

“This is the spot!” I announced to Zach and Angelo as Matt and I stopped and dropped the load of camping gear we were carrying. “My favorite place in the world.” Scooby, the dog Matt and I had recently adopted from the Boulder Humane Society, set off to explore the campsite.

“This is cool, man!” Angelo said, looking around the secret camping spot my family had been using for as long as I’d been alive. I was glad he appreciated it.

It was mine and Matt’s first camping trip of the season, and Angelo’s first camping trip ever. We’d gotten a late start, partly because we’d had to stop at Lizzy’s to borrow extra gear for Zach and Ang. While we were there, she’d given us a box of fudge.

“I bought it in Estes Park yesterday,” she said, and when I looked at the price tag, my eyes just about popped out of my head.

“It’s expensive!”

“It’s imported from Paris!”

Whether that really justified the huge price tag or not I wasn’t sure, but it definitely didn’t stop Matt, Angelo, Zach and I from tearing through the entire box on our way into the mountains.

We packed all of our gear down the hill, and then pitched our tents. When that was done, we settled down with cold beers on the log benches around the empty fire pit.

“What made you decide to get a dog?” Zach asked as he scratched behind Scooby’s ears.

Matt and I looked at each other and shrugged. “It just seemed like the thing to do,” I told him.

“Why’d you name him Scooby?” Angelo asked.

I shrugged again. “What else would you name a dog?”

“Snoopy.”

“Spot.” That was Zach.

“Rover.” That was Matt.

“Cujo,” Angelo said.

“Okay,” I said laughing. “I don’t know why!”

“Because he wanted to be able to do this,” Matt said. He turned to Scooby and said,
“Scooby want a Scooby-snack?”

Scooby turned in a circle, whining in excitement, then sat up on his hind legs to beg. Zach and Angelo laughed.

“See?” Matt said to them, smiling. “Jared didn’t waste any time teaching him that one.”

“Okay!” I said. “Stop teasing my dog! Let’s get the fire going. I’m starving.”

“What are we having for dinner?” Angelo asked.

Matt didn’t answer, but pulled a package of hot dogs out of the cooler and tossed them to
Ang.

“Why’d you buy the small ones?” Angelo asked, looking down at the package with
obvious disappointment. “They make big ones you know.”

Matt gave him a wicked smile, and asked teasingly, “You need a bigger one?”

Angelo pinned him with a withering glare. “You did *not* just make the hot dog-penis
joke.”

Matt laughed, and Zach said with a smile, “Somebody had to do it.”

Angelo rolled his eyes. “It’s like a bad movie. Buncha lame-ass barely-disguised sex
jokes. I hate shit like that.”

“I guess we won’t talk about the buns then,” I said, and Zach and Matt laughed.

“Who’s gonna tell ghost stories?” Angelo asked, looking around. “That’s part of the
campin’ thing, right?”

“Not me,” Matt said. “I don’t know any.”

“Me neither,” Zach said. They all looked at me.

“I don’t know any ghost stories,” I told them, “but there is an urban legend around here about a lost hunter. His name was Hank Lockner. He was sort of a crazy old hermit. He lived a little ways outside of town, and he never talked to anybody. But supposedly he had a bunch of hunting dogs—a whole pack of mean hounds. And one day he took them all hunting, and he never came home.”

It was quiet for a second and then Angelo said, “That’s it?”

“He was never seen again. But the story goes…” I stopped. They all watched me in anticipation for a second, until Matt threw a stick at me. I laughed. “The story is that he’s still up here in the mountains, and that when hunting is bad, he kills campers and hikers to feed to his dogs. Sometimes you can still hear the hounds braying, while they chase down their helpless prey.”

They all stared at me in silence for a minute, and then Angelo blurted out, "That's the fuckin' lamest ghost story I ever heard!"

"Oh yeah? What've you got, punk?" I asked, laughing, but he just rolled his eyes at me.

“I’ll work on the fire,” Matt said. “But we’re still going to need roasting sticks.”

“Easy!” Angelo said. “How hard can it be to find a stick in the woods?”

