

4 December 12th 3113 words

My eyes blur along with the scenery as the truck speeds along the dark pavement. The ancient vehicle, ridden with rust and water damage, creates an unsettling atmosphere that clicks and rattles in dismay after every informality in the road face. I'm led to believe that this sorrowful piece of metal used to be a Chevrolet Silverado. I thought the pitiful beast should've been put out of its misery years previous. But Jessica Sharpin (or Jess), my dear comrade and partner in crime, refused to consider my sour opinion on which regarded her beloved truck.

I eye her now, both hands clutching the worn wheel as she glares lethargically through the yellowed windshield.

"How much gas do we have left, Jess?" Daniel Galene (Danny), my alter ego if not more intelligent, raises the daunting question that has consumed my mind ever since we drove past the local station without dropping by.

Three hours have passed us by since then, and with the truck's archaic mileage, one would be due shocked to see that it has brought us so far yet.

Jess's eyes swivel to the indication meter, and she contorts her shoulders as to block me from also viewing the dial. "We'll be fine. Just don't worry about it." Her voice remains smooth as she expertly dodges the question.

Danny lets out a defeated sigh, and I lean far over Jess's shoulder despite her accusatory mutterings. My heart sinks to meet my stomach, and I fall back into the unyielding leather seat with a defeated puff of breath.

"Heavens, Jess. We're running on fumes."

The resolute statement earns me nothing more than a dismissive roll of her eyes. "Please, Glen. Don't go all smart on me--I get enough lecturing from Danny, okay?"

“I don’t lecture you, I rectify you,” he says bluntly. “Unfortunately, it seems as though I’m about one hundred miles too late to set you right now.”

Her mouth takes a gloomy dip downward. “Look, *guys*. We’ll be just fine. This pretty baby only has to take us ten more miles.” She fondly pats the dash to amplify her statement, which was underwhelmingly plain when unaccompanied.

However, the point still seems undersized compared to the situation, prompting my complaint. “Ten? Jess, the dial is squarely on zero.”

She turns promptly towards me, catching me with her trademark stare. “Then we’ll just walk the rest of the way. We’ve already gone two more miles, and we can walk eight miles in just a few hours. We’ll call it an introductory hike for gracious sakes!”

“Jess, keep your eyes on the road!” Danny’s cry cuts through the elongated, uncomfortable silence, and Jess’s foot slams on the brakes.

The monotonous cacophony of the typical road noise morphs into a screech of pain from the tires as they painfully scrape against the road. My heart slams into my ribcage as my gaze snaps forward to focus on the road ahead.

I brace my hands against the edges of my seat as I gaze upon the source of commotion. The large trunk of an evergreen is splayed across the road, and I prepare for impact. However, after an agonizingly long while that must’ve been only a few seconds, my nose burns from the odour of burnt rubber--but at least we’ve drawn to a stop.

“What is this?” I vocalize scornfully, automatically angry at the item of which provoked my fright. I stare aghast at the colossal tree, stiffly draped at such an angle to flawlessly block any incoming and outgoing traffic.

“It must have blown over,” Danny explains tactfully. “Inconvenient for us, of course, but not unusual.”

I give my head a disbelieving shake. “Does it matter? How are we going to get to the lodge now? So much for a luxurious weekend in the woods.”

Jess raises her eyebrows and opens the door. “I guess we’re just gonna go on a little stroll, huh? Eight miles isn’t that terrible, anyway,” she justifies, killing the engine and slipping her keys from the dash with a soft, metallic jingle.

She steps out onto the road, her low heels clacking against the fissured asphalt. I share a look with Danny, and we both exit the car in unison, walking around to meet Jess as she pans her pale eyes around the wild expanse of trees.

“Are we really conquering this on foot?” I ask.

Jess mutters something that somehow manages to sound both indignant and humbled. “I guess so. Just relax, okay, Glen?”

She strolls away without waiting for my consent; though, being familiar with myself, I probably would’ve given it to her regardless. As I follow a little ways behind her, Danny catches up and matches my pace.

“I know it seems daring to walk this,” he admits, keeping his voice down so as to not further agitate Jess. “But it’s not like we would’ve made it much longer in the Silverado with how much gas is left in the tank. Besides, home is way further away than the lodge. We’ll get there in no more than a few hours, fill up a can of gasoline ahead of time, and just bring it with us on the way back. Okay?”

If Danny and Jess agree, there'd be no use in me activating a one-man stand. So, I shake my head and let go of a weighty breath. "I know, it's fine. I won't argue with you. I just don't like it, that's all."

He punches my shoulder a little too hard, but I accept the friendly gesture without comment as I drift ahead of him to accompany Jess in carefully edging around the fallen tree. However, I almost crash into her from behind when she comes to an abrupt and unanticipated halt.

"What's up?" I ask, a little intrigued at what might be so raptly holding her attention.

She turns toward me and accusingly points at the severed tree stump, judgmentally brandishing a leather-faced journal with her other hand.

