



WOODS
By Michael J. McLaughlin

Book Excerpts

PROLOGUE

“I hate this garbage,” Crystal said, dropping the first few chapters of the manuscript onto her lap.

The campfire crackled, spitting a flurry of sparks into the night air.

Tyler continued reading *Someone’s Screaming in the Woods*, handing each typed manuscript sheet to Crystal as he finished it. Despite reading at a fraction of her speed, he was thirty pages ahead and gaining ground while she lost interest. Lured deeper into the suspense of the horror novel, he seemed oblivious to the real woods, the campfire, and the beautiful blonde sitting next to him.

“Why does anyone read Dorian’s books? I’ve never understood it.” Crystal said a little louder.

Tyler didn’t look up from the page, but said, “I like it. It’s scary as hell. Honestly, it might be your husband’s best book ever.” Not seeing her scoff, he continued talking. “The movie rights for this one are going to be worth a fortune. Especially since it’s the last book he ever wrote.”

Dorian Cain, the best-selling horror novelist, was dead. For years he channeled an assortment of mental illnesses to kill his characters in creative ways. This time he killed himself, hanging from a tree in his beloved Maine woods.

The media pounced on the story. Accountants followed the estate inheritance money trail, though every dime led directly to the Mount Rose Public Library. The tiny library in New Jersey was trying to figure out what to do with more than three hundred million dollars. A replacement library and Dorian Cain museum were already being discussed, but you could build dozens of those with money like that.

Dorian Cain had a covetable novelist's resume. He wrote over forty novels, including twenty five that made the New York Times Best Sellers' list and five more that would likely find their way there posthumously. Over two hundred million copies of his books were sold in countless languages worldwide. Several spawned high-grossing films, and one made it to Broadway, albeit for a short-lived run.

Crystal said, "I hope you're right about the movie rights. Hauling ourselves all the way up here to Maine had to be worth something. And being married to Dorian all these months had to be worth something. Hopefully his sniveling fans will pony up at the bookstores and box offices."

Horror fans throughout the country and much of the world mourned Cain's death. The Official Dorian Cain Fan Club held a month of vigils at the author's favorite haunts and book settings. Fans arrived in full costume as their favorite Cain characters and read his book passages. Fortunately nobody was slaughtered.

Crystal, Dorian's second wife, was thirty years his junior and easily could have found ways to spend three hundred million dollars. Getting free passes to a museum dedicated to her late husband wasn't the return on investment that she anticipated when she married him eight months earlier. Her mourning was primarily for the loss of his fortune.

"The fans will be all over this," Tyler said after finishing the last page of the section in his hands. "It was totally worth the trip. I'm relieved that we found all the geocaches. We've got the whole book. Now we get one last night together in the woods to celebrate without worrying about the media hounding us."

Tyler took another sip from the whiskey canteen and passed it to Crystal. She smiled, held the canteen up in a "cheers" motion, and took a sip. A grimace followed the whiskey down as she wiped her mouth with her sleeve.

"You're right," she said, sliding along the blanket to be even closer to Tyler. "We did it. We have the world's only copy of *Someone's Screaming in the Woods*. It's time to celebrate."

She pressed against him, all but tackling him down onto the blanket, and kissed him with a passion she had never expressed with Dorian. Lying there in Tyler's embrace, she

allowed herself to forget that the novelty of this young, empty-headed Adonis had long ago worn off, and that this excursion through Maine's North Woods would be their last foray together. Why should she deprive herself of some fun before breaking up with him back home?

"Let's go to the tent," she said before staggering back to her feet.

He flopped over and playfully grabbed at her ankle, but she broke free and laughed all the way to the tent.

"You're too modest, Crystal Cain," he said. "We're ten miles from anything but trees out here."

Modesty had nothing to do with it. There were just too many crawling critters on the ground to continue lying there. At least the tent offered an enclosed space, a barrier between them and the wildlife. Crystal also made a mental note to change back to her maiden name. If she wasn't going to get any of the estate money, then the Cain name was useless to her. Dorian's social media whackos would have to put in a little effort to track her down if they wanted to continue hating on her.

Flashlight in hand, she inspected the inside of the tent, and then the depths of the sleeping bag, to make sure nothing had crawled in since her last check. She stripped off her hiking clothes, taking time to fold and zip them inside her backpack before sliding into the sleeping bag.

Tyler was taking too long. Maybe he got lost.

"Where are you?" she called out.

There was no answer.

