

Slashslashslashslashslashslashslash (Various Inanimate TFs)

Her boots splashed as she ran, sinking and squelching in the mud. Though the rain had stopped, the road remained waterlogged, and every few meters she slipped and had to right herself before she ended up facedown in a puddle.

To her sides, the trees fencing the road shivered in the wind, the few leaves that remained to their tall, black trunks rustling with a sound like a comb through knotted hair. The forest rose from the earth like the ribs of a rotting animal, blackened by decay, tenebrous and cloying, a stark contrast to the full moon pouring its pale light through the clouds.

In the distance, an owl hooted. Flinching, she grasped her arm and hurried harder. The wound had stopped bleeding, but it still hurt.

Fifteen meters down the road, the inevitable finally happened. Her boot stuck, the mud refusing to release it, and with a scream she flew from her feet, almost breaking her ankle in the process. She struck the ground with an awful squelch and lay there shivering, too cold and wet and weak to stand up, though she scrambled all the same, digging her nails deep into the soil in a feeble attempt to find purchase.

A shadow sliced through the moonlight and fell, like a mourner's shroud, over her body. Trembling, too tired even for screams now, she rolled onto her back and raised her eyes to its owner's face.

"N-no, no... No, please!" She pushed herself back, her eyes wide and her face pale, and the figure stepped carefully around a puddle to follow her. "Please! Please! Please, don't—!"

The claws sliced through her skin like air, and for a moment there were screams, swiftly silenced, followed solely by the symphony of the knives.

At last, the claws ceased swinging. All that remained of their victim were a few scraps of flesh and cloth. And an elegant darkwood chair, neatly carved, its polished wood shining in the moonlight.

For a second or two, the shadow stood and observed it, silent, an artisan looking down on their masterpiece.

Just as it seemed it might stay there forever, a drop of rain landed with a little plop in the puddle by its feet. Soon it was followed by a second, then a third, and—

Grabbing its victim's remains, the shadow turned and sped into the darkness of the woods.

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The rain pelted the windshield of the Pinto as it crashed into the drive, its wheels flinging mud at the stacked log wall of the cabin.

In the passenger's seat, Mary clung to the door, skin drenched in sweat. "Jesus Christ, Jean. Are you *trying* to kill us?"

"Whaat? Relax, will you?" Popping the car into park, Jean pulled the handbrake and ran a hand through her short blonde hair, grinning. "We're all in one piece, aren't we?"

"Yeah, barely," said Mary, rummaging in her bag. "No thanks to your driving."

A pale hand tapped Jean on the shoulder. "I counted at least six times on that trip in which we came close to perishing," said Sophie, adjusting her glasses. "Seven, if you count that incident with the tanker."

"Hey, *he* was the one who wasn't looking in his mirrors!"

"Ugh, who *cares?*!" Mary's seat shook as the person behind her kicked it. "Just hurry up and let me out of this piece of shit. I've been sitting so long my ass feels like it's been steam-ironed."

"You sure it's not all the dicks?" said Mary, looking back.

"Excuse me?" Gritting her teeth, Lily kicked the seat even harder. "What the hell are you implying?!"

"Nothing... nothing..." said Mary, checking her compact. In the mirror, Lily scowled at her.

Beside her, the Pinto's final passenger groaned. "*Please*, please stop making so much noise," said Harley, rubbing her temple. "My head feels like a fire alarm..."

"How are you *still* hungover?" said Mary, snapping her compact shut with a frown. "It's almost sunset."

Harley just groaned. "Does anyone have a Tylenol?"

Rolling her eyes, Mary unbuckled her belt. As quick as they could, the five of them hurried out of the Pinto and through the rain to the cabin, trying not to get stuck in the mud.

"Well, here we are," said Jean, once they were all on the veranda. "My auntie's cabin." Rummaging in her jacket, she produced a pack of cigarettes and lit one with a flash from her lighter.

The cabin stood steadfast on the clifftop, a puzzlebox of dead trees and murky glass. Built at what had once been a reasonable distance from the edge, time and the weather had left it perilously close to the edge, and now it looked as if a single good storm would be enough to send it plummeting into the lake below. Assuming it didn't collapse into a pile of firewood at the first breeze.

"It looks like shit," said Lily.

Jean shrugged. "What were you expecting, The Ritz? You're welcome to sleep outside if you don't fancy it."

Lily mumbled something inaudible and went to fetch her luggage.

Inside, the cabin seemed even less pleasant than it had outside, with its harsh wooden walls and faded curtains. There were no lights, so the only illumination was what could pierce the dirty windows, which wasn't much. Mary advanced slowly, flinching each time the floorboards creaked beneath her feet.

She checked the kitchen first, since had a feeling she was going to be cooking. It was well-stocked, if a little rustic, but she hadn't exactly expected to find a Cuisinart. At the end of the room, a door opened onto the cabin's backyard, or what was left of it: all that remained was a small patch of muddy earth, barely big enough to park a car, and a weathered path, which sprang from the rear of the house like a devil's tail and curled down the cliff to the shore, where a single rowing boat sat at a small pier. Waiting for Charon, presumably.

Leaving the kitchen behind, she found the rest of the group in the living room, where Jean was making a token effort to light the logs in the fireplace. A moose's head hung over the mantle, looking down at them all with an expression of intolerable sadness. *Oh, why didn't I stay in Canada?*

"Alright," said Jean. "Now, full disclosure: there's only one bedroom, "so most of us are gonna have to sleep in here."

"What the fuck?" said Lily. "You didn't say anything about that!"

"I told you to bring sleeping bags, didn't I? What did you think they were for?"

"I *thought* they were for sleeping under the stars. You know, something *romantic*. Something that I would be interested in doing. Not *breaking my back* lying on these moldy fucking floorboards. She stamped her foot, and they were all a little surprised that it didn't go straight through it.

Jean rolled her eyes. "Alright," she said. "Does anyone object to *Lily* getting the bedroom?"

Mary and the others shared a look. Sleeping on the living room floor wasn't the *most* appealing prospect, but what was the point of taking the bed if you couldn't get to sleep for Lily's whining anyway? They all shook their heads.

"Great. Lily, the bedroom is yours then."

"*Thank* you."

A smile crept onto Jean's face. "You know, it's a king-sized bed, by the way. So if anyone else wants to share it with her..."

"Pass," said Mary, quickly. Sophie and Harley weren't far behind her.

Lily gave them the finger and marched off.

As the rest of them unpacked their things, Mary found her eyes drawn to a door tucked into the corner of the room. Curious, she gave the handle a tug, but it remained steadfastly shut. "Hey, what's behind this?" she asked.

Jean shook out her sleeping bag with a frown. "That? Oh, that's just the basement," she said. "Aunt Nancy said not to go down there. It's full of old crap, apparently."

"Okay, if you say so." Mary went to continue unpacking, but as she turned away from the door, she heard something. Frowning, she stepped back, listening carefully.

There. Subtle, but just about audible: a scratching sound, like claws against wood. "Did your auntie say anything about rats?" she asked.

Jean shrugged. "Probably. She said a lot of bad things about this house, to be honest. There's a reason she's letting us use it, instead of renting it."

"Maybe we should have made Lily sleep down *there*," said Sophie.

The windows shook in their frames, trembling at the fury of the rain.

Pulling the curtains shut, Harley groaned. "Ugh, I wanted to go *swimming*." Even with the curtains shut, the roar of the storm was impossible to block out. It sounded as if the sky had gone to war with itself, one side firing a volley of rain and the other countering with a harsh barrage of thunder. Out here in the woods, they were in no man's land, and it felt as if all the shells of heaven would fall on them at any second.

"Hey, there's nothing stopping you," said Jean, lying in the armchair with her legs over the side and a bag of chips in her hands. "You might wanna wear a lifering though." Harley threw her pillow at her.

On the other side of the room, Sophie's glasses glinted in the firelight as she flipped to the next page of her book. She'd found a whole stack of them in the corner, seemingly dumped there by Jean's aunt.

Settling into the elegant darkwood chair beside her, Mary leaned over. "What are you reading?"

"*The Wizard of Oz*," said Sophie.

The wind roared, rattling the shutters. Mary shivered. "Let's hope this storm isn't *that* bad."

As she settled back, the hallway door flew open, and in marched Lily, a towel wrapped around her form. "Jean, you bitch!"

"What's the matter?" said Jean, plopping another chip in her mouth. "Something wrong with the bathroom?"

"Why. Is. There. No. HOT. WATER?!"

Jean laughed. "Yeah, that happens sometimes. Hey, if you wanna warm-up, you can always come on a midnight run with me."

"You're going on a midnight run?" said Mary.

"Yeah. Really helps me sleep, you know?"

"I hope you run off a cliff," said Lily, marching in the direction of the bedroom. "This is the last time I go *anywhere* with you." And with that, she slammed the door behind her.

"That's not a threat!" cried Jean. She shook her head.

"Why did you even invite her?" said Mary.

"What better way to get rid of her? This wood is full of bears, Mare." She tapped her nose knowingly.

Mary snorted.

On the far side of the room, the television crackled as Harley flipped to another exciting shot of static. "Come on! Come on! What the hell is wrong with you?"

"It's probably the storm," said Sophie, without looking up from her book. "The rain is distorting the signal."

"Urrrrrrgh...!" Flinging the remote away, Harley stomped back over to her sleeping bag. "What are we even meant to *do* without TV?"

"You could always try sleeping," said Mary, rustling her sleeping bag at her.

"My head still hurts..."

"Why don't you take another Tylenol?"

"I diiiiid... Now my liver's hurting too..." She massaged her brow with a groan. "Somebody do something to distract me."

Jean stopped chewing and cocked her head thoughtfully. "Well," she said, "after a moment of thought. I guess I could always tell you the ghost story."

As one, the three of them stopped what they were doing to look at her. "Ghost story?" asked Mary.

"Yeah. Didn't I tell you? This place is haunted." Their faces must have been a real row of portraits, because she burst into laughter. "What, don't tell me that's a deal breaker for you?"

