

NO ONE HERE GETS OUT ALIVE... 

TRAPPED

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Trapped

a novel of terror

Jack Kilborn

Author's Note

This ebook is actually two ebooks. I wrote TRAPPED twice. The final version is the one I prefer, and it is presented first. But I've gotten a lot of email from fans who wanted to read the original, uncensored first draft, so I've included it as an extra after the Afterword. The Afterword explains why there are two versions of this book in the first place...

Everyone is a moon, and has a dark side which he never shows to anybody.

—Mark Twain

It's lonely here, there's no one left to torture.

—Leonard Cohen

What's he building in there?

—Tom Waits

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Prologue

He couldn't move.

The table he lay on was cold against his naked back. There were no ropes binding his arms, no belts securing his legs. But he was immobile, paralyzed.

Yet he was still able to feel.

Panicked thoughts swirled through his brain. *Where am I? Was I in an accident? I can't open my eyes. Am I blind? Am I dead? I can still think, so I must be alive. But I can't move. Can't talk. What's happening to me?*

He concentrated, hard as he could, trying to move his hands and touch his face.

Nothing happened.

Noise, from the right. Footsteps. His body didn't seem to work, but thankfully, his ears did.

Someone's in the room.

He felt a hand touch his face, and then saw painful bright light.

A doctor in a green smock stared down at him.

He just pried my eyelids open.

"Good morning. You're disoriented, I bet. Confused. Probably can't even remember how you got here." The doctor's voice was scratchy, strained, as if he wasn't accustomed to using it.

Please, tell me what's going on...

"You can't move because you've been given a paralytic." He was an older man, bald, his scruff stained. "Unfortunately, you have to remain conscious for this procedure to work."

The doctor walked off, out of sight. The man's eyes remained open, unblinking, gazing into the light overhead. *Am I in an operating room? What procedure? Who was that doctor?*

It was bright, but it didn't seem bright enough to be a hospital. The light was yellowish, dim, coming from a naked bulb hanging from the ceiling. And there was a smell. Not an antiseptic, car facility smell. A smell of rot and decay.

"The drug immobilizes the skeletomuscular system." The doctor was somewhere near his feet. The man couldn't move his eyes to see him. "You're completely helpless. One more dose and you'd stop breathing altogether."

The doctor rested a hand on the man's knee, gave it a pat.

"You've lost your reflexes, your ability to flinch. But other vital functions remain active."

A sudden pressure, between his legs. The doctor was squeezing his testicles. The agony bloomed white hot and inescapable. His vision went blurry. He tried to pull away, tried with all of his might, but he didn't budge an inch.

"You can still feel pain, as I'm sure you notice. Lacrimation is normal, for now. Your pupils can dilate. And, of course, your pulse and heart rate just shot up considerably. The drug keeps you from moving so I can do the procedure, but it doesn't shut you down completely."

The man felt the tears flow down the sides of his head, the throb still lingering after the doctor released his grip.

This wasn't a hospital. It couldn't be. A doctor wouldn't do that to me. What the hell was going on?

Then he heard the most agonizing scream of his life.

It didn't come from the room, but from someplace else in the building. Nearby, maybe a room or two over. The scream was so shrill it didn't sound human at first. Then it lost pitch and was replaced by shouting.

"NO! PLEASE NO! STOP IT! JESUS NOOOOOO!"

What are they doing to that poor guy?

And what are they going to do to me?

“That’s one of Lester’s guests,” the doctor said. “Lester has been with him for a few hours now. I’m surprised he still has a voice left. I shudder to think what’s being done to make him cry out like that. Do you recognize who it is?”

And then, all at once, the man knew who was screaming. He remembered how they got there. The strange noises. Being chased. Hunted. Running terrified. And then being caught. Caught by...

“No need to worry.” The doctor leaned over him, smiling. Crumbs wedged in the corners of his lips, on his chin, and a small streak of something brown—*blood?*—smears across his age-spotted forehead. “You won’t end up like that. You’re being given a gift. An invaluable, extraordinary gift. The world is full of lambs. But very few get to be wolves. Lester’s playmate, sadly for him, is a lamb. But you, *you*, my lucky fellow—you’re about to become a wolf.”

The doctor raised a gigantic syringe.

“This is going to hurt. Quite a bit, in fact.”

The man couldn’t move, couldn’t turn away, and he was forced to watch and feel as the needle descended and plunged into his unblinking eye.

Part 1
Campfire Stories

Sara Randhurst felt her stomach roll starboard as the boat yawed port, and she put both hands on the railing and took a big gulp of fresh, lake air. She wasn't anywhere near Cindy's level of discomfort—that poor girl had been heaving non-stop since they left land—but she was a long way from feeling her best.

Strangely enough, Jack seemed to be enjoying it. The three-month-old baby in the sling around Sara's chest had a grin on his face and was drooling happily. Sara pulled a tissue from the sling pocket and wiped off her son's chin, wondering how anyone, especially someone so small and fragile, could actually like this awful motion. Even though she was feeling ill, she smiled at the sight of him. Just like she did every time.

Sara closed her eyes, bending her knees slightly to absorb some of the pitch and roll. The nausea reminded Sara of her honeymoon. She and Martin had booked a Caribbean cruise, and their first full day as a married couple found both of them vomiting veal picata and wedding cake into the Pacific. Lake Huron was smaller than the ocean, the wave crests not as high and troughs not as low. But the waves came faster and choppiest, which made it almost as bad.

Sara opened her eyes, searching for Martin. The only one on deck was Cindy Welp, still perched over the railing. Sara approached the teen on wobbly footing, then rubbed her back. Cindy's blonde hair looked perpetually greasy, and her eyes were sunken and her skin colorless; more a trait of her addiction to meth than the seasickness.

"How are you doing?" Sara asked.

Cindy wiped her mouth on her sleeve. "Better. I don't think there's anything left in me."

