

The triX-Files

Warren Grove, New Jersey
Friday, September 8
10:22 pm

Campbell Smith swore as he stumbled over a fallen log. His flashlight did little to cut through the gloom that had fallen. In fact, it only served to illuminate the swirling mist that engulfed him. The full moon had disappeared beneath ominous black clouds, and Cam wondered, not for the first time, how he had been talked into this. He pressed on, the night sounds of the pine forest giving him little comfort.

"Cam!" His best friend Kenny Butler called, his voice hovering somewhere between a raspy whisper and a controlled holler.

Cam stopped and turned around. "Yeah?"

"Are we almost there?" Kenny said in that not-quite-a-whisper voice that people use when they're trying to be quiet but heard at the same time. His crunching footsteps grew louder as he closed in on Cam. The pitch black combined with the lingering fog made it hard to see the meager light of Kenny's flashlight, even though he was no more than a few feet away.

"I think so," Cam replied as he turned and continued on the overgrown road forged by loggers more than a century ago. *This hasn't even been a path for ages*, Cam reflected. *The forest has reclaimed what we humans have taken from it.*

Cam hadn't been out here since he was a boy. Once upon a time, his dad had taken him hunting in the Jersey Pine Barrens frequently, and Cam had enjoyed the father-son weekends spent under the stars in front of a roaring campfire. The seventeen-year-old felt a momentary pang of sadness at what would never be again; cancer had put an early end to those carefree, crisp autumn nights.

Suddenly, the moon came out from behind the dark clouds, casting a pale yellow glow to the forest below just as Cam and Kenny entered a small clearing. Cam stopped and looked around, trying to get his bearings. The cabin they were looking for wasn't far from here for sure.

"Man, we're idiots!" Kenny suddenly piped up as he, too, stopped at the entrance to the clearing.

Cam looked at his friend, amused. "You just now realized we were goaded into this?"

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"Not just now. Damn! I've been thinking about it the whole way here! It seemed like a good idea at the time..." Kenny's voice trailed off.

"We'll spend the night at the cabin, take pictures to prove it, and we'll be heroes at school on Monday," Cam said in a matter-of-fact voice, more to reassure himself than his friend. He really hoped his strong words didn't betray the bad feeling that had settled in his gut.

Why had they agreed to spend the night in that old cabin everyone said was haunted?

'Cuz we're seventeen-year-old guys who can be manipulated by taunts from our friends, he thought wryly. Cam paused in his tracks and then thought of the other person who had been present after school the day they had discussed this endeavor. *And a pretty face.* How was he supposed to refuse Bud's challenge in front of Jennifer? Jennifer of the ebony hair and smoldering dark eyes.

"Dude! Why do you have that goofy look on your face?" Kenny interrupted his friend's daydreams.

"Dude, whatever! I don't know what you're talking about," Cam retorted as he started toward a dim path at the opposite side of the clearing. Kenny shrugged and followed.

Insects kept up a chorus, somewhere in the distance an owl hooted, and a gentle breeze whistled through the pines, providing an accompaniment to the crunching and snapping of the boys' footsteps.

Fleep! Fleeowweep! Both boys froze in their tracks, listening for another sharp cry. It was hard to tell whether it was close or far away.

"What was that?" Kenny didn't even try to keep the panic out of his voice. "That doesn't sound like any animal I've ever heard!"

"I don't know, but let's high-tail it to the cabin!"

The two friends starting running, almost reaching the opposite edge of the clearing, before a huge gust of wind came from nowhere, replacing the gentle breeze of a moment before and shaking the trees. As if extinguishing a flame, the moon chose to go back under the dark clouds at that moment, leaving the terrified friends in pitch black.

A dawning, terrifying realization struck the boys as they simultaneously grasped the fact that both of their flashlights had died at the exact moment the wind had appeared to douse the pale light of the moon.

"Listen!" Campbell hissed.

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"What? I don't hear anything," Kenny whispered.

"Exactly!"

The forest had become perfectly silent. The air was still--no insects chirped, no pines whistled. A hush had fallen over the whole forest, and the two friends were surrounded by an oppressive silence that exuded evil.

Seconds that felt like days ticked by as Campbell's and Kenny's panicked minds raced, desperately searching for a plan. Something, *anything*, that could be remotely useful.

"Kenny?" Campbell whispered.

"Yeah?" Kenny croaked back.

"Run!"

As of one mind, both young men turned and ran back toward the old logging path they had just came from.

Fleep! Fleeowweep!

Above the loud noise that the two friends were making as they stumbled through the underbrush, the weird forest cry could still be heard. Kenny fell over a stump, sprawling on the forest floor. Cam, out of his mind with fright, did not realize his friend was no longer behind him until he heard a sharp *Fleep! Fleeowweep!* at close range followed by Kenny's scream of horror.

Involuntarily, he stopped. "Kenny?"

Damn it! I can't leave him here! Cam's mind screamed. But I don't want to die here, either!

Loyalty won out, and Campbell headed back to where he had last heard Kenny, or thought he had. "Kenny? Kenny? *Kenny?*"

Campbell was about to give up and head out of the woods when the moon abruptly appeared and illuminated the clearing that he had not managed to make it out of.

Cam looked down and a wave of revulsion and horror swept over him like a tidal wave. The moonlight was bright enough so that Cam could see the mutilated and mangled body of Kenny Butler.

Oh my God! They killed Kenny! Were Campbell's last lucid thoughts before hearing a sharp *Fleep! Fleeowweep!* He turned just in time to see a strange bird-like creature with a deformed head and gleaming talons flying through the air, straight at him.

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Campbell managed a dry croak before the beast descended upon him. Then, all was silent.

The breeze picked up again, insects resumed their chorus, and the pines whistled once more. The moon continued to shine down on the little clearing, casting a pale glow over two bloody, lifeless bodies.

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