"Tyler, where are you?" she called out again.

The tent entrance zipped open, allowing a fresh wave of campfire scent to waft in. Tyler was shining the flashlight up into his face, creating ghoulish, glowing prominences and dark hollows.

"Honey, I'm home," he said with wide eyes and a demonic smile.

"Stop being an idiot," she said. "Come in here and zip the tent closed before we have every insect in the woods crawling in."

He did what he was told. For three straight days in the woods and most of their previous time together, he had done what he was told.

Opening the sleeping bag, she asked, "Isn't it a lot nicer inside the tent?"

He nodded and said, "You're very convincing."

As Tyler's abandoned flashlight rolled aside, Crystal watched his shadow contort and stretch across the tent fabric.

She didn't hear anything before the attack. There was no warning at all.

A knife sliced the tent open from top to bottom behind Tyler. The man standing there was barely visible, as though inseparable from the surrounding woods. His silhouette dwarfed

Tyler and struck with the speed and deadly precision of a rattlesnake. Something long and sharp at the tip of a rifle was visible for only a fraction of a second before plunging deep into Tyler's upper back.

Tyler never reacted. There was no time. It all happened too quickly. His dying body slumped onto the sleeping bag. The predator gripped the handle of the rifle with both hands, thrusting its attached wooden blade deeper into his prey.

Crystal struggled to escape the sleeping bag and then shuffled backwards toward the far corner of the tent. There was nowhere else to go.

She screamed at the horror of the unfolding scene. "Who are you? Why are you doing this? Please don't kill me."

Nobody else would hear her screams.

The attacker pulled the blade from Tyler's back and stood as the blood dripped from the tip onto the dead body.

"You don't need to worry about him anymore," he said. "You can love me now."

CHAPTER 1

Three weeks later...

"Now I'm not saying you're gonna die..."

The mid-sentence pause dangled the words in the air of the Maine country store for an eternity, taunting every impatient ounce of New Yorker in me. If my friends and I weren't gonna die...what? The gray haired man working the counter seemed in no hurry to reveal the answer. Each word meandered toward us as though it had nothing else to do. R's were nowhere to be found, and vowels crawled out with an unpredictable number of syllables.

An oversized, silver can of beer started toward the old man's mouth, but then tilted toward the five of us, one by one. The end of his sentence was near.

"You're just gonna regret it," he said, adding "Regret it bad." He indicated he was finished with a definitive nod and a swig of beer. Snorts and snickers from unseen locations suggested he was entertaining an extended audience while lecturing us.

Looking down at the beer can with a shake to make sure it was empty, he scowled as though it had somehow let him down. He punished the can for its emptiness, squeezing it in the middle and tossing it into a garbage can along the back wall. A cascade of clanking cans suggested it wasn't the first beer of the day.

"We camp a lot," Clay said. Tone biceps twitched instinctively at the threat to his manhood, but his words eased out through a perpetual smile. His well-worn hiking clothes were the only ones that hadn't been stripped of price tags that morning. The "we" in his

sentence was a fabrication, though. He knew it, we knew it, the clerk and his audience knew it. Clay had grown up in Vermont as the outdoorsy-est of outdoorsmen, and Beatrice had gone hiking with him a few times. But the closest the rest of us had ever gotten to camping was in a movie at the Tribeca Film Festival.

“I’m sure you do,” the man said while popping another beer tab. He blew dots of foam in all directions. “But this is Maine. And not tourist Maine. Not the L.L. Bean outlet or Bah Hahbah. ‘Taint postcard weekend resorts like...” For the life of me, I couldn’t decipher the places he named after Bar Harbor. “This is the North Woods. ‘Taint the same thing as pitching a tent in your backyard.”

There weren’t backyards at our homes, and I had never been near a tent.

The old man continued, “It’s about survival, at least where you’re headed. Anything can get you out there.” He looked at my older sister, Beatrice. “You could get struck by lightning, pretty young lady.” He pointed at our friend, Edison, who was my age and had recently pulled past me in height, and said, “You could get mauled by a bear, young man.”

Edison emitted a muffled gurgle of some sort. I thought he might unload a poopsickle in his pants. His brand new L.L. Bean hiking outfit was a few sizes too big. The boy rarely ventured outside, let alone into the woods. He was a walking pharmacy, loaded up on shots, pills, and creams.

“The bear would devour you and the little girl in two chomps,” the old man said.

My name is Tempest. I was the “little girl” he mentioned.

