

# THAT NIGHT

Three friends went into the woods tonight, but only two are left.

They are running. No longer daunted by the dark. Their eyes wide, their breath sharp and fast, every part of their bodies alight with the electric desire to live. Behind them, looming hemlock trees swallow the path they took inside, obliterating every trace of their presence.

One of them stumbles. Lands hard and gives a small cry. Their knees crush damp moss. The other one whips around, eyes marking the shadows in their wake. Something moves from tree to tree, a darting haunt, a hunter.

“Fern,” Jaq says, pulling at her friend’s arm. “Get up. We have to keep going.”

Fern looks up. Tears drop from their eyes, leaving tracks in the blood that mars their skin.

A cry of anguish rings through the dark. The voice grows louder instead of fading away. In its wake the forest is silent and cold. Not even the rustle of wind or chirp of a frog.

“Jaq—” Fern’s breath catches. Their voice is too loud. They reach for Jaq’s hand and squeeze, fingers cold and wet.

Jaq makes a move as if to look behind her, but she cannot bring herself to search for whoever—or whatever—made that sound.

“Get up,” she whispers, tugging Fern’s hand, but Fern still doesn’t move.

“We have to go back for Mal,” Fern sobs. “She might still be—”

“She’s not.” Jaq cuts them off. “Look at us!”

Blood-splatter paints across Jaq’s pale pink hoodie, smeared along the bottom of her jaw. In the moonlight it’s a vivid, horrible brown. But Fern almost finds the contrast lovely, their mind desperate to create something beautiful, even now. Especially now.

In a daze they look down at the blood staining their fingers, thinned to a sticky paste. They raise a hand and trace the edges of blood on their cheek toward their ear. Feel the wetness clinging to their blond curls. Wonder if blood can stain hair.

“But what if—”

“No,” Jaq whispers. They’ve been still for too long. Her mind is reeling. The only girl she’s ever kissed is gone. “Not now. Fern, we have to—”

*RUN.*

The voice is a thunderclap between them.

It jolts through their bodies, forcing Fern onto their feet and Jaq into a sprint. They crash through low ferns and slip against crumbling deadfall. Neither of them knows if the direction they’ve chosen is the right one, only that it is better than going back, better than returning to that house where their friend is nothing more than blood soaking into the earth.

Hand in hand, they run, their hearts twisted and terrified as they race for safety.

How they could have been so wrong? How could the place they’d trusted so well have betrayed them with such malice?

The edge of the woods appears. The trees thin to reveal the

houses beyond, each one wrapped in a peaceful quiet, with curtains drawn against the cold night.

The relief the two friends feel at the sight is ruined by the knowledge that this is what they were running from in the first place. That peace is only ever a lie. But right now, they have no choice.

“They’ll help us.” Fern pauses. “Won’t they?”

“We can’t tell them the truth,” Jaq answers, thinking especially of her parents. They would have to lie. Keep lying. Only, what lie could explain why she’s covered in her best friend’s blood? Or why they went into the woods tonight?

But as the two step through the trees and onto the scrubby grass of their neighborhood, something shifts. The sensation is a little like falling and a little like being tugged by the ocean tide. A current runs through Fern and Jaq, swift and cold. It takes. Fern wobbles on her feet. Jaq frowns and blinks.

And when they look at each other again, the blood on their skin and hair and clothes has vanished.

They stand beneath the thin light of a crescent moon, not entirely sure how they got there.

“Are you, um . . .” Fern begins, but the question has no end point. She only has the faintest memory of deciding to come out tonight with Jaqueline De Luca and Mallory Hammond. Neither of whom she knows very well. But Mal never showed.

“I should probably go,” Jaq answers, baffled that she ever thought it was a good idea to sneak out with Fern and Mallory. People she’s not even friends with. “My parents will kill me if they find out I’m gone.”

“Yeah, me too.”

The two walk together in silence before going their separate ways.

By morning, Mallory's parents activate the church phone tree. Jaq's parents get the call, and they ask Jaq if she saw Mallory last night. She answers honestly: she didn't. She hasn't seen Mallory since school on Friday.

Fern doesn't hear about it until Monday morning, when the news is all over Port Promise: Mallory Hammond, the closeted, angry girl, has finally run away. Everyone in town believes it's true.

And though something scratches at the back of their minds, muffled as though trapped beneath layers of ice, Fern and Jaq believe it, too.