

## **In the Forest**

By: Eva Van Meter

“NIXON, WAKE UP!” My little brother’s piercing voice rang throughout my disorganized bedroom. Groggily, I blinked open my cerulean eyes only to see little Oliver standing at the foot of my bed. His hair was the hue of a freshly-picked strawberry while still tousled and messy like every seven year old.

“Wha—what’s up Oliver?” I managed to ask as I slumped out of bed.

My redheaded brother gave an exaggerated sigh, “Dad’s leaving for his work thing now! He made me run up here to get you, so come on!”

How could I forget? Dad’s going to be gone for a whole week on a business trip. He’s left us alone before but never for this long. It would either be an exciting or a challenging week. More so challenging since my four younger brothers hate having to listen to Flynn and me.

Flynn’s my older brother at 18 years old. He’s congenial when he wants to be, and the younger ones would much rather obey him than myself. I don’t know if it’s just because he’s the oldest or because he acts more like my father.... Probably both.

Well, now that I told you about Flynn, I might as well give you the rundown on all of my younger brothers. There’s Greyson who’s 13, two years younger than me. He likes to think he’s always in charge. Thinking about it now, I guess we all were a little like Greyson at 13.

Anyways, there’s nine year old Cole who’s inquisitive and quiet. He enjoys being inside than outside, which makes it easier for me to supervise him.

Then... there’s our nature-loving twins: Oliver and Axel. Both are redheads, both love adventures outside, and both are seven years old. Whenever they want to romp around outside, I’ve got to be there to make sure they don’t cause a dilemma. I don’t want them to get hurt. I don’t want any of my brothers to get hurt.

I sauntered unsteadily as I descended down the stairs, each wooden slab manufacturing a loud creak. In front of me, Oliver scurried down the steps with liveliness. Reaching the bottom of the staircase, I took in the scene that continued to progress.

Axel was observing a caterpillar on the other side of the window; Oliver ran to join him. Cole was reading a fantasy book on the carpet. And Greyson sat on our old sofa, listening to a conversation Flynn and my father were having. I ambled over to Dad and my older brother, rubbing my eyes sleepily.

“Finally you’re out of bed,” Flynn bantered.

I rolled my eyes sarcastically at him.

“Good morning, Nixon! I hope you slept well,” my father greeted buoyantly.

I answered less sprightly with a, “Morning, Dad.”

I’m usually not too energetic this early.

“Now that you and Flynn are here, I want to talk to you both alone before I leave.” I glanced at my brother. We knew what this was: he was going to put us in charge and give us a lecture on all of the rules. I was curious about this pep talk in particular though; he’s never left us alone for an entire week.

Dad maneuvered us to the dimly-lit kitchen and faced me and Flynn, his face plastered with a stern complexion.

“I’m putting you two in charge this week. You already know what my expectations are of you, so I won’t go too far into the nitty-gritty, but I want both of you to act responsible and fair towards your younger brothers,” he eyed us expectantly, “Can you do that for me?”

We nodded.

“And remember, if anything happens, call me *immediately*,” he emphasized on the last word, his tone of voice serious.

I quietly replied with, “We will Dad.”

His head shifted towards the shabby stove to the left of him, squinting to see the displayed time. “Alright, it’s about time for me to go, but try not to forget what we’ve talked about,” my father’s lips tilted to a smile, “However, I trust you boys enough to know that I shouldn’t be worried.”

Flynn and I grinned, then embraced our father.

Flynn spoke, “We’ll try our best to make sure everything goes smoothly.”

“I know,” Dad answered, then proceeded to return to the living room and say goodbye to all of the others.

After a couple of minutes, we stood outside the house waving as he drove the worn jeep down the dirt pathway, ceasing only until the copious trees shielded it from our view.

Once back inside, I noticed a framed picture sitting on the small table near the stairs.

“When was this picture here?” I asked Greyson who was heading to the kitchen. He turned to look.

“Which pi—oh. Yeah, Dad put that there before you came downstairs this morning.”

It was the photograph of me and my family when we went to the beach. Oliver and Axel were only three then.

And Mom was still alive.

I gazed at the picture. We all looked so happy.

Mom’s long, perfect, sunset-colored hair was billowing in the salty breeze. She was wearing her bracelet with the pretty rock attached to it. The rock was beautiful and it had a spotted white and

black pattern. She found it the day she met Dad and always used to say that it symbolized the limitless ocean. The white colors in the rock being all of the elegant aspects while the black being the mysteriousness of it all. She used to love the sea.

I miss Mom.

The memory of that morning is still so vivid in my mind. It's as if it happened yesterday. We all just wanted to take a quick swim in the lake nearby. The lake led into the river flowing by our house. We swam there for almost fifteen minutes before we realized Mom was missing.

After ten minutes, we began to get worried. We called the police whom arrived in about seven hours. Those seven hours were agony. What was worse was the fact that the police were able to find Mom. According to them, she was swept into the river by a strong current in the lake which pulled her head downwards, forcing her—well—forcing her to drown.

