

JENNA RECKTENWALD

Frozen Remnants

Things our friend left behind

“Yeah, I did try them too, but I appreciate it. Thanks, bye.” I hung up and stared at my phone’s call history. Nathan's neighbors on the left and right were both busts. The cabins were far enough apart that they weren't sure the last time they saw him.

In the summer they would have been glad to make the trek and check on him, but winter had set in weeks ago. I rubbed the stubble on my chin and ran through the facts once more.

My best friend, Nathan, had been out of contact for a month. The month before that his messages started to concern me.

We had a lot of ingrained habits from rooming together in college. Tuesdays were pizza night. Even if we moved out to our own places long ago, we’d still text photos of the night's slice. On Fridays we had goofy TGIF memes, and in-between we would bitch about work, the news, or disappointing sports scores.

My first indication was the second Tuesday in November. Instead of responding to my pizza pic with his own, I only got a thumbs-up emoji. It seemed silly to even think on this, and I didn't at the time, but looking back it was the start.

That week he was quiet, no responses to my small texts here and there. I figured he was extra busy and gave him a break from my usual corny Friday memes. He apologized that Saturday and said he had been cleaning his house and hadn't seen my messages for a few days.

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The next message was a week later, asking for advice on over-the-counter sleeping medication. I had bouts of insomnia in our final year of school and became good friends with melatonin, so I assumed he was having a rough time himself. I replied with the dosage I took in the past and a few warnings on side effects I had.

Then we had the last message I received from Nathan, sent the next Thursday: “WE'RE OK. We don't need anybody!” It was bizarre and out of context. I texted multiple times the following days to check what was going on, but they all remained unread.

I half convinced myself I texted him too much during whatever stressful period he was going through and had upset him, but when a month went by I started reaching out to others in our friend group to see if he truly was okay.

And no, I don't think he is. Erin and Stephen had similar stories of long silent periods and odd replies. Neither had heard from him since December, and we were now in the middle of the second week of January.

I feared the worst. Nathan was always a sturdy guy, both physically and mentally, but it was always those you least expected that ended up hiding depression or suicidal ideation. I prayed he was just in a bout of something but safe.

Erin shared in my worries and asked if I'd call the neighbors or local sheriff for help. Neither route had been any luck. The neighbors didn't know anything, and the sheriff said they could maybe spare someone to check next week. They brushed me off as paranoid and even crudely suggested he may have a new girlfriend keeping him busy.

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But I knew Nathan wasn't that type. Ever since his girlfriend, Kendra, died, he hadn't been interested in dating. He said his son was too young to go through that and that he might consider it when he was older.

I wasn't left with many options. I had to get up there. His cabin was in a remote part of Maine, and my first hurdle would be transportation. There was no way my finicky Infiniti would make it through 80 miles of icy backwoods roads. Hell, it might not even make it to Maine's border with my luck.

Stephen had an Outback, but he also had a new fiancée that likely wouldn't be too keen on me borrowing him and his car for at least three days. I sighed and looked at the time. It was getting late in the evening, but I could at least call Erin. She was a night owl and had also insisted I keep her up to date on any news.

The phone only rang twice before she picked up. "Hey, did the neighbors know anything?" Worry was evident in her voice and lack of greeting.

"No, Erin, unfortunately not. Both neighbors sounded to be on the older side, and they were adamant they couldn't physically get to his cabin to check for us until spring. We're running out of options short of heading up there ourselves."

"Then let's do it!" She replied without pause. The instant suggestion made me think she was already reaching my same macabre conclusions about what we may find. "I'd like to, but I'm getting stuck on the physicality of the plan. I don't want to get us ninety percent of the way there and then get dangerously stuck in a snowbank in the middle of

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no where. My car can't get us there. We need something with utility for the icy back roads.”

“So! Rent something and let's throw clothes in a bag! We could be headed out in the morning.” I had to stop myself from making a frustrated noise at her flippant solution. Erin was a no-nonsense type A personality, but sometimes she lost sight of small details.

“I don't know about you, but taking at least a half week off work to consider this is breaking my budget. I can do gas money, but I can't rent a big vehicle right now. I'm trying, Erin. Do you think you could help me talk Stephen into us borrowing his car?”

