

The wind howled as the young girl tore through the night, sprinting faster than the moonlight that shone through the treetops. It was dark, and damp and miserable like exactly what you'd expect from a gloomy forest straight out of a horror movie, but nothing compared to the creatures that resided within it. Darkness prowls freely here.

Black. Everything was black. Her senses were muffled, suppressed by the muddy undergrowth that seemed to mock her as she stumbled along, her pace unfaltering even as stray branches sliced deep into her skin. Crimson leaked down her arms and legs, and her greasy nest of hair felt disgusting against her scalp, but it didn't matter. Not now.

Where was she? The girl was running blindly through the forest, not knowing or caring which direction she ran in, as long as it was away from that *thing*. But every tree looked the same, every branch and leaf and nest; They all looked the same. How was she supposed to find her way out?

Above her, something screeched, its cry piercing through the dense forest and shook her to the bone. It jolted her back to reality, the walls pressing in against her as she gasped for breath, pace finally faltering. The crackling of the leaves stopped, and all sound faded away until it was only her ragged breathing and an occasional chirp of the birds and the wind dancing among the branches, stirring up the leaves. Something was wrong. Where was it?

She must've twisted her ankle somewhere along the way, probably from stepping in a hole she didn't see. Gashes littered her body, reminders of the branches that lay too low, with red streaking her puffed and swollen face. She couldn't see them, not in the dark, but she could definitely feel it. The pain was just starting to set in, and she tried to push it aside like she had read in the books, but collapsed as she took another step. It was agonizing, and she knew she wouldn't make it any further, unless she dragged herself all the way.

No. If she was going to die, she wouldn't spend the last minutes of her life dragging herself away from inevitable danger. She would spend it proud and strong and brave, defying whatever came to claim her life until her dying breath. Then she would greet Death calmly, and take his or her hand gently when the time came.

A branch snapped, the sound ringing around the forest and alerting the young girl, who pushed herself against the bush of wildberries, hoping whatever that was hunting her would have eyesight as poor as she did. But she knew deep inside that if that were the case, it wouldn't have come so close already.

"Hello, little girl." A hauntingly sweet voice cooed out of the darkness, sending her heart into her throat. It was everywhere, beside her, above her, below her, and from her all at once. It was as if *she* herself was speaking. That was impossible, but somehow, in that moment, it made sense. "Don't be shy."

She tried to press herself deeper into the bush, but it only resulted in a loud rustling that she cursed herself for. The air quieted, and somehow the silence deepened. It was as if the earth itself had stood still in this thing's presence, afraid movement of any sort would risk angering it.

"Well, what do we have here?" The voice crooned softly, suddenly so close it was merely inches away from her, stopping right outside the bush until all that was between her and that thing were a tangle of branches and rustling leaves. "Looks like we found our little angel."