"You didn't say anything about a haunting!" cried Harley.

She shrugged. "Why would I? It's just a stupid story. Come on, Sophie, don't tell me *you* believe in ghosts."

Sophie slammed her book shut, looking conflicted. "Of course not... There's always a scientific explanation for the supernatural..." She didn't sound particularly confident about this though.

"What's the story?" said Mary, her curiosity overwhelming her.

Tossing aside her chip packet, Jean grabbed a flashlight from her pack and marched to the fire. "H-hey!" they cried as she extinguished it.

A second later, her flashlight snapped on with a click. She was holding it under her chin, turning her face into a pale mask, grinning. "So, you wanna hear the story of Lake Ananse, huh?"

"Do you need to be such a drama queen?" said Sophie.

Mary shuffled her chair forward a little. "What's the story?"

Jean's smile split her face. "How much do you three know about witches?"

Naturally, it was this exact moment that Zeus decided to let loose. The flash lit up the room, and when the crack came an instant later, the whole house seemed to shake with the force of it. Jean snickered as they tried to stop their hearts exploding.

"Witches?" said Mary, once she'd recovered.

"That's right. You know the kind. Crooked nose. Pointy hats. Curses. You ever heard of the Salem Witch Trials?"

After a moment, Mary nodded.

"Well, we're not exactly in Massachusetts, but they had their own witch trials right around here, you know."

"What do you mean, 'right around here'?" said Sophie. "We're in the middle of nowhere. There isn't a town for miles."

"There isn't *now*," said Jean. "But there used to be one, not far from here. It's all overgrown now, but you can still see the ruins. I'll take you out there and show you tomorrow, if the weather's good."

“What happened to it?” asked Mary.

Jean grinned. “I’m getting to that.” Taking a deep breath, she forced her face into a harder, more serious expression, and leaned forward, letting the light of the flashlight sharpen its shadows. “They say it all began on one stormy autumn day, late October in the year 1888... The sun had just set, when a woman walked in out of the woods and into the town of Pendlewich. Eight-feet tall, naked and covered in dirt, with nails like a cat’s claws and long, black hair all knotted and tangled, she looked to the villagers like an escaped lunatic. Half of them wanted to drive her away, but the kinder half won out, so they gave her an old cabin on a cliff at the very edge of the village, and every day someone would go up there and take her food and firewood. She never came out herself, at least not at day, anyway, but she seemed harmless, so they let her be.

“Then people started to go missing.

“It started small at first: a man left on a trip to the next village over and didn’t come back after a week like he’d said he would. For the first few days, they assumed he’d had extra business, and after a week, that he’d gotten stuck. Only when a traveler from the other village passed through and said they hadn’t seen him were they forced to admit he’d been lost.

“A month later, another villager disappeared. This time, it was a woodsman who’d gone out into the woods to search for fresh lumber. When he didn’t come back, the village sent a search party after him, but all they found were a few scraps of cloth and blood, as if he’d been ripped to shreds by a wild animal. Most of them assumed it was a bear, but a few threw suspicious looks at the cabin on the cliff and wondered about the strange woman who lived there.

“The disappearances didn’t stop: not a week later, someone else vanished. This time, it was a young woman who’d been out in her own garden. And she wasn’t the last. After her, the disappearances picked up pace. Soon, a day didn’t pass without a new one.

“Finally, one of the men had had enough. Grabbing a torch, he marched up to the old cabin and kicked his way in, but the dark-haired woman was nowhere to be found—the house was empty. There was something to catch his attention though: effigies, tens and tens of effigies, carved from wood in the image of the missing villagers.

“Just as he was about to give up, he heard a scratching sound from the basement. Carefully opening the door, he crept down the stairs, shining his torch into the darkness, and as he descended, he saw a shape, an inhuman shape, crouched atop the corpse of one of the villagers, blood dripping from its claws. He stumbled back, pale with shock, and at the sound it spun—”

The whole house shook under the hammerblow of the thunder. Harley screamed. Mary lurched in her chair, struggling to keep her breathing calm.

“Leaping up out of the dark, she chased him out of the cellar and all the way to the village square, where she ripped him apart and devoured him, and she didn’t stop there: now the whole village had seen her secret, and she couldn’t let them live knowing it. So she chased them down and she ripped them to pieces and devoured them, one by one, every single one of them.

“In the end, there was only a single survivor: a fisherman who’d been out on the lake and missed all the carnage. Of the dark-haired woman, there was no sign whatsoever, not even a strand of hair. But rumor has it she still lurks in the woods to this day, searching for her next victim to rip apart and devour... Mmmm~.” She licked her lips and rubbed her belly.

The other girls stared at her in pale terror.

Jean’s laughter couldn’t have been harder. “Look at you guys. You really believe in this crap, don’t you?”

“Of course we don’t,” said Sophie. “Y-you don’t have to believe in the supernatural to be scared by it.”

“Sure, sure,” said Jean, smugly.

“Maybe we should do something else?” said Mary, giving the trembling Harley a look.

Jean snorted. “Sure. Who’s up for cards?”

The thud of the front door snapped Lily out of her slumber.

Sitting up with a groan, she inspected her watch. Midnight, to the minute. Obviously Jean was starting that midnight run she was so proud of.

Lying back, she pulled the sheets up over her shoulder and rubbed her face into the pillow, but no matter how hard she tried to smother herself, she just couldn’t get back to dreamland. Groaning, she rolled from side to side, gritting her teeth in frustration, and finally ended up staring at the ceiling, letting the moonlight pour right into her pupils. Fucking Jean.

Since she was awake, she supposed she might as well take the chance to use the toilet. Throwing herself out of bed, she flung on her dressing gown and slippers and made her way to the door, opening it carefully, because she was a considerate person, and not a giant, ignorant bitch like some other people.

The living room was silent, the only light the thin moonbeams seeping in through the open window. Mary, Sophie, and Harley lay on the floor in their sleeping bags, silently slumbering. Naturally, none of *them* had been awoken by Jean’s ignorance.

Stepping carefully over them, Lily crept in the direction of the hall. Halfway across the room, however, she heard a familiar sound. Exactly the opposite of the one that had woken her.

Turning, she found the far door swinging, wide open.

With a roll of the eyes, Lily crept back across the room and grabbed the handle, intending to shut it. The last thing she wanted was to be blamed when it inevitably slammed.

On the threshold, however, she came to a stop, looking down into the darkness. Were these stairs? Was this the basement? She didn't remember Jean saying anything about a basement.

Turning back, she scanned the room, and, finding Mary's rucksack lying open beside her, hurried over and started rummaging for a flashlight. With it in hand, she returned to the basement door, flicked it on, and took a long look inside. The flashlight's beam poured down the stairs, illuminating the cobwebbed steps and fingerstained railings. Beyond them, nothing could be seen, even with its aid.

Shuddering, Lily turned away, intending to leave, but as she did, a sound hooked her ear and dragged her right back again: a scritch-scratch-scratch-scratching sound, as if someone were dragging a knife against a piece of wood. What the hell even was it? Did this fucking ruin have *rats* as well?

For a moment, she stood there frozen in indecision, biting her lip and looking back and wondering if she should wake one of the others. Finally, her curiosity won out: tugging her dressing gown a little tighter, she took a step forward, placing her foot ever so delicately on the top step, lest the entire staircase fall apart beneath her. Only when she was absolutely certain it was stable did she dare put any weight on it.

Stable it might be, but only barely. As she descended, the staircase creaked beneath her like the bedsprings of a couple in the middle of a bout of very passionate lovemaking. Shivering, Lily gripped the handrail even tighter, trying to ignore the dust on her palm. *Why the fuck am I even doing this?! she thought, taking another step down. It's Jean's house! That means it's Jean's rat problem!*

As she neared the bottom of the staircase, more and more of the basement came into view. It looked less like the kind she was familiar with and more like some kind of bizarre mine: the walls and the floors were raw soil, and the ceiling supported by an array of worryingly ancient-looking timbers, which gave the impression they'd snap and bring the whole cabin crashing down on her at any second. A few barrels and crates had been stacked in the corners, but otherwise the only thing the basement held was old furniture, chairs and tables and cupboards too antique even for the cabin's ye-olde-aesthetic.

Finally, she stepped from the stairs onto the cool stone floor and stood there for a moment, shivering in the chill and snapping her flashlight left and right in search of mice or rats or whatever the hell it was she was hearing. God, she hoped she found them. Nothing could make this more worth it than rubbing Jean's face in *rats*.

Scritch-scratch. Scritch-scratch.

She jerked to the left, her heart thudding away like a broken old boiler. *There*, she thought, shining the light at a dusty old wardrobe. *The sound's coming from in there*.

With every step she took towards it, however, she found it harder to advance. She had a terrible vision of herself opening the awful thing and a *swarm* of rats surging out and over her, biting and scratching her. By the time she finally grabbed the handle, she was practically frozen. The only thing keeping her from turning and fleeing was the fact that, if she did get ripped to shreds by a swarm of fucking rats, it would be *Jean's* fault.

Steeling herself, she took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and ripped the wardrobe open.

"Meow," said the small, black cat scratching at the rear wall.

For a second, Lily simply stood there in silence, too stunned by the whiplash of this to properly respond. Finally, with a roll of the eyes and a deep sigh, she bent down and proffered her hand for the cat to sniff. "Hey there, kitty," she said, scratching it under the chin. "What are you doing down here?"

With a mrrrp, the cat rubbed against her, and so she leaned in and scooped it up and held it against her. Was it stray? It was friendly, so it probably wasn't feral. Had one of the previous tenants left it here? But if so, how had it been feeding itself? Did it have a way out of the basement? Even if so, she couldn't imagine it was safe in the woods—this place was just *full* of bears. Oh, but she supposed there were fish in the lake and—

"Lily?! What the hell are you doing down here?"

Lily jumped, and as she did, the cat leapt from her arms and disappeared through a crack in the stonework. Huffing, she turned and found Mary at the top of the stairs, looking down in a mix of confusion and concern.

