

Darkness. It devoured everything.

The sliver of moon above was barely bright enough to cast light through the dense canopy of trees that surrounded her.

The effort to stay quiet was becoming increasingly difficult the longer Stephanie's mind played tricks on her. Each sound, every shadow, was the monster she was running from.

What had started as a typical night with friends had turned into every woman's worst nightmare - being hunted by a stranger.

At first, there had been sneaking glances at the bar, then easy banter and flirting, and finally the decision to throw caution to the wind and leave with the person for some privacy.

Now she was running for her life in the stifling air of the woods she'd fled into.

A twig snapped to the right, and Stephanie held her breath. Crouched against a large tree, she closed her eyes and tried to slow her breathing.

"You can't hide forever," a voice called out, the elation sending shivers down Stephanie's spine. "I will catch you."

She clasped a hand over her mouth to stifle her sob as she shook her head and prayed for rescue.

She knew, God, she knew, that no one was coming.

Her friends thought she'd gone home with the stranger, cheering her on in their drunkenness.

Why did she ever think it was a good idea to go home with someone she didn't know? All she wanted was one night of worry-free fun while she was on vacation.

"Boo." The gleeful whisper came right by her ear, and Stephanie screamed. Hands seized her, hoisting her from her crouch and slammed her back into the tree.

She fought with everything in her to break free, but they were faster and stronger.

"That's cute," they chuckled, catching her wrist and pinning it above her head, breath hot against her ear. "But I win."

Searing pain exploded in her stomach, stealing the breath from her lungs. The knife slid in with terrifying ease. A scream got caught in her throat as the blade was yanked free and was then driven in again. She felt the warmth begin to pour down her stomach, the air becoming heavy with the metallic tang of blood.

The void closed in as her legs buckled, and she collapsed.

Crying, scrambling in the dirt.

Trying to cling to life.

They watched from a few feet away as Stephanie dragged herself across the forest floor, her movements becoming sluggish.

Blood soaked her shirt, her hands, and the ground beneath her. The dirt churned through her fingers as she clawed her way through the forest's leaves.

She continued to put one hand in front of the other, but her body faltered, no longer under her command.

She pictured her friends, her family, her life.

It wouldn't take long now for the wounds inflicted to rob her of the life she had left.

Stephanie stopped fighting, realizing her fate. Her beloved cat back home would wonder where she was. She would never fulfill the dreams she had for her future: meeting someone, starting a family, and growing old.

Their face blurred as her vision swam.

“Why?” she whispered.

They approached, their shoes crunching on the dry leaves, and smiled.

They bent down to lean in closer. “Why not?”

They caressed her face with chilling gentleness.

The last thing she saw was their eyes, bright with twisted excitement.