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Beneath the Canopy

by Tyler Markham

Alicia couldn't see her hands in front of her face. Just five minutes ago, the trees were alight with the red glow of sunset, and now the vine-laden forest floor seemed to writhe in the dark as if it were alive and hungry. She unlaced her boots and sat down hard on an overturned tree, sighing with relief as her sore feet met the cool mountain air.

What had started as a beautiful hike in the Olympic National Park in search of the newest video for her and her boyfriend's YouTube channel, slowly turned into an aimless trek through rocky terrain and looming trees as the safety of the sun disappeared below the horizon. With each passing minute, she felt more uncomfortable out in the forest as she watched Tommy pace back and forth with the ragged, printed-out map he bought from a local under his flashlight.

Pine crunched under his feet, sending Alicia's hair on end as the sound bounced through the trees, creating monster-like noises out in the dark that jumped from ear to ear, untraceable.

"I swear it's supposed to be here," Tommy said. "Right here! I can't believe I paid him fifty bucks for this piece of shit map. Should have brought the drone and found the damn mine myself." He walked farther into the forest, his eyes still on the wrinkled piece of paper.

Tommy heard about this haunted location from Alicia herself, instead of his usual source, shit fluff articles on abandoned urban hellscape. She lived in Port Angeles in the early 1990s when she was a young girl, and even though it was almost a four-hour drive from Olympic National Park, her family had made the trip more times than she could count.

Alicia happened upon a mine as a child, and in this particular mine, fifty years before she was ever thought of, a group of men got stuck in its depths. The second she told Tommy the story of stumbling upon it, he ran around the room, throwing clothes haphazardly into bags in their motel in Colorado, and drove into the darkness toward what he called *a literal goldmine*. He didn't listen when she said she didn't remember where it was.

"Where are you going?" she yelled.

"Looking for the damn mine. What else do you think I'd be doing walking around the forest at night? We have to find this so we can get on the road early. Next video needs to be filmed and uploaded within three days, or we're screwed."

"How would we be screwed? We made ten thousand in revenue last month from the asylum vlog. We had a million views."

He turned to her, his face a pinhole in the increasing darkness of the forest.

"You don't get it, Alicia. If we don't get these videos going, the people are going to unsubscribe. Some people, they get a large following and fizzle out. But not us. We can do it. I think so. But we have the apartment, the camper, loans, and your credit card debt. I'm not going back to being broke. We need this."

"My credit card debt?"

"I sure as hell don't use it," he said.

"Oh, you don't use it? Good luck eating then."

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

He stomped back to her through the underbrush and stood with his hands on his hips.

“Are you coming?”

“No,” she said. “Give me one of the flashlights. I’m going back to camp.”

“No.”

“Tommy, you’re being crazy right now.”

“Don’t call me crazy!”

Spittle landed on her lower lip. She wiped it off calmly, trying to quell the anger bubbling up at the edges. His eyes were twitching in the dim light the flashlight provided, and the way he stared at her made her heart deflate, along with her anger. In those eyes was the boy she had initially met a year ago, hiking with his camcorder, laughing and slowly wooing Alicia with his sweet, sensitive soul. Ever since, though, their videos needed to be wilder, and so did he.

She squeezed her eyelids shut and tried to remind herself he hadn’t been wrong yet, and took one of his hands and squeezed playfully, trying to calm her nerves.

“I’m going back, Tommy, with or without you. We can finish this in the morning, babe. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

He crossed his arms in protest, and the flashlight bathed the forest canopy with sterile, white light.

“Fine then. I’m going. Glad to know the channel is more important than my safety. And yours. Come with me if you’d like,” she said.

“Alicia, wait.”

She shoved her feet back into her boots, stood without tying them, and walked into the dark.

She peeked over her shoulder to see if Tommy had followed, and when she saw him still looking at the map, she turned and quickened her pace up the hill. She was sick of being dragged around by him. Just now, just this weekend he finally took a suggestion from her, and it turned into this. She loved what they did. Exploring the world together. But now she had no say. No say in her safety or her work. When they got back to camp, she'd tell him she was done with it. That if he wanted to stay with her, he had to stop with the insane schedules and give her the ability to choose her own life.

