

## The Fiends of the Forest

On the outskirts of a Colorado town called Lampweed was a neighborhood bordering a forest mountain. The mountain divided Lampweed from its neighboring town, Docborough. Both towns were populated by divorcees who would rather have their mansions to themselves than allow their bothersome offspring to jump on the furniture, so the sidewalks were often too crowded.

Zack Halo was a special case. He was one of the few kids with a determined cassanovetta for a mother. The other kids had mothers who relished their bachelorettehood and the loneliness it offered, so he was shunned among his peers. He sulked around the streets, kicking a used-up Juicy-juice can. His brother's need for privacy was to blame. With mom out on the prowl, Steve had his own date life to cultivate in secret. Well, it was no secret from Zack. He knew, and that was the main reason he'd been ushered out the door.

He was bored to pieces, except whenever some bully or junior kingpin came along, and then he was *in* pieces. He took up a goal: find another kid in the same sinking boat, then bond with him over it. Maybe they could team up and throw some rocks at their tormentors.

"No, I think rocks deserve respect," said the first outcast he came across. "Rocks aren't man-made, like that tin can. Like dirt, sky, and water, rocks should be used to build something, or keep something alive, not to make it die."

Her name was Piper. She might have had the sort of red hair she could camouflage herself in a barrel of mackintoshes with if it weren't full of twigs, leaves, and dirt. Zack was curious, but he wasn't rude enough to ask if there were eggshells in there as well. That's what it looked like. He also wasn't manly enough to admit that his point in throwing rocks was to keep

*him* alive. But in talking to Piper, he'd noticed a sort of reluctance among the sidewalk toughs to come over and beat on his head with boxes in grocery bags.

"Well, maybe it isn't necessary. Nobody's coming over to pound me."

"They're not coming over to pound me either. And do you know why?"

Some friendly looking kids ambled their way. One look at Piper's "Wild-woman" attire, though, and they turned around and sped off full steam.

"Well, no, but... you know, I'm not running away. Oh wait, it's because you don't fit in, right? Neither do I. My brother kicked me out of the house so he can schamoosh with his girlfriend. I'll bet they fit in with their high school friends, and that makes them suck."

"My mother fits in," said Piper. "She wants me to fit in, but that's not why she put me outside. She just wants the house to herself while she throws out the garden I tried to plant in my bedroom."

Zack began to reevaluate his goals for meeting this "other misfit friend." Now even he was starting to feel a magnetic repulsion against this girl.

"You planted a garden? Why?"

"Because of the kid who lives next door. His mom doesn't care one way or another whether he fits in. So instead of fitting in with these swines," she gestured to a flock of summer fashionistas across the street, "I wanted to join his inner circle. We can see one another's bedroom. I've seen him grinning and waving at me. He's not only got a garden, he's got a jungle."

Just then, a car honked. A patrol car. It had a middle-aged bald man in the back seat who shook his fist at them. Zack noticed a trend in that the cars began to drive a little slower as they passed. Perhaps they were looking at them, thinking of contacting a higher authority.

“I think we’d better get moving. Which way is your house?”

Piper pointed, and they took that direction.

Of course, Zack had no intention on meeting Piper’s mother. Any woman who’d evict her own child certainly wouldn’t welcome a stranger. His idea was to meet this neighbor. Piper detailed what she could see of the kid’s bedroom from her window; banana trees, flytraps, vines, the works. It wasn’t merely the plants that made Zack curious. After all, if he wanted to look at plants all day, he could stare out his back window at the mountain forest.

No, what intrigued him the most was the arrangement of these plants. This kid apparently used nature as his own furniture. He’d suspended a birdbath from ivy to use as a hammock. His bed was an elaborate nest made of elephant ears and pines. His bedroom didn’t even have a roof; several oaks grew through it, allowing him to climb out whenever he could. This was a kid who didn’t need to be kicked out of the house. This was a kid who would voluntarily leave when he wanted.

It was all true. Zack identified the house based on the trees growing out of it. Various parts of the roof seemed to be gateways for allowing trees to grow through them. The house was otherwise normal; too big for any fewer than eight people to be living in, but likely owned out of conformity.

“It’s a little crazy that your Mom doesn’t take you and move away. That oak up there... man. Really makes the house stand out, doesn’t it?”

“She can move away herself. I’m staying right here.”

Piper ringed the doorbell, and a young woman, seemingly too young to even have been married—let alone divorced—invited them in. “Why, you must be here to see Tony. Tony loves it when other children admire his handiwork.”

“I’ve been admiring it since I moved in, Mrs. Vincetti. I even tried to replicate it.”

“Oh my my, I can’t imagine you got very far, not with your mama—”

“Uh, hey, um,” Zack tried to think up a question that required urgency. “Where’s your bathroom?”

“Oh, we had that removed once we moved in. We compost.”

Zack didn’t know what that was. Piper’s question helped to clear things up.

