

Blackness and darkness suffocated the surrounding air and the smell of freshly-dampened woods lingered. Shards of moonlight attempted to pierce through the dense woods (the quarter moon was concealed behind the ancient trees) but the majority of the reflected light was blocked by bark and foliage – only tiny streams of light wriggled their way through. Because it was the early hours of the morning, sounds of nocturnal animals hunting would be expected but no sound travelled in the air. An eerie silence. As he stepped into the woods, the only vibrations that reached his eardrums came from his bare-feet carefully selecting the path, on the sodden ground, that would be the least likely to give away his position. He felt his heart pounding in his chest but he couldn't turn back: he actually felt safer away from the broken-into home and the blanket of trees provided a weird sense of safety. Crack. A sound shot through the woods and reached him but it was quickly followed by eerie silence again. Holding his breath, carefully choosing his path, he continued to venture into the woods, whilst trying to maintain a safe distance from the mysterious intruder.

A foreign smell filled his nostrils as he ambled deeper into the water-logged trees; nothing he had previously smelt came close to matching the traces of scent that drifted into his nostrils. He couldn't explain why he kept travelling deeper and deeper into the woods; it was as if he had lost control of his body and had no free will. Although the dense forest provided an effective shield from the biting wind, the temperature was just above freezing and he trembled – he had travelled into the woods in his lounge wear (his green-striped pyjama bottoms from Next and his favourite O'Neill t-shirt). No sensation or dexterity was left in his fingers or toes and blankets of water vapour was visible from his mouth everytime he exhaled. Although he was trying to hide and pursue at the same time, all efforts to carefully select a path and reduce the level of noise that he produced had ceased: human instincts to tremble and shudder to keep the body warm had kicked in.

Crack. A sound shot through the woods and reached him again. But, again, it was quickly followed by an eerie silence. He froze and stood still. Something wasn't right – he hadn't noticed it, as his frozen limbs trudged along on their senseless mission, but he was no longer fighting past trees. There was a clearing in the woods. For some unknown reason, he still didn't turn back. He stared at his toes, that were starting to turn an unhealthy shade of blue, and then stared, trance-like, at a cluster of trees beyond the clearing. Four finger-like objects scraped along the bark and disappeared into darkness. Crack. Crack. Crack. The sound circled him. His heart thumped. His breathing quickened. He spun and try to catch a glimpse. Nothing but shadows and darkness was visible. Crack. Crack. Crack. The sound was closer. The pupils in his eyes expanded. Cold sweat dripped down the bumps on the back of his neck. His hands clenched into fists. A shallow breathing could be heard directly behind him. He held his breath and began to slowly turn. And then ... he saw it.