature out in the woods.”

Jamie chimed in, “This is a story I could have gone my whole life without hearing.”

“I apologize for bringing you into this, but you had to see this,” Andrew replied.

“How big was the elk?” Ryan probed.

“It wasn’t an elk. Its mouth was huge!” Andrew reiterated.

“You must have been really tired. “ Ryan was giving in to the idea that his friend had lost his mind.

“I hope you were really tired,” Jamie mentioned.

Andrew hopped down into the nest and reached into the bramble for a glass bottle. The nest didn’t give up its prize easily, and Andrew had to snap a couple of twigs to break the bottle free.

Once the bottle was free, he held it by the neck towards Ryan, “Recognize this?”

“That’s my beer,” Ryan sounded much more apprehensive now.

“This is where I saw the creature,” Andrew replied, but as he thought of the creature the hair on the back of his neck stood. Andrew reached for one of the few bras that were stashed inside the nest and held it toward Jamie.

Her expression fell, and her face reddened, “That’s my bra. How did it get out here?” She snatched the bra from Andrew, but her mind continued to reel, “This was in my backpack. It was zipped up.”

“Zack brought you here?” Ryan asked.

“This is where he walked to. He stepped into the circle and stood right here.” Andrew gestured at his feet.

“So then it’s settled. Zack took our shit,” Ryan gritted his teeth as he fondled the glass bottle.

Andrew looked around the circle and kept a keen eye on the trees around him. He shook his head and rubbed the corners of his mouth. “It can’t be that easy. I mean, look at this stuff! There is tons of stuff in this circle that none of us own.”

“Did Zack react when you saw the creature?” Jamie asked.

“No,” Andrew regretted responding quickly, “Zack claimed that he was sleepwalking.”

“It sounds like Zack is a creepy thief,” Ryan decided, “and you need more sleep.”

Andrew struggled for his words. He knew what he saw, and he was sure that Zack didn’t steal. It seemed like there was nothing Andrew could say to convince his friends.

“Promise me this,” Andrew pleaded with his friends, “Let me figure this out. Don’t confront Zack just yet.”

“You really are sticking your neck out for the guy, huh?” Ryan accused.

“He’s my friend,” Andrew made eye contact with Ryan, “He’s *our* friend.”

“I won’t say anything, but if he comes close to my tent tonight, I’m spraying him with my bear spray,” Jamie announced.

Andrew nodded. “That’s fair.”

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Once again, Andrew was jostled awake by Ryan. Andrew groaned but was quickly shushed by his tent mate. He had gone to sleep after dinner, but Andrew could tell it wasn’t morning yet.

Before opening his eyes, Andrew whispered, “What’s going on?”.

“There’s something out there,” Ryan said softly.

A spike of fear rushed through his veins, but Andrew quickly calmed his nerves. The night was dark, and Andrew couldn’t see his hand in front of his face. Cold air chilled Andrew’s sleepy body, and he wanted to roll over and fall back asleep.

Ryan audibly gasped in surprise. “There it is again. Listen.”

Andrew held as still as possible to prevent the sound of his sleeping bag from drowning out the faint noise. At first, he couldn’t tell if he had heard it or not; It was like the thought of a sound. Eventually, the noise became more clear and Andrew knew exactly what Ryan was talking about.

“It sounds like car keys,” Ryan concluded as Andrew thought the same phrase.

In the distance, there was the cry of jingling car keys. Andrew only knew they were car keys because he could recognize that sound anywhere. He jingled his keys all the time while he walked and the noise had become second nature to him.

“That’s my car keys,” Andrew whispered back.

“Let’s go fucking get that raccoon then!” Ryan said with excitement.

A brief image of the elk creature he had seen the night before came to mind, but he brushed it aside. *“It had to have been a dream,”* Andrew thought to himself. Zack didn’t remember anything from the night before which meant Andrew was the only one to have seen anything. All day, Andrew had been trying to convince himself that he hadn’t seen anything and it had just been a trick of the light or sleep deprivation.

Ryan was already throwing clothes on and feeling for his boots and Andrew felt obligated to join him. After all, they were his car keys.

Blinding light filled the tent, and Ryan nodded at his flashlight, "Still works."

"Shut that thing off!" Andrew covered his eyes, but the damage had been done already, "It's going to know we are here!"

"What do you mean?" Ryan turned the flashlight off. "What's going to know we are here? A jackrabbit?"

Andrew didn't want to say what he thought was out there because saying it would bring it to fruition. In reality, Andrew hoped that two rats were playing with his car keys.

Before Andrew knew it, Ryan had bolted out of the tent and began searching the trees up and down with his flashlight. Both of them were quiet as they listened to hear the sound again. The forest slept peacefully, and the darkness wrapped each tree with such a thick coating that the two men couldn't see anything without a flashlight.

Ryan and Andrew's patience was pushed to their limits and by the time they decided to head back to their tent, they heard the noise again. The jingling pierced through the night sky and the direction it came from was clear. Andrew whirled toward the noise and grabbed Ryan's flashlight from his hand.

The noise came in three distinct jingles like someone was taunting them. A silence that felt longer than an eternity separated the sets of noises. Unlike the footsteps that Andrew had followed a couple of nights before, the sound always came from the same place, and as the two men approached, Andrew's heart began to beat faster.

Andrew could see the trampled foliage he had left in his wake while he had followed Zack the night before. The tinkling of the car keys led them to the game trail. His pace slowed, and Ryan began to travel in front of him. It was as if the air around Andrew's legs became thick like molasses. Dread seeped into his veins like an overflowing dam.

It was near. Andrew could feel it.

"I think it's coming from over here!" Ryan whispered over his shoulder, not realizing the distance he had put between himself and Andrew.

Words choked in Andrew's throat as he tried to call out to him. They were in danger. Before Andrew knew it, he was standing still at the edge of the campground. Ryan had waded through the vines and bushes and now was exploring the game trail.

"Dude, this trail goes around the whole fucking campsite!" Ryan remarked. Suddenly something bright caught his eyes.

Andrew and Ryan both saw it. A set of silver keys dangled from a low-hanging branch. Andrew's flashlight cast reflections around Ryan like a woodland disco ball. The branch they dangled from was thin, old, and rotting.

Ryan looked at Andrew with a proud smile, "Watta ya know! A raccoon did get your keys!"

The keys hung helplessly on the branch, but as Ryan stepped forward to reach for them, the branch curled and shook the keys three times.

Immediately, the haunting realization struck Andrew like a freight train and he could feel his breath escape him. The branch that the keys were dangling from was no branch at all.

Long, wood-like fingers curled around the keys and strangled them of their sound as a beastly leg stepped out from behind the tree trunk to reveal a ten-foot-tall monster. The creature stood on two bulky legs that looked like the hide quarters of a deer. Ryan shouted in horror as blood-red eyes peeked from behind the trunk and shot wildly between the two men, who were both frozen with fear.

An elk head with an open jaw displayed its row of sharp teeth. The creature dawned a large rack of antlers atop its head, and they split and cut through the surrounding branches as it moved. Letting its long pink tongue slither out of its gaping, jagged mouth, it searched like an octopus tentacle for the car keys. With a swift movement, the rotting and withered arms surrendered the keys to their pulsating tongue. The tongue took Andrew's keys behind the rows of sharp teeth and into the belly of the beast.

Ryan reached for his brother's knife on his belt but was oblivious to the creature's other arm sneaking up beside him. The monstrous elk grabbed Ryan by the throat and lifted him off the ground. All thoughts of the knife were abandoned as Ryan grasped at the grizzly hand covered in patchy bark and fur.

Satisfied with its capture, the creature looked back at Andrew with an open and dripping mouth. It was as if the creature's tongue had a mind of its own as it writhed and slithered within the elk monster's wolf-like jaws.

Andrew's body refused to listen to his mind. The creature used its massive stride to close the distance between the creature and Andrew. Ryan still dangled from the firm grasp of the elk creature, and his limp body flailed like a rag doll with each mighty step the creature took.

