

A car door slamming roused John from his sleep. He glanced at his alarm clock and sighed when he saw it was only five A.M. Bunching his blankets up around his neck John closed his eyes, comfort lulling him back to sleep.

Another car door closed, causing John to cover his head with his pillow. Then he remembered.

"We're leaving today!"

He burst from his bed, tripping after landing on the floor. Unphased the teenage boy got up and hurriedly dressed, his excitement making him forget his exhaustion. John rummaged through his chest of drawers, grabbing anything that might prove useful on a camping trip. Almost forgetting, he snatched up his book on how to identify animal tracks. It had been a birthday present, and he was determined to use it to learn how to define bear tracks.

He heard the front door open, and footsteps echoed downstairs. His brother was here. John turned as his bedroom door opened.

"You almost ready?" his dad asked, still wearing his pajamas and rubbing sleep from his eyes.

"Yeah. Do you think I should bring an extra sleeping bag?"

His father scratched his head. "You shouldn't need one, unless you think you'll get cold."

John dropped the extra on the floor in the corner. "I don't think I will. I'll just leave it."

He headed to the kitchen, making a swift breakfast. He was still eating when his older brother Simon walked in, his camping pack slung over his left shoulder.

"Hey, John, how you doing?"

"Good, how 'bout you?"

"Not too bad, although I am looking forward to this camping trip more than I expected. I guess all the studying for finals wiped me out more than I thought."

John finished his food as his brother went to greet their father and mother. A thrilling feeling made John run to his pack and check through his gear for the fifth time in the past twenty-four hours. He added the things that he had taken from his room, slipping them in a side

pouch.

“Now I just need to grab my knife and I’ll be set,” he whispered.

His brother and parents entered.

“Where are we meeting Dave?” John asked his brother.

“The East parking lot of the Camping site’s lodge. I told him we’d be there at six.”

“Then you’d better get going. It’s almost an hour drive,” their mother said.

Taking the advice, John grabbed his Survival knife, then helped Simon load the car.

Their packs took up all the space in the trunk.

“What about Dave’s bag?” John asked.

Simon closed the door. “We can put it in the back seat.”

They went back inside to say goodbye to their parents, the cold morning air making them move a little quicker than usual.

“You’re sure you have everything?”

Simon smiled as he reassured his parents. “Yes. We’ve both double checked our bags.”

The boys gave their father and mother each a hug, then headed out the door; getting into the car they rolled down their windows, waving as they pulled out of the driveway.

“We’ll be back on Saturday!” John called, putting on his stocking cap.

As they drove away Simon turned on the radio, closing the windows and setting the heat on high. John watched as his parents went back inside the house. He gripped his gloves tightly, forgetting to put them on, trying to imagine what the mountains might look like after not visiting them for so long. Would everything be the same? Or would there be obvious changes? He hadn’t been there since he was ten, so he was choosing the latter. The minutes flew by, neither of the boys noticing the length of the drive because their thoughts were so focused on the trip. A red light snapped them out of the trance.

“How’s school going?” Simon asked.

“Okay, I guess,” John replied. “I’m not failing any of my classes, but I’m not doing great at any of them either.”

Simon grinned, switching on his turn signal. “That sounds like me.”

John smiled slightly. “I don’t know, you’d be surprised. I can’t seem to learn anything.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Simon said, a chuckle escaping his lips. He changed the subject. “How’s baseball?”

“It’s great. I tried out for pitcher.”

Simon raised an eyebrow. “How’d that go?”

John nodded his head. “It went well. I think I’ll make the team.”

Thunder boomed, rattling the car. A flash of lightning illuminated the dark sky.

“Great,” Simon said sarcastically, switching on his windshield wipers as rain pelted down.

John looked out his window closely. “It’s turning into sleet. I’m surprised it’s not snow.”

Simon slowed the car down as the weather took a turn for the worst. A huge bolt of lightning struck close by, making nothing but the sleet visible.

“Nobody is going to be able to see us,” Simon said, spinning the wheel. “I’m gonna pull to the side of the road.”

The cars progress was slow, John’s brother holding up from stepping on the gas pedal. The vehicle idled over to the curb.

“What now?” John sighed.

Simon pulled out his phone. “I’ll try to reach Dave. He may be able to meet up with us here.”

The next few minutes passed slowly as Simon tried to call his friend. It wasn’t working.

“I don’t have service.”

John handed him his. “You want to give mine a try?”