Her ears beat with the rushing blood of her heart, and as she took a step around a cluster of spiny shrubs and over a moss-covered portion of the hill, she felt her foot come loose. Dirt moved, sending her face down, clawing at the earth to get traction as she slid. She grasped at the vegetation, the speed of her fall increasing at every moment. She was going to tumble down the hill if she didn't do something.

She released one hand, her grip loosening on the other, and plunged her fingers into the wet soil of the forest to try to get a hold. She felt another caving in, like there was an opening below the ground. Before she could stop herself, she rolled backward into a tall pine. Her head smacked into the wood. Shooting stars danced into her vision. Everything seemed brighter for a moment, and during the fall, she must have screamed because she could hear Tommy rushing through the forest and yelling.

"I'm over here," she said, rubbing the sore spot on her scalp. There wasn't any blood on her hand, which was a good sign. Maybe the fall would snap Tommy out of his current state of

insanity, and get his ass back to the camp. She lifted her head to see what she had fallen over, and her expression soured.

Tucked into the side of the hill, still partially covered by moss and wet bendy branches, a small opening looked back at her. A vent, maybe four feet in diameter, protruded from the side, with a portion of its grate bent outwards. If she acted fast enough, maybe she could convince him to take her to the hospital before he saw the grate.

Tommy stopped hard in the dirt, the flashlight blinding her, causing her head to throb.

“Jesus, Alicia.” He held a hand out for her to grab and pulled her to her feet. She wavered for a moment, stepping from one foot to the other until the ground seemed to stop moving.

“What the hell happened to you?”

“Slipped on a rock,” she said as she rubbed her scalp. “I hit my head really hard, I don’t know if I can-” He turned the flashlight to the side of the hill to see what caused her fall, and stopped. His mouth hung open as the metallic shine of the grate glinted out like a signpost, and as he crawled on all fours to the hill and peered in through the small hole she had created in her fall, Alicia’s hope for safety seemed to slip.

“Woah, holy shit. This might be it. Holy shit!” he jumped up and pumped his fist, hooting and hollering. He grabbed Alicia by her face, and as he went to kiss her, she pulled away. He hadn’t even asked her if she was hurt, and the thought of a kiss sickened her.

“I don’t think that’s it,” she said. Before she could go any further, he was on his hands and knees clawing at the dirt. Slowly, the hole grew in size, the damp soil fell, and the entrance cleared. It stared back at Alicia like a gaping mouth with snarled metal for teeth and dark green ivy for hair.

Tommy grabbed a pair of bolt cutters, and with anxious speed, he clipped away whatever was left of the broken grating.

“My head hurts,” she said. He didn’t turn and kept clipping. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

“You’re fine. I can’t believe we found it! This is going to be amazing.” He tore the rest of the grating off, threw it to the side, and opened his camera bag.

“Tommy, I’m not going in there.”

“No, you’ll be fine. No reason to be scared. None at all.”

“That isn’t the mine!” she finally yelled. Her chest heaved up and down, her breath creating little puffs of steam in the ambient light of the flashlight.

His head snapped over his shoulder. “Who cares?”

“I do! We shouldn’t go in there if it isn’t what we’re looking for. We have no idea what could be on the other side.” she said. “Tommy, it’s dark. Please, please can we go back.”

He came close enough that his hot breath stung her cheeks.

“Help me with the camera. Please. I promise I won’t let you get hurt,” he said.

As he walked away, the belief she held so dearly, the belief that he would never let her get hurt disappeared.

His eyes were wild as he opened the camera bag.

In the distance, Alicia could hear the crackling of tree branches as something crawled its way around in the darkness.

She had been in this forest before. Camped overnight in sleeping bags. But, as Alicia listened to the sounds around her, the air felt charged with electricity, like any moment lightning

would strike them. She looked into the dark depths of the vent again and knelt next to Tommy to set up the camera in silence.

She stepped back with her arms crossed tight over her chest as she watched Tommy pack the camera into the bag again, finally satisfied with the introduction to their video. The anger she had suppressed earlier leaked back into her muscles, tightening them as she watched him, but when Tommy began to crawl into the darkness of the tunnel, every inch of strength seemed to leave her body.