She sounded more upbeat. “Yes! I'll call him right now!” But before I could remind her of the time and that Stephen was definitely in bed given his early morning schedules, she had already hung up. “Oh well” I sighed. That was Stephen's problem now.

I jolted up from a deep sleep. I heard banging in my dream, but my apartment was silent as I looked around. I thought I had hallucinated it until the loud banging resumed from my front door. For a moment my sleep deprived brain told me that it was Nathan, and I lunged towards the door to open it.

Halfway through wildly swinging the door open, I realized what a stupid idea that was. Of course it wouldn't be Nathan, and I hadn't bothered to check the peephole to confirm who it really was. Fear surged down my neck, but I was relieved to see it was only an excited Erin and annoyed Stephen behind her.

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I blinked a few times and reached in my pocket for my phone, only to realize it was still on my nightstand. “What time is it? Did something new happen, Erin?” She rolled her eyes and shoved past me into my apartment. “It’s morning; that’s all you need to know, sleepyhead. We’re picking you up to go check on Nathan.”

“Sorry, Ben. I tried to slow her down, but she’s been go-go-go ever since she woke me up last night.” I looked Stephen over. His normally combed and gelled hair was mussed every which way. His shoes, pants, and coat in no way matched. It looked like he couldn’t decide if he was going hiking, lounging at home, or to a business meeting, so he wore one piece from each attire. I had the distinct impression Erin barged into his apartment and dressed his half-asleep form herself in her push to get on the road.

“No need to apologize, I should say sorry myself. I knew she was planning to call you late last night, but she hung up before I could stop her. Would you, ahh, like to borrow another coat?” I looked up and down his thin gray blazer. He looked as well before throwing his hands up and stomping over to Erin, who was now raiding my own dresser drawers.

“If you’re going to get into such a hell-fire hurry you may as well go yourself!” Stephen took his blazer off and threw it at Erin. “I could have froze to death wearing that into the middle of Maine in winter!” My theory was confirmed, and I leaned on the door frame to let them both get it out of their systems.

Erin snatched the jacket off her face and let it drop to the floor, going back to grabbing random shirts from my top drawer. “We don’t have time for this! If you want to be warm, get your own damn clothes

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and stop standing around! I'm doing both of your packing because of how slow you are!"

Stephen turned back to me for support. "C'mon, man! Are you going to let her man-handle all your stuff?" I walked past them both and grabbed my phone off its charger. It was 5:34 a.m., no wonder I felt like a zombie. Erin had a funny definition of morning.

I turned back to Stephen and shrugged. "Let's not fight. I wanted to plan this better, but if we're going, let's go. I'll get us both heavy coats, but I don't care what Erin grabs besides that."

Erin seemed pleased with my answer and stuffed one of my backpacks down before zipping it up. "Great, let's go! I had the mapped route download to my phone on the way over, so we can get there even if we lose signal. I'll drive, you navigate! And Stephen, you can play backseat princess and hand us snacks."

I grabbed my backpack from her, took my heavy winter coats out of my closet, and headed towards the door as Stephen argued about his car insurance not covering Erin.

My anxiety mounted the closer we got to Nathan's cabin. Stephen noticed and tried to comfort me with a hundred and one Outback facts, but I wasn't worried about the icy roads and his tire tread height. I didn't know if today would be the last day I would say Nathan is my friend in the present tense. My mind imagined his corpse and a knocked over chair. Why would he not contact anyone for a month?

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Despite her pushy tendencies, I appreciated Erin in an emergency. She was carefully watching the road and getting us closer and closer to our destination. I knew she was worried too, but she funneled it all into action. I could see why Nathan had her over the second week after Kendra died. She must have cleaned his house from top to bottom, forced food into him and his son, Miles, and made him get out of bed to shower. She wasn't the type to wallow, and sometimes you needed that.

I slept on and off until Erin shook me awake and called out to Stephen as well. "We're on the last mile according to GPS. Nathan's cabin should be around this bend." I inhaled sharply and forced myself to sit up straight.

