

## Nightmare

Fog washes out the blues and blacks against the midnight sky. The trees moan and sway to the occasional breeze. A young woman with torn clothes at her shoulder's dashes through the landscape, nearly tripping. Plumes of white follow her huffs of breath, the only sound against the insect thrum of the night.

A gunshot cracks out across the valley a thundering echo following. By instinct her whole-body flinches, arms jerking to cover her head, but her legs never stop running. She sprints on, pushing off the ground, hurdling herself with every step. Her heartbeat pulsing through her entire chest vibrating down her ribs, up her throat, in her skull. Her muscles burn like never before, screaming for her to stop, to rest. But she can't, not when her target is so close. A two-story building no more than a mile away, next to an empty intersection, their roads stretching out for miles; the fire station. If she could just get to the fire station...

She puts her head down, arms swinging, fingers outstretched with every stride, reaching for the haven before her eyes. She sucks in air in long ragged breaths her lungs filling with piercing cold air. Her vision jars with every thump of her feet on the ground. The breeze fights her, whistling in her ears and drying her eyes making them water. Her vision blurs. Her throat coats with saliva and flehm. She lifts her head blinking and swallowing hard. She's halfway there. She pushes on. She cries out from the effort. Her head throbs from where her assailant hit her, skin hot against the breeze. Her pain subsides as the building gets closer. The glow of its lights calling to her. She could even see a silhouette inside. She's nearly there. She takes a deep breath, sucking in the air, trapping it in her lungs. Using all her voice she lets it rip from her throat in one long banshee shriek, calling out with everything she has, her muscles, her bones,

down to her very soul she screams. The echo of the words, *help me*, tumble through the air, reverberating.

She's in the parking lot now. Only a few strides and she is slamming through the door bursting into the entrance. Two firefighters are already standing, their tired eyes now alert. She underestimated the energy it would take to stop moving and tumbles into one of them. But he doesn't push her away, instead, he grabs her elbows to steady her trembling body, which is close to collapsing, and never breaks eye contact.

"A man...", she squeezes her eyes shut in an effort to speak, "...kidnapped me..." she pants out, chest heaving. "...is chasing me..." But before she can finish, the entrance door hinges squeak behind her. She darts behind the men who already have their guns out and pointed at the door. Upon seeing her captor and assailant, the two firefighters look at each other and silently begin lowering their weapons.

"What are you doing?!" She demands in a shrill voice, the question echoes in the large room. Her heartbeat pounds in her skull. All three men shift their attention to her and the air in the room shifts with them, becoming prickly. It only takes her a few seconds to understand the horror of her situation. She takes a step backward, her bare feet sticky on the linoleum floor. Her whole body trembles. A cold, dark, dread spreads throughout her body as the realization occurs, a once unfathomable thought. *They're crooked*. The two pillars of safety before her suddenly crumble to ash in her mind. But *why*? What do they get, money, first picks among the girls?... Her eyes sting. She gags, nearly vomiting. There's nowhere to escape, nowhere to go. Tears flood her eyes. She whispers, "You're all going to hell."

One officer responds, "No, Sweetheart, you're already there."

Her original pursuer points his weapon at her with clear intention to shoot. Swiftly, one officer pulls at the gun, exploding a large chunk of the wall beside her. A yelp escapes her as a cloud of drywall dust fills the air.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” the same fireman shouts, “She’s precious cargo.”

“She’s not worth the trouble.”, the other throws back. A scuffle breaks out as the third man attempts to break it up. Among the commotion, she seizes her opportunity and runs for the backdoor exit. Outside once more, the closing doors silence a string of curse words coming from inside.

She hides among the shadows in a small crook on the side of the building. Her whole-body pulses with each heartbeat, down to the ends of her fingers. Swallowing down her breath, she presses her body hard against the cement surface, indenting and scraping her skin, and waits for her pursuers to follow. One by one they flood out, kicking up gravel like dogs caught on a scent, eager to devour. One-man barks orders at the others and each darts in opposite directions away from her.

After the scurry of feet fades and her ears, straining, haven’t heard a thing, she creeps out, only peaking at first. Not five yards from her is a steep hill that branches into the open plain. Her goal is beyond that plain; into the wood with branches tangled in fog and enveloped in shadow. There she might have a chance until morning. Sprinting, she quickly closes the distance, the frigid air stinging her nose and piercing her lungs. Getting on her belly, she slides down, leaning closely against the grassy hill until finally, her feet touch the flat ground again. Just as she takes a step towards the woods, she hears voices in the distance.

Instinctively she crouches down. Searching for cover she spots a tunnel in the hillside and crawls over. The tunnel is a dark pit big enough for her to fit in but not tall enough for her to stand up straight. A sheet of black water lays on the surface, mirroring the darkness of the tunnel which she can see no farther than a foot into. Occasionally a drip of falling water echoes throughout. Hesitantly and careful not to splash the water, she dips her feet in, soaking them in the cold liquid. She delves in just enough to shroud herself in shadow and crouches down. The voices she heard earlier are faint and fading.

There's a gentle breeze in the tunnel, tickling, and giving her goosebumps on her neck. Involuntarily her lungs stop contracting. Her whole body stiffens and burns. Not a breeze, *breath*. Breath against her neck. Someone's behind her. She clasps her hands together to keep from trembling. She swallows hard ignoring the stench of rotting algae. Muscles tensing, she leaps, attempting to make a run for it but something catches her ankle, and she falls, splashing into the water, hitting her head hard on the concrete. A hand grabs her neck out of the water tilting her head. Liquid spills from her mouth and out her nose. She fights to keep her eyes open; she can't pass out. She catches a brief glimpse and can tell by his black pits for eyes that it's her original captor.

Only when he begins dragging her out of the tunnel on her back does she begin to come to her senses, but even then, her body won't obey her. It's not until her limbs thump painfully out of the tunnel and she sees open air again does she jerk onto her stomach. She tries clawing at the dirt, but her fingers only brush the reeds of grass. Finally, she inhales sharply, letting out a mixture of a scream and a violent sob which is answered by the pulse of insect cries and the low moan of oak trees.