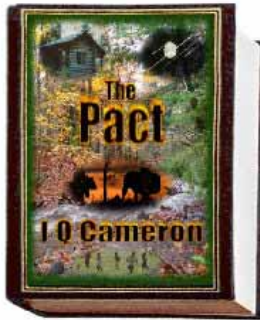


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The Pact

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(Version: V8.0C)

(A novel by)

I Q Cameron

Introduction

Thank you for choosing to read this free novel portion from www.killernovels.com

As stated on my website, this novel portion is offered free of charge for your consideration.

As a writer, I make every effort to make available novels of the highest quality, and I sincerely hope that you will enjoy this free portion so much that you will purchase the remaining portion of the novel from www.killernovels.com for a small fee. Please remember that by doing so you will receive a fantastic novel conclusion, while also helping me to be able to continue this writing venture.

The Pact is one of my most baffling multiple-murder mysteries yet – and it is *definitely* a murder story with a difference. And while the plot centres around a group of late-teens hiking in the woods of Nova Scotia (Canada), it is not your usual teen-slasher outing. It will have you wondering about aliens... *Aliens? Really?* Yes, really. And you may even find yourself beginning to wonder about the motives of more than one member of the group... You will need to keep an open mind here – or you may miss the hints. All is not what it seems, and there is more going on here than meets the eye...

The Pact is a killer-thriller, set in the wonderful scenery of eastern Canada (Nova Scotia), and while it is loaded with thrills and spills, murder and mayhem, twists and plenty of suspense, it also carries a deeper, hidden message about matters that affect us in our time. There is almost something allegoric here... If you enjoy murder stories with suspense and surprises, you'll really enjoy the twisted, brutal and hidden secrets within *The Pact*.

Take the challenge and see if you can work out what's going on. As usual, I'm betting you can't! Why are teens dying in such horrible, terrifying ways? And who *or what* is behind it all? As numbers dwindle, you'll be left wondering who, if any, will survive? And how?

The Pact is tricky, impacting, challenging, and most of all, memorable. Best of all, there are plenty of clues along the way... so best of luck working it out! Otherwise, just enjoy the blood, suspense and the deeper meanings portrayed here...

The Pact also offers a brief look into the Christian message, as portrayed by various characters

within the story, and allows you, the reader, to consider the power and grace of God, even in horrible situations. This allows us all to consider what the message of Jesus Christ is *really all about*, explained simply and without religious fanfare or ambiguity. And, without pulling punches...

(Dare you to read...☺)

Now, please enjoy!

Foreword

Having been a Christian for some decades, I always found it difficult to find novels that properly captured lifelike action, terror or even romance, while still maintaining Christian values or the deep truth and freedom that having a *real* relationship with the living God brings. Often (I found) writers sacrificed the reality or impact of life's sometimes horrible events, watering things down too far in an effort to make their story appear more 'Christian' or inoffensive.

The Bible, on the other hand, does not hide from the awful things men (and women) are capable of. Nor does it play down horrible events such as war, murder, sexual misconduct and assault, treachery, etc. Indeed, life itself can be unrelentingly offensive. With all that in mind, I have tried to keep my novels as realistic as possible without glorifying such things as violence, murder, sex, terror and every other horrifying human advent.

Jesus Christ died for us so that we could live forever (Heaven), as well as live fulfilling and meaningful lives right here and now – *true healing and true freedom!* And only He can do this, because He has the power and authority to firstly forgive us for all our wrongdoings (sins), and then to begin working inside us to change us into what He has always wanted us to be (and wanted for us).

So often Christians (in novels and in life) are portrayed as weak and 'just too good' to be real, in a world that we all know is *very real!* I would like to break that mold, since I believe a Christian hero or heroine should probably be one of the best examples of Godliness-meets-humanness we could ever find in this life.

Just like my books, such heroes are not perfect! (Smile...☺) Those who trust in Jesus for forgiveness and everlasting life (in this life) are not perfect. God is changing and working on us and in us every single day, no matter how our story looks. Like a story God is telling, we are a work in progress...

Jesus Christ has a life-changing impact on the genuine believer, because the two enter into a *real and loving relationship*. This, however, does not mean that our Christian heroes will ever be perfect, nor should they be portrayed that way. Indeed, the whole reason for Jesus Christ's intervention in history and in our individual lives is that we will always remain in need of His divine help and salvation, whether it be with external forces, internal ones, temptation, sin or any other factor.

Needing His help and forgiveness will never change. And God will never tire of giving it.

Many of my earliest writings lacked Christian input. Hence, I have done my best to withdraw most of those versions of my novels from circulation, and have replaced them with something I think that both Christian and non-adherent will find challenging to say the least. I am attempting to fill what I believe is a Christian literature void, and while some may find my stories too violent or suggestive in some areas, I have tried to write about *real* issues without shying away from reality, and yet without glorifying sexual issues, crudity or coarse language.

These things exist. I don't ignore them, but neither do I exalt them.

I have no interest in terms such as 'have faith' or 'simply believe', which are meaningless to the one who doesn't understand them. Sometimes I may give an example, or even brutally demonstrate them. I would rather ire some readers, who judge my work as 'going too far', than to indulge in the usual '*too valiant and too true*' hero figures. Life is real, and when there is action, it is very often brutal.

With all that in mind, I have decided not to pull punches, so to speak. My 'baddies' are bad, and my 'heroes and heroines' are human, and as real as I can make them. I avoid excess course language and sexual scenes, but make no apologies for realistic violence and faulty characters. These things are very much a real part of life, and since we are all living in the age of terror, perhaps there is a time and need for recognizing 'real' characters and events, even – and especially – in Christian writing.

Hence, perhaps you, the reader, will be kind enough to show me a measure of grace (should you deem that I go too far in some of the things I write, etc.), as I endeavor to explain in my own very fault-riddled way, what salvation in Christ, God's love, forgiveness and some other key Christian values and teachings really mean to us all.

And I sincerely hope I don't fail you too greatly... ☺

Disclaimer

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Prelude

Bonnie lay on her back, staring up at the brightly adorned Nova Scotia heavens.

The night sky was as clear as she had ever seen it, just as Cindy, the weatherwoman had promised, and the stars were simply ablaze, twinkling and piercing the darkness as though the dark fabric of space had been peppered with holes through which a universal light shone to dazzle

onlookers. The moon was small, just beginning its slow, patient cycle, making gazing at the heavens even more spectacular.

The weatherwoman had been right about the warmth of the night too. Dressed in the same jeans and light, white blouse she had hiked in for most of the day, Bonnie only felt a hint of cool. Indeed, the night was warm and silent and seemed to sparkle with promise and peace.

Bonnie felt totally relaxed.

Only the small fire that her husband, Kyle, had lit threatened to detract from the splendour of the heavens. It's warm, dancing glow of red, orange and yellow played games in the darkness, flickering and dancing, but was not able to drown out the stunning aerial show above. Then, almost as if to spite Bonnie, Kyle dropped another dry branch on the flames before coming to join her. His carefree act evoked momentary rage from the fire, causing it to spit crackling embers into the darkness for a time, which temporarily obscured Bonnie's enjoyment of the aerial show.

They lay side by side on a queen-size sleeping bag that had been laid out on a plastic tarpaulin on soft grass. The tarp might well have been left at home, since there wasn't even enough dew to dampen the scene, so mild was the night. Kyle seemed far more interested in his lovely wife for a time, and then, following her lead, he also became mesmerised by the night show.

"Pretty good," he noted, not much of a stargazer.

"Very good," she corrected. "Look, and there's another satellite. That's six I've counted so far."

They both watched as she pointed to where a small dot of light moved with silent, measured grace across the night sky.

"You watch," she said, excited by it all. "It'll reflect the sun's light, just like the moon does, and then when it gets to about there, it'll just disappear." Again she pointed to show him the general area when to expect the tiny light's departure. And sure enough, right on cue, it faded and slipped away into the inky blackness as the earth blocked out the sun's rays.

"Seen your comets yet?" he asked.

"Not comets," Bonnie corrected. "Meteors. Meteor showers all week, they're saying."

"Might be aliens," he suggested flippantly.

Her eyes narrowed as she gave him a feigned frown.

"Don't mock my love of the stars," she protested. Then, joining his light-hearted joke, she added, "Anyway, they come in spaceships, not meteor showers."

"Oh," he said lightly. "I stand corrected."

Then he pounced upon her, throwing his larger frame over hers and tickling her ribs as he fell into position above her. He grinned wildly, threatening to kiss her, and this time, rather than protest at how he broke into her stargazing, she grinned back at him.

“That’s right!” he agreed, a devilishness in his tone. “But their nasty little alien monsters don’t *need* spaceships. They come down in comet showers and eat up unsuspecting hikers.”

She let him kiss her, then added dryly, “Way to create the mood, Kyle. Scare a girl.”

“That’s my motto,” he shot back, not even hesitating. “Scare the pants off her!”

With that she kissed him again. Kyle couldn’t ever be accused of being a Romeo, but he was hers, and they were alone in the most beautiful place in the world.

And that was enough.



The dark coals of the dying fire hissed and spat steam and small flecks of white ash as Kyle emptied the remains of his coffee on it. He rinsed the cup and tipped the water out in the same way, and the fire hissed its last.

Morning found the pair hiking roughly westward again, just as they had done the day before. Their planned trek would eventually take them into the beauty of Kejimikujik National Park, where they would meet up with one of the walking tracks there. Once they found the Liberty Lake trail, Kyle knew they could easily be home in just a few days.

The Lake trail itself was over sixty kilometres, but having done this same walk before with some of his buddies, Kyle knew they would meet the trail about three quarters the way along, making the return walk much shorter. Not that it mattered. They were experienced hikers, and on holidays, so they could take as long as they liked.

Just to be sure, Kyle kept Bonnie ahead of him, occasionally consulting his compass and giving orders about course adjustments accordingly. They had both kept themselves reasonably fit, so it wasn’t hard going, and besides, following Bonnie was pleasant enough for him, as well as reassuring.

“Hope you’re keeping an eye out for those aliens,” he joked as they strode along.

“I’ll keep a lookout for crop circles too if you like,” she droned.

“Good idea,” he replied. “I’m keeping my eyes peeled too.”

She read his insinuation in a moment, and glanced back to see his gaze squarely upon her blue

jeans, and more accurately, her butt. Bonnie smiled; it was nice that he enjoyed her as he did.

“So, we gonna get to the Lake trail today?” she asked.

“Should do,” he answered. “‘Less the aliens get us.”

“You’ll save me,” she quipped. Then she looked back and rolled her eyes as if to say she wasn’t sure he would.

“Keep your eyes front,” he groaned, as though genuinely concerned that she might trip.

“You’re cute, but I don’t wanna have to carry you outa here.”

“You should talk,” she chided. “Where have your eyes been?”

“On your lovely bum,” he answered honestly. “Told you this park had lots to see. Anyway, it *is* cute; your bum, I mean.”

“That’s why you married me,” she said with a smirk. “‘Cause I’m cute.”

Bonnie stopped walking and stared at him as he responded, as if she was checking that her husband was smart enough to give the correct answer. Kyle responded with humour, and clearly as if he took her gaze as a good-natured challenge.

“You got it,” he answered wisely. “You *are* cute... *especially your butt.*”

Though his words may not have reflected great wisdom, his earnest and appreciative grin certainly did. So, having confirmed that Kyle indeed had given a suitable reply, Bonnie turned and walked again.

“And skinny,” he added prudently from behind.

“Good answers,” she congratulated him, without looking back. “You’re learning.”

“I *could* carry you out of here if I had to,” he assured her. “And that’s why *you* married *me*. Because together we’re as tough as *Bonnie and Kyle.*”

“Bonnie and *Clyde*,” she corrected. “It was Bonnie and *Clyde*, *not Kyle.*”

He smiled but didn’t respond.

It was a joke he had come up with not long after they had met, and one that only he seemed to *get*. Everyone else he said it to somehow managed to laugh, but really didn’t make the comparison. Kyle would have told the whole world that they were as tough as Bonnie and Clyde, but there was simply no truth to it. He was far from tough. The height of his illegal activities was to have cheated the tax department out of some undeclared cash transactions, and as for his physical feats, hiking was about as rugged as he ever got.

Still, she let him have his joke without criticism.

“Yep,” she encouraged, “you’re my hero.”

With that she took a cell phone from her breast pocket and snapped a particularly natural photo of him, still smirking and enjoying his *gangster* joke.

They walked on, puffing lightly as the warm morning sun added an extra delight to their day.



Fall's first fiery red and orange leaves of the maples disguised it at first.

It was only the consistent movement of tiny flames and a thin veil of blue smoke that caught Bonnie's eye. The fire was small and almost concealed within a small hole, and she knew instinctively that it was done like that either to stop it from getting away, or to hide it.

The latter possibility caused her to stop in her tracks and not move.

Her eyes began scouring the area for signs of life, but there were none, and all she could hear was the trudging paces of her husband behind, picking his way past some annoying alders. A raised hand was enough to stop him, but Bonnie was too slow transforming it into a raised finger before her lips, and he was already speaking before she could stop him.

"What is it?" he asked, his voice trailing off toward the end when he saw her gesture for silence.

"Somebody's camp," she whispered. "I think... I think maybe we should stay away."

Kyle came to her side and peered through the thick bushes to where a small fire smouldered in a hole, and a couple of shiny pans lay on the grass. Some bedding and utensils lay not far away, beneath a camouflage green-and-grey tarpaulin. Indeed, upon close inspection, the camp was small and well hidden, whether intended that way or not.

As he concentrated, Kyle then noticed what looked like a piece of technology – perhaps a radio or an odd-looking radio-control device. A couple of dishes lay upon the soft grass, along with what looked like a large water bottle. That was all there was, but the presence of the fire meant that they had certainly stumbled upon *someone's* camp.

The absence of a proper tent or anything else one might expect to find in such an isolated place made Kyle feel instantly uneasy, just as Bonnie did.

"Yeah, you're right. Let's go back," he whispered. "Don't want to disturb anyone."

What he really meant was that he didn't want to surprise anyone in such a deserted place, and by doing so, perhaps scare a hunter or the like into something they might all regret. Bonnie couldn't have agreed more.

That said, she couldn't help but snap another photo on her cell phone.

They began to backtrack.

Silently.



Bonnie turned and walked backwards on a safe, flat part of the track as she snapped another photo of her sweating husband. Her timing was perfect, and she managed to catch him staring at her again, instead of watching where he was putting his feet. She shot him a frown of feigned chastisement, then turned without ever slowing her stride.

His infatuation with her body was pleasing, she had to admit, but she wondered how he had managed to trudge this far without falling in a hole, or breaking a bone somehow. Kyle's lack of due care for the tracks leading into Keji was almost a little disconcerting.



When the attack came, it was without warning.

And furious.

Kyle barely heard a rustle in the thick bushes before a dark beast hurled itself through the air at his wife, just a few meters ahead. The thing came from their right, out of sight, and already airborne as it engulfed Bonnie's head and chest with its outstretched legs and massive body. Even in that moment of adrenalin-fuelled fear and horror, Kyle's reeling mind had time to realise that he had no idea what the *thing* was.

Worse still, he had been so busy ogling his wife's natural assets as she walked, he had allowed her to be attacked without any idea of the lurking presence that had laid in wait for the trudging pair.

At first he thought it was a bear, the beast's dark covering being about the right color for a black bear. But even in that instant, he recalled that the bears in this part of Canada were not known to attack, let alone with such speed and fury. Besides, even though it was large, the beast seemed too small for a bear.

Bonnie was down and flat on the ground beneath the thrashing beast before Kyle could even react, let alone identify the thing.

Even as he automatically began to launch himself forward to tackle the growling, snarling

beast, Kyle was himself hit from the right by yet another brute, its black form smashing into his side with disarming force. Apart from the fact that he didn't see the attack coming, the sheer weight of the snarling monster was sufficient to knock him right off his feet. As his forward momentum skewed drastically to his left with the impact, he could hear Bonnie screaming for help as the first beast thrashed over her struggling form.

The rush of adrenalin that surged through Kyle's veins anaesthetised all pain as the second beast tore two large gashes in his right forearm. A spray of blood went almost unnoticed as he tried to fend the animal off, punching frantically at it with his left fist until the monster finally let go.

Just for a moment there was a lull in the terrifying battle as the beast ceased attacking and stood almost still before him, then circled, reappraising its foe. The beast didn't seem as much aggressive as it did cautiously contemplative.

Kyle stood his ground and let out a gut-curdling bellow to try to bluff the strange looking monster, which, even now that it stood still, he still could not identify. It was not unlike a huge dog, or perhaps a mountain lion, but its coat was dull black leather that looked almost plastic, devoid of hair or fur, and the beast was like no animal he had ever seen. It walked on all fours, and when it bared its teeth, it was utterly fearsome, a small coating of frothy saliva and Kyle's own blood glistening ominously on its quivering lips.

But the beast was worse than that.

It was bad enough to be attacked by anything, he knew, but by *these*? He couldn't even begin to imagine what they were. Even in those frantic few seconds, when he had punched away at the nearest beast, he could feel that its skin was thick and very, very tough, almost like some kind of flexible armour.

Laying flat on the track ahead of him, Bonnie screamed again, snapping Kyle from his fear-induced contemplations, and he bellowed again. Again the closest beast seemed to hesitate, and just for a moment Kyle thought he might have bluffed it. But sadly he was not to be so fortunate. Indeed, the dull, black beast was simply waiting for assistance from its mate.

The second monster released Bonnie in an instant, and turned its attention to the larger of the prey, Kyle. A third guttural bellow brought both the monsters edging closer to him, leaving Bonnie alone and bleeding on the grass. As she began to instinctively release her heavy backpack and struggle to her feet, Kyle yelled at her to hurry. Meanwhile, he began backing up.

The pair of black beasts worked as a team, forgetting all about the smaller of their quarry, Bonnie, who quickly scurried to a nearby maple that offered a low hanging branch capable of

bearing her weight, even if it wasn't very far from the ground. A quick glance around told her that it was the only sizeable tree she could hope to reach before the beasts would run her down, so she climbed up on it, placing her feet about her own head-height off the ground.

It wasn't good, she knew, but it was the best she could find at such short notice, and she didn't dare to run. Still crying out from fear and the pain of numerous gouges to her arms, she looked back to where Kyle was backing cautiously away from the two beasts. Instinctively she began to scream, loud and shrill until she distracted the monsters just as Kyle had done for her a few seconds earlier.

As soon as the monsters glanced over their shoulders at the latest ruckus, Kyle took the opportunity to release his own backpack and thrust it away. Then he threw himself up into a nearby spruce. The towering evergreen, with its large lower limbs spreading out horizontally in all directions, offered excellent protection and numerous strong branches upon which to scale his way out of trouble.

Kyle kicked about as the nearest beast's teeth snapped audibly at his tough leather boots, temporarily catching him, and then slipping off as the wild, ghastly monster opened its powerful jaws to get a better hold of its prey. With unnatural strength and speed Kyle climbed two meters up inside the sprawling green and brown branches of the saving spruce, out of reach of the snapping teeth below.

And though the shimmering black monster jumped and snapped at him, it was immediately obvious that it could not climb, and thus Kyle was, at least temporarily, safe.

Looking over and seeing that Bonnie was also above the prowling, snarling invaders, Kyle noticed for the first time that his right arm was badly torn open, and blood was oozing at a frightening rate from two deep gashes there. Blood pulsed down the length of his forearm and caused his right hand to become wet and slippery, making the task of holding on to the rough spruce boughs that much more difficult.

He did his best to maintain balance by wrapping the injured arm about a branch above his head while his feet found sure footing upon a large spreading branch below. Only then did he attempt to grip the duel spitting wounds with his free hand and try to stem the flow.

His other hand became immersed in his own blood in seconds.

"What the *hell* are they?" Bonnie shrieked from her position in the maple, perhaps just seven meters away, with the two prowling beasts between them.

"Some sort of dog! I don't know!" he called back, almost yelling to match his wife's volume.

And then he realised that he had no need to shout, for indeed the beasts were quiet again, pacing patiently beneath and between them.

“*Dog?*” Bonnie screeched back, almost hysterical. “Dog? More like *cats!*”

“Shh,” he insisted, trying to calm her. “Calm down, Love. You’re bleeding. How badly are you hurt?”

In shock, but still functioning, Bonnie looked surprised as she balanced atop the large maple bough, running her hands over her upper body as her eyes searched for injuries. When she looked back to her husband, she looked incredulous.

“Just my arms,” she blurted, her voice still well above what she needed to be heard. “Bleeding, but not too bad. I think I’ll be okay.”

“Good,” he responded thankfully, doing his best to think clearly. “Then just stay there! You got that? Don’t you move, Bonn! Don’t you *dare move!*”

“Where’s your rifle?” she demanded, not responding to his desperate plea, but not daring to ignore it either.

Kyle looked down to his backpack, not far from the base of his spruce.

“Disassembled,” he answered bleakly, his voice dropping in volume some more as the realisation hit him. He pointed to his pack. “In there.”

“Kyle!”

“I’m sorry, Hon...”

“Dammit, Kyle!” she shot back, desperate and impatient. “Why didn’t you have it out?”

She was responding, and indeed chastising, out of sheer terror and the onset of shock, he knew. For the fact was that they had both agreed at the outset of the trek not to carry the weapon assembled.

“Calm down, Bonn. You know why,” he tried to explain, though she was beyond caring for his reasons. “We figured we’d *hear* a bear coming, remember? And anyhow, it’s illegal to wander about with one once we get to the national park...”

“I don’t *care!*” she screamed, terror driving her reasoning now. “Just shoot those damn things!”

“I can’t,” he sighed. Then he rallied, again trying to calm her. “Just stay put, Bonnie. They’ll get tired eventually, and then I’ll climb down and get it. All we’ve gotta do is wait. Okay?”

“They’re not bears, Kyle,” she corrected him, tears beginning to stream from her eyes.

“Yeah, I know,” he agreed. “I don’t know *what the hell they are*, Honey. But all we have to

do is wait them out, and then we'll be out of this. Just trust me. Okay?"

In that moment, it was as though the two panting, patiently plodding beasts actually understood his words, and both Kyle and Bonnie saw it happen. One beast looked at the other, and then moved to the base of his spruce. Very purposefully, it then took a hold of Kyle's backpack.

To the deep dread and disbelief of the two trapped hikers, the powerful black beast then began to drag the heavy backpack, along with Kyle's disassembled .308 Winchester away to one side, and away from both terrified prisoners.

"Dammit, Kyle! It *understood* you!" Bonnie cried aloud, tears streaming down her cheeks. "How can that be? *How?*"

"I dunno," he admitted, his voice strangely low as two realisations struck him. Firstly, he and his wife had both come to the same conclusion about the monsters' intelligence and apparent ability to understand them, and then at the ice-cold realisation at what the beasts were about to do next.

"Bonnie, get further up the tree!" he suddenly insisted, his voice rising again in near panic. "*Get up the tree, Bonn!*"

Bonnie's tearful eyes widened and she screamed again as both dark monsters turned and began to advance on her position. She shrieked at them to leave her alone as first one beast and then the other took turns at snapping at her boots, trying to pull her down. The distraught woman managed to kick first one animal and then the other as their large heads and powerful jaws drew close, snapping audibly and terribly in an effort to bring her down. And in that moment she realised that their sheer size and strength also made them unable to jump particularly high.

The thought gave Bonnie a small, slender ray of hope.

False hope.

For where the beasts lacked the ability to attain great height due to their large body masses, their obvious intelligence was blatantly obvious and eerily terrifying. Seeing that they could not outright capture either of their prey, the two beasts ceased enduring Bonnie's kicking boots and simply sat still, looking just as though they were silently reasoning a way to overcome the height barrier.

When the two monsters moved again, Bonnie's face took on a new look of desperate terror, and again both trapped hikers saw clearly that the beasts had silently arrived at an intelligent conclusion.

It was so unsettling that Kyle felt an involuntary urge to hurl.

Bonnie squealed over and over in terror and disbelief as one of the beasts moved to the hanging

end of the branch on which she so precariously balanced, and then began to pull forcefully at it with its teeth. Up close to the trunk of the maple, the branch was strong, but at its end, it was flexible and weak. Bonnie felt her boots begin to slip as the tenuous timber upon which her life balanced began to wriggle beneath her.

When one beast could not dislodge the female hiker, the other one joined it, and together they began to shake the springy branch so violently that Kyle was unsure whether his wife would be able to maintain her tenuous grip on safety. On the upside, it meant that the two beasts were totally occupied with Bonnie, and to Kyle, the opportunity looked too good to miss.

Without telling Bonnie what he planned to do, he began to crawl his way painfully down through the thick, needled spruce branches and sprawling fronds. The older, harder dried twigs scratched at his face and bare arms, slowing his progress, but he did it so silently that the two monsters never noticed what he was doing, even as he approached the ground.

His backpack and rifle lay perhaps six metres away, now that one of the beasts had dragged it away from near the base of his tree, but Kyle knew that if he could just reach it and get back to the safety of the spruce, he could see about turning the odds in his favour. With a couple of well placed rounds, he would then be able to examine the terrifying alien monsters at his leisure.

What happened next, however, only served to cement the bewilderment in Kyle's mind, and the icy terror in his veins. Without ever turning to see that Kyle was climbing down to retrieve his backpack and weapon, one of the menacing black beasts turned and trotted back to the base of his spruce, forcing him to give up his slender hope of arming himself. The beast bared its teeth menacingly, clearly showing that somehow it had become aware of his silent attempt to defend himself – even though it had not been looking his way.

But the true depth of Kyle's fear was not yet fully realised.

Seeing that it had secured the larger of the two prey in the spruce again, the beast that had treed Kyle returned to assist its mate. However, this time, instead of just pulling at the tips of the maple branch upon which Bonnie precariously balanced, the returning black menace moved to jump up and secure a slightly thicker and stronger portion, while the first monster held the branch down for it to reach.