Cindy proved herself a liar a moment later, pulling away and retching once again. Sara gave her one last reassuring pat, then padded her way carefully up to the bow. The charter boat looked deceptively smaller before they'd gotten on. But there was a lot of space onboard; both a foredeck and an aft deck, a raised bow, plus two levels below boasting six rooms. Though they'd been sailing for more than two hours, Sara had only run into four of their eight-person party. Martin wasn't one of them. It was almost like he was hiding.

Which, she supposed, he had reason to do.

A swell slapped the boat sideways, spritzing Sara with water. It tasted clean, just like the air. A seagull cried out overhead, a wide white M against the shocking blue of sky. She wondered, fleetingly, what it would be like to feel so free, so alive like that.

In the distance, a green dot against the expanse of dark water, was Rock Island. Even from this far away, Sara noticed its wedge shape, the north side of it several times the height of the south, dropping off at a sharp cliff.

Sara shivered, protectively cupping her hands around Jack.

There was a soft thump, next to her. Sara jumped at the sound.

Another gull. It had hopped onto the deck, and was staring at her with tiny black eyes. Sara touched her chest, feeling her heart bounce against her fingers.

Just a bird. No need to be so jumpy.

Sara squinted west, toward the sun. It was getting low over the lake, turning the clouds pink and orange, hinting at a spectacular sunset to come. A month ago, when she and Martin had planned the trip, staring at such a sun would have made her feel energized. Watching it now made Sara sad. A final bow before the curtain closed for good.

Sara continued to move forward, her gym shoes slippery, the warm summer breeze already drying the spray on her face. At the prow, Sara saw Tom Gransee, bending down like he was trying to touch

the water rushing beneath them.

“Tom! Back in the boat please.”

Tom spun around, saw Sara, and grinned. Then he took three quick steps and skidded across the w deck like a skateboarder. Tom’s medication didn’t quite control his ADHD, and the teenager wa constantly in motion. He even twitched when he slept.

“No running!” Sara called after him, but he was already on the other side of the cabin, headin below.

Sara peeked at the sun once more, retied the flapping floral print shirttails across her flat belly, and headed after Tom.

She stopped at the top of the stairs. The stairwell was tight, and the sunlight didn’t penetrate it.

“Tom?” she called down after him.

He didn’t respond. Sara hesitated, adjusted the knit cap on Jack’s head, then took the first ste down.

As she descended the staircase, the mechanical roar of the engine overtook the calm tempo of th waves. The hallway was dark, cramped. Sara didn’t like it, and she picked up her pace, her palms o the walls searching for a light switch and not finding any. Her breath quickened, and her finger finally grazed some protuberance which she grasped like it was a life preserver. She flipped it up an an overhead light came on.

Sara sighed, then chided herself for feeling so relieved. She tried to remember the Captain’s name.

Captain Prendick. A peculiar name, but a familiar one; Sara recalled it used in an old H.G. Wel horror novel.

Prendick was the ninth person on the boat, and Sara hadn’t seen him lately either. Her only meetin with the man was during their brief but intense negotiation when they arrived at the dock. He wa grizzled, tanned, and wrinkled, with a personality to match, and he argued with Sara about the destination, insisting on taking them someplace closer than Rock Island. He only relented after the agreed to bring his extra handheld marine radio along, in case of emergencies.

Sara wondered where the captain was now. She assumed he was on the bridge, but didn’t kno where to find it. Maybe Martin was with him. Sara wasn’t sure if her desire to speak with Martin w to console him or persuade him. Perhaps both. Or maybe they could simply spend a few momen together without talking. Sara could remember when silence between them was a healthy thing.

A skinny door flew open, and Meadowlark Purcell burst out. Meadow had a pink scar across th bridge of his flattened nose, a disfigurement from when he was *blooded in* to a Detroit street gan The boy narrowed his dark brown eyes at Sara, then smiled in recognition.

“Hey, Sara. I was you, I wouldn’t go in there for a while.” He fanned his palm in front of his nose.

“I’m looking for Martin. Seen him?”

Meadow shook his head. “I be hangin’ with Laneesha and Tyrone, playin’ cards. We gonna be ther soon?”

“Captain said two hours, and we’re getting near that point.”

“True dat?”

“Yes.”

“Cool.”

Meadow wandered off. Sara closed the bathroom door, made her way up another cramped flight o stairs, and found the bridge. Captain Prendick was at the wheel, his potbelly pressed against it, on hand scratching the stubble on his chin. He noticed Sara and gave her a brief nod.

“Have you seen Martin?” Sara asked.

Prendick motioned with his chin. Sara followed the gesture and saw her husband folded up in

chair, legs crossed out in front of him and his eyes closed, chin touching his chest. Sara momentarily forgot everything she wanted to tell him, everything she wanted to say.

“Martin...”

“I’m not up for talking right now, Sara.”

He kept his eyes closed. Jack, hearing his father’s voice, wiggled and cooed.

Sara glanced at Prendick.

“I’m running to the head,” the captain said to Sara as he flipped a switch on the panel, next to a picture of him and an elderly woman. “We’re on autopilot.”

Captain Prendick slid past her, his expression dour. Sara moved closer to Martin, put a hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t,” he said.

“Martin, maybe if we talked about—”

Her husband’s eyelids flipped open. They looked unbelievably sad.

“I love you, Sara.”

Sara felt her chest get heavy. “Martin...”

“Do you know I love you? That I love you and Jack?”

She nodded, unable to answer because of the lump in her throat.

“Then we don’t have anything to talk about.”

Martin held her gaze until his eyes became glassy, and then he closed them again.

Sara wanted to touch his cheek, cup his chin and tell him it was all going to be okay even though it wasn’t. Then she left the bridge and made her way back into the bowels of the boat. She opened the first door she came to. In the darkness she made out the shape of a chubby girl asleep on a narrow bed. Georgia. Sara tried the next door. Another cabin, this one empty. After a brief hesitation, Sara went into the room, pulled the folding bed away from the wall, and sat down, making sure she left the door open.

