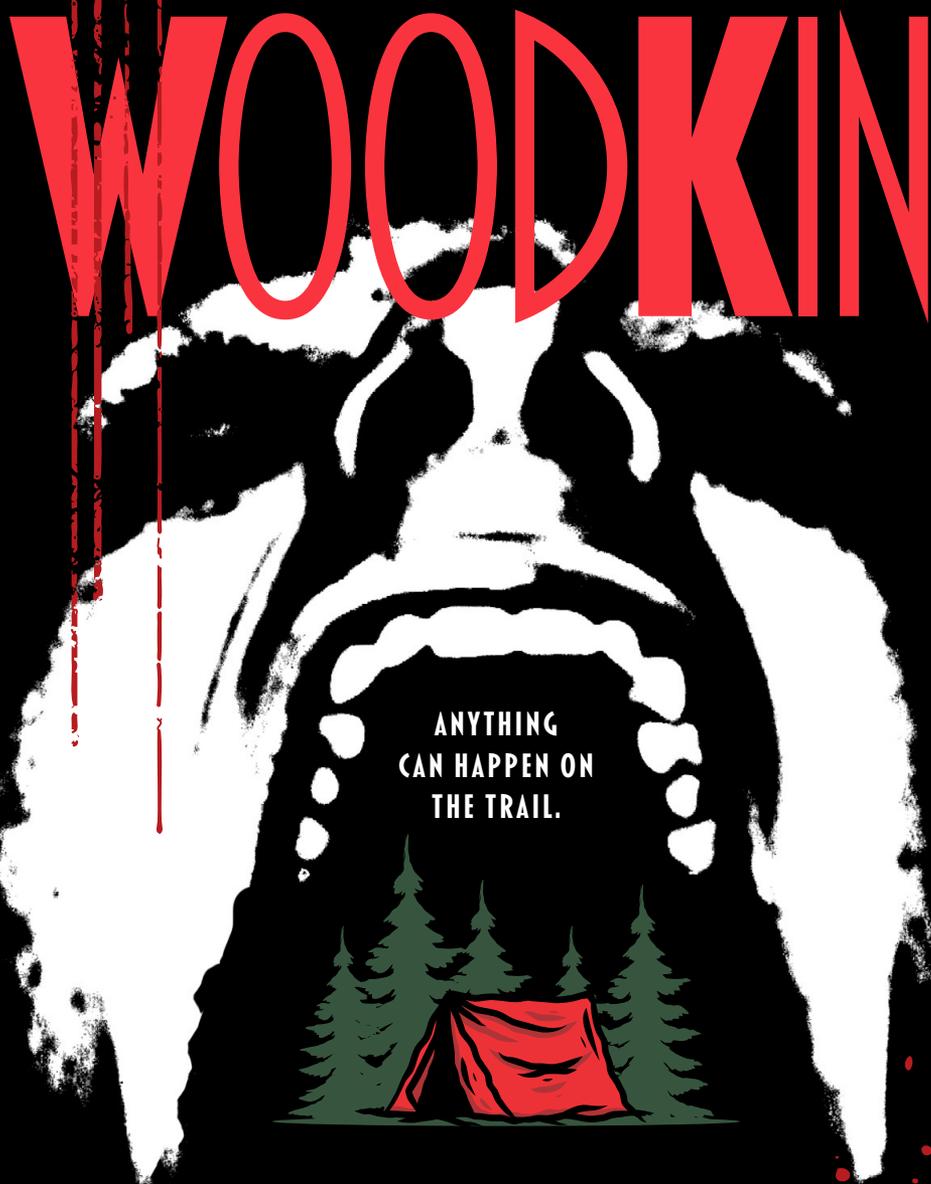


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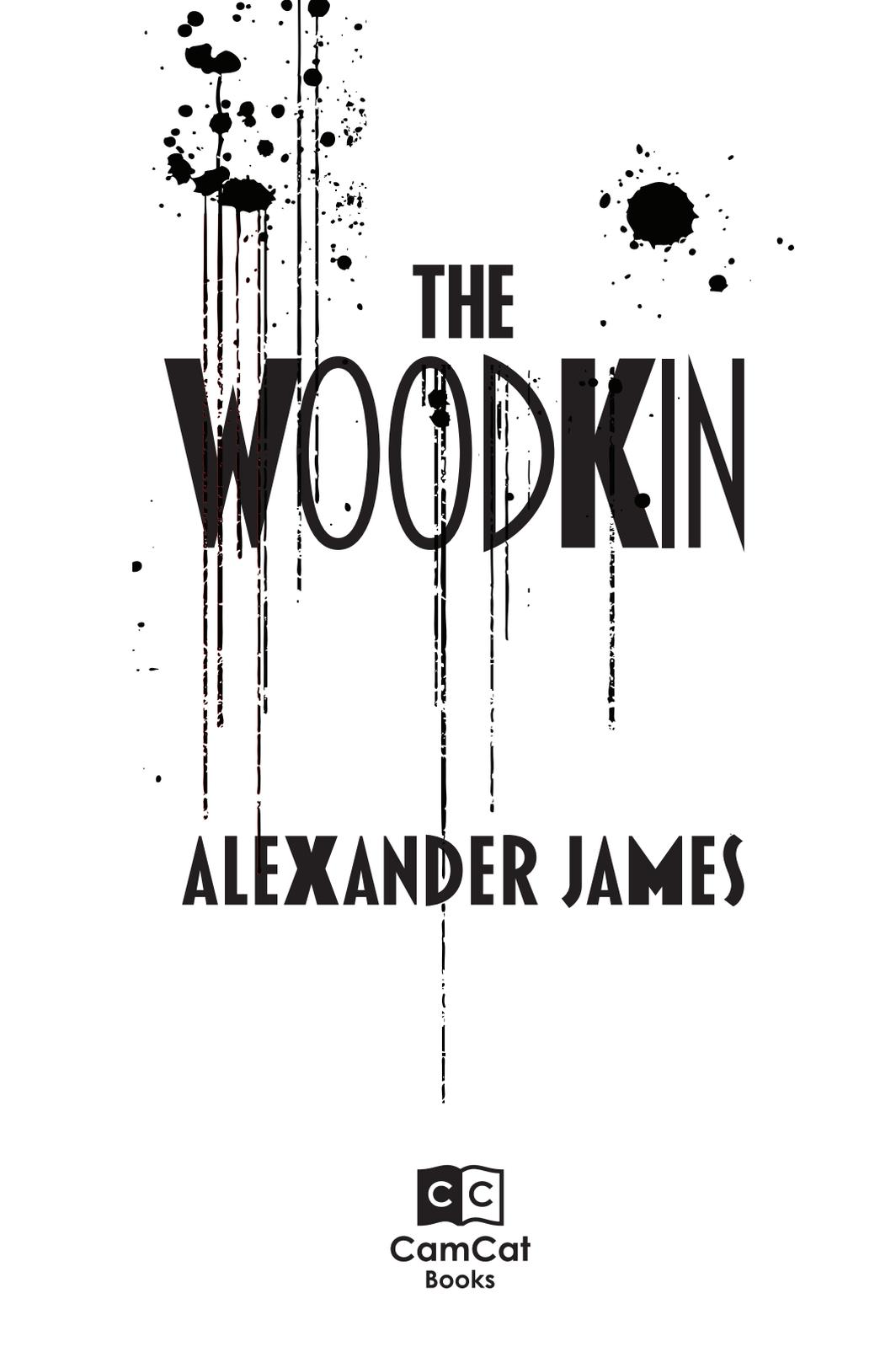
WOODKIN



ANYTHING
CAN HAPPEN ON
THE TRAIL.

ALEXANDER JAMES

**THE
WOODKIN**



**THE
WOODKIN**

ALEXANDER JAMES



**CamCat
Books**

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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To my wife,

who watched me disappear into the pages of this

novel more times than I care to count.

Heck 'em, puggerino.





1

GREEN-EYES



HE'D BEEN ROTTING UPWARDS OF A WEEK.

I found him by accident, buried in the depths of a hollow formed by tree roots on the riverbank. Pine sap perfumed the breeze blowing over the green-glass water, masking the sour-meat-and-maggots stench of his corpse. I almost fell over him, leaning to refill my water in the river shallows. The smell sharpened, grew sweet, the way boudin does after it's gone over.

The bank edge crumbled beneath my size twelves, sending me face-first into the shallows. When I came up for air, spitting water and profanities, I caught a glimpse of his eyes. Green as the moss covering the rocks beside him, swollen in their sockets like grapes. Most of his face had rotted away, skin curling away in tender holes where insects took little snacks.

I crab-walked backward, straight into the river in gut shock, slipping beneath the water with a sputtering scream. I forgot about what's-his-face in the struggle to catch myself from being washed downriver against the mud-slick rocks, pushing my way to the bank. I walked back to my pack, squelching water through soaked socks, approaching the nearby corpse inch by inch, covering my mouth with my bandanna.

His extremities were intact—bloated and disgusting, but whole. His midsection was a different story. I could still make out the ragged ruin of his remaining intestines hidden in the depths of his hollow. Mountain lions always go for the gooey bits, and I'm sure if I was the curious sort and pulled him out to check, his kidneys and liver would be gone.

I wasn't feeling that curious. I took deep breaths and pinched my nose to keep the bile simmering in my esophagus from coming all the way up.