Before I could comment on the overconfidence of the beginning camper, we were startled by the sound of barking. We all looked around for Scooby, who was sitting not far away. He wasn’t the source of the barking. It was obviously more than one dog, somewhere in the distance. Scooby’s ears were perked up, and he was staring into the shadowy woods outside of camp. The sound continued for about a minute before tapering away.

“What the hell was that?” Matt asked.

“It sounded like a pack of dogs,” Zach said.

“I’ve never heard dogs up here before,” I said.

Angelo turned to me with his usual lopsided grin. “No way, Jared. We’re not fallin’ for it.”

“Seriously,” I said. “I’ve never heard dogs up here before.” I looked at Matt for support. “We don’t usually hear dogs when we’re up here.”

“He’s telling the truth,” Matt said.

Angelo still looked skeptical. “Don’t believe either one of you.”

The barking started again, and Scooby turned toward the sound. He was alert, his ears forward and his nose twitching. Suddenly, he took off running.

“Scooby, wait!” I called. “Come back!” But he didn’t even slow down. “Shit!” I said, turning to Matt. “What do we do now?”

Matt got up with a sigh. “We’ll have to go after him.” The two of us started to follow Scooby, but after a few steps Matt stopped, and turned back to Zach and Angelo. “You guys coming?”

They looked at each other, and Angelo shrugged. “Why the fuck not?” So the four of us followed Scooby deeper into the woods.

We could still hear the dogs, interspersed with the sound of Scooby barking back. The other dogs sounded distant, but their barks were low and ferocious. We walked about a hundred yards up river, then crossed to the opposite bank on a fallen log. The sound of the dogs was getting louder.

“It’s coming from the other side of that ridge,” Matt said, pointing.

We rounded the outcropping and we all stopped, staring in surprise at a huge opening in the side of the mountain. It was at least seven feet in diameter.

“What in the world is that?” Zach asked.

“It must be an old mining shaft,” I said.

“No way,” Matt said, eyeing it.

“Why not?” I asked him.

“It’s too big.”

“The shaft is too big?”

“Isn’t it? Why would they make it so big?” Matt shrugged. “It just seems pretty hard to swallow.”

“Really?” Angelo asked in surprise as he eyed it. “It doesn’t seem that big to me.”

Just then, the hounds started barking again. “She definitely went into the tunnel,” Matt said, and started to enter.

“You’re not actually going in, are you?” Zach asked in surprise.

Matt looked back at him with one eyebrow up. “Aren’t you curious why there would be a pack of dogs in a cave?”

“Not really,” Zach said skeptically.

“We have to get Scooby,” I said to Zach and Angelo, “and we’re not letting Matt go alone.” I wasn’t sure what I thought Matt would find, but the idea of waiting outside, worrying about he and Scooby both was definitely not appealing.

Zach thought about it for a second and shrugged. “All right. Let’s go.”

We walked in silence at first. There was almost no light in the tunnel, and after a few yards Matt pulled a flashlight out of his jacket pocket. The walls were packed earth, braced

every few yards with wide beams. The floor was loose silt and gravel, littered with larger chunks of rock and interspersed with occasional mud puddles. We'd been walking for about fifteen minutes when Angelo asked, "How deep we gotta go?"

"Deeper," I said.

"Is it just me," Zach suddenly said, "or is the floor getting harder?"

"It's just your perception," Matt said. "It's just because we're going faster now."

The tunnel was narrowing and Matt had to keep his head ducked so as not to scrape it on the ceiling. I was starting to wonder just how far he was going to take this. It seemed like a long way to go just to investigate some barking dogs. "Maybe we should just go back to camp," I said.

Matt looked at me in surprise. "And leave Scooby?"

"He'll come back once he smells hot dogs cooking," I said. The idea of hot dogs was making my stomach growl, but Matt looked skeptical.

"We've come this far," Zach said. "It can't be much further."

That was easy to say, but the tunnel showed no sign of stopping. It continued to narrow, forcing us to walk single file. Matt was in front, walking with his back bent, and even Zach and I had to duck our heads a bit. Angelo was in the rear. Up ahead, we could still hear the dogs.

Fifteen minutes later, Matt stopped dead in his tracks, causing me to run into him, and Zach to run in to me, and probably Angelo to run into him. "Wait!" Matt burst out. "Haven't we passed that beam twice already?"

"How could we?" I asked. "We haven't made any turns."