“Then you respect the water? You don’t throw your waste in it?” Mrs. Vincetti nodded. Piper sighed. “I wish the rest of the Lampweed women respected nature so much.”

“Oh, we don’t just respect nature, we revere it. Go up to Tony’s room and you’ll see what I mean.”

The house didn’t have a stair case. Zack and Piper climbed up to Tony’s bedroom through the ceiling-piercing oak. Once they reached the top, they knocked on a trap door and pulled themselves up.

“Say, you’re the girl who lives next door to me. It sure is a shame what your old lady’s doing to your room over there.”

“Yes, she thinks she’s won for now. But I’m having another go.”

“And waste all those precious plants?” said Tony’s other guest. “Shame on you. I thought you believed in better.”

She was too young to be wearing make-up, but she wore it anyway. Unlike Piper, she seemed a little adamant about keeping nature out of her hair. She was a bleach blonde with her hair tied up in a ponytail. She wore a jacket and blue jeans. Zack thought that the clothes underneath might be very stylish, but not worth exposing to all the wood or pollen around here.

Once he took his eyes off the argument, he was overcome with spring fever. Tony had arranged the plants in such a way as to create the illusion that nature could grow into a bedroom suitable to the modern-day boy. Every basic element had a botanical counterpart. Where the television might have been was an epic drama between dragonflies and a flytrap, with the former trying to extract nectar from the latter without getting stuck. What would be a closet in a normal boy's bedroom was a hollowed out hickory trunk in Tony's. And while all the normal kids had ceiling fans to circulate air, Tony had an upside down palm tree. Exactly where its roots were was anyone's guess.

"Gee, Piper," Zack hung from a branch and exercised his legs. "Do you think you'll even live in that house long enough to catch up to this?"

"No, but I do think I'll burn her out."

Piper looked through the window. Zack could see over her shoulder someone wrapped up in paper towels shoveling up gardenias and dumping them all into a bucket.

"Good grief, she's not naked, is she?"

Piper ducked as her mother opened up the window and dumped out the bucket. No, she wasn't naked, but the dress she wore beneath the cheap mummy wrap was in no condition to be doing any gardening in. In fact, its only imaginable use would be to go to a ritzy restaurant in and carry around a tray full of shrimp cocktails. No sane woman would bother with dirty work in it.

Piper obviously couldn't watch the fun, but Tony and the other girl crowded the window, allured by the suggestion that they might see someone naked. "Wow, Faye, you really ought to wear that sometime," said Tony.

Faye scowled at him. "She might be naked."

“Yeah, you really ought to wear that.”

“She’s not naked,” said Zack. “But I really don’t think she’d like to know we see her.”

“Excuse me,” said Piper. “I’m the one who doesn’t want to be seen.”

Tony looked away from the window. “You’re not ashamed of me already, are you?”

“You don’t understand. I know why my mother is wearing that dress. She takes her fitting in to drastic measures. If she knew I was here with you, then we’d never see each other again.”

Zack began to wonder what might cause his own mother to take away his own social privileges. He was grateful for her negligence. Any more attentive mother would have seen Mrs. Vincetti for the indulgent enabler she was. She would have yanked her child straight out of that permissive environment.

Speaking of environments, he decided to make the best of this one that he possibly could. He was grateful to Piper for having such a good neighbor.

\*

Every weekday after school, he would head straight for Tony’s house. Sometimes Mrs. Vincetti would have a boyfriend there, but Zack was fairly certain he was just a means for Mrs. Vincetti’s outlier aesthetic. He’d change from time to time; she seemed to be juggling multiple faux boyfriends. Meanwhile, Tony kept his own company stagnant: Piper, Faye, and Zack. Never would there be anyone new.

“Hey Tony,” said Zack, “how come I never see any of the other kids from school?”

This was during a game of sardine. Since Tony’s room had no doors, he deliberately fooled the girls into thinking he’d climb out the roof in order to hide out in the forest.

“They’re all wholly indoor kids,” guessed Tony. “Not a lot of people like to see someone take the outdoors and put it indoors. Just look at Mrs. Link.” Zack wondered who he was talking about, but Tony quickly explained that Piper’s surname was Link. “To be honest, kids *used* to come over, but their moms were sick of them tracking dirt and bark onto the carpet. They made them stay home.”

“Huh. Now *that* is strange. I thought the Lampweed moms all wanted to get rid of their kids.”

“Pfft. Speak for yourself.”

Mrs. Halo never did bother with anything beyond the basic maternal duties; cook dinner, clean house, see kids off to school, ask generic questions about their day. Steve had blackmailed Zack out of tattling by threatening to set his bed sheets on fire, but Zack didn’t care. He didn’t even taunt Steve with an “I-know-something-you-don’t-know” mantra. He sat through family dinners with an air of resignation, after which he organized his room in a way that would allow plants to grow.

Every adventure in Tony’s bedroom was a humbling experience. For certain, Zack’s own bedroom would never be so florally developed.