Those flashing red and blue lights will eternally be burned in my memory.

Hands shaking, I swerved away from the photo of me and my family.

At around noon, we decided to sit outside for a bit. I stepped out the door slowly; the sun shone brightly to illuminate the surrounding forest. The river was rushing perpetually, reflecting a shattered image of altitudinous oaks.

I perched at the edge of the river, gazing at my reflection. My dark brown, curly hair was ruffled and messy. Fixing it, I saw a fish flit beneath the surface of the water.

Then, a random idea crept into my head.

Behind me, Flynn was surveying Axel, Oliver, and Cole who were all sitting at a picnic table, entranced by a stationary locust.

I shouted, "Hey Flynn, come over here!"

He walked over to where I was sitting, “Hmm?”

“Bet you five bucks I can grab a fish straight out of the water with my bare hands,” I challenged.

He grinned, “Oh really? I bet you can’t.”

“Watch me.”

I peered into the streaming water, and almost immediately a fish glided close to land. I submerged my hand and gripped onto whatever I could. I already knew I grabbed a rock before my hand breached the surface.

“Just a stupid rock,” I muttered bitterly and chucked it into the forest.

Flynn snickered, “Guess you owe me five dollars.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

I woke up early the next day and instantaneously knew something wasn’t right. The sound of wailing pervaded throughout the rickety house. I thundered down the stairs to see Flynn comforting a sobbing Cole.

“What’s going on?” I inquired hurriedly.

“Close the blinds,” Flynn murmured.

Close the blinds? I advanced towards the window behind the couch and almost felt my jaw fall to the floor.

A dead deer was slumped right outside our window. Now, I hunt deer, so what’s scaring me isn’t the fact that it’s a dead deer—it’s the fact that someone other than us must’ve killed it. I frantically closed the blinds and hastily did the same to the other windows in the room.

Somehow, Flynn was able to convince Cole that what he was dreaming, and the nine year old went back to bed.

I was still shaken when I questioned, "What are we going to do?"

"Let's check the deer to make sure it wasn't a bullet that killed it," Flynn answered faintly.

I opened the door and expeditiously was faced with one of the most grotesque smells I've ever encountered in my life. The stench was like smell of a rotten pumpkin mashed with the odor of garbage that has been sitting for too long.

I quickly realized why.

The river was congested with dead fish; their small, scaly bodies floated to the surface and twisted in bizarre angles.

I was at a loss for words. Obviously Flynn was, too.

We stood in total silence for fifteen seconds before I finally said, "Let's check the deer and then we need to call Dad."

"Agreed."

We promptly made our way to the deer, scanning it's skin for any wounds, when, miraculously, we found no traces of injuries.

"Was it poisoned?" I breathed.

Flynn responded, "How would that explain the fish? *Clearly* this is all connected to one thing. Look," Flynn pointed to a pile of assorted lifeless insects, "this cannot be a regular contamination. I think we need to check through the forest a bit more before we call Dad, just to make sure."

I paused then retorted, "I can watch over the house. I don't want to leave our brothers unattended. Are you okay with being alone?"

Flynn nodded.

"Be safe," I advised.

"You too."

After 45 minutes, Flynn entered the house and frenziedly closed the door behind him before anyone could see outside. I gave him a questioning glance. He returned it with a grim expression. I stood up and we both strode to the kitchen where the telephone was.

Our father immediately picked up.

"Boys? Are you okay?"

Flynn answered, "No. Dad, something odd is going on in the forest."

"What do you mean?"

And so my brother explained everything we saw this morning in detail to my father whom was silent throughout the whole description.

"I'm driving home," he announced afterwards.

Flynn spoke up, "When's the earliest you can get here?"

"I'd say about tomorrow evening," he resolved.

"Dad, we've got to go and make sure everyone's doing alright, but we'll try to check in with you in the morning," I proclaimed.

“Watch over your brothers and ensure that you’re all secure.”

Flynn reciprocated, “We’ll keep them all safe.” Then hung up the phone.

I sighed and plopped down into a chair. Simultaneously Cole walked into the living room to play with Greyson and the twins.

“At least everyone’s in the same place,” Flynn mumbled.

The whole day was spent in the living room. Flynn was able to persuade them all to sleep in there as well so that they’d be easy to watch over. We took turns staying awake at night so we could be completely sure that everyone was free from harm.

Once Flynn and I were both up at around 7 A.M., my brother said that he was going to phone Dad.

I told him that I’d better patrol the forest.

I stealthily trekked through the woods. Only two days ago I would’ve found this walk enjoyable and peaceful. Now it’s just downright terrifying. The only noise was the distant lull of the river cascading and flowing endlessly. I would’ve preferred to hear cicadas and harmonious birds, but no, only the waters.

As I rounded a rather large rock I gave the most audible and genuine gasp I could muster.

