

STRANGER IN THE WOODS

ASHLEY CARLOS

I've always had a poor sense of direction. Like the time when I was ten and walked down to the store for a gallon of milk not five blocks away and couldn't find my way back home. Or last year when I mistakenly told my dad to turn off the highway and we continued on the wrong road for three hours before we realized the rest of the directions didn't make any sense.

My father warned me not to go too far in the woods, but there's something about this place that feels familiar even though I've never been here before. Like the sweet aroma of butterscotch from the pine trees or the sound the winds makes against the shape of them. My feet have been pulling me forward through the maze of vegetation for hours as if they know where to go, but it's getting late and my feet seem to be lost. My dad's going to be upset that I didn't listen to him and I'm not home in time for supper. I can already see him furrowing his brow and shaking his head as if he expected better behavior from me.

A knot forms in my stomach as I look around, trying to remember a marker. All I see are trees. And all of the trees look the same. I have gone around in circles ten times by now. A breeze rushes through the trees. I pull my jacket a little tighter. The sounds of the crickets overwhelm my brain. A crow flies over, cawing, taunting me.

"Shut up."

An owl hoots in response.

The trees move in closer. Why couldn't I have listened to dad? If I did, I'd be sitting at the table, "dropping" pieces of mom's roast beef on the floor for Luna.

There's a rustling not too far away. I continue walking, knowing that I better find my way back soon or I won't be able to do anything else on our vacation. A few steps later, I hear the rustling again. I quicken my pace, but it seems to be following me. My legs push me faster.

Something grabs on to my ankle, sending me forward to the ground. The damp dirt hugs my face and fills my nose. Everything goes black.

There's a man standing over me. Blocking my view of the only sliver of moonlight. Any memory of where I am vanishes for a moment.

He kneels down next to me. My hand reaches up to touch his face, half expecting there to be nothing. Just a product of my imagination. He snatches

my hand away before I reach his cheek.

"Wha-" I say before he covers my mouth with one hand and holds down my arm with the other. I squirm beneath his hold, trying to push his arm away.

"Quiet. Don't move," he whispers, gripping my arm tighter.

The sound of leaves crunch in the distance.

"Over here!" someone yells. The footsteps get louder.

"Great." The man next to me takes off running and pulls me along. The trees dance around me like I'm in some twisted nightmare.

The man tightens his grasp, assuring me this is nothing close to a dream. I look back to see that the men are several feet away but still close behind.

I trip over my feet, but his hold prevents me from falling down.

He looks over his shoulder before pulling me behind a giant oak tree. His hand covers my mouth. The smell of pine rushes through me. I can hear pounding in my ears.

The footsteps stop somewhere behind us. I hold my breath unsure if I should try to get their attention or not. Something tells me not to.

The sound of leaves rustling to our right catches the group's attention. "This way!"

Their footsteps trail off toward the noise.

The man moves his hand away from my mouth. I try to shake off his other hand that's still on my wrist, but it won't budge.

"Why are you doing this?" I whisper.

"Shhh, you're in danger," he hisses.

I look up at his face as he stares into the distance, looking for the men. He pushes his messy black hair back to the side, revealing a scar right in the middle of his left eyebrow. My eyes focus on his jawline that comes down at a sharp angle to his wide chin. He reminds me of someone. I search for an answer, going over in my mind friends from school, people I've seen back home, even celebrities, but nothing comes to me.

Another owl hoots. I can feel a fire burning inside of my throat and something deep within me, telling me to run. I listen to that voice. I kick the man hard in the shin. He yells out as he lets go of my arm. I run.

I look back to see him following me. If only I could just wake up and mom would bring me some of her peppermint hot cocoa and stay with me until I fell back asleep like she used to do when I was a little girl.

The man catches up to me. He's not as out of breath as I think he would be. "They'll be looking for us soon," he says.

"Who's they? And why are they after us?"

The men's voices return.

"We need to get out of here. Run and don't stop. I'll try to get rid of them and catch up with you."

Before I can say another word, he pushes me forward. I start to run, not

looking back. I reach a highway and slow down to catch my breath. My eyes scan through the darkness. That little voice returns, telling me to turn right and follow the road. I take its advice once again, hoping it takes me back to my family.

The road leads me to a diner. I remember passing it on the way to the cabin with my parents. The sign reads "Spudsy's" in big black letters with "Home of Spudsy's Spuds" underneath. I pass a few cars as I make my way to the entrance. The warmth hits me as I open the door. The smell of fried potatoes and coffee fills the air. I look around at the people eating their greasy provisions. A middle aged man sporting a faded blue trucker hat sits at the bar, sipping his coffee. My eyes continue around the room, focusing in on the empty booth next to me. In an effort to look normal, I sit down. There's a folded newspaper sitting on the table, and my eyes are drawn to these words:

New evidence in connection with the disappearance of Tyler Bloomberg. After disappearing near his hometown of Cedar Valley, police have had no leads since last year when a body believed to be his was found. Yesterday, a witness came forward claiming to have seen Bloomberg in the area with another man. No further details have been released.

Next to the article is a picture of the missing, Tyler Bloomberg. I move closer to get a better view of the familiar face. The room starts to spin and my wrist aches as my eyes focus in on the scar on this man's eyebrow. This has to be a dream, I tell myself. There's no way that man in the forest could be him.

The bells jingle on the door, causing me to turn around. A rush of cold air surrounds me, as I see who just walked in.