"I— I was just— Look, there was a noise, okay? I thought it might be—"

With a click, a flashlight snapped on, and now Sophie and Harley were up there too, looking down at her like she was an idiot.

"Wh-what are you doing down there?" said Sophie. "Jean said we weren't supposed to go into the basement! She said there's—" She cut off, apparently too embarrassed to continue.

Lily folded her arms with a huff. "Yes, well, who cares what Jean says? There's nothing down here anyway, besides the stray cat you just scared off. Thanks for that, by the way."

"St-stray cat?" said Harley. "What color was it?"

"How the hell should I know? It's dark. I couldn't see anything, even with the flashlight."

One by one, the others crept down the stairs, looking around and muttering and generally seeming even more afraid of the place than Lily had been. Now there were here, however,

she felt a strange wellspring of confidence. What were they so scared of, anyway? There was nothing down here!

"I guess it was just a stupid story," said Harley, all but hiding behind Sophie.

"It would appear so," Sophie replied, adjusting her glasses. "Perhaps we let Jean's story get to our heads a little..."

Mary chewed her lip and said nothing.

"Well, I'm glad I could help you all conquer your fears," said Lily, marching straight for the stairs. "Now if you'll excuse me, if I don't pee in the next twelve seconds, my bladder is going to burst."

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Slamming the bathroom door behind her, Lily threw off her dressing gown, dropped her panties, and sank onto the toilet with a sigh of relief louder even than Jean's door slamming.

Once she was done, she went to the sink to wash her hands and remembered, much to her chagrin, that there was no hot water. "Great," she said, as she drenched her hands in the cold stuff. "I guess I'll just die of diphtheria, too, huh, Jean?" Lathering her hands in soap (and it was the real old-timey stuff, too, the kind they probably made out of animal fats), she rinsed them off, grabbed her towel and, just as she made to go—

Someone tapped on the window.

With a shriek, Lily grabbed her dressing gown and hurried to cover herself. Instead of the stalker she'd expected, however, she found the golden eyes of the cat staring at her through the glass.

Releasing her breath, she finished putting her dressing gown on and approached. "Hey there, kitty," she said. "Don't worry—I'm not going to hurt you." She tried to open the window slowly so as not to scare it away, but the stupid handle refused to budge. In the end, she had to give it a good, hard tug that produced an enormous clang. Fortunately, the cat wasn't scared; it simply sat there on the windowsill, staring at her with those deep, golden eyes. Like gleaming coins.

"Alright," she said, reaching out for it. "Come here, kitty. Come here... I promise I'm not going to hurt you... Come here—Ow!"

With a hiss, the cat turned and vanished out the window, leaving only a long red scratch along Lily's arm as the evidence of its presence.

"What the fuck?" cried Lily. "What the fuck?! I thought you were friendly!" Claspings her bleeding arm, she rushed to the sink and started to run the water again, forgetting for several seconds that, of course, *of course*, there was NO. HOT. WATER! Gritting her teeth and

hissing now, she ran it under the cold tap and lathered it with the soap anyway, certain even as she did it that she was simply covering it with germs.

By the time she rinsed it, however, the bleeding seemed to have stopped. As a matter of fact, the wound already appeared to be healing. All that remained was a stark, black scar, as if she were a porcelain doll with an unfortunate crack.

Hugging herself, she shuddered. "I fucking *hate* this place."

On the other side of the shower curtain, something exhaled.

With a startled squeal, Lily threw herself back, slamming her shoulders into the wall and almost breaking her spine on the handrail. "Wh-who's there?" Was it the cat? Had it gotten into the bathtub somehow?

Carefully, her heart pounding faster with the second, Lily pushed herself off the wall and approached the curtain, her hand raised and her eyes wide and expectant. Seizing the fabric, she paused, her every muscle tensed so hard they threatened to pull themselves apart. Her heart thundered in her head. Her hands shook. Her breathing came in ragged, dying breaths.

With a whimper, she wrenched the curtain open. And on the other side:

"Oh," said Lily, releasing it with a scowl. "I guess I must have imagined it..." The bath was empty. Whatever she'd thought was inside was living in her head, not the tub.

With a sigh of relief, she pulled the curtain back and turned to go. Maybe one of the others would have some disinfectant or some—

The claws crashed into her face like the branch of a tree, tearing a scream from her throat as they ripped her from the ground. Wrenched into the air, she kicked and squealed, her eyes widening in terror as they slid down the length of her captor's arm and buried themselves in the appearance of its owner.

It stood at eight feet in height, slender and thin, with a waterfall of black hair that poured from its head to its feet like oil and flowed in rivulets and streams across the floor, silky and wet. The body beneath these locks was undeniably feminine, so rounded with curves Lily felt a flush of envy just looking at it. It was so tall its head should have struck the ceiling, but instead it passed straight through it, as if it were no more solid than mist.

Its claws felt solid enough though.

"P-please..." said Lily, struggling to breathe now. "P-please, d-don't..."

The monster released her, but it wasn't intended as mercy: in that single instant, that ephemeral span of moments as she dropped, it spread its claws and swung like a panther. They cut cleanly through her. Not her skin, not her muscle and her flesh, but something far

deeper and fundamental. As Lily screamed, screamed in terror, it sliced through *her* and peeled *her* like an apple, tearing her self from her core and exposing her inner essence.

Ribbons of her being fell and coiled on the floor, spirals of skin and cloth and hair and face, its features frozen in a look of utter terror. And still Lily continued to scream, louder and louder as it wrapped around her feet, and at last—

That timeless moment reached its end. She struck the floor with a clunk and lay there in the pile of her own flesh, unable to move no matter how hard she tried. *Help me!* she screamed, or tried to, at any rate—no matter how loudly she cried, she couldn't produce a sound either. All she could do was sit there, sit there and watch as the creature snatched up the ribbons of what had been *her* and stuffed them into its razor-toothed mouth, slurping them up like strands of spaghetti. Finally, it swallowed with a gulp, turned, and stepped through the wall as if it didn't even exist.

Lily could only stare, struggling to move. *H-help me! Someone help me!*

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They'd just climbed out of the basement when they heard the scream.

"What the fuck was that?" cried Harley, all but throwing herself out the window in panic.

"What was that?!"

Sophie and Mary, on the other hand, figured it out instantly. "Lily!" As one, they rushed for the cabin's restroom.

By the time they arrived, the screaming had stopped, but the sound from the other side of the door was almost worse: a muffled, stifled moaning, as if someone were trying to scream through a gag. "Lily?!" cried Mary. "Lily?!"

When Lily didn't respond, she threw herself against the door shoulder first, but it refused to budge. Heart pounding, she kicked it instead, but it still didn't open. F-fuck. Where was Jean when you needed her? She kicked it again, but it had no more effect than her first attempt. "Fuck!"

"Mmmphf! Mmmphf! Mmmphf!" With every second, Lily's voice sounded a little weaker.

"I-it must be locked. O-o-or blocked, from the other side," said Sophie.

"What are we supposed to do then?!"

Sophie worked her lips, chewing words. "The window!" she said.

Mary understood instantly. Together, they rushed for the front door, almost knocking over a befuddled Harley in the process.

Outside, with the chill night wind whipping through the night clothes and threatening to freeze them solid, they rushed around the cabin, heading for the bathroom, and trying to ignore the crunch of leaves and twigs beneath their feet as they ran. “Sh-shit–!” Mary hissed as she lost a slipper.

By the time they got there, the sound of Lily’s moaning had stopped completely. “Lily?!” Mary called. “Lily?!” The window was open. If she’d been attacked, whoever had done it must have entered through it.

As they approached, it occurred to Mary that she was rushing straight into danger. Into the hands of a murderer or a kidnapper or a pervert or who-the-hell-knew-what, and for fucking Lily’s sake too. Shit. She knew she should’ve gone to Camp Crystal Lake like her mom had told her.

“Lily!” Reaching the window, she thrust her head through. “...Lily?”

On the other side, there was little more than an empty bathroom. Of Lily, or any hypothetical serial killers, there was no sign. Nor was there any evidence of a fight. Only one thing seemed out of place.

Clambering through the window, Mary bent down and picked it up. Had it been knocked to the floor in the scuffle, or...?

Whatever the answer, there was something chilling about it. Leaning closer, Mary squinted, struggling to see it in the dark.

Was she imagining things, or was there a face in the bar of soap’s surface?

*

Jean’s feet crunched against the dirt of the path as she raced through the woods, her heart pounding in her chest, her brow slick with sweat, feeling more alive than she had at any point since they’d set off.

Around her, the forest stretched its tall, black fingers to the moon as if to grasp it and squeeze. Though the worst of the storm had passed, a chill breeze still flowed through the trees, and when she exhaled, her breath emerged in thick clouds of fog. Frankly, it was freezing. Sweaty as she was, she still couldn’t wait to get back inside and warm up.

Reaching a clearing, she came to a stop and breathed deep, trying to regain her stamina. Ahead, the cabin squatted on the cliff edge; to the right, the reflection of the moon sparkled in the lake. If she looked closely, she could make out the pier and the little rowboat next to it—maybe tomorrow, if the weather was good, she’d take it out for a spin.

With this pleasant image filling her mind’s eye, she took a deep breath and prepared to start running again. No sooner had she taken a step, however, than she heard a rustling in the bushes behind.

Jean froze. She'd been joking about the bears, but now she wasn't so sure. Who was to say there weren't a couple of them lurking around the place?

Swallowing, she risked a glance over her shoulder at the cabin. It was still fifty or more meters away, but she was the best runner on the school track team—if she couldn't beat a bear in a fifty meter dash, she might as well give up. Of course, what she'd do once she got there was another thing, but she could figure that out later. In the meantime...

The bush rustled again. Jean clenched her fists and bent her legs and took a deep breath and—

—and just as she was about to run, the bush rustled one last time, and out popped a little black cat with bright golden eyes. Mrrrping, it ambled happily over to her.

All at once, the chill pervading her faded. "Oh, hey, there," she said, bending down and holding out her hand. "What are you doing out here, kitty?" The cat sniffed it and rubbed against it affectionately. "Are you lost?" Her aunt hadn't said anything about stray cats.

