

Breach

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For my muses. For my puddin', the kitty and the sir. For those
that said I could.

For VT, who knew I would.

For Charity, for my friends and my family and for all those who
helped along the way.

For all of those that opened the door.

Chapter One: Into the Dark

Huddling against the rough bark of the tree I was clinging to, I desperately tried to calm down. Sweat poured down my face and my stomach was clenched in knots. Breathing in gulps of air, I tried to steady myself and fight back waves of nausea. My entire body was shaking with shock and fear. Tears ran down my face as my stomach lurched again and again.

Unable to win that battle, I bent over and heaved my dinner up onto the dirt and leaves at my feet, holding onto the tree trunk for support. Every time I squeezed my eyes closed, I saw red gore and flashes of black. My heartbeat pounded in my ears as I tried to steady myself. My mind was in a frenzy trying to make sense of what I had just witnessed.

White noise filled my ears as shock threatened to spill me to the ground.

When I had returned to our campsite, after a brief hike around the woods, I had stumbled directly into a scene ripped from my nightmares. Unable to scream, unable to breathe, I stood frozen just at the edge of the clearing, barely aware of the wetness spreading down my legs as my bladder let go.

Blood and gore coated what had been our campsite. The bodies of two of my companions, my close friend Kyle and my boyfriend Luka, were scattered in pieces under the monster's legs. I could see an arm, part of a leg, a foot, still twitching with tendons and ligaments trailing from it. My stomach heaved and bile rose in my throat, burning with acid.

My best friend, Stacey, screamed incoherently as the monster's jaw severed her torso from her legs, ending her scream and her life at the same time. Blood sprayed across the tent and the still smoldering fire pit as the creature chewed her upper half. Blood was streaming from its massive jaw while bits of gore and ruined flesh spattered on the ground. My brain was screaming at me, "*Move! Run, Laraya, Run!*" My legs finally got the message. I bolted for the trees, terror consuming my brain.

The creature tearing apart my friends in the clearing was unlike anything I'd ever seen, in life or in my nightmares. It towered at least eight feet in the air, on spindly black legs covered in coarse hair, with piercing, red eyes looming over its sickly, gray body. Rage bellowed from a mouth so impossibly filled with razor-sharp teeth that they seemed to be stretching its mouth past the breaking point.

Moving like a spider or scorpion, it skittered through the clearing, chasing my best friend as she screamed in terror. Odd lumps covered the massive blob that was its body. My terrorized brain focused on the lumps that were moving and squirming around. I gasped in shock as it registered. Faces! Those were faces!

Horrible grotesque faces were trapped under the sickly skin of the monster. Writhing just underneath the flesh, sunken eyes could be seen along with mouths opened in horrifying shrieks and screams of terror and agony. There were dozens of faces, some human while others were not.

There were faces that looked like they had been pulled straight from the depths of hell; demons that defied description, pointy eared gargoyles, and turtle shaped heads with large fangs, animals that looked like mutated hybrids. What should have been a cacophony of sound, a horrific mix

of agony and torture, was muted by the flesh of the creature, into an eerie wailing sound. The agonized screaming of my best friend overpowered all other noise.

I fled through the dark forest for what felt like hours, sobbing from fear and grief, hurtling past trees and tripping over roots. Now I stood here, holding onto a sapling as I squatted beside it, winded and weak. Shaking violently, crying and gasping to breathe, while trying to make sense of what was happening.

My friends had been slaughtered, my Luka, my best friend Stacey and her fiancé, Kyle; I would be next. There was no question in my mind. The monster would be hunting me by now, stalking me through the trees. The scent of my terror mixed with sweat and urine would be raw and potent in the air. Its laser red eyes had swiveled towards me, boring into my soul, as I stood frozen moments before I bolted.

Long minutes passed before I was able to breathe. No longer gasping for air, I stood slowly, still trembling behind the gnarled tree. My heart was pounding against my chest, every beat like a sledgehammer against my rib cage. Every nerve in my body was on high alert; I felt every breath of air on my skin, heard every sound around me.

