

THE WOODS

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Like many teenagers, Vanessa Mentone had gone to college to escape her home and town where she had spent the last 18 years of her life. She didn't really want to be in school, she just didn't want to be home either. Her friends were either working dead-end jobs or leading dead-end lives back in her hometown. When she got a scholarship to the college hours away from her house, she jumped at the chance. All she had to do was volunteer her time to charities and soup kitchens and keep a "C" average and her schooling was paid for. She had gotten a job in the college town for the summer and managed to pay for a sublet so she didn't have to return home. She loved her family, but she hated small-town life. It just wasn't for her. She had met David during her first week of classes. They were dating by the second week of classes. By the third week, they were having sex and by the fourth week, she was in love. Things tend to move quickly when you're only 19.

He was a track star and had a partial scholarship as well. He was also your typical alpha male jock, except he wasn't at the same time. He played hard and played to win, but he was also sensitive and caring at the same time and nothing like the adolescent boys she had known back home. He was a year older than her and in many ways, he was much older than her. He held doors for her and brought her flowers. He even made her soup when she was sick. There was no question in her mind, he was the one. She was as positive as a love struck, naïve 19 year old girl can possibly be. His name was David Grace. There was no doubt in David's mind as to what he was going to do once he graduated. He was going to be a Game Warden for the Fish and Wildlife Dept, that's why the four of them were on this weekend trip.

The other two were Bryce and Lee Anne. They were a couple as well. She didn't know them very well, but from what she had seen, she liked them. Bryce and David had known each other since grade school. He hooked up with Lee Anne at the college. The four of them were on a mission to explore the forest and take some kind of readings from the insect traps set by their ecology professor. They had to spend three days in the forest, with two overnights. The three of them could hardly wait. Vanessa didn't share their enthusiasm. She had grown up in the country and had spent more than her fair share of time in the southern Ohio woods. It was full of whackos and meth labs. Not exactly her idea of a romantic weekend. Why they all had to go, she didn't understand. She had the chance to be alone with David in the woods and he decided to bring along his best friend. It made no sense to her. It was like having to share a birthday party with someone else.

The Wayne National Forest was small compared to others, but once you entered, you would never realize it. She watched the cars and houses thin out until there was almost nothing but grass and trees. No telephone poles, no nothing. This section of the forest was about a hundred and fifty thousand acres. If you got lost, you were really screwed. Cell phone service was spotty. David and his ecology class had been out here last year to set the traps and gauges. He said once

you were about a mile into the forest, he lost cell phone service. Vanessa just had to have cell phone service or at least some way to communicate. She had more time in the woods than the two of them put together and knew how scary it can be when you're miles from civilization and have an emergency. Her father had been hunting one year and had twisted his ankle. Thankfully he had cell phone service and her family was able to find him, but even that took over a day and he was still on a dirt road, not miles away like they were. David and Bryce were from Cleveland. The only woods they ever saw were on TV. She aired her concerns to David last night as they were packing.

"Babe, relax....that's why I bought these, the handhelds. We can talk to each other anytime we want. They're good for up to thirty miles." said David holding up the small walkie-talkies.

Vanessa knew from experience that they were good for about one or two miles in the woods, tops. It was better than nothing, but still not ideal.

"These have an emergency signal that can lock onto and find us. Relax, we'll be fine. It's southern Ohio, not the middle of nowhere." he said as he zipped his backpack.

The problem was, that even though it was just southern Ohio, it was a very rural part of the state. Not much down there. A village or hamlet every so often, but emergency services were another story.

"Look, our problem is going to be keeping those damn Forest Service Rangers from busting us. They actually made us empty our bags to check for booze and drugs the last time we came here. Unbelievable!"

Vanessa had to wonder just what David thought he would be doing once he was a Game Warden. Did he think he was just going to catch poachers and bust cooks? Most of his time would be spent shaking down law-abiding citizens to fund his retirement and justify his position.

Fortunately, the weather was going to be nearly perfect. Daytime highs in the mid-70s, with night-time lows in the mid-40s. Might be a little chilly, but nothing she couldn't handle. As long as it didn't rain, they would be fine. A quick check of the weather showed a 20 percent chance of showers. That meant an 80 percent chance of no showers. She could live with that. She knew how nasty the woods could be even with just a little rain. Vanessa didn't do nasty or unpleasant. That was simply *verboten*.

They needed a fire permit from the Ranger's Office. It was ten dollars. The Forest Service Ranger looked like he was just shy of eighty. It took him nearly five minutes to give David his change.

"Where you folks headed?" the old man asked.

"To the creek area about five miles north of here. The wash area that the school uses to study insect populations. I get to read the results of the traps. Why anyone would care how many bugs there are in the woods I have no idea, but I guess it matters to somebody." said David.

"I see.....you know kids, I hear it's supposed to rain tomorrow. The ground up there is pretty tough to navigate even when it's dry. You guys might want to think about coming back on a drier day." the old man said

"I think we can handle a little rain. No, we have to go this weekend, otherwise the results are invalid. Year-to-year readings. Anything else gets discarded."

"Right. Well, if you folks need assistance, don't hesitate to call. We're always ready to help, even if you just get scared or something. Don't hesitate to call."

"Right.....thank you. I think we'll be ok." said David as he and Bryce left the Ranger Station.

"The hell was that all about?" said Bryce.

"Who knows? He must think we've never spent any time in the great outdoors before." said David.

"We really haven't. We went camping in Boy Scouts, but that's about it."

"Bryce, it's southern Ohio, not Alaska. All you have to do is walk for a few miles and you're bound to run into something. A camp or house or farm. Most of the land in the forest is privately owned.

"I hope we don't run into any pot farmers or tweakers. That could get ugly."

"We might run into a few deer, or maybe even a few raccoons. I didn't see one person on our trip out here last year. The traps are right off the main trailhead. So is the campsite. Only an idiot would get lost out here." said David.

"If you say so," said Bryce.

Bryce remembers vividly years ago when he and David and another camper got separated from the group at Scout camp. That forest was a fraction of the size of this one. Everyone panicked, except David, who just told them to stay put, somebody was bound to find us. Sure enough, an hour later, someone did. That was the longest hour of Bryce's 12-year-old life. It got dark and the temperature dropped like a rock. He recalls not being able to see more than two feet in front of him. Once the sun went down, the woods became its own monster. You may as well be blind. Fortunately, they were able to make a call on their cell phone and David's father was able to calm them down. David thought the whole thing was almost funny. Bryce didn't see it the same way. That was the moment he knew that David would always be the one to wear the pants in their relationship. David would be the one to wear the pants in just about any relationship he was involved in. He always wore the pants, that's just who he was.

It took about half an hour after they had parked, but by noon time, the four of them were well on their way to the area they needed to be inside the forest. Ten minutes after leaving the parking area, they were surrounded by trees and nature. They couldn't hear anything except for the birds.

"I got a text from the Professor's TA, James. I guess he's going to set up camp in that small clearing next to the traps we set. He's pretty cool. Maybe he's got some weed with him." said David.