"Meow," said the cat, which wasn't much of an answer.

"Would you like something to eat, kittycat?" she said, scratching it under the chin. "I think we've got some chicken back in the cabin."

In response, the cat did something unexpected: with a hiss, it swatted at her, leaving a long red scratch along her arm. As Jean snapped back in surprise, it turned and ran, vanishing straight into the bush from where it had come.

"What the fuck?!" cried Jean, clasping her bleeding arm. "If you don't like chicken, why didn't you just say so?"

Hissing, she examined the wound in the moonlight. It wasn't bad at all, just a superficial scratch—the surprise of it was worse than anything. All she had to do was head back and clean it up. She had some disinfectant in her pack, so it shouldn't be a problem at all. She just had to...

Rustling leaves, not far behind her. Turning back, Jean clenched her arm and peered into the trees. What was that? Was the cat coming back?

The moon shone high overhead. In the distance, an owl hooted.

All of a sudden, she felt a lot less comfortable being out in the dark like this.

She took a couple of steps back, her heart thudding in her chest, and finally decided she'd had enough of being outside. With a stifled breath, she broke into a run, the twigs cracking beneath her sneakers as she bolted for the house.

Not ten meters from the door, she struck something. It was like a wire: one minute she was running, the next she was sailing through the air and her ankle was on fire. She hit the dirt

and skidded to a stop with a gasp and a moan, her face caked in mud. Mercifully, she wasn't injured, just dirty.

With a hiss of a pain, she planted her fingers in the soil and tried to push herself back up, but no sooner had she started than something yanked her leg and dropped her to the ground again. Striking the soil with a gasp, she rolled over and looked back with a groan.

A long black rope, smooth and slick, was coiled around her ankle, as if the darkness itself had reached out and grabbed her. Gripping tight, it gave her another tug—with a gasp, Jean found herself dragged back towards the woods.

For a second or two, the utter impossibility of what was happening kept her from speaking. She couldn't be— She couldn't be— This couldn't be happening. What the fuck was—?!

Then her eyes traced the black line to the silhouette in the woods from which it came, and the reality of the situation punched her in the gut. She sucked in a deep breath, ready to scream.

She never got the chance: an instant before she could, another one of those sleek black tendrils slipped out of the trees and coiled around her mouth, gagging her. With that, she could do little more than squeak and squirm, her eyes wide in terror, as the creature reeled her in like the biggest catch of the season. "Mmmphf! Mmmphf!"

As she grew closer, the shadows resolved into a distinct shape: tall, feminine—absurdly feminine—with a fountain of slick black locks pouring from its head. Nothing could be seen of the woman's face, but even if it could have, Jean wouldn't have seen it anyway: her eyes were locked on the monster's hands, and the long, sharp claws that sprang from its fingers. "Mmmmmphf! Mmmmmphf!"

Looking down at her, it lifted its head and wrenched her into the air with two of its silky tentacles. As she struggled, fighting to tear free, it bent down and, taking its knife-like nails, started to dig into the ground. In seconds, it had produced a good sized hole, large enough to fit a whole pot's worth of plant in. Jean could only stare at it, wondering what the hell was happening.

Stretching back to its full eight feet of height, the creature inclined its head and moved her to the hole, planting her feet inside it as if she were some kind of bizarre sapling. Rigid with terror, Jean could only stand there and shake, tears pouring from her eyes. What the hell was it doing to her?!

Stepping back, the monster stood and examined her, head cocked, like a cat studying something it finds curious. Finally, it raised its arms, nails glinting in the moonlight, and as she opened her mouth to scream—

With a sound like tearing cloth, its claws sliced neatly through her, peeling her skin and her clothes as if she were a piece of tasty fruit. But instead of raw muscle and flesh, what they revealed was hard and brown and knobbly. As Jean gaped in horror, she realized it was bark.

Grasping her arms, the monster wrenched them high, and spreading its claws again, sliced them neatly from fingers to shoulder. The ribbons of their flesh landed in little mountains on the floor, and beneath them were revealed two slender, spindly branches, each with five smaller ones stretching from their tip, like the digits of a hand.

Jean, her eyes wide, screamed louder and louder.

Dropping its attention to her legs, which were still planted in the ground, the monster started working upward, slicing away her human exterior to reveal the harsh bark beneath. Under its tender knives, her feet came apart easily, replaced by a system of thin roots. She could feel the wet soil, cool against them.

Now the monster started to work upward, unwinding her legs and leaving only a slim trunk, split a little where her groin had been, as if two trees had grown too close and become fused. She squealed, shaking and trying to move her legs, but she couldn't make them move at all. She was frozen. "Mmmph! Mmmph!" *Help me! Someone help me!*

When the monster's claws reached her chest, they seemed to pause, lingering as if to squeeze them, and then, just like that, lashed them into jiggly scraps. Jean squealed—all that remained were a pair of nobbly lumps.

Finally, the creature reached her head.

She had time for one last scream. With that, it hooked a nail under her jaw, clenched its fist, and tore her face from her skull as if it were nothing more than a rubber mask. Her cry cut out, silenced instantly.

The creature took a second to snip her hair from her head, and with that, it dropped and snarled up her scraps like they were lasagna. Swallowing, it cocked its head in the direction of the cabin. And with that, it turned and sped into the trees, gliding across the ground and through the trunks like a phantom.

Jean, left to watch, struggled to scream. *Help me!* she wanted to cry. *Please! Someone help me!* But her mouth refused to move even the slightest. All she could do was stand there, stand and watch, feeling the cool soil on her roots and the cold breeze on her branches.

...Help!

**

Back in the living room, Mary pulled her dressing gown tighter and shivered, struggling to block out the cold. Sophie had lit the fire again, but she still felt like she'd been on an Arctic excursion.

"Wh-what do you think we should do?" said Sophie, huddling next to the fire with her.

Nearby, Harley sniffled, clutching her head and groaning. "I just want to go home..."

“Why don’t you go get a drink and take another Tylenol?” said Mary.

With one last snuffle, Harley got up to do so.

“Should we call the police?” Mary asked.

Sophie just shook her head. “What police?” she asked. “We’re in the middle of nowhere. Besides, there’s no phone—I already checked.”

Mary nodded. Of course Sophie had already thought about that. “What do we do then? Just sit here and let them take her?”

“Let’s wait for Jean to get back,” said Sophie. “It’s *her* aunt’s cabin. She should know what to do in an emergency.”

“I think you might be overestimating Jean’s planning...” said Mary, standing.

Making her way to the window, she risked a peek outside. She didn’t know what she was expecting, whether it was a serial killer staring back or Lily with a giant cake for them, but what she actually found was nothing. “Where is Jean, anyway?” she asked, flicking a glance at the clock on the mantel. They’d closed and blocked every door and window they could, but all Jean would have to do was shout for them. “It’s almost 1AM. How long is she planning to run for...?”

The realization struck both of them simultaneously. Swearing, Sophie leapt to her feet, and as one, the two of them grabbed their flashlights and rushed for the door. Dragging away the table they’d blocked the door with and unbolting the latch, they rushed outside, their eyes sweeping the treeline. “Jean?” Mary raised her hands to her mouth. “Jeeeeeeeeean!”

“JEEEEEEAAN!” cried Sophie.

From the woods came a muffled scream.

“Sh-shit!” said Mary. *What did they do now? Grab a weapon and give chase, or...? They couldn’t just leave her!*

“W-wait!” called Sophie, when Mary started to move. “What about Harley?”

“You stay with her,” said Mary, before she could stop herself. “I’ll go.”

Sophie stared at her, her eyes wide in shock. “A-are you sure? What if—?”

“I’ll be fine,” she replied, not quite believing it. At least she could strike them with her flashlight, if it came to it.

With one last nod to Sophie, she set off, her hand tight around the flash, struggling to keep the beam from shaking as she poured it into the trees. “Jean?!” she cried as she went. “Jean...?”

Her eyes, and her flashlight’s beam, dropped to the ground, illuminating a streak in the mud where something had been dragged. Heart leaping and lurching, she traced it in the treeline. “Jean?” she repeated, a little more weakly. No one responded.

For several seconds more, she remained stuck there on the spot, frozen in indecision. Finally, she gathered up her courage and advanced as fast as she dared, sweeping the flashlight left and right and behind her as she walked, just in case someone tried to ambush her.

In the trees, she came to a stop, frowning. The trail led right up to one of the pines surrounding the cabin and came to a dead stop, as if whatever was being dragged had shot straight into the sky. She even looked up, wondering if they’d climbed the tree, but that seemed unlikely: it wasn’t tall enough. Finally, she lowered the light to examine it a little closer.

Jean’s terrified face stared out at her from the wood.

With a silent, stuttered gasp of horror, she stumbled back, almost ending up on her ass in the dirt. “Wh-what the fuck?” For a moment, she thought it was an illusion. Pareidolia or whatever the fuck it was called, that she was seeing faces where there were none, but no matter how long she looked, it refused to go away: and it was Jean’s face. It was so clearly Jean’s face, carved into the wood. No, not carved. It was like it had grown that way.

Summoning all her self-control, she flicked the flashlight up and down the Jean-tree’s trunk. It didn’t just have her face: it had her entire body, from her petite chest to her slender, muscular limbs. It was like a statue, a living statue.

Something cracked in the woods to her left. With a gasp, she whirled, flicking the flashlight’s beam into the bushes. “Wh-who’s there?”

No one responded.

Cautiously, keeping her flashlight locked on the trees, Mary took a step in the direction of the cabin. It wasn’t far away, only ten or fifteen meters—if she had to run, she could definitely make it. She could definitely make it, she just had to—

Something slithered out of the bushes, winding its way towards her feet. For an instant she thought it was a snake and then, a second later, an oil spill, that someone had poured a bucketful of the awful substance onto the ground and let it flow towards her. Only when it came within a foot of her did she realize it was hair.

