

I followed the light of the fire for hours and hours until I got close enough to see the fire itself in the distance, with three figures standing around it. I would know Liam and Tristan a mile away. Wishful thinking, or maybe nostalgia almost tempted me to think that the third silhouette was Hudd at first. It used to be such a familiar sight, the three of them together. But the third silhouette could only have been Carver.

I don't know what I expected, thinking about Carver all this time and not actually seeing him, but he was just a regular person. Just a man, with a face that was caked in mud and eyes that reflected the firelight. I thought that was it, that it was finally time to confront Carver once and for all, but as I started to get close, the firelight changed. It got brighter and brighter the closer I got. It was loud and violent, angry, and the three of them just sat there staring into the fire as the light got so bright that I couldn't see them at all anymore. And then it snapped off like someone flipped a switch. When I could see again, I was there alone, in the dark by myself.

I don't know how long I sat there calling into the dark.

He got away from me this time. But I was there, looking right at him, and he didn't even know it.

Was this how he felt when he was watching me and the boys? Like an animal circling its prey?

There's no direction anymore. I tried to mark trees so I'd know where I'd been. I drew big X's, so that I wouldn't be able to miss them. At first it seemed to be working. I seemed to be going in a new direction. No marks on any trees. But then out of nowhere every tree was marked. Every single goddamn tree was marked with my and Hudd's initials. Just like when we left our mark on the tree when we were kids.

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| hear children, but they're not mine.

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Someone's screaming in the dark. A man, calling out for help. The voice is familiar, but I can't quite place it.

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The screaming hasn't stopped, but I think I recognize who it's coming from now. I think it's the old Sheriff Lanning, Wes Lanning's uncle Emmett. I remember him visiting my school when I was a kid, talking about stranger danger. He can't really be out here. I must be hearing things.

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I tried to find the source of the screaming. It got louder and louder, calling for help over and over again until it finally turned into wordless howls of pain, and then there was silence. I'm alone again.

I saw what I thought might've been another person at first, someone wearing all white, someone else lost in the woods. Then it came closer, and I saw that it was something with flesh the color of maggots and barely any meat on its bones. Its skin was twitching and writhing as though it was full of insects.

I tried to hide behind some trees, holding my breath in case it heard me. Then it slowly turned toward my direction, and I saw that it didn't have a face. It started walking toward me and then running. I was so afraid that I couldn't move. I just scrunched my eyes closed and thought, "This can't be it." And then, when I didn't feel any pain for a long moment, I opened my eyes and realized that I was curled up in my tent. I must have dreamed it, although I don't remember falling asleep or even setting up the tent.

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I woke up in the middle of the night to the sensation of hands around my neck. But, of course there was no one there.

Still, my neck hurt, and I used the camera on my phone to take a look at it. There are two handprint shaped bruises circling my neck. Even now, hours later, they're throbbing in pain. It hurts to call out for Tristan and Liam, but that's not going to stop me.

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I thought the sun was going to come up. I had hope for just a second. I was sleeping, not that I knew what time it was, only that I was tired and had to lie down for just a minute, and when I opened my eyes there was light. It was a sunrise.

I sat there for hours just staring at it, hoping, praying, the sun would find the strength to rise, but it sunk back down, swallowed up by the endless canopy of trees.

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I think I've moved past fear somehow. I'm seeing the stick figures. I'm hearing things all around me, and I'm noticing how my heart isn't pounding, how I can't feel the blood rushing into my ears anymore. Now I hear things in the night and I scream back at them.

I found the stump. The spot where Hudd and I used to leave each other notes. It's the place where we used to meet. The hours we spent here were some of the happiest I've ever had.

Even this place I shared with my husband has been tainted now. This goddamn forest is taking everything from me.

Some of this stuff shouldn't even be here. When I think about it, though, I should have expected one more insult from this forest. Tristan's birth announcement. God, this place is taunting me. Carver's taunting me.

But I'm going to be the one to win in the end. I have to be. As difficult as it is to maintain hope, I can't entertain any other possibility right now.

There's no point in writing any of this down to try to account for what's real and what's a nightmare, because it doesn't really matter. I'm going to leave these journal pages here. Maybe someday somebody will find them. I'm going to keep searching, keep looking for my boys. I'm not leaving these woods without them. God, I hope someone finds this. If someone does, if someone is actually reading this, don't come in here. Not if my boys somehow make it out. If they get out and I'm still in here, don't come get me. You'll only get lost too.

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17 / 9th set

I'm so sorry, Mom.