

EXIT 13

THE WHISPERING PINES

JAMES PRELLER

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ONE

ASH STARED OUT the side window. They'd been driving since forever. He was in a land somewhere between wakefulness and sleep, reality and dream. The past hundred miles were a groggy, boring blur. The highway was fully dark, not another headlight on the road. The sky seemed starless, blank. The upper atmosphere obscured by clouds.

And, weirdly, the car was moving slowly. Crawling, really.

Willow's voice broke the quiet. "It's so foggy. Can you even see, Dad?" she asked from the back seat. Willow was Ash's older sister by eighteen

months, seated an arm's reach away. It lately felt to him that the distance between them was far greater than that.

“Ha, *seeing*—that’s overrated!” joked Mr. McGinn. No one laughed. He drove with his neck strained forward, hands tightly gripping the steering wheel. The fog crept along the roadway like a living thing—twisting, snaking, reaching out with cold fingers. The McGinns were driving through thick clouds, scarcely able to see the road.

“This fog came out of nowhere,” Mrs. McGinn said. She sat in the front passenger seat, flicking through her phone. She turned to her husband. “I’m frustrated. There’s not a hotel within fifty miles that accepts pets.”

Ash, eleven years old, instinctively felt for Daisy, curled up between Willow and himself. Daisy was a goldendoodle, a snuggly, softhearted pet that had grown up with the children.

“Maybe we should pull over,” Ash suggested. “Daisy might have to pee.”

Mrs. McGinn nodded to her husband.

Without another word, Mr. McGinn eased the car

to the side of the dark highway. “We’ll wait out the fog and stretch our legs. And kids—stay out of the road.” He pushed a button and the emergency lights flashed on, in case another motorist came zooming past.

“Here? Seriously?” Willow said. “We’re stopping in the middle of nowhere?”

“We’re somewhere, Will. We just don’t know where that is, exactly,” Mr. McGinn replied. “Everywhere is somewhere! Isn’t that right, kids?”

Willow gave him the dead eye. She looked to her right, past Daisy and Ash and into the murky distance outside the window. She could make out a line of trees not far from the road. It was hard to tell in the dark. “In movies, this is where the ax murderer usually pops out of the forest and chops everybody to pieces. Don’t you think, Ash?”

“Willow, don’t tease your brother,” Mrs. McGinn said. “Besides, they actually don’t use axes anymore. Nowadays, it’s usually a machete.”

Ash clicked the leash onto Daisy’s collar. “Ha, ha, so funny.” He groaned. “You guys don’t scare me.”

“Sure,” Willow said doubtfully. “Be safe out there, Little Brother.”

The family exited the vehicle, except for Willow. She sat, arms crossed, announcing her disapproval. Mr. McGinn sagged against the front quarter panel of the car. His curly red-blond hair and freckled skin betrayed a Scottish ancestry (he could perfectly imitate Shrek’s thick burr). Some might describe him as a “big teddy bear” and not be far from the truth. Doughy, soft, large, gentle. Mr. McGinn rubbed his tired eyes.

Absently, Tricia McGinn—tall, with light-brown-colored skin and dark hair that flowed past her shoulders in a shiny wave—squeezed the back of her husband’s neck. “You look tired. We could all use a break. Driving in this weather is stressful for everyone.”

She returned her attention to the phone. “Signal’s gone. That’s weird. Suddenly I’m not getting anything.”

She looked into the night sky, as if an answer would be provided there. A radio tower, a flickering satellite, something. But the night sky was strangely still. No lights, no stars, no *thing* at all.

As if they had driven into a void.

Ash led Daisy into the grass, tugging gently.

The ground was damp with dew. The fog swirled and circled around them, brushing against Ash's legs like a hungry cat. A cold breeze stirred. A shiver zippered up Ash's spine. He regretted leaving his hoodie in the car. He walked away from the road and the parked car, toward the tree line. The leash went taut behind him. "Come on, Daisy." He pulled. "What's the matter? Are you afraid of the dark?"

The dog's legs remained locked in place. Daisy stared into the trees, unwilling to take another step.

Leaves rustled—a twig snapped.

A shadow moved amid the shadows.

Ash heard a faint thumping, then a rhythmic pounding. He turned to see Willow, knocking at the window to get his attention. She was pointing and saying something. He could see her lips moving.

"What? I can't hear you!" he shouted.

Willow pounded harder, both palms against the pane.

"The trees!" she cried. "Behind you!"

"What? The trees?" Ash called back.

Daisy stared into the dark. She let out a low, rolling growl.

Willow opened the door a crack so she could be heard. She screamed, “BEHIND YOU, ASH! FROM THE WOODS! IT’S COMING!”