I didn't know what to expect. Nathan lived nearby in New York up until last year. His grandparents had died and left him their old homestead in Maine. I had questioned him about moving so far away, and to such an isolated place, but he insisted the change would be good for him and Miles. New York had too many memories of Kendra.

This would be my first time seeing his new home. A thought in the back of my mind came forward. What if I had been more vocal about him not moving? Was the move to his remote cabin home a catalyst in whatever stress overtook him? Was I a bad friend for not noticing the change sooner? I had no answers as we rounded the bend.

A wood cabin came into view. It was coated in a deep snow, making it difficult to judge the state of the dwelling. There were no lights seen, and Nathan's car was parked outside, thickly covered by the latest snow storm. A glimmer of hope tried to grab at my chest. Maybe they had just been snowed in and disconnected from service.

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Erin parked right off the road to avoid the snowbank. “They have wood stoves here for heat, right?” Stephen called from behind as we began exiting the car. “So he could be fine!” His voice wanted to portray confidence, but the expression on his face betrayed him. I nodded anyway. “Yeah, I’m sure all the cabins in this area do. I don’t see a smokestack, but they could have recently run out of wood too.”

I let Erin take the lead in knocking on the door, but after a minute of pounding I motioned for her to step aside. “If he’s not answering by now, I don’t think further knocking will help. Let me check the windows.” I could more easily see in due to my height. Poor Erin was almost in snow up to her waist. She was just over five feet tall, so I estimated the snow must have been at least two and a half feet.

I was able to see in after breathing on the glass and holding my hands to shield the outer light. It was dark inside. I saw a turned over desk and scattered garbage on the floor but no signs of anybody in the living room.

Stephen jiggled the doorknob as I looked. “I don’t think this has a proper lock. There’s no keyhole on the outside. Can we force it open?” I left the window and walked back. “There’s only one way to find out. You shoulder the right side, I take the left? On the count of three?” Stephen nodded, and we both reared back. It took a good four hits, but finally the wooden latch on the inside gave way.

Erin shoved past both of us and swung it open. “Hello?! Nathan?! Miles?” I followed after her and took a better look at the living room. The room was frigid. A stone fireplace stood in the middle, but there were only ashes in the bottom. The couch and loveseat appeared ripped in a few places, but I had no way of knowing if they were

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normally in that condition. None of this furniture was Nathan's from his prior house, so I assumed they were left from his grandparents.

The turned over desk caught my eye. It was wooden, and one of the legs had been roughly snapped off. Had Nathan began burning his furniture if they were snowed in? I looked around the middle of the floor. There were scattered papers from the desk, and I did find the broken desk leg nearby. It didn't make sense to leave these burnable items thrown around if he indeed ran out of firewood.

While I poked at garbage, Erin ran in and out of the other accessible rooms, loudly calling out. She returned in a minute. "No one is here! There's crap everywhere, but no sign of Nathan! I don't understand..."

I picked up a particular piece of trash and stood up to put a hand on her shoulder. "It's okay, at least we didn't find Nathan dead. That means he's somewhere. I don't know what to make of this, though."

Erin grabbed the empty bottle from me and turned it over. "Bleach? So he was cleaning? Who cares!" I took it back from her and pointed at several other spots. "Not just one bottle, I've counted five so far. Who cleans with bottle after bottle of bleach? I've never known Nathan to be a germaphobe."

I looked around for Stephen and saw him still in the doorway, hesitant to step in. He stayed put and called out. "If Nathan was doing strange things, doesn't that match hypothermia symptoms? It's like those stories of mountain climbers found dead. They suffered from the cold until their brains short circuited. They were found naked, stripped around the camp."

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“They took their clothes off because their cold-damaged brains were telling them they were hot instead.” I finished the story. “Yeah, I remember from that documentary. But that still wouldn’t explain the bleach. If he was hypothermic enough to cause delirium, he couldn’t have gotten to the store to buy gallon after gallon of bleach. And if he did get to the store, he should have been okay and asked for help.”