And when the returning beast had secured the new and stronger portion, the first one released the thin branch tips, then moved around to the other side of its mate, then jumped up to take hold of an even stronger portion, closer to the maple's central trunk. That done, the monsters repeated the move in what was nothing less than a well co-ordinated and clearly intelligent plan to gain more

purchase on Bonnie's branch.

Having gained a firm hold, and now much closer to Bonnie's feet, the pair then acted as one and began to shake the branch with much greater force than they had been able to earlier. She immediately began to jiggle about with the branch's movements, her boots slipping in turn as she struggled to remain out of reach.

Kyle bellowed in protest.

But his threatening screeches made no difference. The terrifying alien-looking animals needed only to continue their co-ordinated pulling at the maple branch to achieve their horrific goal. Having found a way to succeed, it took only a few well-timed tugs to dislodge the panicked, wailing hiker. And while Kyle bellowed again and again in a desperate attempt to get the monsters' attention, Bonnie was inevitably and decisively shaken from the shivering maple.

With a rustle and a thump, Bonnie fell heavily to the soft grass.



"Get away from her! Get away from her, you mongrels!"

Kyle's bellow was guttural, and sounded almost as threatening as the beasts' growls. But the monsters paid Kyle little mind. He barely seemed to matter now – now that they had what they wanted.

And what they wanted, was the weaker of the two prey.

As Bonnie struggled from having the wind knocked out of her, the dull, black beasts first circled, and then waited, their heads lowered as though they would tear her apart at any moment. But they were patient. *Eerily patient*. Indeed, in those moments, looking on, Kyle realised they were as patient as they were intelligent.

With their prey secured, they were in no hurry.

"Lay still, Babe!" Kyle shouted frantically. *"Lay still! I'm coming down."*

"No! Don't!" she shot back, terse, but controlled now, so as not to spook her attackers. She too could see that there was enough about them to imply great intelligence, so in a last, desperate hope she couldn't help but wonder if a calm, composed response to the situation might just placate the beasts.

They were waiting now, on all fours, their sleek-skinned heads down, their massive jaws just slightly ajar. They had coordinated their attack so perfectly that even in her vulnerable state,

Bonnie could not help but wonder about them. She had never seen anything like them, let alone an animal that could clearly think in unison with another the way these two did. Now only their low, panting breaths seemed out of sync.

An even lower growl from one of the beasts renewed the cold, sickening feeling in her gut.

“Don’t you *dare* come down here, Kyle,” she insisted, her voice low and firm. “You’ll never get to your gun in time, so you’re better off staying up there. You hear me?”

“I can’t just leave you there,” he whispered, just as calm as she, hoping not to provoke the beasts any further.

“Yes, you can,” she insisted. “Just wait. They’re not attacking. They’re waiting for something. Stay in the *damn tree* and just *wait!*”

Bonnie sat slowly up where she lay on the soft grass. Both beasts eyed her from just a meter or more away, but she was right – neither of them seemed in any hurry to attack.

“What the *hell are you?*” she asked quietly, hoping that a soft, human voice might actually calm them. It certainly seemed to.

“You’re not...” she began, and then trailed off, keeping her voice at a lilting tone, hoping to ease the tension in the air. “Well, I don’t know what you are. But you’re smart, aren’t you? *Real* smart. And real... *black.*”

“That’s your bloody aliens from last night,” Kyle offered in a calm voice that didn’t match his words.

“Look,” Bonnie whispered, forcing herself to be composed. “They’ve got fins on the sides of their necks. And... big, sharp... fins at the sides of their mouths – like knives.”

“Yeah, I see it. Just stay calm,” Kyle warned again. “I’m gonna come down and get my gun. Then I’ll blow their fins off and you can look at them all day if you want to.”

One of the black, finned monsters looked over its shoulder to where Kyle still clung to a branch, just out of the animal’s height-reach. Its eyes narrowed, and in that moment it was as though the beast actually spoke silently to the terrified man.

“*No,*” Kyle whispered, intuitively understanding exactly what the beast was thinking. “*No, please don’t.*”

As crazy as it seemed to try to communicate with the monster, it seemed worth a try, especially since he could clearly understand it.

It wasn’t.

The beast, upon turning its attention back to Bonnie, simply stepped forward and struck with

astonishing speed and control. In a smooth, clearly practiced movement the horrifying animal had Bonnie by the throat, and flat on her back again. Bonnie's arms and legs thrashed about for a time, and then slowed as the truth made itself both evident and shocking.

Instead of attempting to kill her, the beast simply applied enough pressure to let Bonnie know that it held the power of life and death over her. She could feel the sharpness of its many teeth pressing into the softness of her throat, its hot tongue, coated in white froth pressing in hard, its hot breaths so close that she could smell the rancidness spilling forth from within.

But the alien-beast made no effort to kill her.

Bonnie could barely breathe at first, and in a move that showed clearly that the animal understood this, its grip eased, and she could just speak, albeit with an unnatural huskiness to her tone.

"Kyle, I'm okay. Stay back! I'm ok...."

The beast squeezed just a little more, but still made no effort to kill.

Unable to talk and just able to breathe, Bonnie used an outstretched arm to signal her husband for calm once more. An uplifted palm told him to stay in the tree. Without a word between them, the couple intuitively knew that since the monsters were intelligent enough to co-ordinate their attack, and even to communicate silently with each other, then perhaps there was some vague hope that the absence of an immediate attempt to kill Bonnie might prove to be a good thing.

It wasn't.

Holding Bonnie down and still, in such a way that the beast could keep her throat in its teeth while keeping both eyes on her treed husband, the monster spread its legs as though preparing for some kind of rapid response. The second beast then trotted patiently around to the other side of the female captive, so that it too could look directly at Kyle. It too then spread its front feet just a little, lowering its shoulders so that its massive head came to hover just over Bonnie's mid-section.

With her head turned to the side just enough so that she too could keep a watch over the actions of her frantic husband, Bonnie could also look down over her own panting body to where the second monster hovered, right over her navel. Like a sickening omen, in that moment she noticed that her button-up blouse had torn apart and pulled out of her jeans, leaving her bare, pale belly partly exposed to the lurking beast. She was sweating, and her panting breaths caused the soft flesh of her unprotected belly to look as though it was almost begging the monster to strike.

A long string of warm, white saliva that almost looked and felt as though it was jelly slipped from the monster's mouth and moved about on the sweaty skin of Bonnie's belly. The white streak

wriggled back and forth with the woman's frantic panting, and then slipped deftly into the perfectly formed cavity of her small navel.

It was like an invitation to the beast.

With a carefree, yet consummate swipe of its head, and without its teeth ever coming into play, the awful monster simply rubbed one of the fins on the lower side of its jaw over the softness of Bonnie's bare belly and opened her up as easily as if she had been struck with a curved sword.

Kyle's bellow of agony was so loud that he barely even noticed his wife's own cry of pain.

In that moment both man and beast understood that they most certainly were communicating. Kyle screeched at the thing to get away from his wife, and as surely as though it understood every syllable he spoke, along with his emotional agony, the beast simply repeated its former motion, this time with the fin below the opposite side of its lower jaw.

This time the beast actually pressed down into the softness of Bonnie's inner parts, and using its second fin, which was shaped not unlike the blade of an ice-skate, managed to carefully pull some of the gasping woman's intestines from the gaping openings in her heaving belly.

Bonnie screamed again, a guttural squeal that sounded somewhere between a cry of anguish and water rushing down a drain. As her arms flailed against the beast that held her down, her pitiful cry ebbed away, and changed to a weak, repeated gurgle, her volume depleted without the aid of her stomach muscles to project her scream.

Just for a few anguished seconds Kyle looked both monsters in the eyes in turn, and in those awful seconds he truly came to understand that they were baiting him. They had clearly realised that they could not get to him while he remained so high up in the spruce tree, so they had simply resorted to doing what was necessary to force him down.

Now they could have not just one prey, but both.

Unable to remain in the relative safety of the spruce while he watched his wife being mercilessly eviscerated by monsters he could not even identify, Kyle prepared to jump down. The spruce's thick, spreading lower branches caught his clothing as he tried to jump down, slowing his move, and scratching him considerably. But he barely felt it. There were only two things on his mind. One was rescuing his suffering wife, and the other involved his .308.

But as he reached the ground, he was shocked again to see that neither of the monsters made any attempt to attack him. Instead, they waited, one maintaining its grip on Bonnie's throat, though still not attempting to kill her, and the other circling around her legs so as to have open ground between it and its remaining prey.

Bonnie was still very much alive and conscious, her small hands making jerky motions that alternated between the awful animal that held her throat in its mouth, and her visible organs and intestines, which were by now beginning to slip silently from her spasming, open belly. Her eyes remained wide open, and all the while her legs stretched out and then retracted, one at a time.

It was all too much for her distraught husband.

“Come and get it,” Kyle grated, full of bitter anger now, feeling no pain and only enough self-preservation to see that the beasts leave his wife alone, regardless of the cost to himself. Deep in his mind was the smallest of hopes that Bonnie might still be saved, especially since the beast had apparently acted with such precision so as to open her up without actually attempting to decimate her organs with its teeth.

But all of Kyle’s resolve dissolved a moment later, when, still piercing him with its cold, dark eyes, the dark monster that held Bonnie’s throat took on a new, unexpected look.

Large fins at the side of the beast’s neck suddenly flared out to the side of its head in a circular pattern, something akin to a frill-neck lizard Kyle had seen on an Australian documentary. The large black head with its powerful jaws looked just for a moment like some kind of grotesque killer-flower, with numerous sharp black spikes flicking to life all around it, each spike joined to the next by thin black webbing.

It only took another moment, sadly, to realise that those ‘petals’ were in fact, more sharp protrusions with which the beast could defend itself, or more likely, inflict serious injury.

“Damn you,” Kyle whispered.

He had never seen anything like it. The beast looked somewhere between a crouching dog or perhaps a bear, but with sharp, metal-like fins that shot out from its neck in an instant to threaten its enemy.

And menacingly, it was also a sign of more horror to come.

The horrific, slobbering beast suddenly looked down at its helpless female prey once more, and then gave a crushing squeeze with its powerful mouth and a powerful shake of its head. In that moment Kyle knew that the extending of the fins about the monster’s neck had been yet another communication to him, as well as to the other beast.

The cracking sounds of Bonnie’s neck crushing and breaking and her final gurgling whimpers were unmistakable.

Kyle rushed to his backpack, but barely made contact with it before both monsters were upon him. He screamed in both agony and anger as they tore at his flesh, their teeth easily crushing the

bones of his fists as he sought to fight them off. The fins beside their lower jaws added terribly to his injuries, opening up his body and limbs over and over, until he was barely recognizable as the man he had been just a minute earlier.

If there ever was an easy way to die, this wasn't it. Even in his traumatised state Kyle had the presence of mind in his last conscious seconds to see the second beast's fins flash out from the side of its neck again, and he knew that it was a signal of his death sentence.

At that point, however, with his beloved Bonnie already dead, it no longer seemed to matter.

As it turned out, *Bonnie and Kyle* had managed to put up a performance that even the real Bonnie and Clyde might have respected.

CHAPTER 1

DAY 1

They were nine in all. Nine hikers. Nine friends of sorts.

And they were nine fellow college students – and for the most part, school acquaintances from childhood.

Rachael Winston led the line of adventurers through the thick woods, picking her way between the various maples, spruce and birch that constituted the majority of the trees in that part of Nova Scotia. Her eight friends plodded blindly along behind, trusting that their leader knew where she was going, though it seemed a fair bet given the confidence Rachael exuded in her purposeful stride and occasional glances at the compass in the palm of her hand.

So confident were Rachael's friends in her ability to lead them through the ever-changing woods and terrain that none even bothered to take much notice of where their meandering path was leading them. Rather, they spent their time glancing about and chatting noisily as they went. Youthful exuberance made the atmosphere vibrant and exciting and entirely carefree.

Rachael was above average in height, which enabled her to take long strides that some of the others in the group found difficult to keep up with. She was fit, keeping to a healthy diet and exercise regime, and she found herself having to stop regularly to allow some of her slower friends to catch up. She didn't mind, though, as it gave her time to take in her surroundings and confirm that she knew exactly where she was at all times, staying on track for their destination.

She sported her long brown hair curled into a thick snake that was twisted and pushed up into a *Tim Horton's* sports cap, with the snake's head of fine brown strands fanning out and protruding

from a hole in the back between the clasp and the fabric. The cobra's head of brown hair seemed to bob up and down with the young woman's strides, and looked as if it might be keeping a vigilant eye over all those she was leading.

Rachael exuded a sporty look, which indeed, fitted her well. Her face shone with a hint of perspiration, though her regular breathing showed that she felt little strain with the arduous trek, even with the weight of her hefty backpack. Rachael was pretty enough to be the envy of many and the desire of most, with sparkling brown eyes and a disarming smile, and topped off with a rich intelligence that gave her a definite air of confidence.

But Rachael had suffered too, and everyone who knew *her*, knew *that*.

Indeed, what she had been through in recent times was no easy thing for *anyone* to bear, let alone someone so young. For over a year she had been down and depressed, struggling terribly, battling inner demons and silent accusations, and knowing that life would always be different for her now. Each day had been a constant struggle, and there hadn't been a single one of those days when she had not woken to a dark inner pain that would not be quenched or reasoned with.

It had been a wrenching, dark time. But it had also changed her for the better.

She had grown up in a Christian home.

Whatever that was, she used to think.

Her parents had done their best to lead by example how they thought *God* would want them to live – and how *Jesus Christ* would want their precious daughter to live. But somehow their teachings, their examples, *their lives* had fallen short of convincing the strong-willed young Rachael of anything... *real*.

Those lessons had come only with pain. Terrible pain.

And now Rachael's young life had discovered *plenty* about pain.

And about consequences.

Dutifully, and perhaps lovingly following her parents' example, she had once even professed to being a Christian, or at least had given cursory allegiance. But all that had slipped away with the dawning of her teen years, and like everyone she had ever known, she had allowed the excitement of being young and full of hormones run away with her.

Teasing boys with her newly developed assets had given way to more serious matters, virginity had been traded for trying to please *the one* she thought so special, and in time – *at his request* – all safety had been thrown to the wind too. And a girl blessed with such beauty and curves had not found it difficult to tempt the one she had so erroneously believed would treat her with love.

But sadly, *love* had never been on his agenda.

And regrettably, Rachael had discovered that fact too late.

First came keeping up with styles, then boys, then alcohol and then drugs, and though she had not indulged in any, she had experimented in all, and a downhill spiral of values and grades had quickly followed. Rachael had drifted slowly away from God at first, and then held him far away, as with outstretched arms as rebellion quickly blossomed within her.

Something within Rachael had prevented her from becoming addicted to any particular substance, a fact that she had been secretly thankful for, and indeed, she had actually been instrumental in keeping her equally rebellious friends from overindulging, and thus becoming fully addicted to any particular destruction. But the real damage had been done not so much to her friends as to herself, subtly at first, and then irrevocably and dire.

The pinnacle to Rachael's rebelliousness had come when she had finally given in to the unceasing urges of the leader among her friends and self-appointed *top dog* at that, Danny Ellerstein. His requests had been domineering and unrelenting, as had his hands, until finally she had let him have his way. And so a girl who had once given more than just tacit devotion to Jesus Christ, surrendered to become a young woman who had slipped far enough down the slippery slope of risky behaviour to indulge in sex, and then at Danny's insistence, *unsafe sex*.

And perhaps most jarring of all the inner voices that accused her, Rachael knew she had given herself to a young man who was nothing more than a selfish and arrogant bully, caring only for what he could take. She had always suspected that in the end, any adoration Danny might have shown her was merely a ploy designed to get him what he wanted.

And it had. Danny had taken all Rachael had to offer without reserve.

Or care.

Then, having allowed herself to be coerced into far more than she actually wanted to give, it had not been a difficult thing for Danny to persuade Rachael to let him fulfil his desires, while caring nothing for what consequences might assail her later on.

And assail her they had.

Rachael still often felt the icy tendrils of chilling terror at the sight of her positive pregnancy test. In those desperate and decisive times she had returned to prayer – the most fervent prayers she had ever prayed. But alas, a second positive test a week later had only confirmed what she already knew in her heart was true.

And as expected and feared, Danny had proven to be entirely without compassion.

It had all been fun, he had said. Just fun. Nothing more. The only thing necessary was for Rachael to have an abortion. It was that simple...

Fun... Just fun...

For Rachael the fun had quickly ceased.

Abortion. She hated the very word now.

And what followed was like something from a cheaply made horror film.

Danny had proven to be the selfish, emotionless void Rachael had secretly always feared him to be, and even fervent prayer on her part hadn't changed the colour of her pregnancy tests. Just as she had always known he would, Danny had left her completely alone. And so, very much alone, she had ventured to her small town's one and only clinic.

Her heart had been terribly burdened that day. She could still recall it with vivid dread. Even as a back-sliding Christian, every fibre of her being had demanded that she should not kill the child within her.

A child. That was what she had been taught.

But suddenly, in the harsh reality of life, the choice hadn't seemed near so simple. The lessons of her childhood and youth had seemed so unimportant, so trivial at the time. But no longer. Not when the stark choice had actually been upon her.

But in the end she had seen no other avenue of escape. Sadly, within the cold reality of the abortion clinic that perilous day, Rachael had justified her decision by musing that if Danny could be entirely selfish about the matter, so could she.

Poignantly, that had been the last time she had thought such a thing.

A small town, few choices and even more limited funds, and a botched operation had seen to that.

For almost a full year the normally upbeat, happy teen had withered and brooded, turning inward, distant and bitter. She had begun to follow in Danny Ellerstein's footsteps, and rather than leave Danny and his small group of subservient followers, she had joined him as their unappointed, but well established leader.

It had been a dark, bleak and bitter time of withdrawal for Rachael, during which her heart had grown black with bitter hopelessness.

A simple slip of the scalpel...

She would probably never be able to have children, she had been told.

Barren...

The price seemed so high as to not fit the crime.

But it was all just fun. Just fun, Danny had said.

No children. Unable to ever have children...

Ever!

How could anyone botch a simple operation that badly?

The accusations and *ifs* had driven her into a deep gloom for almost a year.

But to the amazement of all her friends, in the past few months Rachael had turned her deeply debilitating inner demons away, and had clawed her way to a more positive outlook once more. Even *she* had to smile now at the thought of how she had started out praying for fireballs to fall from the sky and to mercilessly consume Danny Ellerstein, though not before breaking his bones and burning him alive.

Killing him... Slowly...

Without mercy.

But the fireballs had not come.

And indeed, rather than seeing any change in Danny, it had been Rachael who had been changed by her own prayers. Slowly at first, and more recently in a rush, she had been strangely set free – not from the pain of what she had potentially lost, but from the burning, bitter malice she had felt for the young man who remained so blissfully untouched by Rachael's plight.

And all without fiery meteors...

Oddly enough, her true relief had finally come when she had started to pray not for vengeance upon Danny Ellerstein, but for forgiveness – first for her own role in all that had happened – and then for his.

And slowly Rachael had transformed into the far happier and more positive girl of the past – and even more so. Her peace was now visible, despite the ever-present reminders of her friends' thoughtless or unguarded comments. Having suffered and survived the terrible loss of *the operation*, she had given up brooding, choosing to ask God, or perhaps more precisely, Jesus Christ for peace and help.

Jesus had very clearly told her in the Bible that He forgave her for the taking of a tiny life. That much was very clear. And once the guilt was dealt with, and her own fault acknowledged, Rachael had even been able to see hope.

Who knew? Perhaps miracles could still happen?

Perhaps by some miracle she might still be able to conceive later in life.

Surely...

Either way, Rachael had resolved to trust God, and to exhibit light rather than the darkness that might have overcome her if not for the sure and comforting presence of Jesus Christ's unconditional love in her life.

His love was now her rock.



Rachael had made no secret all semester that this trek was her big chance to chase out some cobwebs and regain some of her former flair. She had suffered a long and painful year, and was openly excited about getting away and making a new start.

Indeed, this trip with her friends to her grandfather's cabin on the edge of Kejimikujik National Park in southern Nova Scotia had already flushed away any sign of lurking sorrow or brooding in Rachael, leaving only a vision of joy with enticing, sparkling eyes – and all this even before the long trek had begun. Her spark of old had indeed returned.

And indeed, grown even more brilliant.

And now finally on the long walk, she had all the patience in the world for the stragglers.

Rachael's long-time friend, Amber Anderson strode along not far behind her, and like the group's trail guide, Amber had no difficulty keeping up. She was exceptionally tall, even taller than the young men in the group, and though she sweated somewhat, her lankiness and sporting interests definitely made the going somewhat easier for her than it was for most.

Amber's hair was almost as ridiculously long as her legs were, light brown and straight, and reaching all the way beyond her buttocks. Her eyes were pale blue, and while Amber was not nearly as pretty as her friend, Rachael, her height, hair and remarkable figure easily had the attention of all. Tall, attractive and popular as she was, though, Amber was inclined to brood, partly due to her somewhat superior air, and oddly enough, jealousy of the other girls.

Boys had noticed Amber right from her earliest school memories, and she had learned at a young age how to manipulate them with little more than a suggestive glance or a subtle word. In latter years even grown men had fallen victim to a strategic glance and a deliberate smile. She loved that she could do it so easily, and indeed it had proven a powerful asset, and one she had learned to use with considerable skill.

As for the jealous side of her nature, Amber knew very well that she possessed all it took to

drive men wild, but that was never enough. It never had been, and it never would. Some of the other girls were so much prettier, and that had always both attracted her and irked her.

Long legs and long hair were great, but she simply was not perfect, Amber decided.

And it always irritated her.

Amber didn't need *attractive*.

She needed perfection.

In time even her amazingly long and luxurious light-brown-golden hair, the envy of almost every girl who knew her, had not been enough to satisfy either. In her mind, *she should have been born blonde – not light brown. Blonde! After all, she had the blue eyes...*

As it was, the lighter part of the gold in her hair came from a bottle.

A bottle.

That sucked.

It just wasn't right!

She should have been perfect.

She *needed* to be perfect.

Sadly then, no matter how many boys swooned over her, and no matter how many girls longed to have hair half as thick and long as hers, a dark envy had always robbed Amber of any real happiness or peace. It left her at risk of being a superficial friend at best, and potentially something far worse.

This made her a complicated mix of emotions and dislikes, a potentially prickly person that no male could understand, but most wanted to please. Most doubted any would ever succeed at either.

Even Amber had her doubts.

After all, she realised, she would never be able to admit to how she coveted the prettier girls their looks. And so, she had become prone to flirting subtly with her pale blue eyes, flicking her amazing long hair, and using her wonderful body to get boys to do her bidding, and yet in truth, she had never allowed any boy or young man to actually get close to her.

Not even as a friend.

It was a trait she knew deep down she was fated to hold on to. Interestingly then, while Rachael and Amber had been friends for as long as they could remember, Amber had fully expected Rachael's tragedy and Amber's undeniable popularity with the opposite sex to drive a wedge between them. But it hadn't.

Well, perhaps at first, Amber could admit, but not for long.

After her initial bitterness, Rachael had striven to keep their friendship alive, and the pair had become close again in recent times as both young women's character flaws and struggles gave the other comfort.

It was an odd, but undeniable dynamic.

Amber watched Rachael as she strode ahead of the group, fit and sprightly and happy again. It was good to see, even though a twinge of jealousy crept into the tall girl's heart. The truth was that while Rachael had been brooding, she had been less than attractive to the boys, and that meant one major player had been out of the boy-claiming game. For a jealous and suspicious Amber, that had been a time of relief in a very real way.

But now the vivacious Rachael was back, and when it came to boys, more of a threat than ever.

Or perhaps not...

Lately Rachael had been sprouting all this *Jesus stuff*, as Danny called it, and their old friend no longer seemed near as interested in boys and sex as she once had. For that matter, Rachael wasn't into *most* of the pleasures they all had formerly loved to be secretive over, but then brag to one another about when it was just the girls together.

Amber smirked. Boys knew nothing of what girls were *really* all about.

They were just toys... Yep. Boys were so good to have fun with – in every way.

As long as you then kept them in the dark...

As Amber's conniving mind went back to Rachael's sprightly form at the head of the pack, another thought sprung to life.

Hmm, she mused.

Whether Rachael posed a threat to the boy-impressing situation or not, it felt good to see her so happy again. After all, her friend had been through a terrible ordeal, and there had been times when Amber had actually wondered if Rachael might seek vengeance upon all those who had badgered her into having the abortion.

Fortunately, though, Rachael had never sought payback, and that was a great relief. *And odd, really*, when she thought about it.



Not far behind Amber Anderson paced Danny Ellerstein.

As the group's self-appointed and natural leader, one might reasonably have assumed that he

would be at the front of the pack, especially since he too was fit, and the tallest of the young men in the group. Danny had always been the undisputed leader and decision-maker, so his normal place *was* out in front. Of course, this was Rachael's outing, and she was the only one who knew the way, but there was a far simpler reason for Danny's position among the line of hikers. The simple truth of it was that he felt a particularly pressing need to walk behind Amber, no matter where she might have fallen amid the walkers.

Where Rachael stood out as pretty among the young women, Danny possessed similar natural attributes among the young men. Tall, with a rugged face, a pronounced chin complete with deep cleft, and challenging brown eyes, Danny was gifted like Amber in that he could easily have the opposite sex swooning over him with very little effort. His short, golden spiked hair and remarkably handsome looks made him a strong magnet to the girls, and added to his already brimming confidence. He didn't even try to be popular; he simply was. Not too bright, but always ready with a flashy grin and an unfathomable confidence, Danny was always going to lead.

He'd even found ways to get through his studies without putting in any real effort. That was simply who he was. When it came to young women, Danny had never had to try very hard to be a hit.

Except for the one he now *really wanted*, that was.