The elk creature's breath stank like the dead carcass of a rotten deer, and the creature's hot breath assaulted Andrew's nose enough to wake him from his terrified paralysis. The creature let a shrieking howl escape its demonic throat as it suddenly reeled back towards its hand that held Ryan.

Ryan twisted his knife into the creature's wrist and croaked victoriously as he continued to slash his knife back and forth, "Eat shit and die venison!"

Releasing him from its clutch, the creature cowered away and licked its wounds. That was invitation enough for Ryan and Andrew to run back to their tents. A chilling screech bellowed from the rotting animal as it pursued them. The creature went into a frenzy and dragged its arms between its legs as it sprinted towards the two fleeing men. Andrew looked over his shoulder and swore as the creature quickly gained on them. Shrieking and stomping shook the ground that Ryan and Andrew traversed.

Suddenly, the sound ceased. There was no demonic call filling Andrew's ears and no large beast chasing them. Andrew and Ryan stopped running and looked around to see a still forest. It was as if nothing had changed since they had initially walked towards the game trail.

Ryan struggled to catch his breath. "Where did it go?"

Andrew was puzzled. "I have no idea. It was just chasing us!"

"Was that a skin-walker?" Ryan asked. "I've heard stories of a skin-walker, but I never heard people say stuff like that!" Ryan gestured towards the game trail.

"That was it," Andrew couldn't peel his eyes away from where the beast once stood. "That was the creature I saw." While the forest had resumed its calm composure, the feeling that Andrew was being watched remained.

Chapter Six

Unsettling Encounter

Mindlessly poking at the crackling fire, Andrew basked in the morning rays. He hadn't slept at all last night. After Ryan and Andrew calmed down from their experience, they lit a fire and didn't speak. The sun was just starting to poke through the trees, and for the first time in hours, Andrew looked around him. Rustling from Jamie's tent was the only sound in the campsite. Eventually, she poked her head out and smiled at the sunlight before approaching the two men.

"You guys look terrible," Jamie commented as she took a seat near the fire.

"I saw it," Ryan uttered under his breath. His eyes didn't leave the flickering flames.

Jamie's face looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Andrew's monster," Ryan continued. "We saw it last night. It came into camp. It tried to kill me."

All Andrew could do was nod. His voice felt weak, and his body had been pushed past exhaustion.

"We need to get out of here then," Jamie demanded.

"It had the car keys," Ryan said slowly as he still processed what he had seen the night before. "It swallowed them."

Jamie's eyes couldn't get wider. "How are we going to leave?"

Andrew parted his lips, and his jaw felt wired shut. "I don't know, but we need to pack up the tents and leave before nightfall," Andrew responded. "Wake up, Zack. We need to tell him."

Ryan stood up slowly and approached his tent, but once he arrived, Ryan swore under his breath. The door to Zack's tent was unzipped and Zack wasn't inside, "He isn't here."

Andrew spun his head quickly. "He's not here? Where is he?"

"Maybe he wandered off again," Jamie suggested.

"We need to find him soon. We can't risk traveling at night," Ryan said as he scanned the trees around him. "Who knows where that monster is."

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Zack's eyes opened slowly as the sound of singing birds crept into his sleep. He rubbed his head before opening his eyes to see the trees above him. Fear overcame him, and he shot to his feet. Zack's tent was nowhere to be seen. The trees around him revealed no unique details that could help him identify his location.

Beaming its rays into Zack's eyes, the sun was directly above him. He shielded his eyes and continued to look around. Nothing looked familiar, and Zack prayed that he hadn't wandered far. Zack's hair stood on end as he heard the crunch of leaves behind him. It sounded much larger than a human.

Zack turned around slowly, and his heart began to beat faster. Behind him, in the shadows of trees, stood a creature that horrified him to his core.

Moist fur allowed sunlight to glisten off of the animal. A large, deer-like torso expanded and contracted to force large amounts of air through its mouth. Even though its head looked like an Elk, its gaping alligator mouth panted like a dog, and its jaws extended back to where its head met its neck. The elk creature was on all fours, but only the back legs resembled anything like a deer. Its front arms had fingers that were long and lanky, and its arms looked like they were covered in dry bark that shielded red flesh from the elements.

Large, round eyes darted between Zack's limbs as if the creature was looking for the perfect first bite. Finally, the gaze settled on Zack's eyes, and the creature's piercing stare held eye contact with his trembling face. In Zack's mind, it was abundantly clear: he had stumbled across a demon.

At first, it felt like a headache, but the longer Zack stayed motionless, the more intense it became. Voices crept into his ears. Zack looked around him to see who was speaking, but no one was there. It was as if a thousand people were trying to whisper the same phrase in Zack's ear at once.

"Are you," the ghostly voices hissed, "afraid?"

Zack looked back at the creature, who had crept forward an inch or two. Bravery overcame him as he remembered the prayers his mother would recite at night, "No, I am not afraid."

The whisper spoke again, "Good."

Zack's eyes darted around his surroundings with the hope of finding an exit, but every time his eyes fell back to the creature, it had taken a silent step closer. The voice in his head faded in and out with each word and fluctuated between feminine and masculine voices. Thousands of other voices echoed words and repeated phrases which made it hard for Zack to focus.

"People who are scared never taste good," the ghostly breath continued, "they make us more hungry."

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“Then why eat them?” Zack’s voice quivered in his mouth. Every time he looked away, the creature came closer, and at this point, it was only a couple of paces away.

Zack began to take steps backward and the creature didn’t show signs of pursuing, but the voices recommenced, “Adding happy souls to our repertoire makes us forget how angry we are, but when you hunger for so long,” the voice adopted a deeper vibration, “you lose your willingness to be picky.”

“What do you want with me?” Zack stalled for time. The longer he could keep the creature talking, the less time it would have to eat him. *“Unless it could talk and eat at the same time,”* he thought to himself.

“Your mother was right to warn you of us,” the whispers poked at his brain. It felt like a million fingers prodded his grey matter. “We suffer, Zack.”

He felt his heel make contact with a root, and Zack turned his body to hug a tree and prevent himself from falling to the ground. Zack quickly turned back to the beast, but it was too late. The monster pressed its forehead against Zack. Its eyes pulsated with a slow heartbeat, and it searched Zack’s soul. Foul odor oozed from every pore of the living roadkill.

“So many souls are trapped in this body,” the ghostly voices moaned in lamentation. “You’re very optimistic we aren’t going to eat you. Your hope would be a nice change to our dreary company.”

Opening its mouth, the creature revealed its yellow spikes and long tongue it kept hidden in its jaws. The elk’s hot, moist breath instantly consumed Zack’s senses, and he felt unable to move.

Suddenly Zack heard Andrew’s voice shout his name in the distance. The creature in front of him reacted by looking in the direction the voice came from. It gave Zack one more look before beginning to creep backward without breaking eye contact. He heard one last phrase in his head before the creature turned to run off into the trees.

“Do cheer up your friends, Zack.”

Zack stood in shell-shocked silence. His experience with sleep paralysis had never been that vivid before. Moisture remained on his face from where the creature’s hot breath had been. *“My nightmares are getting worse,”* Zack thought to himself. *“I’m losing my mind.”*

If his friends found out about his troubled mind, Zack feared that they would ostracize him. He couldn’t let them know what had just happened. Zack could tell that his friend’s moods had shifted for the last couple of days, and this would only make things worse. As Andrew and his friends got closer, Zack concocted a story to tell. He couldn’t tell them what he had really seen. Not tonight, at least.

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Andrew had spent all day being terrified to look beyond the tree line of the camp. Luckily, the constant fear had worn his mind enough for him to catch some sleep. It wasn't nearly as deep or comfortable as Andrew normally slept, but his body ached for rest.

