

Mill Creek

“It’s just a summer job,” Adam’s mom said, driving through the rain as the storm rumbled behind them through the mountains. “And it’ll—”

“Look good on my resume, I know,” Adam sighed. The trees outside the window rushed by in a blur, the rain streaked his window and the dark woods that flanked the car blended into a wall of shadow. “I’m not opposed to being outdoors, but all summer? And with Uncle Andy?”

“I thought you liked Uncle Andy?”

“When I was seven, yeah. He was this...goofy uncle with all these wild stories. Now, he’s weird.”

“So he’s eccentric,” Adam’s mom shrugged, “it’s not like he’s an ax murderer.”

“Did I mention the part about him living in the woods?”

“He’s an environmentalist. And he lives in a proper log cabin, it’s not like you’re going to be outside in weather like this.”

“Some of my friends are enjoying the summer off...”

“And those same friends will be looking for internship experience when they’re in their senior year. And you’re getting paid for it, too!”

“I’m only doing this because you and Dad are going on a cruise for a month. Most people would be fine with their twenty-year-old son staying home alone.”

“For a month? Not yet. Consider it this way: you and Uncle Andy are roommates for the summer. Do it right and maybe next summer you’ll get to spend some time relaxing at home. Deal?”

“Well, since that’s our exit? I don’t have much of a choice.”

“There is a town nearby, ya know. It’s not like you’ll be completely in the middle of nowhere.”

The rest of the drive was quiet, punctuated by the regular breaks in the radio for commercials. Adam kept time with the station announcing who played 'the best of the oldies!' every hour. Mill Creek was barely a town by Adam’s standards. It was a handful of houses that lined a road leading to a small cluster of two-story buildings that constituted downtown. Adam was already

bored as they drifted by the sleepy-looking diner and rolled off onto an ominous-looking dirt road.

Adam had very little time to examine Uncle Andy's house. It was an old log cabin with red shutters, a wild, unweeded garden, and lights glowing in every window. His mom rushed through the rain to knock on the door while Adam trudged behind with his suitcase.

"Welcome to Mill Creek!" Uncle Andy chuckled as he welcomed the pair in. "Not our normal weather, I assure you. Usually, it's a fair bit cozier when it's raining."

Uncle Andy was tall with, skinny arms and a beard with hair like wire bristles and a bald head under a winter cap. His glasses were thick and made his eyes look bigger like he was always surprised. Adam liked him well enough but doubted he and the scrawny ornithologist had much in common. Adam's mother stayed through dinner but left before the storm could finish. It rained for the rest of the night and Adam fell asleep to the sound of rain and the chill of the wind creeping in through the gaps in the cabin's walls.

The next day, Adam and Uncle Andy started the day by going to the diner. It was a slow day—at least, in Adam's opinion—with one old man at the counter working through a crossword, a pair of middle-aged ladies gossiping over coffee mugs, and a pair of teens arguing about a movie they'd watched earlier. Uncle Andy traded pleasantries with everyone before going to what Adam guessed was his regular table.

"Hey Andy!" the waitress grinned coming over. She was in her fifties with a plastered smile and too much morning 'pep' for Adam. "Who's this? Long lost son?"

"Not so lucky, Marie! This is my nephew, Adam. He'll be helping me out during the summer: a fresh pair of eyes and a strong back to get through the mountains."

"Well, nice to meet you, Adam! How you enjoying Mill Creek so far?"

"A bit rainy, but I'll manage."

"It grows on ya," Marie smiled. "I'll be sure to throw in something special with your order. Now, what can I get a couple of workin' men?"

Adam and Uncle Andy waited on their order while Uncle Andy talked him through everything they'd be doing for the day. As Uncle Andy prepared his tea, Adam glanced up as a girl walked

through the front door. She was wearing shorts and a tank top, with her red hair tied up in a loose bun as she walked behind the counter with a backpack slung over her shoulder.

“Marie’s niece, Gwen,” Uncle Andy said, noting Adam’s interest. “Came over from Montana or something similar.”

“Problems at home,” one of the gossiping women leaned over, slyly inserting herself into the conversation. “I say it was an unplanned pregnancy.”

“I say it was trouble with the law,” her companion said. “Probably on the run from her past...”

“You watch too many soap operas, Diane,” Uncle Andy scoffed. “Nothing wrong with coming out to Mill Creek for something different. We should all be so lucky for a fresh start.”

The rest of the day was in the woods, though luckily the rain had stopped. Adam followed behind Uncle Andy, noting his measurements on their way around the map and carefully cataloging all the birds in the area. A few birds of prey surprised Adam, but Uncle Andy was more interested in tiny finches or other twittering birds. Adam's uncle would point out the protected birds in the area he was studying and Adam took pictures as best he could. They tracked rabbits and foxes around the nests of their birds and Uncle Andy was relieved that no harm had come to the nests. They only stopped for a granola bar around noon but hiked around the woods for most of the day.