“Zack, since you’re the heaviest, you’re naturally the one on top,” said Piper.

They were organizing a “monkey vine.” One person would hang from a branch, someone lighter would hang from the branch hanger’s leg, a lighter person would hang from *that* person’s leg, and on down the line.

“I’m not sure that branch is strong enough.” Zack tugged on it. “Faye, aren’t you afraid of getting squashed?”

“If I was afraid, I wouldn’t have decided this game in the first place.”

Faye's hair seemed immune to the tussle of the jungle. Ever tied up in that ponytail, Zack hadn't seen so much as a single hair stray away. By contrast, Piper's own composure seemed to get a little more disarrayed with each consecutive visit. It had started out with considerable antigenous debris, sure, but now there seemed to be more twigs and leaves than hair. It was inspiring, in a way. Her clothes had adopted the same style; pollen, seeds, and mud sprinkled various places around her jeans and sweater. The effect, as compared to Faye's unfazable hygiene, was almost magnetic.

"I'll have to hang from your foot," said Piper. "There's a bramble patch growing around the third person down, and I don't want to get thorns."

"But that means *I'll* get the thorns," whined Tony.

"I think you'll be safe."

They commenced the hanging. Zack hugged his safety branch, Piper wrapped her arms around his feet, and the spectacular weight to which Tony and Faye added up to brought out his inner atesmatic.

"Don't start wheezing," yelled Tony. "Faye isn't even off the ground yet."

"Yes," said Faye. "Yes, I am. Don't forget how dangerous this really is."

Zack's grip ended after his attempt to tighten it. Faye never even hung on in the first place, and the other three fell straight to the floor, with Zack and Piper side-by-side.

Lying there on Tony's floor, Zack realized that Mrs. Vincetti and Mrs. Halo had one principle thing in common: permissiveness. They had different styles of permissiveness, Mrs. Halo's the result of neglected parental investment, Mrs. Vincetti's a militant indulgence, but if Tony could recruit a girlfriend under his mother's eye, why couldn't Zack do the same? After all, he had no intention of taking romance nearly as far as Steve had.



“Say, Piper?” he said. “Can I ask you a question? See... we’ve been going here together for weeks now, and, you know how we never see any new kids coming over? Boys or girls?”

“I should hope not!”

Just then, some done-up painted city woman turned her blazing gaze on Piper. “So *this* is the place that has been corrupting my own blood!”

Mrs. Link scurried into the room and pulled Piper to her feet. Somewhere along the way, a disapproving tree branch got a hold of her dress and made a slight tear in it. Through the eyes of Mrs. Link, the tear was not so tiny.

“This is preposterous.” Mrs. Link surveyed her surroundings while Mrs. Vincetti climbed up after her.

“It’s all part of the décor, Tula.” Mrs. Vincetti clasped her hands, pleading for the other mother to see her son’s bedroom in a favorable light. But Mrs. Link—Tula? She could not possibly have been born with that showgirls’ name—had focused in on some sticky yellow bulge growing out of the tree, something shaped like a giant throat lozenge, orbited by gnats.

“This is a disgrace to our community, Veronica.”

“Nikki,” corrected Mrs. Vincetti. “Veronica is my mother.”

“Veronica is ashamed, then.” And with that she ushered her daughter towards the trapdoor through which she entered, only remembering that it was a fifteen foot drop when Piper’s foot reached the ledge. Then she just ordered her daughter down. Mrs. Vincetti followed them.

“That was Piper’s mother?” scoffed Faye. “I hardly recognized her without the toilet paper.” Zack thought that the very same paper would be better suited draped all over Mrs. Link’s house.

“And here I was,” he said, “thinking I was about to get a girlfriend.”

“Oh, you want a girlfriend? You can borrow Faye every once in a while, if you need to. We have spaghetti Tuesday afternoons, though. Can’t break those dates.”

Zack didn’t answer. Neither did Faye, so she had to be a second-hand girlfriend to Tony, or even a third-hand girlfriend. Zack wanted someone all to himself. At the moment, Mrs. Link had her daughter all to herself.

\*

Zack returned to the Vincetti’s, but without Piper and her increasingly botanical hairstyle, the jungle felt oddly lifeless; morbid, desolate drafts punctured his energy. This didn’t go unnoticed by Tony or Faye. While he sat on a bed of monkey grass, trying to refresh his zest, they would proceed with the games of hide and seek or the climbing races. It was only a matter of days before Zack left the group himself. He was sure of it.

One evening, he left Tony’s house and understood that the afternoon play had taken on the same dull monotony as dinner with his mom and brother. He needed another place to go, somewhere just as natural as Tony’s bedroom. There was such a place directly behind Lampweed’s outskirts neighborhood. It was the forest.