The beer can then pointed at Finn, who was Edison’s older cousin and Beatrice’s long-time bestie. He was also the city-slicker-est of all of us, as advertised by his black outfit and the volume of product holding his impeccable hair in place.

The old man said, “You could get lost and wander in circles for days until your supplies run out. Happens all the time. Remember, nobody’s gonna come bail you out if you get yourself in danger. I don’t see your Mommy and Daddy anywhere.”

Beatrice jumped in, “Our mom died last year. Thanks for the warnings, though.”

I wondered, not for the first time today, and far from the last, what the heck we were doing all the way up here. The old man was right. These woods were jam packed with dangers, the likes of which we had never encountered. A week ago I was finishing freshman year at a prep school a few blocks from our Fifth Avenue apartment. Now I was gathering food and essential survival items to cram into a backpack and lug around for the next few days. The backpack was half my size but felt like twice my weight.

What would Mom say about this craziness if she were alive? What would Dad say if he knew what we were about to do?

This adventure in the woods was nirvana for Clay, Beatrice’s new college boyfriend (“What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,” he kept saying – who says something like that?).

But not so much for the rest of us. If it weren't for their relationship and Beatrice's intrepid response to any threat or dare, we wouldn't have strayed anywhere near Maine. (Mom was an English professor and made us learn SAT words like "intrepid" and use them in a sentence. When I say such words, Beatrice calls them Tempest-isms, so I mainly use them in my poetry and other writing. She says they're not even on the SAT anymore. My big sister is everything a girl wants to be, all rolled up into a beautiful package, but I think the SAT words remind her too much of Mom.)

Edison added a box of Pop-Tarts to our supply mound and said, "You don't know when, you won't know why, but these will be the best thing in the entire world when we stumble on them at some point along our hike." Then he disappeared. When he returned, his arms were curled like a hammock filled with cans of insect repellent, enough to fill a bathtub.

"Black bears, right? No grizzlies?" Edison asked the man.

"Mostly black bears," the man said. "But they aren't like your black bears back home. Where is home for you, anyway?"

"New York City," Finn said.

The man's hearty laugh showcased the silver fillings in his molars. "I knew you were flatlanders, but New York City?" He laughed again. "Okay, picture your wildlife back home. Well, the bears in these parts are even more territorial, desperate for food, and eager to attack than your typical New York City subway rats."

Edison's insect repellent tower rattled. After adding granola bars to the counter, I helped with his squirming cans. One clanged on the floor and rolled down an aisle.

Finn retrieved the stray can and asked, "Why all the repellent? I thought you liked bugs."

"Dead ones," Edison said. "Not flying, bloodsucking mosquitoes like *Aedes vexans* and *Ochlerotatus canadensis*."

Finn asked, "What about the black flies, Simon Jennings or something like that?"

"*Simuliidae jenningsi*," Edison said. "Maine is loaded with them. They're attracted to exhaled carbon dioxide and sweat, so as long as we don't breathe or move, we're fine."

Edison had gotten the brain genes in their family, plain and simple. I used to think Finn had gotten all the good looks, but Edison had caught up a bit in that department since I last saw him. He was coming out of his shell too. Up until this week, he had hardly spoken to me, but we talked the whole drive up, mainly about animals we hoped to see or hoped not to see in the woods. He still leaned pretty far to the geeky side, but I was okay with that. I leaned a little that way myself, and I enjoyed his company.

"Any more of these?" Clay called out, jingling a leather strap with silver bells.

"What's that?" Finn asked.

"Bear bells," Clay said.

“Bears would never wear those,” Finn said. Then he whispered to me, “The new boyfriend is a bit of a dumb ass, don’t you think?” He winked and tossed his hair back.

“Should have a few back between the duck calls and the night crawlers,” the man said. He put his beer down at an angle, causing it to teeter momentarily, and then reached down behind the counter. “Ayuh. This is what you really need to fight bears.”

When his hands reemerged, they were clutching a rifle.

We recoiled from the counter in unison. I held my breath. Clay signaled “stop,” and Finn poised with two tight fists, ready to strike. Edison’s arms shot overhead as though a bank were being robbed, an asthma inhaler trembling in one hand.

The man smiled from ear to ear. “Need any ammunition?” He rested the rifle on the counter and held out a box of cartridges.

Beatrice gently held Edison’s hands and lowered his arms.