The waves weren’t as pronounced down here, and the rocking motion was gentler. Sara again thought of her honeymoon with Martin. How, once they got their sea legs, they spent all of their time on the ship, in their tiny little cabin, skipping exotic ports to instead order room service and make love. After a rough beginning, it turned out to be a perfect trip.

Sara checked the door again, rubbed Jack’s back, and closed her eyes, wishing it could be like that again.

“It was a night exactly like tonight, a few years ago,” Martin said. “Late summer. Full moon. Just before midnight. The woods were quiet. Quiet, but not completely silent. It’s never completely silent in the woods. It seems like it is, because we’re all used to the city. But there are always night sounds. Sounds that only exist when the sun goes down and the dark takes over. Everyone shut your eyes and listen for a moment.”

Sara indulged her husband, letting her eyelids close. Gone were the noises so common in Detroit: cars honking, police sirens, arguing drunks and cheering Tigers fans and bursts of live music when bar doors swung open. Instead, here on the island, there were crickets. A breeze whistling through the pines. An owl. The gentle snaps and crackles of the campfire they sat around. Jack’s breath on her neck, slow and steady from sleep.

After a few seconds someone belched.

“My bad,” Tyrone said, raising his hand.

This prompted laughter from almost everyone, Sara included. Martin kept his expression solemn, not breaking character. Seeing Martin like that made Sara remember why she fell in love with him.

Her husband had always been passionate about life, and gave everything his all, whether it was painting the garage, starting a business, or telling silly campfire stories to scare their kids.

Her smile faded. They won't be *their kids* for very much longer.

"It happened on an island," Martin continued. "Just like this one. In fact, now that I think about it, this might actually *be* the island where it all happened."

Tyrone snorted. "This better not be the same island, dog, or my black ass is jumping in that mo lake 'n swimming back to civilization."

More laughter, but this time it was clipped. Uneasy. These teenagers had never been this far from an urban environment, and weren't sure how to act.

Sara shivered, tucking the blanket in around her baby. All the things she wanted to say to Martin earlier were still bottled up inside because she hadn't had the chance. Since the boat dropped them off, it had been all about hiking and setting up camp and eating dinner, and Sara hadn't been able to catch him alone. He'd been intentionally avoiding her, staying busy, keeping that smile on his face like he had been sculpted there.

"Was it really this island?" Laneesha asked. Her voice was condescending, almost defiant. But there was a bit of edge to it, a tiny hint of fear.

"No, it wasn't," Sara said. "Martin, tell her it wasn't."

Martin didn't say anything, but he did give Laneesha a sly wink.

"So where was it?" Georgia asked, though her face showed zero curiosity.

"It wasn't anywhere, Georgia." Sara slapped at a mosquito that had been biting her neck, then wiped the tiny splot of blood onto her jeans. "This is a campfire story. It's made up, to try to scare you."

"It's fake?" Georgia sneered. "Pretend?"

Sara nodded. "Yes, it's pretend. Right, Martin?"

Martin shrugged, still not looking at Sara.

"So what pretend-happened?" Laneesha asked.

"There were eight people." Martin was sitting on an old log, higher up than everyone else. "Camping just like we are. On a night like tonight. On what might be this very island. They vanished. These eight, never to be seen again. But some folks who live around here claim to know what happened. Some say those unfortunate eight people were subjected to things worse than death."

Meadow folded his arms. "Ain't nothin' worse than death."

Martin stared hard at the teenager. "There are plenty of things worse."

No one spoke for a moment. Sara felt a chill. Maybe it was the cool night breeze, whistling through the woods. Or maybe it was Martin's story, which she had to admit was getting sort of creepy. But Sara knew the chill actually went deeper. As normal as everyone seemed right now, it was only an illusion. Their little family was breaking apart.

But she didn't want to think about that. Now, she wanted to enjoy this final camping trip, to make some good memories.

Sara scooted a tiny bit closer to the campfire and put her arms around Jack. The night sky was clear, the stars bright against the blackness of space, the hunter's moon huge and tinged red. Beyond the smoke Sara could smell the pine trees from the surrounding woods, and the big water of Huron, a few hundred yards to the west. As goodbyes went, this was a lovely setting for one.

She let her eyes wander over the group. Tyrone Morrow, seventeen, abandoned by a mother who could no longer control him, running with one of Motor City's worst street gangs for more than two years. Dressed in a hoodie and jeans so baggy they'd fall around his ankles without the belt.

Meadow was on Tyrone's right. He was from a rival Detroit club. That they were sitting next to each other was a commitment from each on how much they wanted out of the gangsta life.

On Meadow's side, holding his hand, Laneesha Simms. Her hair was cropped almost as short as the boys', but her make-up and curves didn't allow anyone to mistake her for a man.

Georgia Dailey sat beside Laneesha. Sixteen, white, brunette, pudgy. She held a long stick and was poking at something on the ground; a dead frog, belly-up with its legs jutting out. Sara thought about saying something, decided to let it go.

Behind Georgia, Tom Gransee predictably paced around the fire, tugging at his wifebeater T like it was an extra skin he wanted to shed.

These were kids society had given up on, sentenced into their care by the courts. But Martin—and by extension, Sara—hadn't given up on them. That was why they created the Second Chance Center.

Sara finally rested her gaze on Martin. The fire flickered across his handsome features, glinted off his blue eyes. He had aged remarkably well, looking closer to twenty than thirty, as athletic as the day she met him in that graduate psych class. She looked down at her son in the baby sling—a miniature version of Martin—and absently rubbed his back.

"On this dark night six years ago," Martin continued, "this group of eight people took a boat on Lake Huron. The SS Minnow."

Sara smiled, knowing she was the only one old enough to have caught the *Gilligan's Island* reference, the boat the castaways had taken on their three hour tour.

"They had some beer with them," Martin said. "Some pot..."

"Hells yeah." Tyrone and Meadow bumped fists.

"...and were set to have a big party. But one of the women—there were four men and four women just like us—got seasick on the lake."