It was an uphill climb, but the Lampweed women didn’t segregate themselves from the Docborough men with a plateau. Naturally, they’d need something hard to cross. If Zack himself ever wanted to permanently divide himself from Steve and Mom, then a forest mountain would do the trick. He could barely traverse it himself. With any luck, his youthful exuberance would not fail him when the time came.

Atop the first hill, he could see the forest’s margin but very little of what lay inside. He looked back at the neighborhood. A light was on in every house. Surely everyone was having

dinner right now, however reluctantly, with their cagey, skin-flint, happily divorced mothers. He turned back to the forest and saw Piper emerge with a bucket.

Zack called out and ran towards her. Keeping his balance was tricky; he tripped more than once on his way down, but he did make it without injury.

“You escaped,” he remarked. “Look, things aren’t fun anymore at Tony’s house. Do you think we should—” He noticed that she carried soil in the bucket. “What’s that? You’re not still thinking of planting your own garden in your bedroom, are you?”

“It got me thrown out of the house last time. There’s no question it’ll get me thrown out again.”

“But you *are* out of the house. Come on, Piper, don’t try to grow what Tony has. That’ll take forever. Where’d you get that dirt, anyway?”

She pointed toward the forest and grinned. “Where else?”

“That soil doesn’t belong to you, you know. You’re the one who said we should all respect the Earth.”

“I think of it as recruiting the Earth to help me do my dirty work.”

A soft crack interrupted their argument. It wasn’t like a branch snapping, it was more like two bricks colliding.

“What’s going on back there?” said Zack.

“I don’t know.”

“How could you not know? You were just in there. You know, they might be disrespecting the Earth.”

Another soft crack. It was like two bricks colliding, shattering, and showering the ground with their dust organs. Piper dropped her pail to investigate. Zack followed her in.

The noise continued, although with closer inspection, Zack heard the colliding masonry as more of a pop, as if a popcorn bag had been unwisely overstuffed and then microwaved to the point of bursting. Accompanying the pops was a series of lights, mostly blue and red. Was there a celebration going on in Docborough?

“Docborough men don’t celebrate,” said Piper. “Or if they do, they celebrate using beer, not fireworks.”

“Sorta like we celebrate by going to Tony’s indoor jungle.”

“What were we celebrating? I thought we were just hanging out.”

“Independence from our mothers.”

“Hmm... seems to me we were given that. I’d think a celebration would come after something we earned.”

Zack stopped dead in his tracks and tried to think of the most forceful way he could show how offensive she was. The distant fireworks were too distracting, though, so he confronted her the usual way.

“Don’t be such a snoot. I was going to ask you out right before your mom came over and took you away.”

Piper slowed, but she hesitated to stop completely. In Zack’s mind, he’d made considerable impact to distract her even that much from the call of the wild. “I guess I should automatically say ‘yes’ if I expect us to remain friends.”

“Why not at least give me a try?”

“I am giving you a try. I’m giving you a tree—”

Whatever she was about to say next remained a mystery for the rest of everyone’s life, because all of the sudden, a tree caught fire. It was like something out of an action film, only

instead of a filthy, villainous vehicle like an oil truck, something innocent and in need of a little love and care was the victim. Instantly, Zack and Piper found something upon which to agree. Whoever had launched the missile did not have ecological care at the top of his priorities.

“Fire! Fire, help!” cried Zack.

Piper grabbed him by the arm. “Don’t yell. The men could be drunk and come after us next.” Still holding on to his arm, she dragged him back towards Lampweed. The blur of trees, vines and bushes blocked his view of the tree’s surroundings. Was anyone coming to help it? He couldn’t know. All he knew was that a tree was on fire, and its black ebony flesh was dying a little more with the lick of the flames.

“Where are we going? We need to throw dirt on the fire! We can’t give up like this!”

“We can’t protect the Earth if we’re not around to protect it,” countered Piper.

It looked like they wouldn’t be. Out there, in front of the hill, Mrs. Link and Mrs. Halo stood side-by-side with their arms outstretched. Zack escaped Piper’s grip through a trip over the bucket she’d dropped. Even still, Piper kept running, straight into her mother’s incarceratory two-armed grip.

“Evil child! I ought to contact a reform agency.” Mrs. Link scowled at her peer. “That goes for you too. That goes for all three of you. You, Jennifer Halo, bringing a man into your domain so easily, you, Piper Jo Link, sneaking off into the woods with a boy I do not know, and you, Zachary Halo—”

“Leave my son out of this.” Mrs. Halo picked up her son and brushed him off.

“I shall not,” warned Mrs. Link. “Especially if he succeeds in deceiving my daughter a second time, which he will certainly not do. I will make certain of that.”

She escorted her daughter away over the hill. She was remarkably dextrous for a woman in stiletto heels. Zack couldn't count the leaves and small creatures she skewered on the way home.

"Oh, Zack," said Mrs. Halo. "What am I going to do with you?"