I suddenly had an idea and stooped to the floor to grab a nearby plastic bag. It was empty, but I crawled towards the next and continued my search. A boot appearing by my hand startled me, but I looked up to see Stephen finally stepped in. “Is the madness affecting you, Ben? What are you doing?” I grabbed a few more bags out of the trash and stood up.

“I’m looking for something. It might help us narrow down what happened. If we can get a better idea of what we’re dealing with, the local sheriff should take us seriously next time we call.” I checked each bag until I came across my prize. “This!”

“A receipt?” Stephen questioned. “A receipt for...” I paused as I smoothed the paper out and read it. “Canned soup, bandages, a long list of over the counter medications, whoa, and six bottles of bleach! Dated November 8th, so that means he didn’t lie to me about cleaning his house when he texted the following Saturday.”

“Can I see that?” Erin asked, and I handed the paper over. “This looks like he or Miles was sick, but I don’t understand the medication list. There’s sleeping aids, cold medicine, fever reducers, three different antihistamines, and styptic powder. Was he having an insomnia bout after cutting his arm off and getting the flu? Who needs all this?”

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“I don’t know, but if we keep looking around maybe we’ll figure more out.” I picked up another piece of paper and noticed it was a drawing by Miles. It depicted a square with a triangle on top, two stick figures, and a smiling cloud. Accompanying the family portrait was a scrawled “6” at the bottom. It made me sad to look at, knowing he may have been sick shortly after drawing it. I turned the wooden desk upright and made sure it could balance on only three legs before setting the drawing carefully on top.

“That’s a good idea, let’s check that too.” Erin stood beside me and began opening the desk drawers. There were only four of them. The first two on the left had only stationary, stamps, and pens, but the bottom drawer on the right had a wallet and keys. I took the keys as Erin checked the wallet. “Stephen, can you run back out and see if these are for Nathan’s car? I’m sure they are.” He nodded and took them out.

“Definitely his wallet too. His ID is in here, credit cards, insurance cards, a little cash, and some older receipts. Nothing interesting, but he wouldn’t leave this here if they had to go to the hospital with Miles.” I agreed. “That’s a good thing to keep for now. The sheriff can’t say he’s only gone to a hotel and brush us off. He couldn’t do that without his wallet.”

“Or his car.” Stephen re-entered and handed the keys to me. “That’s his, and the key fob still works too. The car didn’t have anything except sunglasses and a few toys and cracker crumbs in the back. It has gas and turns over fine.”

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“So...” I recapped. “He left without his wallet and car, on foot, or someone kidnapped them both? But that’s far-fetched... there’s no sign of a break-in.” “Except for what we did.” Stephen corrected.

“I know, we’ll have to explain that to the sheriff too. But I’m sure Nathan wouldn’t press charges for us breaking a crappy wooden latch. We’re here to help Miles too, if something is going on.”

“Let’s check out the kitchen.” Erin interrupted. “It was one of the few rooms I could get into so far.” “Wait,” I held my arm out, “You mean the other doors are locked?” “Locked or blocked. I’m not sure which room is which, but the others have to be bedrooms or the bathroom.”

Stephen walked ahead of us both into the hall and off to the right. “Let’s check what we can without breaking into more rooms.” He called back. “My fiancée will kill me if I go to prison.”

The kitchen was in a similar state. Trash was scattered on the floor, but a new finding was black stains on the floor near the fridge and table. I bent down to see if they had a chemical cleaner smell, but I nearly retched as Stephen opened the fridge.

“Ugh, that’s rank!” He slammed it shut again. “Everything is rotten!” I didn’t know what to make of that in terms of Nathan’s timeline we were piecing together. Had he left weeks ago? Or were they too sick to get food from the fridge and sustained themselves only on processed foods and canned soup?

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I picked up pieces of garbage to find more clues: Another bottle of bleach, partly full this time, food wrappers, an empty tube of teeth whitener, and crumbled papers. Most of the papers were drawings from Miles, but I paused as I looked them over. These were done solely in red marker and had an erratic pace to the strokes. I felt uneasy looking at them.

The last two papers were from Nathan. One was a grocery list with common food staples, and the other was a note to Miles that read “Enjoy your lunch, and have a great day at school!” Both must have been over a month old given the state of the fridge and that Miles wouldn’t have gone to school sick.