Zack had been extremely quiet once they had found him. He chalked the experience to a sleepwalking incident and refused to say anything else. By the time Andrew, Jamie, and Ryan had brought Zack back to the campsite, it had become night. The three of them tried to sit Zack down and have a conversation with him, but he insisted he just wanted to eat dinner and go to sleep. After Zack had turned in for the night, Ryan followed suit. With night closing in quickly, their plan to escape had vanished with the sunshine.

Jamie looked at Andrew for leadership, "You're just going to let us stay another night? Even though you know what's out there?"

"I don't think we have a choice," Andrew said as he threw more logs into the fire.

"Do you have another set of keys?" Jamie's questions were frantic and she was desperately trying to keep her cool.

"I think the best solution is for us to stay put. Both times that I encountered that thing, it stopped before it got to the campsite. We have to hope that whatever is keeping it at bay works for one more night," Andrew began to plead with Jamie. "Whatever you hear tonight, do not leave your tent."

Jamie wasn't happy about the idea, but she agreed. Both Andrew and Jamie said goodnight to each other and crept into their tents. Even though he was in his sleeping bag, sleep was the last thing on Andrew's mind. He sat for what felt like hours mulling the escape plan over.

A breeze sailed through the tent's interior and lulled Andrew to sleep. Even when he was asleep, he felt restless. He couldn't help but wonder what lurked outside his tent. The image of the creature haunted Andrew's dormant mind. Even in sleep, he couldn't escape the monster.

Soft whimpering woke Andrew from his tossing and turning. He wasn't sure how long he had been asleep but he quickly decided that it wasn't nearly enough. Andrew opened his eyes reluctantly and scanned the tent. It was too dark to see anything, but the longer he waited, the more his surroundings crept into focus.

At first, all he saw was Ryan's silhouette huddled in his sleeping bag. Andrew rubbed his eyes, hoping that it would adjust his eyes faster, but he was wrong. Reaching for his flashlight, he continued to listen to the whimpering. The noise sounded close, and Andrew guessed it was an animal outside.

More of the tent became visible to him as he continued to feel around quietly. Andrew's mind began to drift to the worst possible scenario, "*Could this be another ploy from the monster?*". Finally, Andrew's fingers fell on the flashlight, but before he could turn it on, the whimpering evolved into something else.

“Andrew,” Ryan’s voice was shaky and frightened.

His eyes still struggled to see in the dark, but from where Andrew was lying on the floor, he could see Ryan’s pale face with tears dripping from his eyes. Andrew had never seen Ryan cry, which meant something terrible had happened.

“Andrew,” he cried out again. This time pointing towards the foot of his sleeping bag, “It’s here.”

Chills went down Andrew’s spine like a spider down a web. His mind moved to a thousand places a second: *“What did he mean?”, “Where is it?”, “Are we in danger?”*. Ryan’s whimpering continued, and Andrew’s eyes became more adjusted.

Andrew followed Ryan’s sleeping bag down toward his feet, and as his eyes traveled, the hair on the back of his neck stood stiffer. The breeze that Andrew had been feeling came from the open tent door, and in the doorway huddled the creature.

On all fours, the creature had pushed its face through the opening far enough that its antler left imprints and tiny holes in various places on the tent roof. Its blood-red eyes were transfixed on Ryan’s body, and its mouth lay ajar with saliva dripping out of the cracks between its alligator teeth.

The elk monster’s fleshy tongue extended further than the jaw of the hideous beast and curled around Ryan’s bare feet. Shreds of fabric surrounded Ryan’s exposed ankles, and one of the beast’s hands propped the hole it had made in Ryan’s sleeping bag open. Pulsating, it slid across his skin and continued to wrap around his ankles and toes, exploring new ways to entangle Ryan’s soles.

Horror swept over Andrew in more ways than he ever thought possible. All Andrew could do was watch Ryan tremble silently and inspect the scene he was a part of. All of the blood in Andrew’s body seemed to stop, and his mind felt weak.

Andrew mustered every ounce of courage he had in his body. He had to move. He couldn’t subject himself to another second of watching his friend in peril. With a quick movement, Andrew snatched the flashlight and pointed the beam at the creature’s eye.

A howl projected from its throat as it violently ripped its head out of the doorway, taking half of the tent with it - the tent canvas wrapped around its antlers and snout. Zack bolted from his tent to see what was making such a freakish cry, and the moment he saw the creature, his expression dropped. The creature was blind. Dust kicked up as the creature violently thrashed around, desperately trying to untangle itself. Andrew wasted no time.

Wherever Ryan was, knives were nearby. It only took Andrew a short moment to find a blade in the wreckage of their tent. Andrew sprung into action and charged the whirlwind of dust, canvas, and forest monster. Plunging the blade into the mess, Andrew felt resistance on his blade, but the sudden

warm sensation in his hands proved that the blade had met its destination. The creature shrieked and thrashed its legs wildly, striking Andrew in the stomach.

Andrew's body flew backward and struck the ground with a sickening thud. The air inside his lungs escaped rapidly and it left Andrew gasping. He watched the creature stand on its hind legs and run towards the tree line in a blind and wild manner. Ryan and Zack both chased it until it disappeared into the darkness.

The sound of quick footsteps echoed off the trunks of the trees. Andrew knew the creature was circling the campgrounds, but he couldn't pinpoint where it was. Clutching his stomach, Andrew still felt the concussive force that had hit his chest, and it made him nauseous.

Ryan and Zack were of like mind and scanned their surroundings with flashlights in hopes of seeing the creature before it struck. Zack spun in circles and swung his large yellow flashlight to illuminate the campsite, but none of them saw anything.

Bursting from the brush behind Zack, the Elk creature remained low to the ground and sprinted towards Zack's rear. Its arms dragged below the monstrous elk's body and its footsteps sounded like Andrew's heartbeat he heard in his ears. It only took a matter of seconds for the beast to close in on Zack, and like a football player, it tackled him to the ground.

Andrew didn't have time to shout. He felt like a guilty bystander, viewing the world around him spin wildly out of control. His face felt cold, and Andrew's ears began to ring. War cries echoed in the forest as Ryan hurdled over branches and bushes, desperately trying to save Zack.

Standing tall on its hind legs, the creature lifted Zack with both hands, pinning Zack's arms to his sides. Zack squirmed with desperation as he kicked and bucked, but his feeble attempts to escape were nothing compared to the brute strength and wild blood that coursed through the creature's heart.

Opening its mouth wide like a viper, it barred its yellow and rotten spikes for teeth, saliva dripping from its fangs. Andrew watched in terror as the creature thrust Zack's head toward the back of his throat and clamped its jaws shut around him. Zack's legs stopped kicking, and a dark ooze dripped down Zack's limp body.

Jamie, against Andrew's orders, poked her head out of the tent to see the reason behind the commotion. Her scream pierced the night air as she witnessed the event much closer than either Andrew or Ryan had. Ryan covered his head and fell to the ground as he tried to change direction and run from the creature. Andrew curled into the fetal position and prayed the creature was satisfied with only one kill.

The creature looked at the remaining humans and allowed a victorious screech to bellow from its mouth. It began walking towards the game trail with Zack's body still in its clutches. The three friends showed no sign of stopping the monster. The loud thumping of footsteps disappeared through the thick bramble and underbrush until there was no sound left. Ryan, Andrew, and Jamie kept their silence strong. It was as if the three campers were frozen in time.

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Andrew and Ryan both walked over to Jamie like lifeless zombies. It felt like an eternity before Andrew found the courage to break the night silence, “We have to get out of here. Now.”

Chapter Seven

Severed Expectations

The three survivors had gathered everything they could carry and left everything else behind. Their tents, sleeping bags, and camping supplies had been left at camp. Each one strapped a backpack with their essentials to their back. They all concluded that they had to leave immediately.

“If we don’t have keys, what’s our plan?” Jamie asked with a hopeful tone after a half mile of silence.

“We are going to have to find a way to get home without them,” Andrew responded with a sullen tone.

“We can try hot wiring the car,” Ryan responded. “My brother taught me how.”

“We’ll have to try, but if worse comes to worst, we’ll have to walk home.”