\*

All Mrs. Halo did with her younger son was ground him before immediately returning her attention to the boyfriend of the week. Steve wasn't around for some reason. For all Zack knew, the idiot had been caught socializing with Leah in a way even Mrs. Vincetti wouldn't approve of, so she said, "All right, buster, only *I*, the owner of this house, get to go that far. Out. Now. If you're going to do that, it's not going to be under my roof."

But Steve's transgressions weren't any of his business. Piper's freedom, on the other hand, was. He skulked past his uncomfortably busy mother to raid the garage for a tool box. Steve and Leah were there, and they took Zack's paralyzed horror for nosiness.

"Damn you, pulp-head," snarled Steve, "can't a guy get any privacy around here?"

Leah, clearly turned off, pushed her boyfriend off and readjusted her garments. "More like damn *you*, Steve. You told me we'd go all the way tonight, and the only place we've gone are places where moms and pee-wees can spy on us."

Zack's eagerness to rescue Piper was a little frosted by the apparent algorithm for teenage reasoning. "You guys are not bright. You don't really expect to get any privacy in a garage, do you?"

Steve wanted to cream him, but Leah kicked him in the shin. "This place stinks! I want to go out into the forest and be admired by all the woodland creatures!"

“Screw that.” Steve rubbed his shin. “I need somewhere private. Forests don’t offer any privacy.”

“Um, I know where you can get all the privacy you need.”

Steve scoffed, but Leah slapped him, warning him that he’d better not go back on his word if he wanted mutual love. Zack continued, “It’s at Mrs. Vincetti’s house. Seriously, her son’s as young as I am, and he has his own girlfriend, who’s also my age.

“Woah, anybody *that* lenient has gotta have their own teen make-out room! I’m in.”

Poor dumb teenaged Steve and his poor dumb teenaged girl trophy. Zack led them away, with the stars closing in around the clouds, and got to Mrs. Vincetti’s house.

“This strapping young couple,” Zack introduced his brother and sister in outlaw, “needs a private room to get acquainted with one another. Even though my mom thinks they’re acquainted enough.”

Mrs. Vincetti raised her eyebrow. “Neither of you are Tula Link’s offspring, are you?”

“I don’t even know who that is,” said Leah. Then she remembered to have manners and use them. “But bless your house, if it has a room for our privacy.”

“I don’t know who Tulippo is, but I’m the brother of... uh...” There was no way Steve could refer to or address Zack without insulting him, so he just pointed.

“Well, you’re welcome in here, my guests. As long as your mothers do not turn out to be like the one who lives next door to me.”

While Mrs. Vincetti led the teenaged dopes away, Zack headed off to Tony’s room.

“Guys, two things: We’ve got to rescue Piper, and then we’ve got to save the forest!” Zack climbed around the room. “Guys? Faye? Tony? Listen to me, this is important!”

The two were looking through their window at Piper's house. When Zack joined in, he saw her using sign language while he and the other two stared haplessly.

"What is she saying?" said Zack. "Can either of you even read sign language?"

"No," said Faye, "but it does look like an emergency."

Zack took a minute to marvel at Faye calling something that didn't involve the ruination of her hair or hygiene an emergency, then grabbed a vine.

"I know exactly what's going on," he said. "We've got to save her."

He tied it around a coconut and slung it out the window, only for it to shatter the wrong one. One, for that matter, to a room Mrs. Link was in.

"Vandals!" she thrust her head out the window. "I shall sic the law and all its legal might on you!" Then she darted away, presumably to dial 9-1-1.

"Okay, that's where I draw the line." Tony scrambled away towards his "belonging branch," the thing that substituted for a closet. "I hear Docborough's nice this time of year. Faye, how's about you and I spend the rest of our lives there?"

"But Tony," cried Zack. "Piper needs us now more than ever. What if she has bars on her door? Here mother threatened to take her to a reform school."

Faye took a deep breath. "We women have to stick together. The votes are two against one. You lose."

But Tony continued to pack. Zack had seen a little too much of his hospitality to be comfortable with his disloyalty. If Tony was willing to show his dark side, then Zack could darn well show his own.

"You know, Faye just might not be your girlfriend when you get back."

"Who cares?" snapped Tony. "Love can't live forever."



“True enough. But I think you ought to know that before you move to Docborough, there are apparently a gang of drunk men cavorting around in there.” Zack felt as though he were getting ahead of himself. He’d never used a word like “cavorting” before. “By ‘in there,’ I mean in the forest dividing that town from ours. They’ve got fireworks they’ve been using as weapons, and the whole forest could combust at any second.”

Tony continued to pack, but at a slower rate. The threat of a burning birch tree just didn’t trump the threat of a malicious mother. Why should he be afraid of mothers? His own was a human lamb.

Faye was fed up with it all. “Are you thinking of dumping me?” she demanded. “What do you mean, ‘love doesn’t last forever’? What kind of hopeless sentiment is that?”

Tony shrugged. “We’ve all got single parents, don’t we?”

