

SUICIDE FOREST

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WORLD'S SCARIEST PLACES: BOOK ONE

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Ghillinnein Books

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FIRST EDITION

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The novels in the *World's Scariest Places* series are set in real locations. The following is a Wikipedia “Suicide Forest” excerpt:

Aokigahara (青木ヶ原), also known as the **Suicide Forest** or **Sea of Trees** (樹海 *Jukai*), is a 35-square-kilometre (14 sq mi) forest that lies at the northwest base of Mount Fuji in Japan. The forest contains a number of rocky, icy caverns, a few of which are popular tourist destinations. Due to the wind-blocking density of the trees and an absence of nearly all wildlife, the forest is known for being exceptionally quiet.

The forest has a historic association with demons in Japanese mythology and is a popular place for suicides despite numerous signs, in Japanese and English, urging people to reconsider their actions.

2004

PROLOGUE

SUICIDE Forest is real. The Japanese call it Aokigahara Jukai (Ah-oh-kee-gah-hah-rah Ju-kii), which means “Sea of Trees.” Each year local authorities remove from it more than one hundred bodies, most found hanging from tree branches and in various states of decay. Abandoned tents, moldy sleeping bags, dirty daypacks, and miles of ribbon litter the forest floor. It is said the area is haunted by the ghosts of the suicides, and locals often report hearing unexplained screams during the night. Signs warn visitors not to leave the hiking trails. These are routinely ignored by thrill seekers hoping to catch a glimpse of the macabre. Most find their way out again. Some never do.

1

WE took two cars from Tokyo to Yamanashi Prefecture, where Fujisan, better known in the West as Mt. Fuji, was located. The first car was directly in front of ours. It was a Toyota minivan, smaller and boxier than the ones you see back in the States. It belonged to a salary man named Honda. I guess you could make a joke about Honda driving a Toyota, but that was his name: Katsuichi Honda. Also in his car was Neil Rodgers, a fifty-five-year-old English teacher from New Zealand, and a guy named John Scott. I didn't know anything about John Scott except that he was an American soldier stationed in Okinawa, and he knew my girlfriend Melinda Clement because they went to high school together.

Driving our car was Tomo Ishiwara, a twenty-two-year-old university student studying psychiatry, which was a rare major in Japan. Generally speaking, people over here didn't speak about their problems; they drank them away. One of the first expressions I learned fresh off the plane four and a half years

ago was *nomehodai*, which basically means all-you-can-drink shōchū, sake, and beer. For some people in over-stressed Tokyo, this was a nightly occurrence, and in many cases it was better therapy than weekly sessions with a shrink.

I sat shotgun. Mel was curled up on the backseat in a fetal position. We went to a bar the night before for a friend's birthday party. She got silly drunk. It wasn't the smartest thing to do on the eve before you climbed a mountain, and I hoped she was going to be okay on the way up. Nevertheless, a potentially more serious concern than her hangover was the weather. When we left Tokyo this morning at ten o'clock, the sky was a dismal felt gray. That was typical, and it hardly meant it was going to rain. But it should have lightened when we got out of the sprawling metropolis. Instead it darkened, the light grays becoming thunderhead grays. In fact, the entire sky had seemed to swell, pressing fatter and lower over the landscape of rice fields and woodlands. For the last two hours I'd been waiting in vain for the clouds to blow away, for a crack to form, filled with blue and sunshine, because I didn't think you could climb Fuji in the rain. The flanks of the mountain were covered in volcanic rubble, which would be slick and treacherous. Your jacket and clothes would get wet, which would freeze when the sun went down and the temperature plummeted. Not to mention at some point you'd be walking *through* the clouds. What if lightning decided to strike? I had no idea what it would be like to be inside a cloud where lightning was birthed, but it didn't sound very safe at all.

Staring out the windshield now, at the iconic Mt. Fuji towering in the distance, I shook my head, an almost imperceptible

gesture. I'd planned for everything—everything except the fucking weather.

WE continued west along the Chuo Expressway for another ten minutes before entering Kawaguchiko, a touristy town around the eponymous lake at the base of Mt. Fuji. The town seemed dead, nobody out and about, perhaps because of the foul weather. I thought I heard music and wound down the window. I was right. Playing over loudspeakers lining the street was some nostalgic eight-bit Nintendo music. It reminded me of the cheesy stuff that played when your videogame character enters a new town in *Pokémon* or *Final Fantasy*.

Only in Japan, I mused. And it was true. Japan was a different world for me, completely foreign but seductive, and I rarely went a day without marveling over some aspect of the country's culture or technology.

Mel and I—and Neil, for that matter—all worked together at the same private English teaching company called HTE, aka Happy Time English. It was by far the largest company of this type in Japan, with some four thousand schools across the country. Although it was a notorious teacher-farm, it was a good choice to go with if you'd never been to Japan before because they did everything for you, from sponsoring your visa to getting you a fully furnished apartment. They even gave you an advance on your salary, if you needed it. Most did because the majority of teachers they shipped over were broke college graduates with no savings, and Japan could get pricey.

Mel and I have both been with HTE for close to four years

now, though this was likely our last year. Mel had her mind set on heading back to the States when our contracts expired in three months' time. This was the reason I'd organized the trip to Fuji. Living in Japan and not climbing the mountain would be equivalent to living in France and never visiting the Eiffel Tower, or living in Egypt and never exploring the Pyramids.

Honda put on his blinker and turned off the main street.

"Where's Honda going?" I said. Katsuichi Honda preferred to be addressed by his surname, as was common practice among older Japanese.

"Don't know," Tomo replied. "I follow."

We tailed Honda's van through several side streets before ending up at the town's train station, a stucco and half-timbered building with a brown shingled roof, something that would look more at home in the Swiss Alps rather than in rural Japan. The parking lot was as deserted as the rest of the town. Honda pulled up in front of the main entrance. We stopped behind him.

"Why do you think he's stopping here?" I asked.

Tomo shook his head. "Beat me," he said. His English was pretty fluent, but he consistently butchered his articles, prepositions, and plural forms.

I turned in the seat. Mel remained fast asleep.

"Wait with her," I told Tomo. "I'll find out what's going on."

I got out of the car. The air was crisp and smelled of autumn, which was my favorite season. It always evoked childhood memories of trick-or-treating and hoarding candy and making ghosts from tissue paper and cotton, and spiders from

fuzzy pipe cleaners.

I stopped at Honda's van, where the others were already out and stretching. Honda wore a red jacket and khaki pants with pleats and cuffs. He had a full head of thick black hair, graying at the temples. His wire-rim eyeglasses sat perkily on the flat bridge of his nose. He worked for a Japanese construction company, and he claimed to have met Donald Trump in Trump Plaza during a business trip to New York City. He said Trump's daughter personally escorted his sales team to Trump's office. On first sight, before any introductions were made, the chubby Queens native with the bad hair stood up from his desk and announced, "You guys want a picture with me, right? Come on over here." Stereotyping the flash-happy Asian? Or pure megalomania?

Neil's hedgehog hair was light brown, and he disliked shaving, so his jaw was usually covered in stubble, as it was now. Like Honda, he also wore eyeglasses, though his sported trendy black frames. He's lived in Japan for something like twenty years, teaching English as a second language the entire time. He doesn't open up much, and we've never sat down for a heart-to-heart, but from what I've gathered from coworkers, he came here with his first wife, a fellow Kiwi, to save up for a down-deposit on a house in Wellington. This was back during Japan's "bubble economy" when the yen was ridiculously strong and the New Zealand dollar equally weak. At some point he began to have an affair with a student a dozen years his junior, which would have put her at about twenty-two then. The missus found out, returned to New Zealand, and divorced him, taking all of their savings in the process. He remained

here, living from paycheck to paycheck like most overseas teachers regardless of age, and enjoying his life.

I didn't know what to make of John Scott, the army guy. He was several inches shorter than me, standing at about five foot ten, and stockier. Beneath short-cropped hair with a ruler-straight hairline he had an everyman face, cornflower blue eyes, and a strong jaw and nose. Maybe it was his leather jacket I couldn't get past. It was thin, three-quarter length, and more stylish than functional. Who wore a jacket like that while climbing a mountain? Or maybe it was his boorish confidence. When we picked him up out front a Tully's Coffee, and everyone made introductions, he was backslapping and acting as if he'd known us all for months, not minutes.

"Ethos!" John Scott greeted. I could only assume he'd forgotten my name, which is Ethan, or this was some sort of buddy-buddy nickname.

"Why did you pull in here?" I asked Honda.

"It's going to storm," he said, looking up at the sky. I looked up too—a mimicking instinct. Unsurprising, the clouds were as dark and low as they had been when I'd looked up two minutes ago.

"It might blow over," I said, turning to Neil. "What do you think?"

He shook his head. "I wouldn't hold my breath."

"We can wait it out."

"For how long? I thought the plan was to start climbing right away?"

Mt. Fuji was divided into ten stations, with the first station located at the foot of the mountain and the tenth being the

summit. Paved roads went as far as the fifth. Our original plan was to drive to Kawaguchiko Fifth Station and begin climbing at approximately 4 p.m. Then, after a three-hour trek, we would stop in one of the mountain huts that dotted the trail to get something to eat and rest before starting off again at midnight, ideally passing through the Shinto gate at the top at around 4 a.m., right before sunrise.

“We could hang around town until ten or so,” I said. “Start the climb then.”

“One continuous hike through the night?” Neil said.

I nodded.

“What are we going to do all day?” John Scott said. “Sit around and talk?” He made it sound as though talking were a punishment.

“How about Fuji-Q Highland?” Honda suggested.

“The amusement park?” I said.

“I’m not spending the day in an amusement park, thanks,” John Scott said.

“What do you recommend?” I asked him.

“I don’t know yet. But let’s think this through.”

“There are many hot springs here,” Honda said. “We can go to one, then take lunch afterward.”

“Have lunch,” I corrected him vacantly. I didn’t usually do this outside the classroom, but “take lunch” always irked me, one of those expressions the Japanese favored that just sounded wrong. You teach for long enough, you’ll hear some pretty odd stuff. Once I asked an attractive female student what she had for dinner, and she told me a cock. I asked her where she got the cock, to puzzle out the mispronunciation, and she said the

machine at the front of the school. It took me a second before I realized she'd meant "Coke."

"Ah, have lunch," Honda said. "I'm sorry. I always forget."

"I don't think hanging around naked with a couple dudes all afternoon is really my thing," John Scott said.

Bluntly stated, but it's what I was thinking too.

"We can head up to the fifth level," Neil said. "Look around."

"And do what?" John Scott persisted. "There's a tourist store where you can buy a hiking stick. That's about it."

"You've climbed Mt. Fuji before?" I said, surprised.

He nodded. "Went with a couple buddies last year."

"Why do it again?"

"Why not?"

I frowned. Climbing Mt. Fuji was hard, laborious work. I didn't know anyone who'd done it twice, especially in consecutive years. An old Japanese proverb put it best: "You are wise to climb Fuji once, but a fool to climb it twice."

"We can always cut our losses and head back," John Scott added. "It's Saturday. Tokyo will be hopping."

