

WHAT HAPPENED AT SISTERS CREEK

Excerpt #1

SNUGGLED INTO A one-person sleeping bag with her boyfriend, Carrie snapped awake for the seventh time that night. They'd fallen asleep after making love. Considering the spatial logistics and the unforgiving discomfort of a hard ground, this was an idea far less romantic than it sounded. A layer of night sweat collected on her stomach and forearms. She had to keep her head turned left to avoid suffocation. The tent itself was even claustrophobic, being only a two-person, pop-up tent. The ceiling seemed less than a foot away.

Heavy footsteps pounded against the dirt outside, undoubtedly from a person. There was the slow *swish-swish* of feet moving through leaves, a graceless, lazy-footed gait. The person breathed with a deep rasp, beast-like. A mosquito zinged close to her ear, and she shook her head since she couldn't get her arm free to swat at it.

Carrie had come on this camping trip with her boyfriend Mike because she thought surely he meant to propose to her by campfire. Somehow this hadn't happened yet. Maybe tomorrow night. Maybe he'd temporarily lost his nerve. He was definitely going to though because she'd already found the engagement ring in his luggage, digging for it in a frenzy while he paid for gas. Before the trip, she'd even dyed her hair blue-green to make the event more memorable. Changing hair color for life events was her social media trademark.

She wiggled out of the sleeping bag enough to raise herself onto her elbow. She leaned across Mike's body to try and peek through the tent's single mesh window on the other

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side. She needed to show herself that it was only a raccoon. A deer. Who the hell would be walking around the deep woods this time of night?

While leaning across Mike, she placed pressure on his sternum, and he woke up, groaning. "Carrie! Ow!"

She told him she heard something outside the tent. Sounded like a person walking around their campsite.

Mike guided her gently back onto her side. "Carrie, come on. Again?"

"Listen, and you'll hear it!"

He paused. He ran his forearm across his nose. "It's the forest, babe. It makes noises. I warned you about this."

Mike settled back into the sleeping bag. He returned to sleep within seconds. Carrie managed to slither back down and fall asleep again too. Minutes later she heard intense breathing outside the tent. Heavy footsteps. This was not some stupid squirrel.

She poked Mike until he stirred awake, which took some work.

"Carrie," he said, beyond irritated. "For chrissakes..."

Two yards from their tent, something growled, a tympanic rumble she could feel inside the ground, vibrating through the tent even.

Carrie and Mike froze. It was a bear! She clamped a hand over her mouth and muffled the urge to scream.

She'd once seen an online show in which some guy had gotten half his head peeled back from a bear attack. People died from bear attacks all the time! These were people who wanted to survive every bit as much as she did now. Yet they were dead. How were she and Mike going to be any different? They were going to die in agony, possibly even forced to watch as the animal ate one of them before the other.

"What do we do?" she shrieked.

"We don't scream," he hissed. He grabbed up his jeans next to him and searched the pockets.

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“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I’ve got pepper spray in here somewhere. Okay, got it. I’m going to go take a look.”

“What? Don’t!” She felt blanketed in a web of ice. She tried talking and moving but could no longer do either, held in place by a pressure, a level of fear so overwhelming it paralyzed her. She didn’t know a person could be this afraid.

Mike was already unraveling himself from the sleeping bag. He checked through the mesh window. He froze there, and she watched his back. She waited for some indication of relief. It was nothing. A fox. A rabbit.

“Yi yi yi yow!” a voice boomed from high above their tent. “Boing!”

Carrie screamed, startled by how human the voice sounded. This was a person in a tree. Or incredibly tall. *Not* the voice of a normal person. She balled her fists in front of her face and tried not to cry. She crawled out of the sleeping bag and squatted. Her knees went to jelly, so she had to sit.

“Mike,” she whimpered. “Who was that, Mike?”

He shook his head, dazed. He scooted on his butt towards the tent’s opening. “Guess I’ll find out,” he said.

Mike leaned forward, unzipped the tent’s doors, and got yanked outside. He disappeared so instantly that Carrie’s initial reaction was to continue staring at the place where he’d just been a second ago. Mike howled from torment while being lifted into the air. Carrie screamed again and urinated herself.

Mike’s voice went higher than hers as his assailant began doing something to him that was even more excruciating. She heard bones being crushed. She fainted against the side of the tent, and her dead weight brought down both sectional poles. The small tent caved in on top of her. Parts of Mike dropped and collected there as well.

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Excerpt #2

HOURS LATER, Jay awoke with the stinging urge to pee, unsure how this was possible. He'd made sure to only steal the tiniest sips from everyone's water. He was making a point to not be a mooch or a bother, already acutely aware of his unsavoriness to those around him. He genuinely wanted to construct a heroic saga out of this adventure, especially a first-hand, action article involving himself. He'd gone to sleep rehearsing his Pulitzer speech, though he did this every night anyway.

He tried holding his pee a while longer, not thrilled about the idea of leaving the tent, crossing the campsite to the giant cypress tree, designated collectively as their "Men's Room."

Jay lay immobile with indecision until he couldn't hold it anymore. He was going to wet himself. He elbowed and kicked his way from under his blanket, which he had apparently thrown over himself during the night. Jay struggled to his feet and left the tent. Their campfire had been reduced to a bed of black-gray ash, pulsing orange between crevices. Dustin sat nearby, hunched over, asleep, stiller than dead.

Jay tiptoed over to the cypress tree, located on the far side of the site's perimeter. He undid his zipper and emptied his bladder. The sudden drop in pressure from his urinary tract felt glorious. The relief left him in the form of a long and slow sigh.

He brought his eyes up through the split trunk of the cypress. The figure had to be almost eight feet tall. Jay cleared his eyes, certain this was simply his mind inventing shapes out of darkness and foliage. The large man's hair hung in long, stringy strands over his face, hidden by darkness. His muscles were bodybuilder-big but warped. Tendons stood out where they shouldn't. The texture of his skin appeared squashy, artificial

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almost.

The beast of a man stood bracketed by a pair of oak trees, illuminated in the moonlight. But there was no mistaking he was actually there. Jay even took in the green and brown aura clinging to the man's head, swarmed by a halo of gnats. He could even make out his frosty breath, visible from the cooling humidity. He even smelled the guy—a nauseating stench, like a landfill of diapers. Like how a person who had never once bathed, shaved, or wiped his ass might smell.

Jay turned his head back to the campsite. Could hear Murphy snoring because of course he snored. Jay felt frozen, encased in cement. He'd never been this terrified in his life. His knees seemed they might fail him, and he even stumbled, having to grab onto a lower branch. When he looked back to the figure, he saw it was gone, only an empty shaft of moonlight where it had just stood, the gnats still orbiting crazily there, confused as well.

Jay sprinted towards the tents. He opened his mouth to yell for everyone. His larynx closed around the word "sheriff" when a large hand grabbed him beneath his jaw. Another hand gripped the back of his head and pulled the two halves of his skull apart. Jay managed only a quick squirt of throaty air as the flesh of his jaw stretched until tearing. With an effortless pull, the top of his head came off, allowing the socket of his brain to spill out, tumbling sponge-like over the dew-kissed earth.