His leg was bent beneath him, knee jutting a hundred and eighty degrees in the wrong direction. He must have slipped on the trail or overbalanced on his way down. Broke his leg a good two hundred feet from where anyone would have been walking, well-hidden by the pine trees, loose leaves, and scree. Probably tried to struggle back up the hill, but with that fracture he wasn't going anywhere. So he tucked himself into the hollow to overnight it, recoup a little strength for another try in the morning.

And that was where the lion must have found him—sleeping and crippled. Pretty much sliced and served on a silver platter for your average mountain lion.

I clung to the facts. Broken legs, well-hidden. It made sense, everything made sense. Because in my head, someone screamed. A hole opened in my gut, and the familiar taste of adrenaline and panic flooded through. My fingers tingled, like they were being pricked with needles.

He fell. Broke his leg. He fell. Broke his leg.

Over and over. I stood up too quickly, suddenly desperate to put distance between him and me. The horizon reeled, and for a second I thought I would overbalance and dunk myself into the stream again. I had trouble breathing, as if I had sunk beneath a black tide. The sensation dredged up memories—memories I desperately wanted to keep buried. I hadn't felt like this in over a decade.

Quick, before the tingling made its way up my arms, I looked away from the corpse. Five things I could see. The stream, green-glass water. A nearby rock, white and black like a tuxedo penguin. That pine tree, whispering to itself in the breeze. The mountains, the sun dancing on the water. Four I could touch, three I could hear. Two things I could smell.

Him. You didn't get used to the smell of the freshly dead. I muscled past it, forced myself to think. Him, yes, and the warm pine-scented air rushing through the valley. The dry dirt of the trail, rising like smoke beneath my boots. Finally, I could taste bitter adrenaline on my tongue, a result of my heart slamming a sledgehammer against my ribs. Fear, prickling my skin. Fear of the nightmares returning. Of the screaming, deep in the pits of my mind. I'd only just started sleeping through the night a few years ago.

Breathe.

I relaxed, degree by degree. The grounding lessons with Dr. K still worked. I took a deep breath, then another. I was okay. A dead body was unusual, but it wouldn't hurt me. The panic eased.

"I'm sorry." The only thing I could think to say, and it came out pitifully empty, hollow.

Could be some ID tucked into a pocket somewhere, but I sure as shit wasn't going to reach in there and roll him over for it. What skin I could see was stretched, turgid; it looked like it would burst at the slightest touch. If I'd see his skin split open and ooze whatever liquid lingered inside, I would lose my lunch.

My toes tingled; the muscles in my calves twitched with the urge to turn and run—run as fast and as far as I could. The familiar abyss

gaped open in front of me, but I stepped over it, smothered the memories before they could rise out of that darkness. Some things you left in the past. Bodies didn't have any power over you, once they were dead.

Some lessons you only need to learn once.

I made a note of where I was so I could leave word with the next rangers station. I was pretty sure I'd passed Image Lake a few hours ago. I had to go off my gut and the blurry picture I'd snapped last minute of a map hanging in the rangers' station at the Locks.

I negotiated my way back up the slope toward the trail, hunched forward so my backpack didn't drag me back into the same fate as what's-his-face. Another four hours of sweat-slicked hiking waited for me.

Now, though, the trail changed. Now the whispering pine trees were voices, floating soft on the breeze. Faces hid in the deep-cut channels cutting into their bark, watching me. The prickling sensation stayed, tickling the small hairs on the back of my neck. Someone was watching me—I spun, as if I could catch them, only to see the trail.

Empty. Just me.

Every time I turned back, walked on, told myself I was being silly. I resettled my senses with the five-to-one grounding exercise Dr. K taught me all those years ago. But the trees still whispered and the faces still watched.

Just me. And the voices in my head.

I appreciated the shade offered by the towering trees; I was what my dad affectionately referred to as “Irish pale,” and the travel-sized bottle of sunscreen I'd begun with ran out four days ago. Currently I was in the “burn and blister” part of building up a natural tan. Not a cloud in the sky for miles—great news if you were taking the boat out on Lake Union or sipping cocktails on a Seattle rooftop; bad news if you were Josh Mallory, trudging pink as a lobster through the spine of the Cascades.

The Washington section of the Pacific Crest Trail was a bitch of a thru-hike. Towering volcanoes, plunging valleys, a hundred-plus miles

of hiking glory—and I needed every second of it. When I crawled up the side of a mountain, struggling for each breath and concentrating on keeping my legs from collapsing, I couldn't picture Deb, standing in the kitchen looking like someone sucked all the wind out of her lungs. I couldn't think about the cardboard box, crumpled in the bottom of the trash can. I couldn't think about what waited for me when I'd finally emerge from the mountains.

Shit happens, right?

That's what this trip was all about.