For a guy who wanted to get into Law enforcement, particularly pointless law enforcement, David did like to break the rules. He loved drinking and weed. He once said that drug dealers should all be rounded up and shot, but apparently, legal drug dealers were ok. Didn't make much sense to Vanessa, but she knew not to interrupt David's rants. Once he got started, it was best to let him go until he was through.

They took only the bare essentials which were basically food and beer. Lugging around the cooler was not easy. Bryce had one of the wheels he could tow behind him, but that only worked on a smooth surface, not on a trailhead with dirt and rocks. She had pointed out that instead of beer, they should probably bring just bottled water, but it fell on deaf ears. Going camping without alcohol was just plain silly. The fact that none of them were actually old enough to drink, didn't seem to matter either, at least not David and Bryce. Laws were for other people, not them. That's how they saw most of these types of situations.

The four spent the next two hours walking up and down the small dirt road. They passed by a couple walking their dog and an older man walking with a large walking stick. That was it. They never saw another person. It was as if the entire world had vanished and it was just the four of them.

The plan was to make it to the research area by nightfall, then camp out and head back the next day. They had given themselves another day, just in case something went wrong and they couldn't read the traps correctly. The plan was to only spend one overnight in the woods. It would be a very long two days, but it could be done. She certainly wasn't going to protest. The sooner she got out of here and got into a hot shower, the better. This was not her jam. She was just being a good girlfriend. She wanted David to see that she could hold her own and wouldn't go all "girl" on him when things got rough. She had been hunting and scouting with her father when she was younger and was no stranger to the outdoors. She knew how fun and also how punishing it could be. Her father had nearly died when he accidentally hit a bee's nest with his quad. Had he not been on it, he would probably have died. The woods didn't care if you lived or died. You were playing its game, by its own rules.

They stopped twice for a water break. Bryce had lost service on his cell phone. Lee Anne's was spotty as was hers. The National Forest Service had some kind of rule against cell towers in the forest, so the service was unreliable.

It wouldn't be too much longer and none of them would have any service at all.

She didn't know Lee Anne very well. She packed way too much stuff and didn't seem too pleased at all about being out here. She was still wearing her makeup and trying to look good for Bryce. Vanessa figured this was probably her first time in the woods and would likely be her last. She was wearing a tee shirt and put on tons of bug spray. Vanessa had kept most of her body under a layer of clothes, even if it was uncomfortable. The bugs had a hard time getting under her clothing. With all the diseases mosquitoes carry nowadays, you could never be too careful. She

was slowing them down as well. She was wearing sneakers and not walking shoes or hiking boots. Her feet were probably killing her and it wasn't going to get any better. Vanessa had tried to give her some advice, but she was a year older than Vanessa, so she obviously knew better. They kept walking, with her and David up ahead and Bryce and Lee Anne a ways behind them. They had gone nearly four miles when disaster struck. There had been so much rain, it had washed out the trailhead. The river was overflowing, causing it to go over the trail. It was several feet deep. Too deep to try and cross. Their packs were water resistant, not waterproof. David threw his hands up in the air in total despair.

"You've got to be kidding me! The trail is washed over and that old bastard never said anything?" he said throwing his hands up in the air.

"I know.....what an asshole," added Bryce.

"The hell are we going to do now?" asked David, sitting on a nearby rock.

"We'll have to find a place where the water thins out and we can cross. Nothing else we can do," said Vanessa.

"Bryce, I'm not getting wet. You never said I had to cross a river," added Lee Anne looking mighty upset.

"Relax babe. You won't have to get wet. I'm sure we can cross it and still stay dry.

David and Vanessa went off the trail, up some rocks to have a look. The water was flowing downwards and the river seemed wider the further they went. It was no use. They were going to have to turn around and find another way. Vanessa pulled out a forest map and looked for a way to cross.

"I need a beer," he said and headed back to the others.

Vanessa put the map away and followed behind. She knew he was pissed, but she also knew him well enough to know to let him be in charge and make the decision, or at least to let him think he was in charge.

Just as they entered the clearing, David's face lit up, when he saw that James was sitting on a rock with the other two drinking a beer. David walked over to him and gave him a high five.

"What's up, man? How are you?" he asked

"David! Good to see you. Can you believe this? Hey, don't worry, I found a way across, it's a bit of a hike, but I think we can all stay dry." he said chugging his beer.

"No shit? Sounds good to me, just lead the way."

"We gotta go through some thick brush. I didn't see any poison ivy, but make sure you are all wearing pants and completely covered. You don't want to get poison ivy on you out here."

She could see Lee Anne was none too pleased about having to really get into the thick of the woods, but it was this or nothing. James took the lead and led the group through some trees and into the brush. She could hear the water, it got louder and louder, which meant that the river was getting narrower. She saw the rocks and the quarry up ahead. They spent the next half hour walking. David stopped when he saw that a large tree had fallen over a group of rocks making a perfect bridge to the other side.

"James.....why don't we just cross here?" asked David.

James had this weird look on his face. He suddenly went from his carefree self to someone much more serious. She had never seen James like this before.

"NO!.....I mean not there. No, we definitely don't want to cross there. It turns into a marsh on the other side. That's not where you want to cross, believe me."

"No, it doesn't. It goes uphill? How is there a marsh on the other side? Look, James, I can even see the trail from here. No, this is definitely where you want to cross."

"James.....you don't want to cross there, okay? Just trust me on this one, please?" he said with a note of desperation in his voice.

"James, we're crossing. I'm done with all these mosquitoes. I must have like ten bites on me. You know what those little fuckers are going to do to my skin." said Lee Anne, who broke off and started making her way down to the rocks.

She had never seen James like this before. He had this completely blank look on his face. He had gotten very serious. He wasn't screwing around. She just couldn't figure out why he didn't want them to cross there. It seemed to be the perfect place to cross. He didn't even follow the group. David stopped in the middle of the fallen tree and looked back at him.

"Are you coming or aren't you?" he said

James reluctantly followed the group and crossed the tree with them. As soon as the group had crossed the river and made their way up and over the rocks, they saw it. It seemed totally out of place in this massive forest, but there it was. It was a cemetery or at least the remains of it. She looked back and saw James frozen at the edge of the rocks that led into the small cemetery. It was like he didn't want to enter.

"What's the matter?" asked Bryce.

"Nothing.....I'm coming," he said

"Why is there a cemetery way out here?" asked Lee Anne.

"Look at the dates on these. 1867. Yeah, they all have the same date. What the hell is this place James?"

"It's a cemetery."

"Well no shit I can see that, but why out here?"

"I don't know. I guess this is where they ended up." he said

"Is this why you didn't want to cross here? Why can't we cross a cemetery? They're dead. What the hell are they gonna care?" asked David.

"It's an old Indian cemetery. It's where the Shawnee Indians buried their dead," he said with a blank look on his face.

"Cool. I gotta get some pictures," said Bryce.