Matt shook his head. "I don't know. It's like every twenty yards, the scenery repeats itself."

“I have no idea,” I sighed. “All I know is I’m starving. Man, we’ve gotta find Scooby so we can go back to the camp and eat dinner.”

Zach suddenly burst out laughing. Matt turned his flashlight on Zach, and we both stared at him puzzlement.

“What’s so funny?” I snapped in annoyance.

“Don’t you see?” Zach asked, still laughing. “We keep passing the same background over and over. You’re following a dog named Scooby. You haven’t had a hair cut in god knows how long, and you can’t stop talking about how hungry you are.”

“Are you saying I’m Shaggy?” I asked, trying not sound even more annoyed, which only made Zach laughed harder. “I’m definitely *not* Shaggy!”

“I think you might be!” Zach laughed.

“If I’m Shaggy, then you’re Fred.”

“Why does *he* get to be Fred?” Matt asked.

“Are you kidding? Look at him. We’re camping, and he’s wearing an Oxford shirt with a sweater over it. And loafers! All he needs is a red scarf around his neck.”

“Hey guys?” Angelo suddenly called. He was a few yards behind us, and when Matt turned the beam of the flashlight his way, we found him hunched over, looking around on the ground. “Does anybody see my sunglasses? They were on my head, and now I can’t find ’em.”

Zach started laughing even harder.

“Are you kidding me?” Matt said indignantly. “*I’m* Daphne? How can *I* be Daphne?”

I was starting to laugh now too. “Well,” I told him, “you are awfully pretty.”

It was with great relief that we finally spotted the dim glow of fading daylight ahead of us. The tunnel had become even narrower, so that even Angelo had to duck to get through.

“We’re almost at the end,” Matt said. “It’ll be nice to get out of here. This must be the back entrance,” Matt said.

“How do you know this isn’t the front?” I asked.

“It’s a pretty tight squeeze on this end.”

“So?”

“So,” he said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world, “that makes it the back door. It’s always tighter.”

“Really? I didn’t know that. Ang, did you know that?”

Angelo shook his head. “No man, how would I know that? Zach?”

Zach was looking thoughtful. “I think Matt’s right,” he said. “I think I remember learning that back in college.”

“I’ll just have to take your word for it,” I said. “All I know is, I’d rather be here than back at the other end.”

“*No shit!*” Angelo said. “That other end was seriously disturbing! Gave me the creeps.”

We pushed through the narrow entrance to find ourselves in a small clearing. In the middle of the clearing was a cabin. And by cabin, I mean a house that was bigger than my home back in Coda, but built out of logs in order to make it look quaint.

“I’m calling for back up,” Matt said. “The forest service may want to check this out.”

Luckily, the forest service must not have been far away, because they arrived only a few minutes later, two men in jeans and green jackets, driving a truck. One was short and fat, and the other was gangly and had a face covered with acne.

“We’ll follow your lead on this,” they said to Matt.

Why did Matt have to be involved? “What the hell?” I asked, but before I could get much

farther than that, we were overrun by the hounds from hell.

“*This* is the vicious pack of dogs?” Angelo asked, looking down at three basset hounds who were lumbering around our feet, jowls quivering and tails wagging. Scooby was with them too, greeting us with pure doggy enthusiasm. One of the bassets started barking, a deep, huge bark that I would never have believed had come from such a short dog if I hadn’t seen it. Apparently their big barrel chests allowed them to sound much bigger than they actually were.

“I guess this is them,” I said.

“Their barks must have echoed in the tunnel,” Zach said, “so it sounded like there were more of them.”

“Great,” I said. “Mystery solved. Can we go back now?”

“Wait a second,” Matt said. “I can hear people arguing. I think we better check this out.”

At first, I wasn’t sure what he thought he heard. All I could hear was the rustling and sniffing and occasional barking and braying of the dogs at our feet. But as we neared the cabin, I began to hear voices. Matt was right. It sounded like two people arguing. We couldn’t quite make out their words, but they were definitely unhappy.

“Everybody stay behind me,” Matt said. “I’ll see what’s going on.” He turned and pounded on the door hard enough to rattle it on its hinges. The voices inside suddenly fell silent.