The two other friends nodded in understanding. They continued walking in silence. Andrew had wasted no time in gathering his friends and their packs, which meant they were walking towards the car before the sun had risen. The sky was bright enough that they didn’t need their flashlights to traverse the rocky trail but dark enough that they couldn’t see clearly through the trees. Jamie still flinched when sticks broke in the distance, but the three travelers were beginning to be tired of being afraid.

Like robots, the lifeless campers kept a steady pace, and by the time they returned to the car, the sun was creeping over the horizon.

“Shit man,” Ryan had taken the lead which meant he saw the car first, “Your tires are fuckin’ flat.”

Andrew had been lost in thought. The image of his friend’s lifeless body took hold of Andrew’s idle mind, and he couldn’t shake the sensations. Ryan’s comment sparked life back into Andrew’s eyes, and he snapped out of his traumatized daze, “My tires?”

Ryan nodded. “All four tires have been slashed.”

Andrew wasn’t sure if the beast was intelligent enough to slash tires, but he wouldn’t be surprised.

“Does that mean we can’t drive the car?” Jamie asked.

Andrew took a second to observe his wheels. His initial emotion was disappointment; Andrew’s parents would kill him if they found out they needed to replace four tires. He remembered his dad telling

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him the dangers of driving on flats when Andrew first got his license. Now was an exception, “Fuck it, we drive on flats.”

Ryan nodded with a satisfied smile, “Alright, let’s get hot wiring.”

Andrew reached for the driver’s door and tried the handle only to discover that he had indeed locked the doors.

“Can we pick the lock?” Jamie asked, looking over Andrew’s shoulder.

“I have a better idea,” Ryan began scanning the ground around him. “I’ll find a rock.”

Andrew loved his car, but their lives were in danger the longer they stayed stranded there. He could always buy a new car. Ryan ushered everyone out of the way before rearing his arm and throwing the largest rock he had found.

The window didn’t put up much of a fight. The crunch of glass reminded Andrew of the crunch Zack’s body had made only a couple of hours before. It stunned him momentarily before he physically shook his head to break out of the funk.

Ryan reached into the window and unlocked the car, “Looks like the car’s battery is still kicking. That’s good news.”

“Can you get it running?” Andrew asked.

“It shouldn’t take me long,” Ryan responded as he hopped into the driver’s seat. Andrew circled to the other side and sat in the passenger seat. Jamie climbed into the car and began rummaging through the backseat for anything that might be useful. “I’ll charge my phone and try to get a phone call out.”

Andrew couldn’t help but smile. It felt like safety was just a moment away. The exhaustion caught up to him like a stalking mountain lion, and Andrew felt his eyelids become heavy. Ryan chuckled when he noticed Andrew fighting sleep.

“Take a breather, chief,” Ryan said as he surveyed his workstation. “We’ll be on the road in no time.”

Andrew didn’t have the energy to fight him. He closed his eyes, and sleep overcame him.

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The memory of the creature’s deafening howl jolted Andrew awake, and he gripped the dashboard. Ryan was still beside him with half of his body outside of the car as he worked under the steering column. Jamie had fallen asleep in the back seat.

“Good morning,” Ryan said without looking at Andrew.

“How long have I been out?” Andrew demanded.

“A couple of hours or something. I don’t fucking know” Ryan swore under his breath, “This is taking longer than I was hoping.”

“I thought you knew what you were doing,” Jamie’s groggy voice came from the back seat.

Ryan grumbled, “My brother taught me how to hot-wire a post-two-thousands sedan. These nineteen-ninety SUVs are different. Give me a second. I got it.”

“Does your phone work?” Andrew looked at Jamie.

She shook her head slowly. “The signal comes and goes. I can’t get a call out long enough for someone to pick up.”

Andrew looked out the windshield and saw that the sun was directly above them. “It’s noon already?”

“Tell me something I don’t fuckin’ know, Andrew!” Ryan sighed, “I’m trying to go as fast as I fucking can!”

“Is it going to come back?” Jamie asked in a soft, quivering voice.

“Let’s hope not,” Andrew responded.

An eerie elk call echoed from the forest in front of them. Birds evacuated from the sound of the call and formed a large dark cloud. Ryan, Andrew, and Jamie held their breath. Ryan’s hands began to tremble as he continued working under the dashboard.

“Do you think it knows we are here?” Jamie whispered from the back seat.

“It knows we aren’t at camp,” Andrew said as he began sliding his body off of the seat and down into the footwell. “We have to hide.”

Jamie threw a blanket she had found in the back of the SUV toward Andrew, and he used it to cover his body. Jamie did the same in the back seat.

“Dude, it could be here any second,” Andrew whispered to Ryan. “Hide!”

“I’m close. I know it!” Ryan pleaded with himself. “Any second now.”

“You can do it later. We need to take cover!” Andrew begged Ryan.

The sound of heavy, hooved footprints came from the forest. Their time was up. Ryan's eyes went wide as he desperately tried to jam wires together.

"Ryan," Andrew demanded, "get in the damn car!"

Andrew saw the top of the trees suddenly shake like the wake of a shark's dorsal fin. Something was coming from the forest and heading toward them. Ryan looked at the trees and swore. Dropping what he was doing, he pulled his body out of the car and closed the door. Andrew was speechless. Dirt and gravel crunched under the SUV and Andrew guessed that Ryan chose to hide under the car.

Within seconds, the footsteps were upon them. Andrew tucked his head under the blanket and did his best to control his breath. No matter how quietly he exhaled, it sounded too loud.

All he could do was hope. He hoped that Jamie was hiding. He hoped that Ryan was hidden enough under the car. He hoped the creature would leave them alone.

Andrew heard the footsteps approach the car and begin circling the vehicle. Like a horse inspecting a new salt lick, the creature's breath was sporadic and searching. The car was deathly still and Andrew couldn't move his body from the fetal position.

Dirt shifted quietly, and Andrew listened to Ryan fidget. The sound was quiet, but their surroundings were quieter. At any moment, the creature might hear them.

The sharp trill of Jamie's ringtone filled the silence as her phone began to blare under her blanket. She swore and silenced it quickly, but the damage had already been done. Andrew's head was still under the blanket, but he could hear the creature stop walking and turn to look at the car.

Despite his instinct telling him to stay hidden, Andrew pulled a small corner of the blanket off of him so that he could see with one eye. The creature was standing right outside the shattered window and was too preoccupied with the back seat to notice Andrew's movements. Its beady eyes scanned the blanket Jamie was under, and its devilish tongue licked its lips. Long, nimble fingers reached into the window frame. The creature extended its rotten arm into the back seat and felt around for any signs of life.

"Under here jack ass!" Ryan's voice shouted from below the car.

With a violent motion, Andrew felt the car rock as the creature withdrew his hand and used his supernatural strength to tip that car. The suspension creaked and moaned as the driver's side wheels left the ground.

Ryan desperately tried to crawl back to avoid being caught, but he wasn't quick enough. Andrew's heart dropped as he listened to Ryan shout in alarm. There was nothing Andrew could do

besides listen to his friend get dragged from underneath the car. It sounded like Ryan was putting up a fight, but it was obvious that the creature had the upper hand.

Profanities and screams fell on helpless ears. The creature was silent but yelped occasionally when Ryan landed a solid punch or counterattack. Andrew's blood itched. He wanted to help but was terrified of taking his blanket off of his head. Ryan's screams filled his mind. At one point, he heard Ryan's body hit the side of the SUV in an attempt to flee, but his resistance was cut short as the creature dragged his body away from safety.

Andrew listened to the creature howl and grunt before a loud crunch stopped all of the noise. Ryan bellowed a painful scream, and a large body dashed through the trees again, leaving Ryan alone to cry in peace. Even though Andrew was certain that the creature was gone, he was still terrified to reveal himself.

Moments passed, and Ryan's shouts continued, but they were losing energy with each moan. Andrew threw the blanket off of him and left the car quietly. There was no evidence that the elk creature was still near, and he ran towards Ryan's voice.