Simon took it, dialed in the number and put the phone to his ear.

“Hey, Dave, how’s it going?”

John took off his stocking cap, listening to the conversation.

“Same trouble here,” Simon said, “Where are you?... Really? Hey, we’re about five minutes ahead of you, do you want to try and meet up with us?”

“He’s behind us?” John whispered to his brother.

Simon held a hand up. “Okay, we’ll see you in a little bit. Bye.”

John took his phone back.

“He was running late,” Simon said, “and was sitting on the side of the road like us. He’s gonna come here.”

“Cool,” John said.

Another crack of thunder made them go silent. The boys peered through the car’s windows, watching for headlights. The sleet had eased up a little, replaced by rain. John thought outside looked like a scene from a horror film. The wind snapped the barely visible tree branches back and forth, while the water poured from the sky, pounding the rocky earth. The flashes of lightning which illuminated the area, cast strange shadows on the edges of the road and rock, making ones eyes start to see things.

After seven minutes had passed, headlights came into view.

“There he is,” Simon said, turning on his car so as to let his friend know where they were.

The brothers watched as Dave pulled in behind their car. They saw his form jump out and run towards them. The next instant he was in the back seat of the vehicle.

“I can’t believe this weather! It sprang out of nowhere!”

Simon and John smiled, watching the man pull off his soaked jacket.

“I mean, did you see that lightning a while back? Unbelievable!” Dave ran a hand through his damp red hair. “Okay,” he smiled and looked at Simon and John, “What’s up, guys. Sorry, I was just a little surprised at the unexpected change of plan.”

“So are we,” Simon said, “If this doesn’t let up soon I’ll try to reach a gas station or something.”

“Way out here?” Dave exclaimed. “We’re almost right smack dab in the middle of the mountains!”

Simon once again tried to get his phone to work, responding as he did. “I know, but there’s a station not far from here. We’re about twenty minutes away.” He turned to John. “Is your cell still working?”

His brother glanced at his phone. “No, I just lost service.”

“Same here,” Dave said, showing his cell phone to his friends.

They fell into silence, each looking out the window, hardly believing their situation.

Time inched by, and John found himself getting drowsy. He didn't really try to fight it, knowing that they were stuck where they were for the time being. Before five minutes had passed, he was fast asleep.

* * *

John awoke to a burst of thunder. He started, forgetting where he was.

"I'm in the car," he whispered, remembering the storm that had stopped them on their way to the camp site.

John looked around the vehicle. Dawn was here, the dim light steadily getting stronger. Simon and Dave were gone. Confused, he listened intently.. All John could hear was the sound of the rain pounding outside. He rubbed a hand across his eyes. Then froze. He leaned his head closer to his passenger window, a sound becoming barely audible over the storm. The teen's eyes moved to the hood of the car, seeing that it was up.

"What's going on?" he said, tensely.

He heard the sound again and whipped his head to look out the window.

It was someone crying out.

Alarm filling him, John opened his door and stepped out into the steady downpour. He turned from side to side, trying to figure out where the sounds were coming from. A crack of thunder rang throughout his ears and he ran to the front of the car. He picked an object up off the ground.

“A wrench?”

A shout ripped through the trees, bouncing through the rocky terrain. John ran to the side of the road; shading his brow from the rain with one hand, he looked down a steep bank where a shallow river was starting to swell.

Dave lay next to it.

Shock made John stay where he was for a second, then with a cry of surprise he half jumped half slid down the muddy decline. He slipped on his way to his friend, covering himself with mud and cutting his knee. Wincing, John crawled to the still form.

“Dave! Are you hurt? What’s going on!”

To John’s relief, the young man opened his eyes. They were filled with pain, and John gasped when he saw a vicious wound along Dave’s stomach.

“Where’s the bear!” John heard him say.

“A bear!”

“It attacked while we were fixing the car. Simon decided to move to a different spot, but it wouldn’t start.”

John felt a sudden flash of fear. “Where’s Simon?”

Dave closed his eyes and let his head fall back into the muck. “I don’t know! He led the bear away from me.”

John rose, panic starting to well up inside him. “Which way!?”

Dave pointed to the left.

“Stay here,” John said, not knowing what else to say, as he ran off.

The dark trees leaked water, providing basically no cover from the rain, as John sprinted through their trunks. He stopped dead, seeing a red drag mark along a protruding stone.

“Simon!” he gasped, pulling out his Survival knife and gripping it like a vice.