"NO!.....look, let's just get out of here," said James as he walked quickly past the gravesites. Everyone just looked at one another with a confused look on their faces. They didn't protest and a few minutes later were back on the trail. Half an hour later, they were at the research station. It had a makeshift canopy with a tarp over it. The traps were laid out fifty feet from one another. The bugs were supposed to be caught in the traps. Based on how many bugs were caught in the traps, they were supposed to make a determination as to how many total bugs were in the area. The bee population had been steadily declining for years, but last year, it exploded. If you are into biology or entomology, this was a very big deal. David and Bryce just wanted an easy "A" from their professor for volunteering their services so they could blow off the rest of the class. Vanessa carefully watched James. As important as these traps were to his career and schoolwork, he didn't even seem to care about them. He just kept looking around the campsite, as if he were waiting for someone to show up.

It was nearly dark as the group finished the campsite. Vanessa and David made a fire and everyone settled in for the evening. David's normal bedtime was like midnight, so she knew there was no way he was going to pass out. She made sure they had enough wood to get through the night, then she cracked open a beer. She couldn't believe that Bryce had managed to carry that giant cooler this far through the woods and over a makeshift bridge. When Bryce needed a beer, he needed a beer.

James was unusually silent for most of the evening. He was normally very sociable and loved to gossip about many of the faculty members at the college. She suspected he also had a thing for Lee Anne and more than once she had caught him staring at her when Bryce wasn't watching. She had also caught Lee Anne staring back at him. That was one drama fest she could definitely do without. Bryce was normally very cool and fun to be around, but when he was drunk, he could become very unpredictable.

He just said nothing and sat staring into the fire. Finally, Bryce confronted him and asked him why he was so upset.

"Come on man, you haven't said barely two words since we went into that cemetery. Did you know those people or something?" he asked

"No....no of course not. They've been dead for a hundred and fifty-four years. How could I?"

"Well, something sure has you spooked. What is it?" asked David as he put his beer down and put the hot dogs on the grill.

"It's nothing.....honestly, I don't even know why I'm letting it bother me."

"What is it?"

"Well, last year, I came out here with Professor Rosenthal. We set the traps, most of them, then you guys went out with him and set the rest. It was lame, nice guy, but super boring. Wouldn't drink or smoke. Anyway on the way back, he stops and pulls me aside. He's like super serious all of a sudden. I'd never seen him like that before. He takes me over to that cemetery and says to never, under any circumstances enter that cemetery. He said the entire area is cursed."

"Cursed? What do you mean cursed?" asked Lee Anne

"Well, right after the Civil War, the government rounded up all the Shawnee Indians and forced them to relocate to Oklahoma. Broke all these Peace Treaties they signed. Basically forced them to leave at gunpoint to make room for the white settlers. Well a small group of them refused to leave. Put up quite a fight. When they finally surrendered, there were only about forty of them left. Women, children, and about a dozen or so men. The Army just killed all of them. Told them they were being loaded up on wagons, but they had killed so many Army troops, that the General just shot them. All of them. Women and children included. Took their bodies and buried them out here in the middle of nowhere where no one would care. I guess this shaman or medicine man cursed all of them with the last breath in his dying body. Said that anyone who enters this area will be cursed forever. Well, no one really paid much attention to him. There was a village about a mile from here. You can still see the remains. Settlers started coming and pretty soon everyone forgot about the dead Indians. One day a farmer went to the village to make a delivery and discovered that everyone in the town had vanished. Gone. Disappeared. No one ever did find out what happened to them. They were part of this religious sect, so most people just assumed they packed up and went elsewhere when the authorities began looking into some of their practices, but who knows? No one ever heard from any of them again. Rosen said that over the years, several hikers and others had just vanished from the woods. They go in, but they never come out. Sometimes they find their gear, or their clothing, but never find them. I mean it's just a ghost story, but it creeped the hell out of Professor Rosen. Never thought a college professor would be afraid of a ghost story." said James.

"Man, we did a lot of really horrible things to the Indians. I can't blame them for cursing us," said David.

"Look, it's just a story. Turns out that the Forest Service can't touch the site because of some 1995 law that says only a certified representative of the tribe can unearth an Indian burial site. They've been trying for years to find a representative from the Shawnee Nation to come out and identify them, but they're not even sure they are Shawnee. There were several tribes in the area. It's so far off the beaten path that the Forest Service just pretty much forgot about it. You wouldn't even know it's there unless you knew exactly where to look."

"Well, here's to all those poor dead Indians. I am sorry for what my ancestors did to you. I hope you won't hold it against us." said David raising his beer in a makeshift toast. No one else in the group participated.

"Well, that is one hell of a story James but, I don't believe a word of it. I think Rosen was just messing with you," said Bryce

"Yeah, maybe.....he just seemed so serious when he told me about it."

"He probably planned the whole thing. You have to watch these college types, they might look all innocent and nerdy, but they're freaks. I've dealt with enough of them to know." said Lee Anne.

"Anyway....what's done is done. I just hope the Indians forgive us," said David.

"Are you even sure they were Indian names on the grave markers? Most were too old to read clearly," said Vanessa.

"I don't know. Somebody is buried there."

"Yeah, but it could be somebody from the village. Who knows. If the government killed all those people, why would they mark the gravesite? Wouldn't they want to keep it a secret?" asked Vanessa

"Back in the 1860s, I don't think an Indian life was worth a asshole in the snow. I mean we slaughtered them wholesale and no one seemed to care. I'm sure no one was going to get upset about forty dead Indians, especially if they were killing white people."

"That's terrible," said Vanessa.

"That's our proud history. I can't blame the Indians for being too upset with us."

"Still, I think old Rosen was just yanking your chain. I've never heard of anyone disappearing in these woods," said Bryce.

"About ten years ago, two British Hikers vanished in here. They wanted to hike every single one of America's National Forests. This was actually their very last one. Took them almost a year to do it. Well, they checked in at the Ranger Station and that was the last anyone ever saw of them. Their families contacted the British embassy about two weeks later and said they were overdue. They searched the whole forest, but never found a trace of them. They found their gear, but that was it. Kinda creepy. They certainly weren't inexperienced hikers." said James as he lit up a cigarette.

"Well maybe something did happen to them, but that doesn't mean the woods had some kind of curse on it."

"No, but the professor told me about another that happened when he was a kid. Two teenage girls were riding their bikes through here. One of them got a flat tire, so she stayed with the bike until

the other one could go and get help. When she finally did get back hours later, the girl was gone. Her bike was there, but she was gone. Never did find her. It made national headlines. Rosen was just a kid when it happened.

"People go missing all the time. If you stop and think about how many thousands of people come through here every day and leave without incident, I don't think those cases are very unusual," said David as he ate his hot dog.

"Yeah, Rosen was just giving me some shit. I guess when bad things happen to us as kids, it tends to carry over into adulthood."

"Have a beer, James. Stop scaring the girls," said Bryce as he threw him a beer.

"I can't believe you carried that thing through the woods and over that tree. You know Bryce, you might have a problem," said James as he drank his beer.

"I'll say. We only half seven beers left." he said as he opened another.