THE CAR RIDE was as silent as a grave for the first three hours speeding south on I-5. Deb drove, white-knuckling the battered steering wheel while I stared at the corridor of marching pine trees passing in a blur. Against the pale skin of her hand, the pink diamond in her wedding band looked red, a coal ablaze. The space between us gaped, measured in miles. It wasn't until we passed Chehalis that she tried again.

“Josh—”

“Nope.”

“Josh, God damn it, listen to me. This is such a stupid plan. You can't go off into the wilderness by yourself for three weeks—”

I couldn't listen anymore. I'd listened to her all last night, alternating between shrieking and pleading, and the night before that. And the one before that.

“Life turns on a dime.” I read that in King's *11/22/63*, which currently sat dog-eared and well leafed through on my nightstand. I chewed through books fast for an ex-football player and kid from Alabammy, but I always took my time with King's stuff. Read them too fast and you miss things, and the man doesn't put stuff in his books with the intention of you missing it.

No writer does, I guess.

Life turns on a dime. Which is a fancy way of saying shit goes sideways faster than you can imagine.

My life turned two nights ago because of a beer bottle.

Deb is a through-and-through believer in sustainability and recycling; she came by it honestly from a pair of patchouli-soaked hippies in Portland. We had an assortment of identical-looking bins lined up in the kitchen—plastic recycle, glass recycle, glass with paper recycle next to plain old paper recycle, compost, food compost. I put a few away (why not, thought I, it was Friday night) and it surprised no one when I tossed the bottle into the wrong bin. In my defense, in the South “recycling” meant filling your beer bottle with water so it sank to the bottom of the lake.

“Josh, that doesn’t go in there,” Deb said from the couch. She wasn’t even looking; she just knew.

“Shoot, no one cares.” I crossed to the fridge to grab a fresh one. “Want some more wine?”

“I care. Put it in the right bin. And no, I’m all right.”

I rolled my eyes and affected a thick, childish lisp. “But it’s all groth in there. I don’t wanna.”

“Tough titties, Puff Diddies,” she said, no sympathy given. She set her glass of white wine down on the coffee table, pushing herself up and toward the bathroom. “Do it anyway.”

“You know it’s Puff Daddy, right?” I bent over and lifted the lid. Luckily for me, I’d tossed it into the paper recycling, but my bitching aside, the containers were pretty clean. “It’s important to me you know it’s Puff Daddy.”

“You’re a Puff Daddy!” Deb cackled, leaning forward from her position on the toilet. I shot her a mock glare, and she grinned.

I burrowed through the rinsed-out milk containers, empty pints of yogurt, and thousand envelopes of junk mail. I snagged the first fingerful of glass I found and pulled. The beer bottle surfaced, half exposing a brilliant purple cardboard box I didn’t recognize.

“What’s this?” I tossed my bottle into the right receptacle and looked at the box, frowning. The bottom two-thirds were missing, the edges jagged. A green semicircle arced over the words *Plan B One Step*.

My stomach dropped to my toes. My mouth tasted like old carpet.

I played football in high school, plus a glorious season and a half at University of Alabama (roll tide roll) as a linebacker. In a game against Georgia Tech, I swallowed a beast of a hit from a soda machine with legs. I went down hard and he came with me, burying his helmet at mach-3 against my crotch; I wore a cup, but there isn’t a cup in the world capable of absorbing that much mass with no repercussions.

I earned an ambulance ride to the hospital, where a nice doctor with cold hands sliced me open and . . . saved my pocket rocket for further excursions into deep space. I forget the exact words—I’d been doped up on some heavy medication after the surgery—but the only complication arose around a bundle of ducts in my testes the doc needed to snip. He lost the battle but won the war, if you understand what I’m getting at. I’d felt so grateful I still possessed complete operation of my parts that I didn’t even mind I’d never have children. For a sophomore in college, that was pretty much an ideal scenario anyway.

“Deb?” My voice shook. Cotton stuffed my head; my brain wasn’t working right. “Sweetheart, what is this?”

“What’s what?” she asked without looking. She tied her sweat-pants, not paying attention. The television blared in the background, angry white noise. I didn’t say anything; I didn’t trust my voice to work at that moment. When she finally did look up, she saw my face first and concern flashed across her baby blues.

Then she saw the box.

Deb’s never been a good liar. We met my first year in Seattle, both incoming first-years for the massive soul sucker Amazon. She made fun of my Southern drawl, and I made fun of the half-dead bonsai tree leaning, drunk, on her desk. Two weeks later we went out on our first

date—dinner at RN74 and drinks at Canon, up on Capitol Hill. A year after that I proposed. Two weeks before I tossed my bottle in the trash, we celebrated our five-year anniversary. And in all our time together, she'd never once been able to tell a lie. It was one of the things I loved about her—she wore every emotion on her face, clean and crisp as if she wrote it on paper.

I saw utter, absolute shock, the mirror of mine, followed by a dismay scoring a dozen tiny lines in her brow. Her mouth worked, but no words came out.