Finn looked down at the cartridges, patted his pockets with feigned assurance that they were well stocked with ammunition, and said, “No, thanks, dude. We’re good. Do you take Amex Black Cards?”

CHAPTER 2

Endless treetops of the North Woods rippled beneath the helicopter like ocean waves. Somewhere behind us, the expansive green mass of leaves and pine needles had gobbled up the heliport and country store, which was apparently also the town.

Being suspended like a hypnotist’s charm, dangling and defying gravity in a flying metal canister, was not my idea of fun. My skin was clammy, and my insides whirled faster than the pulsating rotors above us. I struggled to keep my breakfast down.

Beatrice was well aware of my intense fear of heights and patted my shoulder with nurturing instincts she inherited from Mom. But not wanting to accept anyone’s sympathy or acknowledge yet another shortcoming in comparison with my big sister, I inched away from her hand, maybe too noticeably.

The trip to Maine was a present to ourselves in order to celebrate the end of the school year. Edison and I were fortunate to join the older three. At least that’s how I had felt back at home. The further we flew from the only named dot on the map into the desolate woods, the more I wondered how lucky we were.

I love scary stories. Well, I used to love them. We told them with Mom and Dad around the campfire on summer nights. After Mom died, Dad stopped telling stories. That’s also when my nightmares started. I’m not sure why I read so many horror novels during that time. Maybe I was trying to replace my nightmare content with something other than Mom. I’m not sure. Dad and Beatrice were supportive, but they didn’t understand at all. When my headaches

started a couple of weeks before the trip to Maine, I didn't tell them. I would get myself through the nightmares and headaches.

Though Beatrice and her girlfriends claimed to be Dorian Cain fans, I read more of his novels than the others combined. I followed his social media pages, which were, at times, even more delightfully warped and twisted than the books.

Cain had announced that he was going to hide the sections of his next novel manuscript in geocaches. Five GPS-tagged containers would zigzag more than forty miles through the North Woods, one of the most isolated regions in North America. Before hiding them, Cain had posted the GPS coordinates and a clue for finding the first one. Each geocache would then contain GPS coordinates and clues to help find the next.

The manuscript sections were to be read around a campfire in Cain's favorite place on earth. What better way to heighten the terror of the master's horror novel than to read it somewhere secluded and dark – somewhere nobody could hear you scream, as he had always liked to say?

Cain had always loved the North Woods. His parents took him camping there when he was a boy. In a blog post on his website, he wrote about later taking his first wife and their son back there. The location was meaningful to all of them. Several of his novels took place in the woods, so it was not a great surprise that he chose to spend his final moments there.

After nearly finishing the forty-mile hike to hide his novel manuscript, Dorian Cain hung himself from a giant pine tree. His body was found by a wildlife photographer. The news of his suicide was devastating to me and his lesser fans worldwide.

Only Dorian Cain would launch such a bizarre project from beyond the grave. Only Cain horror junkies like me yearned to be the first to read his posthumous novel, rather than wait to buy it in a bookstore. And only my Manhattan-bred, frontierswoman-wannabe sister, Beatrice, would fancy hunting geocaches for days in the woods. It was as though Cain had stashed his manuscript just for us.

Beatrice sprung the idea on us a few weeks before the end of the school year. The plan started as more of a joke than anything else, but it rapidly evolved into an unspoken dare, though nobody ventured to call it anything but an awesome idea.

Supposedly, Clay (or The Boyfriend as Dad liked to call him) immediately said, "I'm all over it." He lived for hiking, camping, and fishing and had no other summer plans. The expedition also promised some desired snuggle time with my sister. Had he met the rest of us, it's unlikely he would have been so enthusiastic.

With typical "Finn-esse," Finn said that hiking beyond the paved walkways of Central Park was "wack," and camping just to read a book was "doubly wack." But then he immediately agreed to go. He's always had a thing for Beatrice, even though she was oblivious and kept him in the friend zone. She couldn't wait for Clay and Finn to meet. Her beauty must

have created a barrier from reality. Seeing Beatrice cuddling with Clay was guaranteed to infuriate Finn, but there was no way he was wimping out.

Finn probably convinced Edison to go, either to keep him company or to keep me company. I think Finn always hoped the introverted scientist and introspective poet would find an intellectual love connection. Edison was likely more intimidated by his older cousin than by the woods, so he agreed, risking harm from his many maladies. (Malady is a good SAT word, though I bet nobody's used it in print since Shakespeare's King Lear said, "But where the greater malady is fixed. The lesser is scarce felt.")