It wasn't much longer before the fire dwindled down to just a dull flame. David got some more firewood to throw on the fire. Vanessa only had one beer, but it was enough to make her sleepy. Half an hour later she was fighting to stay awake. It was only nine o'clock.

"We're supposed to check the traps at exactly twelve hour intervals. I'll get up at six and check them. You guys don't have to get up. I'll call Rosenthal and let him know we made it." said James.

"You have service out here?" asked Lee Anne.

"Satellite Phone. Works anywhere. It's Rosenthal's. He gave it to me before I left. I'll give him a call and fill him in. I guess he was kind of worried about us."

"The hell for? I think we can handle an overnight camping trip," said Bryce.

"I think he was more concerned about the insect traps. He got a big federal grant to study them. He doesn't want to lose it next year."

"Tell him we said hi."

"Will do. I might even call my girl," said James as he got up from the campfire area and went into the darkness.

"You got any weed?" asked Lee Anne as she turned to David

"Of course. Never leave home without it," he said and opened up a small plastic case that contained a pipe and a bag of weed.

"A little souvenir from my last trip to Colorado." He lit up the pipe and took a deep hit.

"A pothead Game Warden.....you know you might have to arrest people for doing the same thing we are doing right now. Doesn't that bother you?" asked Bryce.

"No, why should it?" he said.

Vanessa put up a good fight, but after a few hits, she was done. She kissed David goodnight and she climbed into her sleeping bag. She hated sleeping on the ground with God knows what beside her, but she was so tired, she didn't care. She stared into the fire. Its flames almost seemed to hypnotize her. She passed out and slept straight through the night. She knew David probably wanted to screw around, but she was in no mood for sex. Sleep was the numero uno priority here. When her body spoke, her brain listened. She was out within ten minutes.

She was the first one awake the next morning. She opened her eyes and could see a family of deer not more than fifty feet from her. She rolled over and took several pictures with her phone. She thought about waking up David, but he'd probably want to shoot them or something. She appreciated nature. David wanted to control it. She looked at the clock on her phone. It was just past six. She had to piss like a racehorse and unzipped her sleeping bag and walked over to a wooded area to relieve herself. She took a few pieces of toilet paper with her. She knew she would have to crap sooner or later and just hoped that she could hold it until they got back to the Ranger Station.

She figured Jim would be up and went down to the shore to look for him. She went up and down the river, but couldn't see him. Maybe he had already checked the traps and maybe he hadn't. If he didn't, they would have to spend another night out here, which was not something she wanted to do at all. She recorded all of the readings with her phone and then walked back to the small campsite. She could see James's gear and rucksack were still there, as was his sleeping bag. He couldn't be too far away. She got the fire going again with lighter fluid and some kindling. None of these boys knew how to make a fire. She had a small grill and camping coffee maker with her. Once the fire was hot enough, she made a small carafe of coffee for everyone. That was bound to make David's day. He was a coffee addict. Even camping coffee was better than no coffee.

An hour later, the entire group was awake. She and Lee Anne brushed their teeth. Bryce brushed his teeth and rinsed with water from the creek.

"Bryce, what are you doing? You can't drink that," she said in horror.

"I'm just rinsing."

"Doesn't matter. You know how many animals go to the bathroom in the water?" she added

"I'll be fine. Do we have any beers left or did numbnuts drink all of them?"

"I think there's a few left," she said

"Good. I always start my day with a cold beer," he said going through the cooler.

"Oh yeah, Bryce definitely doesn't have a drinking problem," she said to herself.

By now David was up as well. He poured himself a cup of coffee and put some powdered creamer in.

"See Bryce, I told you this one's a keeper. Where the hell is James?" he asked.

"Didn't he say he was going to check the traps?"

"I was just down there. I didn't see him," said Vanessa.

"Where'd he go?" asked David

"Maybe he saw a good-looking doe in the trees and decided she was the lucky girl."

"Lucky for who?" asked Vanessa

"JAMES.....BREAKFAST!" shouted David

"So, what do we have this morning? Eggs? Muffins? Hash Browns?"

"We have granola and cashew milk. Bon appetit," said Vanessa as she handed him the food.

No one said anything or even seemed worried that James was AWOL. It wasn't until they were almost packed up that David went looking for him. He returned ten minutes later.

"Where is that idiot? We got to get going."

"Did anybody get the readings of the traps? If not, Rosy is going to be mighty pissed," said Lee Anne.

"I got them. I took pictures of the readings."

"That will have to do. I got to be back home by tonight to watch the game," said David.

"Guys, we can't leave here without James. What if he's in trouble?" said Vanessa.

She could tell by the looks on their faces that they were trying not to think about it. She knew everyone would protest, but in the end, they couldn't just leave until they knew James was alright.

"He'll be fine. He probably left early this morning. He didn't want to hang around Lee Anne with Bryce here." said David.

"But David, his stuff is still here."

"Well honey, he could be anywhere. We can look again, but I doubt we're going to find him," said David.

"Don't you think that's a little odd? Why would he take off and leave all of his stuff here?"

"I bet Rosy told him to check some other traps. He's got a few stations in the woods here. This isn't the only one."

"I think he would have at least said something. He must have taken the phone, 'cause I don't see it here," said Vanessa.

"He probably didn't want to wake anybody."

"Did he ever come back last night, after he made his calls?" asked Lee Anne.

"Yeah.....I mean I'm pretty sure he did. I don't know. I was up for a little while, then I passed out." said Bryce.

"I could still hear him talking when I went to sleep. Vanessa, he's a big boy, I'm sure he's fine." said David.

"What if he's not alright?"

"Well then.....hell I don't know. I guess we can look for him. I don't even know where to look."

"Let's go up and down the river. If we don't see him, fine, we can go. But let's just look." she said

"Okay.....JAMES, COME OUT COME OUT WHEREVER YOU ARE!" shouted Bryce.

The four of them went down to the station on the river bank. They looked in the grass and rocks next to the river, but James was nowhere to be found. After half an hour of searching. David and Bryce sat down to have a cigarette. The girls came over and joined them.

"I don't know buddy, what do you think?"

"He's probably back at the Ranger Station by now. I bet he left so we'd have to take all of his shit back with us and he won't have to carry it. He is one lazy little fucker."

"I don't know. He better have Rosenthal's phone with him. Those things aren't cheap.

"Um guys," said Lee Anne staring down into the grass behind them.

They turned around and saw the Satellite Phone lying in the grass. It was cracked and the battery had been taken out of it. The demeanor of the group changed almost instantly. The situation had now gotten very serious.

"Okay, this is weird," said David as he picked up the broken phone.

He tried to turn it on, but it wouldn't even turn on, without the battery.

He looked around as if he was expecting someone to be watching the group.

"Guys, I think we should get out of here," said Lee Anne.

"Yeah. I think you're right," said David as he tossed the phone.

"Everyone has their radios?" he said as he held up his.

The group held up their radios.

"Turn them on. We're on Channel 5. They should be good for a few miles if we get separated. There's supposed to be an emergency signal we can use."