I looked over to see what Erin thought, and I saw her staring intensely at the stained floor. “That’s blood.” She uttered, but Stephen was quick to disagree. “What? No! What kind of blood is black? That’s got to be ink or paint. Nathan joked about how messy having a kid was. I’m sure Miles spilled something.”

“Old blood turns dark! That’s exactly what old, dried blood looks like.” Erin argued. Stephen scoffed. “What made you the expert on blood? Killed anyone lately?”

She crossed her arms over her chest and stood back up. “I’m a woman, you dolt. You think I haven’t seen tons of blood in my lifetime? Don’t piss a woman off! We know how to get blood out of any material. That’s why statistics say men kill more people than women. The women aren’t caught!”

“This isn’t the time to be fighting.” I interrupted. “If that is blood, then we’re getting a worse picture of what happened. We need to figure

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this out and help them.” Stephen looked embarrassed and left the kitchen first. “Fine, let’s go break more doors.”

We found the bathroom next. It was the door in the middle of the hall. The entry was blocked with a large china cabinet that had fallen in front of it. Stephen and I moved the cabinet upright and out of the way.

The inside was more barren than the other rooms. There was no trash nor papers. Directly ahead was a broken medicine cabinet mirror, on the right a toilet, and on the left a standalone bathtub. I opened the medicine cabinet first, expecting to find it packed with the miscellaneous medications from Nathan’s store receipt. To my surprise, it was empty except a lone forgotten toothbrush on the top shelf.

The bathtub had no shower curtain left on the rings, but a blanket was at the bottom of the tub. Erin picked it up before I could. “This is so torn, it’s almost rags.” Her face held an air of disgust as she dropped it back down.

Stephen looked in the toilet commode and behind it. “There’s no shampoo, soap, nothing in here. How did Nathan live like this?” I shook my head. “I don’t think he did. His bathroom at his prior house was normal. He had a bunch of shaving creams, body wash, everything a normal bathroom would have. This doesn’t look like him.”

There wasn’t much else to look at, so I turned to leave the small room. That’s when I saw it. My hand gripped the side of the bathroom door and pulled it closed to see more. The bottom third of the door

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was carved out with long scratches. It was made of heavy wood, so my brain struggled to understand how the gashes were this deep.

“Holy shit!” Erin exclaimed. “Do you think they locked an animal in here? It scratched all along the floor too. I assumed those were scratches from the furniture that fell, but no, it matches the marks on the door.”

I didn’t know what to think, but Stephen had a suggestion. “Oh! That explains the lack of items and blanket in the tub! They had a dog in here and didn’t want it chewing things up. Damn, he did a number on the door though!”

It was a reasonable explanation, and I wanted to grasp onto it. I turned back and grabbed the blanket, inspecting it closer. “Not a single dog hair. This... couldn’t have been used by an animal.” I wanted to be wrong. I wanted it to be an animal. But Erin and Stephen only stared in silence. We all left the bathroom and shut the door behind us, not wanting to look at it again.

There was one last door in the hall. It was locked, but like much of the cabin it didn’t appear to be very modern. Stephen looked to me, and I nodded. It took one shoulder ram to splinter the door at the strike plate. Stephen shoved it open the rest of the way and stepped in.

I felt my neck muscles tense as Stephen appeared to be swallowed whole by the darkness. The rest of the cabin had dim lighting from the windows and moonlight, but this room was different. Nothing could be seen from the doorway, no windows, no outline of furniture, no

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floor leading back. A base instinct in the back of my mind gripped me. I wanted to shut the door again and leave, to double back to our car and take off.

But I couldn't give in to such cowardly fears. Whatever was here was something my best friend faced alone, with his sick son relying on him. I owed it to him to look in the face of it and deal with whatever the answer was. I stepped inside too.

I hoped after a moment my vision would adjust, but nothing happened. Stephen called out three feet to my right, and I jumped from the loudness of it. I couldn't see a hair of him despite being so close.

"I'm right here, Stephen. You don't have to shout." He thankfully lowered his volume before replying. "Shit, man. I can't even-" "I know," I interrupted, "I can't see anything either."