Having time to reflect on it, I'm not sure what I wanted to hear.

There's a stillness that comes with certain things, big things in everyone's life. Like everything in the world is reverberating, vibrating at a bone-deep level, and when it stops . . . the silence is absolute. I felt it the night I came home from a game in high school and found my dad weeping in the living room, holding a pair of Mom's flower shears. He hadn't been sober enough to put pants on and leave the house. I felt it the night I asked Deb to marry me, hunched against the pouring rain of a summer storm in front of her apartment. On our wedding day, when she filled the silence with "I do."

I felt it that night, looking at my wife's face. Because the box I held in my hands belonged to her, and I couldn't have children.

She mouth-breathed for fifteen seconds, staring at the kitchen floor. The huge, body-racking sobs came from within, building like a hurricane dancing on a ghost of breeze.

"Are you crying because you did something you regret?" I sounded like a robot, and I couldn't do a damn thing about it. Every breath I pulled into my tight lungs was a concerted effort. The world fell still, and we huddled in silence. When she looked up, it wasn't sadness plastered across her face.

"I'm crying because my own fucking husband doesn't trust me! How dare you—"

Ding ding, round one.

I don't remember the fight that ensued. I remember it being bad, but the details stay fuzzy, as if I deliberately forgot them. That night and the two others after it blended into a misery of shouting and tears. But as it usually does with the really bad fights, it kept circling back to the same premise; a broken record, scratching at the needle. The same line Deb half shouted again in our car as we rolled down I-5 to the Cascade Locks on the Oregon border.

"You know, you have no real right to get upset at me. If anything, I should get upset at you. You don't trust me! My own husband!" Tears in her eyes, her voice cracked.

I didn't trust her, and my mistrust in her was an unbearable strain on our relationship. She found a ceaseless variety of different ways to phrase it, couched in a dozen different tones, but always with the same message. Over and over. She never once gave me a straight answer about the box and what, if anything, had made it necessary. No matter how many times I pressed. Always the lack of trust—my lack of trust.

As they say back home, "If you believe that one, I have a bridge to sell you . . ."

But at this point I'd closed in on forty-eight hours with no sleep. I lived beyond emotion. Now I was dull, blunted to her tears and hoarse indignance. I turned around and ran my hands over my pack, pretending I couldn't hear her. For my own self-preservation, if nothing else.

We sat in silence, staring at the other cars in the Locks parking lot. Listening to the tapping rain drive against the windshield, after another one-sided shouting match. After I checked my pack for the umpteenth time. After her misbegotten anger ran dry. We sat in silence.

I felt like I should say something to her, but the cotton still hadn't left my head. I had no words.

"Will—when you're done, can we . . ." Deb bit her lip, staring at her feet. Cleared her throat. "Do we have a chance, after you're done? I—I . . ."

There it was.

She'd never been able to tell a lie in all the time I knew her. I bit off the fury threatening my lips; ten o'clock already. I wanted to get twenty miles in before dusk. I opened the door, pulled out my pack, and left. The last thing I saw before the woods swallowed me was my wife, sobbing against the steering wheel.



I WAS TWO weeks into a three-week hike, walking roughly twelve hours a day. So for twelve hours a day, I played the events with Deb on a loop. Going over and over it, shredding it and examining it from every angle. Looking at the YOUR WIFE IS CHEATING ON YOU sign hanging over my head lit up in neon.

So, yeah. It was nice to think about a dead guy for a change. As long as I played it carefully. I hunted for facts. Facts were safe ground, facts didn't change. Facts didn't disturb that long-closed box in my head.

Green-Eyes could have been a day hiker, up from Everett or Seattle, but the odds weren't in his favor. We were a day north of Stevens Pass (the last time I crossed asphalt, by the way), and the nearest jump-off point for the Cascades. There wasn't shit around for miles in the way of day hiking, unless you were coming in from Chelan, twenty miles to the east. He might have been making a bid for the summit of Glacier Peak, but if he was, he took a cockeyed approach. A thru-hiker made the most sense. Like me.

Well, sort of. True thru-hikers were the ones who did the PCT proper, starting at the Mexico border. As I was running away from my problems on short notice, I had to make do with the Washington part. Didn't quite count.

My boss had been less than pleased about my sudden and non-negotiable opt for three weeks of vacation starting immediately. The slippery fucker had probably replaced me already, but I didn't care.

My job existed in the “real world,” and I wasn’t in the “real world.” This was the trail world, and we played by different rules here.

The valley closed in around me. The crunch of my boots on gravel suddenly seemed too loud.

“Seeing things, Josh. You’re acting all jumpy.” I thought speaking out loud would help, but I was all-the-way wrong. My voice floated, disembodied, like someone else’s. Someone I couldn’t quite see, lurking just outside of view. I stopped talking.