Diving into the brush, he found Ryan sprawled out on the ground, but not all of Ryan was there. A pool of blood surrounded his left leg, and Andrew noticed it had been severed at the middle of his thigh. Ryan gripped the ground around him with white knuckles and sobbed quietly.

"Holy shit," Andrew gasped in surprise. Without a second of hesitation, Andrew took his belt off and began to create a tourniquet so that he could dress Ryan's wound as best as he could.

"It got me," Ryan said through gritted teeth and tightly closed eyes, "It fucking got me! That mother fucker took my fucking leg."

Jamie followed Andrew through the brush, but the moment she saw Ryan, she turned away to hurl. Andrew took a deep breath and surveyed Ryan's body.

"We have to get him to the car," Andrew said firmly.

"No," Ryan pleaded, "Don't touch me. It hurts!"

"How are we going to get him back to the car?" Jamie had turned her back to Ryan in hopes she would stop vomiting.

"We are going to carry him," Andrew responded. He lacked a better idea. Howls in the distance proved that they needed to move quickly. If the creature didn't come back to finish them off, wolves or bears would.

"Am I gonna have to help?" Jamie whimpered.

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Andrew nodded as he stood at the end of Ryan's legs, "Get him a stick or something to put in his mouth."

"How about a gun," Ryan cried, "Put me out of my damn misery!"

"Your job is to stay quiet, Ryan," Andrew gestured for Jamie to help.

She looped her arms under Ryan's shoulders and kept her head turned as far as possible to avoid looking at him. Andrew lowered himself to the ground and placed his hands under Ryan's right thigh and what was left of Ryan's other thigh. The wound was very moist, and Andrew's fingers struggled to grip his flesh.

The two rescuers took baby steps back to the car, and through the constant fear of being discovered, they eventually got to their destination. Ryan had sworn like a sailor the entire time, and Andrew made no action to silence him. Jamie helped Andrew place Ryan in the driver's seat and they closed the door to shut him in. Andrew looked around but found no better rag to wipe his friend's bodily liquids than the blanket he had been hiding under.

"What now?" Jamie was afraid to ask.

"Ryan needs whatever medical attention we can give him," Andrew said as he took inventory of what he could find in his car.

Jamie pointed at the house standing within the tall metal fence. "Do you think there's anything in there?"

Chapter Eight

Over the Chainlink Fence

“That’s a good idea, but I have no clue how we are going to get into that house,” Andrew said as he inspected the tall fence.

“We could hop the fence or something,” Jamie responded.

The three of them were conscious of time beforehand, but now the chance that all three of them survived was draining on the floor of the driver’s seat.

“Even if we could climb that ten-foot tall fence, there is barbed wire at the top,” Ryan said through agonizing pain.

The house was designed to keep intruders out, and it performed its job well. Andrew decided that it would not be easy to break in, but their lives depended on it.

Ryan gasped for air before speaking. He pointed at the manual gear shifter in between the two front seats. “We could roll the car into the fence.”

Andrew thought about the idea. “I don’t think we’ll get enough speed to break through the fence, but we could roll the car up next to the fence and use the car as a ladder.”

The car wasn’t taller than the fence, but the fence would be a hell of a lot easier to climb if they were already five feet in the air. Andrew surveyed the land between the car and their salvation. Andrew’s SUV was nestled into a small ditch, but if they could push it out, the car would be free to roll down the slope that led to the house.

“I’ll steer the car since I won’t be too good at pushing,” Ryan laughed as he winced.

“That leaves pushing to us,” Andrew gestured towards Jamie and himself.

Jamie understood what was expected of her and walked to the back of the car. Before Andrew could follow, Ryan clasped a blood-soaked hand on Andrew’s sleeve.

“Look man,” he said between gasps, “I don’t think I’m making it out.”

“Yes, you are. Steer the car,” Andrew said firmly.

“Say something nice,” Ryan winced in pain and spoke slowly. “Say something nice at my funeral. I was never the best friend to you, but tell my dad I was a hero. Make something up.”

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Andrew looked into the eyes of his childhood friend. “That creature was about to find Jamie. You got that monster’s attention and saved her life.”

Tears began to form at the corner of his dark brown eyes.

“I’m not saying anything at your funeral,” Andrew continued, “Because you’ll be telling that story on your dad’s fishing boat.”

Ryan didn’t say anything. He gripped the steering wheel and sobbed. Andrew left him in the driver’s seat and joined Jamie at the back of the SUV.

The two campers with both legs intact assembled at the back of the SUV. They preemptively placed their shoulders against the trunk and leaned their bodies on the car. The emergency brake disengaged with a loud creak, and Andrew felt the weight of the car rock back on him and Jamie.

Jamie grunted as both of them pushed with as much strength as they could muster. For once, Andrew cursed the fact that he owned a large vehicle. Slowly, the front tires graced the top of the mound in front of them, and once the center of gravity passed over the summit, the car’s body weight carried it.

Andrew watched his car lifelessly bounce down the rough terrain. Its movements were jerky, especially since Ryan was steering the massive vessel without the aid of power steering. The car picked up speed towards the fence and was stopped by both Ryan applying the brakes and the passenger’s side of the car impacting the fence.

The two pushers exchanged a fleeting smile as they celebrated the small victory they had achieved, but their job wasn’t over yet. The sun was beginning to set, and none of them were sure they would survive another night.

Andrew rushed to the car and met up with Ryan, who wore a grin from ear to ear. “That was fun,” Ryan said between breaths.

“The fun isn’t over yet. Let’s get you over the fence,” Andrew responded.

The sun was beginning to set, and the sky turned dark. Flashlights illuminated their objectives, but the three individuals tried their best to keep their light beams dim or pointed down. Using Ryan’s multitool, Andrew had spent the last five minutes unraveling barbed wire to create a clear path they could use to jump the fence. Jamie was helping Ryan onto the hood of the car, taking breaks to vomit.

Still hands were the name of the game that Andrew was playing. He found that when he got distracted, his shaky hands would often get cut by the sharp wires. Sometimes, he would see shadows moving in the house, or he would swear he heard the howl in the distance. Any time he hallucinated, he would look at his friends to see if they reacted as well.

Eventually, Andrew cleared enough of the fence for him to climb over and enter the compound. Jamie helped Ryan over the top of the fence, and Andrew did his best to control Ryan's fall. While Andrew eased Ryan to the floor, a noise caught all of their attention.

The monster was heading back, and it was coming fast.

Andrew waved quickly to Jamie who began climbing the fence, and when she was safely on the other side he scooped Ryan's arm over his shoulder and began making his way to the house. A large sliding glass door separated the three refugees from salvation inside the house.

"Find me something to break this window," Andrew instructed Jamie.

Jamie nodded, and a look of worry overcame her. "Don't leave me here, OK?"

Andrew looked her squarely in the eye and promised, "I'm not going to leave you."

She hesitantly darted around the corner and was gone in search of tools.

Ryan leaned himself against the wall, and Andrew began to inspect the glass door. Andrew's eagerness convinced him that it was a better use of his time to break through the glass himself. Taking a couple of steps backward, Andrew threw his whole body into the glass pane. With a breath-stealing thump, his body hit the window like an unsuspecting bird. The window remained intact, but Andrew noticed that the impact had slid the door open slightly.

Ryan couldn't help but laugh. "You didn't check if the door was unlocked?"

Andrew shot him a dangerous look that shut Ryan up. Andrew scooped the amputee over his shoulder and brought him into the dark house. They stumbled through the dark, running into everything imaginable. Andrew guessed that they had entered the dining room. Eventually, Andrew found something sturdy to rest Ryan on. They both searched the walls with their flashlights.

"Let's hope that the power is still on," Andrew commented as he reached for the light switch. With the press of a button, the dining room was illuminated by a brilliant light. From where Andrew stood, he could see a marvelous kitchen attached to a grand dining room. Immediately, he noticed a colorful bowl full of keys, some of which were car keys.