In the trees, what she’d thought was an oak shifted, exposing its true identity: an enormous figure, eight feet tall and clawed like a tiger, and sauntering slowly, tenaciously towards her.

With a scream, Mary dropped her flashlight and ran.

*

Slamming the door behind her, she struggled to force the table back into place and rushed for the living room, where Sophie and Harley were waiting in concern.

“Did you find Jean?” said the former.

Mary struggled to give her an answer. “W-we need to get out of here! Now!”

“G-get out of here? What do you mean?” asked Harley.

“There is a fucking witch out there!” cried Mary, thrusting a finger at the window. “She turned Jean into a tree!”

Sophie stared at her like she’d gone mad, and quite possibly she had. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Oh, for the love of—” Grabbing her wrist, Mary dragged her to the window. “Look! There! In the trees! There’s a maniac and she’s like eight feet tall, and she’s doing something *really* strange with her hair and— *Fuck.*”

True to her words, the figure stood on the very edge of the treeline, her feet in the brush. She was as tall as some of the smaller trees herself, and though her eyes were hiding by the black of her hair, somehow Mary could tell she was staring right at them.

Beside her, Sophie and Harley stared in shock. “Wh-what do we do?” asked Harley.

Sophie swallowed. “Look, all we have to do is keep calm and think this through logically. If we can just get to the car...”

“What about Lily and Jean?” said Mary.

Sophie bit her lip. “I— Look, we can’t exactly rescue them ourselves. If we get to the car, we can get out and call for help. What else are we meant to do?”

“How are we meant to get to the car when she’s *right* there?!” said Mary.

Sophie’s eyes snapped left and right as her brain worked through the options. “Weapons,” she said at last. “There’s got to be something we can use to fight her here. Even if it just buys time to get to the car, that should be enough, right?”

After a moment, Mary nodded. “Did Jean say anything about guns?”

Sophie shook her head. “I don’t think so. But there are knives in the kitchen.”

"We don't need knives, we need scissors," said Mary, recalling the way the monster's hair had snaked towards her. "Shit. Is that really the best we can do? Just point a knife at her? What if she's like a werewolf? Is the cutlery silver?"

Sophie simply stared at her.

"Why's she not coming any closer?" said Harley, who was the only one still watching the window. The other two turned to see—sure enough, the eight foot woman remained in the trees, simply watching them. Watching.

"Maybe she's like a vampire?" said Sophie. "Maybe you need to invite her in before she can enter?"

"How the fuck did she get Lily then?" asked Mary. "You think Lily invites eight foot tall women into the bathroom with her?"

"Eight foot tall men, maybe," said Sophie, beneath her breath. "Look, maybe she's just trying to psyche us out. All we need to do is stay calm and think our way through this. ...And I *really* think we should focus on getting to the car and getting the hell out of here."

After a moment, Mary nodded. "What's the plan?"

"Knives from the kitchen," said Sophie, after a moment. "Silver, if there are any. One of us will go out the front door and distract her—if she attacks, they can just run back inside. The rest of us will go out the backdoor and sneak up to the car. Once they go it running, they can drive to the back of the house, pick up the last person, and then we can all get the hell out of here."

"What if she does some magic or something?" said Harley.

"I don't know. How the hell do you expect me to outstrategize a *witch*, Harley?"

"Who's going to be the distraction?" said Mary.

For a moment, all three were silent. Mary released a long sigh. "I'll do it," she said at last.

"A-are you sure—?"

"It's fine. Don't worry." Mary didn't particularly *want* to do it, but Sophie would just freeze up and Harley couldn't be trusted to tie her own shoelaces. Ideally it would have been Jean, but with her gone...

She flicked another glance out the window: the eight foot tall woman remained exactly where she'd been, simply standing there in the treeline and watching them, waiting.

Mary bit her lip. How hard could it be to play distraction?

The floorboards creaked under Mary's boots as she crept towards the front door. "Ready?" she called, flicking an anxious look over her shoulder.

After a moment, Sophie's voice sounded: "R-ready!"

Mary took a deep breath. "Okay... Here goes..." Grabbing the handle, she managed to wrench it away from the door. Before she unbolted it, she paused, waiting and listening for a sign the monster had moved, but there was nothing. Finally, her heart thudding, she unbolted it, grabbed the handle, and, tugging it open—

She'd expected to find the monster waiting for her on the doorstep, but no: it was still loitering in the treeline, unmoving, like it was too shy to approach.

Mary breathed in. Exhaled. Shakingly, her hand went to her pocket, where she'd stuffed the carving knife they'd found in the kitchen. It wasn't silver, but it seemed like a pretty good substitute. Unwrapping it, she tossed the dishcloth aside, grabbed the handle of the blade, and, her hands shaking, did the best she could to raise the thing menacingly. Christ, she felt like Shelley Duvall.

Taking a second to build up her confidence, she stepped forward, sinking her boot into the mud of the cabin's drive. "Wh-who are you?" she called, as much for Sophie and Harley's benefit as for the monster's. From behind her came the sound of the backdoor slamming shut.

The monster didn't respond. In fact, it showed no sign of having heard her at all. But that was fine; she'd expected that. All she wanted was to keep its attention. "Wh-who are you?" she repeated. "What have you done with Lily?"

At this, the monster cocked its head slightly. Mary couldn't tell if it was considering her question or just responding to the sound, but at least it was listening. By now, Sophie and Harley should be at the car. She daredn't look, lest she alert the monster, but she should be hearing the ignition any second now.

"What do you want with us?!" she cried, as loudly as she could manage. It came out hoarse, a little overacted, but that was fine. "What do you *want?!?*"

The roar of a car engine starting. The screech of tires against mud.

Taking one last second to make sure the monster still wasn't moving, Mary dropped her arms and rushed back into the cabin, slamming the front door behind her as she went. Charging through the living room and the kitchen, she soon reached the backdoor. Tearing it open, she threw herself outside, just in time to almost be hit by the reversing Pinto. "Get in! Get in!" cried Sophie, from the driver's seat. From the back, Harley stared in stunned terror.

Throwing herself into the passenger's, Mary slammed the door and hurried to buckle up. Meanwhile, Sophie punched the accelerator, and with a roar of tires they were flying forward, sending flecks of mud flying everywhere as they sped around the cabin.

As the building dropped away, there appeared the monster, still standing in the treeline, simply standing and staring, utterly unmoving, as if it didn't even care. And then just like that, she was gone as well, and the Pinto was racing down the dirt road through the woods and away from her.

Watching her fade into the distance, Mary allowed herself a sigh of relief.

"D-did we do it?" asked Harley.

"Let's not get carried away," said Sophie. Her hands were tight on the wheel, white with tension. Her gaze was locked ahead as well, as if her entire head were in a brace. "We're not out of the woods yet."

"How far to the edge of the woods?"

"About three miles."

Mary nodded. That wasn't great, but it could be much worse. At least they hadn't crossed any bridges to get here. And even if their path were blocked by a fallen tree or something, there were plenty of alternative routes they could take. For a creepy old forest in the middle of nowhere, this place was riddled with roads—she'd seen them on the map before they set off. Maybe it was something to do with the abandoned town Jean had mentioned.

Speaking of...

"Sophie," she said, chastising herself even as she spoke. "Do you think that thing... Do you think it has anything to do with Jean's story?"

She'd been expecting Sophie to turn to her smugly, to curl her mouth in a grin and tell her, as pretentiously as ever, that there was no such thing as magic or monsters or witches or anything like that.

Instead, Sophie flicked her a look of terror and went straight back to staring ahead at the road, saying nothing. Mary swallowed.

"Er, hey," said Harley, in the backseat. "What the fuck...?"

"What is it?" said Mary, as much to take her mind off Sophie's expression than anything.

"There's a fucking cat here," said Harley. And bending down, she rummaged under Mary's seat and, sure enough, pulled out a cat. A big black one with bright, golden eyes.

Licking its paw, it stared at her blandly. "Mrrrp."

"The hell did a cat get in the car?" asked Sophie.

"Maybe it hopped in when you opened the door?" said Mary.

Sophie squinted. "I don't see how. It's not like I wasn't paying attention."

"It doesn't matter," said Mary. "It's not like we can turn back and drop it off, is it?"

Sophie shook her head. "No," she said, risking a glance back at the cat. "Sorry, kitty, you're coming with us. You know, I've always wanted a cat, actually."

It was like someone had flipped a switch in the feline's brain. With a hideous screech, it threw itself at her, claws out and swinging. Sophie screamed as it scratched her.

"Sophie! The wheel!" As the car swerved, heading for the ditches, Mary grabbed it herself and only barely managed to keep them on the road.

After several seconds of furious scrambling, Sophie finally managed to get the cat off her. With a cry, she flung it back into the backseat, where it hissed and disappeared back under Mary's chair again.

"What the fuck?!" cried Sophie, slowing the car as she took back the wheel. "What did I *do*?" The cat had left a net of small scratches all over her face and arms, though fortunately none of them were particularly deep.

"Sophie, the road," said Mary. In her shock, Sophie was starting to drift again.

"All I did was *look* at the stupid thing. What the fuck? What the *fuck*?!"

"Sophie, the road...!" As they swerved left and right, Mary considered grabbing the wheel again. And there, right as she raised her hands, she saw it: there, right ahead, in the middle of the road— "Sophie!"

The witch, eight-feet tall, her hair flowing down her sides like oil.

"Sophie!"

With a scream, Sophie swerved, and they shot past her and off the road, where the car rocked and bumped and finally slammed to a stop with a screech as Sophie slammed the brakes. The engine stalled.

Heart pounding, Mary looked back and found the monster walking casually towards them, her hair trailing behind her like a dark bride's wake. "Sophie!"

"I'm trying!" The car shuddered as Sophie turned the key again, but no matter how many times she tried it, it refused to turn over. Not that it would have made any difference anyway—they were way too deep in the ditch to drive out without help.

Swallowing, Mary made an executive decision. "Get out! Everybody out! Quickly!" Kicking open her door, she grabbed Sophie by the arm and dragged her out of the car. Harley hurried to follow them.