"Look at the stump! It looks like it was cut, doesn't it?" she exclaims, gesturing her already pointing hand to magnify her potent dismay, proceeds to give the journal another accusatory flourish. "And I don't even know how to explain this!"

"Explain what?" Danny asks, coming up behind me and curiously peering at the journal, then the tree stump. "The journal looks pretty average to me. And so what if the tree was cut down? Probably just some kids messing around."

Jess's thin fingers slide in between the pages of the journal, opening the small book at the halfway mark. Then she once again holds up the logbook, showing off an emboldened scrawling that takes up the breadth of two entire pages: "**Turn Around.**"

The dark, scratched writing is weird enough on its own, each garish letter both somehow dipping too low and yet jutting too high. And to see the jagged font for a pair of words that touch a little too close to home sends gooseflesh creeping up my arms.

To further my unease, Jess flips to the front title page, where the journal states the name of the owner. Krysen Mara.

“The name isn’t familiar to me,” Danny remarks, scowling at Jess. “Someone you know, perhaps?”

“Of course--why else would I be showing you?” she counters shamelessly. “Krysen was in my Home Ec. class a couple years ago. She sat in the back and always kept her hair in her face-a real creep of a girl. Funny, though; I haven’t seen her since.”

Danny looks in between the journal and the tree which, now that I’ve been alarmed, does show some pretty convincing signs it was chopped. “So what?” he says, brushing it off. “Even if this girl is some weirdo wandering in the woods, she’d have no reason to mess with us. Let’s just keep going, yeah?”

Her only response is to give an unsatisfied snort and turn on her heel, stalking around the tree and disappearing around the other side. Danny and I exchange a glance before I turn and follow after Jess.

When I step out around the large trunk, I see her. She silently stares into the woods on the opposite side of the road, her form rigidity still.

I take a step forward, and my foot scuffs the ground. The soft, innocent scrape of the rubber sole against the asphalt. Truly a harmless, ordinary sound to behold, if the ear can even catch it at all.

But as though a switch had been triggered by nothing more than the hushed noise, she breaks out in a hastened dash towards the shadowed treeline. My heart locks in momentary confusion, and then I’m sprinting after her, howling her name and calling her to stop. Though the relentless wind rushing past my ears drowns my words as soon as they leave my mouth.

After a breathless minute, a third pair of stomping footsteps joins the chase, signaling Danny's awareness of the commotion. He hollers at me too, but the exact words are lost along with my own, the hungry air greedily devouring every snippet and glimpse of speech.

I crash into the shrubbery only a few seconds behind Jess, the vines slicing at my face while the twisted roots desperately try to snare my feet. Any other time, I would've slowed in order to avoid any injuries. But, if I yearned to keep up with Jess, I would have to hold my pace until she relents first.

But inevitably, just as I'm reaching to seize her arm, a root ensnares my ankle and flings me down. My face meets the dirt first, and the undesirable tang of plant matter and blood fills my mouth.

My mind still caught up in the thrill, I twist over to untangle the root from my foot. But when I look, the pressure around my ankle abruptly departs, and I catch an unsightly glimpse of a pale hand slithering back into the shrubbery. I scream and shuffle backwards on all fours, wildly gazing at the spot in which the hand had vanished behind branches and leaves.

Then Danny howls at me, and his crashing footsteps manage to slice through the ringing in my ears. An outstretched hand reaches for me, and I graciously accept the assistance in standing. When I've regained my footing, I spit out the savory blood that still unpleasantly lingered in my mouth.

"I lost Jess," I marvel defeatedly, somehow forgetting about the ghastly sight of the hand at the realization.

He swears under his breath. "What the hell was she doing anyway? When I came around, she was already running and screaming her head off at somebody."

I pause. "She was yelling at somebody?"

He reaches up and pinches the bridge of his nose, squeezing his fingers white. “Shoot; you think it was that Krysen lowlife?” A sigh. “You know what?--It doesn’t matter. We just have to go find Jess. Come on.”

I grip my own arm in a form of petty self-consolation, and follow immediately behind him. The tips of my fingers start to tingle from blood deprivation, but I keep a firm grip on my arm, too scared out of my wits to truly care.

We creep forward at a sluggish pace, equally slowed by both the underbrush and our own trepidation. Suddenly, Danny stumbles forward, nearly tipping over. I stifle a gasp and reach to steady him, naturally assuming he had simply tripped over another root. However, it was the lack of one that caused his fumble.

After successfully regaining his balance with my assistance, we both look up to see... Well, anything but what we expected.

The natural plant growth suddenly thins into nearly nothing. Instead, there are bushes of another origin. Stalagmites of dozens upon dozens of hoarded newspapers crowd the entire clearing until the ground can hardly be seen. Far above our heads, the branches strain so far they form a net to perfectly block out the sun. Only a few, dappled spots make it through, and even they are lost upon the hundreds of papers.

Danny presses a copy of the USA Today into my chest, and I numbly take my hand from around my arm to clutch the paper instead. I scan the paper with mild interest.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2020

NEWSLINE

A QUICK READ ON THE TOP NEWS OF THE DAY

WEATHER: Forecasters are keeping an eye on the big storm whipping southward in the Pacific, however, they have come to a somewhat certain conclusion that the storm will not reach the coast.