That’s not what I think it is.

It can’t be what I think it is.

Was my heart beating so fast I can’t feel it, or was my heart even beating at all?

Right in front of me lay the corpse of a human. At least, I assume it’s a human. I think it must’ve been a woman previously since the only patches of withered hair were fairly lengthy. It had two legs and two arms and two open, glassy eyes peering at something only it could see. Its skin



was bluish white. Its face was flattened inwards. Its mouth was gaped open in a silent scream or a desperate attempt to breathe in oxygen.

But why, *why*, was there something familiar about it?

I think I'm going to vomit.

I turned, heart in my throat, and fled back towards the house hysterically. I slammed open the door recklessly, shaking head to toe.

"Whoa, hey, Nixon are you alright?" Flynn asked, sounding legitimately concerned.

I croaked, "Flynn follow me; Greyson you're in charge."

Once we were outside, I rashly blurted out, "There's a dead person in the forest. I just saw them."

"What?" Flynn demanded, dumbfounded.

"Just come with me."

I rapidly retraced my steps through the forest, still shuddering, until I came to the big rock which, behind it, was where I found the body.

No.

No, something isn't right.

Where's the body? An animal couldn't have taken it, they're all dead. What's going on here?

"Nix?" My older brother inquired worriedly.

"It was just here."

“Maybe we’re in the wrong place?”

“This is where I found it.”

“Are you sure?”

He could tell by my face that I wasn’t lying.

Flynn glanced up at a nearby tree, “Hold on, was that there before?”

The words ‘PUT IT BACK’ were carved haphazardly into the trunk of a spindly maple tree.

My voice was trembling when I uttered, “We need to call Dad *right now*.”

And we did. We called the police, too. They told us that they’ll be here in about six and a half hours. For the majority of that time I was sitting on the couch half watching over my brothers and half staring off into space.

After a few hours, I finally feel as if I’ve recovered from this morning, so I asked everyone, “I’m pretty thirsty. ‘Anyone want some water?’”

And that was when I heard the most ominous and horrifying thing I will ever hear in my entire life.

“*Water.*”

It came from outside and it sounded as if someone was trying to mimic my voice, but it was *all wrong*. It was distorted and strangely high pitched at the end.

“What was that?” Greyson whispered.

Flynn’s mouth was wide open.

Cole was sitting up and alert.

Axel and Oliver continued to play.

I just sat there in awe.

“Water. Water. *Water!* *WATER!*”

The voice progressively got louder. Axel, Oliver and Cole were in tears. Greyson was looking at me and Flynn.

Flynn stood up.

“Alright, Greyson take Oliver, Axel and Cole upstairs.”

I stood up as well and hurried to the window, cautiously peeping my head around to get a look at what was making the comotion.

It looked exactly like the corpse.

It was the corpse.

No wait—squinting closer I could see that it was faintly translucent.

Like a ghost.

I waved Flynn over. Ghosts have been a touchy subject ever since Mom died. My brother looked as petrified as I was. While we were investigating the figure, its head turned to look at the river and then quickly snapped back to stare at the house.

“Okay so it’s yelling about water and it keeps looking at the river. Do you remember anything we did in the last two days that might’ve affected the river?” Flynn frantically interrogated.

I went over the previous few days in my mind, “No.... We were barely outside except for... Flynn I think I know what’s wrong! On the day Dad left, we made a bet about catching a fish, and when I grabbed a rock instead, I tossed it into the forest.”

“Are you sure it was a rock you picked up?” My older brother demanded.

“I—no. I didn’t get a good look at it,” I stuttered.

“Where did you throw it?”

“To the left of the river, by the dirt road.”

“That settles it, then. I’ll run out and retrieve it. You can stay here and hold down the fort.”

“Flynn, no. No, I’m not having you run out there.”

“Yes you are, I’m the oldest and—”

I cut him off, raising my voice, “Flynn I’m not letting you do this! I’m not having you run out there and risk your life when I’m the one who started this! I will not lose you like I lost Mom, okay!? I’m not losing any more of my family members, do you understand?!”

Flynn drew silent.

“Just keep them safe,” I murmured.

“You be safe, too.”

I grabbed a flashlight and trudged outside as silently as I could. I headed for the dirt road, attentively avoiding the yowling ghost. I switched the flashlight on and began to thoroughly scavenge for any strange rocks. After a full five minutes of searching, I was on the verge of giving up when suddenly it sparkled in the artificial light.

My blood turned to ice.

I'm dreaming, right?

The rock was beautiful and it had a spotted white and black pattern.

My mother's.

After a few moments, I was sobbing. Eyes flooding, I tenderly picked the rock up, clutching it delicately in my hands. I knew what I had to do. I had to return it to where I found it.

I lumbered to the river and gently dropped the stone in the churning water.

In seconds, the shouting halted. In days, our belongings have been packed up. And in weeks, we've moved far away from the memories that haunt us in the forest.