I looked at him evenly. He didn't know anyone here except Mel, he was a last minute tag-along, and suddenly he was calling the shots for all of us?

The main doors of the train station opened, and a young Mediterranean-looking couple emerged. Their hiking boots and backpacks suggested they were here to climb Mt. Fuji, though I would have guessed that even had they been dressed in tennis whites and runners. Why else did foreigners come out this way? They walked past us, heads down, in conversation with

one another.

“Excuse me,” I said to get their attention.

They stopped and looked at me, then at the rest of our small group. They were quite attractive, both with dark, wavy hair, dark eyes, and smooth, olive-colored skin. The girl was petite, the guy average height and springy in an athletic way. They couldn’t have been any older than me, twenty-five or twenty-six, tops.

“Yes?” the guy said. He was smiling and seemed like a good-natured sort.

“Are you two climbing Mt. Fuji?” I asked.

“That is why we came here. But the woman at the ticket booth told us we cannot climb.” He shrugged. “She said wait until tomorrow.”

“Did she say the trail’s closed, or it’s just not recommended to climb?”

“I do not know. Her English was worse than ours, you know.”

He found this funny and laughed. Based on his gentle accent and cadence, I guessed he was Israeli. While in Thailand by myself the year before during the Christmas break—Mel had gone back to California to visit her mother—I’d met an Israeli named Moshe on the ferry from Ko Samui to Ko Phangan. He was a chatty, friendly guy, and to save cash we agreed to share a room on top of a restaurant which, judging by the mops and buckets in one corner, might have doubled as the janitor’s closet when unoccupied. That same afternoon he invited me to a party to meet his friends, who were already on the island. They were all Israeli, and I quickly became some-

thing of a celebrity-oddity. Israelis were notoriously close-knit when traveling together, and an Irish American infiltrating their group was apparently a hoot. I left a couple hours later drunk and stoned and glad to be on my own again.

“I am Benjamin—call me Ben,” the Israeli added. “This is Nina.”

I introduced myself and everyone else.

“So what are you two going to do now?” John Scott asked them, though it seemed the question was more directed at Nina.

“We are going camping.” Ben pointed west. “We were going to climb Fujisan today, then camp in Aokigahara tomorrow. But now we will switch the order. Camp then climb.”

“*Honto?*” Honda said, with a rising intonation on the *to*. His eyebrows shot up above the rims of his glasses. He mumbled something more in Japanese, shaking his head.

“You’re talking about the suicide forest or whatever it’s called?” John Scott said.

I saw Neil nodding.

“Yes, that is right,” Ben said. “Every year many people go there to kill themselves.”

“Seriously?” I said, surprised I’d never heard of the place before. “Why there? What’s special about it?”

“There are many stories about Aokigahara,” Honda said. He was frowning, clearly uncomfortable to be talking about the subject. “According to our myths, it was once the site of *ubasute*. Families would abandon their young or elderly there during periods of famine, so there would be less mouths to feed. Because of this, many Japanese think the forest is now haunted by *yūrei*, or the souls of the dead.”

I tried to imagine the psychology behind the decision to doom a loved one to the slow and agonizing death of dehydration, starvation, or exposure. It sounded like the folklore of Hansel and Gretel, only in reverse, with the young abandoning the old. “But what does that have to do with people going there to kill themselves?”

“It has always been a place known for death,” Honda said simply, “so it attracts death.”

“And there are those books,” Ben said.

“What books?” I asked.

“Many years ago there was a bestselling novel about a couple who kill themselves together in Aokigahara. This made the idea very romantic and popular. Then there was another book called *The Complete Manual of Suicide*. It described the forest as beautiful and peaceful and the perfect place to die.”

That last bit struck an awkward note with me.

The perfect place to die.

Silence ensued. I looked at Neil, then John Scott. Neil’s brow was furrowed, as if he were perturbed by the dark turn the conversation had taken. John Scott, too, seemed preoccupied with his thoughts. Ben said something to Nina in Hebrew. She said something back. She saw me watching them and smiled.

Ben said, “We will take a bus to Aokigahara now.” He pointed to a nearby bus stop. There was no bus there yet. “You know, you and your friends should come with us. It will be an adventure, what do you think? We do not mind the company.”

I was about to decline when John Scott said, “I’m up for that.” He shot a cigarette from a pack of Marlboro Reds that

had appeared in his hand. “Beats an amusement park.” He lit up and blew the smoke out of his mouth in a long, relaxed stream.

I’d quit smoking a year ago because Mel had wanted me to. She’d said she was concerned about my health, though I suspected she simply didn’t like the smell of the smoke on my clothes and in my hair. Still, to this day, a freshly lit cigarette always unleashed a craving inside me I had to forcibly ignore.

John Scott took another long drag, blowing the smoke around his words while he spoke: “So how about it? We wanted to kill some time? Camping in a haunted forest sounds sick.”

Neil was gazing at nothing in the distance, which I interpreted as noncommittal. Honda had started shaking his head again. He was definitely not cool with the idea.

“Neil?” John Scott pressed. “What do you say, big guy?”

Neil wasn’t a big guy, and considering he was about twice as old as John Scott, I thought “big guy” sounded disrespectful.

Neil shrugged. “I like camping, and I’ve heard of the forest. It could be interesting. But it’s going to rain. The last thing I want to do is spend the night cold and wet.”

“Aokigahara, it is special,” Ben said. “The trees, you know, are very dense. The canopy keeps most of the rain out.”

I found that hard to believe, but I didn’t say anything—because I was warming to the whole camping idea. It was a long weekend, which meant we could still climb Fuji on Sunday and return to Tokyo on Monday without anyone missing work. “We’re pretty well prepared to camp,” I said tepidly. “Food, tents, warm clothes...”

“Dude, let’s do it,” John Scott said.

Honda made an X with his arms and bowed apologetically. “I’m sorry, I cannot go, not there. But you go. I think you are crazy. But you go. No problem.”

Ben shifted his weight from one foot to the other, as if impatient for us to make up our minds.

“Give me a sec while I run this by my girlfriend,” I said.

I climbed in the front seat of Tomo’s souped-up Subaru WRX. Mel, I noticed, was still sleeping. I said to Tomo, “What do you know about Suicide Forest?”

“Ah! Is that what you talk so fucking long? Leave me here?”

“You could have come over.”

“You say watch Mel.”

“What do you know?”

“It’s famous for Japanese. Guys go there to suicide.”

“So that’s true?”

“Crazy, right?”

“What would you think about camping there tonight?”

“Are you fucking kidding, man?” Tomo was a hip guy, and it was hip for young people in Japan to use swear words when speaking English. It showed off their fluency. But some used four-letter words too much. They didn’t grow up with them, weren’t lectured against their use as children, they were just words. Tomo was one of those guys. “You want camp there?”

“We can’t climb Fuji because it’s supposed to rain. So we either go back to Tokyo or do something here. Honda doesn’t

want to camp. But Neil and John Scott are okay with the idea. Those two there”—I pointed to the Israelis—“are going.”

“She’s so hot.”

I think Tomo currently had two or three girls chasing after him. He was handsome, with the shaggy hair popular with Japanese guys, almond eyes, and a sharp nose and cheekbones. He could use a visit to the dentist, however, because his teeth were crooked every which way. But that was only my opinion; *yaeba*, or snaggletooth, was commonplace in Japan and considered attractive. I’ve even heard of people paying for a dental procedure to get their own fake *yaeba*.

A newsboy cap with a stiff peak sat atop his head while a cashmere scarf was looped around his neck, the tails dangling down over a vintage motorcycle jacket. It was leather, like John Scott’s, but somehow it seemed less pretentious.

“Who’s hot?” It was Mel. I turned and saw her stirring. She sat up, blinked, and rubbed her eyes, which were a sparkling blue. Her blonde hair was messy and all over the place. She had the same makeup on from the night before. The right side of her face was red, from where it had been pressed against one of her arms.

“Hey,” I said, leaning between the seats and kissing her on her cheek.

“Thanks,” she said, brightening up. She was always thanking me when I kissed her. You might think she was being sarcastic, or bitchy even, but she didn’t have a sarcastic or bitchy bone in her. I believe she simply enjoyed it when I showed affection. I was flattered she felt this way. I’ve known couples who can’t stand each other after six months of steady

dating. The fact Mel and I still got along so well was a good sign of our compatibility, I thought.

“Are we here?” she asked.

“Almost,” I said. “We’re in the town at the bottom of Fuji. There’s a bit of a problem.”

“Of course there is.”

“It’s supposed to rain. It doesn’t look like we can climb today.”

“Good, I can keep sleeping.” She flopped back down on the seat and closed her eyes. “Wake me up when we get back to Tokyo.”

“Actually, we just met a couple who were supposed to climb Fuji today too. They’re going camping in a forest nearby. We’re deciding whether we should join them.”

She opened one eye and peered up at me, pirate-like. “How far is it?”

“I don’t know. Right around here somewhere.”

She considered this for a moment. “Okay.”

“Really?”

“Why not? We’re already here.”

“There’s a catch.”

“What?”

“It’s called Aoki—?” I looked at Tomo.

“Aokigahara.”

“So?” Mel said.

“It’s also called Suicide Forest,” I told her, “because Japanese apparently go there to kill themselves.”

She frowned.

“I’m sure it’s more hype than anything,” I added quickly.

“A few people have probably killed themselves there over the years, and it’s gotten a bad reputation—”

“No, I’ve heard of it,” she said, sitting up again. She pulled her hair back over her shoulders, revealing her slender neck. She slipped an elastic band off her wrist and used it to tie her hair into a ponytail. The pair of emerald studs I’d given her for her birthday back in June glittered in her ears. “My students told me about it. And it’s not hype. I think a lot of people kill themselves there every year.”

“We don’t have to go far in—”

“You don’t have to baby me, Ethan. I’m not scared. I’d like to see it for myself.”

I nodded, pleased with how easy that had been.

I turned to Tomo. “So how about it, T-man? You up for this?” I waited expectantly for his answer. With Honda out, he had the only car.

“Yeah, okay,” he said, flashing those savage chicklets of his. “Let’s go see some fucking ghost, right?”

2

BEFORE we left for Aokigahara we visited the restrooms in the train station and bought some extra snacks from a Mini Stop, given that weight was no longer much of a problem. I stopped by the ticket booth to get a map of the area. A uniformed woman greeted me pleasantly. As soon as I mentioned “Aokigahara,” however, her eyes narrowed and her cheery smile vanished. She studied me, perhaps trying to piece together my intentions. All she knew was that I was here by myself, asking how to get to a place where people went to kill themselves. I didn’t know how to explain I was with my friends, and we just wanted to check the forest out, so I adopted a guileless expression to alleviate any concerns she might have. Apparently it worked, because she gave me the map, though I felt her eyes follow me as I walked away.

Back outside I found everyone already packed into the vehicles. I climbed into the Subaru, then we were on our way.

Tomo cranked the stereo and rapped along with some Jap-

anese-English hip hop band. He knew all of the Japanese, but when it came to the English he would keep the beat by tapping the steering wheel and only belt out the words he could catch such as “nigger” and “fucking hoe” and “my bitch.”