"Dude, where the hell is he?"

"I don't know Bryce. Let's just get out of here," said David.

"Yeah, good idea." he said.

The four of them walked quickly back to the campsite. Ten minutes later, they were packed up, ready to go back. Bryce put his backpack on and grabbed his cooler.

"You're really going to carry that thing all the way back?" asked Vanessa.

"Yeah, why not?"

"It's going to slow us down."

"I paid fifty bucks for it. I'm not just going to leave it here."

"Did anyone try the phone?" asked Bryce.

"Nothing. Without the battery, it's useless," said David.

They said very little as they packed up. They headed back to the trail and as soon as they were away from the river, David stopped. Vanessa caught up to him and quickly saw what the problem was. The trail had vanished. It was nowhere to be found. It seemed impossible, but that's what they were now facing.

"What the hell? Where's the trail?" asked Bryce

"I don't know. Did we get turned around somehow?"

"No. There's the fence and sign marking the study area. This is the right way. At least it was." said David in astonishment.

"This can't be the right way. I don't remember seeing any of this on our way here," said Vanessa.

"It is the right way."

"It can't be. The trail's gone. We must have come in from the other side."

"There is no other side. It's just the marsh and the river. This is the way we came in."

"Then where's the trail?" asked Lee Anne.

Vanessa suddenly got a very bad feeling about all of this. She was not just worried anymore, she was beginning to feel something else. *Panicked* would be a more appropriate word to use.

"David, what the hell is going on?" she asked putting her arm around him.

"Look, it's not a trail, it's a forest service road. Roads don't disappear, it has to be around here somewhere."

"David, the road was right here. Now it's gone," said Vanessa.

"Maybe, it's just up ahead or something. I really wasn't paying attention when we came in."

The group continued walking through the trees until the clearing was gone from their view. David and Bryce stopped and took a drink of water. She knew David well enough to know that he didn't fold under pressure. He was obviously shaken like the rest of them, but he certainly wasn't going to let it show. Not when there are ladies present.

"Dude, what the hell is going on? First James vanishes and now the trail vanishes?"

"I know. We must have gotten turned around. Let's go back towards the campsite. The trail has to be on the other side."

"We were just over there. There's no trail there. This was the way we came in."

"Okay, group meeting," he said and walked back over to the girls.

Lee Anne seemed more annoyed than worried. She must have figured they were just lost. Vanessa knew better. They weren't lost. Somehow the road they used to enter the camp had disappeared. That was an entirely new level of worry for her. Still. The sun was shining and they had plenty of supplies. Her father had drilled into her head that what kills people in the wilderness isn't the wilderness, it's not thinking clearly. People get lost and assume they're going to die out here. She knew they had to conserve their food. She had brought a water filter with her to remove any germs and parasites in the water. Once she didn't call her parents that afternoon, they would start to worry and call the Forest Service. By nightfall, there would be people out looking for them. As scared as she was, she was more scared of having to be rescued. Her father would never let her live it down.

David took out his map.

"We can't be more than a mile or two from RT 141. No matter which direction we go, we're bound to hit the pavement. It's going to take us a whole lot longer to get back home, but at least we'll know where we are. Damn compass doesn't even work." he said holding it up.

"Vanessa had a bolt of fear go through her. Compasses don't break. Not unless the North Pole just vanished. It was working fine yesterday. Now it wasn't. Nothing about their situation seemed to make any sense.

"David.....where's James?" asked Lee Anne

"I don't know Lee. Right now, we have to worry about us."

"I know. It's just that if something happened to him and he's hurt.....well how is it going to look for us when we show back up? Everybody's going to think we just abandoned him. Something's wrong. Something is very wrong here." she said holding back her tears.

"Jesus Lee, get a hold of yourself. James could have just dropped the phone and panicked when he broke it or something. The dude was so high last night, who knows what he was thinking? I know it sucks, but what do you want us to do? We can't spend the rest of the day looking for him when we don't even know if he's still around?" said David.

"He wouldn't have left all of his gear. There's just no way," she said.

"If we get back and he still hasn't shown up, then we can organize a search and rescue party for him. Right now, no one even knows he's missing, if he is missing."

"He's right Lee. We did look for him. We gotta worry about us right now." said Bryce.

"I just can't help thinking, he might be hurt and can't move and needs our help."

"We shouted and screamed. Half the forest could have heard us. We did look for him. Look, the road can't be more than a mile or two from here. Let's keep going and regroup when we hit it, okay?"

Lee Anne nodded. This was the first time Vanessa had ever seen her without makeup. She thought Lee Anne was prettier without it.

They walked mostly in silence for the next hour. What unnerved Vanessa more than anything was that her GPS on her phone was also not working. Nothing. She would temporarily lose service, but it would always reconnect. Not this time. With no compass or GPS, they were really lost.

No one wanted to bring up the disturbing fact that their trail had vanished, their electronics were not working, or James could be dead for all they knew. They didn't want to mention the obvious. The obvious would make them think and worry.

They had been walking for nearly two hours. The woods was getting thicker and thicker. It would thin out, then suddenly, they would find themselves in the middle of heavy brush or growth. She could still see the river, which gave her some sort of assurance. They stopped at the bottom of an outcropping to take a drink. Bryce and David lit up a smoke. Lee Anne said nothing and just seemed to focus all of her energy on not screaming and running away.

"Dude. Where the hell is the road?" asked Bryce

"I don't get it. We must have walked four or five miles. We should have hit it by now."

"This sucks man. We're gonna miss the game tonight for sure."

"That's what you're worried about right now?"

"I got a hundred bucks riding on that game. I'm going to go up to the top of that hill. Maybe I can see something."

"I'll be there in a minute," said David as he took a drag from his cigarette.

Bryce climbed up the rocks and nearly lost his footing. He caught himself on a branch. He was more angry now than worried. No one was even watching him when he climbed to the top. The three of them weren't even paying attention. Vanessa followed him up the rocks.

Bryce was only out of their site for a minute. As soon as she got up to the top. She looked around and could see nothing but more forest. It seemed to go on forever. It also quickly dawned on her that Bryce was nowhere to be found.

"BRYCE!" she shouted.

A chill went through her body. It was as if someone slapped her. Bryce was gone. The forest thinned out almost completely below. She could see for hundreds of feet in either direction.

"BRYCE!" she shouted again.

"What's wrong?" asked David catching up to her.

"Bryce is gone," she said

"What?"

"David he's gone. Where the hell is he?"

David said nothing and just looked around. She was right. They could clearly see the area below. Even if he were to run as fast as he could, which wouldn't be very fast with his backpack, they should still be able to see him.

"BRYCE, WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU?" shouted David

Lee Anne had now caught up to them. The three of them said nothing. Vanessa wasn't just worried now, she was beginning to panic. Something was very, very wrong.

"Okay David, I don't want to go all girl on you here, but what the fuck is going on?" she asked

"I don't know baby. Let's climb down and look for him.