Ryan saw a different story once the lights turned on.

"God motherfucking damn it," Ryan weakly exclaimed in surprise. Andrew whirled to see what could have warranted that response from Ryan.

Andrew watched Ryan point a feeble finger down a hallway, and when Andrew approached, he noticed the smell first. Nausea washed over Andrew as he covered his nose. Dried blood painted the

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hallway, complimented by human-sized scratch marks along the floors and walls and antler-sized gouges in the ceiling.

“We can’t catch a break,” Ryan caught his breath before speaking again, “can we?”

Jamie’s footsteps appeared at the open glass door, her eyes wide with terror. “Guys, there’s a hole in the fence!”

“How big?” Andrew asked, but he knew the answer just by watching the tears stream down Jamie’s cheeks. All signs pointed to the fact that the creature had already made its way in once before, and it could easily gain entrance again.

The dishes in the cupboard began to rattle as thick hooves made contact with the concrete patio outside. The loud clopping from outside filled the house, and Ryan, Andrew, and Jamie realized they needed to hide. Andrew ducked behind the island in the kitchen while Ryan did his best to hide under the dining room table. Jamie had nowhere else to go and tucked her body just inside the doorway so that she couldn’t be seen from outside.

“How could the creature not know where we were?” Andrew thought to himself, *“I turned on the lights! I’ve given our location away!”*

The footsteps outside slowed as they approached the sliding glass door and snorting nostrils searched the air for any sign of life. Tension hung in the air so thick that Andrew could pick up a kitchen knife and cut it. Fighting his instincts once again, Andrew peeked his head around the nearest corner to look outside. The creature had abandoned the patio and was searching the rest of the backyard.

Now was his time. Remaining crouched on the floor of the kitchen, Andrew tried his best to reach into the bowl for a set of car keys. The edges of the bowl were just high enough that his fingers could not explore its contents. Andrew quietly stood so that he could see into the bowl and select a set of car keys closest to the top. Grabbing the keys was their best chance of survival, Andrew had decided, and he guessed the garage was down the bloody hallway.

After successfully grabbing the car keys, Andrew quickly spun his body around so that he could crouch on the ground once more, but during his spin, his hand struck the counter.

The keys ejected themselves from his grasp and landed in a loud jangle on the tile floor. Andrew looked out the doorway of the sliding glass door to see the creature staring back at him from across the backyard. The two of them were locked in frozen eye contact. The creature’s muscles twitched as its mouth began to widen.

Andrew dove for the keys and the elk creature wasted no time to stop him as its large animal pace carried its massive body across the green grass. Andrew tried desperately to warn his friends but the words couldn’t escape his lips fast enough.

Jamie couldn't have moved even if she tried; The beastly monster had arrived at the sliding glass door faster than Andrew had ever seen an animal move. The mutated elk reached its thin and bony arms into the house and gripped the sides of the glass doorway. Unbeknownst to the creature, its grip had landed on Jamie's chest, and the force that it exerted to pry the rest of its body into the house was enough to cause bodily harm to the unsuspecting woman.

Andrew saw the terror in her eyes as Jamie realized she had nowhere to run. His ears rang, and his surroundings became muffled. It was like a horrible train crash that Andrew couldn't look away from. Andrew's body stiffened, and his eyes showed no attempt at shielding him from what was about to happen. Everything around him slowed to a speed where he saw every detail ten times over.

Her eyes went wide as the tough fingers wrapped around her chest pressed through her sternum and into the doorway behind her. Jamie's body went stiff, and blood jettisoned from her mouth and chest simultaneously.

The sickening pop of young woman caught the attention of the creature before it had finished entering the doorway. A tongue stained by recent prey explored the freshest of its kills. The creature hastily tunneled its tongue into Jamie's exposed chest cavity.

Ryan's voice sounded distant, but Andrew could tell Ryan was trying to get his attention. All Andrew could think about was the woman in front of him, gouged open like a dissected frog. His body heard Ryan's shouts but paid no mind.

"We have to go, Andrew!" Ryan's voice echoed in Andrew's head.

"I can't leave her." Andrew felt his lips form words, but he had no control of his tongue.

"She's gone! Let's go! We have to go!" Ryan's voice pleaded.

Andrew felt eerily calm. All of his motivation and determination seemed distant, and he felt his bones sag under the weight of his body. He didn't want to run anymore. He just wanted it all to be over.

Ryan's hand clasped on Andrew's ankle. "Andrew! Let's go!"

The moment rushed back to Andrew, and his slow-motion experience came to a rapid halt. Andrew was reminded of their danger as the creature pressed its muscular body through the small doorway.

Andrew grasped Ryan's hand and began dragging him along the dining room floor and down the blood-stained hallway. Their movement angered the feasting creature, and it continued to claw its way into the dining room more ferociously.

What Else Lurks By The Fire

Andrew found the door to the garage and ripped it open, almost sending it off of its hinges, and patted his hand wildly in the dark to find the garage door opener. He felt a button on the wall, and once he pressed it, a loud motor began to hum.

The crisp, outside air flooded the stale garage as Andrew continued to drag Ryan's body. Ryan's hand was beginning to feel cold and Andrew knew his window to save his friend was shutting. Screeching and howling flooded the garage from the hallway, and the clattering of dishes signaled that the creature had made it into the kitchen.

Andrew pressed the key fob he had picked up, and one of the three cars in the garage blinked its lights and came to life.

"Come on, Ryan, stay with me!" Andrew opened his mouth for the first time in what felt like ages.

Ryan's eyes were still open, but his spark was dying. Andrew hoisted his friend into the back seat of the sedan and closed the door. A loud crash reminded Andrew that the creature was battling the house to get to them, and the creature was winning.

The elk monster's face was now visible through the doorway, and its quick breath and bloodshot eyes told Andrew that the monster wasn't going to let up until it finished them off. Large antlers dug into the ceiling above the creature as it forced its large body down the hallway.

Throwing himself into the driver's seat and slamming the door behind him, Andrew put the car into drive and pressed the accelerator to the floor. The engine purred, the tires screeched against the smooth concrete floor, and Andrew's body pushed against the seat as he sailed out of the garage door and through the house's gate.

Even inside the vehicle, Andrew could hear the creature howl in defeat behind him. The creature rested and watched the car roll away. It didn't chase them. Andrew and Ryan had been the prey that got away.

Andrew followed the dirt driveway back to the main road they had used days before. "Ryan, we did it! We are going home!"

The backseat was quiet. Andrew turned his head to look at his friend and saw that Ryan's skin was pale and cold to the touch.

"Ryan," Andrew repeated, "Hey Ryan, are you with me?"

Andrew hit the steering wheel with the palm of his hand in anger before completing the rest of the drive in deathly silence.

Alternate Ending

Chapter Seven (Alternate)

The three survivors had gathered everything they could carry and left everything else behind. Their tents, sleeping bags, and camping supplies all had to be abandoned. Each one strapped a backpack with their essentials to their back. They all concluded that they had to leave immediately.

“If we don’t have keys, what’s our plan?” Jamie asked with a faux hopeful tone after a half mile of silence.

“We are going to have to find a way home without them,” Andrew responded softly. His mind raced through every option at their disposal, often getting stuck on Zack and his last moments. Glistening teeth slash through the darkness. Slashing through his flesh. The sound of ripping flesh echoed in his mind.

“We can try hot wiring the car,” Ryan spoke, breaking Andrew free from his mind, “My brother taught me how.”

Andrew nodded, grateful for the distraction. “We’ll have to try, but if worse comes to worst, we’ll have to hike to some sort of civilization nearby.”

The two other friends nodded in understanding and continued walking in silence. Andrew had wasted no time in gathering his friends and their packs and ordered their retreat before the sun rose. The sky was bright enough that they didn’t need their flashlights to traverse the rocky trail but dark enough that darkness still obscured the forest around them. Jamie flinched when sticks broke in the distance, but the three travelers’ fear was turning into exhaustion.

