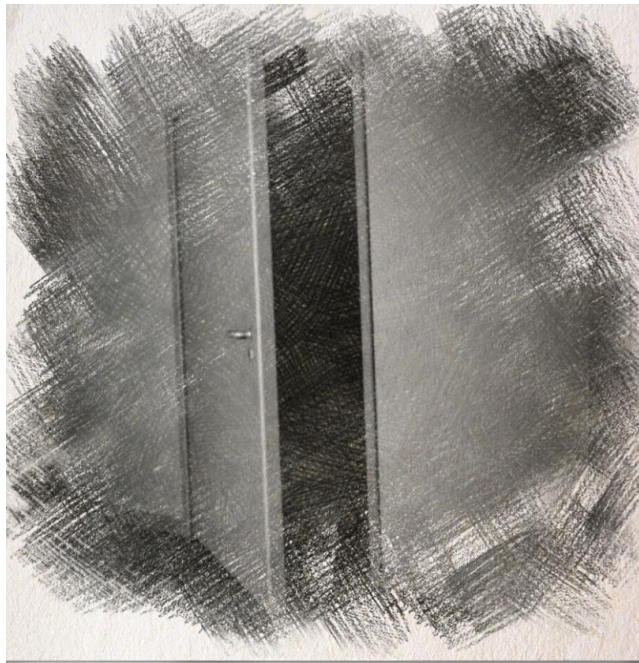


Chapter 11: The Woods

Chris woke up suddenly thinking he heard something in his room. He looked at the window and it was still dark. He laid very still, his heart was racing. Although it was dark, he could see a little light coming in from the full moon. He was afraid, but he didn't know why.

His closet door was open, and he thought he saw something like a shadow move. His eyes got bigger as he strained to see better - nothing.



Then it moved it again. He knew this time that something moved. He didn't know if he should get up or just lay there. He wanted to call out for dad, but he felt paralyzed with fear.

He laid there for what seemed like a long time, but it may have only been a few minutes. He waited - nothing. After another five minutes, he felt that he needed to get out of there. He drew up enough courage to get up keeping his eyes fixed on the closet - still nothing. He inched along the far side of the room closest to the door - still nothing. As soon as he reached the door, he ran across the hall to Bobby's room. His heart was still pounding as he pulled down the blankets on the bottom bunk and climbed in. Bobby was breathing heavy and didn't wake up. Chris laid there wondering what that was. Eventually he fell back to sleep.

"What are you doing in here?" Bobby said as he climbed down from the top bunk in the morning.

Chris sat up in bed, "there was something in my room last night?"

"What?" Bobby said a little afraid.

"Yeah," Chris continued, "it was in my closet."

"What was in your closet?" Bobby asked.

"I don't know," Chris said still a little afraid.

The sun was just coming up. Chris got up and grabbed Bobby's pajamas as he climbed off the steps and said, "come with me."

Chris took a baseball bat out of the closet. As they snuck quietly across the hall, they could see that mom and dad were still asleep.

He snuck quietly into the room holding the bat in ready position just in case, with Bobby close behind. Chris' opened the closet door all the way with the bat. Once in the room, Chris lifted the bat higher, ready to hit anything that might move in the closet. He didn't see anything, so he poked the clothes with the bat - nothing. He poked the items on the shelf above and then below where his shoes were. Nothing.

"There's nothing in there," Bobby said a little bit relieved.

They stood there looking at the closet for a bit longer. Nothing.

"Are you sure you weren't dreaming?" Bobby asked.

"Nope," Chris said, "I know I wasn't asleep."

"Should we tell mom and dad?" Bobby asked.

"No," Chris replied, "don't say anything."

They heard someone coming.

"What's going on you two?" mom asked half asleep, "why are you up so early?"

Chris hid the bat behind him, “nothing,” Chris said, “I thought I heard something in the closet. Think something must have fallen down in there.”

“You must have been having a bad dream again,” mom said. “I heard you tossing and turning last night. Did you have another bad dream?”

“I don’t remember,” Chris said.

“Well, I might as well get up and make some coffee,” she said as she walked down the hall towards the kitchen.

Dad got up to go to the bathroom, but he didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary. While he was in the bathroom, Bobby snuck back into his room to get dressed.

Chris got dressed as quick as he could and walked down the hall towards the kitchen. He peaked into Bobby’s room and it was empty. He joined them at the table. Mom was drinking a cup of coffee and Bobby just sat there staring into space.

“Want something to eat?” mom asked.

“I’ll make some cereal later,” Chris said, “but I’m not hungry right now.”

“Me neither,” Bobby said.

Mom gave them a funny look as it was rare that they didn't want breakfast.

"You boys are up early," dad said as he came into the kitchen, and mom lifted her cup to see if he wanted any and he nodded. Dad took a sip of coffee and looked at Chris, "have any plans today?"

"Yeah," Chris said a little more chipper as his dad took his mind off of what happened, "ok with if we go exploring in the woods with Davey this morning?" Chris asked, "he wants us to come over at eight."

"I guess so," dad said. "I gotta start work on Monday, so we won't be able to work on the porch until Saturday."

Good! Chris thought and asked if he could be excused. He left the room and Bobby followed after him.

Chris and Bobby gathered their things into a backpack and went to the kitchen to grab some food to take with them.

"What stuff can we take with us to the woods," Bobby asked Chris in a whisper.

"Shhhh!" Chris said, "where's mom?"

“She’s hanging the clothes out on the line,” Bobby noticed as he looked out the kitchen window.

“Hurry Bobby,” climb up and get some cookies.