I slowly shuffled my right foot towards the left side of the room, hands outstretched to feel what I could. "You go right, I got the left. We should meet in the middle somewhere and have an idea of what this room is."

I kicked corners of furniture and moved around them until I found the back wall. I first noticed thick blankets draped up high. "Hey, Stephen, where are you now? I found something." The answer again came unexpectedly close. "Several feet on your right, and me too. Something is covering this back wall."

"If nothing else, we can pull it down and check it out better in the living room light." I tugged, and it easily came free. I reached back up expecting to feel the wall, but there was another layer of fabric.

"What the hell..." I pulled again, and it came down. This one was thinner than the first, but its removal still didn't allow me to feel the

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wall. I pulled a third time, but I was met with resistance and the sound of tapping metal. “I think it’s a curtain now, but there were blankets and sheets over top of it too.”

I pulled the fabric to the side and it easily slid. A window was revealed, and the moonlight now showed the room to us.

It was a bedroom with a few large dressers. There were scattered pieces of trash, but nothing alarming. I found myself relieved at the relative normality of the room and the fact that there was no body here. I hated that my mind was going to that first now, expecting to see Nathan’s corpse around any given corner.

Stephen pulled the blankets and sheets off the window on his side, illuminating the room further. I could walk around freely now, and I moved to check out the bedside table.

The top drawer contained a few photos of Nathan’s late girlfriend, a watch, a journal, and a half-empty prescription pill bottle. I knew Nathan had a congenital heart defect controlled with medication. He complained about the cost sometime when we dormed together. This was further proof that he hadn’t left his home under normal circumstances. He never would have left this behind.

I put the pills and photos back, but I took the journal and closed the drawer. “Anything on your side, Stephen?” He was rummaging through bedcovers and picking papers off the floor. “No, just food wrappers mostly.” “Alright, let’s convene back in the living room and decide what to do.”

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Erin had stayed outside the bedroom, and we walked together to the living room. “There wasn’t much there except some of his prescriptions and a journal, but I haven’t looked at it yet. I was hoping you’d skim it for me, Erin. I feel weird prying in case there’s nothing related in there.”

She took the blue book from me and began flipping pages. I tried not to look over her shoulder. I doubt Nathan would write about me, but I didn’t feel like finding out either. Most likely pages were filled about Kendra. Nathan didn’t like to dwell on it when we talked, but I knew from Erin that he did go to therapy biweekly immediately following her death. He didn’t keep a journal in college, so I could assume it was a habit he got in therapy.

Stephen didn’t share my same sense of courtesy. He gawked over her shoulder as she flipped, eager to follow along. I turned away and looked out the window towards Stephen’s SUV as I thought.

“We should have enough information to get the sheriff to take us seriously. There’s strange things here I can’t explain yet, but we know that Nathan isn’t here, and he wouldn’t leave without his wallet and medications. I say we go straight there and make a formal report where they can’t ignore us.”

Stephen looked around the room slowly before replying. “I don’t think that’s a bad idea necessarily, but this definitely doesn’t add up.” Erin paused her flipping to look up. “I don’t think staying here will help us figure out where Nathan is. We’ll be wasting time.”

“No,” Stephen jumped back in, “I don’t mean the things we found. I mean the literal layout of the house doesn’t add up. The bedroom went back pretty far, and the kitchen too, but the bathroom was very

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small. This is a rectangular cabin from the outside. There should be another room between the bathroom and back of the home.”

My brow furrowed. “What are you getting at? There wasn’t another door in the hall. Are you saying Nathan wallpapered over a door?” I didn’t like the prospect of another room to potentially discover a corpse in. We needed help, and we could go get it with the sheriff now.

Rather than respond, Stephen left the room and went into the hall. I and Erin both followed. “It would be between here! That’s where the space between the rooms is.” He pointed to a bookcase, and I didn’t want to believe him.

Before I could respond, Erin began sticking her hand behind it as far as she could. “You’re right! There’s a corner and then the wall goes inward!”