When I’d first met Tomo over eight months ago, I’d had him pegged as a sex, music, and party type of guy. But after I spent a day with him and his younger sister, who was autistic, I discovered he had a surprisingly caring and nurturing side as well, though this was something he would never admit and, of course, something I often teased him about.

He changed CDs now, crowed “This nigger is shit, man!” and began rapping to some misogynist song.

Doing my best to ignore him—I was pretty sure he’d meant *the* shit—I opened the map the ticket-booth woman had given me. Mt. Fuji was represented by a triangle. There were railway, bus routes, and expressways, each marked in different colors. The five nearby lakes and other tourist attractions were labeled in both English and Japanese. Off to the side was a magnified inset of the area surrounding Lake Saiko, which was pronounced “Lake Psycho.” It showed a number of walking trails that connected certain lava caves that had formed when Fuji last erupted.

Aokigahara, which should have been in the vicinity, was notably absent.

I tossed the map on the gaudily carpeted dashboard and tried to imagine what lay ahead of us. How many people killed themselves in Suicide Forest every year? A dozen? Two dozen? Would we stumble across a skull half buried in leaf litter? A corpse hanging from a tree branch? That last thought

gave me pause. Not bones. A corpse. Was I prepared to experience something like that, something so dark?

Abruptly, against my will, I saw my older brother Gary in his shiny beige casket, his hair washed and brushed, his ears and nose stuffed with cotton, his lips waxed over, his eyes glued closed, the makeup on his face thick and caked, the red tie perfectly knotted around his throat.

Blinking away these last images, I shifted uncomfortably in my seat and focused on the trees passing by outside the window.

SOME twenty minutes later Honda's minivan pulled off the highway onto a back road, and we followed. Dense forest crowded us on both sides. Honda turned into a nearly empty parking lot. We parked two spots down from him. I got out and closed the door, which echoed loudly in the stillness. More doors banged closed as everyone else got out.

"So here we are!" Ben announced. His delicate features almost gave him an effeminate appearance. He pulled Nina against him and kissed her on the forehead. Then he hooked an arm around Tomo, who was standing next to him, and kissed him too.

"Hey, man, I'm not gay, right?" Tomo said, pushing himself away.

But Ben's enthusiasm was infectious, causing everyone to smile or chuckle. It was a welcomed diversion from the overcast sky and stark, somber parking lot.

Tomo, blushing, popped the Subaru's trunk. I retrieved

Mel's fern-green Osprey backpack, which sat on top of a jack and lug wrench, and helped her shrug into it. I tossed Tomo his bag, looped mine over one shoulder, then shut the trunk lid.

"You're sure you don't want to come, Honda?" I said.

"This forest, it is not for me." His eyes flicked nervously to the trees. "Daytime maybe. But nighttime?" He shook his head.

The seven of us said goodbye to him, shaking or bowing awkwardly—foreigners rarely master the bow—and started toward the sole path that led into the trees. Parked next to it was a late-model Mitsubishi Outlander. The white paint job was patchy with dust or grime. Numerous dead leaves protruded from the groove where the windshield met the hood.

"Does that car look abandoned to any of you?" Mel asked.

"Shit, you're right," John Scott said. He peered through a window. "Hey, check it out."

The rest of us squeezed in for a peak. The backseats were folded down. On them rested a tire pump, a first-aid kit, and a spare bicycle tire. A black sheet covered most of the available cargo space. Beneath it were two humps, one beside the other.

John Scott opened the back door, which unsurprisingly was unlocked. Theft was virtually nonexistent in Japan.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"I want to see what's under the sheet."

"You can't break into his car."

"I think we know he's not coming back."

"Maybe he's camping."

"He'd have to be camping for a hell of a long time. Look at all those leaves."

"I want to see," Ben said.

“Me too,” Tomo agreed.

John Scott pulled the sheet clear, revealing a dark blue suit, a pair of black dress shoes, and a rectangular leather briefcase.

We stared at the belongings for a long moment, nobody speaking. The sight was quietly disturbing, and I don't think any of us knew what to make of it.

“Let's go,” Mel said, and her voice had changed. It was sharper than before.

John Scott made to close the door.

“Put the sheet back,” I said.

“Why?”

“Because he covered that stuff for a reason. That's what he wanted.”

“And he might still be coming back,” Mel added.

I knew she didn't believe that, no one standing there did, but we didn't say anything to the contrary. John Scott replaced the sheet, closed the door, and we continued toward the path. I glanced back over my shoulder and was surprised to see Honda still standing by his van, watching us. I raised my hand in farewell. He did the same.

Then I followed the others into Suicide Forest.

3

SUICIDE Forest, or Aokigahara Jukai, was unlike any other forest I had visited before. The variety of evergreen conifers and broadleaf deciduous trees grew too close together, bleeding into one another, confusing your eyes and creating the illusion of impassable vegetation. Their branches formed a tightly weaved canopy overhead, blocking out much of the sunlight so it was darker than it had been only minutes before in the parking lot. And everything inside this shadowed, sepia-toned world seemed twisted and primordial and...wrong. That's the best way I can describe it. Nature gone wrong. The spruce and hemlocks and pine couldn't root deep, because beneath the thin layer of windswept ash and topsoil the forest floor was an uneven layer of solidified magma left behind from when Mt. Fuji last erupted roughly three hundred years before. Instead, many of their roots grew aboveground, a tangle of gnarled, woody tentacles crawling over the protruding bluish-black volcanic rock in a desperate struggle to gain a foothold in

life and survive. Consequently, several trees seemed to be a victim of their own success, toppled by their inability to properly anchor their massive weight, so they either leaned at angles, caught in the indifferent embrace of their neighbors, or lay flat on the ground, among all the other crooked branches and rotting deadfall. In fact, it wouldn't have been hard to imagine the forest was sick and dying had it not been for the profusion of bright green leaves and mosses and lichen and liverworts, which painted everything with a much needed coat of color.

“Sort of like Middle Earth, I reckon,” Neil said, breaking the silence that had stolen over us. “The Ents. Treebeard.”

Eyeing a nearby nest of tree roots, I could almost imagine one of these trees coming to life and walking away.

“An enchanted forest,” Mel said. “That’s what I think. It’s so *green*. Like from a fairytale.”

The conversation continued for a bit. It was trite, talk for the sake of talk, noise to fill silence. It petered out quickly. Over the next twenty minutes we passed several rusted, grime-covered signs. Some urged potential suicides to reconsider their actions and think about those who loved them, while others asked hikers to report to the local authorities anyone who was alone or seemed depressed or angry. One warned that camping was not permitted. This gave us pause, but Tomo insisted it was meant only as a suicide deterrent, because many Japanese would come here under the pretext of camping while they worked up the courage to kill themselves.

The farther we went, the more apprehensive I became. The forest was too still, too quiet. In fact, I had yet to hear a single

animal. No bird calls, no insects. Nothing. How could a place so lush with vegetation be so devoid of life? And why? Animals certainly wouldn't care that the forest was a suicide hot zone.

Mel, who was walking beside me, took my hand and squeezed it. I squeezed back. I wasn't sure if she was being affectionate or wanted to talk about something.

When she didn't say anything, I assumed she was being affectionate.

"You're in a good mood," I said.

"I feel good."

"You're not hungover?"

"Not anymore. I guess I slept it off."

"You're not weirded out or anything being in this forest?"

"I think it's amazing. I mean, not in a good way. It's just such a special place. It's so different than Tokyo, you know?"

I thought about that for a moment and wasn't sure I agreed completely. Tokyo was a forest of glass and steel while Aokigahara was a forest of trees and rocks, but both were graveyards of sorts. Because, if you knew anything of the merciless corporate culture in Japan, the shiny skyscrapers that dominated Tokyo's skyline were really nothing more than impersonal tombstones, the people who worked within them slaves in an endless sojourn to get through to the next day, to reach the "golden years" of retirement. Ironically, many died spiritually long before that. Just ask that poor guy who'd left his suit and briefcase and dress shoes in his car.

I was about to mention this but didn't know how to convey it intelligibly in words. Instead I said, "Yeah, it's a crazy

place.”

“It’s these types of trips I’m going to miss when we leave Japan. We should have done them more. Why didn’t we do them more?”

I shrugged. “We’re always working.”

“Because we’ve stayed at STD. We could have had way more holidays somewhere else.”

She always called HTE that—STD. It was her joke. Something we caught and couldn’t get rid of.

“You know,” she went on, “my friend Francine got a job with a university. She gets six months off. *Six months*. Half the year. And she still gets paid more than we do.”

“We can apply at a university, if you want?”

“It’s too late, Ethan. We’ve been here too long.”

I didn’t say anything.

She glanced at me, apparently thought I was angry, which I wasn’t, not really, and ballet-toed to plant a kiss on my cheek.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Don’t make fun of me.”

“I’m not. I enjoyed it.”

Smiling, she said, “I’m going to go talk to John.”

I glanced ahead at John Scott, who was telling Tomo some story.

“Okay.”

She hurried to catch up. I watched as she squeezed in between John Scott and Tomo. John Scott hooked his arm around her shoulder, said something that made her laugh, then, after what I considered to be an inappropriately long amount of time, withdrew his arm again.

Neil took Mel's spot next to me. He was whistling that popular American Civil War song—the one everyone calls “The Ants Go Marching” nowadays—though I couldn't recall the original title.

I glanced sidelong at him. Neil Rodgers. More affectionately referred to as “Neilbo” or “Mr. Rodgers” or sometimes “That Fucking Kiwi” when spoken about in jest by the people we worked with. A Canadian coworker named Derek Miller went after him the most for being what he called “an oddball serial rapist.” That was going overboard, of course, but Neil was admittedly a bit of an oddball. I think Neil would even admit it himself if you asked him. He didn't have tape holding his glasses together or anything like that, but he did have a handful of idiosyncrasies. He only owned one suit, for example, which he wore every day. I knew this because there was a small hole in the seat, next to the left pocket. He kept his cell phone in a pouch attached to his belt, like he was Captain Kirk and it was his phaser. And he would always eat the same thing for each meal. Rice, fermented beans, some nuts, and a salad if he had a day shift. Rice, a piece of chicken, and three or four pork dim sum if he worked evenings. His wife prepared the dishes for him, packing them in a Tupperware container that had his name written on the lid in black marker.

Nevertheless, of the twenty or so full-time teachers at our school, I'd say he was the most popular among the students—at least, he was the most requested for private lessons. We taught everyone from kids to the elderly, either one on one or in small groups. The majority were sleepy salary men forced by their companies to learn English, or bored housewives

wanting someone to talk to. After years of delivering the same lessons over and over, I sometimes dreaded certain classes with certain students in which I would be going over past participles for the thousandth time.

Not Neil.

He had a zany, manic energy. He was like that kid's television presenter Mr. Rogers, hence the moniker "Mr. Rodgers." This was why the students liked him so much. They knew he was always giving one hundred percent.

"Do you think this is a good idea?" I asked him now, mostly to shut him up. The nostalgic tune was out of place in the forest, almost creepy.

He blinked at me. "Camping here?"

"Yeah."

"It was your idea."

"It was the Israelis."