The monster stood at the top of the ditch now, only a few meters away from them. Its hair wriggled around it as it walked, curling and uncurling like a nest of snakes. Mary took one last second to look and, swallowing hard, scrabbled back up onto the road, with Sophie and Harley not far behind her. Their boots slapped against the mud as they ran, leaving deep prints in their wake.

“What *now?!* ” cried Sophie, struggling to keep up.

“We’ll have to make it on foot!” cried Mary.

“On *foot?!* We’re not even at the edge of the woods! It’s ten miles to the nearest city!”

Mary opened her mouth to respond, but she could already tell from the ache in her lungs that it was futile. Sophie was right—they were never getting out of here on foot. Slowly, she took a deep breath. “We’ll... we’ll have to loop back to the cabin.”

“You want to go *back?!* ” cried Harley, looking like she’d just developed another migraine.

“What else are we meant to do?!”

“Just run!” cried Mary, grabbing a flashlight from the trunk. Holding it in her mouth, she started clambering for the top of the ditch. After a moment, the others followed her.

It was a difficult climb: the mud of the slope came apart under her hands, threatening to send her sliding all the way back down again, but in the end she reached the top. The witch or whatever it was stood barely three meters away now, moving slowly, slowly towards them, as if there were no urgency whatsoever. Did it not care? Or did it know they’d never escape?

Sophie dragged herself up onto the road behind her. Grabbing her arm, Mary pulled her up and bent down to grab Harley, who’d given it a run up. Once she was up, the three of them three one last shared glance at their pursuer, and with that, they ran for it.

After a moment, the witch started to walk.

The mud slopped beneath their boots as the three of them ran, hearts pounding, lungs ached, their faces soaked with sweat and mud. The trees seemed to circle them, the black bars of a giant cage, and with every step they took it seemed a little tighter. Mary’s stomach turned; she wanted to throw up.

Behind them, the witch ambled, casual as anything, as if their urgency meant nothing to her. *Run as fast as you like*, it seemed to say. *There’s no escape.*

Mary slammed her eyes tight, sucked in a deep breath, and ran even harder.

For almost ten minutes, they outpaced her, leaving the car far behind them and their bodies shaking, though the house seemed no closer than it had been when they started. Even if she

squinted, Mary couldn't see the lights. For all she knew, they were running in the wrong direction.

Finally, with a squeal, Sophie tripped, landing with a splat in the swamp the storm had made of the road. Seeing her struggling to push herself out of the gloop, Mary turned back to help, boots slopping as she ran.

Like a bolt of Stygian lightning, the witch's hair shot across the road and coiled around Sophie's ankle. Snapping straight, it yanked her back, earning a sharp scream in the process. "Mary!"

"I'm coming!" Leaping, Mary just about managed to grab her hand, but it made little difference: a second later, the monster's hair gave another tug, leaving Sophie squealing as it dragged her through the mud.

"Mary! Mary! Help me! Heeeelp!"

"I'm trying!" Tightening her grip, Mary tugged harder and harder herself, until at last, just as she thought she might win out, her hands—slick with her sweat—slipped. Sophie shot back, dragged screaming across the ground, and as the monster reeling her in, it started to spin her around, wrapping her in its hair like a spider cocooning a fly. Mary could only stare, eyes wide in terror, as Sophie's cries of fear cut off, muffled. Soon, she was gone, out of sight, hidden by the monster's dark locks.

With a whimper, she grabbed a rock and slung it as hard as she could at the creature's face. It was a good throw, about as good as she'd ever thrown, but it didn't strike: instead, it slipped straight through the monster's flesh, as if the creature were made of air.

Slowly, it turned to her. And though she couldn't see its eyes, its razor grin left no ambiguity.

With a whimper of terror, Mary turned and ran.

*

Trapped, bound tight, in a cocoon of silky darkness, Sophie squirmed and thrashed, squealing as loud as she could manage. Around her, the witch's hair shifted and slithered, tightening in some places and loosening in others. One of the places it grew tighter was her mouth, which cut her screams off pretty quickly. "Mmmphf! Mmmmmphf!"

Finally, just as she thought she'd never see daylight again, the monster's hair uncoiled with a sound like rustling leaves, and just like that, she found herself falling.

She struck the wooden floor with a gasp and lay there groaning, rubbing her wrists and her thighs, which were red and sore where the monster had gripped them. Rolling over, she found it standing over her, looking down with what she hoped wasn't a hungry grin.

Trembling, she pushed herself back. "Wh-what do you want with me?"

Her back slammed into something soft. Belatedly, she realized she was back in the cabin's living room. But why though? Why had the monster brought her *here*?

As if to answer this question, the monster leaned forward, raising one of its awful, slender arms and extending one of the knives glued to the end of its fingers. It took Sophie a second to realize it was pointing at something.

Trembling, she turned to follow, tracing the invisible line of its aim across the room and to the far corner, where she found herself staring at the pile of books she'd taken a look at when they first arrived. She stared at them, trying to comprehend, but whatever the witch was trying to say to her, it meant nothing. "Wh-what do you—?"

Like a panther, the creature sprang across the room and spread its claws, and before she even had a chance to perceive what was happening, sliced neatly into her exposed, virgin flesh. Sophie screamed. And screamed. And screamed.

It started with her feet first, pinching her toes between its awful clawed fingers, and as she squealed and kicked and wailed, peeling them like potatoes, exposing the hint of something hard and smooth inside. Sophie screamed even louder as she realized it was wood.

Grabbing her legs, the monster slammed them together and, holding her by the ankles, swiftly stripped the rest of them too. Ribbons of flesh and cloth flew from her claws as they swung, scattered all over the floor, and all Sophie could do was lie there and watch, wailing in terror.

Reaching her torso, the witch ripped apart her blouse and the stomach underneath it, revealing a rectangle of wooden slabs, wide as her hips, if not even wider. Even as Sophie moaned in shock, the monster continued upward, tearing apart her chest and revealing another slab in the process.

Finally, the witch reached Sophie's head. As she drew in the breath for one last scream, it stuck its fingers into her mouth, pinched her lips with its claws, and calmly tore the last of her human self to shreds.

With a clunk, Sophie flew back and struck the floor. *Help me!* she cried, struggling and failing to move. *Help me!*

The witch ignored her. Instead, it scrabbled across the floor, snatching up her scraps and stuffing them into its mouth and swallowing, messily. Only once it was done did it finally turn its attention back to her. Taking her by the sides, it picked her up and planted her on her feet and finally pushed her back till she was placed neatly in the corner. Sophie squirmed, still struggling to move. *Wh-what have you done to me? What have you done?!*

Taking a book from the pile on the floor, the witch placed it calmly on Sophie's stomach.

Afterward, once it was done filling its new bookshelf, the witch turned its attention to the window. The rain continued to lash against the glass, but the storm seemed to be breaking.

Gathering up its hair, the creature stood, and waited.

*

The rain had started again. Bullet-like, it ripped through the canopy of the forest to strike them in their hiding place at the base of a great old elm. Already, it had soaked them to the undies. The only consolation was that it had washed away the dirt.

“What should we do *now?!?*” said Harley, hugging the cat to her chest.

“Why did you bring that thing?” said Mary, studying it suspiciously. As violent as it had been to Sophie, the cat seemed surprisingly docile now. Maybe it just hadn’t liked her perfume? Either way, she didn’t trust it.

“I couldn’t just *leave* it,” said Harley, sounding horrified. “Anyway, you didn’t answer my question. What the hell are we supposed to do *now?!?*”

Mary swallowed. Why was *she* in charge all of a sudden? That was supposed to be Jean’s role. “We have to get back to the house,” she said, poking her head out of the ditch again—if the witch was following them, she was doing it stealthily.

“*Why?!?*”

“Where else are we meant to go?!?” said Mary, all but throwing up her arms. “It’s the only shelter in the area!” Harley flinched back, and with a sigh, Mary lowered her voice. “I’m sorry,” she said, “I’m really stressed at the moment.”

“I-it’s okay,” said Harley. “Urgh, I really wish I had another Tylenol.”

“Me too,” said Mary, dismally. “Come on, let’s move. We’ll freeze if we stay out here much longer.”

She set off without waiting for a response, snapping on her flashlight and crashing through the underbrush into the line of trees. Each time a twig snapped beneath her boot, she flinched, hearing the crack of a bone. Harley trudged behind her, breathing hard.

After several minutes of this, Mary spotted a shape through the trees: it looked a lot like a house, but that couldn’t be right. They hadn’t been walking for anywhere *near* long enough to reach the cabin yet. So what was she seeing?

Harley came to a stop beside her, the cat on her shoulder. “Is that a house?” she asked. “I thought Jean said we were in the middle of nowhere.”

“She did,” replied Mary. “Apart from—” It all came back to her all at once, blinding as a lightbulb to the face. “The village,” she said. “The one from Jean’s story...”

“The village?” said Harley, raising an eyebrow in confusion.

“Jean said there was a ruined one, right?” said Mary, lurching in a half-run. “This must be it!” Now that she was looking a little closer, she could make out other shapes in the night: shapes like walls and ruined fences.

“H-how does *that* help us?” said Harley, hurrying to catch it.

“There might be shelter,” said Mary, pressing forward. “Even if the whole place is ruined, there should at least be a basement or something.”

As they emerged from the trees, the rain grew even heavier, drenching them till Mary started to feel even her bones were soaked. Hugging herself and shivered, she looked left and right in search of her shelter: the village wasn’t as ruined as it had looked from a distance—in fact, it seemed more abandoned than anything—but now she was having second thoughts. What if the witch was lurking in one of the buildings to ambush them?

“What are you waiting for?!” cried Harley. “Can we *please* get into cover?! I’m drowning!”

“Okay, okay,” said Mary. Wasn’t there something else, too? What else had Jean said? She wished she’d been paying attention properly.

As they approached the abandoned town, Harley suddenly stumbled. “Ow!” she cried, struggling to hold the cat and stay on her feet. “What the fuck?!”