"I hear that." In her oversized jersey and sweatpants, Cindy looked tiny, shapeless. But Sara noted she'd gotten a little bit of her color back.

"So they decided," Martin raised his voice, "to beach the boat on a nearby island, continue the party there. But they didn't know the island's history."

Tom had stopped his pacing and was standing still, rare for him. "What history, Martin?"

Martin smiled. An evil smile, his chin down and his eyes hooded, the shadows drawing out his features and making him look like an angry wolf.

"In 1862, done in secret, Rock Island Prison was built here to house captured Confederate soldiers. Like many civil war prisons, the conditions were horrible. But this one was worse than most. It was run by a war profiteer named Mordecai Plincer. He stole the money that was supposed to be used to feed the prisoners, and ordered his guards to beat them so they wouldn't stage an uprising while they starved to death. He didn't issue blankets, even during the winter months, giving them nothing more to wear than burlap sacks with arm and leg holes cut out, even when temperatures dropped to below freezing."

Sara wasn't a history buff, but she was pretty sure there was never a civil war prison on an island on Lake Huron. She wondered if Martin is using Camp Douglas as the source of this tall tale. It was located in Chicago near Lake Michigan and considered the northern counterpart to the horrors committed at the Confederate prison, Andersonville.

Yes, Martin has to be making this up. Though that name, Plincer, does sound familiar.

Martin tossed one of the branches they'd gathered earlier onto the fire. It made a *whump* sound, throwing sparks and cinders.

"But those starving, tortured prisoners staged a rebellion anyway, killing all of the guards, driving Plincer from the island. The Union, desperate to cover up their mistake, stopped sending supplies. But the strongest and craziest of the prisoners survived. Even though the food ran out."

"How?" Tom asked. "You said there are no animals on this island."

Martin smiled, wickedly. "They survived... *by eating each other.*"

"Oh, snap." Tyrone shook his head. "That shit is sick."

Sara raised an eyebrow at her husband. "Cannibalism, Martin?"

Martin looked at her, for the first time in hours. She searched for some softness, some love, but he was all wrapped up in his menace act.

"Some were cooked. Some were eaten raw. And during the summer months, when meat would spoil, some were kept alive so they could be eaten one piece at a time."

Sara did a quick group check, wondering if this story was getting too intense. Everyone appeared deadly serious, their eyes laser-focused on Martin. No one seemed upset. A little scared, maybe, but these were tough kids. She decided to let Martin keep going.

Martin stood up, spreading out his hands. "Over the last five decades, more than a hundred people have vanished on this part of Lake Huron. Including those eight men and women. What happened to them was truly horrible."

The crickets picked that eerie moment to stop chirping. Sara noticed a brief flash in her peripheral vision. Lightening? No, the weather was fine. Besides, this seemed to have come from the woods. She scanned the woods, waiting for it to happen again. They stayed dark.

Cindy eventually broke the silence. "What happened to them?"

"It's said that these war prisoners became more animal than human, feeding on each other and on those men unlucky enough to visit. Unfortunately for this group of eight partiers, they were all doomed the minute they set foot onto Plincer's Island. When their partying died down, and everyone was drunk and stoned and passing out, the prisoners built a gridiron."

The word *gridiron* hung in the air like a crooked painting, blending into the forest sounds.

Tyrone whispered, "They built a football field?"

Martin shook his head. "The term *gridiron* is used for football these days, but it's a much older word. It was a form of execution in ancient Rome. Coals are spread over the ground, stoked until they're red hot. Then the victim is put in a special iron cage, sort of like a grill, and placed on top of the coals, roasting him alive. Unlike being burned at the stake, which is over in a few minutes, it takes hours to die on the gridiron. They say the liquid in your eyes gets so hot, it boils."

Sara stood up. Martin should have known not to go there with the gore. "I think that's enough, Martin. You've succeeded in freaking everyone out." She forced joviality. "Now who wants to roast some marshmallows?"

"I want to hear what happened to those people," Tom said.

"And I want to be able to sleep tonight," Sara replied.

Sara's eyes met Martin's. She saw intensity there, but also resignation, and something else. Something soft and happy. Eventually his lips curled into a grin.

"But we haven't gotten to the part where I pretend to be dragged off into the woods, kicking and screaming. That's the best part."

Sara placed her hands on her hips, feeling herself smile. "I'm sure we would have all been terrified."

Martin sat back down. "You're the boss. And if the boss wants to do marshmallows, who am I to argue?"

"I thought you're the one who created the Center," Laneesha asked.

Martin glanced at Sara. There was kindness in his eyes, and maybe some resignation, too.

"Sara and I created it together. We wanted to make a difference. The system takes kids who are basically good but made a few mistakes, sticks them into juvee hall, and they come out full blown crooks. The Center is aimed at giving these kids positive direction and helping them to change

Martin smiled sadly. "Well, that was its purpose."

"It's bullshit the man cut your program, Martin." Meadow tossed a stick onto the fire.

"It sucks," Cindy added.

There were nods of agreement. Martin shrugged. "Things like this happen all the time. I'm sorry I couldn't do more for you kids. Sara, Jack, and I are a small family, but you guys are like our—"

Martin screamed in mid-sentence, then fell backward off the log, rolling into the bushes and the darkness.

Sara, like everyone else, jolted at the sound and violent action. Then laughter broke out, followed by a few of the teens clapping.

"That was awesome, Martin!" Tom yelled into the woods. "I think I wet my freakin' pants."

The applause and giggles died down. Jack slept right through it. Sara caressed his head and waited for Martin to lumber out of the woods and take a bow.

But Martin stayed hidden.

"Martin, you can come out now."

Sara listened. The woods, the whole island, stayed deathly quiet.

"Martin? You okay?"

No answer.

"Come on, Martin. Joke's over."

After a moment the crickets began their song again. But there was no response from Martin.

"Fine," Sara called out. "We're not saving you any marshmallows."