And while Amber knew he wanted her, she was the prize he had not been able to get close to.

And so Danny would be the latest victim of Amber's well-shaped and well-clad butt, and he was indeed already discovering that she could be, in his words, *as cold as she looked hot*. Still, hormones and a natural lack of wisdom gave him an uncanny ability to think somewhere lower than his head, and he wasn't about to quit on Amber without suffering many more humiliating and frustrating attempts to have her. In his mind, she was worth the hunt – and the pain.

And for certain, he would suffer.

Those three – Rachael, Danny and Amber – made up the leadership of the group, the rest dutifully willing to follow the mix of brains, brawn and beauty of the trio. And so they found themselves hiking through the particularly beautiful wilderness of eastern Canada on a bright early-fall day. The startling colors of the first changing leaves of the maples and ashes attested to the true majesty of the place, and a gentle breeze soothed what little fatigue and sweat the long walk had drawn out of the hikers.

It was the long-awaited dream break from college, filled with youthful exuberance and set in the most stunning, wonderful landscape possible.

What could possibly go wrong?



“You sure you know the way to your granddad’s cabin?” Danny asked, somehow managing to force himself to look past Amber’s behind and into the watching eyes of Rachael as she turned to answer him. He was not, however, able to leave a good measure of sarcastic doubt out of his question.

“Yeah! ’Course I do,” she assured him confidently, as though even to ask was ludicrous. “I used to do this with him every summer when I was a kid. You gotta trust me, D.”

Danny shrugged as if to say he believed her, or perhaps didn’t care. It was difficult to tell, and the only thing that was for certain was that he felt duty-bound not to sound concerned. The leader could never show doubt.

Rachael, he knew, was still particularly attractive, but very much off limits. *Especially nowadays*. Things between them had chilled to say the least, and there was a strain that ran so deep as to potentially threaten deep conflict, but if left alone, each knew they might just manage not to blot out their one-time friendship. It was a tenuous balancing act.

But then, Danny also knew he simply didn’t really care. What was done, was done – and it had been lots of fun while it lasted.

Still, it was a pity how they had ceased to be romantically involved, the lanky leader decided, and then his mind was gone again, drawn inexorably away by a force stronger than memories. His mind slipped back into its self-imposed trance as he ogled Amber’s butt just ahead once more. Without her noticing he took out his cell phone and snapped several photos of her alluring form from behind, and continued to snap away until she noticed and turned to shoot him an exaggerated frown.

“Just what the heck do you think *you’re doing?*” she asked, feigning annoyance, when really she enjoyed that he liked to look at her that much.

“Just gettin’ some mementos of our trip,” he answered with a lecherous grin. Without hesitation he snapped another, this time of her face.

“Oh, sure,” she continued to chide. “And just what is it you plan to *do with them?* I better not find them *anywhere* on the net, you pervert!”

“Well, yes I am, and thank you very much for, like, recognising that fact, Miss Anderson,” he

announced proudly, as if being interviewed. “And may I say that, like, personally I really think you should be just *so proud* of your butt, but if you *really don’t want* to see it on social media – as may, or may not have, like, been my plan – then I suppose I can just send them to, like, my computer, and of course, keep them for my own use later on.”

“Ooo, yuk!” one of the girls called out loudly from near the back of the line of hikers, and several snickers followed.

“You’re disgusting!” Amber chastised him, shaking her head and still feigning annoyance.

“Well, thank you again,” Danny crowed proudly.

“You won’t be sending them home to your laptop anytime soon, D,” Rachael called back, happy to at least dampen his enthusiasm for his lewd photographic achievement. “No cell coverage out here.”

“Oh, well that sucks!” he snapped back noisily. “Where the hell have you brought us, Rach! Huh! No cell! This is, like, prehistoric or somethin’!”

“It’s called *getting away from it all* for a reason, Danny,” she pointed out drolly, and with yet more enjoyment. “Sucks to be you.”

“Sucks to suck,” came a voice from behind, the usual sequel to the former comment.

“But you’ll still have your photos of Amber’s bum for later, so you’ll survive,” noted Rachael, happy to add to prod him a little more.

“Don’t listen to her,” Amber countered in an exaggerated tone, clearly defending the boisterous leader of the group. “You can take some better ones later – if you remember to ask me, that is. Send me a text when you can.”

Everyone laughed. It was typical Amber, sending Danny – or any boy – mixed messages.

Danny’s eyes lit up. It was equally typical of him to assume that girls would want him.

“I can text that,” he declared resolutely, as if it was imperative, and then he actually tapped out a text to be sent once his phone had a signal. It was done in mere seconds, and when it was, he read it aloud for all to hear – especially Amber. “Take photos of Amber’s butt. S.I.S.”

“SIS? What the heck is SIS?” asked one of the stragglers.

“*Snicker In Silence*, drone,” Danny explained. “It’s like, the opposite of *Laugh Out Loud*. Like, try to keep up, will ya? And I ain’t just talkin’ about your walking pace, either.”

His sarcastic tone brought a mix of groans and laughter from the various hikers, depending on their take on Danny, who could be offensive and vile, and yet oddly and occasionally thoughtful. Moreover, he was almost inevitably hard to read.

Rachael, who knew him better than most, saw his eyes move immediately back to Amber's lovely behind, and gave an imperceptible shake of her head. Immediately she heard Danny's cell phone clicking again as he took more photos.

He would never change, she knew.

But then, she didn't really expect him to.

CHAPTER 2

NIGHT 1

That evening around a campfire, the group of nine sat and relived the long trek they had endured to reach their nighttime destination. And despite a consensus that it had been hard going, and that clearly it was all Rachael's fault for not warning them just how trying the trail would be, it was done with a large degree of laughter.

Rachael took pains to explain to them that the trek could have been done quicker, had it not been for the frequent stops that grew in duration as the day dragged on. Put simply, the *snails had slowed the rest of them down*.

And for that she was shouted down with a chorus of hearty, though fake denials. The truth was, and they all knew it, they had been slow. Painfully slow.

Relishing their freedom, some had brought alcohol, and sat sipping at bottles that were shared freely among the group. A large bottle of vodka surfaced, but strangely seemed never to find popularity amid the already euphoric atmosphere, mostly because no extra high was needed. Besides, given Alfie's general loathing of alcohol's destructive reputation upon the athletic body, there was just enough apprehension over its presence to sap its intended purpose anyway.

Moreover, the appearance of alcohol made Rachael question yet again whether she really belonged with the group anymore. Not that she had anything against having a drink, but most of her friends tended to drink to excess, and that didn't sit right with her anymore. Besides, having placed her trust in Jesus, she knew innately that He wanted her to preserve and protect herself, and drug use and alcohol abuse generally ended in less-than-safe situations with her friends.

To her relief, however, the plunge into booze never really took off. Even Danny's weed didn't turn into the mind-dulling crevasse she had feared it could.

Indeed, the scene became shrouded in a strange kind of natural awe. It didn't take long before those who partook of alcohol dispensed with their drinks and sat close to the fire, leaning in with

marshmallows skewered on long sticks instead, warming the large white hunks until they were toasted brown or caught fire and had to be hurriedly extinguished with some overzealous puffing by the owner.

The welcoming fire crackled and spat occasional embers at its mesmerised onlookers, threatening them should they dare to venture too close, but never delivering on doing anyone actual harm. Only the marshmallows suffered, and the mood became easy and calm, and completely hypnotic to all.

It was utterly euphoric.

Amber made no effort to shake off Danny, who made very sure he got to sit next to her – and close. He couldn't keep his eyes off her, and he felt no need to hide the fact. She enjoyed the attention, even if she found little in him to her liking, except perhaps for his good looks. Still, she knew he was as shallow as she was, so it didn't seem to matter. Besides, it was fun leading him on, and there was never any chance of her lowering her guard to him.

The only one who didn't seem to grasp that fact was Danny.

"Anyone got any scary stories?" he asked, a mischievous tone to his question.

Amber sighed.

Sadly, it was about what she expected him to ask. Although, as she thought about it, his question could have been far worse. Still, Danny was Danny and the night was young, so there was plenty of time for him to demand more lewd things – of the girls, of course. Amber was surprised he hadn't already tried to get them playing some form of *strip poker*.

Whatever you do, don't suggest it! she thought, rolling her eyes.

As a leader, Danny made his friends feel safe from outside threats; his brusque, confident manner usually just threatening enough to scare off most of those who might otherwise try to bluff or threaten any member of the group. But he wasn't known for being a genius, and he was even less renowned for being sensitive.

Having tried to coax the group and failed, Danny tried again.

"What about scary, *sexy* stories then?"

There came an almost coordinated, "*Oh, Dan-ny,*" from the girls, and a few grins from the young men present.

Sarah Goldman, who sat to Danny's right, looked up into the shimmering darkness. The night was clear as crystal and brightly illuminated by a plethora of brilliant twinkling stars. Even as she looked, a meteor streaked through the darkness, slashing it until the tiny light faded out and was no

more. Immediately the bright scar it had rent in the darkness healed over, but the magic of it remained, missed by none.

Sarah's blue eyes twinkled too in the soft firelight.

"My story is just that every time one of those lights crosses the sky it means another alien has just come to Earth," she said casually. Her tone was so unaffected that it was as if she might actually have been serious.

Sarah was of medium height and thin enough to be considered petite, with an not-quite-flat chest to match her lack of weight anywhere else. When she wasn't holding her marshmallow stick with both hands to steady it, she often preened her fair hair, stroking it away from her face so that she could always look her best. That was important to Sarah. Hair – *especially blonde hair* – was for attracting the right kind of boys, and should never look dishevelled or even slightly out of place. And like all the young women present, youth helped her to maintain a natural health that seemed to glow in the firelight.

"Aliens?" Danny shot back, a measure of sarcasm in his tone. "Sure, Sarah. And what do those aliens do? They *eat* people!"

"Just college students," came a reply, not from Sarah, but from beside her. The voice was from a friend who knew very well that sometimes Sarah needed to be saved from the potentially obnoxious Danny Ellerstein, who was likely to sink to jokes about Sarah's lack of cleavage if she annoyed him. Anna Robertson understood there was a chance that Danny might follow his usual *breast-course* and that Sarah was already sensitive enough about the matter, so she was only too happy to assist.

Anna shrugged and added, "Boys mostly."

"Boys with marshmallows," Rachael threw in.

Anna was also of medium height and with hair that was similar to Sarah's except that it was longer and sported natural waves. They were similar enough to sometimes be asked if they were sisters, though Danny always laughed at the possibility, since Anna sported ample cleavage and was always happy enough to show it, where Sarah possessed far less to show and made very little effort to do so.

Anna also possessed a marked effervescence that usually made her the life of a party, and at the very least got her noticed. She had a reputation for being reasonably smart and resourceful, and anyone who spent enough time around her knew that she could also be remarkably feisty when tested. Like Amber, she knew boys noticed her, and that made life enjoyable. Playing hard-to-get

only added to the pleasure.

And, whether Sarah's sister or not, she usually felt a desire to protect the smaller girl.

"Oh, that's funny," Danny countered sardonically. "Well, maybe it was aliens that ate those two missing hikers the cops are lookin' for. So, I guess you might be right, Anna. Well, except that if it *was* aliens, then they ate the wife too, not just the husband."

Anna knew that even if Danny didn't like her personality, he liked pretty girls, and that made him easier to argue with, if not to control. All she had to do was disagree calmly, without actually challenging him, and he would never dare to put her down too harshly. Cleavage and beauty had their advantages, and the only trick was to remember not to make him angry.

Don't rile the in-your-face and unpredictable Danny, and he was child's play.

"Nah," she said confidently. "Those two are just lost, that's all. They'll wander around out here for a few days and then get picked up by a news crew in a helicopter or something. 'Course, even if aliens *did* get them, they'd only eat the man. The woman they'd just let go."

Danny tilted his head and gave a slight scowl. Anna was right about one thing, at least; he could never risk insulting a pretty girl, let alone when he was already hoping to impress another. Still, he couldn't let the taunt go unanswered.

"So you believe in aliens?" he asked, again with unveiled sarcasm.

His question caught Anna off guard, and she found herself answering honestly even before she realised it might not be wise to bare her soul to the likes of a noisy, prank-pulling loud-mouth like Danny Ellerstein.

"Well," she admitted honestly. "Yeah, I think they... *could* exist... and if they do, I'm really scared of them. I think if they can make it all the way across the galaxy to Earth, they'll be easily able to beat up our defences, and I... *I really hate* to even think what they might look like. And if you *really* want to know the truth, Danny, I've had nightmares about them ever since I was a kid, so nowadays I just make jokes about them to try not to be so afraid."

"Well, it just so happens there's something coming up behind you now. Hey, Anna, do you think it could be one of your aliens?" Danny provoked boisterously, pointing until his victim felt compelled to look, even though she knew full well he was baiting her. "Ugly little sod he is too. Oh no, it's only Evan!"

"I knew I shouldn't have told you anything *meaningful*," Anna replied, eventually unable to resist looking over her shoulder. Then she shrugged and twisted up her nose, realising that Evan was already sitting with the group and shaking his head at Danny's comment. "No seriously, I've

been terrified of the idea of aliens ever since that movie came out. You know, the one with what's-her-name in it?"

"Jaws?" Rachael suggested wryly. "You know the shark was made of plastic, hey Anna?"

"No! You know..." Anna refuted impatiently.

"You mean the one with the aliens in it?" Danny jibed, and then he laughed some more.

"Thanks, Danny," Anna chided, pretending to be hurt, and by so doing, baiting him in return.

"I was sharing a real fear, you know."

"They're a load of garbage, Anna," he announced with certainty. "I can't believe you'd fall for *that crap*."

"Well, *I* believe in them," Sarah put in.

While she was thankful that Danny's initial attack had been deflected by Anna, she wasn't totally subjugated by his confident, brusque manner – at least while he was not angry or bullying. Her relationship with the group, or more precisely, Danny, was a strange mix of genuine admiration for her leader, and a deep dread of his relentless teasing.

"Well actually, space is a void, so they couldn't arrive in a meteor shower because they'd already be long expired from suffocation – not to mention the total absence of water, which would likely have resulted in death by dehydration millennia ago. Though that's actually arguable since comets technically have ice pellets in their trails. And then there's the cold... But then of course, even if there *were* aliens and if they *were* dead, they wouldn't decompose out in space because there would be no bacteria to break down their bodies, so I suppose they *could* carry intergalactic diseases..."

The voice came in a rapid flurry from across the fire from a young man whose skewered marshmallow wandered about precariously amid the edges of the flames. Having heard his name mentioned as the butt of Danny's latest insulting joke, Evan Amity could not resist adding some science to the discussion.

"*Evv-aan!*" Anna's exaggerated use of the young man's name was accompanied by a wrinkled brow that spoke of her dismay that he would even dare to speak in such factual tones. "Too many long words, you *nerd!* We're not in class now, *dork*. *Lighten up!*"

Evan, the only one smarter than Rachael, and perhaps a true genius among the group did his best to smile and shrug Anna's rebuff off. Had the reprimand come from anyone else in the group, he might not have even noticed it, since he was used to such outbursts being directed at him. But Evan had no shortage of desire for Anna – partly because she was remarkably pretty and reasonably

smart, but moreover, if he was honest, because he was in love with her breasts. In his eyes, she could do no wrong, and he secretly looked for any opportunity to talk to the *blonde miracle*, as he thought of her, just so that he could steal clandestine glances at her wonderful cleavage.

Naturally, this was no secret to Anna, even though she let him think she knew nothing of his not-so-secretive glances. Put simply, she didn't mind him looking, but she didn't want the hassle of dealing with him, so she said nothing. Sadly, Evan's mountain-sized desire for Anna was counterbalanced by an equal and opposite lack of courage to say anything to her, coupled with the almost iron-certainty that she would flatly and coldly reject him.

Equal and opposite – it was like science...

And it paralysed him into a silent, cruel death.

So, had anyone else shouted him down, perhaps Evan wouldn't have cared, but not so with Anna. Normally he was well aware of his superior intellect and of the fact that it was that very thing that had purchased his entry into the 'in-group'. And since some in the group needed his ongoing help to attain clandestine copies of up-coming tests as well as to manipulate computer records regarding exam results, his admission to the group had been cemented through necessity, if not popularity.

Put simply, being *cool* didn't really matter. Still, Anna's rejection always hurt him.

To the core.

Evan was short, with scraggly mid-brown hair, notably *un-trendy* reading glasses and no physique at all. In short, he was a computer-nerd personified, but Evan knew that within this group, none of that mattered. As long as he could keep hacking the college mainframe and somehow drag various allies across the academic line, he attained a popularity of a different kind among both the males and females.

Still, that didn't stop the boisterous Danny Ellerstein from laughing out long and loud at Evan's simple rendition of the facts.

"They'd do *what*?" Danny guffawed noisily, exaggerating for maximum effect. "They'd *expire... in a void? Expire in a void? Really?*"

"It means they'd, like, *die in a vacuum*," Anna explained particularly dryly, sensing the hurt she might have potentially subjected Evan to, and coming to his rescue as Danny pounced.

"I *know* what it means," Danny assured her curtly, and more importantly, the group.

"Well, I still believe in them," explained Sarah, not put off at all by either Evan's intellectual appraisal or Danny's overt sarcasm. "Vacuum or not, I think they *do* exist."

“There could be a vacuum somewhere else here, I’m thinking,” Danny suggested, though much more cautiously. And while he didn’t dare to point at Sarah’s head, they all knew that was what he meant.

Too many pretty girls to come right out with anything too hurtful, he thought.

Still Sarah did her best to ignore him.

“They’re real, no matter what *anyone* says,” she said with certainty. And of course, by *anyone*, she really meant Danny.

“And they only eat men,” added Anna, again buoying her more reserved friend, and secretly totally paranoid about the possibility of their existence.

“And boys,” shot back Sarah, daring to challenge Danny just a little more. Her comment was lost on no one, and yet again Danny felt compelled to respond.

“*Geez*,” he complained emphatically, clearly feeling the need to defend himself. He was immature enough that his tone might have come across as nastier than it really was had his friends not known him so well, and in that moment he forgot all about the quiet, subtle voice that had just warned him not to insult pretty girls. “Then I guess we’d better get Evan to get out his microscope and look in some of your ears – ‘cause I think there might be a few vacuums...”

He was going to say, “...*in some of you girls’ heads*,” but at least managed to leave off the last part. Still, the worst of it was out before he took the time to think, and just a second or two before he noticed Amber’s head tilted down as she gazed firmly at him, her eyes narrowing with displeasure.

“Not everyone,” he quickly added, much softer and overtly conciliatory.

Anna giggled out loud, enjoying Danny’s instant withdrawal, as if Amber might slap his wrist.

“*Eewww*, bum-merrr!” she droned in a long, exaggerated taunt.

“Major bummer,” Sarah dared to whisper.

“Sucks to suck,” someone whispered, though Danny could not be certain who.

“Hey, don’t laugh,” he shot back defensively. “What I mean is, you don’t want to let the vacuum in your head – *if there is one there, that is* – keep you from believing all that alien-crap!”

He looked at each of the accusing young women in turn, then glanced quickly again to Amber, where a hint of a nod and a questioning gaze on his part spoke clearly of a young man checking to see if he had addressed his concerns acceptably in her sight. Amber sighed out loud and shook her head slowly as if to say there was no hope. Hence, in the absence of condemnation, Danny decided that Amber must not have wanted to side publicly against her fellow females, and therefore likely

agreed that he had done well in her view.

“That’s all,” he said confidently, and he gave several positive nods as if he had cleared the matter up with Anna and Sarah. Then he laughed out loud. As an afterthought, he threw in, “Sorry, Sarah. Didn’t mean to... *alien*-ate you. Get it? *Ate you!* Alien – *ate you!* An alien ate you...”

Sarah rolled her eyes, but couldn’t hide a smile. Given that this was Danny speaking, she realised, that actually wasn’t the dumbest comeback he could have made. Or the nastiest. In the end she gave a soft laugh and nodded to concede his work of genius.

“Yeah, I get it. Good one, Danny,” she replied with a grin.

Danny sighed, then gave a disarming smile of his own.

“You sure are hot, Sarah,” he continued, making sure he stayed on the good side of all the girls present. “But... *Aliens? Really?* You can’t really be serious? Like, *seriously?*” Then he changed tack in a moment. “And speaking of serious: if it turns out that aliens *really are real*, and if they, like, abduct you and like, *clone you* – or some other alien crap like that – then I gotta say there’s only *one thing* they could do to like, make you better, Sarah.”

She eyed him speculatively, waiting, then rolled her eyes as he cupped both of his hands as if holding up two large melons against his upper chest.

“Well, a couple of things, actually,” he blurted, and then laughed out loud at his crass joke.

His comment brought a predictable gaze of caution from the tall girl, Amber. The fact that she had very little real interest in Danny didn’t matter as much as knowing that *he had eyes only for her*. Still, she knew he was only having some fun while also playing group politics, and so she let the comments about Sarah go unchallenged.

“I just believe *anything’s* possible,” Sarah responded honestly, as though she felt she really did have to explain herself. Besides, she was happy not to come between Danny and Amber; that could not be a good career move within the group.

“Yeah, that’s right – *anything’s* possible. Like Alfie, here, having a bright idea,” Anna ventured, not afraid to push her luck a little further, but happy to take the focus off Danny and on to someone else for a change.

Even more, off the subject of Sarah’s breasts, or lack thereof. *Off the subject of aliens too*, for that matter. The last thing she needed was to have the nightmares return.

How she had hated those nightmares...

The quietest member of the group, Alfie Braun, sat across from Anna and at first simply smiled, then began to nod and shrug in reluctant and good-natured agreement. If it was possible,

Alfie actually possessed less academic prowess than did Danny, an achievement in itself. Indeed, his only real talent was his strength, which was considerable.

A football star and definitely the man to have on your side in a fight, Alfie gave the ‘in-group’ the extra muscle it needed to maintain a healthy respect among peers. What Danny couldn’t provide, Alfie could. It had worked right through school and now even into college, and Danny Ellerstein had made the most of his friend’s menacing strength while confronting foes.

While not particularly tall, Alfie was all muscle, with short dark brown hair and matching dark brown eyes. And while he lacked the intelligence to struggle through study without serious assistance, he could be strangely thoughtful around the girls, a trait that gave him added popularity with at least half the group.

Sadly, though, along with intellect Alfie also totally lacked tact.

“Or of Danny ever getting to first base with Amber,” he said with a laugh.

A sudden flourish of noisy ‘*Eeewwweeee*’s, smirks and overt glances amid the group culminated in laughter all around as Danny shook his head in disbelief that his friend would point out the obvious in such a tactless way. As for Amber; her face didn’t show even a trace of emotion or care. She could do that, and indeed, it was why she had been able to keep so many male students hanging on for so much longer than they otherwise might have over the years.

“Just because everyone can see it, doesn’t mean you’re supposed to *point it out, Alfie*,” Anna pretended to whisper, though very much loud enough for all to hear.

“Oh, sorry,” Alfie blurted. He smiled good-naturedly, well aware that yet again he had blundered, though perhaps not entirely sure why. It did him good to have Anna explain it, though he didn’t seem any brighter in the end.

“Yeah, well, maybe the aliens will come after you girls,” Danny countered, knowing he had to say *something* to take the heat off himself. “And when *that happens*, we all know who you’ll all come running to.”

“Alfie?” Anna asked, trying to sound genuinely unsure.

“Nah, Evan,” Rachael put in, sounding much more certain.

Evan glanced at Rachael and drew a short, sharp breath.

Oh, if only Anna could have said ‘me’, he thought painfully.

There were more smirks and laughter as each female present glanced at the skinny nerd of the group and tried to imagine him protecting them from anything more than a paper cut. As the laughter continued, however, Evan forgot about his hurt over Anna, even if only temporarily. His

face suddenly lit up with a wide grin at the thought that the lovely Rachael would suggest such a thing.

He had wanted Rachael once too, but no longer. Nowadays his desire was all about Anna.

“Oh, yeah, laugh it up,” Danny protested. “But *I’m the one* with the knife. You all remember *that* when you’re running through the woods in your scanty night dresses with a blood-suckin’ alien after you.”

“But I don’t wear a scanty night dress,” Alfie threw in with a satisfied chuckle, smart enough at least to know how to make *that joke*, and at Danny’s expense, no less.

The rest of the group exploded with laughter, all rolling about at Alfie’s comment, and caught up in the blissful elation of being so young and free. There wasn’t a dry eye to be seen, nor a face that did not exude satisfaction over the way Alfie’s joke brought Danny temporarily crashing back to earth and forgetting what he was about to say.

And as the laughter died away, Anna knew exactly how to add to Danny’s torment.

“But I don’t wear *anything scanty* to bed,” she said in an affectedly innocent voice, inferring that perhaps she slept entirely naked. Then she looked intently to Meg for verification that she was not alone.

“No, neither do I,” Meg agreed heartily, but equally innocently, as if neither girl understood why Danny would think they wore *anything* to bed. “*Never* anything scanty... Why would Danny think that?”

Danny shook his head, firstly agog that both girls would intimate such an overtly sexual mental image, and then because he realised that they had yet again worked together to play mind games with him. Their words, and more specifically Danny’s gaping mouth served only to add to the laughter about him – laughter that was all enjoyed at his expense.

And in the end, even Danny had to snicker, unable to hide his enjoyment.

“Interesting...” he finally groaned. “Very interesting. I’m gettin’ some pretty good mental pictures of you two.”

When the laughter finally died away, he stood up and twisted his hips so that a hunting knife and scabbard that hung from his jeans belt was thrust toward the light of the fire. Then he tapped the long knife’s thick handle lovingly with his right hand.

“Oh yeah,” he bragged loudly. “You’re all so brave now, but youse girls’ll all come runnin’ to me and ol’ Jim Bowie here once you’ve got a filthy great, girl-eating alien after you.”