I wondered if Green-Eyes had a trail name. Hikers doing the “long haul” on the trail often gave themselves trail names. Ironclad, All In, Pine Tree, Rain, Lotus—it could be anything you wanted. Day hikers were a dime a dozen. Thru-hikers . . . those were a much rarer species.

I rounded a bend and froze.

He sat on a petrified tree, shedding a tattered flannel that looked like it hadn’t seen the inside of a washing machine in years. As if he were plucked straight from my thoughts and placed there. A present, just for me.

It’s easy to tell the difference between day hikers and thru-hikers. Day hikers were well fed and bouncy, chirping like birds about how nice the day is, or how heavy their pack felt. How excited they were to eat when they got back to town—that was a big one. Thru-hikers had an underfed look about them: too thin, eyes retreated into deep hollows, all sharp angles and dishevelment. Carved from wood. They didn’t talk as much.

“Hiya.” I waved, like he couldn’t see me, even though we were the only ones on the trail. *Stupid.*

He nodded in reply. Stared at me. Buried so deep in his skull, his eyes glinted like shards of glass in the sunlight. Watching. “Thru-hiking?”

I couldn’t tell him. That wasn’t how things were done in the trail world. You didn’t bring your problems to other people, you didn’t make them buy into your bullshit.

Plus . . . what if he thought I did it? It wasn't that far a stretch—we weren't exactly close to a town. If someone came up to me talking wide-eyed about a corpse they found an hour behind them this far removed from civilization, the first thing I'd think was that I might be their next victim.

No thanks.

I swallowed the paranoia and fear crawling up my throat and shot for normal. How did normal people talk?

How the hell would I know?

“Yeah,” I answered.

“Got a name yet?”

“Switchback,” I said, feeling rather stupid. Like a kid in grade school introducing myself by the nickname I invented. His chapped lips spread mechanically, revealing a double row of shockingly white teeth. Twitching a little, like his muscles had forgotten how to move that way. He stuck out a hand.

“Boots. Good to meet you.”

We shook. His grip was brittle, like I might break it if I squeezed too hard. It wrapped around mine, engulfing my knuckles in his tanned and cracked-skin ones. He looked at me as if waiting for something. Something I should say or do.

“So, you, uh . . . you been on the trail long?” I asked.

“‘Bout two months,” he drawled. Texas, unless my ears deceived me. Another good old boy from the South. I waited for a follow-up, something to keep the conversation going. Those Southern manners were imprinted deep in my bones; I couldn't just abandon a conversation, once it started.

Nothing. He stared at me. Something lurked in his eyes. Curiosity, like I was a novelty toy fresh out of the cereal box. And something deeper, something with edges.

“What brought you out here?” My voice cracked. I cleared my throat.

“Been wantin’ to do it for a while.” He shrugged. “Up and did it.”
A pause, growing like a thing alive.

“You?” he finally asked, a full ten seconds later. I felt like I might be going crazy. Maybe the shit with Deb was messing with my perception. Could be. Dr. K and I talked about perception at length, all those years ago. Every chance this dude acted perfectly normal, and *I* acted like the kooky one.

Breathe. Everything was fine. I was just fine.

“Oh you know.” My turn to shrug, smiling wide. “Just running from my life and problems.”

I meant it as a joke; something lighthearted. But my voice cracked halfway through, and the words floated between us, empty and cold. Ha-ha, my life is a trash-can fire of pain and lies, let’s all laugh at it together, amigo.

“That right?” He didn’t join in my pathetic laughter. He stared at me. I squirmed under that gaze. I took off my pack, sat on it and undid my shoe, pretending to hunt for another pebble just for something to do.

“Oh well, I mean . . . I was mostly joking. I’m just out here like you said. Wanted to do it forever.” I said it while I scrabbled inside my shoe, looking for a rock I knew good and goddamn well wasn’t in there. He stared at me, sitting on his log. I could see his arm bones in my peripheral vision, jutting through the too-thin skin.

Then, as though I imagined it, the edges in his eyes disappeared. Humanity flooded back into his face.

“Well.” He slapped his knee, shooting to his feet. Another smile creased his tanned cheeks, this one smooth and warm. “Think we might pound down some miles together, what say? Weather looks like it might cooperate.”

A good thing I was already sitting; the surge of relief made me weak at the knees. See? Perfectly normal. My perception skewed, that’s it. Just another hiker, and a friendly one at that. *That simple, Josh.*

“Let’s do it,” I said.

We ambled a good five or six miles together, talking about nothing of any consequence. He didn't bring up why I came to the trail again—he probably saw the real answer on my face and learned his lesson. I swallowed any mention of Green-Eyes, kept him to myself. My own little secret. He pressed right to the top of my lips, sitting on my tongue like a foul aftertaste. A voice, whispering in my ear.