"But you and John Scott were keen for it."

"I thought it would be interesting."

"And now?"

My eyes scanned the trees. "It's still interesting."

"You want to back out?"

"It's not like we're the first people who've come here to check it out. They have trails."

"But how many people camp overnight?"

"Who's going to know?"

"Do you think we'll see a body?"

"I don't know." I shrugged. "Maybe."

"Do you want to?"

"I'm not sure. Well, I guess. If we see one, we see one."

As I contemplated how honest I was being with myself, I realized there had been another option to pass the time until the weather cleared up. We could have stayed at a Japanese inn with those tatami-matted floors and screen doors. I was sure Mel and Tomo would have been up for this option. But I didn't know about Neil; he was notoriously cheap and had likely agreed to camp only because it was free.

I glanced ahead again. Mel was still next to John Scott. She was dressed in a violet K2 jacket and jeans. I had on an identical jacket, only mine was black. We didn't buy them to be cute. They had been fifty percent off in some store in Shinjuku, and neither of us had brought warm jackets with us to Japan. That was the thing with teaching overseas: your worldly possessions were limited to what you could pack into a suitcase or two.

Mel kept turning her head to look at John Scott, making me wonder what they were talking about. I caught a couple words, but that was all.

Neil resumed whistling. I asked him, "How's Kaori?"

"She's taking the kid to Disneyland this weekend."

"How old is Ai now?"

"Four."

"She's going to school?"

"She's in kindy." He nodded at Mel and John Scott. "How do they know each other?"

John Scott said something to Mel. She punched him playfully on the shoulder.

"They went to high school together."

"You don't like him, do you?"

It was a good question. Did I like John Scott? I had a bad habit of judging people quickly and sticking by those judgments even when they were proven to be completely wrong. In the case of John Scott, however, I didn't think my initial impression was off. He was a mouthy jock.

"What does it matter?" I shrugged. "I don't know him."

Neil nodded, as if I'd made a salient point, and began to whistle once more. I couldn't be bothered to tell him to stop.

THREE Japanese hikers were coming down the trail toward us. Two men, one woman, all attired in hiking clothes and armed with clear plastic umbrellas.

"*Konichiwa!*" Ben called amicably. "*Konichiwa!*"

His pronunciation was worse than mine. The Japanese returned the greeting, smiling and bowing.

"How is your hike?" Ben asked.

They appeared confused.

"Walk?" I intervened. "Good?"

Several hesitant nods.

"Hey—*sumimasen?*" John Scott said. He struggled expressing what he wanted to say in Japanese, gave it up, and switched to English. "We're looking for some other trails. Not the main ones. You understand?"

They did not. In fact, they seemed eager to move on.

John Scott held them at bay with: "Yo, whoa, wait, wait, wait." He turned to Tomo. "Translate for me."

"Translate what?"

"What I just said. Secondary trails, off this main one?"

Tomo seemed reluctant.

“Dude,” John Scott said. “Just ask.”

Tomo asked.

The eldest of the three Japanese—full head of white hair, matching mustache, gold-rimmed glasses—frowned. He shot something back. Tomo replied, holding up his hands, but was promptly cut off. The man began shouting. I saw spittle fly from his mouth. Every time Tomo tried to appease him, he shook his head and his arms and raised his voice louder. I watched, dumbstruck. I’ve rarely seen Japanese people lose their temper. They had a saying: the nail that stands out gets hammered down—hard. This could mean anything during a typical day. Don’t leave work before your coworkers. Don’t make business decisions on your own. Don’t ever, ever be late.

Don’t show your emotions.

So what was going on here? White Hair had totally lost it. Tomo realized the futility of arguing and gave up. I put my hand on his back and led him away. The others followed.

John Scott said, “What the hell’s his problem?”

Tomo shook his head. “He says we don’t be here.”

“Why’s he here?”

“He go lava caves, ice caves.”

“What’s the big deal?”

“He thinks we look body.”

White Hair continued to yell at us.

“What’s he saying now?” I asked.

“He report us.”

“Is it illegal to go off the path?”

“Don’t think. He’s fucking crazy guy. Who cares?”

“Fuck you, kemo sabe!” John Scott yelled back, flicking the finger.

“Hey,” I told him, “cool it.”

“What’s your problem?”

“You’re being a prick.”

“Listen to the spaz.”

“He has a point,” I said. “Maybe we shouldn’t be camping out here.”

“Don’t give me that shit. This is all about us not being Japanese. Being *gaijin*. If we weren’t foreigners, he wouldn’t have gone off on us like that. They’ve got to get over their racism.”

“You’re just feeding into their stereotype of the loud, obnoxious American.”

“Yeah? And he’s feeding mine. Xenophobic asshole.”

“This isn’t your country,” I said.

“That gives him a right to spaz out?”

“You know ‘kemo sabe’ isn’t Japanese, right?”

“What is it?”

Shaking my head, I walked on in silence.

NOT long after I’d first arrived in Japan I was at a restaurant with a bunch of friends. The deal of the day was all-you-can-drink shōchū, beer, cocktails, and high balls at a self-serve counter for three hundred yen. The catch was you only had thirty minutes to imbibe before you had to pay again. Being unapologetic boozehounds we were good-heartedly smashed within the hour. While taking the train home with my Scottish roommate, I was on my cell phone, speaking loudly to my ex,

Shelly, back in the States, who'd just happened to call. The Scot sat across from me, staring silently at the glass in his hand, which he'd taken, full of rum, from the restaurant so he could keep drinking. I was oblivious to the old man who'd stalked over until he began railing me out in Japanese. I had no idea then how big a faux pas it was to speak on your phone on the train, and I argued back. The Scot stared up bleary eyed, said something, then puked all over himself. To his credit he managed to catch a fair bit of vomit in the stolen glass. The man, red-faced, stormed off the train at the next station.

At the time I thought the guy was being an asshole for not minding his own business. In retrospect, I realized I was being the asshole by not conforming to Japanese societal norms. True, he probably thought of me as a typical *gaijin*, but that's exactly what I was. So was he being racist? I don't think so. Japanese have a complex set of sensitive rules to dictate social situations. They know those rules. Foreigners often don't. Hence foreigners are perceived—and treated—differently. That's simply Japan. You either get used to it, or you go elsewhere.

WE must have walked for another ten minutes before we found what we were looking for. To the left of the main trail a rope was strung horizontally between two trees. A placard hung from the middle of it and read "DO NOT ENTER" in English. Beyond, a narrow, lightly trodden path snaked away deeper into the forest. The spindly saplings lining the margins leaned inward, their branches interlocking overhead like bony

fingers, forming a forbidding tunnel.

The uneasiness I'd felt earlier was back, more persistent, and I began second-guessing the wisdom of our camping out here.

Mel was apparently on the same page. She folded her arms across her chest, as if she was suddenly cold, and said, "Don't tell me we're going down there?"

"Yes, of course," Ben said.

"Why don't we camp right here?"

"Here is no adventure."

"I've had a pretty good adventure so far."

"People will see us."

"Who? We've only passed those three hikers."

"We walk down the path," Ben said, "find a good spot to make camp."

"That Japanese guy threatened to report us," Neil said. "What if he does just that and the local police come? I don't fancy getting arrested."

"Arrested? For what?" John Scott said. "Straying off the path?"

"Trespassing. They saw all our camping gear. They can put two and two together."

"This is public land."

"That sign specifically says not to enter."

"There's no threat of punishment."

"What does that bit say there?" Mel said. She pointed to a placard next to the English one. It was smaller, the words written in kanji.

"Don't go in woods," Tomo translated. "You get lost."

“That’s all?” I said.

“See?” John Scott said.

I glanced about, searching for other warning signs—and spotted a surveillance camera ten feet away, atop a black metal pole. It was partly hidden behind a tree.

“What the hell’s that?” I said, pointing to it.

Everyone looked. There were a few exclamations of surprise.

“Who put that there?” Neil asked. “The police?”

“Must be,” Ben said. “But it is no big deal.”

“What do you mean?” Mel said. “They could be watching us right now.”

“Even if they watch,” Tomo said, “they don’t care.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“They worry the suicide guys. You? Foreigners? They know you don’t suicide, right? They don’t care.”

“So are we agreed?” Ben said. “We go in?”

I looked at Mel. She shrugged resignedly, and that made up my mind too. Ben, grinning broadly, stepped over the line, then helped Nina. As she stepped over it her shorts rode up her legs. John Scott went next, scissor-style, then Tomo, then Neil, who caught a foot and almost tripped. I lifted the line, and Mel and I ducked beneath.

Leaving the main trail behind, we ventured into the unknown.

4

WE walked in silence. The time for chatting and gaiety was over. What had begun as a novel idea, something to pass the time, had become serious business. We might not be technically trespassing, but we were definitely somewhere we were not supposed to be. Aokigahara was a place where people came to die. It was home to the dead, not the living. I think the reality of this was beginning to sink in for all of us as we proceeded down the stick-tunnel, which was both claustrophobic and menacing.

Nevertheless, nobody made any mention of turning back. We were drawn forward, I suppose, by morbid curiosity. It was human nature to want to know what was around the next corner, regardless of what might await you.

My heart was beating faster than normal, my senses heightened, as if I had just downed a large energy drink. My eyes scanned the snarl of forest that bordered us on both sides, though I wasn't sure what I was expecting to find. A dangling

noose? A body? A white-faced ghost flitting through the trees toward us? I couldn't hear anything besides the crackle of our footsteps and my excited breathing. I wondered again about the peculiar silence of the forest and said, "Hey, Tomo. Where are all the animals?"

He glanced back over his shoulder. "What you mean?"

"There're no animals. No birds or anything."

"It fucking haunted forest, man. Birds scared shitless. They go other forest."

"What about the wind?" Ben said. "There is no wind either."

"I reckon that's because of the trees," Neil replied. "They grow too thick for any wind to blow through."

"If this trail is off limits, Tomo," Mel said, "then why is it here? Who made it?"

"The police. They use to find body."

"How many do they usually find each year?"

"One hundred. Two hundred."

Mel stopped. "What?"

We all stopped too.

Tomo shrugged. "Sometime more, sometime less."

"I had no idea the number was so large." Mel had blanched. "I figured—I don't know—like a handful of people every year."

That was closer to the dozen or two I'd estimated the number to be.

"Japan has the highest suicide rate in the developed world," Neil said matter of factly.

"Are we really going to see a body?" Mel asked.

“It’s a big forest,” I told her noncommittally.

“And probably if you do,” Ben said, “it will only be an old skeleton or something.”

“Much better,” she said.

“Do you want to go back?” I asked her.

She looked at me. “Do you?”

“Don’t be a cheesedick, dude,” John Scott said. “We’ve decided. We’re here.”

“Do you want to go back?” I asked her again.

“Pussssieeee,” John Scott said.

“Stay out of this,” I told him.

“I’m just saying—”

“It’s not your business.”

“It’s okay, guys,” Mel said. “I’m fine.”

Snorting like he’d just won some bucking challenge, John Scott took the lead with Ben, and we continued on. I glanced ahead at the guy a few times, continuing different conversations in my head. Some scenarios had me telling him nobody wanted him here. Others deteriorated into a fistfight in which I handily defeated him.