They all laughed again, this time at his exaggerated display of imagined bravery and manhood,

and Anna was again unable to resist another taunt.

“Oh, in your dreams, Danny!” she sprouted, good-naturedly but taunting just the same.

“Well, you will be now, I gotta admit. Given your last comment, I mean,” he admitted in an exaggerated tone. Then once again he looked to Amber to check that he had not overstepped the mark in flirting. Amber didn’t seem to mind, though. Indeed, she gave more attention to Anna’s next comment, rather than Danny’s overt flirting.

A few of the other girls shook their heads and agreed with Anna, but as the laughter died down, Anna added with a shrug and a tilt of her head, “Well, alright. Maybe.”

“Maybe *what?*” Danny demanded, thinking he might finally have won her over.

“Well, I s’pose it depends on what this *alien* looks like,” Anna mused contemplatively, pretending to actually be thinking the matter over. “I mean, if *he* is good looking, well, maybe I might just hang around. That’s all I’m saying.”

All the girls giggled noisily.

Danny shook his head in defeat, knowing they were conspiring to argue with him and to annoy or humiliate him, and in truth it was partially working. Either way, once the laughter started, the entire group joined in, derailing any immediate attempt Danny might have made to appear more impressive or in control to the young women present. He gave up and sat down, casting a brief glance to Amber to see that she still took him seriously.

As usual Amber gave nothing away.

“Well, you’re right,” Danny conceded reluctantly, and just a little broody. “I suppose maybe there really *are aliens*, and like I said, that’ll be what ate those two missing hikers. You girls just should keep close to us men, that’s all I’m sayin’. Well, *me*, more precisely.”

He waved his fingers in the air and made a creepy ‘*Wooooooo*’ noise that undulated for added effect.

“Well, I think you’re *all wrong*.”

The voice came quietly from across the fire. Meg Farrell looked rather more Amazon than her usual primped and preened self in the dancing light of the fire, with the stars arrayed above and behind her for added effect. And with a suggestive pouting of her rather full lips as she twirled a portion of her long brown hair, she easily disarmed Danny just a little more, playing along in the game of teasing and toying with him.

“Yeah, what do you think, Meg?” Amber asked, watching carefully to gauge how Danny would respond to what was clearly about to be yet another teasing from a pretty girl. Amber knew

Danny looked at *all* the girls, but what really interested her was to know if he would dare to flirt with them – especially in front of her.

Meg, being above average on the *Ellerstein scale of wantable-girls*, was a better-than-fair test of his faithfulness.

“I think you’re *kinda* right about the aliens... but I think... there are only space-*men*, and they’re desperate for Earth *women*!” Meg gushed, putting on as seductive a tone as she could muster, and pushing out her breasts for added effect. “I mean, after all, *that’s why they come* to Earth, isn’t it – to find *women*? And if they’ve come all the way across the galaxy in search of *us*, I think it’s only reasonable to expect that they would be... *advanced in every way* to mere men. Don’t you think?”

“Oh yeah,” Anna agreed enthusiastically, seeing where Meg was going. “And they’ve probably got some serious *probing* to do.”

Everyone laughed again.

“Oh, seriously?” Danny whined.

It was so unusual for them all to bait him that way, he thought. *Must be the outdoor air...*

“Yeah, and let’s face it,” Meg concluded, loving every moment of being able to tease the over-confident male leader of the group, and still toying suggestively with her hair while fluttering her eyes at him. “Mere men will prove *no match* for them.”

Danny gave a forced smile so as to avoid further embarrassment as the rest of the group joined in with boisterous laughter and approval. A leader of the group he may have been, but tonight, it seemed, he was not beyond teasing, and least of all over the subject of sex. Besides, they all knew that if anyone deserved a good drubbing on that subject – or any subject – it was Danny.

Amber watched her would-be boyfriend with great interest, well aware that he was feeling far more uncomfortable than he would like, simply because he was trying so hard to impress her – and the other girls. She could tell little from his demeanour, except that beneath his fake grin, he was most certainly put out that they would all dare to conspire so brazenly to make fun of *him*.

Even the boys. But especially the girls...

And Amber didn’t doubt that Danny Ellerstein would look and wait for the opportunity to pay them all back.

In full.

And then some.

And then it would suck to be them.

CHAPTER 3

Later that evening with the campfire still burning to give off much needed light as well as a sense of comfort, the group of nine lay on their sleeping bags, staring up at the stars. The heavens were so clear that every small light shone or reflected down with striking brilliance; the moon, stars, satellites and planes.

And meteors.

“More aliens,” a clear English voice ventured softly and casually in the darkness.

The quiet, almost factual sounding comment came from Gemma Archerfield, a usually quieter member of the group, who was not long over from England, and came with a particularly aristocratic-sounding accent and a few odd expressions and ways of doing things – at least as the rest of the group saw it. Gemma was just a little shorter than Rachael, with long medium-brown hair and clear green eyes, and while perhaps not as *trendy* as most of the girls in the group, she often displayed a suppressed desire to be wilder than she was, which made her interesting and fun to tease. Besides, and perhaps most importantly, she had a definite penchant for sharing her father’s wealth with any who would accept her, and since the group was made up of ‘poor’ students, her popularity was in a sickly twisted way, assured.

“Yep,” agreed Sarah, equally nonchalant. “*Lots...* of aliens.”

“Coming to probe us, no doubt,” Meg suggested, still hoping to produce some small reaction from Danny. A few flashes of white teeth and moving heads told of a joke silently enjoyed by all, but that was all. They were tired now, and relaxed.

“Guys, please,” droned Anna. “I really *do* have nightmares about them. Can we just... like... let it go?”

“Like what?” Sarah asked, genuinely interested. “What do you dream about, Anna?”

“Probing,” snorted Danny suggestively, but when no one joined his crass joke, he let it go.

“Not probing,” countered Anna. “No, just... *slashing* usually. Nasty dreams, y’know? Ever since I was a kid.”

Several *hmm*s was all the reply she got, but she knew it was better than sarcasm.

Danny took a long draw on a joint, then passed it to Amber, who did likewise. She then, in turn, passed it on, most members of the group dutifully trying the drug, and enjoying the resultant high to varying degrees.

“What do you reckon, Rach?” Amber asked, noting that her old friend had passed on Danny’s joint without sampling it. “You’ve been pretty quiet tonight.”

“Just thinking,” came the soft response in the dim, flickering light. “I love the stars, and especially the meteors. *Shooting stars*, you know. I make wishes on them.”

“Yeah, *really*? Like, what do you wish for?” Anna asked. She suddenly imagined, in her drug-induced enjoyment that such things might be possible.

“Oh, you know, the usual stuff...” Rachael began, and then sensing that she might have inadvertently opened herself up to a subject that she didn’t really want to discuss, she added in a somewhat louder and very clear voice, “*Like a good, mature man, perhaps.*”

Neither the words nor their overt challenge did any good. Rachael had stepped into a verbal trap and she knew it. She was quietly evasive in the darkness, and the more sensitive and sober of the group knew she had good reason. There were some things that alcohol and marijuana would *never* be able to hide – and Rachael had consumed neither.

“Rachael only wishes for *one thing*,” Danny pointed out insensitively, seeing his chance to place the burden of the group’s attention on someone other than him. Besides, tactless or not, he owed her now – and the others too, for that matter.

“*Danny!*”

This time Anna really was trying not to be heard, unlike earlier when she had happily joined in teasing him. He was overstepping the barrier of good taste, and Anna thought it best to derail that particular vein of thought before it even got started.

In his slightly drunk and high state, Danny would have nothing of it.

“Oh, *what*?” he shot back abruptly. “Everyone knows Rach wants to be able to have kids!”

“*Dan – ny!*”

This time several voices chimed in together, but he remained immaturely defiant.

“Oh, look,” he continued. “Sorry, Rach, but I just think that *not being able to have kids* is not all that bad, that’s all.”

“Oh, real tactful, Danny,” Anna chided. “Good one, *dumb ass!*”

“Hey,” he protested, “I’m allowed to have an opinion too, aren’t I? And I’m just of the opinion that if I couldn’t have kids, it wouldn’t be *all bad*.”

“I can see the wisdom in that,” Anna dared to venture, albeit at little more than a whisper.

Danny scowled in her direction in the soft light, not quite as inebriated as Anna might have thought he was.

That made twice he owed Anna now...

“Oh, real funny,” Danny shot back as he held out his hand to take the very last of a joint. “Look, I just mean – I think there are advantages to being able to have as much sex as you want without any of the risks. That’s all I’m sayin’.”

“Firstly,” Anna continued to have fun with him while also trying to help take the focus off Rachael. “You’d never be able to have as much sex as you want because it takes *two people*.”

A chorus of *woooos* broke the peace of night.

“Well, maybe not for you,” Anna added offhandedly, as if rethinking her assessment.

“*At least two*, actually Anna,” Danny corrected with a snide grin of his own in the darkness.

Wooos turned to open laughter. Anna let the noise die away and then added, “And secondly, there are still those little things called STDs, remember? Pregnancy might not be your *only* risk, Danny.”

“Oh, come on guys,” Gemma droned, her British accent more pronounced than ever as she tried to make a point. “A little sensitivity, *please*?”

“I *am* being sensitive,” insisted Danny argumentatively.

“Bud?” Alfie interrupted. “Really?”

It was enough from another male member of the team to give Danny a moment of pause, despite his growing bitterness at being mocked so much by those who normally fell into line at just a word. The drugs had his mind in a spin.

“What the hell’s wrong with all of you tonight?” Danny demanded, smirking but genuinely perplexed. “It must be this camping-out thing that’s got you all so damn smart-mouthed!”

“It’s okay,” Rachael finally said, doing her best to douse any potential argument. She sighed, then gave a weak smile. “It’s okay, really. I know *none of you* thought I should have had the kid... the *baby*. Hey, *I didn’t* either. It just... didn’t turn out so good for me, that’s all. But we don’t all have to dwell on it. Okay?”

“Yeah,” said Anna boisterously in support. “Leave her alone.”

“Oh, stick a cork in it, Anna,” Danny persisted, refusing to be shouted down. “Everyone knows you all blame me, but...”

“That’s because it *was your fault*, genius!” Anna shot back firmly, but cautiously. She widened her eyes and shook her head vigorously from side to side as if to ask how he could doubt it, and then smiled at him so as not to push her luck too far.

Danny was unpredictable even when sober, and notoriously so when drunk or high.

“No! It wasn’t, actually!” he crowed, as if he knew something she didn’t, but his noisy attempt to defend himself was cut off quickly by an even louder call for peace.

“It’s *ooo-kaaay!*” Rachael called long and loud over the rising voices.

Having gained their attention again, she lowered her tone and looked directly at Danny, instantly recalling how she had promised herself that during this trip away with her friends she was going to do her best to set things right with her former boyfriend.

Danny looked as if he was feeling attacked, though all the while he did his best to look like he was calm and fully in control. But he wasn’t, and Rachael knew it. She also knew *that* made him potentially dangerous. And while there was a time she could happily have heaped condemnation upon him just for the pleasure of making him squirm – or angry – or anything – she knew it was not what God was calling her to do.

“Danny,” she said softly, “I want to tell you something.” Then, with a slightly raised voice that was clearly for the benefit of the others present, she added, “And all you lot can just shut the hell up and listen.”

Shut the hell up... Hmm. Maybe not the best start to her Christian confession. Still, it was the heart of it that mattered. She could work at reining in the words on another night...

There came a respectful hush.

“Shoot, Rach,” Danny challenged her, doing his best to prepare another round of blistering wit should the need arise. In reality, though, he had nothing and he knew it.

“Danny,” she continued. “I want you to know something. I want *all of you* to know something. And it’s this: I forgive you. For all that happened, I forgive you.”

He looked surprised. It was not at all what he expected.

“You *forgive* me? But I didn’t *do anything?*” he argued dubiously.

“Oh, shit,” came a whispered voice from somewhere else in the darkness – a voice that reeked of disbelief and disdain. Rachael didn’t even take the time to identify the speaker, but riveted Danny’s gaze with her own.

“I want you *all to know* that I’ve forgiven Danny,” she repeated. “Danny’s our friend and that’s all there is to it. He’s *my friend*. Okay?”

There came a *wow* from somewhere to Rachael’s right. Then another.

“But we... I didn’t do anything... that you didn’t *say I couldn’t*,” he argued, mindful of the eyes upon him – especially Amber’s.

“That’s true,” Rachael conceded with a hint of a smile, her white teeth glistening in the dim

light. Then, she clarified. “But we both made a mistake... and *I* paid the price.”

Danny ceased his defence. He may not have been bright, and he certainly wasn't fully in control of his mind at that point, but even he could sense the eyes upon him. There didn't seem to be a safe response, especially given all the girls present.

They'd all stick together, he decided. *Even if they were wrong, they'd stick together. Girls did that. But it didn't matter. After all, they all had something he wanted – so maybe it would be best to be quiet. Yeah. That was it. Just be quiet...*

Even if Danny didn't know much else, he knew with absolute certainty that he liked girls. And while he wanted to argue the point that he hadn't done anything Rachael hadn't agreed to at the time, meaning that in his eyes he hadn't erred at all, he thought better of it.

His struggling mind went to the only place he could think of, and he quickly began to formulate another comeback.

“Gee, thanks, Rach.”

“You're welcome,” she assured him. Then she dared to add, “God forgives me, so I forgive you.”

“*God?*” Danny echoed.

He sounded incredulous, wiping hair backwards off his brow as he thought how to recover from a situation that had clearly gotten out of his control. For that matter, the whole night seemed to have been out of control. In his mind, this would never do.

“Wow, *God*,” he continued. “Well, yeah, thanks, Rach. You're takin' advice from an invisible guy now. I... I'm...”

“He's speechless!” Meg interrupted, immensely enjoying the sight of Danny squirming. While relishing the thought of the boisterous young man finally caught lacking something to say, the brunette also felt a need to come to Rachael's aid. “Like, seriously, I never thought I'd see the day.”

“Yeah, yeah. Funny. Real funny,” shot back Danny, laughing to shake off any suggestion of shame. “Still, I'll tell you what *is* funny. Or good. Yeah, maybe good. I'm not tryin' to be cruel to you, Rach, but seriously, I'm sorry you can't have kids and all that, but maybe it's a *good thing* – now with you hangin' 'round with the plumber and all.”

“Oh... *seriously*...” groaned Meg, shaking her head. “Just when we thought you might have actually shown a bit of sensitivity. *Dan – ny! Really?*”

“*What? What?*” He looked genuinely puzzled again by the groans that passed around the

group. "I'm serious. That guy's no good. He's a dweeb! That's all I'm sayin'."

Rachael felt a wave of relief wash over her at having so publicly forgiven the one person who had hurt her most in her short life. It felt good. Incredibly good! Liberating! Wow! She closed her eyes, almost ecstatic with relief. Then she laughed out loud as she opened her eyes again to realise that Danny genuinely did not understand why his allies were so shocked at his crass, insensitive take on things.

It was typical Danny.

Groans turned into laughter as each of Rachael's friends saw that she was unfazed by Danny's insensitive summation of the young man she had spent time with after her unfortunate experience with their leader.

"Geez, you're a dork!" Amber said with a *tsk* for punctuation, but it was obvious that she too felt great relief.

If nothing else, Danny took notice of that. Even in his dazed state, it was clear that there was *nothing* more important than Amber's opinion. Not sure how to proceed, he simply shrugged and tried to act nonchalant. When the nervous laughter died down again, Rachael seized the opportunity to explain something else she had kept secret.

"And since I'm telling my BFFs my dirty secrets," she began.

"Not *nearly dirty enough*," droned Danny, hoping for more.

"Ah, and none of this is really a secret," Alfie interrupted innocently. "No, seriously, Rach. We all know this stuff."

"And that's why we all love you, Alfie," she assured him.

Alfie grinned at her open show of affection, but like Danny, he somehow managed to miss the main points of the conversation, and that the secret was yet to come.

"*Shh! Shh!*" hissed Anna loudly. "Rach's gonna tell us a dirty secret. *Eewwe*, like, make it good, Rach!"

"She's a *Christian*..." Danny droned negatively, sarcastically. "How good could it be?"

"Nah, not that sort of secret," Rachael said. "Sorry to deflate you there, Anna."

"Ah, *come on*," groaned Danny, happy to have the spotlight taken off him, at least temporarily. "I knew it. *Bor-ing!*"

"Danny!" snapped Amber in a friendly rebuke. "Ignore him, Rach. What's the secret?"

Rachael sniffed, enjoying the dynamic between the pair. Danny was under the spell of Amber's body, if not her heart, and he was like an obedient puppy, obeying her every word. Well,

for the most part, anyway... She gazed directly at the rambunctious young man until she had his attention once more, unconcerned about what Amber might think of it.

“Well, just that you can relax, D. I’m not seeing Aaron anymore. That’s all.”

“Like I care,” Danny said with a shrug, his mind temporarily confused, or perhaps uncaring. Anna rolled her eyes, but thought better of chastising him again.

Then, somehow in the soft light of the dying fire, Danny sensed several looks of disdain.

“Nah, what I mean is, it just don’t matter,” he explained pointlessly. “That’s all.”

“What happened?” Amber asked, sounding more interested in details than caring, and happy to draw Rachael’s gaze away from Danny.

“Nothing happened,” Rachael assured her, and she met her old friend’s gaze, suddenly aware that whether Amber liked Danny or not, she was innately jealous. The thought almost made her smirk, and then she was serious again. “It’s just, well... You all know I became a Christian...”

“A Bible basher, you mean,” Danny droned.

“A Christian,” Rachael corrected, not even bothering to look back to him as she responded. “And I just didn’t think I should be dating him anymore. We’re sort of, like, just *different* now.”

“Yeah, you’re hot, and he’s not!” Danny crowed, again drawing a chastising glance from Amber. “Shoot, I hate to think of you... *dating* that loser, Rach.”

“What was wrong? Is it because he’s the older man?” Meg asked, sounding genuinely confused. Then she blatantly lied. “You don’t have to tell us the messy details if you don’t want to. But it’d be good if you did, y’know.”

“Ah, you dummy!” threw in Anna, and she pretended to reach out and slap Meg in the dim light. “He’s only a couple of years older than us. It’s not like he’s thirty, or something!” Geez, I remember seeing him at school.”

“Me too,” droned Danny. “And he was a dork then too.”

Rachael ignored him again.

“No,” came her simple, honest response. “Nah, I didn’t mind him being a bit older than me. But he’s not a Christian. That’s all. It’s just that now I think I’ve gotta be more serious about the men I date. I want...”

“You want what, Rach?” Anna asked, drawn in instantly as her friend became reticent about sharing the deeper truth. “Go on. Just *say it!*”

“Love,” Rachael admitted sheepishly, as if it was something to be ashamed of. “And to stay out of trouble. And bein’ a Christian means...”

“Bein’ a dork?” Danny suggested quickly.

“Being... No, *wanting*, that’s it. *Wanting* what God says I should do. That’s all.”

“Boring!” he threw in again, with amazing speed, especially given that he was at least partly intoxicated.

She saw Danny roll his eyes, and there came several prickly seconds as her friends, who didn’t understand her faith, struggled not to make her any more uncomfortable than she had already been made to feel.

“Well, I for one am proud of you, Rach,” Amber said, somewhat overstating it, and she patted her friend on the back. “Standing up for what you think is right. Good for you.”

Even in the semi-darkness Rachael knew very well that her response really translated as, *I sure hope I don’t need to be worried about you wanting Danny again*. Danny, however, was blissfully oblivious to the silent, hidden messages that flurried about over the top of the flames of the campfire, and still seemed far more concerned that Rachael stay well away from the plumber.

“Oh, *get real!*” he insisted boisterously, suddenly incensed at his new love-interest’s slant on Rachael’s time spent with the rather unpopular plumber, and entirely oblivious that she had in fact just shown considerable jealousy toward Rachael – over him, no less. And true to form, he temporarily forgot that he was supposed to be impressing Amber.

He sat up and stared squarely at his new love-interest with an accusing wrinkle on his brow.

“Amber, as I recall, *it was you and I* who were the ones that told Rach to get the abortion in the *first place!* It’s *your* fault as much as mine – or anyone’s for that matter. *And then*, as I recall, *it was you and I* who told her to stop seein’ the dorky plumber too!”

In a moment of horrifying clarity, Danny suddenly realised that his tone and accusation might easily derail any hopes he had of ever getting close to the tall, shapely Amber, and he changed tack in an instant.

“And that was all good advice – but we *both* agreed on it,” he added. Then he turned quickly to Rachael, with whom he knew there was no chance at all of ever getting close to again.

“Now, look Rach, all I’m sayin’ is that it might be a pity you can’t have the plumber’s kids, but it ain’t all bad either... That’s all. And if you’re away from him, then that’s... like, a good thing. Right? It’s better that way. Know what I mean?”

Danny writhed uncomfortably, knowing that he was drug-affected and probably saying things he shouldn’t if he wanted to win Amber’s affections. He groaned defeatedly, searched unsuccessfully for another joint, then gave it up, unsure how the tall girl was feeling about him at

that moment.

Oddly enough, Rachael simply smiled. She felt nothing but relief for having told her friends that she had forgiven Danny, and then that she had parted with someone she had come to believe had also been a mistake – and all in obedience to God – to Jesus. And if she was honest, it felt even better to watch Danny remove one foot from his mouth only to replace it with another.

Amber, feeling the eyes of others upon her, felt that she simply had to respond to Danny's repeated thoughtless, and now convicting comments. She gave the only defence she could think of.

"Yeah, well, maybe I *did* encourage Rach to have the... *op*, but it's like I always say; sometimes when you're in a mess, you just gotta try for the best possible outcome. That's all. Maybe there *are no good answers*, so you just gotta, like, choose the best thing you can." She looked decidedly uncomfortable, jiggling her feet and tucking them up close to her buttocks on the soft grass as the fire-shadows danced about her.

"I forgive you too," Rachael said thoughtfully, well aware that her old friend was feeling the microscope upon her. *Or was it a magnifying glass – with the sunlight pinpointing her and starting to burn...?* "It's alright, Amber. It just doesn't matter anymore."

Amber nodded, made a face, then stared at the embers.

"Thanks Rach," she said as nonchalantly as she could.

"Oh, you guys have all gone soft," Danny insisted, and even after all the looks and comments, it was obvious that he still didn't understand his friends' disapproval at his lack of sympathy for Rachael. "Not having a kid means, like, *not complicating things*... And not havin' *that jerk's kids* is even better! That's all I'm sayin'."

"She can't have *anyone's* kids, Danny," Anna corrected in a terse, harsh whisper, feeling suddenly remorseful over having also encouraged Rachael to have the abortion. "Look, guys, I'm like, as guilty as anyone, and I'm as sorry as anyone for what happened. And since we're all, like, being honest here tonight, I just want to say I'm, like, really sorry too, Rachael. I'm sorry."

"Thanks, Anna, but I told you," insisted Rachael, "all is forgiven. I wish you all would just, like, *let it go*. Anyhow, when it all comes down to it, it's my *own fault* for having the termination."

"Means *abortion*, Danny," Anna threw in, visibly annoyed at his continuing insensitivity.

Her comment lacked tact or even wisdom, given Danny's strict hold on power, and the fact that he was somewhat inebriated and high. And yet strangely it broke the tension. They all laughed again, then listened as Rachael went on.

"I've dealt with it. Really," she said in a resigned tone. Then she sighed. "I guess there's

worse things that could happen to a girl.”

“Like *marryin’ the plumber!*” insisted Danny sarcastically. Then he did his best impression of a man many of them had come to look down on because of his approach to life. Danny was merciless. “Oh look, *uh-hewk*, water goes downhill! Who’d a thunk it? *Uh-hewk!*”

“*Danny!*” The calls of opposition came from most of the girls.

“He’s *not* like that and you know it,” protested Rachael, unable to resist laughing along with his tasteless mockery. “In fact, he’s not even a plumber anymore.”

“I know he’s a *loser*. *That’s* what I know!” Danny returned cruelly, unrelenting. “Sorry, Rach. I mean, you’re a hot babe, and I’m sure you had all the baby-makin’ potential in the world, but frankly, *not* havin’ that moron’s babies did you a *huge* favour!”

“*Dan – ny!*” Again the chorus of female voices shouted him down. Only Gemma did not join the refrain.

Rachael gave a resigned smile and held up restraining hands.

“It’s okay, guys,” she assured them, and keen for them to let the matter go. “We’ve been over this enough. I’m good. Can we just move on, *please?*”

She shook her head imperceptibly in the soft light as a thought struck her with force. It was a thought she dared not share.

Having an abortion had never been God’s will for her. She knew that now. But she also knew that God had a way of bringing good out of bad, and maybe not having a baby with Danny was the real blessing...

She’d never thought of that before. Or at least, no so vividly. Wow!

There came a natural silence as various ones tried to think of another subject. It wasn’t an uneasy silence, just peaceful. Rachael was right; they *had* all talked it through – many, many times – and she had learned long ago not to expect sympathy or even understanding from Danny Ellerstein. Danny was Danny and that was all there was to it.

“Lots of shooting stars,” noted Sarah, lying flat on her back and looking up again.

“Actually those are meteors,” noted Evan factually, never realising how nerdy he sounded.

“When they hit the earth, they are called meteorites, but while they’re up in the sky...”

“Evan!” Amber snapped jokingly. “Relax, Buddy. *Not in class!* Remember?”

“Careful, I’ve got dirt on you,” he joked back.

“*Eewwee*, sucks to be Amber,” Anna threw in with a giggle.

“Don’t, like, laugh too loud just yet, Anna. He’s got dirt on us all,” Meg noted. The thought

made her secretly cringe. A few selfies to a select few seemed okay, but Evan – having *dirt* on her – or photos? It was a depressing thought to say the least.

“More than you could possibly know,” Evan said quietly in the darkness. “Did you know that camera in your laptop can be accessed remotely to record you doing all kinds of interesting things? I’m just saying... That’s all.”