Like robots, the lifeless campers kept a steady pace, and by the time they returned to the car, the sun was creeping over the horizon. Andrew hadn’t realized the slope of the ground when they were initially descending to their campground, but his calves were now burning in agony having been forced to walk uphill for the greater part of a day.

“Shit man,” Ryan had taken the lead, which meant he saw the car first, “Your tires are fuckin flat.”

Andrew had been lost in thought. They had been so quick to leave the campsite that they had no choice but to pile all of Zack’s things in his tent. The three of them hadn’t bothered looking for Zack. Could he have been saved? Should they have buried the body? Ryan’s comment sparked life back into Andrew’s eyes, and he was brought back to reality, “My tires?”

What Else Lurks By The Fire

Ryan nodded. "All four tires have been slashed."

Andrew's pace quickened as he inspected his car. Each tire had large gashes in the sidewall. The rubber folded and squished under the weight of the vehicle. Andrew wasn't sure if the beast was intelligent enough to slash tires, but he wouldn't be surprised.

"Does that mean we can't drive the car?" Jamie asked over her shoulder, her gaze still in the forest behind them.

Andrew took a second to observe his wheels. A wave of disappointment removed him from his current situation. Andrew's parents would kill him if they found out they needed to replace four tires. Then again, a bloodthirsty forest monster would kill him if he stayed.

His father stressed the dangers of driving on a flat tire when Andrew first got his license. Now was an exception, "Fuck it, we drive on flats."

Ryan nodded with a satisfied smile, "Alright, let's get hot wiring."

Andrew reached for the driver's door and tried the handle, remembering that he had locked the doors.

"Can we pick the lock?" Jamie asked as she lowered herself onto a rock, her back to the group. She couldn't bring herself to look away from the direction of their campsite.

"I have a better idea," Ryan began scanning the ground around him. "I'll find a rock."

Andrew loved his car, but their lives were in danger the longer they stayed stranded there. He could always buy a new car. Ryan ushered everyone out of the way before rearing his arm and throwing the largest rock he had found.

The window didn't put up much of a fight. The crunch of glass reminded Andrew of the crunch Zack's body had made only a couple of hours before. It stunned him momentarily before he physically shook his head to break out of the funk.

Ryan reached into the window and unlocked the car, "Looks like the car's battery is still kicking. That's good news."

"Can you get it running?" Andrew asked.

"It shouldn't take me long," Ryan responded as he hopped into the driver's seat. Andrew circled to the other side and sat in the passenger seat.

Jamie climbed into the car and began rummaging through the backseat for anything that might be useful. "I'll charge my phone and try to get some help."

Andrew felt the twinge of a smile curve his lips. It felt like safety was just a moment away. The exhaustion caught up to him like a stalking mountain lion, and Andrew felt his eyelids become heavy. Ryan chuckled when he noticed Andrew fighting sleep.

“Take a breather, chief,” Ryan said as he surveyed his workstation. “We’ll be on the road in no time.”

Andrew didn’t have the energy to fight him. He closed his eyes, and sleep overcame him.

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The memory of the creature’s deafening howl jolted Andrew awake, and he gripped the dashboard. Ryan was still beside him with half of his body outside of the car as he worked under the steering column. Jamie had fallen asleep in the back seat.

“Good morning,” Ryan said without looking at Andrew. He was wrestling with wires and body panels.

“How long have I been out?” Andrew demanded.

“A couple of hours or something. I don’t fucking know,” Ryan swore under his breath, “This is taking longer than I was hoping. I don’t recognize anything under here.”

“I thought you knew what you were doing,” Jamie’s groggy voice came from the back seat.

Ryan grumbled, “My brother taught me how to hot-wire a post-two-thousands sedan. These nineteen-ninety SUVs are different. Give me a second. I got it.”

“Does your phone work?” Andrew looked at Jamie.

She shook her head slowly. “The signal comes and goes. I can’t get a call out long enough for someone to pick up.”

Andrew looked out the windshield and saw that the sun was directly above them. “It’s getting dark already?”

“Tell me something I don’t fuckin’ know, Andrew!” Ryan shouted in frustration, but took a breath to calm himself, “I’m trying to go as fast as I fucking can.”

“Is it going to come back?” Jamie asked in a soft, quivering voice.

“Let’s hope not,” Andrew responded.

What Else Lurks By The Fire

An eerie elk call echoed from the forest in front of them. Birds fled from the sound of the call and formed a large dark cloud that rose like smoke. Ryan, Andrew, and Jamie held their breath. Ryan's hands began to tremble as he continued working under the dashboard.

"Do you think it knows we are here?" Jamie whispered from the back seat.

"It knows we aren't at camp," Andrew said as he began sliding his body off of the seat and down into the footwell. "We have to hide."

Jamie threw a blanket she had found in the back of the SUV toward Andrew, and he used it to cover his body. Jamie did the same in the back seat.

As Andrew settled in, he realized that Ryan hadn't moved.

"Dude, it could be here any second," Andrew hissed. "Hide!"

"I'm close. I know it!" Ryan pleaded. "Any second now."

"You can do it later. We need to take cover!" Andrew begged Ryan.

The sound of heavy, hooved footprints came from the forest. Their time was up. Ryan's eyes went wide as he desperately jammed wires together.

"Ryan," Andrew demanded, "get in the damn car!"

Andrew peeked his head over the windowsill and saw the trees shake and sway like the wake of a shark's dorsal fin. Something was coming from the forest and heading toward them. Ryan looked at the trees and began to whisper obscenities under his breath. His movements were more sporadic. Half of Ryan's body still hung out of the car, and luckily, the monster was coming from the other direction.

Within seconds, the footsteps were upon them. Andrew tucked his head under the blanket and did his best to control his breath. No matter how quietly he exhaled, it sounded too loud.

All he could do was hope. He hoped that Jamie was hiding. He hoped that Ryan would abandon his attempt to hotwire and instead find shelter. *Maybe he could hide under the car.*

Andrew heard the footsteps approach the car and began to inspect the passenger side of the vehicle. Like a horse exploring a new salt lick, the creature's breath was sporadic and searching. The car was deathly still and Andrew couldn't move his body from the fetal position.

After a couple of vicious snorts, the creature began to back away from the car. Andrew couldn't see it, but it sounded like the creature was moving away from them. He counted the creature's footsteps, listening to them get further from the vehicle.

Suddenly, the engine turned over once, and the car alarm blared.

In shock, Andrew threw the blanket off of him and looked around. Ryan was still tucked under the dashboard with wires in his hands. The marks of wet tears streaked down his dirty cheeks. With his hands full of frayed wires, he was desperately trying to turn off the alarm. Andrew turned to the window to see the creature only paces away from the vehicle. Much closer than he had thought.

The monster's back was facing the vehicle, but the long serpentine neck swiveled its eyes over its shoulder. Beady eyes scanned the vehicle for life, and its devilish tongue licked its lips. With unnatural speed, it twisted on its hooves and threw its body against the passenger side of the SUV. Glass shattered simultaneously and rained down on Andrew.

A scream emanated from the back seat as Jamie escaped the blanket and began to crawl across the back seat to the driver's side. Long, nimble fingers reached into the window frame. The creature extended its rotten arm and began to swipe wildly at Jamie.

The engine turned over once again, then again, then the car roared to life.

"I've got it!" Ryan shouted as he climbed into the driver's seat and threw the vehicle into reverse.

"Go, go, go!" Andrew crawled from the footwell into the passenger seat.

The car jolted backward, nearly sending Andrew's forehead into the glove compartment. Jamie was thrown from the seats onto the floor. The creature's hand was yanked from the interior of the car, and its body smacked against the side of the vehicle as they made their exit.

They pulled out of the dirt lot that they had parked in and back onto the dirt road. Crunching to a stop, Ryan threw the car into park but hesitated as he looked up.

Andrew watched in horror as the creature began to gallop after them, using all four limbs to carry his ghastly frame towards his prey. Ryan shouted in terror as he put the car in drive and slammed his foot on the gas pedal.

