

Eyes watched Sarah Maitland as the 21 year old arts student set a steady pace. She ran to unwind at the end of the days classes and knew the sweeping path around the bottom of the lake well. To her left something flickered amongst the trees catching her attention. As the sky transitioned toward sunset the burst of light made no sense and she slowed. Curiosity getting the better of her she switched off her iPod and pulled both ear plugs away.

She cautiously stepped off the dirt track vying for a better view.

Again the light shone once, twice then nothing. Sarah reasoned it must be car headlights or a torch. The idea of another person out here perhaps a student, perhaps not, made her hesitate. She had told Rachel her roommate she would be back within the hour.

Trying not to sound too frightened Sarah asked "Who's there?"

The light fired once more and she considered being on her way. Surely whatever the cause remained none of her business? Suddenly something new and unexpected carried on the wind; the unmistakable sound of a crying child. The tone of sadness spurred Sarah's feet to action. Her pace quickened bolstered by a sense of concern as she moved closer.

Woodlands enveloped all but the meandering driveway of Grantiff University. Bequeathed 12 years prior from the late widow Mrs. Farnsworth, secluded hectares sprawled right in the middle of the forest. Her instructions gave permission for the South Gippsland shire to fell a large rectangular expanse from the top of Drovers hill down to the lake allowing students a habitable open space for exercise and quiet contemplation.

Sarah never gave much thought to the Farnsworths. Being a girl from Sydney she cared little for the local history. The coastal region of Victoria held no special place in her heart beyond an affordable and practical environment to learn and make new friends. She remained blissfully unaware of the proud roots dating back to the convict days. Hardened prisoners with the promise of a chance to live free had carved a living out of the rolling hills and lush green forests.

Sarah held a hand in front of her face to fend away the worst of the low hanging branches. Like her father and older brother Trent, she stood a smidge over six foot and often hit her head on all manner of things. A moment later the growth cleared and she drew to a halt at the edge of a small clearing. A diminutive girl knelt in the middle, her head hanging low toward the moss covered ground.

Sarah guessed five perhaps six? The girl wore a tattered, aged dress. Her hair looked a mess of twigs and leaves. In her lap she held a long silver metallic torch and every few seconds her thumb moved the switch on and off. A blast of light had Sarah's hand go to her mouth. The child's entire form shone red, awash with blood. Slowly the head lifted and the small face looked up with pleading eyes.

"Oh dear" said Sarah as she moved closer, stopping before the child and bending down to comfort her. "There there, where's your mother you poor thing?"

The crying stopped as tiny round eyes gazed up. The tears were gone replaced by something else, something sinister. A look of confidence, of purpose as the girl stared long and hard.

Sarah recoiled for she saw a twinkling of madness and stumbled backward. In confusions she asked "What?"

In an instant the world exploded. All manner of foliage and debris whipped upward. Sarah, lifted off the ground by heavily bound netting, remained temporarily blinded and disorientated.

"Help help."

"Help Help" mimicked the child in a mean, teasing voice.

The girl, also swept up by the netting, wriggled within the confines until she faced Sarah. The expression changed once more to a look of indifference. The girl began to calmly hum a haunting tune, as if this were any other day. Pausing mid note she ran her tiny tongue along Sarah's closest arm and down her lower back, savouring the sweaty flavours from her running shirt.

As the net spun around and around Sarah noticed a group of people wearing heavy dark cloaks. She tried to fix her gaze, straining to recognise at least one of the faces. The strangers wore a dead pan, stoic aspect. Something sharp bit at Sarah's lower back causing her to smart. A few seconds later her eyes rolled up into her head and the world descended into darkness.

*- II -*

"Over here" said Constable Stuart O'Brien as the pair of German shepherds darted eagerly to the left, dragging him away from the beaten track.

The search party consisted of O'Brien, Senior Constable Greg Evans, the University caretaker William, Kate the head of the Student Union and Rachel, Sarah's dormitory roommate. The moonlight cast long gray shadows within the forest as the cold caused their breath to hang heavy on the air. The dogs pulled at their leashes and the constable fought to maintain control.

The others almost ploughed into O'Brien's back for he abruptly stopped. The dogs swept back and forth at the edge of a clearing as if hesitant to enter. The stringent odour of rotting flesh assailed everyone, causing most to gag in reflex. Evans managed to hold his torch and O'Brien's steady enough to reveal the gruesome scene.

A carcass of some kind lay in the middle with blood and entrails spread about all over the place.

Rachel said "Sarah, Sarah" as she made to dash forward.

"This is a crime scene everyone stop moving" replied Evans as he grabbed the young girl by the arm.

"But that's my friend down there and oh my God, there's so much blood."