Bobby open the drawers one by one with each one open a little less than the next to make a ladder to climb up onto the counter. He took one last look out the kitchen window and mom was still at the clothesline. He reached up high with both hands and picked up the pig cookie jar and brought it down onto the counter. He opened it and it was full of fresh homemade chocolate chip cookies, “chocolate chip cookies!” Bobby yelled out to Chris.

“Just grab some quick,” he said as he looked out the window to make sure mom wasn’t coming.

Bobby grabbed a handful and put them in his pocket, closed the lid, and put it back up on the top of cabinet, then climbed down, then he and Chris left out the front door before mom came in.

As they were running across the road to Davey’s, Chris asked, “how many did you get?”

Bobby reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of cookie pieces, along with a little lint mixed in.

“Yuk, you can have ‘em,” Chris said, and Bobby didn’t care as shoved some in his mouth.

Davey was sitting on the front porch waiting for them, all ready to go.

“Be quiet,” Davey said as he led them quietly through the Crenshaw’s back yard along the fence to the entrance into the woods.

“This is where we usually go in,” Davey said as they walked onto the path that led into the dark woods. Gary Crenshaw was sitting on the back porch smoking a cigarette as he watched them walk his yard towards the entrance to the woods. Gary nodded at the boys when they saw him.



“The Crenshaws don’t care if we cut through here,” Davey nodded back at Gary and they stepped into the woods.

“Wow,” Chris said, “it’s dark in here.”

“Your eyes will adjust,” Davey said as they continued to walk down the narrow path.

The forest was thick and dark, but there was enough light coming through the trees so they could see that the path was getting wider in the distance. They stopped when they reach the fork in the path.



“This path,” Davey said as he pointed north, “goes to Northhampton,” then he pointed in the direction of the other path that led south, “and this path goes deep into the woods. But, a little way up,

there's a path off this one that goes west to Big Bethel Road where our fort is," he explained, "and also to the feed store. Got any money?"

"No," Chris said.

"Yeah," Bobby said, "I do." He pulled dollar out of his pocket.

"Great!" Davey said and led them south, "we'll get some candy at the feed store."

As they walked through the dark woods, they noticed so many things that they'd never seen before. The moss on the trees, lots and lots of ferns growing on the ground, except where the path was.

"What's that!" Bobby stopped looking up in the trees when a red bird flew past him.

"That's a cardinal," Davey answered. "Don't you have cardinals in California?"

"Never seen a *red* bird."

"The cardinal is our state bird," Davey explained.

They all focused on the bird again as it flew from tree to tree. Suddenly something slid across the path in front of them and they all stopped still in their tracks.

“Oh, it’s just a black snake,” Davey said and continued on, “they’re harmless.”

“Over here,” Davey said as he pointed to the tree house.

Davey climbed up to the fort on pieces of two-by-fours nailed into the tree and looked down at them. Then, they climbed up.



They climbed up and went inside and sat down on the floor.

Davey opened a tin can on the floor and took out some matches and lit an old candle.

“This is cool!” Chris said.

“Yeah,” Bobby agreed, “what’s this?” he asked pointing to a sheet hanging on the wall with big black letters that spelled SRAM.

“That’s the name of our fort,” Davey explained, “we are the SRAMs.”

“The SRAMs?” Chris asked, “what are SRAMS?”

“Just the name my dad and his friends decided to name it when they built it a long time ago,” Davey said, “dad said it means MARS spelled backwards.”

They laughed, “OK” Chris said, “whatever.”

“What do you guys do in here?” Bobby asked.

“Just hang out,” Davey said, “and defend our territory from the Gruders.”

“The Gruders?” Chris asked.

“Yeah,” Davey said, “they live way on the other side of the woods, and they’re not allowed over here, it’s our territory! We stay away from them and they stay away from us – usually.”

“OK, I get that,” Chris said as he explained a similar story in Pacific Beach where he grew up, where they defended the pier as their territory from the Clairemont brats.

Davey opened up a hidden window in the fort and looked out, “this is our lookout window,” he said, “you can see pretty far away from here,” and he pointed, “see that water tower far off in the distance?”

They looked out and saw the tower, “yeah”, they said together.

“That’s the Gruder boys’ territory,” Davey explained, “stay away from there,” he warned.

As they looked around they could see that they were closer to the tops of the trees where more light was coming into the woods so you could see for a long ways off.

Chris dug into his pocket and pulled out some firecracker, “Wanna light off some firecrackers?” Chris said as he took some out of his pocket.

“Where d’you get those?” Davey asked as examined them.

Chris removed the rest of the firecrackers, cherry bombs, and M-80’s and piled them up on the floor, “Bobby found them in the cubby hole in my uncle’s old bunk bed,” Chris said as he handed some to Davey.

Davey lit a match to see them better. He didn’t mean to light them, but as soon as the match got close, the firecrackers exploded in his hand, he dropped them, they hit the floor where Chris put down the other fire crackers, cherry bombs, and M-80s, and it was like fire works! They panicked and climbed down from the fort as quick as they could. Davey stayed behind and took off his t-shirt to smother out the fire.

When Chris realized Davey wasn't behind him, he climbed back up and saw what he was doing and pulled off his t-shirt to help him. Bobby then climbed back up and helped too. Eventually, they got the fire out, but not without a big hole in the floor and the roof, and three ruined shirts.

"We gotta fix this before the guys find out," Davey said, "let's go back to my house to get some wood and nails."

It wasn't long, and they were back with the supplies. Davey had pulled three t-shirts off the clothesline for them. They patched up the holes and covered them up. "Don't tell *anyone* about this ok?" Davey warned and everyone agreed to keep this their secret.