“*Evan!*” This time most of the group joined in chastising him.

Meg felt her heart drop. *Yuk! What a thought?*

She would need to have a quiet word with the computer nerd when no one was around. And again her heart sank at the very thought of it. *What if he really DID have photos or video of her doing... whatever? Her computer was in her bedroom... Her bedroom! What had she done in front of it?* The possibilities were horrible beyond description. *And what would she have to pay him to ensure that such images never made it on to the Internet?*

If they hadn’t already?

Oh, yuk! Such a conversation could only serve to give Evan ideas... What would he demand of her? Was there no justice at all?

“Yup, I’ve got all the dirt. I *really* have,” Evan repeated, and it sounded like a genuine promise. Just for effect he added, “And more.”

“And I’ve got this real big weapon close to my hip,” Danny grated threateningly. He tapped the knife in its pouch at his right hip, knowing there was just enough light from the fire for all to see his exaggerated gesture.

“Nah,” shot back Anna, always happy to tease the lover-boy, albeit with due care. “I’ve seen your weapon, and it’s not *that* big. I’ve seen bigger.”

Another chorus of *Wooh*’s echoed in the darkness.

Amber shot an accusing look at Anna, only to realise that her friend was, of course, joking. As a member of the group, Anna enjoyed Danny’s protection, but she had often shared with Amber that she didn’t find him particularly attractive, even though others did. And she certainly didn’t trust him...

Another challenge, Danny thought. He couldn’t let it go unanswered.

“You really are fast with that tongue, Anna,” he warned, leaving himself wide open to more drubbing.

“You’ll never know,” she quipped, and again the group *woohed*.

“You should be careful,” he warned, knowing that Anna was far too smart for him to match

wits with, least of all when his mind was half-fried. In the end he simply resorted to a physical threat, and although he sounded like he was joking, there was just enough doubt about him for her to take heed.

“I’ve got a knife, you know.”

Anna shrugged silently in the dark.

“Can’t argue with that,” she remarked wisely.

Rachael could not help but silently agree.

Perhaps she should have words with Anna, she mused silently. Meg too. She had never doubted a lurking sociopathic tendency in their male leader. Danny was, for the most part, good fun, as long as he was on your side, and not being tested or ridiculed. And certainly there was value in having his protection, not that protection was really needed in college. But he could be so... unfeeling.

He could be so... *frightening.*

Frighteningly unpredictable.

And now, finally away from the bustle of the last days of a long semester, and able to pray quietly in the beauty of the star-studded night, she could hear a voice that until now had been little more than a whisper. It was a voice she had ignored, and in her haste to enjoy life, had not fully or properly acknowledged.

So, how did God talk to people anyway?

Was it in silent voices in the dark?

Or was the voice there all the time – and she just hadn’t been listening?

Rachael let out a long, soft sigh in the darkness.

She was certainly listening now.

The rest of the group simply hadn’t seen Danny at his worst – but she had glimpsed his dark side on the night she had suggested not going through with the... *operation*. He had felt she was questioning his authority – as if he actually *had some authority* – on that night.

And he had been livid.

From that moment forward, deep down, Rachael had truly begun to wonder about him – even fear him – and only her deep need for the friendship of the group during a time of deep, dark depression had kept her anywhere near the unpredictable Danny Ellerstein.

But Rachael never doubted that one day she would see Danny’s dark side again. And she never doubted for a moment that her friends would too.

And in truth, she suddenly heard a whispering voice say, it was probably very wise not to argue with Danny, least of all when he had a knife on his belt...

CHAPTER 4

“Gotta be aliens in that,” Sarah said quietly, her small, slender arm rising to point at the fire-show of space debris that slashed white-hot lines in the star-studded blackness of the night sky.

“*Man-eating* aliens,” asserted Meg.

This time her words were met with silence, a sign that the group had tired. Indeed, so tired were they that no longer did anyone even bother with the alcohol and marijuana Danny had brought along for the trek. Their long hike had taken a physical toll, and each was now relaxed and enjoying the peace, the glow of the dying fire and the night-show of stars and meteors above.

“Did you ever try anything stronger than weed?” Amber asked Danny in the darkness, still ever so slightly high from an earlier joint shared with him.

“Nah...” he droned. Then he changed tack, admitting, “Well, yeah, but it was... a bad thing. Too much. Besides, they reckon that stuff’ll kill you. And I’m too young – *and handsome* – to die.”

The group came temporarily alive with a conglomeration of groans and comments at his statement, and then fell silent again.

“I did,” admitted Rachael. “Really bad stuff. You think you can handle it, but you can’t. Besides, if you get a bad batch, it *really will* kill you.”

“Well, who’s *a bad girl then?*” Danny droned some more.

“Not really,” she corrected. “Just had the chance. Stupid really. Not good stuff. Get it wrong and it’ll kill you for sure. You guys should try to stay away from it. I won’t do it again. Like Danny said, I’m too young and beautiful to die.”

To Danny’s annoyance, no one in the group argued the point with her summation, and his tit-for-tat groan fizzled out alone in the cool night air, just like the meteors above him. Then, out of nowhere, Evan’s voice broke from the darkness in a most unexpected gesture of kindness and support for Rachael.

“Well, I for one am real sorry you can’t have kids, Rach,” he whispered.

“Oh, seriously! Give it a rest, Nerd-boy,” threatened Amber.

“Thank you, Evan,” came Rachael’s quiet response. She didn’t even look around as she spoke

her next words, but remained lost in her thoughts, her eyes locked upon the dazzling display in the night sky. “What about you, Amber? You wanna, like, have kids?”

“The truth?” Amber replied cautiously. “I know it’s a big deal to you, Rach, but really, I don’t think I care too much. Not *yet* anyway. I like my body *just* the way it is, and that childbearing gig can be a real drag on the hips. Know what I mean? Besides, I’ve got stuff I want to do.”

“We all like your body the way it is too, Amber,” Danny put in with a wry grin, and the other boys nodded their agreement. “Some of us, like, more than others.”

“Mmm,” Rachael replied, ignoring Danny and showing no particular emotion. She didn’t even seem shocked at her friend’s response: It was just typical Amber. The tall girl’s answer did, however, trigger an interest in what the rest of the group might say, so Rachael simply asked.

“No trick question here,” she said. “But like, what about the rest of you? Do you all want kids?”

“Nah, just sex,” Danny shot back with a coarse laugh. “Lots... of sex.”

“Best of luck with that,” Amber groaned threateningly, and there was just enough in her tone to caution him.

“Back to my question,” Rachael said with a feigned groan. “So, like, do you all want kids?”

“Yeah, I s’pose,” answered Danny, rushing in as always, but at least somewhat more seriously this time. “Well, like, eventually. Like, there’s no point in having all those little guys if you don’t spread them around – know what I mean? But as for now – like, *right now*, *not* being able to have kids might be a cool thing. Like I said, if you know what I mean.”

“So sensitive,” one of the girls whispered, though Danny could not be sure which one.

“Anna?” Rachael asked, totally ignoring Danny’s typical response, and not giving him time to say more.

“Well, yeah, I guess. Hadn’t really ever thought about it. I’ve just started studying, you know. I guess I’m just too busy having a good time to think about all that baby stuff.” And that was the entirety of her answer.

“I do,” Evan offered. He sounded keen to give an answer, in case perhaps, he might be skipped over. “I *definitely* want kids. No point in being a genius if I don’t pass it on, right? I’m just sorry for Rach, that’s all.”

“You *do know* how it’s done, Evan, like, don’t you?” Danny scoffed.

His jibe brought a grunt of protest from the nerd and a few small snickers from some of the girls, but nothing more.

“I can even tell you how the chromosomes work,” touted Even defensively, feeling hurt at having his meagre male prowess questioned. “When it comes to sex, I like, know *everything*.”

Danny’s comment was lost to Evan a moment later as Rachael asked a simple question in the flickering firelight.

“Is that why you suddenly lost interest in me?” she asked simply, totally ignoring Danny’s comment and Evan’s knee-jerk self-defence response. “Because I can’t have kids?”

There was no venom or accusation in it, just a simple query from a friend.

“Well... Well...” Evan faltered, unable to bring himself to respond.

“All those brains and suddenly no answer,” commented Anna. “I reckon it must, like, just mean you’re right, Rach.”

“I know,” she said casually. “It’s alright, Evan. I already knew.”

“*Everyone knew*,” droned Sarah.

“No, that’s not true,” Even lied. Then he tried to make an excuse. “You were already with that other guy, Aaron – the plumber. I couldn’t... intervene in that.”

“You sure couldn’t,” noted Sarah, enjoying teasing him. “Not without a gun.”

“Or a crowbar,” joked Amber.

“And the word isn’t *intervene*, Evan,” Meg added, prodding him. “It’s *compete*.”

“Oh, I dunno,” said Danny, lacking in tact as always. “I think Evan might’ve done alright against the plumber.”

“Danny!”

The quiet rebuke from Amber was enough to derail yet another criticism fest from the insensitive group leader. Having silenced Danny, Amber then remembered a time when Evan had been totally smitten with Rachael, and she couldn’t help but question the brainiac further on the matter.

“That didn’t stop you from, like, trying it on with Rach, as I recall, Evan,” she said bluntly. “Seems to me I remember a few hopelessly feeble attempts to say nice things to her when you first joined the rest of us. That was only a year ago now, as I recall.”

“Mmm, just before Rach had her op,” Danny put in, refusing to be so easily silenced.

All eyes turned to the nerdy genius, who remained silent for a time, suddenly both hurt *and* embarrassed.

“Sorry,” he whispered so quietly in the darkness that most of them didn’t even hear him.

“*You? You?*” accused Danny, having missed both the whisper and the depth of Evan’s guilt.

The loud teaser pretended to roll about with laughter. “*You – and Rachael?* Evan, I hate to be the one to tell you, Buddy, but like, Rach is *way too hot* for you. You’d never be able to handle a babe like her! You *reeaaal-ly* need to aim lower, Buddy! Like, find yourself another computer geek, Dude. Preferably female. Oh, shee-oot!”

Evan was truly hurt this time, and struggled for words of protest, but could find nothing that was both apt and safe to say.

“Not me,” interrupted Meg confidently, this time making it her turn to take the heat off the poor, beleaguered nerd. “No way. I like my body just the way it is, and my life. *Uh-ahh!* No. I’m with Amber. Like, why spoil a masterpiece? I can get, like, any guy I want, and that’s the way I want to keep it.”

“Oh, who’s got tickets on herself?” Danny shot back, immediately turning his sarcasm on Meg instead of Evan. “You’re not *that* hot.”

“Yeah, I am,” she stated confidently and ever-so flatly, never doubting. “And you’d come crawlin’ on broken glass if you thought I was interested.”

“Danny’d crawl up to your granny,” Anna quipped.

A chorus of *woohs* broke the peaceful silence, along with numerous loud sniggers.

“Oh, *ha ha*,” Danny grumbled snidely, tiring of Anna’s witty nips. In truth he thought Meg Farrell was utterly superb, but he could not let her know that, since she was so aloof with him that his only defence was to pretend he had no interest in her. Besides, Amber was his current interest, and she would certainly not approve of Danny showing too much interest in *any* of the other girls.

“No, I’m good,” Meg said firmly, ignoring Danny’s comment. “No kids for me. What about you, Gem?”

“Oh, *heavens no!* Not me,” Gemma explained in her rather noble English accent. At first she sounded apologetic, and then once she had done that for Rachael’s sake, she sounded instantly excited, and even giggled. “I’m sorry, Rachel, but I... Well, I plan to marry into money, and have a *really, really* wealthy husband who...”

“You *already have money!*” protested Amber boisterously, unable and unwilling to mask even a small portion of her rather glutinous jealousy of the English girl’s finances.

“Oh, no,” Gemma gushed, grinning cheekily. “I mean, well... yes, I do. Well, *Daddy does.*”

“Damn straight!” asserted Sarah, also sounding rather envious. “How else could we all afford to do what we do if your father wasn’t bankrolling everything?”

“True, true,” agreed Gemma with considerable satisfaction. “And I’ve got *breeding too, don’t*

forget. No, what I mean is, yes, Daddy *does* have money, and he is generous with his little girl – that being *me* – but I mean I want *real money*. Not just an... *allowance*. And lots of it!”

“*Ooo*, it’s *daddy*, is it?” mocked Danny, making fun of the English girl’s posh accent as well as her choice of words.

“Yes, quite,” Gemma replied aristocratically, not really understanding why the word she used to describe her father should ignite any reaction in the young man. “That’s who he is, *Daddy*. ”

“*Daddy!*” Danny repeated with a loud snort, as if it was some kind of lewd word.

“Oh, don’t mind him,” Sarah explained. “He just means that we all have a *dad*, or a *father*. And *daddy* sounds a little bit... *English*. That’s all.”

“Well, it *is* Daddy,” Gemma said in an even more stuck-up accent, pretending to sound offended, and then giggling because she couldn’t maintain the ruse. “And my *daddy* pays for a lot of the fun we have, Daniel Ellerstein, so I suggest you learn some respect, young man.”

“Respect. Got it,” he mocked again, but he managed to return a good-natured smirk. “*Daddy. Respect. SIS.*”

“Anyway, putting this heathen brute’s rude interjections aside,” Gemma continued, putting on an even more exaggerated posh accent than before, “You may feel free to *snicker in silence* all you want, Daniel, but I just want to say that I’m going to marry some *real money*, and have lots of servants to do *all* my bidding, and I’ll never have to work again.”

“So, why do college?” Alfie asked flatly, genuinely wondering at his friend’s logic.

Gemma shrugged.

“Daddy’s idea.”

They all laughed.

“But what if your *moneybags* hubby wants kids?” Rachael asked, not letting Gemma off the hook so easily.

The English girl looked thoughtful for a moment and then shrugged.

“Can’t you just... *buy them?*” she joked, enjoying the attention and the laughter.

Rachael made a wistful expression that was barely seen in the darkness.

“Oh well, then I suppose I will just have to grin and bear it,” Gemma gushed, still sounding upbeat – and as if she was already quite wealthy. “I mean, they say you grow to love them, don’t they? And I plan to have servants to do all the work, so... In any case, I’m sure I can exercise the weight off *my hips*, even if some here don’t need to. Or can’t.”

An amicable chorus of *woohs* circled around the campfire from all directions for a time, and

the girls found themselves looking to each other in turn as they wondered just who Gemma might be referring to.

“Oh, jolly good *show!*” Anna announced in her most affected English accent.

“Yes, *well done, chaps!*” droned Meg in a similar tone.

Another round of laughter showed universal approval, and then Amber rightly announced that only Alfie and Sarah were left to answer the biting question regarding children.

“Well, go on Alfie,” she coaxed. “All the rest of us had to say. So do you.”

“Me?” Alfie said, as if he had not expected to be asked for an opinion, as he so often was not. “Well... Well, I suppose... maybe... *not*. I mean, I like the idea of sex, don’t get me wrong, but kids? Hmm. Nah. I wanna make my fame and fortune playin’ football. After that maybe, but it’s like, sure not anything I think about now. Nah, not for me. I wanna be, like, famous first. I figure I’ll only get one go at it, so I better, like, make the most of it, you know?”

His response brought nods of approval from most of the group, who seemed to understand and even predict his point of view perfectly. Still, knowing that Rachael could likely not have children, and so had no choice in the matter, Alfie felt a pang of guilt. To take the focus off himself, he quickly turned the question to Sarah.

“Oh well, that’s easy,” Sarah stated confidently. After I finish college, which like, by the way, I’m only doing because my parents insist that I do, it’ll be just like I always said; I’m going to be a Hollywood star. You just wait and see.”

“Good for you, girl,” Anna encouraged.

“You sure got the looks for it,” Alfie said with a small whistle of approval.

“Geez, Alf, I never knew you cared,” Sarah crooned.

Of course, *she did know*, but she was never going to let herself get tied down to a man whose interests were basically limited to football and women, and oddly enough, in that order. Career came first for Sarah, and everyone who knew her, *knew that*. For most of them, college was a necessity on the way to something else, and not a bad way to spend a few more easy years with friends.

“He doesn’t *care* about you, Sarah,” said Danny abruptly and with considerable certainty. “He just thinks you’re hot.”

When Alfie gave no sign either way, Sarah turned her attention back to toying with the high and partially drunk braggart.

“Yeah, and what about you, Danny?” she asked. “Do you think I’m hot?”

She flicked her blonde hair and blinked her blue eyes at him in what was an overtly flirtatious move, just to see his reaction. Danny, normally loud and confident, twisted up his face to show he knew she was only pretending, and then fell strangely silent again. He glanced at Amber to see that he had responded appropriately, and then answered rather more cautiously than usual.

“Well, yeah, you’re... cute,” he admitted. Seated right next to him, Amber pretended to glare at him, waiting, testing him.

“What?” he protested innocently. “She is. And she’s, like, flirtin’ with me!”

“Just waiting for you to put your foot all the way in that big mouth of yours,” Amber explained, pretending to be annoyed with him.

They all laughed again to varying degrees as each person realised that yet again the girls had conspired to make fun of the over-confident Danny, a task made much easier when he was inebriated and high. When he shook his head, pretending to find their trap to be distasteful, Amber punched his arm.

“Dummy,” she said. “I know my friend is nice.”

“Not as nice as you,” he whispered cautiously, making sure that Sarah could not hear.

“Nice save,” Amber whispered back.

They looked like a pair of impish children whispering secrets, and clearly Danny felt relieved at the tall girl’s response. When the laughter ebbed away, all eyes fell into the trance of the dancing, dying firelight, before Rachael spoke softly again.

“Thank you all for being honest,” she conceded.

A series of *mmm*’s said that none of them really knew how to respond.

“It’s okay. It’s history now,” Rachael said reflectively. There was a meaningful silence, and then she added, “By the way, Danny, he works with animals now.”

“Who’s an animal?” he asked, genuinely so busy with Amber as to have missed Rachael’s words and to have forgotten the theme of the earlier conversation.

“Not an animal! He *works* with animals! The plumber – Aaron. You remember? The guy *you insisted I not see* anymore. He quit his job as a plumber, and then like, got into working with animals. Like a vet, you know? Does night courses in electronics or something like that too. Said he was, like, diversifying. Anyhow, he reckons he’s a lot happier doin’ that than working in people’s houses,” she explained. “That’s what he was doing the last time I spoke to him.”

“Look, he can be a rocket scientist for all I care. He’s still a loser,” Danny affirmed, feeling the need to justify his strong opinions over Rachael’s ex-boyfriend. “Now he’s like, just *a loser*

with animals. I just hope the animals are safe. And I still know you're, like, better off without him."

"Yeah," Rachael replied quietly, feeling oddly sadder about Danny's harsh view than she did about having given up her boyfriend. "I know you do."



As the group of tired friends began to fall asleep under the clear starry night, with a soft glow of embers gently illuminating parts of their forms and faces, they were not alone in the peaceful Nova Scotian woods.

Somewhere in the darkness, hiding and waiting, pairs of black eyes took in the number of the group, noting each person in detail.

And they waited.

CHAPTER 5

DAY 2

Meg groaned about how hard the going was, and stopped to drink from a water bottle. Sarah, who was considerably smaller and somewhat fitter, was barely struggling at all, though she did find her pack straps made her shoulders sore. And Alfie, ever the muscle supply of the group, took some of what Meg was carrying to help ease her task.

"Girl," Danny said sarcastically as he and Amber passed by.

Meg puckered her puffy lips as if she might be going to offer a kiss to the group leader, and then changed her mind and gave Alfie a peck on the cheek for his kindness. A tilt of Danny's head showed that she had successfully made him jealous, and the expression on Alfie's face of pure euphoria showed that he was suitably pleased. Alfie liked all the girls, but simply didn't know how to talk to them, so Meg's gesture left him both ecstatic and confused.

"*Woman*, actually," she taunted amicably at Danny as he and Amber moved ahead.

That was all Meg got from him, as he returned to being mesmerised by the sight of Amber again, dressed in white shorts and a cut off blouse, striding along the path ahead of him. Then it was Meg's turn to shake her head in distaste.

"Tell me again why Danny gets to have such a voice in everything we do," she said to no one

in particular.

“Cause I’m cool,” he called back confidently.

She was surprised he had heard her offhand comment, and even moreso that he bothered to answer, so taken was he with Amber’s behind. Still, it annoyed her just a little to have to admit that maybe, just maybe, despite all his loud and thoughtless comments, he was right – he was kind of cool.

In a *scary* kind of way...

Leading the group from in front as she usually did, Rachael stopped walking and turned to wait for the others to catch up. As if it was an excuse to complain, Meg wasted no time in asking the obvious.

“Are we there yet?” she droned.

“Nope,” replied Rachael happily. “But this marks the worst of it. It gets easier from here on.”

“Great. But like, are we there yet?”

“A few more hours, then just one more hard bit near the end.”

“Good,” quipped Danny. He reached out with stiffened fingers that resembled claws, and briefly latched on to Amber’s shapely shorts, but only briefly since he was unsure how she would react to such a brazen move – at least in front of their friends. “I quite like a hard bit... at the... behind... I mean, at the *end*.”

“Oh, give me a break,” Meg groaned. She turned her attention back to Rachael in a moment. “What, are you sayin’ *we’re not* near the end yet? Are you sure?”

“Course I’m sure,” Rachael answered, screwing up her face. “You doubt me?”

“No, just my ability to keep walking under these conditions,” Meg replied. “Remind me again why we didn’t just drive in to this cabin of yours, Rach.”

“Well, like I already told you; we could have driven right up to it,” Rachael explained. “But where’s the fun in that? I thought the whole idea of going to my granddad’s cabin was just the fun it was getting there. Besides, the hike’ll do you good, Meg. Think of your figure.”

“My figure’s just fine,” the sulky brunette shot back.

“Sure is,” Danny retorted, daring the wrath of Amber, who simply rolled her eyes at her would-be boyfriend’s predictable response.

“Oh, dear. The struggle is real,” Danny mocked. “Sucks to be you, Megsy.”

The brunette tossed some hair away, revealing a sweaty face from which her unmistakable pouty lips protruded a little more than usual. Just for effect Danny snapped a photo of her with his

cellphone, then quickly texted himself a message to go with it, speaking out loud so that she knew what he had written.

Sucks to be Meg. SIS.

“There’s the dream,” she pouted.

“Yeah? What’s that?” he asked, unable to resist responding to her meagre bait.

“SIS, D,” she groaned with exaggerated impatience. “That you really could just *snicker in... silence!*”

“*Ooo!* Someone’s getting a little feisty!” he announced happily.

Meg shook her head in an effort to ignore him, then looked back along the track they had just walked, as if to point out how rough it had been. She looked tired, in a pouty, spoiled kind of way.

“Yeah well, the worst is over now,” Rachael promised again. “Really. Just have a drink and I promise it gets a whole lot easier from here on. The rocky stuff and the hard going is all over now. There’s just one more hard bit near the end. If we can just keep going like this, we should be there by the end of the day.”

“The *end* of the *day*?” Meg protested, her groaning voice rising and lowering like the rugged path over which they had just walked. Somehow, in an over-pampered whining way, her tone, if not her comment, seemed oddly fitting to her plight.

“This afternoon then,” coaxed Rachael, knowing it was a stretch given the slow pace of the group. “Anyhow, once you get to here – where we are right now – it’s easier to go on to my granddad’s cabin than it is to go back. That means we’ve done the hardest part, so you can stop complaining, Meg.”

“Ah, the acme, the *zenith*. Or maybe, more rightly, the *nadir*. The point of no return,” Evan ventured.

“Yeah... *that*,” Rachael said, wrinkling up her brow at the nerd’s wordy summation. Then she smiled. “Trust you to come up with a technical term for it, Evan.”

“Not technical,” Evan protested. “I’m just saying, it’s the point...”

“*Ev-an!*” Anna droned. “She’s joking with you. We know you’re right. Okay?”

He shrugged.

“It’s so hard to please you girls,” he said with a groan.

“Ah, the struggle really *is* real,” Danny put in with a measure of satisfaction. “Good to see that, like, I’m not the only one these... *girls*... are toying with – on this hiking trip, at least.”

It was obvious to all that ‘girls’ wasn’t really the word he would like to have used, but the

ever-present attractive body of Amber Anderson before him was enough to cause him to refrain from overstepping the boundary of such honesty. Or vengeful retaliation...

“Mmm, you have no idea, dude,” Meg replied to Evan through a long, deep sigh.

“It’s so beautiful here,” Gemma said in her strong English accent. “It’s a beautiful sunny day.”

“Don’t be deceived,” Amber warned, feigning a serious voice. “Keep your eyes out for aliens, remember.”

“Oh, stop it,” Gemma insisted in her aristocratic way.

“Yeah, please don’t,” agreed Anna. “If I dream of aliens again, I’m gonna like, *attack* somebody, I swear. And it’ll be all your fault, Amber.”

“It’s when you’re dreaming that they get you,” Rachael said in a serious voice. “Or walking. Or with your friends. Or alone...”

“Oh, *come on*, guys,” Anna droned. “Must you?”

“*WoooOOooo*,” Danny crooned, undulating for effect.

“Isn’t that a ghost, not an alien?” asked Sarah, sounding genuinely unsure.

“Oh, whatever,” Danny said. “Ghost, alien – they both eat you – or kill you. Or whatever. Don’t, like, get all technical on me – that’s Evan’s job.”

Evan rolled his eyes.

“I guess it sucks to be me,” he suggested weakly.

“Sucks to suck!” several voices chimed in.

“Yeah well, I just want to *get there*,” Meg complained again, ignoring the jibes at Anna, who had dared to confide her childhood fear the previous night. “I sure hope this cabin of yours is what it’s cracked up to be, Rach.”

“Oh, you poor thing,” Danny teased some more. He snapped another photo on his cell phone of Meg whining for effect.

Rachael made a face.