Thunderstorms are becoming a once again regular occurrence in Louisiana and Oklahoma, but nothing tremendous or report-worthy has threatened the residences yet, as most storms have taken place over expanse stretches of unoccupied land. *To see details in color. 13B.*

DEATHS: David Sheehan (March 31, 1938 - December 1, 2020), a notable American reporter, broadcaster, interviewer and host, sadly passed away last week. *To see details. 2A.* **Krysen Mara** (July 5, 2006 - December 12, 2020), a freshman who attended Bedford High, New Hampshire, tragically took her own life in the nearby forest, Clear-Ridge Grove. *To see details. 2B.*

Confused, I flip to the designated page and start reading section 2B, now vastly absorbed in the copy. I skip the larger portion all about David Sheehan and eye the smaller paragraph noting Krysen.

Krysen Mara: (July 5, 2006 - December 12, 2020), an unpopular freshman student at Bedford High School, N.H., took her life in the forest. Her body was found the next morning by the unfortunate hiker, Micheal Tremori. The cause of death has been confirmed suicide, as the girl was found hanging from a noose that was sloppily fastened to a tree branch. People tried to contact any friends, but it sadly appeared that nobody knew their depressed, reclusive classmate. Upon further digging, we attempted to contact her grandmother, and only remaining relative, for more details of the girl's early death, only to find the woman dead in her bed from old age. No more information has been found, so please excuse us if we are forced to simply let go of this tragic "*ghost*" story.

I lower the copy of the USA Today and share a long, disquieted look with Danny. "And it gets weirder," he says quietly, showing off another copy of the USA Today. The exact copy. I look around the forest of newspapers and scan every headline. Every single dozen upon dozen copies are on the exact same story. "Somebody clearly didn't like something that was said in here," Danny continues, giving the paper a shake and returning it to the ground.

My mind races with thousands of conflicting thoughts. Krysen is dead. Then why was her journal there? Maybe she left it there two years ago before killing herself. Then who did Jess see in the woods? And who grabbed my foot back there in the woods? Who's hand did I see snaking back into the underbrush?

"Oh gosh, Danny. Where is Jess?" I ask, my heart steadily gaining speed.

“She’s right here.” A small, whispery voice murmurs something, so quiet that it could’ve easily passed as the wind.

But my frayed nerves seem to demand the noise's attention, and when I glance toward the sound, my blood runs suddenly cold. Krysen Mara is standing only a few yards away, looking like any other normal girl. Her figure was slim, but not malnourished. Her face was full, but not round. Her hair hung loose and straight down her back. And her eyes even contained a faint twinkle.

The only thing that hints that something isn’t right, is the noose she clutches in her right hand.

She smiles and uses her left hand to point behind me towards the sky. “Your friend is there.”

I slowly turn around, debating whether I really want to find what lies behind me. But I’ve always been a curious person, and when I see Jess, I can’t hold in my horrified shriek. Jess’s feet hang so low, I’m surprised the tips of her heeled shoes didn’t brush the top of my head when I walked underneath her into the clearing. Her neck was twisted at an unorthodox angle, and her face was already resembling a plum. Slightly bloated and an unsettling shade of violet.

I turn back around and blindly grab for Danny, yearning his support and consolation. But he’s vanished from my side. Angrily smearing tears of both distress and confusion from my face, I peer through the trapped water to see Danny standing toe to toe with the frightening girl.

I can’t see their exchange, but it appears friendly and polite, as they had known each other for a long time. She appears to hand him something, and when Danny turns back around, he has the noose in his hands.

SUNDAY, January 23, 2022

NEWSLINE

A QUICK READ ON THE TOP NEWS OF THE DAY

WEATHER: Forecasters are pleased to announce that the hurricane which whipped through Iowa has passed with no casualties. The violent wind thankfully stayed far away from towns and cities in the local area, a wonderful and unexpected miracle according to homeowners. As always, January is a marvelous month, and we have no further crises to take note of. Happy Sunday! *To see details in color. 13B.*

DEATHS: Jessica Sharpin and Daniel Galene, two friends who attended Bedford High, N.H., were both found dead, hanging deep in the Clear-Ridge woods on December 12th, 2022. The alarm was first raised when somebody reported Jessica's car abandoned in the middle of the road, and the scene was later investigated after the police received a rather disturbed phone call from Glen Olwen, who claimed to be with the two victims at the time. Glen stated many things that did not line up with the evidence collected by the police, and she was immediately considered a suspect of murder.

The things she stated were easily proved invalid, such as when she tried to convince the police that her friends hung themselves in a clearing full of newspapers due to the appearance of long dead: Krysen Mara. However, no newspapers were found at the scene, and as our rabid readers would know, Krysen Mara has been dead for over two years. Olwen has since been put on many trials, in which she consistently pleaded not guilty. However, as time goes on, the court is not convinced by her delusional tales. So to say, things are not looking up for the supposed teenage murderer, Glen Olwen. *To see details. 2A.*