"BRYCE, THIS ISN'T FUNNY. I WILL BEAT YOUR ASS!" shouted David.

They climbed down off the rocks and were now in the clearing below. Off in the distance, they could see Bryce's backpack. They ran over to it. David picked it up. Bryce was nowhere to be found.

"Okay, okay David.....what do we do now?" asked Vanessa

David took off his pack and went inside one of the pockets. He pulled out his .22 caliber pistol. He made sure it was loaded, then tucked it into his pocket.

"I think somebody's messing with us. That's fine."

David fired a shot into the air. It rang out and echoed all around them. If there was someone following them, they would now know they had a gun. Even a small gun was better than no gun. David was a good shot. She had been out to the range with him and seen him shoot. He was no amateur.

No one really knew what to do. They knew they had to keep walking, but the longer they walked, the more disorientated they became. They should have hit something by now, the forest just wasn't that big.

They searched the area as a group. They even found Bryce's footprints. They disappeared a few feet from where they had found his backpack.

"David, if this is your idea of a joke, I'm not laughing," Vanessa said.

"This ain't no joke honey. I don't know what the hell is going on," he said sternly.

"Bryce and James aren't going to just jump out behind a tree and scare us, right?"

"I wish they would. Honey, this isn't some prank. Bryce is gone." he said with an aloofness in his voice.

"David, I have to pee," said Lee Anne.

"Me too. Alright, let's all go and pee as a group. From now on, no one leaves the other's sights. No one. We all stay together."

"You're going to watch us pee?"

"Yes."

Lee Anne said nothing and just dropped her pants and squatted. Vanessa did the same thing. The three were now peeing in unison, trying not to look at one another. Vanessa gave Lee Anne some toilet paper.

"Where's his handheld?" asked David.

"He had it clipped to his shirt," said Vanessa.

David grabbed his handheld.

"Bryce, come in," he said nervously into the radio

"Bryce if you can hear me, key the mic," said David

Sure enough, the mic was keyed.

"Bryce if you're in trouble key the mic three times," said David.

The group held its breath. David turned up the volume. They could all hear the mic keyed quickly three times.

"Okay, buddy. If you can see us, key the mic twice. If not just hit it once."

The mic was keyed once.

"Okay, you can't be that far away cause you're still in range. Stay where you are. We'll find you. There's a bright red button on the radio. Press it. It's the emergency button.

The emergency flashing red button went off on all of their radios. David was doing his best to keep calm, even if it was hopeless.

They climbed back up to the top of the hill. It took them about two minutes. In that span of time, Bryce's radio had gone silent. They looked over and over. David pulled out his pistol and fired three consecutive shots in order. It was a distress signal. Someone was bound to hear them now. Guns were not allowed in the forest. Shooting was definitely not allowed.

"That should get every ranger out here looking for us," he said.

"Bryce....Bryce can you hear me?" asked David into his radio.

Lee Anne was starting to cry. Vanessa wasn't too far behind. As seasoned as she was, she was still a girl and this situation was getting uglier by the minute. She was out of options. Bryce could be dying and there wasn't a damn thing they could do to save him. She wanted to just start sobbing, but that wasn't going to save Bryce. There would be time to cry later.

"Could he have fallen into the rocks somehow?" asked David.

"I doubt it, David. Someone took him." said Lee Anne between sobs.

"Who would have taken him?"

"The woods. These fucking woods are evil. I can feel it, David. I could feel it as soon as we left that cemetery. It's like some dark cloud is following us. It's getting darker and darker. It's going to get all of us eventually." said Lee Anne

"Jesus Lee are you listening to yourself? No, there's no evil that got Bryce. Someone out here is following us. They're going to pick us off one by one. Look, I love Bryce as much as you guys

do, but right now, we have to save ourselves. They know I have a gun, maybe that might make them back off."

Said David as he put a few more bullets into the pistol.

She thought it odd that they hadn't seen anyone since yesterday. Coming out here, they passed by a few different groups of people. Now, there was nothing. Just nature and silence. It was enchanting, but it was a façade. Right now, no one was enchanted. She would have given one of her tits to be back home in her dorm room.

David tried the radio once more. He kept talking and talking, but it was no use. Bryce wasn't responding.

"Okay fearless leader, what the hell do we do now?" asked Lee Anne.

"We follow the river. I remember the last time we were out here, the professor said that the river ends up at a lake. There's always people there. You can rent boats there. It can't be too much farther up ahead."

David's plan made sense to Vanessa. Lee Anne took off her pack and sat down on the rocks.

"I'm not leaving Bryce here. It's bad enough we left James. I'm not leaving my boyfriend."

"Lee Anne we don't even know if he's still alive. There could be people watching us right now, just waiting for us to lower our guard. We don't even know where he is."

"What if he's dying and needs our help? You're going to just leave him here? God are you an asshole!" she said as she lit up a cigarette.

Vanessa could see that David was hurt by what she had said. She also knew at this moment that staying here made no sense. If Bryce was hurt and needed help, his best chances were for them to go and bring him help.

"Lee Anne, just listen to me here, please. He's gone. If he was anywhere around here, we would have found him. We have to go and get help, that's the best chance James and Bryce have right now." said Vanessa

"You two are just trying to save your own asses. Fine, go. I'm staying."

"Jesus Lee," said David.

"Lee, it's going to be dark out here in about six hours. Total darkness. You really want to spend the night out here by yourself?" asked Vanessa

"I'm not leaving Bryce. He's not just my boyfriend. I'm pregnant, Vanessa. Bryce is the father. We're going to get married."

David and Vanessa seemed totally caught off guard. They looked at one another in amazement.

"You're pregnant?"

"About six weeks. Look, I never should have said anything. I can't just leave him. If something happened to him and I could have saved him, I'd never forgive myself." she said as tears rolled down her face.

"We haven't told anybody. I wasn't going to say anything until I started showing."

"Lee, I can't make you go with us. That's your choice, but my God, something is really, really wrong here. If you stay here, alone, what do you think you and your baby's chances are out here?" asked Vanessa.

"I wouldn't want to go living without him. You guys go on. I'm staying." she said

David and Vanessa didn't really know what to do. They didn't want to leave her, but they knew they couldn't stay here either. They had to make the most of what daylight they had left.

"Do you want my gun?" asked David.

She shook her head no.

"I might be too tempted to use it on myself," she said

Her words almost seemed to smack David. He said nothing and pulled Vanessa away.

"You're making a mistake Lee. A big one," he said as the two of them climbed down off the rocks and into the clearing below.

"Keep your radio on. Don't turn it off. Please, Lee think about this." said David with a sense of desperation in his voice.

"I am thinking about it," she said pulling out her radio.

"Bryce....Bryce baby, just hold on, I'll find you," she said into the radio.

Two minutes later, she was out of sight. Ten minutes later, David and Vanessa were thinking of their own survival and not hers. They had left one of their best friends out in the woods. Neither of them wanted to think about it.

They walked in silence for a few minutes. Neither of them wanted to contemplate the gravity of their situation, which seemed to be getting worse by the minute.