"Stop it. That's not human, look. I bet all this blood's not either. ... O'Brien can the dogs find the scent?"

"Nah, it's gone."

"How can that be?"

"Not sure. We'll need to check again in the morning. Hard to see much of anything now. ... It's getting late, all we're going to do is mess the area up if we go stumbling about in the dark."

"But Sarah's out there, a student. We can't just give up" said Kate, fear clearly evident on her face as she cradled the sobbing form of Rachel.

Evans replied "Now listen no one's giving up. We'll be back at first light. I won't have anyone getting hurt moving through the forest at night. ... Take us back grounds keeper."

"Sure" replied William more than happy to get away from here as the cold had started to freeze his toes. He set off back toward the path.

Evans moved his torch across the horror one last time and paused for a few seconds. Amongst the gruesome mess something small reflected the light. He squinted to confirm what he saw and shook his head. Under his breath he said "Oh for fuck's sake. That's all we bloody well need" before he turned to follow the others.

- III -

"Begin my son. Tell me of your sins, past and present."

"I, I ahh don't know what to say."

"Why are you here then?"

"I didn't know where else to go. I need help."

"Do you know what confession is lad?"

"Not really. I mean we, my family, we come to church on Sundays and all that. I've heard of it but I've never been in this box before."

"I see. Look I'm busy Brandon, I don't have no time for games."

"Wait please I need your help. Something's wrong with me I can feel it."

After a short pause the priest replied "Calm down. Perhaps it's something medicinal. Doctor Norrish might be better~"

"Nah it's not like that. It feels like I'm burning on the inside and I keep having really weird dreams."

"When did all this begin?"

"Two month ago when school started back. It's gotten much worse since then. Been going on for a while now."

"Have you spoken to anyone else about this? Family or a trusted friend?"

"Only my best friend Sean, Sean Nickel. I think my Mum knows something's up with me though. Sean told me not to come see you because I'll get into trouble but I had to. I just had to."

"I can only help with your spirit, your soul. Confession's for repenting against committed sins.

Sounds to me like you're sick, an illness of some kind. ... Did you ride your bike to town?"

"Yeah came straight from school."

"So your Mother doesn't know you're here?"

"No. She thinks I'm at Sean's place."

"It's clear confession's not what you need. Why don't we call your mother and~"

"Oh no don't do that, you can't. She'll tell Dad and he'll beat me like he use to do to my brother Malcolm."

"I see. ... Understand anything you tell me remains strictly confidential. This conversations between you, me and God. No one else."

"What do I do Father, to stop the burning I mean? Can you make it stop?"

"I've only a basic understanding of medicine. ... It might be as simple as heartburn or a hundred other things. Part of my service to the parish is aiding the sick, showing them the way to God and through him the strength to persevere."

"How do I do that?"

"Why don't we prove these symptoms are physical and not of your spirit. Then you'll see you're really better off going to see a Doctor."

"No Doctor it's impossible. I've got no money and I don't want my parents to find out. Please?"

" Fine. As this is your first confession you can perform a small penance and then be on your way."

"What do I do?"

"Go kneel before the image of our saviour and offer a heartfelt prayer. I'll bless you and you'll be free to go."

"Okay."

The wooden doors creaked on their hinges as the pair exited the small twin cubicles. Their footfalls echoed loudly within the high ceiling stone and aged wood building. The church remained empty as Father Tomley had been out tending the garden when the insistent boy arrived. He had discarded his wide brimmed hat, gloves and boots at the doorway before hastily throwing his robe over plain trousers and flannelette work shirt.

Tuesday afternoon's at 4 pm never drew much of a crowd.

Brandon dutifully walked over to the cross and knelt before it. Wearing his light grey shirt and black pants with matching school shoes he looked out of sorts, like an altar boy who had forgotten to adorn a white robe. The priest returned his Rosary beads to an ornately gilded box bolted to the wall. He extracted a small vial, closed the box, turned and walked over to the boy.

"Go with the grace of God my child" said Tomley as he bestowed small droplets of holy water.

Brandon rocked back and forth, his arms shook and he visibly paled. Suddenly he turned to the side and vomited a gelatinous substance, a deep red almost blackened bloody ooze.

Tomley rushed to catch the boy as he fainted.



*Day One - Saturday*

Sarah opened her eyes to complete darkness. She knew she was naked and yet something, she had no way of knowing what, pressed hard against her. A moment of vertigo struck as she couldn't tell if she sat, stood or remained laying down. She tried to twist and wriggle about to no avail. The only thing she could move was her right arm which remained free from the elbow down, albeit at a strange angle. Wriggling her fingers she noticed how much colder the limb felt compared to the rest of her.