Thumping rubber tires struggled for grip as they kicked up rocks and dust instead of propelling the car forward. The vehicle began to twist in place as momentum began to build. Everyone in the car swore under their breath as the creature closed the distance and lunged at the car, missing them by inches as the car built speed and tore down the dirt road.

Sliding and slipping down the dirt road, Ryan's white knuckles did their best to keep them on the road. Howling echoed behind them as the creature continued its chase. His eyes were tied to the road, but a victorious cackle began to spill from his mouth.

The laughing was infectious. Andrew soon began to laugh as he sat back in his seat, leaving the creature behind them. Even Jamie sat back in the back seat and took a deep breath.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” Jamie chuckled with the rest of the car.

But before anyone could agree, the back window shattered, and a clawed hand penetrated the back seat, clawing for the only handhold available to the fiend.

Jamie.

Chapter Eight (Alternate)

Andrew saw the surprise in her eyes turn to terror as the hellish creature reached in a clawed hand into the back seat like a raccoon reaching into a box of crackers. His ears rang, and his surroundings became muffled. It was like a horrible train crash that Andrew couldn’t look away from. It happened so suddenly that Ryan hadn’t even noticed anything was wrong yet. Andrew’s body stiffened and his eyes gave no attempt at shielding him from the events unfolding before him.

Her eyes went wide as the claws dug into her shoulder and chest and then ripped through her. Each claw, like a knife, sliced straight through her, then the seat behind her. Neither gave any resistance to the creature’s massive size. The only thing the creature could grab onto was the back door, and as its grip clamped down on the door, the metal groaned and twisted.

Jamie’s body went stiff, and blood jettisoned from her mouth and chest simultaneously. Her eyes rolled back into her skull, and the life held in her body escaped through her gaping open mouth. Andrew held his hands over his mouth, and only then did Ryan realize that something was wrong.

The car lurched as its momentum was sapped by the behemoth now latched to it. Ryan turned in his seat to see Jamie’s body, his eyes widening in terror at the horrific sight.

The moment slowed to a stop. Jamie became the second friend that they had lost on their hellish excursion. The bare metal wheels squeaked and crunched beneath them as the they clawed for grip. Their vehicle was practically at a stand still, and the creature licked it’s lips in victory.

It reeled in its prey with its massive strength and shoved its face through the shattered back window. A tongue stained by recent prey explored the freshest of its kills, and before either passenger could protest, the creature hastily tunneled its tongue into Jamie’s exposed chest cavity.

“Hell no,” Ryan shook his head in rage as he jumped out of the driver’s seat and into the back with Jamie’s corpse, knife in hand.

A hair-raising shriek filled the car as Ryan slashed wildly at the creature’s tongue, shredding the pink flesh to ribbons. The large monstrosity ripped its head from the inside of the vehicle and whimpered in pain.

"Hit the gas!" Ryan called over his shoulder, pursuing the creature into the trunk of the car.

Andrew climbed out of his seat and leaped over the center console, practically landing on the gas pedal. The engine roared, protesting the abuse as Andrew asked for all of its power, but the wheels couldn't deliver.

The creature still had a grip on the back door.

Ryan crawled over the back seat and delivered a swift stop to the creature's fingers wrapped tightly around the window frame, but the hellspawn didn't react. Its other hand was still wrapped tightly around its tongue, nursing the fresh wound. Black ooze squeezed between the creature's fingers, and the tongue seemed to hang limp from the palm of its hand.

The car was pinned, and even when Andrew twisted and jostled the steering wheel, the dirt road withheld its aid against the rapidly spinning tireless wheels.

Ryan stomped again to no avail. He delivered kick after stop after stab after slice, and the creature did not let up. Finally, the creature balled up its tongue and shoved it back in its mouth like a large wet noodle, securing it deep within its jaws. Its attention was now on Ryan.

An arm plunged into the interior of the car, and Ryan ducked out of the way just in time. It flailed wildly against the back seat, searching for its prey like an anteater's tongue in an ant hill. Andrew crunched the car into four-wheel drive and pressed the gas pedal to the floor. He felt powerless as his friend fought for his life.

His kicks were no longer aimed at the creature's hand but at the door itself. Perhaps if Ryan could knock the entire door loose, they would be free. Loud thumping echoed in the cabin as Ryan kicked hard and fast, yet the door didn't budge.

Andrew looked through the rearview mirror to see Ryan reach for the seatbelt closest to him. He wrapped it around his fingers a couple of times before lunging for the back door.

The creature seemed distracted by a rather large glass shard that had pierced its forearm as Ryan reached his hand out the window and gripped the handle. With a sturdy pull, the door opened and the weight of the creature was too much for the hinges to bear. Like an airplane door dislodging itself from its doorway, the hunk of metal that the creature was holding onto was gone in a blink.

The car veered forward, and Ryan lost his balance as the vehicle jerked. Ryan squeezed his fingers around the seatbelt strap and hoisted himself back into the car. He pumped a fist into the air and shouted, though his happiness was short-lived.

What Else Lurks By The Fire

The rearview mirror revealed what had stolen Ryan's attention. Blood covered the back seat, creating a gorey halo around Jamie's body, which was rapidly cooling. Ryan climbed forward and put a finger against her neck, his face revealed the results before he could speak.

"We'll get her to a hospital," Andrew reassured himself and hoped that Ryan overheard him.

Silent moments slipped by them before they realized that the creature was no longer following them. For the first time in a couple of days, the weight of the creature lifted from the two men. No more howls that made their hair stand on end. No more panicked fleeing through the woods.

And most of all, no more dead friends.

That is, except for the girl in the back seat.

Author's Note

Hello Reader!

Thank you so much for reading my very first published short story! I originally started this project to compete in a competition on Inkitt.com. I have been writing for the better part of my life, but I had never finished or shared my work until this point. This competition pushed me to write a short story in a month, and I worked tirelessly to submit it in time. I can comfortably say that this competition was the push I needed to create and complete a finished project, and I have no idea if it was even submitted correctly.

The inspiration for this short story came from an unsettling dream rooted in my brain to this day. Some dreams are just so jarring, uncomfortable, or intense, that the visuals haunt you far into the waking hours, and I know I'm not alone in this experience.

I had a dream where I was sleeping in a tent in the woods, and a buddy of mine was sleeping on the floor next to me. In the dream, I woke up and saw my friend petrified with fear as something was standing outside of our tent, its tongue wrapped around my buddy's foot. I jumped into action and chased the creature deep into the woods. I woke up with a word in my brain, "Dahtos", which I am convinced is the name of the creature I witnessed. I put that scene into writing with the hopes it would finally leave my brain.

And from there, I expanded on the thought. What if there were some demonic creature deep in the woods that was preying on campers? Why were my buddies and I out in the woods? How would a group of teenagers flee from such an aggressive presence?

The story grew, and it was only after I had completed the short story that I realized that I had written a story about a Skinwalker.

I was going to name the book "The Dahtos"; however, I didn't feel like that title would mean anything to a prospective reader, especially because I never refer to the creature as a Dahtos in the book. This means that I settled on the original title of "The Last Camping Trip," which is probably the most boring and generic title I could ever come up with. It wasn't until I was submitting the manuscript to Amazon's "Kindle Direct Publishing" that I changed the title to what you see now.

Surprisingly, I have Freddie Dredd's "Freddie's Inferno" album to thank for this story. That album played on repeat while I wrote, inspiring some of the graphic and horrific themes within the story. I couldn't stop creating mental montages of the monster to the horrorcore lyrics of "Wrath" and "Greed" and the scene in Chapter Seven when the cell phone rings and alerts the creature was directly inspired by the ringtone-esque intro of "Gluttony". The entire album was an odd place to pull inspiration from for a horror book, but it hit the spot for me.

What Else Lurks By The Fire

I really hope you enjoyed the story because it was extremely fun to write, and I found myself hung in suspense just as much as my characters were.

Thank you again for reading.

Nathan Segeberg