After the bookcase was moved, we were immediately assaulted by a pungent stench. Stephen whipped his body to the side to avoid vomiting on Erin beside him. She quickly pulled her jacket above her nose and didn’t appear to be fairing much better from the look on her face. I was too scared to react. This was a smell I long feared to find in his cabin. It stunk of death.

I stared into the dim doorway. Stephen’s retches continued, but my hearing became tunneled. My breathing and heartbeat seemed louder than anything. Why didn’t Nathan tell me things were bad? I could have drove down weeks ago and took him and Miles to the hospital. If he was being stubborn, I could have at least stayed with them and played

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nurse. Or I could have called Erin; he might have accepted help from her.

He didn't deserve such a lonely, cold end. Part of me wondered if he had been suicidal for years and I missed the signs. Was not seeking help for his sickness his way of forcing life's hand? Did he think this was the right way back to Kendra? He loved his son so much. I couldn't fathom him leaving him, but grief and depression are often not logical.

As my eyes focused, I saw dark streaks on the floor and another jug of cleaning fluid off to the side. Pine-Sol? Now that I had seen it, another mingled scent made sense. I took a last breath and steeled myself.

"If you guys don't want to go in, it's okay. You could get a head start back to the sheriff's, but I have to... see it." Erin looked at me softly, understanding what I meant and what I expected to find. Stephen wiped his mouth and turned around. "As much as I'd like to do that, I can't. We can't leave you here, Ben. It's not fair."

I grit my teeth and breathed slowly through my nose, willing the threatening tears to leave my eyes. Erin put her hand on my shoulder without saying a word. After a moment, I straightened up and looked at them. "Let's do this, for Nathan. He deserves to not be left here."

I walked in first, hoping to shield the worst from Erin's view if it came to it. The doorway led to a very short hallway. The floor was sticky, and more scratches gouged the walls. A new explanation came to mind. Had Nathan tried to get help at the end, but been too weak to walk? Was he delirious and scraping his pocket knife along the floor and lower wall?

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The end of the hall opened into a large room. It was mostly bare of furniture, save a wooden chair turned over and a metal fireplace near the back. Items were scattered on the floor, and there was a very obvious dried pool of blood in the center. I didn't understand what I was seeing. The smell was near unbearable here, but there was no body.

Erin squeezed past me before I could stop her. "He's not here? Then he might still be alive! Right, guys? He could have just injured himself...!" Her sentence trailed off, and I grabbed for her arm as she walked towards the blood. "No, you don't need to look. I'll do it."

I stepped in further and felt a twist in my gut when I saw what stopped her. It wasn't just blood. There were a few clumps of hair and flesh scattered about. They were only palm-sized. I jerked my head up to inspect the windows further back. Had an animal gotten in and consumed what was left?!

Stephen followed my line of thinking without speaking. He strode over and began tugging at the windows, inspecting the frame. "It's been closed, and it's not broken." His face was pale and his eyes wide. The house was sealed. Nathan was dead. But Nathan's body was not here. Miles was not here. I clutched my head in my hands and leaned forward to stop the dizzy spell as it came on.

In the corner of my eye I spotted a rusty pair of pliers near the blood. There was a tooth a few inches away. Another freak oddity to add to the list. Nothing made sense.

Erin began to cry, finally unable to keep her brave face. "What does this mean for Miles? Where is he?" I thought of how I could answer her, comfort her. I didn't know what to do.

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She continued without waiting for me. “According to Nathan’s journal, Miles got sick first. Could this be... how do we know this is Nathan?!”

“Fuck...” I started to sob. “I don’t know... I don’t know! I have to see it. What was the last thing he wrote?” My face felt hot despite the stinging cold. I tried to get ahold of myself as I took the book from Erin and opened it.

I started from two months back and flipped forward. As I read, I looked around the room again. There were piles of torn blankets thrown into the corner. The top of the window had one scrap of blanket still hung with duct tape. There was duct tape on the arms and legs of the wooden chair thrown to the side.

Erin began panicking and started calling for Miles. Her voice started very small and shaky, but she began to call louder. “Miles... Miles... Miles!” I dropped the book and lunged towards her, grabbing her from behind and tightly covering her mouth with my hand.