Leaves were whispering to each other, insects that

were chirping in the underbrush suddenly went silent and in the distance, branches were breaking, loudly being snapped in half as something big was careening through them. My blood ran cold and I bolted.

Moving further away from the sound, I fled deeper into the dark, trying to be silent and light on my feet, but every footfall sounded like thunder. The animals and insects had fled into hiding, keenly aware that a predator was close.

The darkness hung heavy around me, the air was thick with odors of rot and decay, making it hard to breathe; the kind of stench that coated your tongue with the taste of mildew as you inhaled. My brain was in full survival mode. "Run! Run! Run!" The words flashed in my head, a bright, red neon sign, I ran faster and harder than I ever had before. Overcome by sheer terror, I fled through the darkness.

The sounds of pursuit filled my ears as the monster stalked me through the woods. Pebbles scattered into the brush as its spindly legs raced after me through the night. The shadows reaching from beneath leaves and bushes felt alive, like they might snatch me down into the abyss at any moment, hold me pinned there in the dark for the monster to feed upon.

Terror fueled my flight, adrenaline dulling the pain in

my legs. Running blindly through trees and bushes with thorns tearing at my clothes and skin, I fled. Rocks, vines and knotted roots all sought to slow my flight. I stumbled, fell, rolled and leapt to my feet all in one motion. The nightmare behind me fueled me on. I was oblivious to the pain.

Minutes later, I jumped down a small bank and splashed across a narrow stream, hoping the creature was too far behind to hear the water splash against my boots. Scrambling up the bank on the other side, hands grabbing to find hold among the loops of decaying vines and slippery tree roots, I clambered up the bank in a half crouch.

Reaching the top of the embankment, I bolted through the night, slamming into trees as I went. Branches whipped at my flesh as I ran, cutting into my outstretched arms that were raised to protect myself from the stinging onslaught. The woods blurred past my vision, a nightmarish blend of thick trees and razor-sharp thorns. Shadows reached for me at every turn, threatening to snatch me up and feed me into the jaws of the creature that was close to snapping at my heels.

I halted for a moment as I came to a thick patch of briars but then I threw myself into the thorns, blindly trying to escape certain death. I pounded through the thicket, razor

sharp brambles tore at my face and hands, raked through my clothes, and tore snarls through my hair. Several minutes later I burst through the briar patch and came to a thick stand of trees, all crowded tightly together.

Large branches hung down, heavy with wet leaves. Several thick, black pine trees in the midst layered their silver tipped branches onto the drooping leaves of the trees around them, forming heavy layers of leaves and needles.

I barely hesitated before deciding to try to crawl into the middle of the trees. I climbed over the roots and shoved one leg inside, then turned sideways to squeeze between two massive trunks. Once inside the first ring of trees, I gingerly repeated this process, until I was in the middle of the tightly woven copse of trees.

I sank down to the leaf-covered ground that smelled sharply of mold and rot and leaned heavily against the tree at my back. Shaking, I tried to steady my breathing, forcing myself to calm down, trying desperately to listen for the sounds of pursuit. My face was flushed from exertion; my arms and chest glistened with blood, sweat and tears.

I knew I was not safe, but for right now, I was securely hidden. The sheer size of the trees and the lack of space between their gnarled branches would make it

impossible for the giant monster to reach me. I sat, weeping silently with my head on my knees, arms wrapped around my legs. Long minutes passed and I pulled myself together, wiping my face on my jacket sleeve.

As I sat listening for sounds of the creature, the sound of branches snapping came from far off to the right. It was still a few minutes away, but I knew it would catch my scent again soon. Hunching over, I huddled against the tree, trying to become invisible, but my smell alone would give me away. My clothes were soaked in sweat, urine and muddy stream water. The stench of fear and terror hung over me, like the smell of death at our campsite.