Faye was about to branch off the argument by threatening to initiate the divorce process if they ever got married. She got as far as claiming custody of the seventh daughter when a grape hit her in the ear.

“Oops, I was aiming for Tony.” Piper struggled to crawl in through the window.

“Piper, you’re saved!” Zack seized her sleeve to help pull her in while Faye followed close behind. “Here, grab ahold of this sycamore branch.”

Piper declined, and as Zack insisted a little more, he saw that a bird had made a nest in it. Three unhatched eggs lay in the center, and it made Zack wonder what other wildlife had come to live in this room. He also wondered whatever happened to that tree they’d abandoned.

“Come on, guys. We can’t just hang around here like a couple of teenagers I could name. We’ve got a forest to save.”

“Not me, brother.” Tony folded his arms and turned. “I’ve got all the forest I need right here.”

“Fine, stay here, then,” said Faye. “And while you’re at it, you can find yourself another girlfriend as well. Good luck finding one as stain-free as I am. Don’t forget I took a dirt bath and came out as white as a lily. Nobody else can do that.”

The three of them scampered down the vines and branches before filing out the trap door. By the time they got to the foyer, Tony caught up to them.

“You jerks would really leave me alone up there. Meanies.”

“Let’s just hit the road before your mom comes back.”

Zack wasn’t sure why Mrs. Vincetti, lenient as she was, had to be left in the dark over the forest fire business. Through his own lightening fast reasoning, though, he knew that she had to draw the line somewhere, and the idea of kids taking on adults with fireworks as weapons was likely the toe before the line.

\*

By now, it was late evening. The kids had to sneak between the houses so as to avoid Mrs. Link, who now patrolled the nearby curb. She had no doubt become wise of Piper’s breakout, evidenced not by her calling out, “Piper” (for she was too crafty for that), but by her ill-composed bush disguise, held together over that omniscient cocktail dress.

When they were clean out of earshot, Zack said, “Sooner or later, that dress will get ruined. Just how many cocktail dresses does your mother have?”

“I haven’t looked in her closet. I’ve only ever known her to wear that one thing.”

These were some odd women. Faye never got dirty, Piper never got clean, and Mrs. Link only wore the same thing over and over.

The pops and cracks that had so allured Piper and Zack were not commencing. Perhaps if they wandered far enough they'd smell the smoke of the smoldering tree, but there was no trail to follow. They'd also accustomed themselves to the man-made jungle of Tony's house. The authentic forest was surreal and uninviting, accompanied by the bitter smell of beer. Zack recognized it from the breath of one of his mother's boyfriends.

"Eeuh," said Tony, "what smells like fermented toast?"

"Drunk guys," whispered Zack. "They set a tree on fire. They don't belong out here."

"Wait, do you have any plans?" said Faye. "I didn't come out here to be kidnapped by rough Docboroughians."

"We'll steal their fireworks," said Piper. "We will hop around and destroy anything they might kindle a fire with."

"Yeah, great plan, if we can find them in the first place," said Tony.

The first place they found was a cabin. The doors were unlocked, so naturally, it was a sign that they should waltz right in.

"I think we hit the jackpot," said Tony. "My dad's an alcoholic. And forgetting to lock the front door is a symptom of alcoholism."

Piper shushed him. "Do you here something moving upstairs?"

"Careful," said Zack, "It might be bears."

Faye shushed him. "Don't be ignorant. The Docborough men exterminated the last of the wild carnivores over one hundred twenty years ago."

"Hhmp. Doesn't make it any safer."

They went upstairs anyway, where they found, not the secret stash of illegal forest burning inventory, but a pile of parent comafying clothes and the teenagers who should have

been wearing them. Their names were Steve Halo and Leah Evans. They heard the kids come in and stopped dead in their action.

“You idiots,” groaned Steve, “can’t we have even five minutes to make out?”

“You’re the idiot,” countered Zack, “you *had* a make-out room, a private one where nobody could stumble in on you. And what do you do? You come out here to the middle of the woods where drunken men set trees on fire.”

“No, *you’re* the idiot,” scolded Leah. “If you think we’d make out in a room that smells like garlic, you can just jump out the window.”

“You idiot,” snapped Faye, “Like making out in a room you can’t escape from is any better.”

A door slammed downstairs.

And the fact that they couldn’t escape this second floor cabin situation came to life. Steve and Leah scrambled to get dressed, with Leah complaining that this was the worst date she’d ever been on, and the younger kids took their hiding places. It was not an easy thing to do. Drunken Docborough men usually didn’t decorate their houses, given that they had nobody to impress except themselves on how much less shallow they were than their wives. Inevitably, then, the six underage woodland vigilantes had to make do under the bed. All the while, Steve and Leah brainstormed ways to renew their make-out session, onlookers or no. And then the men came upstairs. It was enough to silence everyone.

