

It was sheer silence that awoke Willow from her slumber. Howling winds had beat against the doors of the old Volvo, and snowy cyclones had roamed the outside world when she'd fallen asleep, but finally the stillness of midwinter had settled in. Now the night was thick oil, silent and oozing, the falling snow quiet as an assassin as it fluttered down.

"Willow," came a voice.

That blurry state between sleep and sleeplessness focused, and Willow found herself staring into the grim face of her father. No longer was he perched in the driver's seat--instead the door to Willow's left was hanging open. Her father's boots were planted amongst the crystalline snow beyond it. Why had they stopped driving?

"Where are we?" Willow whispered.

He ran a bony hand over his sweat-drenched forehead. "We ran out of gas, just our luck."

"And?"

"We're stranded in the snow, Willow."

She sat up. "Stranded?"

Her father offered a dry chuckle and pointed into the night. "See those lights?"

Willow blinked. With a long day of travelling behind her and only a few hours of night ahead, it hurt to stay awake. Still, in the falling sheets of snow she spied a few distant lights, huddled on the shores of a lake. Turned out there were a few mobile homes there, down the slopes that lined the snowy freeway.

"What does that have to do with us?" she asked.

"I'm going to see if anyone can help us," her father replied. "Even a few drops of gasoline would last until the next station."

"And you'd leave me here?"

"You're tired, Willow, and--"

She shook her head. "Daddy, it's dark."

"How old are you?"

"Eleven," was the mumbled reply.

"Exactly, so don't be scared. We want to get to your mother's by morning, don't we?"

Willow was finishing a short and rather cold weekend with her father--the weekend of her birthday, actually. Since her parents had divorced seven years earlier, she and her father had spent their birthdays together. The long drive home through the northwest took most of the

day, though, and now Willow realized it would take most of the night as well.

"Just stay, Daddy."

"Willow, it's not your decision. I won't be long." Forehead creased as he frowned down at her, he waddled around to the trunk to grab an empty jerry can. In seconds the hatch clicked open--he muttered something about closing it when he returned--and he was about to slam the back door when he swung it back open and looked Willow in the eye.

"Everything's fine, right?"

"Right," Willow whispered.

Before she knew it the door had hissed shut. Willow didn't move, merely laid there, sprawled over the backseat with a blanket draped over her shoulders. At least she was warm.

And alone.

She'd fallen asleep with her hands clamped over her ears, trying to keep herself from listening to the crackling radio. Interspersed with periods of static, a low voice had drawled about a recent serial killing in the upstate, how the probable suspect was a tall and lanky man with long scraggly hair. He'd used a jagged knife to slay his most recent victim, and if Willow remembered the report correctly, no one knew his whereabouts. Lost to sleep's grasp, Willow had never heard the end of the story.

Something outside howled.

She cringed. What was that? The wind, perhaps--but no, it was stiller than death outside, and this howl was lower, almost croaky. What would howl on a night like this?

Willow never wanted to look out the frosted window, never wanted to see the empty freeway white with falling snow, but she looked anyway. Hunched gargoyles loomed over the tiny Volvo, mountains, separated only by the freeway and the shady lake below. An endless expanse of evergreens stretched up the slopes, their usually colorful pigment obsidian black in the night. Everything else? Too dark to see.

Once more, something in the night howled.

Peering into the blackness, Willow felt her teeth clanking together like rattling chains. Something was on the other side of the freeway, but she couldn't quite--

Then came the van. A huge, vibrantly painted Volkswagen with seemingly ancient music blaring from it. It reminded Willow of those strange vans from the seventies--she saw them in movies--but she wasn't looking at the van as it slowly rolled past, plowing through the snow. Her eyes darted past it, to the edge of the freeway where a shape had materialized in the headlights.

A wolf.

A huge brute of a dog, with its glistening claws curled around the side rail where the black forest met the freeway. As it lifted its grey chin and howled again, Willow gasped, but her fears dared not end there. The van kept rolling away, but she spotted the shadow of a tall and lanky man beside the wolf.

With long, scraggly locks of hair.

And a jagged knife.

Now Willow's gasp cracked into a scream. Could this be the killer from the radio? Nobody in the report had mentioned a wolf, but--

The man with the knife swung his right leg over the side rail, and when he'd planted both his feet on the snowy pavement he started towards the old Volvo. His hair caked in snow, seemingly frozen to his neck, he pointed a crooked finger at the car.

The wolf bounded over the rail and sprinted for Willow.

Screaming wasn't working. No one answered, so Willow scrambled around the car and locked each door. Then she sunk out of view, crouched on the floor of the car. Muttered a prayer. Waited.

How long did she wait? A minute, maybe two, and for that minute she heard nothing.

Another throaty howl pierced the air like a dull needle, followed by a few thuds. Willow opened her eyes, looked to the windshield and saw the wolf clawing, leaping, slamming his body onto the glass. She scrambled up to the seat, but when her gaze fell to the side window, she regretted it.

On the other side was the killer.

Those dark eyes had recognized the locked doors--he knew he couldn't yet enter, but as his beastly pet kept clawing at the windshield, he bent closer to the window. Now she could see his face.

His bloody face, slatted with scars and gashes.

His angry face, with arched eyebrows and gaping blue lips.

But the detail that sent chills down Willow's spine was not a scar, not a bloody wound, or even the black teeth that he bit his lip with. Instead it was the yellow, flaky skin that encircled his bloodshot right eye. How sickly it was, letting slivers of rotten yellow skin shed and drift away every second.

Willow shrieked. Wouldn't he leave?

Her question was answered as the man with the yellow eye raised a bony hand. The wolf ceased its assault on the windshield and disappeared below Willow's view. Then the man staggered away, to the rear of the Volvo.

The open trunk.

Willow felt the thud that shook the car when the man with the yellow eye climbed into the trunk.

She felt the seat behind her shake as he grunted and began his quest of breaking through the backseat with his knife. This was insane. Paralyzed with shock, Willow couldn't move at all. She only waited, knowing in the next minute she would die. Like an explosion, the sound of the backseat fabrics tearing boomed in Willow's ears. The knife was breaking through.

She could see the jagged edge, protruding only inches from her elbow. For the first time in her life she was going to die. So, she merely clenched her eyes shut and wept, jolting violently in her seat with no water seeping from her eyelids, no sound escaping her lips. She waited for the sound of death but heard nothing.

Willow heard the wolf purr outside. She blinked, scanned the highway to see the wolf bounding into the darkness, then turned to her left, where her father was emerging out of it. He was grinning stupidly, holding up the jerry can as if it was a trophy, and in seconds she heard gasoline sloshing into the car. He then tossed the jerry can away, and carelessly slammed shut the trunk.

In which the man with the yellow eye lay.

Only seconds passed before her father plopped into the front seat and began to explain how some old man in a dumpy shack had donated the fuel to them. It would last them to the nearest station, for sure.

But Willow wasn't listening.

Long before had she passed the state of crying, of tears. Now her wide eyes would not blink, they only stared, stared down at the rip in the backseat, where the dim lights of the Volvo illuminated one thing, staring up at her--the yellow eye.

Meanwhile, as the car's engine kept revving, cheers went up from her father. Why did he cheer? A ruthless killer was in the trunk, waiting to strike. She tried to tell her father, but her mouth would not move. It was not the chilliness outside that had frozen it, though.

Oblivious to it all, her father swiveled in his seat to look at Willow. "Aren't you happy?"

She couldn't even shrug, only stared into the rip in the seat. The yellow eye was gone.

"Well," her father said, smiling. "I guess I was right. Everything's fine."