The memory hit me, an overwhelming assault on my senses; my friends, reduced to pieces of bone and tissue. The blood seeping into the ground, the bloody jaw of the monster, the hot coppery smell of blood and the stench of feces from their disemboweled bodies. The pure terror on my best friend's face as she was ripped in two, her screams still echoing in my mind. My heart ached, Stacey was more than a friend to me; she was my sister by choice.

Images of the scene flashed through my mind, a horrible montage of death and gore. Ropes of intestines dangling from tree branches like vines, viscera strewn

everywhere, their bodies literally torn apart. Blood splashed on trees, across our tents and the picnic table. Only a few body parts remained on the ground, but no heads.

Remembering the faces trapped in the flesh of the monsters' body, I shuddered violently and vomited into the dirt.

Would that be their fate? To forever be trapped in the flesh of that thing. Writhing and screaming in agony for eternity? What was the creature? Where the fuck did it come from? It couldn't be from this world, but if it wasn't, where the hell did it come from and how did it get here? Questions rolled through my mind like ocean waves, questions that I could not answer.

My battered mind could not accept that fate for my friends, could not comprehend what was going on. Pain consumed my body and mind; the world threatened to slide away as my brain tried to deal with the trauma. I focused on my breathing, one deep breath at a time, one slow exhale, trying not to pass out. I would need to focus to survive the night.

With my head pounding like a jackhammer on concrete, exhaustion began to set in, and my muscles burned in agony, while my body shook uncontrollably. Leaning my head back against a tree, I closed my eyes, and put all my focus on breathing quietly, willing my body to calm itself. I

prepared to wait for morning and with it, an end to this nightmare, a logical end. *There had to be a logical explanation, right? Maybe I am just dreaming. Maybe I'm stuck in another nightmare. Luka will wake me at any minute. Come on, Laraya, wake up! Wake Up!* I pondered this question for a long while before fatigue won over and I slept.

Short minutes later, I was jolted awake, immediately alert despite my fatigue. The noise had been close by, the sudden, sharp crack of a branch being snapped in half, rustling in the dead leaves. Frozen in place, I did not move a muscle, did not exhale.

I suddenly became acutely aware of something crawling on my skin, big and covered in bristles. It scuttled across my hand and down my leg. Revulsion filled my brain, and I bit back the soft moan of horror that threatened to spill from my mouth. I prayed that it would continue into the trees, leaving me unharmed. Spiders horrified me, most bugs terrified me on a primal level. It was all I could do to stay deathly still even as the muscles in my legs twitched to get away.

Several more times, I felt my skin crawl with bugs and insects as they navigated around me to the knobby boughs of the trees beyond. The hairs were raised on the back

of my neck, goose-bumps covered my body, but I remained motionless. I had much bigger problems at the moment.

The forest around me had recoiled into silence, except for the skittering legs of the monstrous creature hunting me. I could hear it scurrying to my left, branches ripping from trees as it went. Wet, snorting sounds filled the air as it tried to track my scent.

The endless wailing of the voices trapped within, provided a demonic background noise to the hunt. I was trapped in a malevolent black hole from which I might never escape. My skin grew clammy from terror-induced sweat and I shuddered; I felt like I had been buried alive in the decaying flesh of a corpse. I struggled to breathe.

Frozen in place, my legs cramped, pins and needles jabbing me as my limbs came awake, but I did not move. The slightest noise would bring the monster closer to the thicket where I was hidden. Right then, the scuttling came closer, right outside of where I sat. Tears ran down my face, dripped from my jawline onto my coat, down my neck and sweat ran in rivers down my spine.

I had never known fear like this, it paralyzed me to my core. My only coherent thought was *don't move. Don't move. Don't move.* Over and over on a loop in my brain, it was

all I could think. The forest seemed to be a living entity, throbbing with an evil all its own. The air was thick with tension and the scent of the rotted vegetation around me.