A branch breaking made him whirl around. He jumped with fear as a bear growl sounded to his right. With his legs shaking, John tried to get them to do his bidding as he unsteadily ran toward the noise. He took cover behind a tree, leaning out to see if the bear was in sight.

It was clear.

Gasping for breath, John climbed up a large rock and slid down the opposite side. He

froze as he heard his brother cry out.

“He’s still alive,” John whispered, a new sense of purpose driving him forward.

The teen jumped a log, landing in a large puddle. He scanned the heavily wooded landscape, searching for anything to lead him onward.

A roar shattered the silence. John ran for it, scrambling up a slope, using his knife to help him. He cleared it, bending down to inspect a deep print in the earth.

“A bear track,” he hissed, not needing his book to help him identify something so blatant.

He looked up and saw a trail. John followed it, the marks leading him to a sparsely wooded area. He held his knife ready, his fear welling up again. The trail led right up to a ring of falling trees, their hollow trunks seeming to gape at him.

“Simon!” he whispered.

There was no answer; John swallowed, his mouth suddenly going dry.

He tried again. “Simon!”

It was quiet. John inched forward, holding his blade out in front of him. His hands were wet, making it hard to hold anything; he couldn’t even swallow. He heard a noise behind him, and it made him freeze. With fear eating at him, John slowly turned; the fear of what he might see making him shake painfully..

It was a grizzly. It bared its teeth, raising itself up on two legs. John couldn’t move as the beast let out a terrifying roar. It dropped to the ground and charged!

That broke the paralysis. With a cry, John ran. He didn’t know where to go, or what to do. He jumped on a log and hurled himself up to a ledge. He stopped, realizing that the bear wasn’t following.

“What?” John exclaimed, wondering why he wasn’t already dead.

That’s when he hear it. Simon's pain filled cry, that ripped the peaceful woods into pieces. Anger filled John as he leapt from his hiding place, realizing that the bear had just intended to scare him away from it’s meal. He sprinted back the way he had come, not caring how much noise he was making. He halted as he made it back to the spot.

He saw the bear emerge from behind a large bush; he knew Simon was in there.

“Come and get me!” John screamed, waving his arms wildly in the air. He picked up a

large stick, swinging it in front of him. "I'm right here!"

The grizzly snarled at him, slowly backing behind the bush. It was warning John not to provoke anything.

With a shout, John charged the animal. He swung with all his strength, breaking his stick over the bear's back. The beast let out a roar, turning on its attacker. John knew he had gone down the path of no return. The bear would try to kill him.

"Come at me!" he said, his knife before him.

The bear charged, a growl rising in its throat. John jumped to the side, swiping with his blade as he did; but he tripped. A rock made him fall to the ground.

John gasped in fear, the bear standing over him. It lunged with its jaws, and John rolled away. He found his knife in the wet grass. Letting out a shout of desperation, he plunged the blade into the bear's chest. The beast roared in pain, stepping away from John, allowing him to raise himself off the ground.

The bear growled deeply, its eyes narrowed. It was preparing to charge again. John felt his fear enclose him. He looked around desperately for a weapon, his knife still in the bears flesh.

He saw the rock at his feet.

"Just like a baseball!" the words screamed in his head.

A yell welled up in John's lungs; he grasped the rock with his right hand. He slid his left leg forward like he was on the mound, and let out the fastest pitch he had ever thrown.

The missile sped off and nailed its target on its head, smashing one of the eyes. The bear let out a roar, lowering its head and turning to one side. It shook its body, let out a guttural growl, and ambled away. It stopped after going twenty feet, looking back at its enemy; it snarled, then disappeared.

John stood there with his arm still thrown forward, stunned by what had happened.

"Simon!" he cried, running behind the bush and kneeling by his brothers side.

Claw marks ran all over the young man's body, and blood ran from a blow to the head.

"Please, please wake up! The bear's gone!"

Simon didn't move.

Panic coursed through the John's veins. He tried to think, but his mind was spinning.

"Simon," he said again, surprising himself with how quiet his voice was. He shook his older brother's shoulder. "It's time to go."

Nothing happened.

John rose and turned away. He pulled at his hair, blaming himself for what had happened. Then he remembered to check the pulse. He spun around, but stopped short.

Simon's eyelids fluttered briefly, then opened.

"John?"

His brother fell at his side, tears of relief starting to fall down his face. "Yes?"

Simon looked at himself, his face showing very little emotion.

"Next time we should bring a gun."