

# PROLOGUE

**H**e isn't afraid until the sky turns purple.

"Please," he says. "I didn't see anything."

But in the forest, it's the trees that seem to decide what gets seen and heard. Tonight, his words are buried.

"I promise I won't tell."

He hesitates only for a moment. Then he hears the first footstep.

He's fast, but they're faster. Each time his boots hit the ground, leaves crunch behind him, closing the distance between them.

A bramble loops around his ankle, and he goes down hard, smacking his chin, his teeth squeezing the sides of his tongue. Gasping, he crawls to his feet again, launching forward, flailing through low branches and reaching vines. He bursts out of the thicket and into the clearing. Still, the moonlight can't break through. It's like the sky has swallowed it.

*They're coming.*

He whips around, frantically searching for a place to hide, and dives behind a nearby bulldozer, its massive shovel still entrenched in the soft ground. Crawling underneath the scoop, he tugs his knees to his chest, struggling to hold his breath before he's had a chance to catch it.

Now he can see a sliver of sky between the bulldozer's arm and the joint of the scoop, but he doesn't really need to see. He already knows what will happen.

It starts with the lightning, a silent warning before the rupture. Next comes the thunder, only it's no ordinary rumble; this thunder splits a hole in the sky.

From the cloudy purple heavens, the crows emerge.

They move like a plague, their black wings billowing. Their cries peel away into the night, their sharp beaks pointed in the same direction, always.

He covers his head, even though he's protected under the bulldozer. It's more to deaden the sound.

When the crows finally pass, they leave in their wake a silence thick enough to blanket the entire forest, and this is when he hears the footsteps resume.

*Closer. They're closer now.*

He uncovers his ears to hear where they're coming from, but it seems to him they're coming from all sides of the clearing. Risking a peek, he peers into the dark, but the machinery makes grotesque silhouettes against the dim light of the purple sky. From where he hides, every crane looks like a gallows, every woodpile a crouching beast. Even the colorful tents laid out across the clearing look sinister, their garish carnival colors muted and transformed in the dark.

The spaces between the trees are what he's watching, though. Then he sees the first one emerge.

*Run!*

He keeps to the middle of the clearing, away from the dark

places, but he's exposed. His feet thunder against the soft earth, boots slipping over slick leaves and freshly unpacked dirt. He pumps his arms and pushes away the burning in his chest, the wheezing in his throat. He knows he's being followed, but he doesn't dare turn to see how closely.

Now that he's seen them, there's no way they'll let him go.

The clearing seems to stretch for miles, but when he finally reaches the back of it, he has no choice except to dive through the gaping maw of the forest again. He's forgotten how dense the vegetation is through here.

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At last, he breaks through and runs headlong into a chain-link fence, the tower it guards looming over him like a metal giant. Signs all over the fence warn against trespassing, but if he still had a way in, he would risk it.

He runs along the fence, considering the time it would take to climb it.

*The thought of going back in there . . .*

But there's no time. Footfalls beat the ground behind him in a steady rhythm, and he quickens his sprint around the corner of the fence, bringing him to the back of the building.

Far in the distance, the whistle of the train blares, and he wishes it would stop because he can no longer hear the footfalls.

After another second, though, he understands that it isn't the train that's whistling. It's them . . . whistling to one another.

“Please don't!”



But his pleading won't be heard.

His hands drag along the fence now, groping for any hint of an opening. A fallen loop of barbed wire hooks the skin of his hand, and he pulls back like he's been bitten, droplets of blood splattering the grass underneath him.

His voice quavers. "Where is the door?"

It's around the third turn in the fencing, obscured behind a thick knot of overgrowth. He has to beat back the thought of being dragged into the forest, fingers clawing at the ground.

*Not again.*

"Come on, come on," he whispers, fumbling with the chain that's wrapped unsecured around the fence opening.

When he's loosened it enough to open the gate a crack, he squeezes through, tearing his shirt in the process. He slips through the door just as he hears the crack of a twig close by.

Inside it's cold and drafty, and even the sound of his breath echoes through the cavernous halls. He already knows there's no lock inside the door. All he can do is outrun them, so he feels his way along the walls.

"They didn't see me," he tries to reassure himself, but he doesn't believe it.

A nearby rattle alerts him to movement along the chain-link fence outside.

He opens his eyes wider through the dark, but the draft just makes them burn, and he forces his shaking legs to carry him farther into the dark building.

His shin catches the leg of a chair, and he stumbles, throwing the chair to the ground with a crash. He reaches for a lantern on the nearby table and brings out a gentle light.

He sprints now, arms in front of him as he tries to remember the places to hide. There used to be so many.

Just then, his elbow knocks against a doorway.

“Here,” he breathes, then more excited. “Here!”

He feels along the opposite wall, the hiding place coming back to him now. With a hard push, the wall gives way, and then the floor drops out.

The fall is farther than he remembers, and for a moment, his vision goes black. When he tries to stand, his ankle falters under a fiery pain, and before he can catch himself, he cries out.

His voice ricochets, and he looks up at the opening in the floor above. He’s so still, he thinks maybe he’s forgotten how to move.

When no one appears in the opening, his breath slowly returns. Careful not to place too much weight on his ankle, he hobbles in a half circle, preparing to make his way out. He’s safe now.

Then he finishes his turn.

“No . . . n-n-nooo!” he stammers, trying to back away from them, but his ankle collapses under him, and he falls to his knees, the perfect place from which to beg.

“I didn’t see anything. I swear it. I’ll never tell a soul,” he says, but his voice, where is his voice? It’s barely a whisper.

*They'll let me go. They'll see I mean it, and they'll let me go.*

But he already knows that's not true.

“Please,” he manages to say once more before his throat unleashes a rabid scream.

Then the dark overtakes him.