I could smell the monster looming a few feet away; the stench emanating off it was unbearable, a mix of decay and fresh blood. The fetid odor filled my nostrils and I desperately swallowed back the sudden bile that had risen in my throat from my already delicate stomach. The skittering sounds became louder as the legs of the thing began hunting around the thicket, scraping over roots and bark as it searched for me, trying to find an opening. I hunched over, trying to escape deeper into the tree trunk that I huddled against, impossibly trying to disappear. My heart slammed into my chest, pounding so loudly that I thought it might give me away.

An eternity passed while the monster continued its frenzied scraping and skittering around the circle of trees. The snorting became louder, turning into deep guttural growls, as its legs tried to find a way to reach me. The grotesque body was too large to slip between the tightly woven trees and it howled in anger. Branches shook and groaned in protest as it tried to reach me. Leaves rained down as it shook the trees. Several smaller trees swayed violently against the others, but

none gave.

Miserably huddled inside the relative safety of the thicket, I cursed myself for having chosen to stop here. It could not reach me, but I also could not leave. I could not hope to leave the enclosure without being seen by the monster. My entire being quaked in terror as I wept silently, covering my mouth with the sleeve of my jacket. There was nothing more I could do but wait. Wait and hope that it would grow tired and move on. If anyone ever had a foolish thought, that was it. *What horror movie ever ended with the villain becoming bored?* I shook my head at the sudden random thought, a small smirk covering my face and then vanishing all in the same instant. "Get it together, Laraya," I muttered to myself, this was not the time for idle thoughts, all the while wondering if I had become a bit delusional.

Relentlessly, the creature circled the trees, snorting, growling and wailing coming from it in waves, burrowing deep into my brain. The spindly legs poking and prodding into any opening; tapping along the knotted boughs and trunks with hideous claws. An hour must have passed by before the noise lessened, the skittering slowed and became still. Only the anguished wailing could be heard, although slightly further away. I had no idea if it was leaving the area

or was settling down to wait me out.

I tried to focus on the agonized sound of the wailing voices. Softer but crystal clear, a steady volume from somewhere nearby, I realized the beast had settled in to wait. Inch by inch, I straightened one leg out, then the other, letting the blood flow resume. The pins and needles were like daggers stabbing straight into my brain, each one driving deep into my muscles.

I did not make a sound but exhaled very slowly, trying to focus on moving and regaining my circulation. My ass was numb and damp from the decaying leaves and dank earth under me; I shifted from side to side to ease the pressure. Then, I arched my back slowly, trying to ease the muscle pain and cramping, then lifted each shaking arm over my head, stretching the best I could in the tight space. I could feel my muscles shaking with every movement, from horror and exertion, but I knew that I could not afford to stiffen up, not when I might need to run at any moment. I continued trying to stretch my muscles and work out the cramps for several minutes, biding my time as the monster sat in wait, nearby.

Time slowly crawled by as I sat on the ground, anxious to be free, still hoping to wake from this nightmare.

The incessant wailing was a steady drone; a legion of voices trying to be heard outside of the decaying body of the monster that had savagely torn them to pieces. If I had to describe what I thought Hell sounded like, this was it, at a dull roar.

I had to move, needed to move. Sitting here was not going to change my situation at all. Shifting into a crouch, I slowly stood up, placing my hands on my knees. I took a couple of deep breaths to steady myself. It had been hours since I had food or water, and my head was pounding against my skull, overloaded from stress, fear and fatigue. The voices were slowly driving me insane but as long as I could hear it, I could try to determine what side of the trees the monster was on, using the wailing as an audio compass, echo location of sorts.

I was standing in the innermost part of the trees and had several more layers that I needed to squeeze through before reaching the outside. I paced in slow circles in the tight enclosure, trying to pinpoint the wailing. Finally, I decided to try moving out of the thicket by going directly behind me, as the hellish symphony seemed to be loudest in front of me.