The communal dare of geocaching the North Woods persisted as we mapped out a plan. We dreaded the odyssey that was morphing into reality, but backing down became more difficult. Despite hundreds of reasons not to go, nobody spoke up.

Why didn't our parents put the kibosh on our crazy plan? Well, you don't know our parents. Dad crunched numbers in midtown but hadn't seen a credit card bill in years ("that's what assistants are for"), and the others were divorced a few times over and had accumulated enough wealth to lose focus on mundane details such as their kids. We all pretended that we were going to each other's beach house in the Hamptons. That was it, plain and simple.

There was no investigation, no lie detector interrogation. The parents were happy enough to ship a kid or two to another family, an ex-spouse, a different home, or wherever we were going. House hopping was frequent enough that nobody was suspicious. Mom never would have fallen for it, but Dad was too distracted by his new girlfriend, Joy (or What's-her-name as Beatrice liked to call her), to unravel this mystery.

We could have changed our minds while flying to Bangor. Or later during the four-hour rental car drive. When the bridge was out, we could have declared it a cosmic sign and retreated to another summer in the Hamptons, lamenting how nothing exciting ever happens in our lives. Instead, Finn chartered a one-way helicopter flight from an outpost to an even more deserted part of the North Woods.

The pilot yelled something inaudible over the thumping blades. Nobody had spoken for a long time. It was too difficult to converse over the noise. Everyone else pressed their noses against the windows like poodles in a limo, scanning the scenery. I looked anywhere but down. Being on a ladder or in a tree was enough to trigger my fear of heights. I could barely look out my window at home. The helicopter was the worst.

How long was this flight? More importantly, how long would it take to hike back?

The pilot yelled, "I'm takin' her down over there." That answered one of my questions.

Before I knew where "over there" was, the helicopter tilted forward, dragging my stomach along. A rocky clearing approaching the windshield would be our landing spot. In every direction, as far as the eye could see, there was nothing but woods.

CHAPTER 3

I held my hands against my face most of the flight, peeking out every now and then.

Finn stared out the helicopter window with his eyes and mouth wide open. This was a far cry from his mother's penthouse on Central Park West, overlooking what he had probably always assumed would be the largest green expanse ever set before him.

How many Central Parks could you fit in the North Woods?

Edison sprayed industrial strength something on his ankles. We all gagged simultaneously as the overwhelming lemony scent penetrated our sinuses. Edison sat up, shaking his head to expel the toxins. In a few seconds, he was at it again.

Beatrice and Clay studied one of their topographical maps, pivoting periodically reorienting it to the landscape below. They would lead the rest of us, since we had no idea how to read distances and elevation changes on a topographical map or how to use a GPS. In other words, we had no clue what we were doing.

"The heliport is about forty miles that way," Beatrice yelled. She pointed to nothing in particular, just another expanse of dense and foreboding greenness.

"Not bad," the pilot yelled back, adding a smile for Beatrice. "Most people lose their bearings in the air. Forty miles that way gets you back, alright. Any other direction gets you lost forever. As they say, 'lost in the woods is dead in the woods.'"

Now why did they have to say that?

The helicopter descended faster than expected, causing us to lurch forward. Back-packs and gear rattled in bungee cord harnesses in the back.

A mushroom cloud of dirt engulfed us. I pulled my t-shirt up, breathing through the fabric as a filter, and watched out the window as the flying can touched down, somehow more like a ballerina landing a jump than a heap of metal falling from the sky.

"Not so bad," I said. "Nice job." I patted the pilot on the shoulder and swallowed hard. It would take a while for my stomach to settle and the clamminess to resolve.

The clearing had looked larger from the sky. But it barely accommodated the width of the helicopter blades. An army of pine trees closed in as the rotors decelerated.

Finn shook his hair from his face. "Here we are, boy and girls – Middle of Nowhere, Maine – the great outdoors. Remind me to send a text back to Wall Street to let my dad's assistant know where we are." He frowned at the lack of bars on his phone and turned it off. "When we get back to some place where you can send a text, that is."

I rallied the energy to say, "This is going to be awesome."

Clay stepped out onto the landing skid and jumped down on the ground. Finn followed but misread the unevenness of the surface, causing him to tumble. Standing up again, he

hopped with both legs held together and raised his hands proudly overhead like a gymnast acting oblivious to medal-ruining fall.

Beatrice called down to Finn, "Bad dismount, but lovely recovery. Four point two."

