

Fiction Excerpt

It was the kind of place where monsters lurked--a thick forest where fifty steps in the wrong direction would leave an inattentive explorer hopelessly lost. This particular spot, in what was considered by many to be the most intact boreal forest on the planet, was dominated by black spruce and tamarack and in places where dead conifers had blown down, the prone, rotting trunks were covered in a damp carpet of brilliant green moss. Black and brown bears roamed the landscape, and the grizzly patrolled the forest at the top of the food chain.

The nearest paved highway was 17 miles away, down a series of unpaved, interconnected logging roads dating to the days before the government put a chain around the neck of the timber industry. In dry weather, the roads were navigable with a heavy duty truck, but when the rains came, the only travel was by air. In an era when a world of information was just a smartphone away for most, this was still landline territory, because the closest cell tower was almost 100 miles distant.

On this night, with summer coming to an end, the air was brisk, perfect weather for a bonfire, and the group of friends who had come from Rapid Valley, Pine City, and other small communities, took full advantage. The fire crackled and popped while they drank beer in mismatched lawn chairs arranged in a semicircle around the pit. It had become a tradition for this group of friends to return to this clearing at about the same time every year for some camping and drinking. The core group of eight was largely the same from year-to-year, but there were some new faces this year, too.

A young man in blue jeans and a coffee-colored canvas outdoorsman-style jacket got up and retrieved a cold beer from a steel cooler with "Hamm's" stenciled on the side.

"Riley," one of the gathered men said. "Toss me one."

Riley grabbed another beer from the antique cooler and tossed it to the man, who caught it in one hand and popped the top, releasing a burst of foam that ran down his upper arm and made the woman sitting next to him giggle.

"So, you're spending the night, Riley?" a man asked as Riley returned to his chair.

"Staying 'til Monday," he said, motioning to his green tent in the distance. "Just a little downtime, ya know?"

"Are you concerned about bears?" the man asked with a smile.

Riley smiled. "I'd be an idiot if I wasn't," he said, "but I have my bear spray."

"Oh yeah," a burly man in a trucker hat said. He was Blair Newbury, one of the only members of the group who lived in the area. "After a grizzly makes a burrito out of you in your little tent, he'll use that bear spray as seasoning."

"I'll think it'll be alright," Riley said.

“Personally, I wouldn’t camp out here without my .338,” Blair said. He grabbed at his waistband and tugged in a futile attempt to hitch up his pants.

Riley’s girlfriend, Amber, sat next to him. Every man in the group had taken notice of her. Now, she had a look of concern on her face.

“Amber, are you staying, too?” one of the group asked.

“I was going to,” she said with a nervous smile, “but, bears, you know. I’m just gonna ride back with Jeff and Rhonda.”

“It’s not just bears you should be worried about,” Blair said, and the gathering erupted.

“Oh shit!” a man shouted. “Here we go!”

Laughter and murmuring traveled around the core group of friends. They had heard Blair’s stories before, and knew what to expect.

“What do you mean?” Amber asked, and looked from Riley to Blair, wide-eyed.

“There are Native American legends about a beast that lives in this...” he began.

“Are you talking about Bigfoot again, Blair?” a man interrupted in a loud, mocking voice. Laughter came from the assembled group.

“Sasquatch,” Blair said in a serious tone. “And it’s no joke. I know guys who have seen him. Ten feet tall with legs as thick as a 55-gallon drum, and stinks like a skunk.”

“Frank,” the man said to one of the gathered friends, “You did some anthropology stuff in college didn’t you? Can Sasquatch really exist?”

“Well, he’s right about the legends,” Frank said. “Native Americans have been reporting a large forest-dwelling creature for a thousand years or more.”

“Yeah, but it’s impossible right?” the man insisted.

“In the eyes of science, it’s pretty unlikely,” Frank said. “For Sasquatch to exist it would have to be able to reproduce, which means it would need a breeding population of five hundred or a thousand animals,” he continued, “but nobody has ever captured a live animal, or even produced a carcass.”

“Well, yeah,” Blair said with derision, “If you believe the stuff you hear in the mainstream media, but they’re humanoid. They might bury their dead.” He stared at Amber as he said it with a leer that made her feel uncomfortable.

“I’ve been fascinated by the Thunderbird legend, myself,” Frank said in an attempt to lighten the mood.

“Yes,” Blair said. “Tell it, Frank.”

“What’s a Thunderbird?” Amber asked.

“It’s a piece of shit Ford,” someone said, and someone else laughed.

“Imagine a giant bird of prey, the size of a small plane,” Frank said, “with wings so large, that when they flap, they make a sound like thunder.”

“Is that the bird on totem poles?” Amber asked. “Like the one outside the Chieftain restaurant in Rapid Valley?”

Someone snickered at the pretty blonde’s question.

“Yes, that’s a representation of a Thunderbird,” Frank said. “There are accounts of Thunderbirds in Algonquian lore, and Ojibwe legend says the thunderbird sometimes comes to punish humans for immoral acts.”