I didn't even know what I'd say. What I wanted to say. It's all a matter of perspective, that's what Dr. K said. I just had to look at it a little differently. So I didn't say anything. I talked about boot styles and brands like I didn't have a care in the world.

The hours slipped past. Around late afternoon he turned off, saying he wanted to shoot for the summit of a nearby peak.

“Okay. Guess I'll see ya.” I adjusted the pack straps on my shoulders. Every now and then it slid, pinching the skin.

“Guess you will.”

Too busy with my pack to notice the way he looked at me. Too busy thinking about the dead body to put the pieces together. Perception only fools you so far.

We waved good-bye. I watched him take the rougher, steeper offshoot trail, turn a corner, and disappear. I craned my neck for a flash of T-shirt between the trees but saw nothing. As if the forest swallowed him whole and left nothing behind.

“You're being silly, Mallory,” I grumbled to myself. “Just downright dumb about it. So you found a dead guy. You'll tell the rangers, they'll deal with it. You got your own problems. Now come on, let's get over that saddle before sundown.”

The trees dwindled two-thirds up the ridge. The trail steepened as I climbed, gaining fifty or more feet in elevation with every pivot. By the time I topped the ridge, sweat was dripping from my cheeks, and I heaved like a bellows, taking in the view.

The Glacier Peak Wilderness stretched to the horizon, forested in a carpet of pine trees. Here and there granite summits broke the

green, splintering skyward. A hint of late-season snow lingered in the perpetual shadows. The sun hung three fingers above Glacier's peak; five, five and a half hours of daylight left, by my estimate. I'd also forgotten my watch.

While the ranger I registered with back at Stevens' Pass called my lack of gear "foolish to the point of suicide," I preferred to think of it as minimalist. I backpacked and hiked as a hobby, so I already owned all the basics; tent, sleeping bag, stove, pack. Nuances like watches only detracted from the experience.

Or so I lied to myself.

The trail meandered along the ridge, rising to a pass between a pair of peaks overhead. Cloudy Ridge was aptly named; an edge of bruised navy curled around the slopes, hiding the summits from sight. The trail slipped beneath the cloud layer. It dropped into the valley on the other side, if memory served, where I hoped to find a decent campsite.

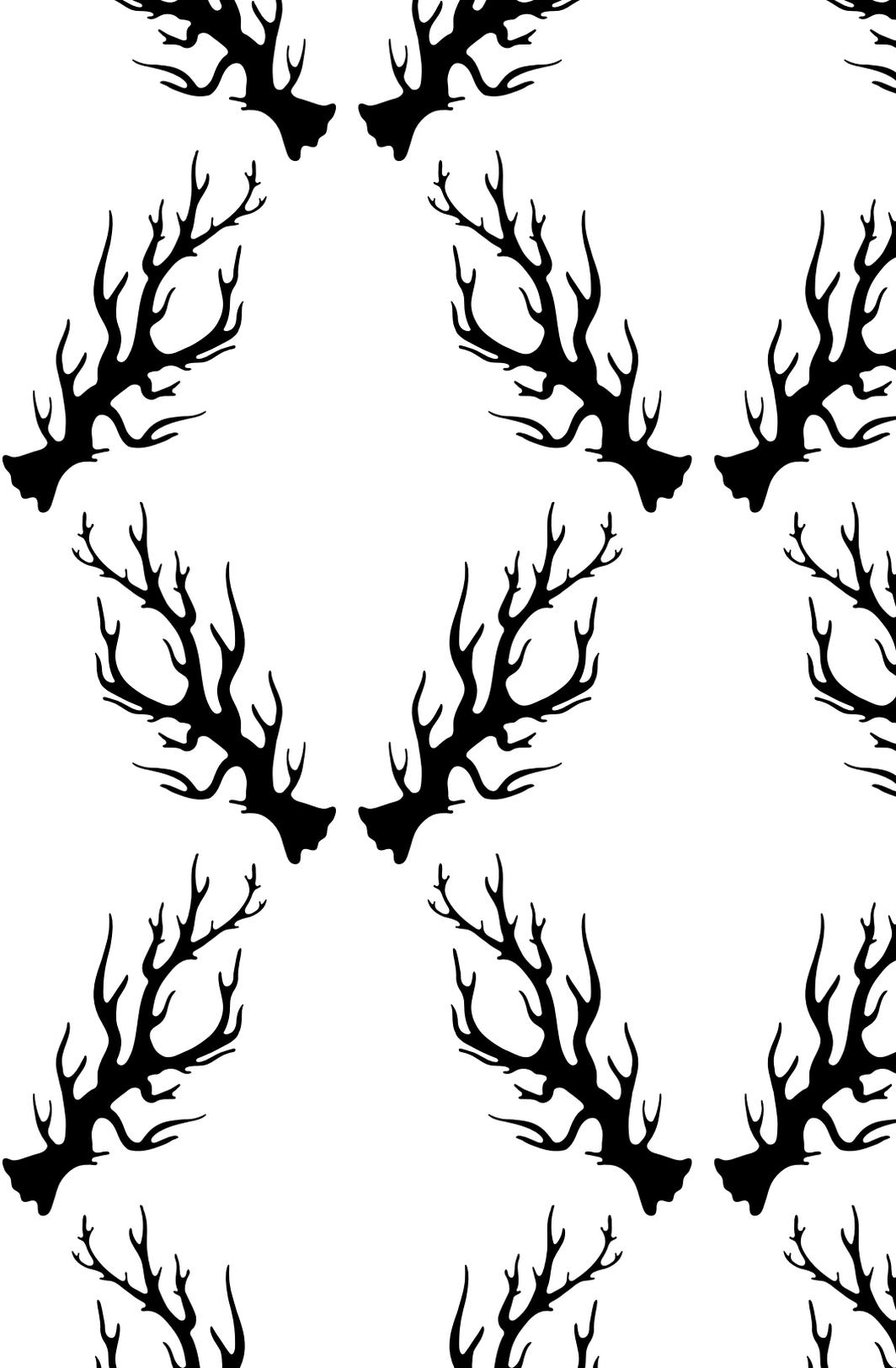
Chances were good I could get far enough away from the rain clouds to find some dry wood and get a fire going. A fire made any campsite infinitely cozier, everyone knew it. My fire-making skills sucked the big one, but what I lacked in technique I made up for in exuberance. The only luxury I had time to stick in my bag was my e-reader and a solar charger. Last night I'd read the first couple chapters of Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*, and it had already hooked me hard; I looked forward to spending a few hours dusting off my elementary-school mythology while warming my socks with a toasty blaze.