None of the Lampweed children had seen their fathers since their divorces. What now stood before them was the ultimate result of feminine deprivation. These blokes were lumberjacks; bearded, staggering, broad. They wore plaid flannel and boots the size of cinderblocks. Zack made a mental note to come back and measure their footprints, especially

when the two men walked directly up to the bed and left his foot a quarter-foot away from his face.

“Somebody’s been sleeping in my bed.”

“Not by the hair on my chinny-chin-chin.”

Zack held his breath. That granny’s-uncle smell of beer seeped through the boot and brought tears from his eyes.

“Can’t be my dad. Must be yours.”

Zack never knew who said that. He did know that a chorus of sharp shushing followed immediately after, and that the next incident, the mighty overturning of the lumbermen bed, proved that the two hadn’t gone deaf.

And to think the fireworks could have been just behind the cabin.

There was a lot of rolling and kicking next, both on the parts of the divorced dads and the Lampweed lads. Faye and Piper dashed down the stairs, promising they had “the cause in mind,” while Leah screamed directly into the grown-ups ear.

“Knock it off, you’ll make him sober!” Steve, free of one lumberman’s grip, grabbed Leah by the arm and tore down the stairs.

Zack himself kicked and stomped the other’s boot. It was evident, however, that the man had a hold of Tony, and that his alcohol intake had numbed him of any possible pain.

“Go on without me,” wailed Tony. “Leave my bedroom forest in Piper’s care, she knows what to do!” Zack followed his orders, and ignored the renouncement implied by, “What, you’re really gonna leave me here?”

Maybe the lumberjacks were cuddlier than they appeared. At any rate, he needed to save the forest.

Steve and Leah were long gone, apt to tattle on the rest of them. More importantly, Faye and Piper had found a trail of beer bottles, paper and gun powder, no doubt leading all the way back to Docborough.

“Guys,” said Zack, “You know this might lead to the reunion of our moms and dads, right?”

Faye dropped her head. “We won’t be able to manipulate them like we used to.”

Zack had only now noticed it, but Faye’s clothes looked somewhat disarrayed. A few of her hairs managed to escape her scrunchie, and even the scrunchie looked weary of life.

“It is every divorcee’s child’s fantasy,” said Piper, “that their original parents will reunite in matrimony.”

The three of them, all children of single men and women, stood around in a circle, looking at one another’s faces. They were not certain what they were looking for; characteristics of their parents, perhaps? Zack could only imagine what they saw in his face. Abandonment of those closest to him, no doubt. Just like his mother.

A distant echo from the direction of Lampweed prompted him to seek an obsessive, paranoid clinginess in Piper’s face. It *should* have caused him to head straight towards Docborough.

“Quick!” said Piper. “Mother’s on our trail.”

“But what about the reunion?”

“It’s a win-win situation, for all I care.”

Faye obeyed much sooner. Zack had to stand by and wait a little longer to ascertain the source as Mrs. Link. Mrs. Link it was, alongside a band of other angry mothers with torches and cans of lighter fluid.

“Hey!” he shouted. “Don’t burn down the forest, it never did anything for you!” Still, he was never one to hold his ground, nor did he do so now. “It did what you wanted it to do, it separated you from your exes forever!”

The reply was so mixed and garbled that he couldn’t continue the argument. He caught sight of Piper and Faye, who were climbing up a rocky slope. Zack began to wonder if he should have just redirected the mom mob to the cabin lumberjacks. He voiced his concern to the girls.

“No good,” said Faye. “They’d just burn it down, and what if Tony’s still in there? He’s a lousy boyfriend when push comes to shove, but I’d like to give him room to practice.”

Zack spotted a cave, but didn’t suggest that they used it to give the moms the slip.

“I thought you said you’d marry him just to initiate a divorce.”

“And imitate Piper’s mother? Pfft. I’m not that ‘progressive.’”

The mothers below had settled for a brainstorming session. They were not lean and agile like they used to be, and carrying torches up a mountain would be risky and impractical.

“Do you think we have them beat?” said Zack.

“Not by molehill,” said Piper. “They know this mountain a little better than we do. Remember, they’re the ones who made the journey from Docborough, so many years ago.”

“Oh, fruitcakes,” whined Faye. “If only we’d been more rebellious in our toddlerhood and explored the area without anyone’s permission.” She pulled herself over a fallen tree, from which bugs crawled out in single file. “I can only presume that we are now reaping the harvest of our juvenile sloth back then.”

Atop the mountain, the three could see Docborough. Although it was late into the night, the town was alive with the reveling loneliness of their dads. Fireworks weren’t going off, but oh, the traffic accidents! Taxi cabs and pickup trucks collided for the love of spirits. Oh, the

vandalism! Grown men with grown beards stuffed stockings and panty hoes with expensive jewelry, twinkling in the moonlight, then hurled it through their neighbor's windows. Other grown men carried their sleeping friends outdoors on sofas, just so that other men could honk their horns as they drove by.