“Well, we’ll get there this afternoon *if* we don’t stand around complaining, that is.”

“Yeah, so come on, *princess!*” Danny teased with a happy grin. He used his cell phone to snap Meg again, then turned away and snapped one of Amber from behind and exclaimed in an exaggerated tone, “Ah, I love all this walkin’ stuff.”

Meg shot a knowing glance at Sarah and rolled her eyes.

“Men!” she complained.

“Nah, boys!” Sarah corrected with a small giggle.

Together they all turned and continued along the path toward Rachael's promised cabin.



Lunch consisted of dry snacks and fruit, because no one could be bothered preparing anything better, and because it was feared the fruit would spoil if not eaten within the first few days. With their packs off, and having rested for a time in the shade of some pines, even the most fatigued recovered well.

As the group sat talking, mostly they laughed. It felt good to be away from studies, and the day was nothing short of spectacular. Early Nova Scotia Fall weather did not disappoint, with cool nights, though not uncomfortably so, and warm, sunny days. Hardwoods were beginning to offer up their first coloured flashes of leaf changes, some maples already turning bright reds, oranges and yellows. The pines on the other hand, maintained their pleasant mid to dark greens, while also presenting a soft blanket of fallen brown and tan fronds upon which to rest. It was an idyllic scene.

"Just like you promised, Rach," Sarah said. "This is really beautiful."

"Yeah, it always is."

"You like the snow too?" Alfie questioned.

"Yeah, I do. It's all good," Rachael assured him. "You get up in my granddad's cabin with a fire going, some good food... Nothing better. I like it all. This place has everything I ever want."

"Not me," said Meg flatly. "I hate the snow."

"Yeah, but you hated the walk this morning too," retorted Anna, teasing. "And *now* look at how good this is." She waved her arms about and looked around for effect.

"Yeah, yeah. What-*evvvver*," protested Meg. She flicked her long, dark hair in a reflex action, as though someone had questioned her appearance. "Look, I'm just not... *made* for all this hiking stuff. I'm a city girl, okay? I like the mall. And, hey, I admit it. This is just... not for me. So don't pick on me."

"Built for comfort, not for speed, hey Meg," Danny offered, teasing her as always.

"I'm not sure I like your inference, Danny Ellerstein," she shot back with a hint of spite. "But yeah. Maybe for once, you're right." In truth she really didn't know whether he was complimenting her or poking fun again.

"You know you're in trouble when they use both your names," Alfie said with a shrug and a grin, and he and Danny slapped palms in a show of male solidarity.

“Yeah well, I’m always in trouble with Meg,” Danny said as though Meg could not hear. “But that’s only because she *wants me!*”

With that he stood up and strode off, leaving Meg sitting with her mouth open, rattling her brain for something sharp with which to respond, though nothing would come. In any case, Danny was gone in seconds, leaving her without an avenue of reproach. As he left he rested his right hand upon the handle of the sheathed hunting knife at his hip, in what more than one of the girls thought was an overt gesture as to how dangerous he imagined himself to be.

“*Ooo*, that boy annoys me sometimes,” Meg grumbled. In truth, she didn’t really mind, except that Danny could be rather less than tactful at times.

“Yeah, they say that’s what happens when it’s *true love*,” Alfie said simply. “No, really. I heard that in a movie...”

“*Al-fie!*” Meg’s exaggerated rebuke was enough to cause the football star to cease his explanation, and as so often happened, the muscular young man was not quite sure what he had said to draw such a reaction.

Meg looked first at him and then at Amber, gauging whether the tall girl would become jealous at the comment. Amber rolled her eyes, but gave nothing away. *She wouldn’t*, Meg knew, because Amber was the type who would keep that sort of thing to herself, then strike back when it was least expected.

“Statistically speaking,” Evan offered, sounding unnecessarily intellectual, “Alfie is right. Often relationships *are* started when a man and a woman start out being offended by each other...”

“*Evv-ann!*” Anna, Meg and Sarah managed to time their complaint almost as one.

“I’m just saying...” he protested, but was cut off again.

“See, Evan,” Anna chastised, “and *that’s* why you don’t have a girl hanging off you. You don’t talk about *relationships* in the same sentence with *statistics*, *nerd-boy!* You gotta learn to lighten up, Buddy!”

“Oh, sorry,” he apologised, realising his mistake now that it had been so clearly pointed out. Then, with a sudden, albeit ungainly flash of bravery, he smiled back at the attractive blonde and asked, “So, will you teach me then, Anna? Like, what could I say to win *your* heart?”

Anna looked shocked at first, then almost creeped-out. And then she had to hold back from laughing, something the others didn’t bother to do. A round of guffaws from the others all but shattered Evan’s rare and unexpected nerve.

“Well firstly,” Anna answered, forced to wait for the laughter to die down. “You don’t try to

win my heart! You try to *get with me*. You're so nerdy, Evan. You gotta just, like, lighten up. What you gotta do is... *impress* a girl. Like, seriously. You know... lose the nerdy science-thing you got goin'. Or, *you could* try winning a million dollars. And then... Nah, sorry, Evan. You know I appreciate all you do, but frankly, there's just *nothin'* you could do to impress me. But, like, don't give up. I just mean that you're, like, not *my type*. But you're okay, *okay*. You could try one of these other girls, though. Gemma's got an English brain. I've heard *those* can be pretty geeky. *And*, I think *she* just might be hot for you."

Each of them stared at the computer geek, almost daring him to try to impress Gemma. Especially Gemma.

But as nerdy as he was, even Evan could see that they were preparing to shoot him down in flames without mercy should he make even the smallest hint of a romantic overture – to any of them. In the end, he knew it was pointless.

Evan sighed and refused to make eye contact with any of them again.

"Ah, I've gotta take a walk anyway," he said dejectedly.

With that he stood up and took a roll of toilet tissue from his pack and then ventured off into the woods, still never looking back at them.

"You were a bit mean, I think maybe, Anna," Sarah ventured.

"I'll say," Gemma put in. "A *geeky English brain?*"

Anna ignored the English girl's good-natured crack.

"Oh, he'll get over it," Anna shot back, sorry that Evan had apparently been quite hurt by her comments, and yet not wanting to admit as much in front of her friends. As though she was suddenly in need of some space too, she stood to her feet, found her own roll of paper, then looked off in the opposite direction to which Evan had gone.

"You guys were *just* as mean. What about the *looks* you all gave him? Would it hurt for just *one of you* to give the boy a kiss, or even a bit of hope? Huh? Turns out he had a good idea, anyhow," she said, enjoying the sound of their renewed laughter as she strode away, and yet still feeling a small sting of guilt. "I'll be back."

"Don't let the aliens get you," called Meg as Anna strode away, happy to add to her dilemma.

"That went well," whispered Rachael, looking at the faces of those who remained. Rather than watching where Anna went, her eyes were still peering into the bushes and trees where Danny had gone.

"Do we all think that boy is entirely stable?" she asked, joking, and yet quietly serious.

“Not even a little bit,” Sarah answered flatly and without hesitation.

“*He sure scares me* sometimes,” Gemma agreed. “But I think he’s good deep down.”

“Deep down after the knife threats, you mean?” Sarah asked.

“Oh, he wouldn’t do anything,” Gemma responded, laughing it off until she saw that her friends were seriously debating Danny’s mental state. Then she whined incredulously, “Oh, you, my friends, can’t be *serious*?”

“I’m just saying that maybe Alfie wasn’t the only form of danger that kept those other groups afraid of us through high school. That’s all,” Rachael ventured honestly. “No offence, Alfie.”

“None taken,” he said with a knowing smirk. “Nah, Danny’s okay. Weird, in your face, but okay. He won’t hurt anyone. He’s all talk.”

“Besides, you’ll take him out if he threatens any of us girls, won’t you Alfie?” Meg asked with an affected, almost lustful voice. She reached out and gently gripped his chin, then leaned closer as if she might actually kiss him. Her face metamorphosed into that of a seductive goddess, her thick lips puckering just a little more than normal, her dark brown eyes widening as if she was intoxicated by the football star. For a few tantalizing seconds, especially having helped to carry her gear earlier, Alfie Braun was so drawn in by her that he actually wondered if she might want him. It was a magical fantasy to him, but one that was fated to end quickly.

And painfully.

After just a few seconds of enticing him, promising him the world without ever a word being spoken, Meg’s wonderful face metamorphosed again. As she began to grin, Alfie knew she was only toying with him – *as always*. He felt both his heart and his blood pressure falling from great heights.

“One day,” he warned, sounding suddenly slightly like Danny, only without the physical threat, “you’re gonna need me. When that day comes, I just hope then that you remember times like this.”

“Geez, you sound like Danny,” Meg droned distastefully.

Alfie said the words with humour, but there was no doubting that she had hurt him, or at the very least, embarrassed him in front of their friends. Feeling his face reddening, he too stood up to leave.

“I think I’ll take a walk too,” he said, though there was no trace of anger in his voice.

“Not a bad idea,” Sarah said. “Looks like everyone else is doing it, so I suppose we all should too.”

“Especially since we’ll need to get going if we want to make it to the cabin this afternoon,” Rachael pointed out.

“Wow. Now, that *would be nice*,” groaned Meg.

With that the rest of the group split up and ventured off into different parts of the thick woods that surrounded their rather beautiful picnic place.



Evan had walked for some time before he found the place he needed, since his need was more to burn off some anger rather than to tend to any call of nature. He was feeling hurt, tired of the relentless teasing he received from his ‘friends’ over what they always called his *nerdiness*.

After all, they didn’t mind his intellectual prowess when it came time for helping them with all the clandestine things he did to get them through their tests. Did it? No! Especially Danny and Alfie. Sure, Rachael and most of the girls were pretty smart, but... well, even Meg needed help from time to time. THEN they were happy to call him a friend. Sure. A friend! Huh! The only one who really ever had been nice to him was Rachael, and now she was... off limits. A girl who couldn’t bear children, well...

Even sighed aloud. He felt frustrated and bitter. Why couldn’t they ever flirt with him? Was he really that nerdy that they couldn’t even pretend? *Geeky. That’s what Meg had called him. Geeky! Well, maybe he’d give her the wrong answers to the next test she asked for help with. That would teach her.*

Or perhaps he shouldn’t be giving her answers at all anymore... Not given his most recent decision... Yeah. That might be cruel, but it would certainly teach her...

Having walked for far longer than he really needed to, the brainiac stopped and looked about. Well, at least he was far away from them all now, so there was no chance of being seen, or worse, photographed while he did what he needed to do. After all, his *so-called friends* found plenty of reasons to make fun of him, so why give them an added opportunity?

When he had done what he had come for, he began to retrace his steps, still bitter, and secretly wondering how he might perhaps infiltrate their computers and *really do* what he had suggested the previous night.

Get some photos of them, take some video... Maybe post some of it anonymously online... Yeah. That would teach them... Then maybe the girls would be nicer to him while he pretended to

help debug their systems.

But no... No, he just couldn't do that anymore. Not now. Not even if he wasn't afraid of what Danny and Alfie might do to him – which he was.

He sighed, dejected and defeated. *No. He could never do that.* Maybe they deserved such treatment, but it just wasn't in his DNA to do nasty stuff like that – *to anyone* – let alone those who were the closest ones to friends that he had. His life might be lonely, but Evan knew it would be a whole lot lonelier if he alienated himself from the group.

They might poke fun at him, but at least he felt protected. And maybe just a little bit popular. Or *cool*, at least.

Evan had been careful not to forget the way he had come. To get lost would only fuel his allies with extra torments, and he didn't need anymore of that. By now, he knew, he should have become used to taunts. And yet their words still had the power to cut him down.

If he was honest, he had come to expect nothing different.

Still, there was a conflict always raging. The truth was that it felt good to be in the *in-group*. That had its advantages. If nothing else, he got to be with some of the finest looking and coolest girls he'd ever known. It struck him as funny how the good-looking guys and girls always seemed to be drawn together.

It made his own presence all the more intriguing.

Of course, he knew very well why he was such an integral part of the group.

Those thoughts were still rattling about in Evan Amity's genius mind when the real surprise came.

CHAPTER 6

Anna Robertson strolled among some maples, enjoying a cool walk among the first brilliant colors of fall. Occasionally she saw small red squirrels darting about from tree to tree as they foraged for food, and sometimes venturing to the ground where they scurried hurriedly about, their bushy tails held aloft and bobbing as they ran.

The sight of two squirrels squabbling over territory, or perhaps food, caused Anna to stop and watch. The pair of tiny reddish-brown animals began by chirping noisily at a safe distance, and then suddenly confronting each other head on. A small skirmish ensued, and the victor then had the satisfaction of chasing the vanquished squirrel for a time.

Then suddenly they stopped their energetic game and scurried away together. It struck Anna as very strange, and for a few seconds she wondered if the pair might actually only have been playing. Then somewhere in the distance she heard a strange sound.

Always concerned that Danny might come snooping, hoping to catch one of the girls in a state of partial or full undress, she looked about nervously. He must have already snapped a hundred photos of Amber's shapely form as she hiked, and his cellphone was never very far from his grasp should another opportunity arise. And experience taught that it didn't have to be Amber's body...

Danny could be fun, but he could also be scary. His propensity to snap images of the girls in varying poses was bad enough, but there were worse things too. His occasional jokes about the knife that hung from his hip didn't help assuage Anna's concerns at all.

Funny that, she thought. Lunatic with a knife. Hmm. Nice lunatic. Fun lunatic. But a lunatic nonetheless. At least potentially.

Having heard an odd sound, she found herself looking about somewhat cautiously. She crouched and looked again in the hope of catching out whoever the intruder was. Anna was certain someone was trying to sneak up on her, and so she was glad that she had done what she came for and was fully dressed again.

"Danny?" she whispered. "Danny, *come out*. This is *not funny*."

Anna heard another sound. Where the first sound had definitely been that of a human, like someone calling out in the distance, it had then been followed up by a much closer rustling of leaves, like someone or *something* sneaking through the bushes. This time the sound was closer, and there was no human aspect to it.

She felt suddenly afraid.

What if it wasn't Danny? That might be worse than if it really was him.

"Danny?"

Nothing.

Ahead of Anna the woods changed to a thick plot of spruce, most of which were immature, and she recognised them as regrowth after logging. Their close proximity to each other and their shortness made their fronds join to form a wall of green that was impossible to see through.

"Damn you, Danny," she said aloud. Then she spoke louder. "Is anyone there?"

Anna flicked her blonde hair away from her face so that she could see everything before her without interference. All the jokes about bears and aliens were never very far away, and the conjecture over the fate of the two missing hikers had roused dormant nightmares. Her friends'

constant badgering about aliens hadn't helped.

Suddenly none of it seemed funny anymore.

"Danny? Amber? Is that you?"

The thought of a bloodthirsty bear bursting from the evergreens suddenly put ice in her veins. She backed up a pace. Then another. In the distance she heard another sound, and then another, but they were far off and she could not distinguish them as male or female – only human. In that moment she knew that *something* was happening.

Something serious.

But she could see nothing in the distance.

And she couldn't see whatever was creeping about close by her either.

Why did you come out this far alone?

And then an awful thought struck her.

Perhaps there were *worse things* than bloodthirsty bears in these woods. What if all the jokes about aliens were actually some kind of omen? *A terrible warning?* A warning that she had ignored? What if by some macabre twist of fate the tales *really did* prove to be true? Perhaps far worse than a bloodthirsty bear might be a bloodthirsty alien... What horrendous things would an *alien do to a young woman?*

Blood turned to ice in Anna's veins. She held her breath, paralysed with fear.

Then, as clear as she had ever envisioned in her childhood, she suddenly saw a dreadful green monster appearing from nowhere, probably invisible until it struck, its multiple, long talons reaching out to take her – *to invade her* – its ravenous mouth dripping with thick saliva. It had the ability to strike without warning, not even allowing its victim time to scream.

Anna could feel the terrifying, horrible alien beast injecting her with a paralyzing venom that left her unable to react or even move, and yet she could still feel *everything* – every tiny pinch and cut, every awful crawling tentacle and probing feeler. *Probing...! Oh, why had she joined in the jokes about that very subject the previous night?*

And she could see all the horror of the monster too.

And what it did to her...

Anna's mind raced away with her, secret fears tearing her from reality and into a childhood abyss of terror, despite the reality of a warm, sunny morning. She was utterly overcome in a moment.

She winced as she felt the green, slimy monster then split her from top to bottom with an

unseen and completely painless weapon, head and all, leaving only her spine intact. The awful creature then tore her open so that her body opened up wide in two vertical halves that hinged perfectly upon her un-severed spine. Strangely she could still see, and even worse, with an improved, three-dimensional clarity that came from having her eyes more than twice the distance apart they would normally have been.

She felt her stomach tighten and heave, and was then aware of all her inner parts slipping deftly from her body to fall with a noisy wet splat upon the soft grass. Suddenly she was just a shell, held upright by the awful monster, cleaved in two, yet still seeing her horrible plight and unable to die. The fiend's venom was *soooo strong*. No only did it immobilise her while her body was split and emptied, but it somehow maintained her brain function – even a brain cleaved neatly in two.

It was the horror she had always feared.

Since childhood.

“Please. Just *let me die*,” she whispered feebly, so quietly that only she could hear.

Beyond belief, her mouth still managed to form words, even though it too was now split vertically in two, the halves separated by the width of her hand. She watched in ultimate horror as even her lungs and then her pounding heart finally slipped with a moist plop from her open chest, and she could see her purple heart still beating, pumping blood into the air, and into arteries that led to nowhere.

The normally effervescent young woman stood deathly still, her green eyes wide and staring at nothing, her mind reeling with a horror that had always promised to haunt her and taunt her with icy terror from her earliest memories.

Only when a hand – a *real hand*, and not something imagined in her troubled mind – came to rest firmly upon her shoulder, Anna was finally able to scream.

And scream she did.



They gave him no warning.

That way he would have less time to call to his friends.

It wasn't that Evan Amity didn't want to keep calling out, but the *thing* had him by the throat in the first seconds. One short, lone grunt is all he had time for. After that he was on his back,

struggling for survival beneath the weight of not just one, but two dark monsters that pinned him easily.

Two horrible black monsters.

Monsters with awful teeth.

And a mission to kill.

Even in the few seconds of life that remained for Evan, his reeling mind had time to see and consider both his plight and the horrible *things* that attacked him. They came from nowhere, made little or no sound sneaking up on him, and showed him absolutely no mercy. In the agony of body and mind, he had time to see their dirty stained teeth, and even smell the filth of their excited breaths as they tore him apart.

One tore open his throat, silencing him almost instantly. That done, the thing retracted, apparently happy that it had both hushed and, for the most part, immobilised its prey. After that it allowed the other monster to tear away at his flailing body. Gasping for air and spitting blood from a ripped throat, Evan writhed about on the grass, punching feebly at the remaining monster as it tossed its head back and forth over his belly.

At first he was unaware of why the terrible creature would do such a thing, tossing its head about like that, but sadly, he even had the time and the presence of mind to see sharp protrusions beneath the beast's thrashing head, under either side of its powerful jaw. The protrusions were long and sharp and curved, like exposed bones perhaps, but quite some distance out from the main jawbone. And yet they were sharp like steel, and dripping with blood.

Evan's blood!

Only when the thing thrashed a few more times and the protruding shears suddenly appeared again, this time with a long, pale string of intestines hooked on the ends of them did Evan begin to imagine the pain of being slashed open over and over. The truth was that he felt almost nothing in the trauma and terror of the moment, but panic told him otherwise.

His genius mind fused.

Evan tried to scream for help, but spewed forth only a noisy mix of frothing air and blood. Then, in a surreal moment of torture, the second beast sat back beside the first, much like a dog might do for its master when commanded to sit. Having downed and silenced their prey in mere seconds, the monsters seemed no longer intent on harming him, but simply sat still, only the husky sounds of their excited breaths filling the air.

Another gurgle was all the sound that the young man could muster. He rolled on to his side,

facing the pair of dark, satin-coated monsters. Evan's bloody hands moved in jerky motions, shock immediately taking a heavy toll, and came to rest over his slashed mid section. His eyes bulged as he dared to look away from the waiting, resting beasts to peruse his injuries. His shivering lower jaw fell wide open in utter shock to reveal bloody teeth as he realised that he was cradling a considerable amount of his intestines.

And was that his liver?

With what little ability he still possessed he forced the inane question from his tormented mind, and then looked to the hideous monsters again. His eyes darted about, his senses reeling, his body finally beginning to feel the pain of multitude punctures and slashes that already spilled much of his blood and inner parts on to the soft grass beneath and about him. He suddenly felt that the grass had become warm and slippery, and in the horror of that moment, he knew intuitively that he would die.

Only the arrival of his friends could save him now.

And they were far away...

Alas, hurt and feeling a great need for privacy so as not to incur yet another drubbing from his allies, he had ventured just far enough that he was surely beyond help. Even if someone had heard his initial muffled cry of terror, he knew they would not find him in time to save him.

And then he heard a familiar sound.

Someone was walking through the grass and the bushes! He could hear the clear footprints of a man – or worse – perhaps another monster! Evan dared not give the latter thought any consideration. *Surely it was a man! Surely! Someone was coming to save him!*

Evan tried to roll on to his back again, since the sounds of the approaching footsteps definitely came from behind him. But hope turned to bewilderment and then to horror again as he took in the strange sight that awaited him.

Not strange, he thought frantically. Obscene!

Not only could he not identify the dark monsters that assailed him and so easily overcome him, but *this – this* was beyond belief! It made no sense at all.

What?

Evan's attention was drawn away from the strange new arrival as first one beast and then the other stood again, hovering, waiting. The dark monsters stood to attention, clearly obedient to the wishes of their newly arrived master.

And so they were.

But it made no sense. Everything had to make sense. It was a logical world. And this was not logical at all! He had never seen things like these beasts...

Even Evan's logical genius was forced to quickly consider the possibility of... something new... something not of this world...

And he knew that, sadly, he would never have time to ponder all that he had seen.

His shivering, icy dread was confirmed a moment later when a series of sharp blades flashed out from around first one beast's neck, and then the other's. It was as though the bloody, slobbering monsters' heads suddenly blossomed like some kind of obscene flowers, with sharp spikes for petals that shot out of their necks. The uniform shards were joined by transparent black webbing, and flexed out in a circular array about the beasts' heads, then fell back against their bodies, over and over in what appeared to be some kind of silent communication.

Or was it a display of some kind?

When finally the spikes came to stay at attention, sprouting out like numerous dark knives for the monsters to slash at their prey some more, Evan knew for certain that it was a sign.

A bad sign.

A very bad sign...

Anna Robertson's nightmare could not have compared with the terror and agony of the final strikes upon the doomed young man. Her dream was only imagined; Evan's nightmare was real.

And it came with searing agony.

Evan Amity spat more air and blood as he tried to cry out at the pain of being torn apart by the monsters, but alas, he could barely make a sound. The awful brutes made no attempt to kill him outright, but dutifully followed the silent orders of their master, understanding every small requirement of the ritual.

And while Evan did not get to see his heart being torn from his chest as Anna had imagined herself seeing, it was done, nonetheless.



"EVAN!"

Danny Ellerstein's voice roared so loud up close that it hurt Rachael's ears. She plugged them with her fingers until the din was over, and then spoke to those about her.

"I don't know what we're supposed to do," she admitted, looking upset. "It's not like Evan to

play a prank like this. Danny yeah, Alfie maybe, but Evan? Nah. All I know is, if we don't like, get going right now, we're not going to make it to the cabin by tonight."

"Who gives a rat's butt about the cabin?" Sarah sprouted, also visibly concerned. "Like, seriously, I don't mind another night out here. But like, we sure as heck better find Evan! What if he's lost?"

"That dork," Meg complained loudly, as if anything that had happened to Evan would certainly have been something he had done on purpose to slow the group down.

"Don't call the nerd a dork," Amber quipped. "You'll upset the geek. And like, we don't need an upset geeky dork. Okay?"

It was enough to make Sarah chuckle, but she was serious again a few seconds later.

"No, seriously, like, what are we gonna do if we can't *find him*?" the small girl insisted nervously. "I hope he didn't like, get so angry that he would have... *gone home*. Do you think?"

"Nah," answered Meg confidently. "His pack's still here. He hasn't gone far. He's just a dork. That's all."

"Well, all I know is we'd better get and look for him," Anna stated firmly. "Stupid geek!"

"Dork."

"Dorky geek."

"Geeky freak."

"You don't think he could have like, wandered off and gotten himself lost, do you?" Gemma wondered out loud to no one in particular, and indeed, to the group as a whole.

"Course we do," Meg answered for them all. "And that's because..."

The pouty brunette left the question open for anyone else who might have desired, to answer.

"He's a dork!" Several voices managed to sound the answer in near perfect unison, which again caused chuckles to emanate from the hikers.

"Cause it sucks to be Evan?" Anna posed.

"If a dork gets lost in the woods, and there's no woman there to tell him he's a nerd, is he still a geek?"

"*It's because he IS a dork!*" Anna and Amber answered on cue, and again in almost perfect unison, culminating their coordinated joke with yet more giggles.

"What, Evan – the genius – get lost?" Sarah asked rhetorically. "What are the chances?"

"Pretty high, apparently," droned Rachael, visibly concerned.

Gemma didn't smile, but continued to sound bothered by the young man's disappearance.

“Well, I for one am worried. Evan might be a brainiac, but I rather don’t think he’s like, cut out for surviving out here.”

“Really?” Meg responded cynically. “You think?”

“My point exactly, Gem,” Rachael said with a resigned sigh and a regretful nod.

“He’ll be lucky to survive at all once I get hold of him,” Danny grated.

“So much for that kiss one of us was going to give him,” Anna scoffed.

Danny spun so quickly at the comment that he almost pinched a nerve in his neck.

“Wha...?”