Gradually my irritation diminished, and my attention returned to the forest. It was getting creepier the farther we went. The saplings seemed to be pressing ever closer together, their trunks lining up as tight as prison bars, while some of the lower branches reached toward us, like skeletal hands.

Suddenly Ben cried out. Then everyone was crowding over something on the ground, just off the path. I leaned over Mel and saw a pile of relatively new equipment. There was a silver flashlight, batteries still in the package, a hacksaw with an

orange handle, black rubber gloves, scissors, tape, and a clear bag filled with numerous cans of chemicals.

“This must belong to the police or volunteers who search for the bodies,” Ben said. “See the scissors and the saw?”

“But what are the chemicals used for?” Neil said.

Nobody had an answer to that.

John Scott grabbed the flashlight and batteries.

“John!” Mel reprimanded. “What are you doing?”

“It will come in handy.”

“You can’t take it.”

“Why not? Someone obviously left it here.”

“They might be coming back for it.”

“I’ll return it on the way out tomorrow.”

“I think you should leave it.”

“Do you have a flashlight?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Anyone else?”

“I have one,” Neil said.

“That’s it? Two for seven people?” John Scott glanced at each of us in turn. “Is anyone else against a third flashlight? It’s going to be pitch black out here later.”

Put that way, nobody objected.

SOMEHOW a pebble had snuck into my left shoe, annoying me to no end. I wasn’t wearing hiking boots like the others. My feet were size thirteen—a size that was nearly impossible to find in Japan, even in a city as large as Tokyo. Consequently, I

hadn't been able to buy proper boots for this trip and instead wore the pair of tattered Reebok trainers I'd brought with me from the States.

John Scott, now chatting up Nina ten feet ahead of me, lit a cigarette. He blew the smoke back over his shoulder.

I noticed his shoes for the first time: eighteen-hole Doc Martins, black leather, yellow laces. Like his leather jacket, I didn't know what to make of them.

Had he planned on wearing them to climb Fuji? Or did he have something else in his big military-issued rucksack?

"What were you guys talking about earlier?" I asked Mel.

"Who?"

I didn't reply. She knew who.

She said, "He was telling me stories about Okinawa. He said it's a great place. We should visit there sometime."

"Where's he staying in Tokyo?"

"A love hotel actually."

"Ha. Whereabouts?" Love hotels were neon-garish places where you rent a room either for a three-hour rest or for the entire night. You select the room from a panel of buttons and settle the bill via a pneumatic tube or pair of mysterious hands behind a pane of frosted glass. Mel and I had stayed in a bunch of them over the years for kicks, and the rooms had featured rotating beds, ceiling mirrors, karaoke systems, hot tubs, and vending machines selling everything from beer to S&M gear to women's panties, previously worn.

"That one in Shibuya we stayed in. Remember, on that small, windy street?"

"Yeah, I remember." I think the area was called Love Hotel

Hill. Our room had no windows for the same reason casinos don't. "There are a bunch of hotels there. He stayed in the same one we did?"

"I recommended it."

I frowned. "How long have you known he was coming to Tokyo?"

"A couple days before he arrived."

"Is that when you invited him to climb Fuji?"

"I told him we were climbing it, yes. He said he'd climbed it before and had other plans. But then he texted me last night and said his plans had fallen through."

I stared ahead. John Scott took another drag of his cigarette, blew the smoke back at us.

"What do you think about his jacket?" I asked.

"What about it?"

"A leather jacket like that? To climb a mountain?"

"He wasn't planning on climbing. I just said that. I guess it's the only jacket he brought with him."

Fair enough, I thought. But I still wanted to get a dig in. I didn't like this relationship Mel had with him. Maybe I was overreacting. I don't know. Something just didn't sit right.

"Where's he from?" I asked.

"Why all this interest?"

"I'm jealous."

"St. Helena. I told you we went to school together."

"What's his last name?"

Mel gave me a look.

"What?" I said.

"Scott, duh."

I raised my eyebrows. “Are you kidding me?” I’d thought John Scott was a double name or something, like Billy Bob.

“No, it’s his last name.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. It felt good—partly because the forest was so damn gloomy, but more so, I think, because I was laughing at John Scott.

“Why’s that funny?” she asked.

“Who introduces themselves with their full name?”

“A lot of people.”

“In a business meeting maybe. Do you call him John Scott?”

“I call him John.”

“What about other people?”

“Back in high school people called him Scotty. I don’t know now.”

“That’s like people calling me Ethan Childs.”

“He didn’t tell you to call him John Scott. That was your decision.”

“Yeah, well, if people kept calling me Ethan Childs, I’d tell them it was just Ethan. Who does he think he is? A celebrity?”

“What’s your problem with him?”

“I don’t have a problem with him—”

“Hey, look there!” Ben shouted.

For an instant a rush of dread washed through me. We’d found someone. He would be hanging from a noose. Dead and cold and—

It was a shoe. That’s it. A lone white shoe.

It sat about ten feet to the left of the path, next to a mossy rock.

Ben and John Scott were already making their way toward it.

“It’s a Nike,” Ben said.

The rest of us ventured closer. It was a men’s. Size eight or nine. The laces were missing.

I surveyed the area, but didn’t see any other sign of human intrusion.

“Looks like it’s been here for a while,” Neil said.

“You think it’s from...you know?” Mel said. “Someone who killed themselves?”

“Whose else could it be?” John Scott said. I considered thinking of him as just John from now on, but I stuck with John Scott. It still amused me that he allowed himself to be thought of as a two-name guy, like Tom Cruise. “A hiker would notice if his shoe fell off.”

“So would someone planning on killing themselves,” I said. “We’re talking about a person here, not a zombie.”

“Where are the laces?” Mel asked.

“Maybe he needed them to do the deed,” Neil said.

“With shoelaces?” I said.

“You know what I think?” Tomo said. “I think the animal eat the guy.”

Ben shook his head. “There would be a skeleton, clothes.”

“Maybe it drag him away. The shoe fall off.”

“I don’t like this,” Mel stated.

“Are there bears in these parts, Tomo?” I asked.

“Yeah, man,” he said. “So many.”

“I’m serious.”

“Yes, there are,” Neil said. “I’ve read about people seeing

bears while climbing Mt. Fuji. But they rarely attack humans unless you get between them and their cubs.”

“I don’t say the bear eat the live guy,” Tomo said. “I say he eat the dead guy.”

“Who cares what got him?” John Scott shrugged impatiently. “All we’re doing is guessing. And all that’s doing is wasting time. I want to see a *body*.” He returned to the footpath, heading deeper into the forest.

After a beat, the rest of us followed.

5

IT became noticeably darker, quickly. Earlier, pieces of the granite-gray sky had been visible through the patchwork of overhead branches. Now little if any gray penetrated the thickening canopy, turning midday into a premature dusk. I usually enjoyed the twilight that bridged late afternoon and early evening. There was a serenity associated with it. But not here in Aokigahara. Here, the trees took on a sinister, emaciated appearance. Their green leaves lost their vibrancy, as if drained of life. Elastic shadows thickened and pooled. My mind and eyes began to play tricks on me to the extent I'd see a tortured face in a twisted tree trunk, or a blackened skull in a mound of volcanic rubble. Moreover, I had the uncomfortable sensation of being watched. Several times I sensed movement in the corner of my field of vision.

And still there were no animals, no wind, just the trees and us in this...crypt.

I wasn't the only one getting spooked by the forest. We

were all acting like animals sniffing out a trap, sneaking glances at the canopy or the suffocating trees, as if searching for some lurking threat.

A crackling of vegetation sounded off to the right. Ben and Nina, who were both ahead of me, jumped a foot off the ground. Tomo dropped into a squat, his hands framing his face like the guy in *The Scream*. Mel grabbed my forearm so hard it hurt. Then, from behind us, John Scott howled with laughter. I knew what he'd done before he tossed another rock into the trees.

“Gosh, John!” Mel cried. “That wasn’t funny!”

He continued to laugh. Neil, who was beside him, and who I could imagine John Scott elbowing conspiratorially when he'd picked up the rock, appeared guiltily amused.

“You fuck-ass!” Tomo said, though he was smiling witlessly. “I almost shit my brains.”

This caused John Scott to crack up harder. Ben and Nina joined in, then everyone was having a good chuckle. We needed it. A release from the pressure that had evidently been building inside all of us.

It was a brief reprieve, however, and after the laughter died down, and we were on the move once again, the silence inevitably returned, just as disquieting as before.

I glanced beside me at Mel. She was chewing her bottom lip, her eyes downcast, watching where she stepped. I could almost feel the tightness in her body. She looked over, smiled. It was a hesitant smile, a hospital smile, how the nurses smiled at me while I was with Gary in his final hours. A reassuring smile.

I felt suddenly bad for springing this camping trip on her. She wasn't cut out for stuff like this. She often refused to watch horror movies because they were too scary, and she rarely, if ever, did anything that was dangerous or illegal.

I took her hand in mine and said, "Still feeling like this is an enchanted forest?"

"A little," she said. "But I feel like we've just walked into the wicked witch's domain."

"I know what you mean."

"What were you thinking about? You haven't said anything for the last five minutes."

"Our Spain trip," I said, which was true. I'd been compiling a mental list of some of the dumbest things I've done or attempted to do in my life. Making the top three was my decision last summer to cross Spain's Camino del Ray, a three-foot-wide decrepit walkway pinned against a sheer cliff face three hundred thirty feet above a river. I'm afraid of heights, and I'd believed conquering the walkway might help me overcome the fear. But when I got to a section where the concrete had collapsed, leaving a large open gap bridged only by narrow steel beams, I returned the way I'd come, meeting up again with Mel, who'd had the sense to wait behind.

"Blue skies, warm weather," Mel said. "That was such a nice vacation. I wish you didn't mention it."

"You'd rather be there?"

"You mean rather there than Japan? Or rather there than a haunted forest?"

I'd meant a haunted forest. But now that she'd brought it up I said, "Than Japan. We don't have to go back to the States.

We could teach in Spain. They need English teachers.”

“It’s not that easy. They’d rather hire someone from the UK who already has a EU passport.”

“What about Thailand, or the Czech Republic? We could even go to Turkey. They’re always hiring. That’s the best perk with teaching. We can go anywhere, travel anywhere.”

“And what about the future, Ethan? We can’t keep hopping around the world until we’re sixty. We need to—”

“Grow up,” I finished for her.

“It’s true.”

“We’re only twenty-six.”

“That’s closer to thirty than twenty.”

“It’s closer to twenty-five than thirty.”

“Whatever.”

“It’s still young.”

“We’re getting older. And what do we have to show for it? We have no house, no savings. No—” She trailed off. “What about children?”

I swallowed. Kids again. She’d been talking about them more and more lately. I would like to have one or two...eventually. Thirty always sounded like a good age to me, though I don’t know why I choose this number aside from the fact it’s the beginning of a new decade. I suppose I figure I would have matured the necessary amount to be a father by then.

“You really want to have kids now?” I said.

“Soon.”

“We’re too young.”

“Young, young, young!”

“You know how expensive they are?”