Following her gaze, Mary lowered her flashlight and found a shallow ditch had been dug in the soil. When she traced it left and right, she saw it encircled the entire town like a half-assed moat. Already, the rain was filling it with water.

“What the fuck is this stupid trench for?” said Harley, stepping carefully over it.

“Maybe it’s something to do with their crops?” said Mary, with a shrug.

She stepped over the trench, and together the two of them headed for the nearest cabin. Mercifully, the door was unlocked: inside it was choked with cobwebs and dust, but if nothing else, it was at least waterproof.

Together, they managed to push a bookcase in front of the door. This done, they dropped to the floor and sat there shivering. Harley’s cat hopped out of her arms and shook itself off, looking around with its head cocked.

“Urgh, I’m f-fucking freezing,” said Harley, hugging herself and shivering. “Can’t we at least light a fire or something?”

Mary shook her head. “We don’t want to give that freak any clue we’re here. If you’re cold, we can look for blankets or something. Otherwise, let’s just huddle down until morning. Then we can think about getting out of here.”

Harley nodded, though she didn't look particularly happy about it.

Mary fetched some sheets from the cabin's bedroom and, shaking the dust off them, tossed one to her. Soon the two of them were huddled together on the floor, trying to pretend they were still on vacation. The fury of the rain seemed to have weakened now, though Mary could still see the odd drop striking the windows.

From its place on the armchair, the black cat suddenly sat up and started to meow.

"What's the matter, kitty?" said Harley, making her way over to it. "Are you hungry?"

"Meow!"

Harley looked back. "Do you think this place has any food left?"

"I doubt it," said Mary. "It wasn't exactly abandoned yesterday."

"Well, it can't hurt to look, right?" said Harley. "Right, Mr. Kitty?"

With a hiss, the cat lashed her across the face. Leaping past her, it shot across the floor and disappeared under the couch.

"Ow!" Harley lurched back with a squeal, claspings her cheek—the cat had barely missed her eye. "What the fuck? What was that for?"

Mary stared at her in concern. The wound wasn't bad—in fact, it was already beginning to heal—but something was wrong here. Why had the cat suddenly changed its behavior? It had done the same to Sophie too, right before—

Teeth grit, she leapt to her feet. "Harley, we need to move! Quickly!"

"Huuh? Wh-why's that—? What's—"

Ignoring her confusion, Mary grabbed her wrist and dragged her to the door. The rain had stopped completely now, though the night was no more comforting than it had been before. Even with their flashlights, it was clear it was far from morning. And the weather hadn't exactly improved—it felt as if it would start raining again at any second.

"Where are we goooing?!" cried Harley, as Mary dragged her out of the cabin.

"Anywhere! Away from that cat!" cried Mary.

"Wh-what? Why—? Why would—?"

"Because it's hers! It's like her pet or, I don't know! Look, it's a fucking black cat, right? Of *course* it's to do with her! Remember how it scratched Sophie right before the monster appeared? It's like it was marking her for it!"

Harley was typically pretty slow, but this time she seemed to get the point right away. Trembling, she pawed the wound on her face. "A-are you saying it's going to—?"

Mary didn't have the strength to lie to her. "Let's just move. Quickly. Before—"

The sibilant sound of dark locks slithering across mud.

Mary caught it only an instant before they reached her ankles. With a scream, she leapt aside, tracing the hair with her flashlight: the creature clung to the side of the village's church, its slender arms and legs wrapped around the way around the steeple. Its slick black hair poured from its head and down to the ground, where it flowed in twenty serpentine rivulets across the town center towards them, carefully skirting the water on the ground in the process.

"It's her!" Trembling, Harley stumbled back and slipped, taking a seat in a puddle with a splash.

Mary had to fight to regain control of her body. "Come on!" she cried. Grabbing Mary by the arm, she wrenched her back to her feet and started to drag her on. Where they were going, she had no idea, but anywhere would be better than standing around and letting the monster take them.

For several seconds, the witch's hair continued to follow them. Then, with a sound like a hundred snapping whips, they recoiled, drawn back to her head, and in a single motion, exploded outward in a spider web of dark lines that glinted in the moonlight. Mary screamed as they shot past them, snaking through the buildings around them and emerging from windows and cracks to cut them off. She had to grab Harley to keep her from running into them.

With every second, the witch's weave stretched a little farther, threatening to wrap around the entire town. Only a small gap remained in the net: a thin passage between two of the houses at the very edge of its range.

Grabbing Harley, Mary rushed for it. "Quickly!" she cried. Harley gave a wordless moan.

Together, the two of them charged, flashlights swinging, feet splashing in the puddles, for the gap. Too late, Mary realized it was too easy. Too late, Mary realized it was a trap.

With a squeal, Harley tripped and fell, striking the mud with a wet splat, her flashlight flying free. Even as Mary turned back to grab her, the strand that had tripped her snapped back and started to coil around her ankle instead, leaving her squealing in terror as it started to pull her back. "Mary! Mary, help me! Please! Pleeeeeease!"

"I'm coming!" Her heart thudding in her chest, Mary rushed to her aid, but she'd barely taken a step in her direction than one of the tendrils of hair flicked towards her instead. Mary screamed and leapt back, barely avoiding it.

The threads continued to tighten around Harley's legs, and at last, snapping straight, started to tug her backward.

On the church, the witch released a triumphant, inhuman cry. Skittering down the side of the building, she raced on all fours towards them, drawing her hair from the surrounding houses as she did. In seconds, she'd whipped Harley off the ground and started to cocoon her.

"Mary! Mary! Mammmpfh!"

Seeing the creature's claws glinting in her flashlight's beam, Mary stumbled back with a squeak, tripped on a drop in the ground, and landed in the mud. In the same instant, one of the witch's tendrils launched itself at her—

—and came to an abrupt stop, as if it had struck an invisible barrier.

For several seconds, Mary could only sit there and stare, struggling to process what she was seeing. Slowly, her eyes slid from the lock of hair, still coiled like a serpent poised to strike, and down to the little trench in the ground and the rainwater that filled it.

Even as she watched, uncomprehending, a drop of rain struck the little moat with a plop, producing a large ripple. A moment later, another landed beside, and then a third, and then—

With a shriek, either of pain or defeat, the witch and its locks turned and fled, flowing into one of the nearby shelters like a tidal wave of ink. Mary could only stare.

A drop of rain struck her head, and with it came realization: *'You cursed brat! Look what you've done?! I'm melting! Melting! Oh, what a world? What a world?'*

With a hiss, she scrabbled back to her feet and ran. *Water. Water—it's weak to water.*

Her boots splashed in the puddles.

The rain poured.

**

Harley thrashed, mad with panic, in the witch's hair, fighting with all her strength to escape and accomplishing little more than exhausting herself. Finally, just as she thought she'd run out of air, the locks loosened, and with a whip-like crack, the witch slung her free. She stuck the floor, bounced twice, and came to a stop groaning near the far wall of the room. Every part of her hurt, though more from shock than any actual injury.

Swallowing, she forced herself to sit up and realized she was back in the same house she and Mary had been hiding in. But why...?

Rain splattered against the window.

Looming over her, the witch took a step forward, the floorboards creaking under the weight of its impossibly-slender body. Looking down at her, it raised a hand: a thin, pale-skinned hand tipped in knives, and though she couldn't see its face for its hair, she got the impression it was smiling.

Trembling harder than ever before now, she pushed herself back, back, till her shoulders slammed into the wall. With a squeak, she struggled to stand, but where was she even meant to go...? It had her cornered.

A moment passed in clotted silence as the witch looked her up and down, head turning slowly left and then right and then finally back again. Harley's heart beat a little faster with every turn, until at last, she was certain it would explode outright.

M-maybe it's changed its mind! she thought, sweating and laughing with fear now. *Maybe it's going to let me go!*

With an inhuman screech, the witch threw itself at her, seized her by the hair and yanked her to her feet and set about ripping away hair and skin and cloth and exposing not bone or muscle or blood, but a slim cone of linen, and beneath it: glass.

Working slowly down her body, the witch ripped away her jacket and exposed the skin beneath, if only for a second before she tore it away in turn. Harley found her arms slammed against her sides and her legs squeezed together, and then, barely a second later, she couldn't feel either at all: when she looked down, all she saw was a pillar of metal.

The witch continued to slice until she reached her feet. There, she took her shoes and ripped them apart and, tickling the soles she'd exposed, sliced through them to reveal a smooth metal base, bronze and circular. The scraps of Harley's former self fluttered to the ground, landing in little coils, like pieces of swarf, and were promptly stomped on.

Finally, the witch released her. Harley struggled to move and found she couldn't in the slightest: it was like she didn't even have anything to move anymore. Stranger still, the world seemed to have grown humongous, terrifyingly tall—she felt like a little mouse in the claws of a cat. *Wh-what happened?!* she cried, wishing she could scream. *Did she turn me into a tree too?*

On the floor, the witch slipped the last of Harley's scraps into her mouth and swallowed with a gulp. This done, she stood and, leaning close, so close Harley could feel her fetid breath against her, raised a hand and tugged what might once had been a lock of Harley's hair.

With a click, it became very bright all of a sudden.

The rain had begun to slow by the time Mary reached the cabin. Her heart pounding, she trudged up the drive as fast as her aching legs would carry her, looking left and right and back again, lest the witch or her cat try to ambush her. Fortunately, she saw neither.

An owl hooted high in the trees above.

Reaching the house, she considered heading inside, but the rain was beginning to slow and her flashlight was starting to flicker, and she didn't want to take any chances. Pausing just a little to catch her breath, she set off again, as fast as she dared, following the trail down the side of the cliff to the lake behind the cabin. Now the clouds were clearing, it sparkled, reflecting a dinnerplate of a moon. Swallowing, Mary hurried even faster.

As she moved, she consoled herself: if nothing else, the witch's cat hadn't managed to scratch her. She didn't know whether it needed to mark its prey or if this was merely a means of tracking them, but whatever the answer, it was clearly in her favor.