“We’d better all stay close to each other,” Rachael warned, more demanding than suggesting, and not bothering to explain Anna’s comment about kissing Evan. “We don’t want to lose anyone else out here. I hate to say it, guys, but like, we’d better take this seriously, I think.”

Danny saluted her as a mocking gesture, but the absence of an accompanying comment showed that he agreed.

“Stupid dork,” Meg insisted. “I’m already tired enough. I just want to get to this cabin before dark. Damn it, Evan! *Evan! EVAN!*”

“Let’s go,” Danny said, taking charge. “Youse can tell me this crap about kissing Evan later. *After* I kill the little turd.”

He pointed to where the girls said they had last seen the young genius venture off, and together they formed a line and began to search the woods.



“How many Einsteins does it take to get lost in the woods?” Meg groaned petulantly.

Trotting at the whining girl’s side, Rachael thought for a moment, and then smiled.

“I dunno. I guess it’s all *a theory – relatively*,” she suggested.

Meg frowned and ignored her friend’s reply, then answered her own question with utter sarcasm.

“Just one,” she said. “And his name is *Doofus Evan Amity!*”

The pair called out the young man’s name in near unison once more.

The reply they got was one neither would be able to forget.



Gemma Archerfield's scream was so piercing that it brought the others racing to her position believing that she was being attacked. A second and third scream took her breath away and left her unable to do anything more than point to a bloody mass on the grass between some shrubs.

Danny already had his knife out of its pouch, ready to defend against any unknown predator, though all his bravado dissolved once he saw what had upset the English girl. A few seconds later he looked every bit as agitated as Gemma did horrified, and it was clear that he had no idea what to do. And when each of the group arrived at the scene, so bloody and awful was the sight before them that no one could act for some time.

Evan's body was still mostly intact, with limbs gashed deeply and bleeding, and both his elbows looking like they might have been broken or at least out of joint. Much of his intestines made a pale, grotesque display like twisted rope about his motionless form, pulled out of his midsection through numerous widely gashed and gaping wounds.

With his shirt torn wide open and mostly removed from his body, his abdominal wounds appeared as if they might have been made by a slashing blade, even a sword or large knife. His chest, on the other hand, had the appearance of having been ravaged by very powerful jaws, complete with teeth marks and ripped flesh hanging from bones. It made for an utterly sickening sight for the unprepared and unseasoned young people.

To add to the revolting sight, it was sometimes difficult to tell one shredded organ from another, especially for those not as familiar as others with human anatomy, but it was obvious enough that even the young man's heart had been ripped from its home and left outside, resting against his bloody side by stringy blood vessels for all to see.

And Gemma wasn't the only one screaming.

CHAPTER 7

NIGHT 2

The mood around the campfire was tense, fearful and morose.

Five campers huddled close, partly for comfort and partly because of stifling fear that whatever had attacked and killed Evan might come back to strike again.

For comfort, the fire was made bigger than the previous night, since to maintain better light was one of the few precautions they could take. In reality, though, there wasn't a single person who didn't dread finding out what it was that had reeked such horrifying destruction upon their fellow

student and hiker.

Being able to see the beast might not be such a comfort after all.

Still, there was the slim hope that perhaps the predator that had killed Evan might be afraid of the firelight, and of their numbers while they stayed together. No one knew. But everyone hoped. One of the few other precautions they had been able to take was to make long spears out of small trees, which they had done, using Danny's knife to cut and sharpen one spear for each person. Each spear had been crafted from a young maple sapling, since those seemed to be the strongest and straightest.

And each one kept their long, sturdy spears very close.

All heads turned in the direction of a rustling sound, and Anna stood to her feet, spear in hand as the nervous group followed suit, then all sighed audible gasps and comments of relief as Rachael's voice could be heard announcing her presence in the dim twilight.

"Don't attack!" she called cautiously. "It's just us! *Just us!*"

There was a murmur of comments, mostly relieved ones as Rachael led the way with Danny and Alfie close behind. The two young men toted fold-up camping shovels, while Rachael carried a small rifle. She was careful not to let it out of her grasp as each of the three took their place around the crackling fire.

An eerie silence engulfed the traumatised students as Rachael then put her head down to rest her chin on her folded knees, the rifle pointed straight up and always within her grasp. She appeared every bit as tense as she felt, her eyes darting about as she looked from the forest to each of her friends in turn, over and over. Most of the others did something similar, until Alfie stood again and moved to Rachael's side.

"Can I have my rifle back now, Rach?" he asked.

She looked reticent at first, but then shrugged and handed it over, still upright so as not to risk anyone being harmed.

"It's not much," Alfie said, examining the .22 he had brought along, "but it's all I got."

"Trust me," Rachael said, clearly unhappy about giving it back to its owner. "It's good. It's *real* good!"

Alfie's .22 was not only a small calibre weapon, but it was also small to look at, just as was intended by its makers. A semi-automatic with a ten-shot magazine, it barely looked enough to protect the group from a predator of *any size*, let alone one that could do what had been done to Evan Amity. Like a voice of doom, Meg immediately pointed it out for all to hear.

“*Dammit, Alfie!*” she whined. “Couldn’t you have brought a *bigger* one? What’s *that* gonna do to a bear?”

“I know, I know,” he admitted defensively, and he sounded somewhat impatient, well aware of the fact already. Then he shrugged. “But it’s small because it’s meant to be kept folded up inside my pack, so *no one* knows I’m carryin’ it. If I get caught by the parks people *even with this*, I’ll be in all sorts of trouble. Let alone if I actually had a *real rifle*.”

“I kinda don’t think they’d be too worried after what happened... After what *we saw*,” noted Anna flatly.

Alfie conceded a nod. Then he pulled back the rifle’s slide very slowly, just far enough to see a fresh, golden bullet being retracted from the breach. Satisfied that it was indeed, still loaded, he then allowed the slide to spring gently home again and completed the simple action with a long sigh of deep satisfaction. Then he withdrew the clip, checked it and inserted it again. There came a welcome metallic click as it reached home, and after that he re-engaged the safety.

“Sorry,” Meg said quietly, sounding almost as if she was on a stupefying drug. “I’m just... *scared*. That’s all. Didn’t mean to... *snap*... at you, Alfie.”

“S’okay,” Alfie replied kindly. “We’re probably *all* a bit uptight right now.”

“You think?” Amber said bleakly, though it was never really a question.

Following his friend’s lead, Danny then reached out a hand and took back his knife from Anna, who had held on to it after all the spears had been made. They all watched as he examined the blade, twenty centimetres of glistening silver that reflected orange and yellow firelight. The group’s leader then smiled in silent satisfaction as he slipped it back into its leather sheath at his hip. When he looked up again, every eye was on him.

“What?” he asked, feeling as if he had to say something. “You all, like, laughed at me, but now you see I was, like, right to bring ol’ Jim, here, with me.”

“No one’s laughin’, D,” Sarah admitted. “You haven’t, like, got a spare hidden away in your pack, have you?”

Danny sniffed.

“As if.” Then he grinned lasciviously at her. “What would you, like, pay me, or *do for me* if I did?”

“Danny, don’t be such a *stalker*,” Amber grumbled, and coming from her it sounded more like a caution than just a simple observation. And since Danny wanted her, it was enough to restrain him, though he laughed just the same, happy for Sarah – and all the girls, for that matter – to know

exactly where his interests lay.

As if they didn't know amply already.

"Mmm. Got it," Sarah retorted dryly, careful to make sure that Amber knew she had no interest in Danny or his advances. There was an uncomfortable silence, then Sarah asked an obvious question of Alfie.

"Do you think that gun'll, like, stop the bear that did that... to Evan?" she asked.

Alfie shrugged, not wanting to answer, but he was unable to avoid her gaze.

"Probably just annoy it, I reckon," he finally speculated with depressed honesty.

"It'd give him a headache," Rachael stated factually. "Still, I suppose if you can get him in the eye, it might..."

"Annoy him even more?" Anna put in with a mix of dry humour and disheartened misery.

Rachael trailed off, too upset to laugh at her blonde friend's comment. She understood all too well that it was a slim hope indeed that such a small rifle could make any real impact upon a serious predator. As for hitting it in an eye; there was an even slimmer hope that Alfie could ever make that shot. In the end, she simply added the best observation she could.

"It's a whole lot better than nothing."

There were several more awkward seconds before Anna broke the dejected silence again. Her rather beautiful face looked sweaty and dirty now, and her pale hair was dishevelled, leaving her to look as if she had been dragged through the bushes. Even her voice sounded strained, as if she was under the influence of a stupefying drug.

"Did you... you know... *bury him*?" she asked simply.

The moroseness of her blunt question seemed to echo with as much lack of tact as Danny's usual blunders, but no one chastised her for it. Silent nods from the two young men told of a deed morbidly done.

"What was left of him," Danny pointed out crassly. "Anyhow, Alfie did most of the diggin'."

"It was hard because of all the rocks. Not a lot of soil here, hey," Rachael explained, her face ashen, her eyes still dancing about the group and the woods beyond. "But we... Sorry. Too much information."

"We had to put some rocks over him – over the grave," Alfie explained quietly, saving Rachael the sad task of explaining further. "'Cause we couldn't dig the hole real deep – 'cause of the rocks, y'know. Like, who knew Nova Scotia had *so many* rocks!"

Sickly swallows and silent nods from those who had not born the burden of disposing of

Evan's torn remains showed not only approval, but appreciation. They all knew it had been an awful task, and one that would no doubt remain in all their minds for the rest of their lives, which at that point, was a duration no one even wanted to contemplate.

"Did you, you know, *pray* over him?" Sarah asked softly.

Alfie nodded.

"Yeah. Rach did."

Sarah nodded appreciatively.

"Good," Sarah acknowledged. "I think that's just... right."

"Whatever," Danny said flatly, happy to stay away from Rachael's all-too-often *religious* conversations that seemed to arise nowadays. He preferred the old Rachael – the one who had surrendered to unprotected sex with him – the one who was more easily manipulated. The one he could *use*. In an effort to change the subject, he added brusquely, "Anyone want to go through Evan's stuff to see if he's got anything we could use."

"Danny!" Amber chastised.

"What?" he grumbled defensively. "No good gettin' all righteous, babe. He's gone, and maybe the little nerd had somethin' that can help us. I doubt it, but hey..."

"Text books?" suggested Meg, daring to ponder what Evan might have brought on their hike. "And underwear I just don't even want to think about."

"Oh, you lot are just sick," Anna whined loudly. "Come on! The poor little guy's not even cold in the ground and you're making jokes about him!"

"Oh, lighten up, *blondie!*" Danny snorted. "Yeah, he's dead. And there's nothin' we can do about that. Gettin' all, like... serious about it ain't gonna help. Like, maybe if we laugh it just might ease the way we're all feelin' right now. You know I'm right."

A *hmph* was all the reply he got from Anna, though his argument was enough to silence her, at least temporarily. In an effort to look like she was trying to assist the group, she then made a suggestion of her own.

"What about his cell? Who ended up with that? Maybe Evan managed to get snap the thing before it... you know, *got him*."

"Hmm. Not likely," Rachael pondered out loud. "But yeah, it might be, like, worth a look. Anyway, I got it. I... took it out of his back pocket, so I can't see how he could have had time to take a photo."

She pulled Evan's mobile phone from a pocket in her jeans and tried to open it, but was

immediately confronted by the need for a password.

“Dammit!” she groaned, her frustration and fear bubbling to the surface. “It’s protected.”

“Better not need a fingerprint,” Danny shot back callously. “I ain’t diggin’ the little creep back up.”

“*Dann-nny!*” Amber sounded more bothered by his lack of tact than before.

The cellphone was passed around so that each of the group could try to guess Evan’s password, but in the end, no one had any idea where to begin.

“Yeah well, if no one can work it out, I’m gonna hang on to it anyway,” announced Meg.

“Maybe we’ll work it out if we just think about it. Anyway, I think we *should keep it*. After all, it’s... it’s like, kinda the only thing we have to remember him by.”

“And kinda the only thing still left, like, *intact!*” announced Danny crassly.

“Oh, *come on, Danny! Really?*” Amber scolded him, though to no avail.

“Seriously, guys! His password is only four digits!” grumbled Meg. “Oh, come on! How hard can it be?”

“Well, if Evan was here, I’m bettin’ he could do the math and tell you the odds,” Danny suggested.

“Yeah, he undoubtedly could,” Anna droned ruefully. “But we sure as heck can’t.”

“Ten thousand, I think,” Rachael stated simply. “Sorry. Not helping.”

Meg gave a sigh of surrender and slipped Evan’s phone into a pocket.

“Yeah, well, it’s like Rach said,” Danny asserted, as if he was suddenly an expert in discerning the signs. “If Evan had it in his pocket, then he wouldn’t have got a photo of whatever ate him...”

“Oh, Danny...” groaned Anna. “*It didn’t eat him!* It just... tore him up. Oh, I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

“What?” Danny grumbled. “I’m just statin’ things how they are. Damn, you lot are suddenly just *soooo* picky! Like, seriously, just lighten up. Youse are drivin’ me nuts here. I’m just sayin’ that Evan didn’t get a photo of it, okay! Somehow I can’t see the little nerd snappin’ off a selfie with some filthy great bear that’s about to eat him, and then takin’ the time to put his cell back in his pocket. Am I right?”

There came a series of sighs.

“Crass, but... yeah, maybe right,” conceded Amber.

“Well, there it is,” Danny crowed. “Danny rules again, despite his detractors.” Clearly bothered that no one found his humorous jabs concerning Evan Amity to be as funny as he did, he

added brusquely, "Someone'll have to keep watch tonight."

"No argument here," Anna agreed. She looked about nervously. "Don't think I'm ever gonna sleep again anyway."

"Me neither," agreed Sarah meekly. Her troubled mind raced immediately back to the horrifying sight of Evan Amity's torn and twisted body. "Did you *see* him?"

"We *all* saw him," Danny replied tersely. Then, without apparent remorse, he added insensitively, "Sucks to be Evan."

"Geez, Danny," one of the girls said with a groan.

"I might normally say it sucks to suck," pondered Anna morbidly, "but considering he's... like, *dead*... and *we're still out here*, maybe it just, like, sucks to be us."

"Yeah," droned Meg negatively. "Then it *definitely* sucks to suck."

"Wow, the struggle *really is* real," Sarah groaned softly.

"I'm just wishing I'd, like, given him that kiss now," Anna remarked reflectively. "Maybe he'd still be alive if he'd just stayed with us another few minutes, you know?"

"Alive?" Meg posed cynically. "Alive? Heck, Anna. If you'd kissed him he would've hung off you forever. He would've clung to you like a puppy-dog."

"Coulda, woulda, shoulda," droned Danny, still with a very clear lack of remorse. "Wouldn'ta changed anything. No point in, like, cryin' over spilt milk, Anna. Or... spilt blood. Get it? Huh? And anyway, if you're like, *that upset* about it, you can just give *me the kiss*."

His comment brought a scowl from Amber and a frown and shaking of Anna's head.

"*Really*, Danny?" Meg groaned.

"Bud?" Alfie said softly.

"Just sayin'. That's all," Danny crowed unrepentantly. "Waste not, want not... Anyhow, karma is, like, karma, you know. You could have like, *kissed* his brains out, but it wouldn't have changed anything. Well, 'sept that I might be jealous of the little dweeb. But he'd still be dead, and you can't change that."

"Please, Danny," Gemma said calmly, hoping to maintain calm in the group. "The poor boy is dead."

Danny's comment brought another stern glance from some of the girls, and Anna, who knew that Danny would very much like to have sex with every girl present, took yet another opportunity to enjoy toying with the braggart.

"Yeah, I suppose it wouldn't have hurt to have had sex with him," she threw in as casually as

she could, as if that really *had been* an option for her. “It’s not like I didn’t think about it. Maybe *then* the poor boy would still be here.”

“*And smiling,*” Meg tossed in like a verbal grenade upon Danny’s tormented ego. She recognised that Anna was toying with Danny in a moment, well aware that the boisterous male leader of the group would have likely cut off an appendage for the chance to even get close to her lovely blonde friend.

Danny looked truly horrified, and oddly enough the banter somehow – at least temporarily – broke the awful, morose tension they were all feeling.

“Oh, garbage!” he exclaimed, sounding genuinely appalled. “Anna, you didn’t *really* think about... you know... *Evan?* Did you? You...”

A challenging scowl from Amber that bordered on spite quickly slowed Danny’s complaint, and finally silenced him, though he was clearly deeply disturbed by Anna’s suggestion that she had considered giving herself to Evan. As Danny continued to look aghast at the notion, each of the girls had to look away from him, secretly smirking and forced to hide their clandestine grins at the knowledge that he had yet again been so easily manipulated. And given that Evan was dead, it all seemed oddly inappropriate to be joking about such things, and yet greatly appreciated.

“Well, yeah. Of course I did,” Anna crooned calmly, sounding entirely genuine in her lie. She gave a shrug as if it was a simple, even honourable matter to her. “After all, *he’s the one* who helped me with some of the stuff I couldn’t understand. Hey, he helped *all of us*, Danny. Only seems fair that I owed him. So yeah, I was actually planning on bonkin’ him on this trip. Besides, he’s nice... he *was nice* to me. And I’m sorry he’s gone. I miss him.”

The last two comments were true, and helped make her ruse about sex and genuine interest in the computer nerd sound just barely more genuine. The result was that Danny was entirely drawn in by the ruse, and in the end it was all Anna could do not to burst out laughing at the arrogant young man’s clearly jealous and incredulous reaction. A quick glance at Amber said that the joke had gone far enough, and so Anna let the matter go, still somehow managing not to laugh, and thereby preventing Danny from realising that he had been the butt of yet another sexually charged joke at his expense.

Rachael too, could see that Danny had yet again been manipulated with consummate ease by a pretty girl – the kind that Danny *always* desired. And as much as she might once have joined in the humorous fray of toying with the arrogant Danny Ellerstein, it seemed out of place to do so, especially given the seriousness of their plight.

She shook her head and sent up a silent prayer about the monsters, her friends, and how to help each friend somehow find God amid the horror of what had already happened to Evan – and therefore might potentially happen to each or all of those left.

Her answer came in an instant.

CHAPTER 8

“Well, I say, *God help us*,” Alfie commented honestly, totally ignoring all suggestions of who Anna might have contemplated having sex with. His mind was utterly focussed and he made no apology for leading the conversation right back where he wanted it to go. “You know I’m not usually, like, religious, Rach, but seriously, I hope God *really does help us* now. This sucks, you know? So, seriously, can’t you just... *ask him*? To help us, I mean.”

Rachael was taken back, and while her initial response was honest and certain, it was far from comprehensive.

“Well... sure, Alfie. And I already have. Trust me...”

“But?” he badgered, sensing immediately that there was much she was not telling him. “Can you, like, ask him, or not?”

Rachael nodded, unsure what to say, and so she simply admitted as much.

“I... I haven’t been a Christian all that long, Alfie,” she answered honestly. “And I don’t want to just give you some, like, stupid pat answer, so I won’t pretend I really know what to say. But I *can* tell you that God is on our side, and... that He *wants* to save us. And yeah, sure, like I said, I’ve already asked him to do that.”

“Well, then why doesn’t He?” Gemma shot back incredulously, bitterly. “Or, why *wouldn’t He*?”

“Save us – from those things?” Danny asked flatly. “Or do you mean, like, from *our sins*! Geez, Rach. If *that’s* all you wanna talk about, I’ve already heard it, so leave me out of this. Okay?”

He accentuated the ‘*our sins*’ part rather vehemently and waved his hands in the air like a minstrel might do, pretending to mock Rachael, her newfound faith and perhaps even God himself. But the zeal of his scoffing died away as the others in the group refused to take part in his bitter mockery, and in the end he simply looked bitter about the entire matter.

“Sorry, Rach,” Alfie apologised, and his remorse was clearly genuine. “But I’m being serious

here. This is not the time for all that, like, making jokes, Danny. Okay? The truth is, when it really comes down to it – at a time like this, when the chips are, like, really down – I’m just a bit jealous of you, Rach. I *wish I could* believe in God like you do. I mean, don’t get me wrong – I *do believe* in him. But I wish I could believe He’s gonna, like, *save us all*. That’d be nice, hey?”

Rachael nodded solemnly, and had difficulty finding the right words to respond at first. Alfie could see she was having some trouble putting her thoughts into words and simply invited her to come right out and speak the truth.

“Let me finish, Rach,” he persisted. “It’s like, you know, I may be strong – like, for football and all that – but I know that’s not always enough. Know what I mean? Like, I *love* bein’ tough, but I know there’s more to life than just impressin’ the girls and scarin’ the guys. You know?”

“There is?” Danny asked, sounding almost genuine in his mocking.

“Shut it, D,” Alfie said offhandedly, and he ignored his friend entirely, a sign of just how serious he was about his inner crisis. “No, I’m serious, Rach. See, I know I’m strong and all that, but like, I also know *that’s* not enough – to like, *save me*. Not from whatever did that to Evan, and so... certainly not from hell – whatever that is.”

“Marriage...” ventured Danny cynically, but he trailed off, given how serious Alfie was, and that Amber shot him a look of indignant disapproval.

“Certainly not from hell,” Alfie repeated. “And I know – at least I *think I know* that’s what we can all look forward to – if I remember what my grandmother used to say about it... You know, if God doesn’t save us from it... Am I makin’ any sense to you?”

“Not to me,” Danny droned, albeit barely audibly for a change.

Rachael nodded and sent up another desperate, silent prayer. Telling her friends about God and His Son, Jesus, and salvation and Heaven and forgiveness of sins and... She had prayed for opportunities to tell her friends about all those things every day, and yet now, suddenly confronted by the reality of actually being asked to talk about the details of her faith, she found herself oddly lacking in a clear plan – and concrete answers.

Even in the best of circumstances it would have been a difficult thing, but given that suddenly they were all stranded in the woods, away from help and with one member of their group already torn to pieces... well, the task seemed so much more daunting. How could she possibly answer her friends’ deep questions now? It was one thing to have her own inner peace, but to explain what God had done and was still doing in her life was a difficult thing to express – let alone amid such traumatic circumstances.

“Well, you’re right,” she began. “Bear with me, Alf. I’m a bit shaken up too, y’know. But I’ll do my best.”

“Good,” the muscular one conceded. “Thanks Rach.”

“Okay,” she began nervously. “Well, you’re right about hell, at least as I understand it. Sin is a bit like AIDS, I think. It started with Adam and Eve, and kinda gets handed down to all their kids – that’s us – like a sickness we’re born with. So, yeah, in a way we’re born with it and we’ll die from it – and by die, I mean that we kinda deserve to go to hell because we all sin.

“But it’s worse than that. What it really is, is that we’re born already separated from God – like... like we have no real connection to Him – and He really wants us to have that. So we all do stuff we know we shouldn’t, even if we know God doesn’t, like, say it’s okay. But He knows we’re born that way, so He already took care of, like, a cure for it – when He came and walked around down here with us – as Jesus Christ.”

“Jesus was God?”

“Sure. Absolutely, He was.”

“Really? I never knew that.”

“Yeah, He was God in the flesh. The Bible says Jesus is God’s Son, and He made himself just like one of us.” It was perhaps one of the few things Rachael felt truly certain of in her exposition of the gospel and her simple faith in God’s saving of her and others.

“And so when He, like, died, He...” Alfie decided it was too risky to venture guesses on a subject he *really* needed to know the answers to.

“People think God’s this, like, really weird being who needed a blood sacrifice to keep him happy, and that He actually *wants us* all to go to hell because we were born bad – which, by the way, He knows we didn’t have a choice in,” Rachael began to explain.

“That about sums it up for me,” Danny threw in crassly. “Sept the part where He likes to watch us suffer on the way through.”

Rachael nodded negatively.

“You couldn’t be more wrong,” she promised, clearly moved that anyone could think such a thing. Her sincerity alone won Alfie over in a moment, even without her added explanation. “That is *sooo* not true, Danny! The truth is that God *loves us all* – like, even enough to die for us, Alfie! He died so you and I wouldn’t have to! You see, He *doesn’t want* any of us to die – because He knows we were, like, born into sin, like, with sin in our veins... No. It’s just that, well, like, *that’s the price* that has to be paid for sin. It’s like, blaming God for gravity! Gravity is just a rule, right?”

Get it? Like a rule of nature, you know?”

Alfie nodded. “Let something go and it drops. Jump off a buildin’ and... you die. So... if you sin, then you... die.”

“That’s exactly right!” Rachael continued. “Let something go and it drops. Jump off a building and you die. You’re a genius, Alfie! So you see, those are not things we can, like, blame God for. Gravity is just a... *law*. Same as sin. So, *if you sin, then you’ll die...*”

“Worse than that, sin and you’ll go to hell,” Alfie confirmed, making the connection.

“Yeah. But the good news is that God actually doesn’t *want us to die and go to hell*, Alfie. *He really doesn’t!* He like, wants us to live *so much* that He came here as Jesus Christ and died for us so that we could have a relationship with Him – and so *we wouldn’t have to go to hell*. Get it?”

“So I’m already saved?” Alfie asked, looking unsure.

“Not quite,” Rachael went on. “It’s like, when Adam and Eve chose to disobey God in the garden – the thing that put us all in sin in the first place...”

“And sin is like AIDS – so now we’ve all got it,” Alfie said, checking his understanding.

“Yep, we’ve all got it. We’ve all sinned and so we all *deserve* to die – to go to *hell*,” Rachael confirmed again. “But when Adam and Eve disobeyed, what they *really did* was to *not believe* God. Get it? They didn’t *believe* him! He actually warned them that they’d die, but they didn’t believe him, and it *killed them* – and all the rest of us ever since – just like them! And so, it’s only when we *do believe* God – about how to be saved by Jesus dying for us – that’s when we truly *are saved!* Get it, Alf? If you want to be saved by God, you’ve just got to believe that Jesus died for you! That’s the best part! He’s even made it *easy for us!*”

“Shit,” Alfie said with a soft groan, and he shook his head in surprise. “Woops. Sorry, Rach.”