Stephen was taken aback and stepped forward to fight me off, but I caught his eyes and whispered. “Don’t. Don’t say anything loud. Please. Please! Erin, don’t call out again. I’m going to let you go. Don’t move from here, either of you.”

My hands trembled, but adrenaline controlled my movements. They stood still as instructed but didn’t understand. I crept over to the metal fireplace. It had to have been original to the cabin, large enough to cook meals in as it doubled as an oven. I hoped with every fiber of my being that it had what I thought it had. The back of the room was darker, and I struggled to see against the black metal. My hand reached out in faith and found a rod in the side of the door.

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I braced myself and then shoved it down with all the strength I could. I held it in place with my body weight and swung off to the side where I was out of the way of the grate of the stove. “Stephen, get your lighter out! NOW!” My ears rung with Erin’s scream before I even saw it. A black spindly arm reached out the front of the grate and flailed wildly, clawing at whatever it could reach.

“WHAT THE FUCK?! WHAT THE FUCK!” Stephen couldn’t keep it together. He began backing out of the room, yelling in disbelief.

“Lighter, Stephen! LIGHTER!” I feared the clawed hand finding mine and held the grate’s locking rod as tightly as I could. Erin snapped out of it first and grabbed hold of Stephen, ripping the lighter from his pocket and throwing it at me.

I snatched it from the floor in front of me and struck it once, twice. Erin understood and raced to the other side of the room despite her terror. She grabbed pieces of torn blanket and threw them towards the fireplace.

“The fire poker!” I instructed. There was one off to the side, which she picked up and wildly stabbed, pushing the blankets past the blackened hand and into the grate. The scratching sounds and screeching from within the metal structure heightened.

I shoved the lighter’s flame into one corner and it easily caught. The fire spread quickly across the blanket pieces, and ungodly shrieks pierced our ears.

Without thinking, I let go of the locking rod and covered my ears. Erin held the poker like a shaking sword, a last resort between her and the thing. Stephen screamed from the doorway, but I didn’t take my eyes off of it. The being tore its arm open from the sharp, jerking

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movements. I watched as black blood dripped from the grate onto the floor below.

Watching the being be licked up by flames felt like an eternity. At one point it ducked its head down, and I could see red eyes looking through at me, and large, sharp teeth as it screamed. It was small. Small enough to hide in the stove when we came into the cabin.

I kept my eyes locked but stumbled over towards Erin and held her. We stood, shaking, until the screams stopped. Stephen's quieter sobs echoed from behind us. After another minute, I found my voice.

"That... was Miles. He was bit by something in the woods in early November. Nathan... He-" I had to take another moment to compose myself. "He knew he couldn't help Miles at a hospital once he saw what started. He tried to fix this himself: Scrubbing Miles' blackening skin with cleaners, pulling out his growing teeth, cutting off his claws, medicating him, sedating him... locking him in the bathroom at first. He thought he could fix him. He couldn't lose another person, and not his son..."

I turned and picked the journal back up. It detailed Miles' symptoms in the beginning, but then it trailed off and had no further entries.

I couldn't fathom such a thing really existed, a monster like this, but Miles' charred, disfigured remains were proof. I hoped to God his soul had long left his body in peace before we killed what remained of him, this thing. Miles had been such a sweet boy...

Erin came back to herself and shoved out of my protective hold. She gingerly took a few steps forward and squatted in front of the grate, looking at it. "If this is Miles... where is Nathan?"

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I took a breath to steady myself and looked closer at the chunks of flesh and hair near the center of the floor. Miles and Nathan had similar hair types, but Miles was always one shade lighter. At this distance, I knew the answer.

“Not here. None of this is Nathan’s. Miles must have... shed parts of himself while turning into that.”

“I-If he’s not here... then...” Stephen stepped back in towards me.

“Then,” I started to finish his sentence, preparing myself, “He could be in the woods outside.” I clutched the fire poker Erin had put down and pointed to a broken off metal pipe on the left. “Pick up any heavy or sharp object you can find... and follow close behind me.”

A last tear fell as I gripped my improvised weapon. “My best friend is a strong man...”

END

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