“Exactly. It’s why we’re leaving Japan—and why we can’t simply keep country hopping for however long you want. Not on the salaries we’re making. We’re okay now because we’re just supporting ourselves. But if we had a child? There’s schooling, clothes, food, medical bills. In the States I could get a job with the Board of Education. I’d have maternity leave, benefits.”

“And you’d be in California. You know how far that is from Wisconsin? I may as well be in Japan.”

“You could come to St. Helena with me.”

St. Helena? I was gob-smacked. St. Helena was a small town in the Napa Valley whose only claim to fame was that Robert Louis Stevenson had walked down the throughway with his bride more than a century before. This was the first I’d heard of the idea of relocating there, and it surprised the hell out of me.

I’ve come to believe there are four types of ESL teachers in Asia. The first are young people looking to travel for a year or two and save a bit of money before returning home and starting the careers they would sink into for the rest of their lives. The second are those who end up marrying an Asian and living the rest of their lives as expatriates, maybe flying home every so often for a wedding or a funeral or Christmas with their ageing parents. The third are the more adventurous who are willing to give up the better salaries and standards of living in Japan and South Korea for a more *laissez faire* lifestyle in a tropical environment in Southeast Asia. These are predominantly male and have little interest in getting hitched in the near future, if

ever. In fact, many of them have dreams of retiring early, buying a hut on a white-sand beach, and spending their twilight years with a constant supply of fifty-cent beers and a revolving door of girlfriends half their age.

The final type are the Runners, and their label is self-explanatory: they're running from something.

This was where Mel and I fit in. I was running from Gary's death, while Mel was running from her family's reputation.

Her parents divorced when she was in her senior year at UCLA, and her mother soon began seeing another man. When her father found out, he broke into the new beau's house and suffocated him to death with a plastic bag. He was tracked down by the San Diego Regional Fugitive Task Force and was now serving life in Corcoran State Prison, the same shithole where Charles Manson was spending his remaining years.

After Mel graduated she returned to St. Helena to be with her mother, where the population was something like five thousand, and where the murder remained the talk of the town. She was harassed constantly, and a month later she flew to Japan to get away.

You can't run forever, however, and although she's made it clear she wanted to return to the States, I never imagined to her hometown.

Mel was looking at me expectantly, as if waiting for my reply.

"We can't go back there," I said.

Anger darkened her eyes. "Why not?"

"You know why."

"That was a long time ago. People forget."

“Not in small towns.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“It’s a nice place.”

“There are a lot of nice places, Mel. Why St. Helena?”

“My mom’s lonely,” she said after a few seconds deliberation. “I think she’d like me back there.”

Panic gripped me. “You want us to live with your mother?”

“Of course not. But we’d be close. I could visit with her a few times a week.”

“Are there even schools in St. Helena where we could work?” I asked diplomatically.

“You think I was home taught? The high school has about five hundred students.”

“What are the chances they’d have a teaching position available, let alone two?”

“It couldn’t hurt to check, could it?”

I opened my mouth to reply, then closed it. I didn’t want to fight with Mel, not here, not now. So I merely shrugged noncommittally.

She gave me an unreadable look, then picked up her pace, leaving me behind to ponder the next five years in St. Helena surrounded by lilacs and grandmothers and perhaps an angry mob keen on a lynching.

WE’D been walking for over an hour and a half now, and I was just beginning to get used to the brooding strangeness of

Aokigahara when the path ended abruptly at two grotesquely fused trees that instilled in me both fascination and revulsion. They wound serpentine-like around one another, fighting, grappling, spiraling up and up in a decades-long struggle to reach the spot of sky that must have opened when another tree had fallen. They were the perfect embodiment of the vicious survive-at-any-costs ruthlessness that had taken root everywhere in the forest, reinforcing my perception that this was a cruel, primeval, unforgiving place, a slice of hell on earth, even for plant life.

Someone had painted what looked to be a white arrow about ten feet up on each trunk. They pointed in opposite directions.

“Are those arrows?” Mel said, frowning.

“I reckon the police made them,” Neil said, “to find their way to other trails.”

“Or bodies,” I said.

Everyone looked at me.

“You really think they lead to bodies?” Mel said.

“Maybe not anymore,” I admitted. “The police would have removed them already.”

“So which way do we go?” John Scott said, lighting up a cigarette.

“I don’t think we should leave this path,” Mel said.

“We won’t go far,” he assured her.

Ben nodded. “We will split up. Half of us will go left for an hour, the other half go right. If either group sees something, we will call the other.”

Mel and I checked our phones. We both had reception.

“What happens if neither of us find anything?” Mel asked.

Ben shrugged. “Then we meet back here in two hours.”

“So we good?” John Scott said.

“Yeah, man,” Tomo said.

John Scott nodded at Neil. “What do you say, big guy?”

Neil was gazing off into the forest. “I don’t know,” he said. “I have a bad feeling about this place.”

“Of course you do. It’s fucking freaky as hell. We’re all freaked. But we’ve already come all this way. We’re so close to finding something.”

“Mate, that’s the thing. I don’t reckon I *want* to find anything.”

“You don’t want to see a body?”

“We don’t belong here. It’s wrong what we’re doing, disrespectful.”

Mel was nodding.

“Anyone else want to chicken out?” John Scott said.

This pissed Neil off. “I’m not chickening out.”

“Then come with us.”

“Yeah, man,” Tomo said. “Don’t be chicken guy.”

Neil threw up his hands. “I’m not a chicken! And if it will shut you two up, fine, I’ll come.”

“Hooah!” John Scott cawed idiotically. He looked at Mel and me.

Although I’d begun to rethink the wisdom of what we were doing out here, the arrows had admittedly piqued my sense of adventure. And John Scott was right. We’d already come all this way. Why stop now? It was just a little farther to see what was behind that final corner. Then we could make camp, eat,

relax, and leave here tomorrow with a sense of accomplishment.

Mel saw my decision in my eyes, and she relented. “One more hour,” she said. “And that’s it.”

“One more hour,” Ben agreed, smiling. “Okay—Nina and me, we will go left. Who would like to join us?”

“I’m down,” John Scott said. He ground his cigarette under his heel, told us, “Peace out,” then started into the trees like a dutiful Boy Scout eager to earn his next merit badge.

The Israelis waved goodbye to us and fell into line behind him.

“And then there were four...” Neil said quietly.

6

THE terrain off the footpath was challenging and slow going. This had less to do with the obstacles of trees than with the ground itself. Every few yards we were stepping over rotting logs and dead branches and volcanic rocks. I tried to grab hold of saplings for support, but they would often tear free from the thin soil as easily as a decaying limb from its socket. Most hazardous of all, it turned out, was the fact a massive network of lava tubes extended beneath our feet. Twice we passed areas where the solidified magma had collapsed beneath the weight of a tree into one of these underground tubes, creating jagged craters twenty feet wide. We circumnavigated the moss-covered and scree-filled depressions with caution. If you stumbled into one and the fall didn't kill you, the sharp rock would shred your flesh and you would likely bleed to death before help could arrive.

The only positive to the difficult landscape, I thought, was that I was so focused on the topography and keeping a straight

line I had little time to reflect on hanging bodies and rapidly approaching night.

When we stopped for a much-needed rest, I took out my water bottle from my backpack and passed it around. It came back to me almost empty. I finished it off, knowing Mel still had half a liter in her bag, which would get us by until tomorrow.

Tomo went to pee behind a tree. I decided to go as well. While standing on a log with my back to the others, staring out into the trees, I was struck by a sobering notion. If we got disorientated out here, we could become hopelessly lost. The signs had already warned us of this, of course, and Mel had mentioned it, but I had never taken the idea seriously until now.

Lost in Suicide Forest.

Tomo and I returned to the others at the same time. He was fastening his belt buckle, boasting that his dick had grown since the last time he'd taken a leak. Neil told him it must have been pretty small to start off with.

"How do you guys feel?" I asked.

"Tired," Mel said.

"Hungry," Tomo said.

"Hungry and tired," Neil said.

I nodded. "Another thirty minutes or so. Then we'll head back and eat."

Mel looked the way we'd come. "We sure we know *how* to get back?"

"I know the way," I said.

"Because if we get turned around..."

“I know the way,” I repeated.

“I guess we could always yell.”

It was true. If we began yelling, John Scott and the Israelis would likely be able to hear us and find us. Or if Mel called John Scott’s phone, and told him to yell, we could make our way to them. Yet this would be embarrassingly desperate for all of us, and I was sure it wouldn’t be necessary.

We continued in the direction the arrow had pointed.

After only a few minutes I was once more breathing hard, and I was glad I had quit smoking. In the back of my mind I heard Mel tell me, “See? I told you that you should quit.” She was always saying things like this. If we went to a restaurant, and it turned out to be good, she would say, “See? I told you we should come here.” Same if we watched a particularly entertaining movie: “See? I told you we should see this one.”

Tomo picked up a long vine that continued for as far as I could see ahead of us. “We follow this,” he said. “We don’t get lost.”

Less than five yards later he shrieked and tossed the vine aside.

“What happened?” I asked, thinking something had bitten him.

He was sniffing his hands. “It pee on me!”

“What?”

“Feel!”

I picked up the vine hesitantly. It was coarse and dry.

“There!” Tomo said, pointing to a spot further down the stem.

“Yeah, I see it,” I said, noticing a six-inch section that

seemed to be covered in some kind of liquid. It appeared to be the only wet spot.

“Smell it!” Tomo said.

I did so and detected a faint ammonia odor.

“It does smell like urine,” I told Mel and Neil, who were staring at Tomo and me like we were talking apes.

“So what?” Mel said. “An animal—”

“You see animal?” Tomo said. “Where? I don’t see none.”

“Where else would it come from?”

“I piss on forest, it piss on me.”

Neil harrumphed. “Please, Tomo.”

“It’s true! Go smell!”

“Forget it.”

Tomo turned to me. “Taste it.”

Rolling my eyes, I started off again.

A vine peeing back on us. Fuck.

I flirted with thoughts of the paranormal for a while. A sentient forest that lures people and animals deep into its heart with the illusion of green tranquility, then, when they become hopelessly lost and expire, it feeds on their carcasses. If I ever wrote a book, I could call this story *The Venus Forest*, or perhaps *The Flytrap Forest*. There would have to be a large cast of characters so the forest could pick them off one by one. And the protagonist would have to somehow survive and defeat the forest. This stumped me for a while, because how could you defeat an entire forest apart from burning it to the ground? Then again, I decided eventually, if the genre was

horror, it didn't need a happy ending, did it?

When I tired of amusing—and frightening—myself, I purposely blanked my mind and focused on keeping in a straight line. Unexpectedly, I began to think of Gary. That's when it always happened. When I least expected to think of him. Of course, in the months following his death, I thought about him incessantly. But time had a way of dulling the pain, distancing the memories. You never forget something like your brother dying, you never accept it either, but at some point, for good or bad, you learn to live with it.