As the sun drifted to the top of the trees, Adam followed his Uncle Andy out of the forest and back to the diner. “I eat here most nights,” Uncle Andy confided. “Not for nothing, but I do enjoy the company compared to eating alone at home.”

The company in the diner was similar to the morning crowd, with only a few more tables filled with people in light conversation. Uncle Andy engrossed himself in the results of today's expedition, squinting at his phone every once in a while as he wrote in a notebook.

“I’m gonna step out for some air,” Adam said.

“Keep an eye out!” Uncle Andy said. “There should be a Great Horned Owl in the area.”

Adam walked out and took a deep breath. He liked Uncle Andy well enough, but he was relieved to get a brief respite from his constant note-taking and excited muttering. He appreciated

the quiet and looked up at the orange sky. “One day down,” Adam sighed, “eighty-seven to go...”

“Tell me about it.”

Adam turned and saw Marie’s niece leaning up against the wall of the diner smoking a cigarette. She exhaled a little bit of smoke and looked at Adam with vibrant green eyes. Before Adam could realize he was staring, she extended her pack of cigarettes. “You want one?”

“No thanks,” Adam shook his head. “Never got into the habit.”

“Smart,” said Gwen, taking another inhale. “I’ve been trying to quit.”

“I’m Adam.”

“I know. It’s not every day someone new comes into this town.”

“People still don’t seem to know a lot about you.”

“If you mean the Gossip Queens?” Gwen smiled. “I’ve been planting different ideas in their heads for weeks. An overheard fake phone call here, a misplaced letter there, and a sprig of inconsistencies? They barely begin to figure me out by the time I place a new rumor in the works.”

“You don’t worry about them talking about you?”

“I’m almost flattered. What are you in for?”

“Summer gig,” Adam said. “My Uncle Andy is an ornithologist and I’m helping him out with a study for an internship.”

“Internship, huh? College boy?”

“Environmental studies.”

“Congrats,” Gwen looked up. “The environment is fucked.”

“Well, no planet is perfect.”

Gwen scoffed a little and went back to her cigarette. With a final exhale of smoke, she dropped it and stomped it out with her heel. “Well, I’ll see you around, Adam.”

“Not tired of me, yet?”

“We seem to be the only two people over seventeen and under forty in this town,” Gwen said. “Might be destiny.”

The next couple of days were like the first. Adam and Uncle Andy would start the day at the diner, traipse around in the woods for most of the day, then return to the diner before heading back home. Gwen's smoke break became the highlight of Adam's day. They would meet outside while Uncle Andy worked through the results of the day while Adam and Gwen talked. Her callousness faded over a few days and Adam felt more comfortable when he first made her laugh with a bad joke. He'd had a fling once at a summer camp, but this felt more consistent, almost grown up. It wasn't making out in the canoe shed, it was all words shared between two people who felt stranded.

The first corpse turned up in Adam's second week traipsing through the woods. The wolf had been split open from the neck to the tail, flayed and spread out to rot in the sun.

"Good lord," Uncle Andy frowned, examining the remains. "We're going to have to call this one in."

"What killed it?"

"I can't tell. Could be another wolf or a bear, but not a lot of it looks eaten. I hate to say, but this might be something worse."

Rumors were already spiraling by the time Adam and Uncle Andy got to the diner. People were pestering the pair with questions about the remains, asking for confirmations of theories, and posturing their thoughts. Uncle Andy fielded most of the questions from a scientific perspective, but people were only interested in validation rather than the facts. They tried to turn Adam to their side, so he was relieved when he was able to step outside and find Gwen.

"I say serial killer," Gwen said, arms folded as she leaned on the side of the diner. "That's how these always start. Some twisted kid in the woods starts cutting things open to see what makes them tick? It's only a few dissections away from cutting open people."

"You must be fun at parties."

"It's not as outlandish as some of the other ideas I've heard. Some people think it's a sasquatch...or aliens."

"Wouldn't that be something," Adam chuckled. "What do you think?"

"I said serial killer."

"Come on, seriously."

“I think animals die,” Gwen shrugged. “Sad fact, but any kid with a goldfish could tell you that.”

“Still, it looked weird. Must have been something.”

“Must have been,” Gwen said. She closed her eyes and leaned back, pushing her body against the cool bricks of the diner.

“Hey, when did you stop?”

“Huh?”

“Smoking. You stopped?”

“Oh, I ran out of smokes. Haven’t had time to buy new ones, but that might be a good thing. Trying to quit, right?”