Martin apparently didn't care, keeping silent. Sara picked up the bag of marshmallows and began passing them out, the kids busying themselves with attaching the treats to the sticks they'd picked out earlier. Sara kept glancing at the forest, inwardly annoyed.

"Now what?" Tyrone asked, raising his stick like a sword.

"You put it in the fire," Tom said. "Duh."

"Ain't never roasted marshmallows before, white boy."

"It's like this, Tyrone." Sara held her twig six inches above the flame. "Like we did with the hounds. And keep turning it, so it browns evenly on all sides."

Everyone followed her lead. Sara allowed herself a small, private smile. These were the moments they came out here for. Everyone getting along. Criminal pasts momentarily forgotten. Just six kids acting like kids.

"Mine came off," Cindy said. She was sitting so far from the fire it had fallen onto the ground.

"Wouldn't eat it no how. So skinny, oughta change yo name to Annie Rezkic."

"Respect," Sara reminded Meadow.

"Sorry. My bad."

Tyrone pulled his marshmallow out of the fire, blew on it, then offered his stick to Cindy. She took it, plucked off the gooey treat, and popped it into her mouth.

"Georgia. Please stop that."

Georgia had been using her stick to nudge the dead frog into the fire. She gave Sara a blank stare and then jammed a marshmallow onto the tip that had been poking the frog.

There was a comfortable silence. The fire crackled. The crickets chirped. The stars sparkled. Tyrone and Cindy giggled, sharing some private joke.

Sara forced herself to stay in the moment, to not look over her shoulder for Martin. He'd come back when he was ready.

Then she saw another flash in the woods. Tiny and bright, over almost as quick as it began. flashlight?

"I'm on fire." Georgia held her stick and mouth level and blew hard on the burning marshmallow. Then she bit into it carefully. "Mmm. Gooley."

"Like an eyeball on the gridiron." Tom plucked his off the stick and pretended it was oozing out of his eye socket.

"Awful way to die." Cindy hugged her knees. "Guy I knew, had an ice lab in his basement. He died like that. When he was cooking a batch it blew up in his face. Burned him down to the bone."

"You see it?" Tyrone asked.

Cindy glanced at her hands, then nodded.

Tyrone frowned, his face looking ten years older. "Saw a brother die, once. Drive by. Right next door to me. I was eight years old."

"I saw someone die, too," Tom said.

Meadow sneered. "Man, yo grandma doesn't count."

"Does too. I was there. Does it count, Sara?"

"It counts," Sara said. She gave up trying to find the source of the flash and smiled at Tom. "Alright, let's try to talk about something other than death for a while."

"Damn." Tyrone stuck out his tongue. "My shit is burned. Tastes nasty."

"I'll take it." Cindy held out her hand, and Tyrone passed it over.

Sara bit into hers, careful not to drip any on Jack. The perfect combination of sweet and toasty. She loaded up another, then felt her neck prickle, like she was being watched. Sara turned around, peering into the trees. She saw only blackness.

"When is Martin coming back?" Cindy was drawing in the dirt with her stick, making no attempt to replace her lost marshmallow.

"He's probably just beyond the trees," Sara said. "Waiting to jump out and scare us again."

"What if someone grabbed him?"

"Cindy, no one grabbed him. We're the only ones on this island."

"You sure?"

Sara made an exaggerated motion out of crossing her heart. "And hope to die."

"What if he had an accident?" Cindy persisted. "Maybe hit his head on a rock or something?"

Sara pursed her lips. There was a slight chance, but it could have happened.

"Meadow, can you go check?"

Meadow made a face. "You want me to go in those woods so he can jump out 'n scare the soul out of my brother? No way."

Sara sighed, and just for the sake of argument she let her imagination run unchecked. What if Martin's little stunt really had gone wrong and he'd hurt himself? What if he'd fallen into a hole? What if a bear got him? There wasn't supposed to be any bear on this island; according to Google there wasn't supposed to be any animal here larger than a raccoon. But what if Google was wrong?

She frowned. Her imagination had won. Even if this was a stupid trick on Martin's part, Sara still had to go check.

"Fine. I'll do it." She got up, handed her marshmallow to Cindy, and dusted off her jeans, staring into the darkness of the woods surrounding them.

And the woods were dark. Very dark.

The confidence Sara normally wore like a rain coat fell away, and she realized the very last thing she wanted to do was tread into that darkness.

"Tom, can you help me look?"

Tom shook his head. "He can stay out there. I'm not leaving the fire."

"Ain't got no balls, white boy?"

"Why don't you go then, Meadow?"

"Hells no. At this particular time, Laneesha be holding my balls."

Laneesha rolled her eyes and stood up. "Y'all are cowards. C'mon, Sara. We'll go find him."

Sara blew out the breath she'd been holding, surprised by how grateful she was for the girl's offer.

"There's a flashlight in one of the packs. I'll get it."

She walked over to her tent and ducked inside. It was dim, but the fire provided enough illumination to look around. Sara cast a wistful glance at the double sleeping bag. She tugged her eyes away, then located the backpack. While pawing through the contents she removed a canteen, a first aid kit, some wool socks, a bottle of Goniosol medication, a hunting knife, the papers...

Sara squinted at them, staring at the bottom of the last page. Unsigned. Irritated, she shoved them back in. She eventually dug out the Maglite, pressing the button on the handle. The light came on. It was yellowish and weak—which annoyed Sara even more because she had asked Martin to buy new batteries and he'd promised to take care of it.

But he also promised to love, honor, and protect.

Putting the papers out of her mind for the time being, she left the tent and joined Laneesha, who was staring into the woods where Martin disappeared.

"You takin' Jack?" Laneesha asked.

Sara looked down. She was so used to wearing the baby sling she sometimes forgot she had it on.

"He goes where I go."

As a shower gift, Sara and Martin had been given a baby monitor. It was in a closet, unopened. Since giving birth to Jack, Sara hadn't ever been more than fifteen feet away from him. And though putting Jack in his portable crib and letting Cindy or Tyrone watch him was a possibility, it was a far fetched one.