We passed our supplies down to Clay and Finn in assembly line fashion.

"You sure you don't want me to pick you up?" the pilot asked, reaching into his flannel shirt pocket. He produced a cigarette with his index and middle fingers and pointed with it.

"Nobody's around to save your asses if you run into trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" Finn asked, wiping off some dirt.

The pilot smirked. "Take your pick."

"That's okay, we've got Beatrice as our scout," Clay said, winking at her. "Plus the whole idea of coming out here is to follow the trail of geocaches back. And we've got these." He pulled a GPS from a side pocket of his backpack. "Piece of cake."

"We'll be back two nights from now, Monday morning at the latest," Finn said. "Just in time for some venison pancakes back at the country store."

The pilot looked up and down at Finn, no doubt wondering how long the New York City boy could survive in the woods.

"What are the geo things anyway?" The pilot asked.

We all turned to my sister, our geocache enthusiast.

Beatrice said, "Geocaches are hidden containers, often with small treasures inside. Geocachers like us search for them. After reaching the correct GPS coordinates, we search the area. People who find the cache can take something from inside, replacing it with another object of equal or greater value. The geocache becomes a time capsule of everyone who's found it."

Billowing smoke, he asked, "Ever find anything valuable?"

"It's mostly worthless pieces of garbage," Finn said.

"Then why come so far to look for them?" the pilot asked.

Beatrice said, "Most often the contents are meaningful to the person who left them, but not worth much money. It's just fun to look for them, kind of like a scavenger hunt."

"Are they always in the woods?" the pilot asked.

"They can be anywhere," Beatrice said. "We've geocached on Broadway."

The backpacks were lined up against a boulder. Beatrice crouched and hopped down while grasping Clay's arms to balance.

"Do you know what's in these geocaches?" The pilot asked.

"The person who hid them was a writer," I said. "These geocaches are filled with parts of his final novel."

"The writer who hung himself in the woods?" he asked.

"That's the one," I said. "We'll be reading his novel around the campfire at night."

“You’re doing all this to read a story?” he asked.

“You bet,” I said, following Edison down from the helicopter with Finn’s help.

An eerie whistle blew through the trees, causing branches and leaves to rustle.

“Looks like the wind’s picking up,” the pilot said, tossing his cigarette out the window. “I’d better be getting back. Are you sure you have everything you need?” He scanned the back of the helicopter to confirm it was empty.

“Yeah, we’re good,” Clay said. “Thanks for the ride.”

We glanced at each other, backing away from the helicopter. Part of me wanted to beg the pilot not to leave us there, but I just waved goodbye. The others did the same.

“Enjoy the hunt,” he yelled as the rotors squealed.

The pilot shook his head at our folly as the metal beast ascended. A dirt cloud slapped my face and snuck up my nose as the helicopter reached the treetops. Our last chance to bail out disappeared as the sound of whapping blades faded.

The ascent of the flying machine must have also stirred the resting spot of a couple of black birds. They surfed the rising air current left behind from the helicopter with minimal effort and swirled in sweeping arcs high above the clearing. The wings were enormous, with white feathers at the tips like gloves sticking out through the sleeves of a tuxedo jacket.

“Vultures,” Clay said.

“Hopefully they’re not here for us,” I said, punctuating with a forced laugh.

Giant bird shadows drifted along the ground, eclipsing ours.

“They’re here for something,” Finn said. “Or someone.”

“They’re actually beautiful,” Beatrice said, shielding her eyes to look overhead.

“Beautiful when up there,” Clay said. “Not so beautiful up close, especially at feeding time. They’re pretty sloppy eaters.”

“They’re scavenging machines,” Edison said. “Their sense of smell is incredible. Their stomachs produce special enzymes to help digest the carcasses they eat. And their heads are small and have no feathers. This way they can stick their powerful, curved beaks into their prey without getting their heads filthy.”

Finn smacked Edison and said, “Stop wooing Tempest and Beatrice with the gory carcass talk.”

The vultures were in no hurry to leave. One by one, we hoisted our backpacks, with all but Clay grunting and sighing. Each time I lifted mine, it felt a few pounds heavier. It was going to be a long hike under all that weight.

“Well,” Beatrice said. “Here we are.”

“And here we go,” Clay said.

“I guess we’re really doing this,” Finn said.

Edison walked where the pilot's cigarette was smoldering and extinguished it under the toe of his shiny new hiking boots.

We entered the woods, all wondering what awaited us.

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