Slowly, I slid one leg out into the line of trees, finding my footing on a thick root. Grasping the branch closest to me,

I angled my body through the opening and brought my other leg out. My clothing scraped against the tree, rustling slightly and my heart leapt into my throat. Clinging tightly to the tree, I steadied myself and exhaled quietly; listening for the death wails coming from the creature. I hoped that I was going to sneak away unnoticed.

Standing silently for several long moments, I listened for any sound from the monster to indicate it had moved. Edging closer to the outer ring of trees, I tried to see beyond the thicket that encircled me, the only thing between me and the nightmare, but I could only see a few inches into the pitch black. I could still hear the cries coming from the opposite side and exhaled quietly in relief. The monster had not yet sensed my movement.

Fighting back the fear that threatened to force me back into the tight space I had been hiding in, I lifted one foot up and out, placing it silently on the ground outside. Clutching the tree, I slowly edged my way around it, and brought my body out through the opening, followed by my right leg. I was still trembling with fear and anxiety, unable to see more than a few dark inches in front of me. I hoped it would be dawn soon, but the forest had not yet begun to lighten. I told myself that I had to move faster. I was

vulnerable and exposed in my current stance; alone in the dark, with no idea of where to go or what direction I had come from.

My only choice was to move and to keep moving until I came to a road, or to people that could help me. Steeling myself and preparing to run at the slightest noise, I took a step forward. Quiet as a mouse, I inched forward, stepping only on the balls of my feet, finding solid purchase with one foot before silently moving the next. My hands were reaching out for the next tree, trying to feel my way through the night. I barely breathed with each step that took me further away from the monster. My body was tense, coiled like a spring, every step silent, leg muscles tight from nerves and adrenaline, ready to bolt at the smallest indication that the monster had moved.

I could not run yet; there was not enough distance between myself and the slumbering beast. I could still hear the tortured voices raised in their symphony of distress. Stealthily, I inched along, every sense on high alert when suddenly something brushed my outstretched arm and I nearly screamed in terror.

My brain stopped the noise seconds before it erupted from my mouth, recognizing that it was a tree branch. I

moved my arms slowly, grasped the branch and felt my way along it to the trunk. Steadily, I eased around to the other side. My body was shaking from the forced slowness of my escape, terror running rampant through my veins. My cheek scraped painfully against the bark of the gnarled tree, and leaves seemed to rise up to greedily suck the blood from my skin.

I felt like I had gone a mile from my hiding spot, but the endless death wails from the trapped faces reminded me how close I was to danger. Taking a moment to lean against a tree, I forced myself to breathe slowly and deeply before I continued. Stepping away from the sapling, I lifted both arms in my dance of the dark and stepped forward. "*One more step, one more step, one more step*" became a mantra in my brain. I focused only on my breathing and my silent movements. *Left, pause, right, pause, listen, left, pause, right, pause, listen.* I continued my silent flight to freedom.

Several agonizingly slow steps later, I finally reached another tree. I felt around the width of the trunk, stepping gingerly along its twisted roots as I navigated around to the other side. "*Stop, listen, breathe, inhale and exhale, inhale and exhale,*" my brain was on autopilot. I merely carried out its commands. Five more times I carried out this process, find a

tree, get around it (*stop, listen, breathe*), find a tree, get around it (*stop, listen, breathe*) and repeat.

I stopped to listen for a long minute and heard nothing but the soft wailing, further away now. I could not hear any other forest sounds. I knew that the predator still lingered. Nevertheless, anxious relief flooded my brain and I allowed myself a moment to breathe. I was not yet safe, but I was gaining distance and soon could flee into the night.

The slow pace was torture, but I knew one reckless step would bring the monster to my heels. I needed to maintain my cautious approach for a few more minutes before I unleashed my leg muscles to the faster pace they were demanding. The more distance I could safely put between myself and the beast meant the more room I had to run and escape.