"Besides," Sara said. "If Martin sees I have Jack, maybe he'll quit screwing around."

They headed for the trees where Martin disappeared.

"If you run into any cannibals," Tom said to their backs, "don't tell them we're here."

"That's weak," Laneesha said.

Sara eyed the girl, normally cocky and busting with attitude, and saw uncertainty all over her young face.

"The story was fake, Laneesha."

"That Plincer cat ain't real?"

"He might be real. The name is familiar. But the way to make campfire stories sound believable is to mix a little truth with the lies."

"How 'bout all them cannibal soldiers, eating people?"

"Even if that was true, and it wasn't, it happened over a hundred and forty years ago. They'd all be long dead."

"So Martin was just joshin'?"

"He's probably just waiting to jump out and scare us," Sara said.

"Proibly. That'd suck, but be better than someone grabbing him."

Sara raised an eyebrow. That possibility was so far out she hadn't even considered it. "Did you see someone grab him?"

"It was dark, 'n he was right in front of that bush. Thought maybe I seen somethin', but proibly just my mind playing tricks 'n shit."

Now Sara was *really* reluctant to go into the woods. She knew the Confederate story was BS, b

wondered if perhaps someone else was on the island. According to Captain Prendick, no one ever came out this far.

“That’s crazy,” Sara thought. *“There’s no one here but us.”*

There were over a hundred of these islands on Lake Huron, from the size of a football field up to thousands of acres. This was one of the big ones, a supposed wildlife refuge. But there was no electricity, and it was too far from the mainland for there to be anyone living here.

Other campers?

Sara reminded herself to be rational. Occam’s Razor. The simplest solution was usually the right one. Martin joking around made much more sense than unknown habitants, or coincidental camper or old Warden Plincer and his ghostly gang of southern maniacs.

Still, they did have that radio the boat captain lent them. Sara wondered if her husband goofing off qualified as an emergency, because she was almost ready to contact Prendick and beg him to return.

“Let’s do this,” Laneesha said.

Sara nodded. Practically hip to hip, the women walked around the bushes and stepped into the thick of the woods.

They were watching. They were watching from behind the trees. Listening to words that made no real sense to them.

They smelled things. The woman smelled like soap. The thin girl smelled like mint gum. The thin boy smelled like sweaty feet. The baby smelled like powder and diapers.

There had been other smells, earlier. Better smells. Hot dogs and mustard. Toasted buns. Potato chips. But that had been earlier, when it was still bright out. So they waited. Stayed hidden. Bided their time.

They were hungry. Very hungry. The hunger consumed their thoughts. It was the only thing they cared about. All they cared about.

They had no affection for one another, no idea of how many of them were there. But they hunted as a pack. Hunted raccoon, and birds, and rabbits, and frogs.

Hunted bigger things, too.

When food was scarce, they turned on their own.

None of them remembered how they got to the island. But they knew the island was a bad place. Dangerous.

But they were dangerous too.

They watched. They waited.

Several of them drooled.

Very soon, they would attack.

Sara drew a breath, gasping at the darkness. When they’d hiked to the clearing earlier that afternoon, the woods had been dark. There were so many trees the canopy blocked out most of the sun. Now, at midnight, it was darker than a grave. The blackness enveloped them, thick as ink, and the fading Maglite barely pierced it more than a few yards.

“Be easy getting lost out here,” Laneesha said.

Sara played the light across the trees, looking for the neon orange ribbon. They’d tied dozens of ribbons around tree trunks, in a line leading from the campsite to the shore, so anyone who got lost could find their way back. But in this total darkness every tree looked the same, and she couldn’t find a single ribbon. Sara had a very real fear that if they traveled too far into the woods, they wouldn’t be able to find their way back to the rest of the group. After only a dozen steps she could no longer see

the campfire behind them.

“Cindy, Meadow, can you guys hear me?” she called out.

“We hear you! You find any cannibals yet?”

Neither Sara nor Laneesha shared in the ensuing chuckles. They trekked onward, dead leaves and branches crunching underfoot, an owl hooting somewhere in the distance.

Sara had been ambivalent about camping, having only gone a few times in her life. But now she realized she hated it. Hated camping, hated the woods, and hated the dark.

But she had always hated the dark. And with damn good reason.

“Martin,” Sara called, projecting into the woods, “this isn’t funny. It’s stupid, and dangerous.”

She waited for a reply.

No reply came.

“I like Martin,” Laneesha said, “but screw ‘em. I’m a city girl. I don’t do creeping ‘round the forest at night. This is a total wack idea.”

Sara agreed. There was no hole or trench around here he could have fallen into, and if Martin hit his head he’d be lying nearby.

Still, if this was a prank, it was being taken too far. It wasn’t funny anymore. It was just plain mean.

And then Sara understood what was happening, and she felt her face flush.

Her husband was doing this because he was angry.

Is this how it’s going to be? Sara thought. Rather than act like the caring adult she fell in love with, he’s going to start behaving like a jerk? Was he actually trying to frighten her, knowing what she’d been through?

Well, Sara could be a jerk, too.

“You can stay out there!” she yelled.

Her voice echoed through the trees, fading and dying. Then...

“elll...”

The sound was faint, coming from far ahead of them.

“Was that Martin?” Laneesha asked.

Sara squinted, crinkling her nose. “I’m not sure. Could have been an animal.”

“Sounded like *help*. Know any animals that call for help?”

“Martin!” Sara shouted into the trees.

There was no answer. Laneesha moved closer to Sara, so close Sara could feel the girl shivering.

“We should go back.”

Sara shook her head. “What if it’s Martin? He could need help.”

“You the social worker. Y’all good at helping people. I’m a single mom. I gotta take care of myself for my baby’s sake. ‘Sides, probly just an animal.

“help...” The voice was still faint, but there was no mistaking it.

Martin. And he didn’t sound angry. He sounded scared.

Sara began to walk toward the voice. “You go back to camp,” she said to Laneesha. “Martin! I’m coming!”