“That’s alright,” she assured him. “A bit of language isn’t going to make any difference, Alfie. Nobody cares, and it’s not my place to judge anyway. What *does matter*, is that all you have to do is to admit you know you’re a sinner, and...”

“Oh, trust me,” he interrupted with a knowing smirk. “I *know* I’m a sinner. All that stuff me and Carol Huckster got up to last year, we... I know... Sorry, Rach. Yeah. I get that part. Shi... I mean, *shoot*, I’ve been beatin’ people up all my life because I was stronger than them... I *know* I’m a sinner. Trust me.”

“So you just have to confess it to God! *Tell him* you’re a sinner, and that you need His forgiveness, and...” Rachael continued to explain, only to have the muscular young man interrupt her again.

“And I get that too,” he broke in, almost sounding excited, similar to times when he finally managed to grasp various learning concepts during his school years. “Trust me! *I know* I need God to forgive me. I know that! I just didn’t think He’d want to. That’s all.”

“See, and that’s the mistake most people make,” Rachael explained with visible compassion and confidence. “Everyone thinks we have to do something *to earn* God’s love, or His forgiveness. But that’s not true. It couldn’t be further from the truth, Alfie! See, God actually *wants* to forgive us! So, once you know you’re a sinner, and once you’ve admitted it to God, it’s like, all you’ve gotta do is *truly believe* Jesus died to save you! And *that’s* what saves you! You just gotta, like, turn everything over to him – and actually *want to get to know Him* – and you’re saved!”

Alfie took a deep breath, and then fell eerily silent for a time. He looked deeply moved, and yet overtly nervous about something.

“What?” Rachael asked. “What’s wrong, Alf?”

He shrugged and looked almost hurt.

“Hey, don’t laugh. Okay?”

“Nobody’s laughin’, Alfie,” Sarah promised, listening to every word that was spoken, and also seeing her big friend’s visible reticence. “What’s wrong?”

“Don’t laugh,” Alfie repeated. “Hey, I may not be the brightest light in the street. I get that. So, I sorta get the whole bit about, like, admitting I’ve been a bad dude to God – a sinner and all – and that I need him to, you know, forgive me. I get all that. And I already think I do that. I may not be bright, but even *I’m not that dumb*. But like, what happens next? Sorry, Rach. I can do all that. I actually *wanna* do all that. But what then? I ain’t bright enough to like, go on to greater things. You know? I’m just not that bright. Or that good. If God wants me to be somethin’ else, I just don’t think I can do it. You know?”

Rachael gave him a reassuring smile.

“God knows that too, Alf,” she promised, utterly confident. “None of us can. We’re not good enough to save ourselves, and we’re not good enough to impress him later on either. We’re only saved because *God chooses* to save us, and that’s the way it’ll *always be*. I don’t have to ever worry again about earning God’s love or forgiveness, Alf. Not ever! I wasn’t good enough to earn it when I was first saved, and I never will be! But God’ll always love me, and *that will never change!* Get it?”

“He’ll, like, *always...* want me?”

“Want you and love you,” she promised him with certainty.

“Wow.”

“Wow,” Sarah echoed from the side.

“It’s like, you just gotta, like, *be sold out to him*, I suppose,” Rachael continued to explain, fearful all along that she wasn’t doing a good enough job of explaining God’s simple and amazing plan to her friends. “It’s just *believing him*, but it’s, like, believing that He knows the best way to guide you for the rest of your life too, and knowing you don’t have to worry about ever having Him *not love you*. Get it? So you just kinda, *trust Him now to forgive and save you*, and you just... *trust Him from here on in*. It’s that easy. Really, it is.”

Alfie looked first relieved, and then somewhat dubious again.

“But what about all that goody-goody stuff? Like *not* swearing and boozing it up, and I dunno – all that stuff I thought was s’posed to be bad? What about all that bad stuff? And goin’ to church? And all that other stuff I’ve heard Christians are s’posed to do? I mean, *sh...* I mean, *shoot* Rach, what about sport? I like to play football on a Sunday – not go to church! What about stuff like that? And girls? What about them? I don’t wanna have to, like, give up girls! I just, like, don’t think I could do that! You know...?”

“I know,” she said softly, understanding him perfectly. “Listen Alf. Having a bungled operation that may or may not have left me unable to have kids doesn’t exactly render me, like, *immune* from still liking... boys. And yes, Alf – *sex!* And from bein’... feelin’, you know...”

“*Horny?*” he ventured with a knowing grin, but there was not a trace of malice in it.

“Exactly,” she admitted. “I still have... desires, Alf.”

“Urges,” Danny threw in cynically.

“...*desires*,” Rachael repeated. “Just like you – and just like everyone does. The only difference is that now, maybe, I know firsthand why God says to, like, play it safe with sex and all the other stuff we, like, tend to play games with. He’s not a spoil-sport – it’s just that He loves us and wants us to have the best life we can – and He knows the best way to actually do that – *better than we do!* And so... now I just trust that God’ll, like, help me hook up with the best guy there is for me – a Christian guy – instead of me playing the field and not trusting Him. You get it?”

Alfie nodded.

Danny scowled.

“Deep,” Alfie conceded. “Now y’see, Rach, *that explanation* makes more sense to me than maybe anything I’ve ever heard on the whole subject of sex before. *And religion.*”

“Not quite where I’d have taken it,” Danny threw in with an unveiled measure of bitterness.

He knew better than to interrupt his muscular friend while he was *so intense*, but he couldn't help himself just the same. "You guys are really *killin'* the conversation here, you know?"

Rachael and Alfie ignored him as if he hadn't spoken at all.

"You wanna know what the bottom line is, Alfie?" she asked.

Alfie nodded solemnly.

"Give it to me," he answered, almost begging her to say it in a way he could understand and apply to his own life.

"Salvation is like, really just all about trusting that God knows the best way for you to live your life," she explained. "So it's like, all about trusting him with the rest of your life, and with sex and alcohol and all that other stuff, and trusting that He'll make you happier than you could ever do yourself! I think it's like, trusting that He knows better what's best for us *than we do*, Alf. With everything! The Bible says – *Jesus says* – if we just trust him and do that, we're saved."

"And if whatever killed Evan comes back and kills me tonight?" the muscular young man dared to ask, not letting her off the hook for a moment.

"It wouldn't matter," she promised him. Then she shot him an understanding grin. "I mean, like, don't get me wrong, Alfie. It'd be nice if that *didn't happen* to you – or to *any of us* – but like, if it did, yeah, you'd be saved."

"Forever?"

"Forever."

"Heaven?"

"Heaven."

"Wow."

"Yeah, *wow* is right."

Alfie looked shocked to the core, and his friends could actually imagine the footballer's mind mulling it all over; the gears – slow as they may have been – clanking and whirring, and then taking hold of a golden opportunity with both of his hands. But it was more than the power of muscle; it was the visible, immovable and irreversible muscle of the will – and of God's personal intervention in his life – and that was far more powerful than his fleeting youthful strength.

In the end his face was beaming with an intoxicated ecstasy that was more powerful than Danny's weed or booze, or anything else Alfie might ever have experimented with.

"I want that," he said simply, eagerly.

Danny groaned and hissed quietly and sidled away in protest.

“Really?” Rachael asked, overjoyed that she had finally managed to not only explain her simple faith in Jesus Christ to her friends, but somehow in her faltering youthful way, she had convinced one of them of the awesomeness of the reality of being forgiven and saved forever by God.

“Yeah, really,” Alfie promised her. “How do I do that, Rach?”

She gave a simple, honest shrug and another small grin.

“You just tell God it’s what you want,” she answered simply.

“You mean *pray*?” he tested.

“Yeah, pray,” she assured him. “It’s only talking to God. There isn’t some secret recipe, y’know?”

“No, I didn’t know,” he admitted, hoping no one would laugh, and relieved when no one did. “I always thought you had to do it a certain way.”

“Nah,” Rachael assured him. “It’s just talking to God. And learning to listen too. I’d love to pray with you if you like.”

“Yeah, I’d like that,” he acknowledged.

Then he gave a shrug of his own as he looked about the dancing campfire to the surprised faces of their friends, who had been inexorably drawn in to listening to the entire conversation. On the far side of the fire Danny now sulked, annoyed at his fellow male friend’s apparent betrayal of their long-shared selfish ways, though even he was now as silent as the rest.

Alfie didn’t feel even a hint of shame or self-consciousness anymore, but oddly enough he *did feel* that he should explain himself.

“Hey, don’t judge,” he announced loudly and fearlessly, just as he always was. “You can all, like, laugh if you want. But we all saw what happened to Evan – and, like, that could happen to all of us. And anyhow, we... we also all saw what happened to Rach this last year. Sorry, Rach. But she’s different now, and we all... *We all know it. And she’s better now, too. She’s better than she was... than she... used to be.* And if I’m gonna die out here – and I might – hey, *any of us might die* – we just don’t, like, know when – then I want what Rach’s got. So I wanna know God – and Jesus – and I wanna do whatever it is *He says I need to do.* And I want to know I’m, like, saved. Okay? So you can all, like, laugh if you want, but I *do believe*, and you should all know it.”

There was an undeniable uneasy silence before Anna spoke the words to break it.

“Nobody’s laughin’, Alf,” she said.

“Nobody,” Sarah agreed.

Meg screwed up her nose.

“Like, I want to,” the breasty brunette admitted, but then she pointed to the ground with both index fingers to make her next point. “But this – *this* – is like, just *too insane* for me to laugh at you guys right now. So, like, you just go ahead and like, do whatever it is you want. I ain’t laughin’.”

The rest remained silent. Amber and Gemma remained solemnly quiet and attentive.

“Any of you guys wanna join us?” Rachael asked simply and somewhat hopefully. For several awkward seconds there were no takers among her nervous and fretting friends, until Sarah spoke up with honest interest.

“I’d like to listen in, if Alfie doesn’t mind,” she asked cautiously.

As much as she didn’t want to admit it to her normally judgemental friends at that very moment, not only was she interested in being saved *from hell, from sin, from all things dangerous, and even from herself*, she was also very keen to be part of *all things Alf-ish* at that moment.

A nod from the footballer was all the invitation she needed to stay close by his side.

With that Rachael, Alfie and Sarah moved to one end of the group, still within the warm, bright comfort of the fire, where they formed a near-silent huddle as Rachael showed Alfie just how simple it was to talk to Jesus – to God – as if He was a friend huddled with them there.

CHAPTER 9

“So, you really think it was a bear that did that to Evan?” Anna asked, sounding a mix of despondent and perhaps just plain voyeuristic, as if to let the matter go without plucking every tiny morsel of macabre horror from the young man’s carcass was simply unacceptable. “I mean, could a bear even *do that*?”

“Course it could! Don’t be lame,” Danny shot back, tired of hearing about the awful state Evan had been found in, and wanting to crush any further discussion about the mess of twisted organs and torn flesh that had greeted the traumatised group. “Can we just *not* talk about it? Huh?”

“Well, maybe we just *have to talk* about it, Danny,” Rachael pointed out. “We have to, like, at least make a plan in case whatever it was comes back.”

There was instant tension in the air, until Danny raised his palms in a gesture for calm.

“Fine. You talk about it then,” he insisted sullenly, almost bitterly. “But can we just talk about what we’re *gonna do*, and not keep on, like, dredging up how the annoying little sod looked? *Okay?* I had to bury the little nerd.”

“Sure,” agreed Rachael. “Gladly.”

A series of silent, morose nods showed that the rest of the group heartily approved that there was little need to concentrate too much on how Evan’s body had looked. Clearly, though, there was a need to discuss how to survive any further attacks by *whatever* had killed their young friend.

Somewhere far off there came the howl of a coyote, and then another. The calls were eerily lonesome and haunting – and given the hikers’ ordeal, rather threatening – despite their distance away. Eyes flashed cautiously from person to person, and then Meg asked the inevitable.

“Damn! Did you hear that?”

“We *all* heard it, dummy,” groaned Anna. She turned a hopeful look to Alfie. “Is your gun gonna keep those things away?”

“Yeah, sure,” he said with a confident nod. In reality, he wasn’t entirely certain, but Alfie knew it would not help to spook the group any more than they already were. “Not a problem. I got coyotes covered, that’s for sure.”

“So, what *did that to Evan?*” asked Meg, her face still damp and stained with tears in the fire’s glow. She looked bewildered and afraid, no longer the confident young woman of that afternoon.

“Do you think *coyotes* could have done that, Alfie?”

“Mmm. I dunno,” he answered reticently. “Nah. Probably like, a bear, I guess. Maybe?”

“So it *was* a bear?” Sarah asked, her face looking incredulous.

“Sure,” Alfie explained. “A grizzly’ll do that easy. And more.”

“Oh, *great!*” Meg whined. “Out here with a freakin’ grizzly!”

“Except that there *are no grizzlies* in this part of Canada,” refuted Rachael quickly and firmly.

“Oh, and how do you know *that?*” demanded Danny, challenging her authority on the matter, and perhaps just a little angry that she sounded as confident as she did.

“Because, like, I grew up in this area, D,” she shot back, indignant at being questioned over something she believed she was somewhat of an expert on. “And anyway, you *know* I’m right! There *are no grizzlies* in Nova Scotia, period!”

“None that we *know of*,” Danny conceded gruffly.

“Then what *the hell* did that to...? What did that?” Sarah asked again.

“I don’t know,” Rachael admitted, shaking her head despondently. “I’ll admit, it looks like a bear, but... Maybe it was coyotes. We all know we have *those here*.”

“Yeah, but like, I don’t think that was coyotes,” droned Meg. “We all just heard them calling, but like, I didn’t hear a thing this afternoon. No snarling. *Nothing*. Did you guys?”

No one bothered to answer because they all knew she was right.

“Well, like, do they *always* make that sound? You know, when they...?” Anna asked.

“When they kill?” Amber said, completing her friend’s question for her. “I dunno, Anna. But who cares? Whether it was coyotes or a bear, we still need to keep watch tonight. And tomorrow, we need to get the hell out of here!”

“Amen to that!” Anna shot back enthusiastically.

“*Amen! Wow,*” Alfie put in, mimicking Anna’s comment. He was entirely sincere in his next question, and sounded even hopeful. “I thought I was the only one who listened to Rach’s thingy on... gettin’ saved. Does that mean you’re thinkin’ of it too, Anna?”

“Please, Alf,” Anna retorted, though as kindly as she could muster. “Even if I was, I wouldn’t want to talk about it now. This is not the time, Buddy.”

Alfie nodded and gave a shrug, realising that he had misread her comment, and that his timing may have been a bit off. Still, having prayed with Rachael, he was utterly convinced that he had finally done the best thing he ever could have.

“Sure,” he conceded good-naturedly. “My bad.”

“Nah, not your bad,” Anna conceded in return, moved by the muscular young man’s humility and openness. “You’re never bad, Alfie. And I’m glad you joined Rach in believing in Jesus. I really am. If you believe He’s gonna save you, then I’m sure He will. Sorry. It’s just me. I’m a bit tense, so I’m a bit... catty.”

“S’alright,” he acknowledged with a smile. “No harm, no foul.”

“You’re a good man,” Anna complimented, softening all the more as she watched how inoffensive the footballer was.

“Yeah, it’s just Anna who’s bein’ a right bi... *cow*,” Danny threw in, annoyed with Anna’s initial sharp reaction to his fellow male, but then just a little cautious about riling Amber by using the wrong noun to describe one of her best friends.

Anna did well not to react to the verbal grenade that Danny had tossed.

“Well, maybe we should just pack up and go now,” she suggested, keen to avoid an argument with Danny, and even more desperate for an answer to their dilemma.

“We wouldn’t get half a *k* out here in the dark,” insisted Rachael. “I know this trail pretty good, Anna, but, like, even *I* couldn’t do it at night. We’d either get lost or break a leg, and like, I don’t really wanna do either. Walkin’ ’round out here in the dark on these trails is like, *not* an option. Seriously.”

“And staying here with a *freaking murdering bear* that’s already tasted blood *is*?” Anna shot back, sounding closer to a breakdown than she intended to.

“*Yes! It is!*” Rachael snapped back equally as vehemently. “Listen. I know you’re scared. We all are. Okay? But walkin’ around out there in the dark *isn’t* an answer. You saw how rough the trail was. If one of us gets hurt, *and bleeds*, then whatever it is, it’s bound to smell the blood and come looking. Do you *really* want that?”

“*Oh, shi... I mean, oh dear...*” Sarah started to say, but she was cut off by Anna’s tearful response.

“*Look! I didn’t want any of this!*”

There was a tense pause, and then Gemma spoke quietly, contemplatively.

“Rach’s right. I heard once that bears can smell blood, and I *sure know* dogs can,” she explained calmly, logically. “So, no, we don’t want anyone getting injured. Heck, I even heard that a bear can smell you when it’s that time of the month, you know.”

“Oh, great,” Meg groaned, sounding even more desperate than before. “We may as well be swimming around with a bunch of sharks!”

“Uh-huh, and *bleeding!*” Gemma agreed vehemently, and there was enough of an inflection in her English accent to tip Danny off to something he might normally have missed. He captured her attention with his own riveting gaze, waiting until she was squarely concentrating on him, and then he spoke quietly to her.

“Is it?” Danny asked flatly. “Your time of the month, Gemma? ’Cause if it is, we can put you in the middle of the group. You know... to protect you.”

She smiled at him from across a ballet of flames.

“Wow, I’m impressed,” she said calmly, sounding surprised that he had picked up on her concern, and looking genuinely touched that he had. “So you *are* human after all. I didn’t think you’d care, Daniel Ellerstein.”

“Course I do,” he said. “Nothin’ gets to any of *my* girls without a fight.”

“*Your girls?*” Anna asked. She let it go, knowing that for once he meant well.

“I am,” Sarah finally whispered.

“*You’re* Danny’s girl?” Amber shot back, surprised by the comment, and feeling instantly and oddly threatened.

“No, not that,” protested the golden-haired girl, her face equally as teary as Meg’s. “It’s that time of the month... for me... I mean.”

Danny sniffed away a hint of a laugh and eyed her up and down.

“Funny,” he said. “Now, normally I might pay extra attention to information like that, but strangely, it just don’t seem to like, matter tonight.”

Despite her ordeal, Sarah still managed to show enough independence to dispute his claim.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she insisted good-naturedly. Her eyes widened as she exaggerated a pretence of indignation. “And trust me, Danny, whether I’m on my period or not should *never* be a concern to you! It’s nothing that could *ever* make any difference, if you get me.”

“You got *that right*,” Amber lobbed in, turning an accusing gaze upon Danny rather than her small, blonde friend.

Danny ignored the intimidation, smirked some more, then shrugged.

“Nah, Sarah, I just meant that if I knew when it was, then I’d know how to avoid all that nasty PMS stuff,” he said jokingly. Then he returned Amber’s gaze and shrugged nonchalantly, deflecting any point she might have been trying to make. “See Amber, *you don’t* have no reason to get all PMS on me either.”

His attention was back on Sarah in an instant, and he waved his hands about as though there were some invisible pre-menstrual waves being emitted by the small blonde. They both let out a nervous laugh, realising that with all the tensions, they were all being more testy with each other than they might normally. And as quickly as they laughed, it no longer seemed to matter. Their laughter was infectious, and soon everyone was having a healthy giggle.

“Sorry,” Sarah said quietly.

“S’alright,” he answered.

His eyes looked strangely sad in the dancing firelight, and suddenly Sarah realised that for all the humour Danny exhibited, he was indeed just slightly hurt. She felt sure that he was pretending to laugh her rebuke off, and maybe Amber’s too, and so she was suddenly afraid that her comments might have been presented with perhaps just a little too much emotion.

Rachael, who had become used to studying Danny’s reactions, saw the hurt in him too, and was busy trying to gauge his mental state when he spoke again, this time much calmer. She had often wondered if one day she might need to take action to avoid a violent incident involving the outgoing, yet often unpredictable Danny Ellerstein. His next comment surprised her, both because Danny managed not to react to Sarah’s shortness with him, and because of the caring tone in which he spoke.

“So, we’ll just keep you in the middle of the group, Sarah,” he said, again sounding somewhat

protective. “Okay?”

Sarah nodded positively, sorry that she had reacted so spitefully to him.

“Thanks, D,” she said.

Amber, who was feeling a little left out of the fence-mending humour, went back to mulling over the horror of what she had seen that afternoon. After just a few seconds of contemplative thought, she asked offhandedly, “Hey, did any of you even see a single footprint near... you know, the attack? On Evan?”

It seemed suddenly as though no one even wanted to speak Evan’s name, in case it upset those already rife with tension and fear, or perhaps worse, for fear of somehow bringing a similar fate upon themselves.

“No,” Alfie answered. “Not a single one. Too many rocks, I s’pose. Lots of blood, though.”

“Alfie!” Gemma chastised in a terse whisper. “We agreed not to talk about... you know... the blood.”

Alfie rolled his eyes, not really sure why Evan’s state was quite so off-limits.

“Hmph,” Amber snorted, dissatisfied, yet knowing that the footballer was right: There had been a few bloody smears on the rocks, but no actual impressions in the soil, simply because there wasn’t much soil where the attack happened.

“Maybe we should, like, take another look tomorrow, you guys,” the tall girl suggested, not wanting to relive the horror, but neither willing to miss the opportunity to search for clues as to what had attacked their friend. “I think we should go back and see if we can find, like, a footprint in the dirt. Then we’d know *for sure* what it was that attacked... What it was. Like, you know?”

“*You* can go back there,” Meg mused in a challenging, rebuking tone. “But like, I ain’t going *anywhere* near there ever again.”

In the absence of any takers, Amber realised that perhaps it was an opportunity that would never be taken advantage of.

“Well, if we’re *not* going to walk tonight,” Anna said, happy to change the conversation, “then I think we should head back home first thing in the morning. What do you all think?”

“No. That’s a bad idea too,” Rachael asserted firmly. “Listen, Anna. Please, just listen. You saw how long it took us to get here. It’s like, a real hard day’s hike, and now there’s some *thing* out there. Hey, it could be watching us right now for all we know. Look, I know you want to go back, but my granddad’s cabin now than it is to do that – maybe half a day or even less. And he keeps a radio there. I think we should just keep on going and barricade ourselves in and...”

“No way!” Anna snapped, sounding suddenly close to hysteria. “You saw *what that thing did!* I’m going back! You can go on if you want, but I’m going home!”

“Hey! We need to stick together, Anna!” Danny snarled the comment, unsure what was the best way out of their predicament, but certain that remaining together was the only safe option. “Don’t go gettin’ all stupid on us! Okay? We need to stick together on this! Like, get your act together, girl!”

“Yeah, we do,” came two more voices. It was enough to bring Anna back from the precipice of a breakdown, if not to assuage her fear.

“Half a day – *max?*” Anna asked, her tone sounding demanding and almost like an accusation.

“Mmm, yeah. More or less, depending on our speed.”

“Okay, so four or five hours then? And *then* we’ll be at your grampie’s cabin, yeah? And then we can close the door on this thing, right?” Anna was vehement, demanding.

“Yeah. It’s a log cabin, so it’s tough. And it’s got, like this big, heavy wooden door, and metal bars on the windows. So you can just close it up and lock this thing – whatever it is – out. Not only that, but he even recorded the GPS co-ordinates on the wall so that we can, like, get the authorities to come right to us,” Rachael promised. “And I suppose, for that matter, even if it comes after us, we can just... hole up in there and use Alfie’s rifle to take pot-shots at it. Okay? Would that make you feel better?”

“And there’s *definitely* a radio?” Amber threw in, keen to leave nothing to chance.

“A radio, *and food and water – and bunk beds,*” Rachael insisted. “Heck, there’s even an inside water and toilet because there’s a spring. Okay? So, we can just hole up as long as we need. I can tell you, it’s a heap better than going back over all that rough ground we went over today. It was hard enough when we were just having fun. Now that we’re all... upset... Well, going back could only be dangerous – especially if thing – whatever it is, comes after us.”

“*Upset.* Hmm. *That’s* the understatement of the decade,” moaned Gemma with a deep sigh.

“You got *that right!*” insisted Anna, keen to make certain that she was being heard.

“Yeah, and I’m right about the *not-going-back* part too, Anna,” Rachael insisted for good measure. “I know you’re scared. So am I, but we *can’t* go back.”

There came another short silence as they all weighed up their options, and then the English girl spoke again.

“Well, if no one else is going to say anything, I will,” she offered. “I know *I sure don’t* want to have to go back the way we came – not if there’s some great big bear out there just waiting to get

me – *us*. I, for one, am all for going on to Rach’s cabin. You *are* sure about the radio, aren’t you, Rach?”

“For the hundredth time – *yes!* I’m certain!” came the promise. “Totally certain! There’s even a solar panel on the roof to keep the battery charged. My granddad believes in being prepared. Okay! He’s always kept a radio and food there for emergencies – and it *always works!*”

Danny sighed. “Well, that’s it then. We’ll get goin’ first thing in the mornin’.”

A consensus of nods told of an agreement between the eight, even if it was a fear-filled one.



As the group talked about who would keep watch, and their fear over the awful horror of what they had seen that afternoon, each knew that it would be difficult to sleep that night. There was a strange mix of exhaustion and dread at play, one of which demanded rest while the other denied it.

And in the darkness there were others who would not rest. Beastly eyes looked down up on the idyllic scene, complete with bright, dancing fire. The two beasts sat patiently, their dark eyes reflecting tiny images of their prey’s firelight. Their mouths hung ajar and they panted softly, while a disgusting mix of white drool and blood hung like crushed, soggy noodles from their mouths.

They had tasted human blood on two occasions now, and both monsters salivated at the prospect of repeating the cruel pleasure of killing again. Skulking in the dark, watching, waiting, they had the appearance of evil incarnate, and of something that was not of this world.

And their prey had every reason to be scared...

(Continued...)

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