Gary was shot early in the morning on December 12, 1999, while heading to practice at the Giant Center in Hershey, Pennsylvania. He'd played for the Hershey Bears of the American Hockey League. Although he went undrafted by the NHL in '96, he was signed as a free agent by the Washington Capitals the following year and spent the next three seasons bouncing between the Capitals and the minors. Most sport pundits agreed he could become a permanent fixture in the pros if he could recover from a knee injury, which had required reconstructive surgery. The injury should have ended his career, but Gary had a determination like no one else I've ever met. He must have trained twice as hard as anyone on his team to get back into playing condition, and the last I spoke to him, about a month before his death when I called him on his birthday, he said he was as good as new.

The guy who shot him was an eighteen-year-old heroin addict who'd been in and out of juvie his entire adolescence. He didn't know Gary. They'd never met. Gary had simply been at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Gary used to jog every day along North Hockersville Road, which cut through secluded woodland. On the day he died he'd left the road to offer assistance to someone slumped against the trunk of a tree. The person, Jerome Tyler, pulled a gun and demanded Gary's wallet. Gary refused and was shot with a .22 caliber gun. Tyler took Gary's wallet and fled. Gary managed to get back to the road before collapsing. He was taken to the hospital where it was learned the small bullets did a huge amount of damage, piercing his liver and aorta.

I was a senior at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and had been sleeping off a mild hangover when my mother called me in hysterics and told me Gary had been shot. I flew to Pennsylvania and arrived at the hospital that evening. My parents were there with Gary's wife, Cheryl, and their infant daughter, Lisa. My father took me aside and explained Gary's condition. His eyes were red, an indication he had been crying, something I had never seen him do. Walking into Gary's hospital room was the hardest thing I have ever done. He was lying on his back in a mechanical bed, hooked up to a life-support machine. He was pale, his skin oily, an oxygen mask taped over his mouth. I didn't know it at the time, but he wasn't getting circulation to his feet and brain. I remained at his bedside for as long as I was allowed, not speaking, not doing anything except holding his hand.

I fell asleep on a sofa in the visitor area and was woken in the morning by my parents and Cheryl. It was written all over their faces: bad news. Doctors had told them that Gary would likely never wake from his coma, and even if he did, he would be brain dead. The decision had been made to pull the plug.

I flew back to Wisconsin in a daze. I don't remember the flight. Don't remember anything about the days that followed. I vaguely recall the funeral. Most of the people present were family. The rest were Gary's teammates. It was an open casket service. Gary looked remarkably lifelike, and I half expected him to open his eyes and say it was all one big joke. I brushed his cheek with the back of my fingers. His skin was gravestone cold, almost rubbery. The knowledge that this would be the last time I ever saw him was like a physical blow, I found it hard to breathe, and I went outside for some air. Three of Gary's teammates were there, smoking cigarettes. One of them was smiling as he told a joke, like this was just another day in the locker room. I walked over and asked the joker what he was saying. He had the sense to appear suitably ashamed. I didn't care. I punched him in the face, pushed him to the ground, then dropped on top of him, raining down more blows until I was pulled off.

Jerome Tyler, who'd been arrested by the police the day after Gary died, was convicted of first-degree murder. The trial lasted one week. The jury took an hour to return a unanimous verdict. The sentence was life imprisonment with the possibility of parole after ten years.

It wasn't fair, I'd thought at the time. Jerome was a cold-blooded murderer. He didn't deserve parole. He deserved death, an eye for an eye. I used to have fantasies about killing him myself; it helped me get to sleep at night. In each of these scenarios I would kill him a different way. Never instantly. It would always be a long, drawn-out process. I would talk to him during this time, mock him, celebrate my life in the face of

his death, paint a clear picture of the nothingness he was headed for.

I don't have these fantasies anymore. It's not that I've forgiven Jerome. There's simply no reason to continue to hold ill will toward him. After seven months in prison he was found in a bathroom, his head in a toilet bowl, seven stab wounds in his back. Official cause of death was drowning.

Not one of the ways I'd imagined it, but good enough for me.

WE came to a white ribbon twenty minutes later. It was tied loosely around the trunk of a small tree and continued perpendicular to us deep into the forest. We stared at it, each of us coming to our own conclusions.

"Did the police leave this too?" Mel asked.

"Police or suicide guy," Tomo said.

"Why would a suicidal person leave ribbon behind?"

"So his body could be recovered?" Neil suggested.

Tomo shook his head. "So he go back out."

I was confused. "If he came here to kill himself, Tomo, it would be a one-way trip."

"Some guys, they don't decide. They still thinking."

"So they spool out this ribbon behind them in case they change their mind about killing themselves?"

"Yeah, man," he said, then started along the ribbon.

"Wait!" Mel said. "Where are you going?"

He looked back. "We follow, right?"

"You know what might be at the end of it?" Neil said.

“Don’t be chicken guy again.”

Neil scowled. “Don’t call me that.”

“What? Chicken guy?”

As we started along the ribbon, I tried to get into the mindset of the person who came to this forest, alone, spooling out a lifeline behind them in case they changed their mind and wanted to return to civilization. They would have been suffering for some time. Suicide wasn’t something you did spur of the moment. So what had happened to them that they’d want to end their own life? The death of a spouse or child? Financial ruin? Poor health?

Or just some really bad luck?

I pictured the person sitting at their computer late at night, perhaps smoking a cigarette in the dark, researching different ways to kill themselves, researching this forest, at least how to get here, where to park. Goosebumps broke out on my arms.

Researching your own death.

Man almighty.

I became aware I had begun to move faster. At first I imagined this was due to the fact I wanted to cover as much ground as possible in the time we had allotted to us before turning around. But I realized there was more to it than that, for it almost seemed as though the forest, like the sentient one I had imagined, was *pulling* me deeper into its embrace.

I didn’t realize I had left the others behind until Mel cried out.

She was twenty feet back, submerged in the ground to her neck. Her elbows were hooked over a twisting root, which was likely the only thing preventing her from sinking deeper.

From what I could tell when I reached her, she had stepped into one of those volcanic craters, only this one had been obscured by a latticework of roots and debris. I guessed the mouth was almost six feet wide, but it was difficult to be certain because I wasn't sure what was true ground and what wasn't. My first thought was of a trapping pit used by hunters and camouflaged with branches and leaves—though this one was made by the forest, not man.

“Are you okay?” I asked, my mind racing for a way to help her.

“I don't know,” she said, her eyes wide with panic. She swiveled her head from side to side, searching for something else aside from the root to grab hold of.

I knelt at what I determined to be the lip of the hole. She was too far to reach. “How deep is it?”

“I don't know.” She was trying to keep panic from her voice and failing. “I can't touch the bottom.”

“Can you try to climb out?”

She struggled for a moment, twisting this way and that, until the root she was dangling from shifted, dropping several inches.

She yelped.

I dove forward and grabbed her wrists. It was a stupid move. Instinctual. Because I was now on my stomach, my upper body cantilevered over the crevice, and I had no leverage to pull her out, no way to move back on my own.

Beneath us, through gaps in the dead leaves and branches and roots, all I could see was darkness.

How deep was it?

“Don’t let go of me,” she said in a frightened whisper.

“I won’t.”

I heard Neil and Tomo coming toward us.

“Careful!” I warned them.

“Oh boy,” Neil said.

“Oh shit!” Tomo said. “The forest fucking eat her.”

“Grab my legs,” I told them, “so I don’t fall in.”

A moment later I felt hands around my ankles.

“Don’t let go.”

“I don’t, man,” Tomo said.

“Mel,” I said, doing my best to affect calm, even though I felt like a man on very thin ice. “Put your arms around my neck. I’ll put my arms around you. Then Tomo and Neil will pull us free.”

“I can’t let go.”

“Yeah, you can. The hole’s probably not very deep anyway. Don’t think about it.”

“You saw how big those craters were.”

“This is just a small one. Come on. You can do it.”

She looked so scared I thought she might cry. She shifted, so her right armpit was hooked firmly over the branch, then she reached for me with her other arm and snagged the collar of my jacket. I slipped my arm beneath hers.

“Good,” I encouraged her. “Do the same with the other.”

She followed my instruction and now had both arms around me, her hands locked together behind my neck, while my arms encircled her torso.

We had become one big Barrel of Monkeys chain: Mel, me, Tomo, Neil.

“Tomo, you got me?” I called back to him.

“Yeah, man.”

“Neil, you have Tomo?”

“We’re good, mate. Tell us when.”

“Now.”

They began to pull.

“Wait!” Mel cried. “My hands are slipping!”

“I got you,” I told her.

The rearward movement caused my shirt to ride up my stomach. Sharp sticks scraped my bare flesh. Slowly, however, Mel emerged from the hole, the root she’d been dangling by now beneath her navel. Then I was back on solid ground. I rose to a kneeling position, pulling her toward me. Tomo released my ankles and squatted beside me—

Suddenly the roots Mel had moved onto gave with a wicked crack. She screamed and plunged into the darkness below, her hands clawing at the rocky wall as she disappeared.

I pitched forward in a futile effort to grab her. I likely would have fallen in as well had Neil and Tomo not restrained me.

“Mel!” I shouted.

I listened with sick anticipation for her to strike the ground. I heard nothing.

“Mel!”

Tomo and Neil were yelling also.

“Ethan!” Mel’s voice floated up, high-pitched and uncertain.

I couldn’t tell how far down she was.

Had she broken an ankle on impact? A leg?

At least she was alive.

“Mel, what happened?”

“Help me—Oh God!”

“What’s wrong?” I demanded. “What happened?”

“I’m on a ledge or something. There’s—there’s nothing below me.”

For a moment I had an image of a massive subterranean cavern opening below her, filled with the bones of all the animals—and perhaps suicides—that had fallen down the crevice in the past.

I swallowed my fear and said, “Don’t move, Mel. Don’t do anything. We’re going to get you out.” I turned to Neil. “Get your flashlight.”

He scavenged it from his backpack and aimed it into the yawning hole. Mel had taken most of the roots and deadfall that covered the opening with her when she fell, and we had a clear view down. The shaft didn’t follow a straight line but corkscrewed around the vertical axis, resembling the cardboard core of a paper towel roll that had been twisted and untwisted. Mel was fifteen to twenty feet down, standing on a narrow, debris-covered ledge. Her stomach was pressed against the rock face, her arms spread eagle.

Beyond her the shaft continued into blackness.

“Good Lord,” Neil said.

I clenched my jaw.

“How deep is it?” Mel called, unwilling to move at all to look down.

I pretended not to hear her. “Go find a long vine!” I told Neil and Tomo. I turned back to Mel. “We’re getting a vine,

Mel. We're going to get you out."

"Hurry, Ethan."

"Don't move. Don't do anything until we get the vine—hold on."

I joined Neil and Tomo, who were two dozen feet away, tugging at a tangle of lianas, trying to pull them free from the tree trunks and branches that their shoots had latched onto.

I shrugged off my backpack and dug through the top pocket for the Swiss Army knife I had brought. I popped the small blade and began sawing at the woody stem of one liana a few inches above where it was rooted in the ground. The diameter was about twice that of a garden hose. It took me close to a minute to cut through it.

I stood and looked up. The severed liana dangled from a mess of branches and other lianas above. Both Tomo and I tugged at it with all our strength, but we couldn't free it.

"Shit," I said, wiping sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand.