The trees were so thick Sara couldn’t walk in a straight line for more than a few steps. Even worse, the Maglite was getting dimmer. How far ahead could he be? Fifty yards? A hundred? The woods seemed to be closing in, swallowing her up. There was no orange ribbon anywhere.

She stopped, trying to get her bearings. Sara couldn’t even be sure this was the right direction anymore.

A rustling noise, to her left. Sara turned.

“Martin?”

Then something bumped into Sara’s side, something strong enough to knock her onto her back. Scared Sara so bad she whimpered, feeling nine-years-old again, helpless and afraid.

Whatever unknown thing had jumped her, it was now straddling her legs, wriggling and thrashing.

And Sara had no idea what it was, couldn’t see it, because the flashlight had gone flying and winked out.

When Cindy was a little girl, she wanted to be a princess. It was partly because princesses were pretty, and had nice clothes, and lived in huge castles. No one ever called Cindy pretty, and her clothes were all her parents could afford, which wasn’t much, and she lived in an apartment which was so small you could hear the toilet flush no matter what room you were in. So being pretty, with beautiful gowns, and a house with a hundred rooms, all sounded really good to a seven-year-old.

Meeting a prince would be nice, too. But Cindy didn’t really have any interest in boys then, and in fact she was jealous that princes got to do cool stuff like fight dragons and rescue people. Cindy didn’t need someone to rescue her. She wanted to fight her own dragons, thank you very much.

The biggest reason, the *real* reason, Cindy wanted to be a princess was because a princess would someday become queen. Queens ruled the country. They were the most powerful women in the world, even more powerful than the President, because there had never been a woman President, but there had been many queens.

Cindy wanted to be a princess who grew up to be a queen so she could take care of herself. She wouldn’t have to worry if Daddy made enough money to buy her new clothes, because she would buy her own. She wouldn’t care that Mommy wasn’t there for her after school, because Queens could take care of themselves, and it didn’t matter if their mommies had to work nights.

Yes, Cindy would settle for no less than princess, and then queen. She would be a good queen, to protect and treat everyone fairly, and make sure everyone had enough food and toys and clothes and shelter. She wouldn’t make working at nighttime against the law because it made people sleepy and mean.

When she told Daddy, he said regular girls couldn’t be princesses, and they’d never be queens because you had to be born that way. But it was okay to pretend. Sometimes, when you can’t get what you really want, the only thing left was to pretend.

“Where’s the bathroom?” Cindy stood up, sucked on her lower lip.

“Girl, you kidding, right?”

Cindy looked at Meadow and shook her head.

Tom snorted. “We’re in the middle of nowhere. The whole damn island is your toilet. Pick a tree.”

Cindy stared into the woods, shifting from one foot to the other. She really had to go. And when she had to go, there was no holding it in. The crystal meth she loved so much had damaged her kidney, and Cindy knew that if she didn’t find a spot in the next minute or two, Meadow would make fun of her for pissing her pants. He was bad enough on the boat when she was throwing up, laughing and making gagging sounds. That guy was a real dick.

She weighed that humiliation against heading into those scary trees alone, and wasn’t sure which was worse.

“Go with me, Georgia?”

“I go wit you, baby, help you take off those clothes.” Meadow laughed. So did Tom. Tyrone kept quiet.

Cindy looked hard at Georgia. “Please.”

Georgia sighed. “Number one or number two?”

This prompted more guffaws from Meadow and Tom.

“Number one. I’ll be really quick.”

Georgia stared into the blackness of the forest, but didn’t get up.

Maybe she was scared, too.

“I’ll go with you.” Tyrone stood up. He looked sympathetic.

“Jonesin’ for some white meat, homes?” Meadow nudged him. “Polly wanna cracker?”

“Be cool, man. The lady needs to go.”

Cindy appreciated the gesture, and if it had been another guy she might have taken him up on it. But she liked Tyrone. Earlier on the boat, he stood by her when she was puking her guts out, even holding her hair back. That was embarrassing enough. She didn’t want to have to pee in front of him, too.

“Thanks,” Cindy said. “But I’d rather have a girl go with me.”

She met Tyrone’s eyes, saw kindness there. Kindness, and something more. He nodded at her, and sat back down. Cindy turned again to Georgia.

“Please,” Cindy begged. “I’m gonna wet my pants.”

“I pay money to see that,” Meadow snickered.

Cindy looked from Georgia to Meadow and back again. Mercifully, Georgia got up.

Cindy rushed to her, grabbed her hand, and tugged her over to the tree line. Not in the direction Martin went. The opposite direction. That seemed safer.

“Look at those bitches go, holdin’ hands ‘n shit. That’s hot.”

Georgia halted, turned around. “Fuck you, Meadow.”

“You wish, mama. Maybe when you come back, I give you a chance.” He added, “If you come back.”

Meadow and Tom laughed. Tyrone stayed silent.

“Come on.” Cindy pulled at Georgia. She felt like she was about to burst. “We gotta hurry.”

Georgia followed. It became very dark, very fast, but Cindy forced her fear back, her whole body shaking with need. As soon as she was out of the boys’ sight she yanked down her sweat pants and underwear and squatted.

“Geez, gimme a little warning,” Georgia said, stepping away.

Cindy urinated, her relief so beautiful it was almost as good as getting high. The spray splashed against the leaves, droplets landing on her gym shoes, but she didn’t care. She closed her eyes and sighed, deeply, almost enjoying the cool night air on her naked butt.

Less than a dozen feet away, something flashed.

What’s that?

Cindy wondered if it was Sara, with the flashlight. Or maybe Martin.

But they’d gone in the other direction.

Cindy continued to watch, waiting for the light to flash again.

“I think I see someone in the woods,” Georgia said softly.

Cindy clenched. Her arms and legs broke out in gooseflesh. “That’s not funny.”

“I’m serious.”

Cindy couldn’t tell if the girl was kidding or not. Georgia was a strange one, and she had a mean streak.