Faye grimaced. "Have our dads all turned into werewolves?"

"Be courageous," said Piper. "Something even more dangerous is waiting at the foot of this mountain, but we must break through.

They descended, artfully dodging loose ledges and fallen trees. Once they saw the margin of Docborough, they saw the danger that Piper predicted.

Their mothers, evidently, had patrolled the forest on a regular basis. A line of them now stood hand and hand, daring them to continue their journey.

"Do as I say," said Piper. "Faye, Zack, we shall form a human boulder. Latch onto my legs and we shall bowl them over."

Zack couldn't keep track of where they were going while they were rolling. To his horror, the women had braced themselves for this, standing one behind the other.

Like a stack of dominoes!

They slammed Mrs. Hoopes squarely in the stomach when they collided, picked themselves up, and forced themselves to race towards Docborough.

"No!" Screamed the mothers. "No husbands! No fathers! No former marri-mories!"

Zack hadn't any idea what the woman was trying to say. He'd just rammed the stomach of a school snob's mother, and possibly cracked a few ribs as a result. He himself lost a shoe, and he'd sprained his ankle too. Faye was refreshingly sweaty, and Piper panted as she passed the welcome sign.



The mothers had regrouped and now chased after them.

Piper rang a doorbell. She didn't stick around to find out who'd come out, and anyway, the answer was another lumberjack being thrown out on his face.

"Ex-wives!" Faye ran straight towards the middle of a park and started screaming. "Your Ex-wives are all here!"

Piper rang doorbell after doorbell; about half the men answered, or at least opened the door to dump out a litter box. The other half was probably watching football. Zack might have been too influenced by the gynocracy of Lampweed, but he believed that watching football was no way to practice modeling for the cover of the next Brawny Man paper towel logo. He crawled into the window of one of the unanswered doors, nearly got his foot snatched by one of the angry mothers (who *still* tried to put an end to the charade), then went to the living room, where to broad plaid-clad beard nerds were doing *anything* but living.

They were watching golf, in fact. Zack did not approve, yet he leaned over the back of the couch between them.

"It's hard being a bachelor, huh?" he said to one. He didn't know whose dad he was. His own, Piper's, Tony's, Faye's, or even Leah's. "Especially a Docborough bachelor." He addressed the other. "Who says our wives get full-time custody of our kids?"

"Our wives do."

"Figures. Not much of men, are we, to sit around and let our wives dictate our lives and our kids lives in this manner, huh? It's no wonder they left us."

"Nope. It sure isn't."

Zack started to choke. His manipulation skills were rusty. Actually, they were non-existent. Not that they needed to be otherwise, because just then, eight or nine moms tumbled through, knocking over the TV set and tackling all three males.

It's amazing what a man can do when deprived of his personal vices, because, in spite of the odds, six of these moms were gone from the living room and out on the street in a matter of seconds, leaving only the hand full of moms dragging Zack out the window.

"Dads, help! I'm being feminized!"

One of them wobbled back to the living room, squinting in disgust.

"Be a man, kid. Take it like a man, then give it like a man."

This confused his kidnappers/confiscaters enough to make them drop their spoil.

"What?" said Mrs. Forsyth. "Give what, exactly?"

Lumberdad shrugged. "Advice, gifts, affection, beats me. As for the rest of you, be women, ladies. Take it like women, then give it like women."

"Take and give *what?*"

"Children, duh." He went back to watching golf, although he had to tape a sports magazine page to the television set to actually be watching anything.

Mrs. Forsyth, Mrs. Hughes, and Mrs. Cinders turned around. They never thought the words of a male divorcee could have such impact. Mrs. Link came hurrying over, carrying Piper in tow.

"You've found one," she said. "Glory be. Now all we have to do is... Hilda, what is the matter?"

“Womanhood,” said Mrs. Forsyth. “That is the matter. Maybe we’ve been doing this the wrong way,” she said. “Maybe all this mayhem is due to us all setting up camp in manhoodsville, because we want revenge for these men having set up camp in womanshoodville.”

“I... I don’t understand.”

“You’re horribly masculine, Tula,” snapped Mrs. Hughes. “You say you speak the voice of the Lampweed women, when all you’ve done is lock up your own daughter in her bedroom.”

Tula dropped her daughter’s hand.

Docborough was still ablaze with angry mothers. Faye was still missing, and Tony’s fate was still a mystery. The Lampweed mothers were still divorced from their sedentary Docborough men. There was still a twitch of masculinity in Tula Link’s brow, but there was no doubt in Zack’s mind that it was now, and had always been, a dam for Tula’s tears. She had not travelled to manhoodsville, she had teleported there. She hadn’t warned her husband to vacate the sofa, she had vacated the house herself, just like the other Lampweed mothers.

“Mother,” said Piper. “Are we crossing the mountain a second time? At this hour?”

Tula didn’t answer. She went to the front door of the house, swallowed the lump in her throat, and rang the doorbell.