"Jesus, I can't believe Bryce knocked up Lee Anne. I mean that's really incredible."

"I know. What do they think is going to happen? Guess it's food stamps and a trailer park in their future."

"His mom had him real young. He told me once he wouldn't even think about having kids until he was over thirty."

"Guess that plan is out the window."

"Lee.....can you hear me?" asked David into the handheld.

He got a crackled response back.

"We're losing her. Dammit! You know I don't think Bryce is really all that into her. Certainly not enough to marry her and have kids with her."

"Well then he shouldn't have gotten her pregnant," she said

"I can't believe they're that stupid. All he ever talks about is working for the National Park Service. It's been his dream as far back as I can remember." he said.

"David.....we have to go back. We can't leave her," she said.

"What if she won't go?"

"Once she realizes Bryce is gone, she'll go. She has to think about her baby now as well."

"I don't think she's thinking with a clear head."

"You can't exactly blame her."

"Lee....can you hear me?" he asked into the radio

The transmission was crackled and difficult to make out.

"Lee, stay where you are, we're headed back," he said

He and Vanessa turned around and walked quickly back to the clearing. It took about five minutes. David took out his radio.

"Lee, where are you?"

He heard nothing on the radio. Vanessa could see he was trying hard not to panic.

"Lee, where are you?" he asked again.

"David." said Vanessa from behind him.

He turned around. Off in the distance on the ground, was her backpack. They both ran over to it. They searched and searched, but she was gone.

"Lee.....Lee can you hear me? If you can hear me, key the mic twice," he said frantically.

"LEE!" he screamed into the radio.

"GODDAMIT!" he screamed.

"She can't be too far."

"But which way?" he asked looking around.

"Not back the way we came. What about straight ahead?" she said.

She and David took off. He made sure they were only a few feet from each other at all times. The woods were thinned out pretty well. He could see about a hundred or so feet in front of him. He kept talking on his radio but got no response. Finally, he stopped. They had been searching for almost an hour. She was gone, just like Bryce and James. David took out his pistol and fired another three shots in the air. He reloaded and fired three more.

"We'll have to wait until dark, but I have a flare in my pack."

"I would think somebody would have heard the shots," said Vanessa

"Yeah, me too. It's like we're the only ones out here.....well us and whoever took the rest of us. Doesn't make any sense. If she was in trouble, why didn't she say something?"

"Maybe whoever took her was waiting for us to leave?"

"If they wanted to grab us, they could have done it as a group. Couple of guys show up with guns. Could have done it back at the campsite. We wouldn't have been able to do a damn thing. Why are they picking us off one by one?" he asked

"They're playing with us," Vanessa said

"Why?"

"Who knows how the mind of an evil person works."

"Yeah, but Bryce just vanished. How the hell would they have taken him and he not made a sound?"

"I don't know David."

"Let's find the river. It can't be more than a mile away," he said. He made sure the gun was fully loaded and they headed back towards the clearing.

"There has to be more than one of them. They must have guns.....okay, where does that leave us?" he asked

"We have a gun. They have to know it. They're going to have to be more careful with us," she said

"Yeah.....I just need one shot. Just one. I'll blow their freggin heads off."

They walked for almost half an hour back to the clearing, then down to the river. From there, it was another hour until they hit yet another obstacle. They both saw it at the same time. Neither of them said anything at first. It couldn't be, but there it was, right in front of them.

"That's impossible," said David.

They were now standing in front of the fallen tree they had crossed the day before.

"I don't understand. How could we be back here? Were we going in circles all day?"

"It must be another tree. It has to be," he said. They crossed the river on the fallen tree and as soon as they were on the other side, they saw the gravesites. They both stood in silence. They were right back where they started. They had burned away the entire day and were still as lost as they were this morning.

"We're never going to get out of here, are we?" she said starting to cry

"Of course we are. If this is the same tree and cemetery, then the road has to be back there," he said

"There was no road. We would have run right into it."

"Then how the hell did we end up back here?"

"I don't know David.....I just don't know.....I'm so scared David. None of this makes any sense."

David put his arms around her and kissed her forehead.

"I'll get us out of this baby. I promise. I'll get us out of this and find whoever took the others. If I do nothing else for the rest of my life, I will do that. I'll find them and kill them."

"We have to spend another night out here. I don't think I can do that," she said.

We'll follow the river. It can't be too much farther. This section of the forest is only about a hundred and fifty thousand acres. We have to run into something pretty soon."

"It won't let us leave. The forest won't let us leave," she said crying into his shoulder.

"Oh, we'll leave. We'll leave then we get even with whoever took our friends," he said trying not to cry himself.

Vanessa had realized by now that something was very wrong with this entire situation. No way could they have ended up right back where they started, it was impossible. Well, improbable anyway. Maybe they had gotten turned around and just didn't realize it. One could quickly become disorientated here. At this point, a hundred and fifty thousand acres may as well be ten million. They were lost and now had to spend another night in this horrible place.

"I don't want to spend another night out here either, but the fact is: we have no choice. We should make camp and be ready to move at first light."

"David.....we can't stay here. We should just keep going. It's going to be a full moon tonight. We can stay along the river. It shouldn't take us more than a few hours to hit something.....anything."

"Babe, I don't want us to get separated. We got lost in daylight, imagine how bad it will be in the dark."

David did have a point. The thought of being out here alone terrified her more than being killed. She had kept it together this far, only because he had been beside her. Without him, she would go to pieces.

She wondered if he was using her for bait, hoping that whoever or whatever was stalking them would try and make their move tonight when they were asleep. So far, no one has been able to stop them. If they came for them, she doubted his little pistol was going to do much to stop them. She put the thought out of her head. David loved her. He would never use her for bait.

They made a fire and she tried to make some dinner. She had a few bottles of water left and could always purify more. They had matches and even a few MREs David had bought before they left. She heated the contents of the MREs and they both sat down to eat, though neither of them were very hungry at this point, even with all the walking and sweating they had done. It was like they were waiting for the inevitable. Trying to rationalize the situation just made it worse. None of it made any sense, from the vanishing trails to the disappearance of the others to the fact that they were right back where they had started. It was like they had stepped into some alternate world. A dark, mysterious world where nothing made any sense, at least not to them. The forest seemed to have its own logic.

They had both tried dozens of times to call on their cells. Nothing worked. They couldn't get a signal.

After dinner, David lit up a battery-powered lantern. It was bright and could throw quite a bit of light. They both figured at this point, who or whatever was stalking them, was going to find them whether they had the lantern on or not. David reached into his backpack and took out his plastic container of pot. He stuffed some bud into the pipe and fired it up. He passed the pipe over to Vanessa who took a deep hit. She had a coughing fit, which caused David to bust out laughing. It was the first time she had seen him laugh or smile in two days.

"I guess if we're going to die, we might as well enjoy what little bit of time we have left," he said.