“Where?” Cindy whispered.

“Oh, God.” Georgia’s eyes got wide, staring at something over Cindy’s shoulder. “He’s right behind you.”

Cindy jerked upright, cutting off the stream and tugging up her pants. She spun around, looking

where Georgia was looking.

Nothing there.

Backing up, Cindy knocked into Georgia, who was quivering with laughter.

It was just a dumb joke.

Cindy made a fist and smacked Georgia on the shoulder. Not hard, but enough to show this wasn't funny. "You ass," she hissed. "You freaking scared me."

Georgia smiled. "Scared the piss out of you?"

Cindy wanted to be mad, but a giggle came out. Aside from Tyrone, Cindy wasn't really friends with anyone at the Center. Georgia wasn't really friend material, and they wouldn't be buddies out in the Real World, but at the moment it felt pretty good to share a laugh.

"Hey," Georgia whispered, leaning closer. "Want to scare those dicks?"

She jerked her thumb in the direction of the camp. Cindy nodded. Frightening the boys was less than they deserved, but it was a good start.

"How?"

Georgia reached into her pocket, and for a fantastic moment Cindy hoped Georgia was carrying what she was taking out a pipe and they'd smoke some ice right now. But the fantasy died when Georgia pulled some ketchup packets from her jeans. How could she have gotten meth anyway? Cindy'd been at the Center for four months, and security was tighter there than it was in rehab.

Besides, Cindy thought, I'm done with that shit.

Cindy had been clean for months, and wanted to stay clean for the rest of her life. Maybe there would even come a day when she didn't think about meth every few minutes. That would be nice.

"We gonna throw ketchup at them?"

Georgia shook her head. "I took these from the fridge, hoping I'd get a chance to use them. I squirted it all over my face and shirt like blood, coming running out of the woods screaming, and fall right in front of those jerks. Then you come up from behind and yell and grab them. They'll shit squirrels."

Cindy nodded, liking this idea. She especially wanted to freak out that tool, Meadow.

"What do I yell?"

Georgia shrugged. "I dunno. Boo?"

"Boo is lame."

"You'll think of something. Help me spread this shit on."

The ketchup was warm, and smelled good. For dinner they cooked hot dogs over the fire, but Cindy declined, saying she was still ill from the boat to avoid admitting the real reason. Now her stomach rumbled at the scent. Cindy smeared some ketchup on Georgia's neck, then licked her finger. Not bad. Maybe there were hotdogs left. Maybe Tyrone was hungry, too, and he could roast one for her.

Stupid. He watched me barf. He's not interested.

But he did give me his marshmallows...

Georgia stopped applying ketchup to her face and stared at Cindy in a funny way.

No, not *at* her. *Behind* her.

"Lemme guess," Cindy said, still sucking her finger. "Some creepy guy behind me again?"

Georgia opened her mouth, but no words came out. She nodded, her head bobbing up and down rapidly.

"I'm not falling for that shit twice, Georgia. It wasn't funny the first time."

Georgia's lips began to tremble, her face crinkling in a prelude to a scream. Cindy had no idea Georgia was such a good actress. She hadn't been this good the previous time.

And for that very reason, Cindy suddenly understood this wasn't acting. Georgia really was seeing something behind her, and she really was terrified.

Cindy didn't want to look. The fear crawled over her like ants, and her legs felt like they weighed a thousand pounds. ~~Georgia had lost all color now, and she was whimpering like a puppy.~~

Look. You have to look. Just do it.

Eyes wide, mouth dry, knees knocking together, Cindy slowly turned around, expecting to see some horrible ghoul with huge teeth grinning inches from her face.

She looked.

There was nothing. There was nothing there at all.

Cindy spun, pissed off she fell for the same trick twice, ready to give Georgia another cuff on the shoulder.

But Georgia was gone.

Sara frantically pushed against the person pinning her legs. She knew judo. Hell, she taught her kids basic self-defense at the Center. But with a baby strapped to her chest—a baby that was not squirming and crying—all Sara could do was push.

She felt breasts beneath her palms, a neck and chin, and higher up, closely-cropped hair.

“Laneesha?”

“Sara!” The teen's breath was warm on Sara's face, and then she was rolling off. “Couldn't find my way back, so I ran toward the flashlight. What happen to it?”

Sara tried to get her breathing under control. The darkness screamed at her, making her voice sound hollow, far away. “It... flew into the woods.”

“Shit. Dark as hell out here. Feels like we got swallowed up by somethin'.”

Sara sat up, heart hammering, squinting into the blackness all around them. “It's a Maglite.” She forced herself to swallow, her fingers absently digging into one of the sling's pockets and finding the pacifier, which she popped into Jack's mouth. “Those things don't switch off accidentally. It probably rolled under some leaves so we can't see it.”

“So how we find it?”

“Couldn't have gone far. You stay where you are, keep talking to me. I'll go around you and feel for it. Can you hold Jack?”

“Yeah.”

Sara pulled him out of his sling, handing him carefully over to Laneesha. Without him next to her belly, Sara felt even more frightened.

“You gotta talk to me, or I'm gonna freak out.”

Me, too. But I can do this.

Sara crawled off, slowly circling the girl. By judging where Laneesha's voice was coming from, she should be able to cover the area in a widening spiral, without missing any spots or getting lost. theory, at least.

“If y'all remembered, I voted for horseback riding for our last trip, not camping on some scary island. I've never been on a horse before. That will be one of the first things I do when I get out juvee. Sara, you there?”

“I'm here.” The ground was rough under Sara's palms, sticks and rocks poking her, cold dirt wedging beneath her fingernails. She went counter-clockwise, gradually orbiting away from Laneesha.

“I don' wanna go to juvee, Sara. I feel like I been making progress, y'know?”

Sara couldn't hold the darkness back. She had to focus on something else. On finding the light. On finding Martin. On Laneesha.

Focus on Laneesha. Be there for her.

“You're doing great, Laneesha.”

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