“I know they teach that shit in cop school,” Angelo said.

“Shh!” Zach and I and the forest guys all hushed him, although I wasn’t sure why.

The door opened. I couldn’t see past Matt’s huge frame, but then a voice I recognized said, “Well, *hello* cupcake! What in the world are you doing here?”

“Cole?” I asked, pushing Matt out of the way.

“Sweets! What a pleasant surprise! I tried to call you earlier, but you weren’t home. How

on earth did you end up on my front doorstep?”

“Yours?” I asked. “Since when do you own a cabin up here?”

“Since just last month, honey. Although this is the first time I’ve actually seen it. I’m using it for business purposes.” He waved his hand at us. “Come on in boys, and I’ll show you.”

We followed him into the “cabin”. Another man stood on the other side of the room. He was big. And gorgeous. And obviously seriously pissed off.

“Where’s Jon?” I asked, looking pointedly at Cole.

Cole rolled his eyes at me, and I knew he understood my real question. “He’s still in Paris. *This*,” he said with disgust while indicating the other man, “is my *lovely* neighbor, Ted.”

Ted rolled his eyes at us, in way of greeting.

I looked around. We were in a large room. It wasn’t a kitchen. It might have been a living room, except there was no furniture. It was warm inside, and it smelled amazing. It smelled like...

“Is that fudge?” Angelo asked.

I turned to see what he was talking about and found myself facing a table stacked high with boxes of fudge—the same fudge Lizzy had given us earlier that day.

“Lizzy said it was from France!” I said. “But you’re actually packing it here?”

“Don’t be silly, Sweets! Packing it is Jonny’s job. I just receive it.”

“Yeah!” the other man said suddenly. “And you need to stop! You’re distracting my dogs!”

Cole flipped his hand at him dismissively. “It’s not my fault their noses lead them here!”

“You’re not zoned for small business.”

“Oh honey, let’s not start that! We both know you’ve got some indecent behavior going on

at your own place, too.”

Ted’s face started to turn red, and I could practically see Matt’s cop senses kicking back into gear. “What do you mean?” he asked Cole.

“Beavers!” Cole said. “He hunts them all the time. It’s disgusting, really. I don’t know exactly what he does with them when he catches them, but honey, you should hear the noises they make!” He shuddered dramatically. “It gives me nightmares!”

“You actually catch them?” the fat forest service guy asked Ted, his eyes huge with wonder.

“Of course,” Ted said.

Both of the forest service guys looked absolutely stunned. “I know lots of us chase them,” the pimply one said. “But they’re so elusive. I don’t know many guys who actually catch them. Can you tell us how you’re doing it?”

Ted eyed the two forest service guys, his good-looking face full of sympathy. “I don’t think my techniques will work for you two.”

I could see the interest in Matt’s eyes. “Interesting,” he said. “I might need to investigate your techniques.”

“No!” I snapped at him. “That’s not your jurisdiction!”

“It could be.”

“But it’s *not!*”

“Fine,” he said, smiling at me. “I suppose you’re right.” He waved at the forest service guys. “Guess he’s all yours, boys.”

They looked sheepishly at Ted. “Sorry sir,” the fat one said. “But you know we can’t allow that kind of behavior. It’s indecent.”

“I understand. Still, I had to do it. *You* understand.” Ted turned to glare at us. “I would have gotten away with it too, if it weren’t for those meddling fags!”

“Does anybody else think this is creepy?” Angelo asked, quiet enough that only Zach, Matt and I could hear. “Like if you pulled on the guy’s hair, you’d find out his whole face is a mask?”

“Yes,” Zach said.

“No,” Matt and I said, confused by why he’d even ask such a strange question.

“Good riddance,” Cole said as the forest service guys led Ted outside. “He was such a bore!” He turned to all of us with a huge smile. “Who’s hungry? I just made a huge pot of franks and beans. I know it’s crude, but it’s comfort food, and I promise you it’ll be the best you’ve ever had!”

“Sounds great!” Angelo said.

“Hey,” Matt said to me. “We came all this way. Did you leave your dog outside?”

“Scooby?” I called out the open door. “Scooby Doo? Where are you? Time for a Scooby snack.”

Scooby came running.

I had no idea why Zach and Angelo were laughing.