“Yeah,” Adam smiled. “Good work!”

The stories of the animal mauling got more extreme as the days passed by. A trio of owls was left out to rot in the morning sun with their wings carefully removed. Another wolf was split open not far from Uncle Andy’s cabin. A rabbit turned up in a similar condition, left in the middle of Main Street. People didn’t start getting worried until a house cat was left in someone’s yard, gutted like it was on display.

Gwen had begun acting strangely, in Adam’s opinion. At times she seemed annoyed, but he was willing to accept that quitting smoking had done it. Her posture shifted strangely when Adam would come and talk with her. Her expression started to slacken until she was frowning more than anything. Gwen’s usual excitement and wit faded into something harder with only short answers. She was still friendly and kind, but it felt more like a play than genuine emotions. It kept Adam up at night.

After a particularly rainy day in the woods, Adam was surprised not to see Gwen in the diner. When he asked about her, Marie only shrugged and said that Gwen was acting oddly. She’d gone out for a walk in the morning and was being flakier than usual. By that evening, she was a missing person. Uncle Andy and Adam stayed late in the diner, joining a group that was comforting Marie while waiting for news of her niece.

“Mill Creek hasn’t seen anything like this in—well, ever,” one of the gossips said, glumly looking out at the storm clouds. “I’d hate to think, but—“

“Don’t even say it,” Uncle Andy said. “There’s no need for such thoughts yet.” The hours crept by as the gloomy day shifted to a gloomier night. After a while, Adam and Uncle Andy could only leave and hope for the best. Adam went to bed early, staring up at the ceiling until his consciousness faded into sleep.

Adam wasn’t sure what woke him up in the middle of the night, but the rain was pattering calmly against the windows. In the moonlight, Adam could make out a shape. It was upright, almost as tall as he was, and walking slowly out into the woods surrounding the log cabin. Adam almost thought it was something alien, but a flash of moonlight saved him with a glimpse of reddish hair.

Pulling on a pair of boots and his hiking clothes, Adam rushed out. The rain had lessened, but it was hardly a nice night for a midnight stroll. The woods creaked with water running down tree bark and scattered on tree leaves. Big, cold drops tapped the top of Adam’s head and made him shiver as he followed the figure who’d passed by his window.

The bitter night almost turned him back a few times, but his curiosity pushed him further onward. The wind wailed and cold water crept into every opening on Adam’s person. He shivered and folded his arms tightly, but persevered through the storm. “Gwen?” Adam called. “Gwen, is that you?”

If there was a reply, Adam couldn’t hear it. Still, he always saw the outline of the figure in the woods just within eyeshot. He was able to follow her after months of walking the woods with Uncle Andy. He passed by the spot where they’d first found the wolf and the birds a little further north. Adam knew the main road wasn’t far from where he was. He was deep in the heart of whatever was causing the disturbances around town. Carefully, he treaded further toward the person he’d been following for over an hour.

Stepping down, Adam almost tripped over a shift in the terrain. He staggered slightly and caught himself. Looking down, Adam saw a pale outline on the ground. The fingers of the hand outstretched as if grasping for something, but Adam could tell the fingers weren’t frozen in rigor mortis, splayed out too flat. He followed the arm down to the shoulder and almost vomited at the sight of an open chest cavity. The heart was prominently on display and still seemed to beat in the chest.

“Adam...”

Turning sharply, Adam saw the human figure standing a few steps away. Gwen’s face was somewhat sunken in as if she hadn’t eaten in days. Her shoulders were cocked, the left slightly higher than the right, and her neck was bent slightly to compensate. Her face was set in a neutral expression, the barest hint of a grin making it seem like bared teeth. Her eyes were duller than Adam remembered, the grass color shifting to a dim brown.

“Gwen, what is this?”

“What is this?” Gwen hissed a mimicked response.

“Stop messing around what is going on?”

“What is going on?” Gwen repeated. The voice was deeper, dropping a few octaves from Gwen’s. The Gwen figure’s hand whipped out, grabbing Adam’s arm with surprising strength. The figure’s neck twisted sharply as they pulled Adam closer. The expression turned fearful and concerned, a grimace of uncertainty replacing the emotionless mask from before.

“So...fragile...” Gwen said, her voice deeper and more like Adam’s. “We will better...the design next time.”

“Next time? Gwen, what are you—?”

Another arm dashed out, striking Adam’s neck firmly. He choked and coughed. The Not-Gwen smacked a fist into his stomach, followed by a sharp stabbing pain in his chest. Adam staggered backward and flattened on his back. With his last moment of sight, he saw Gwen’s face, fearfully staring back at him from the top of the split torso. Adam’s last thoughts before the dark were fearful.