She reached the bottom of the cliff, her boots crunching against the stones of the path as she advanced. Flicking her flashlight ahead, she found the little pier and beside it: the boat that Jean and her auntie supposedly used for fishing. She tried not to think of Jean, planted in the dirt up above, as she hurried towards it.

As she approached, she expected the worst: for the boat to have been waterlogged or flipped over by the storm or even blown to blackened shards by a bolt of lightning. But to her immense relief, it had only accumulated a small amount of water. *All the better*, she thought as she stepped into it. All she had to do was get in and row out a little. How could the witch possibly get her in a half-flooded boat in the middle of a lake? She'd be safe there till morning, and when morning came, she'd be free to leave and get help.

Clambering into the boat, she released a sigh of relief to find it still floating—she'd been worried her weight would be enough to send it underwater. When she tried to push off, however, she realized she'd forgotten to untie the rope holding the boat to the pier. With a hiss, she scrambled back out and hurried over to it.

Something landed with a thud on one of the posts behind her.

Squealing, Mary spun, expecting the witch to be right behind her, but instead it was only an owl, a normal, everyday (or everynight) owl. Sitting there, it looked left and right and finally settled for preening itself.

"Jesus Christ," said Mary, hugging herself. She took a second to catch her breath, and hurried to untie the boat.

It took her almost a full minute to actually get the knot undone—whoever had tied it had been insistent their boat not be blown away in the storm, clearly—and by the time she had, she was all but ready to throw up.

Tossing it into the boat, she started to lower herself as well. No sooner had her feet entered it, however, than she saw movement in the corner of her eye, and spun just in time to see the owl launch itself at her, talons spread.

Screaming, she raised her arms to shield her face and took the bird's talons to them instead. Toppling back, she landed in the boat with a splash, while the bird took flight and swooped

around her. For a moment, she thought it was preparing for another strike, but instead it simply landed on the post and sat there, staring at her, all sign of aggression gone.

A moment later, Mary realized why: raising her arms, she saw the scratches, shallow, barely deep enough to hurt or bleed, but scratches all the same. Was it the blood the thing scented? Or was there something more esoteric to it? Did it need to mark its prey before it could take it?

The rain had all but stopped now. Only a fine drizzle remained, and it was slower with every second.

Breathing hard, Mary pushed herself away from the jetty and started to row, ignoring the pain in her arms as she moved the oars.

The owl simply sat on its post and watched her.

By the time the sun finally rose, Mary barely had the strength to grab the oars and start rowing. She hadn't dared sleep, not a wink, not even when the first rays of sunlight started to creep over the horizon. Instead, she kept her eyes on the pier, waiting, waiting, her every nerve still pulled taut.

Finally, with the sun high in the sky and the dark truly banished, she decided it was time. It was a clear, sunny day without a single cloud left in the sky—exactly the kind of day they'd all been hoping for. Jean would have loved it, if she'd still been— If she'd still—

The boat made a clunk as it struck the pier. Taking a deep breath, Mary scanned the shore for suspicious animals—she had to assume the creature could use any of them, no matter how innocent—and finally, satisfied she was safe, clambered out. Her boots squelched as she walked; they were sodden through to the socks. If she didn't change them soon, she'd have to start worrying about trench foot.

At the top of the cliff, she came to a stop, considering her next option. Even if the witch was gone, she wasn't without problems: with the car stuck in the ditch, she'd have to make it out of the woods on foot, and there was no chance of that if she set out as she was. For a minute or two, she weighed the risk, shifting back and forth, and finally decided it was one she had to take.

The door of the cabin creaked as she opened it. Pausing on the threshold, she waited for a second, listening to the sound of her breathing as it echoed through the building. Satisfied she could hear nothing else, she stepped in, pulling the door shut carefully behind her. The floorboards squeaked as she hurried to the living room.

She found it much as they'd left it, with their sleeping bags still spread across the floor, though two particular features stood out and snatched her attention: in one corner stood a little bookshelf that she couldn't remember seeing before, and on the table by the armchair, a

lamp, which she couldn't recall either. Had they always been there, or was her mind simply playing tricks on her? She decided not to think too hard about it.

Finding her rucksack, she hurriedly changed, swapping out her boots for a fresh pair of sneakers and replacing the rest of her sodden clothes with a tracksuit. Next she went to the kitchen to scavenge food and stock up on water, especially the latter. She filled a bottle with the stuff and kept it in her hand with the lid loose, ready to sling the stuff at a moment's notice.

Finally, satisfied she was equipped, she returned to the living room to take stock. Standing there, thinking about what had happened, it took all the willpower she had not to break down and cry. All her friends were gone, and worse: it was her fault. If she'd only figured out the stupid creature's weakness a little earlier...

Wiping her eyes, she breathed hard and tried to calm herself. The blame didn't matter for now. Time was running out, and she needed to get out before nightfall. The last thing she wanted was to be caught out in the dark again. Who knew if they'd get another lucky rainstorm?

Throwing her bag over her shoulder, she made to go, but just as she was about to leave the room—

The basement door creaked as it swung in the wind.

Mary froze. Had it always been open? It had looked pretty shut when she'd entered.

She stood there for a second, waiting to see if anything would creep out, whether the cat or the witch itself, and when it didn't, swallowed her fear and headed over, rummaging in her pack for her flashlight as she went. Snapping it on, she opened the door and stuck it through, her bottle raised and ready to spray in her free hand.

Nothing more than empty stairs greeted her. Empty stairs and an empty—

Wait. Raising her flashlight, Mary squinted. *That* hadn't been there before.

At the bottom of the stairs was the cabin's sole bed.

Taking one last look behind her, Mary crept carefully down the stairs, sweeping the bed with the flashlight as she went. There it was, the whole, king-sized bed. But what the hell was it doing down here...? How had they even moved it, let alone gotten it down the stairs?

She shook the question out of her mind. No. It didn't matter. She was wasting time and risking her life asking it. Turning, she made to go.

And as she did, something else caught her attention.

Turning back, she aimed her flashlight at the wall. On the floor, its beam burned a vivid hole in the darkness, but here it seemed to do nothing. It was like the dark had clotted, painting

the wall black in the process. Stepping backward, she flicked the flashlight left and right. Sure enough, the wall and the ceiling and several patches of the floor were covered with the stuff. Was it mold? It was strangely slick, almost like—

Like a living thing, the darkness rustled.

Mary dropped her flashlight and ran, screaming, for the stairs. She'd almost made it to the top when a tendril seized the door and slammed it. An instant later, two more coiled around her legs and dragged her all the way back down again. She struck the bed with a gasp and, white with panic, struggled to pop the lid of her bottle.

A lock of hair seized her before she could manage it. It wrenched back her arm, and the bottle went flying. Striking a post, it landed in a corner, and the darkness shifted around it, avoiding it.

Another tendril grabbed her other wrist, wrenching that arm back as well. A third and a fourth seized her legs and snapped them straight, and a fifth wrapped around her mouth, a makeshift gag, cloying and wet and strangely fetid in its scent. Pinned to the bed, she could only thrash, her eyes wide with panic.

Like blood, the darkness pooled and congealed, spiraling out of the walls and into a new shape in the center. Stretching tall, the witch looked down at her, and, raising her claws, seized herself by the face and ripped, tearing the pale skin that served her as her mask to pieces. Like a cheap dress, she split down the middle, and out of the empty sack that had once been her self stepped something large and many-eyed and many-limbed, furry and fanged, sleek as an oil slick. An eight-fingered hand, with nails like knives.

Mary's screaming ended only when she could no longer make a sound.

The rain pelted the Corvette's windshield as it crashed into the driveway, flinging mud at the stacked log wall of the cabin. Around it, the forest shuddered, leaves rustling like the death cry of a wounded animal.

Inside, the five sat and stared at the building in silence, carefully studying the sad little building. In the end, it was Mandy who spoke first. "Holy shit, what a dump," she said. "I thought we were going to stay somewhere *nice*."

"Fuck you, Mandy," said Stacy, snatching the keys from the ignition. "You're welcome to sleep in the car." Kicking open the door, she rushed out, using her jacket to shield herself from the rain, and unlocked the cabin door. One by one, the rest of them hurried after her.

Inside, Mandy shook herself off and shuddered. "Urgh, I'm fucking *freezing*. This place better have hot water."

"It looks like it was built by the pioneers," said Grace, sounding unimpressed.

"What made your Aunt Nancy buy this place, anyway?" asked Sarah.

Stacy shrugged. "I've no idea—I didn't even know she had it until a couple of weeks ago. She sent me the key in the mail. Completely out of the blue."

"Weird."

As one, they entered the living room. With the curtains drawn and the storm outside allowing little sunlight through anyway, it was difficult to see, at least until Stacy managed to find a lamp. With a click, the room lit up.

"Lovely," said Mandy, distinctly unimpressed.

"Oh, relax, you'll get used to it."

"I doubt it." She folded her arms. "Where are our beds, anyway? I want to unpack."

"Okay, uh, full disclaimer." Stacy held up her hands. "Full disclaimer, but there's only one bedroom. So some of us are going to have to sleep on the floor."

"On the floor? Stace, are you kidding me?"

"Relax," replied Stacy. "You can have the bed, Mandy."

Mandy huffed. "Where is it, anyway? It better not be as awful as the rest of this dump."

"Through here," said Stacy, opening a door. She led them through.

On the other side, Mandy came to a stop, one eyebrow raised, impressed. "Well, I suppose it could have been worse." Before them stood a grand, queen-sized bed with plump pillows and a rich duvet. Its frame was carved of smooth wood, dark and polished, and strangely, unlike the rest of the house, which reeked of antiquity, it had an air of newness, as if it had never before been slept in. Mandy's own bed, back home, didn't look half as cosy.

"Not bad," she said, making her way to it. "Not bad. Maybe this trip won't be a complete travesty after all."

The bed's springs squeaked under her weight, and though it must have been in her head, she was certain she heard someone speak.

Please... Help me...

"Hmmm? Did you say something?" she asked.

Stacy shook her head.

"Must have been the wind..."

Outside, the rain had finally started to slow.