I hitched my bag up higher on my shoulders and began climbing. I even started to whistle when I had the lung capacity. Why wouldn't I? The sun shone everywhere I looked, the wind soared. The corpses were behind me, one fresh and the other long-since buried. I could ignore them now.

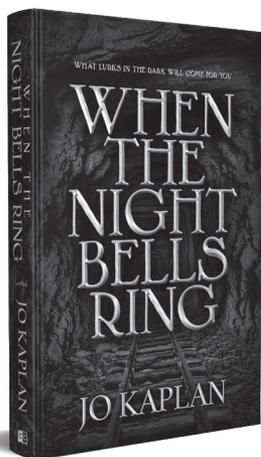
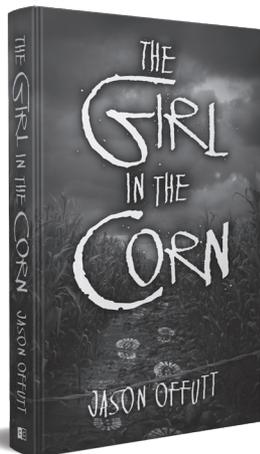
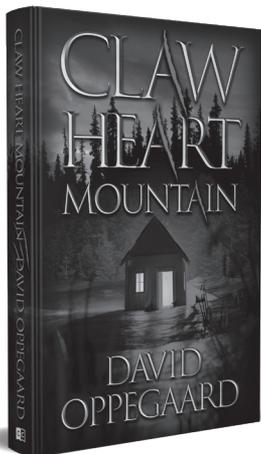
Those were my priorities that afternoon. Remembering where the trail headed, getting to a campsite, and hoping for a fire and a peaceful

evening with a book. I think back on that day and I suppress the urge to throttle the idiot who calls himself Switchback.

He missed the sign. The huge, hit-you-over-the-head-sized sign. Screaming, in big, bold letters: WATCH OUT.

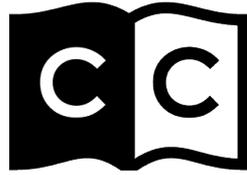


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NO MATTER HOW FAR YOU GO, YOU CAN'T ESCAPE YOURSELF.

AFTER SECRETS AND BETRAYAL SHATTER HIS MARRIAGE, Josh Mallory seeks solace on the Pacific Crest Trail, in the mountains of Washington. On the trail, he's just another hiker. On the trail, he can outrun the memories.

A day into the hike, he comes across the body of another hiker who seems to have fallen to his death. When that night wild animals destroy his food, Josh is forced to detour through a small mountain town, where missing hiker posters hang in the windows. But the residents show no interest in hearing about the dead hiker, so Josh restocks his supplies and resumes the hike, hoping to report his find in the next town.

But night falls too quickly and in his haste to get away, Josh becomes trapped on a mountain ridge beneath the light of a full moon. Feeling more and more uneasy, Josh soon realizes that he may not be alone on the mountain, and begins to fear that like the missing hikers, he won't make it out alive.


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