Then I saw Neil behind me. He was dumping his tent from its nylon sack. Out fell a polyester flysheet, metal poles, several stakes, and guy ropes.

Guy ropes!

There were four of them, each five or six feet in lengths.

"Yes, Neil!" I said.

"We tie them together," he said, "I reckon we can reach her easy."

"Mel! We have rope!" I shouted. "We'll toss it down in a minute!"

Neil was laying the ends of two ropes parallel to each oth-

er.

“The knot has to be strong,” I said, wishing I knew something about knot tying.

“I know what I’m bloody doing.”

I watched as he coiled the working end of one rope twice around the second rope, passing it through the inside of the coils. He repeated this with the second rope in the opposite direction. Then he pulled the free ends to tighten the knots.

“That’s it?” I said skeptically. It looked secure, but it seemed too simple.

“A double fisherman’s. It’s the best way to tie two ropes together.”

He attached the third and fourth segments, stood, and held up the finished length proudly.

“Can you tie the end of it in a loop?” I asked.

“Is there enough rope?”

“I think so. If not, we’ll untie it.”

Neil secured the end in a large bowline knot, then we returned to the hole.

Tomo was kneeling at the edge. He glanced at the rope and said, “Neil, man, you fucking James Bond.”

“Mel!” I called. “We’re going to toss down a rope. You ready?”

“Yes!”

Neil passed me the rope. “There’s nothing close enough to anchor it to.”

I nodded and fed out the slack.

“Can you reach it, Mel?”

“I have it!”

“Slide the loop over your head and under your arms.”

“Is this going to work?”

“One hundred percent.”

The best method would be for her to lean back until she was perpendicular with the wall and rappel upward like a rock climber. But I knew she would never attempt this. Also, if she fell, she would tumble head over heels past the ledge all the way to the bottom, however deep that was.

On the other hand, if Tomo, Neil, and I simply pulled her up hand over hand like you pull a fish out of a hole in the ice, and something catastrophic happened such as the rope breaking, she would hopefully slide back down the wall and land on the ledge again.

This was my thinking anyway.

“You ready, Mel?” I said.

“I don’t think I can do this!”

“You have to. It’s the only way out. Look up at the light. It’s not far. It’s only fifteen feet or so.”

“I can’t do this!”

“Yes, you can. We’ll be pulling you, so you just have to hold on.”

“What if I fall?”

“You won’t. Just hold on tight.”

“What if it snaps?”

“It won’t. It’s strong. I promise you. Don’t think about that. You ready?”

She didn’t answer.

“Mel?”

“Yeah.”

“You ready?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t let go, no matter what.”

“Okay!”

I looked over my shoulder at Neil and Tomo. Like me, they both had their right arm twisted around the length of rope for extra traction.

We heaved while stepping backward. One step, then another, then another. Mel was incredibly heavy. The polyethylene rope dug into my palms, but I ignored the pain.

It was working.

I pictured Mel, peering at the circle of light overhead, her body swinging back and forth as she inched upward, bouncing against the rock face.

If the rope snapped, or the knots came loose...

I didn’t let myself think of that.

Then, what seemed like a very short time later, Mel’s arms appeared over the lip of the crevice, then her head. Her face was a mask of agony and grit. She was so focused she didn’t glance at us. She was squirming, kicking with her legs.

Then she flopped forward on solid ground. She scrambled the rest of the way to us, as if she feared something was about to leap from the hole and drag her back down. She collided into me, gripping me in a fierce hug, and we collapsed together, panting with exertion.

WE remained locked in an embrace for several minutes as our heartbeats returned to normal and our nerves settled down. I

enjoyed the warmth of Mel's body against mine, the softness of it. I breathed in the fresh, lemon-scent of her hair.

"Thank you," she whispered into my neck.

"It's okay," I said, stroking her back reassuringly.

"I was so scared."

"It's okay."

When I couldn't ignore the stinging in my hands any longer, I kissed Mel on the forehead, shifted out from beneath her, and sat up. The rope had left angry red furrows across both palms. Thankfully, the skin hadn't torn, but I wouldn't be surprised if it began to blister at some point. I lifted my shirt. There were a couple thin cuts, but that was all. I barely felt them.

I turned my attention to Mel, who was still lying down, eyes closed.

"You good?" I said, squeezing her thigh.

She opened her eyes and nodded.

"You didn't twist your ankle or anything?"

"I don't think so." She glanced at the crevice. "I didn't even see it."

"I didn't either," I said. "I must have walked straight past it."

"You were going so fast. I was just trying to keep up."

"I know, I..." I shrugged, recalling the pull I'd felt.

"How deep do you think it is?"

"Not that deep," I lied.

"I dropped my phone."

"Down the hole?"

"When you were pulling me out. It fell from my pocket. I

think I heard it land on the ledge below me.”

“You want to go get it?” I said lightly.

“Funny.”

“We’ll get you a new one in Tokyo. It’s about time you updated anyway.”

Neil cleared his throat. “So what do you reckon we do now?” he asked, as he cleaned the lenses of his glasses with his shirt. “Keep going or head back.”

“Keep going, man,” Tomo said, jumping to his feet. “Why not?”

“Because Mel just went through a bit of an ordeal, Tomo. Perhaps she doesn’t want to continue.”

We all looked at her.

“Let’s keep going,” she said. “I actually feel pretty good.”

In a strange way I did too. Alive and invigorated. Maybe it was adrenaline, but I thought it was more than that. We had been challenged, and we not only triumphed, we did so with a cool head and as a team. Really, with Mel now safe, I felt more proud than anything of our accomplishment.

Suicide Forest zero; Team Tokyo one.

“You heard her,” I said. “Let’s move.”

MEL and I walked side by side holding hands, keeping a careful eye on the ground for anymore crevices. Less than five minutes later we spotted a second ribbon. It was blue and continued parallel to the white one for a bit before gradually angling off to the left. I wondered which had been laid down first and whether the person who’d come second would have

been comforted by the sight of another ribbon. To know you were in a place where others killed themselves as well. Where it was somewhat acceptable to kill yourself. Where you could disappear and not burden family and friends, who otherwise would have to identify your body at the morgue, arrange a funeral, attend the funeral.

The perfect place to die.

The longer I was in Aokigahara, the more I believed this statement to be true. Despite the pervasive atmosphere of death and struggle and sadness, you felt cocooned here, isolated from the outside world. And wasn't this exactly what someone contemplating suicide would want? It certainly seemed like a more suitable place to spend your last time on earth than, say, the Golden Gate Bridge, with motorists screaming past, some stopping to stare, some to play hero, as you scaled the suicide barrier.

I was by no means an expert on suicide, but I could relate to the state of mind of someone contemplating it because I had contemplated it myself in the days after Gary died. That had been a shitty time, the worst in my life, and often I would wonder how I was going to get through the next day, or the next week. I couldn't stop thinking about everything that Gary had forfeited: his family, his career, his future. He'd had everything to look forward to. Perhaps this, in some way, was why I felt it should have been me instead. Gary was the star; I was the understudy. I was the disposable of the two of us. Sometimes I wondered if my parents felt this way as well. Parents will always tell you they don't have a favorite child, but I don't know if I believe that. How could they not have

favored Gary over me? How could anyone not have? He was— Gary.

I'd say the worst of the depression—the suicide-thinking depression—lasted one month, maybe two. During this time I rarely left the apartment except to attend my classes. I had wanted to be by myself. I had wanted nothing to do with the outside world.

I had wanted a place like Aokigahara, a place where I could be left alone and forgotten.

Nevertheless, I've always been a pragmatist, and I also understood that my death wouldn't bring Gary back and, just as those signs we'd passed earlier had insinuated, it would only cause my family and friends more pain.

Unfortunately, I had witnessed this domino effect firsthand. It occurred back when I was in high school. On a Saturday afternoon during summer break six guys I knew had crammed into a car with five seatbelts and were driving to see a Pearl Jam concert. Barry "Weasel" Mitchell was behind the wheel. He was speeding. My close friend Chris, who was in the car, told me he'd wanted him to slow down, but he'd been too timid to say anything. Everyone else was fine with the speed, he figured he could be too. They were passing around a two-foot-tall bong, hot-boxing the car. When the bong came to Weasel, he told his little brother Stevie, who was in shotgun, to hold the steering wheel straight while he took a hit. At this point Chris no longer wanted them to slow down, he wanted them to stop, so he could get out, and he was just working himself up to say something when the car drifted onto the gravel shoulder of the road. Weasel shoved the bong aside and

yanked the steering wheel to the left. He overcompensated. The car knifed across the two-lane blacktop. He swung the wheel back the other way. Again he overcompensated. Suddenly the vehicle took on a life of its own, swerving back and forth, back and forth, out of control. Inevitably it launched off the highway, nosed into the shallow culvert, shot back out, and crashed headlong into a tree a little past Blackhawk Airfield.

This was as much as Chris remembered because he was knocked unconscious. Newspapers and the gossip that filtered through our school filled in the gaps for me. A passing motorist called in the accident. The guy who didn't have his seatbelt on—the sixth passenger, Anthony Mainardi—was launched through the windshield, but miraculously he was the least injured, suffering only lacerations to his face and some bruising. The other injuries ranged from Kenny Baker needing facial reconstruction surgery to Tom Reynolds suffering several broken ribs and swallowing half his teeth. Stevie, who was two years younger than everyone else, was the sole fatality. The collision with the tree shoved the engine block back several feet, crushing him in his seat. Apparently his guts were squeezed out of him, similar to what happens to roadkill. He was pronounced dead at the scene.

Two weeks after Weasel was charged with vehicular homicide by intoxication, he stuffed some socks in the exhaust pipe of his parents' remaining vehicle, climbed in behind the wheel, started the engine, and got fatally high on carbon monoxide poisoning. His mother had a nervous breakdown shortly after and was checked into Badger Prairie Health Care Center (which in the nineteenth century had been called the Dane

County Asylum for the Criminally Insane), where she failed to kill herself by slitting her wrists but succeeded by jumping from an eighth-floor window. The day after she was buried Weasel's father, a police detective, took his service revolver and blew his brains out—

“Ah, shit,” I heard Tomo say, tugging me back to the present.

Some two dozen feet ahead of us was a glade created when a large tree fell over and knocked down several smaller ones. The white ribbon ended there.

“It's a dead end,” I stated.

“Looks like it,” Neil said.

As the meaning of this sank in, disappointment welled inside me. We wouldn't be calling John Scott and the Israelis to come meet us. We would have to walk all the way back to the intertwined trees. And if the others hadn't found anything either, then this entire excursion would be a bust.

A white ribbon, that was all.

When we stepped into the clearing, I looked up. It was the first time I had seen the sky clearly since we'd started down the secondary trail. It was low and gray and foreboding. I continued forward, my eyes still raised, my hands out, feeling for raindrops, when Mel hissed at me to stop.

I froze, thinking that maybe I was about to step into an unseen hole. But, no, I was on solid ground. Frowning, I turned toward her, my eyes sweeping the forest floor, and I saw what she had seen. My heart locked up in my chest, and I went cold all over.

I was standing in the middle of a gravesite.