Vanessa moved closer to him. Of all of the things David had ever said to her, that was the one that made the most sense to her. They took turns inhaling and taking hits off the pipe. He stuffed what was left of his bud in the pipe and lit it up. She watched him exhale the pot smoke from his lungs. He reached over to her and kissed her. Five minutes later, they were both screwing each other in his sleeping bag. Death might take them at any moment, but right now, this moment was theirs.

"Under any other circumstances, this would be the perfect night. Just you and me and the stars."

"It almost makes you forget what a nightmare this day has been," she said holding him.

"Why don't they just take us or kill us or something? Why are they playing this game with us?"

"I don't know. I don't want to think about it. Maybe whoever took them is like torturing them right now."

"How the hell could somebody just grab Bryce like that? He would have put up some kind of fight, he wouldn't just have said or done nothing?"

"Maybe he was scared. Got caught off guard."

"Maybe. He's my best friend Vanessa. I can't just leave him here." he said

"We won't. We'll get help and search every inch of these woods if we have to, but we won't be any good to him if we're dead," she said.

She could see he was upset and frustrated. Nothing had gone according to plan. Everything seemed to be spiraling out of control. David was a control freak, or 'control enthusiast' as he liked to put it. Not being in control for him was torture and right now he had no control over anything, particularly their safety. If they wanted to take them, they could. That was driving David crazy at this point, knowing they were powerless to stop their attackers.

"I love you, David," she said

"I love you more baby," he replied. They both managed to fit in the sleeping bag. David made certain his pistol was close by and turned out the lantern. Everything around them went pitch black. There could be an army in front of them and neither of them see it. Even with a full moon, there was hardly any light in these woods. She closed her eyes and hoped that when she opened them next, this nightmare would be over.

She slept very little that night, going in and out of consciousness. Several times she would sit up wide awake to make certain David was still next to her. She would see him sound asleep and roll back over. Finally, at around 3AM, she dozed off for a few hours. The sunlight coming through the tree line is what woke her up. She rolled over to find David gone. She sat straight up and furiously unzipped her sleeping bag. She went from sound asleep to being overcome with fear in a matter of just a few seconds. Her heart settled down when she saw him coming out of the woods holding a roll of toilet paper with him. She quickly ran over to him and threw her arms around him.

"Oh Jesus David, don't ever do that to me again," she said hugging him.

"Sorry babe, I didn't think you wanted to wake up and see me taking a dump right in front of you. We got anything to eat?" he asked

"Beef jerky and some soda."

"Sounds good. I could use some caffeine."

They both had what was left of the jerky and soda. He smoked the last of his cigarettes. She never even thought about smoking until she had met him, now she had an occasional cigarette with him. To make matters worse, the sky was clouding up with rain clouds. Ten minutes later, they could hear the crackle of thunder.

A few minutes after that, the rain started coming down.

"Well, thank God it's not raining," he said as he packed up. They both were smart enough to pack rain gear, but it would only protect them in a light rain. It was pretty much useless in a thunderstorm.

Ten minutes after breakfast, they were packed up. David felt they should go the other way, up the river instead of down it.

"It's not like we can get any more lost," he joked.

As miserable as she was, she was glad to have him here. She liked to act tough and independent, but this was way too much reality for her. This was a nightmare that just didn't want to end.

"There should be a dam or something a little ways up ahead. It's a popular fishing spot. Might be someone there or at least a phone we can use."

At this point, it was about as good a plan as she had, which was no plan. She couldn't understand how they went in circles yesterday. It seemed almost impossible to believe. It made this nightmare all too real, all too terrifying.

They walked upstream for almost an hour. By her calculations, they should have gone almost three miles. The river ran through one of the little villages nearby, so they knew they had to be on the right track.

"David.....I can't go on anymore. My feet are soaked. Can we stop for a minute?" she asked.

The rain hadn't let up, but it hadn't gotten any worse, either. Most of her body was still dry thanks to the poncho, but her feet were soaking wet. Vanessa didn't do wet socks. She thought about taking a plastic bag and lining the inside of her boots to keep her socks dry. David climbed up on a nearby rock.

"Holy shit! There it is!" he said

"What?"

"The bridge and the dam! There are cars parked there! There have to be people there."

Suddenly, Vanessa felt like the giant rain cloud hovering over them had disappeared. She climbed up on the rock and could clearly see the fishing area. Even with a little rain, there were still anglers hoping for a big catch.

"Oh thank God," she said

She got in front of David. She was so glad to see something, anything but these woods, she almost completely forgot about him. She had her eyes off him for only a minute, but that was enough. When she turned around again to talk to him, he was gone.

"David?" she said

"DAVID!" she screamed.

She heard several shots from his pistol in the nearby woods. She dropped her gear and ran off after him. She stopped and looked at the people on the bridge. She could just run towards them. She had a choice to make and in an instant she made it. She knew then that these woods would never just let her leave. Even if he did, she couldn't live with herself knowing she could have saved him.

She ran after him through the trees and brush. She heard another shot. This one was very close. She quickly realized she had been running for almost five minutes. The river was gone, out of sight. She sat down on a stump and began to cry. This wasn't just a cry of helplessness, there was anger in her tears now. The anger seemed to be spilling out of her. She looked up and on the ridgeline, she could see David. She ran over to him. He was only a hundred or so feet away.

He never moved. She ran up to him and threw her arms around him. David never made a sound. She squeezed him with all the strength she had left in her little body.

"Oh thank the good lord. I thought I lost you," she said

It took a few seconds to realize David hadn't moved. He hadn't said a word.

She pulled back and looked at him. His face was frozen in fear.

"David?"

David let out a sound that was the most horrible thing she ever heard in her 19 years on Earth. It was a scream that was so loud, she had to cover her ears. She thought that no human should ever be able to make a sound like that.

She looked down and saw that his feet and legs had turned into tree bark. David was now only half human, half tree.

Vanessa backed away and let out a little scream. She put her hands over her mouth. She turned and saw another weird-looking tree. It didn't look like a normal tree in the woods. The closer she got, the more horrified she became.

She could see the small handheld radio on one of the branches. As she got closer, she could see a face carved into the tree. It was Bryce's face. He was now a tree. She stumbled back and fell. She got up and saw a small article of clothing on the ground. It was Lee Anne's headband. She looked up and saw a mutilated, twisted face carved into one of the trees.

She stumbled and stumbled. It was getting hard to walk now. Her feet didn't seem to want to move. She knew it was her time. She looked at a small sign put in place by the Forest Service. It read:

"HERE LIES THE SMALL SETTLEMENT OF HARMONY OHIO. ABANDONED
SHORTLY AFTER THE CIVIL WAR."

She could see the remains of some of the buildings and foundations that had been reclaimed by the forest. The forest had taken them too. Now it was her turn.

It was such a horrible feeling as she watched her body turn into wood. It was painful and terrifying at the same time. She looked around and could see all the twisted faces carved into the trees, the forest had taken over the decades. She was now part of this evil family who had simply walked in the wrong place at the wrong time. The last thing Vanessa Mentone ever saw was the love of her life who was now a deformed, twisted-looking tree. They could finally be together, forever.