Disorientation lead to alarm and Sarah's heart began to race. Her breathing became laboured and she couldn't draw a deep full breath for something pressed hard against her chest. Fear began to overwhelm the confused girl causing adrenalin to race through her veins. She tried to call for help and could only manage a pathetic whimpering sound.

Sarah cried and cried until she could cry no more.

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Sergeant Simon Bakos supervised his two Constables as they ran Police tape from tree to tree. The steam from his large cappuccino tickled his thick grey moustache as he took a long sip. The warmth helped, although the morning frost reflected his current sour mood. The Constables cigarettes did little to mask the overpowering scent of the rotting corpse.

"We have to wait. I called the Super last night, he's organised a Forensics team from the city.

Nobody touch nothing until they arrive, got it?" asked Simon.

"Sure Boss" replied both Constables in unison.

William stood at the track making sure no one disturbed the policemen. Early morning joggers passed by and acknowledged him for he was well known amongst the students. A few stopped, curious as to what was going on. William lied through his teeth. He fabricating a story about a Parks Officer removing an infestation of European wasps 'back aways in the woods'. It seemed to do the trick. As they moved along he felt quite proud of himself.

Two adults rounded the far corner, walking at a steady pace toward William and he quickly realised they were not students. The plain looking average height woman and slightly taller man were both dressed in casual jeans, t shirts and matching black jackets. Each rolled a trailing heavy silver suitcase on oversized wheels.

"Stop please?" asked William, holding up a hand as they approached.

"And who might you be?" asked the lady as the pair indeed stopped.

"I'm Will. ... I work for the University" replied William as with his other hand he tapped his ID badge clipped to the top pocket of his dark green overalls.

In a fluid move the lady produced identification from within her jacket and replied "Victoria Police, forensics unit. I'm Ricardo, he's Davies."

"Oh okay umm you can go through I guess."

"Thanks."

The pair walked past heading off the beaten track. They gravitated toward the sounds of the two Constables loud grumbles concerning the cold. A moment later the pair appeared out of the foggy haze and walked right up to the Sergeant.

"Bakos right?"

"Yeah."

"Forensics, Patricia Ricardo and this is my assistant, Brett Davies."

"Brett, Patricia" replied Simon as he shook their hands.

"Call me Trish. So what we got?" asked Patricia as she deftly flipped her case around and released the two main latches.

"Reported missing girl. Last night the dogs followed her scent and led us to this."

"Dogs?"

"Sasha and Harley, German shepherds. Trained trackers. We often get calls to go hunt down missing persons out here in the forests."

"Uh huh. I see no body, what of the girl's trail?"

"Well that's just it, after this they couldn't pick up a scent."

"Interesting."

By now Brett had extracted a camera from his case and put the strap around the back of his neck. He flicked his long hair loose and began photographing the scene, slowly moving in a wide circle.

"And no one has stepped within, you're sure of this?" asked Patricia.

Simon nodded and replied "We left a little after 10:30 and arrived back an hour ago. So yeah, pretty sure. This is a ways off the track after all."

"Fine. We'll get started. ... Why don't you and your men go help back at the path. Keep away any curious passers-by?"

"Yeah sure. The Super asked we help you guys out, so whatever you need. I can send one of my Constables to go pickup a couple of coffees from the uni cafe if you like?"

"No thanks we're careful not to bring anything into a scene that might contaminate it. Perhaps later" replied Brett as he swung underneath the police tape and moved cautiously within.

"Right. ... Evans, O'Brien, with me."

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Brandon Driscoll awoke Saturday morning and struggled to get out of bed. By lunchtime he felt so exhausted he simply had to rest. His mother Leanne thought he might be coming down with something as over the last few weeks he had suffered strange bouts of extreme tiredness.

Leanne convinced Brandon's father Scott to allow him to skip the usual weekend chores. Somehow she had to get Brandon to see Doctor Norrish in town regardless of what Scott might think.

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Shards of light split the dusty air. Sarah's head, tilted back at a twenty degree angle, offered limited visibility. She saw an arc in front and to either side. Her chin moved a fraction offering a little more and yet she had no hope of seeing her body. Her eyes adjusted to the faint light and she saw something off white and round, about the size of a soft drink can, an inch in front of her mouth and nose. It contained many small holes and looked a little like a showerhead or an inverted icing sifter, except she guessed made of plastic and not metal.

Sarah could move a little. With considerable effort she was able to swing her entire body back and forth and left and right. The light danced in front of her eyes, sometimes spiking in its brilliance as if amplified somehow. Her breathing echoed louder in her ears and suddenly she understood. She was encased in something solid.

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A large hard plastic capsule. Her own prison.

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