Leaves crackled behind her, and Tommy took another crouched step into the metal throat. She shook her head, slapped her face a few times, back and forth, and crawled through the entrance behind him.

Water trickled from rusted cracks in the vent and dropped cold needles on the back of Alicia's neck. The shuffling of their knees and wet squelching of their hiking boots echoed down the hole to what seemed like a more extensive opening ahead of them.

"Crazy," Tommy said. "I wonder what's at the end of here. Could be anything."

"Yeah. Crazy." Alicia said.

"How long do you think this goes? It could go for miles."

"It could be a dead end and we could plummet to our deaths."

Tommy looked over his shoulder to stare daggers at Alicia. He paused for a moment with that angry glance, then kept crawling.

“I wonder how long this opening has been blocked? With all of this rust, it has to be at least a decade.”

The echo was shorter now, and in front of them, it looked as though the duct work started to slope down like a kid’s playground slide, but instead of wood chips at the end of it, Alicia’s mind drew up the maw of some deep chasm where they would be left to die. They approached the curve, and that’s when she saw it. At the end of the tunnel was another chain grate, partially separated, just like the first.

“Tommy,” Alicia whispered, but he kept crawling towards it. “Tommy, wait!”

He ignored her again.

Alicia’s stomach dropped when the room at the end of the vent came into view. It was a small, rectangular office.

Filing cabinets were knocked on their sides with their spilled paper guts covering every square inch of tile. A faux-wooden desk, like the ones teachers have in classrooms, stood in the center of the room where a coffee-stained mug lay on its side among random crumpled papers, spilled pens, and a screwdriver. The walls were covered with degrees hanging askew in the dim light.

Something wasn’t right about it. The room, this tunnel, everything was wrong. Alicia looked behind her and saw nothing but darkness.

“Hey, Tommy and Alicia here.”

He held up his phone and turned the camera to face the room.

“As we were looking for the mine, we stumbled upon this little opening in the forest, and look at what’s in there. We’re going in.”

“Going in?” Alicia whispered.

“Why’d we come out this far if we’re going to go home empty-handed? Here, hold this light while I cut this out.”

She stared down at the flashlight in her hands. It felt good. Heavy. She thought about turning and running, even looked over her back down the tunnel, but her phone battery was less than ten percent, and when she looked down at Tommy she knew he wouldn’t make it in the forest alone.

She jumped when the final barrier to the room tumbled to the tiled floor. Tommy crawled through and jumped down with a crash.

“Guys. Take a look at this. Look at all these papers everywhere.”

Alicia stood back from the hole. A single line of sweat cascaded from her forehead to her chin. Why would an office be here, in the middle of nowhere? Alicia felt like she knew, in her bones, in her racing heart, she knew they shouldn’t be there.

“C’mon Alicia,” Tommy said in a cheerful voice. She felt a little safer when she heard it, and when she noticed he had the camera up and pointed at her, she felt the shocking flutter of excitement that she always got when he had the camera on her. She smiled, waved, and dropped down into the room.

Everything in the office smelled damp. Old. Now that she was in she could see what was actually on the floor. Manilla file after manilla file. She picked up a manilla folder next to an old broken computer and opened it to the last document.

COPY

United States Department of Energy

November 13, 1992

Johnathan T. Anderson

1000 Independence Ave SW

Washington, DC 20024

Dear Mr. Anderson,

Test Subject 43 has shown promising results after behavioral analysis, so I wouldn't worry about that. The anomaly we witnessed in March seems to be a fluke.

Regarding your other question, your lack of faith in the project's success is a direct insult to me and my colleagues. I apologize that we have not been able to provide sufficient enough evidence for you, and politely invite you to attend a demonstration we have planned for Governor Louis this December. I think you will find it most compelling.

Sincerely,

Dr. Gregory Caldwell

As Alicia went to flip the page, something screeched in the room causing her to drop the file and yelp. Tommy was trying to move one of the filing cabinets from in front of the door.

“What the hell are you doing?” Alicia said. She yanked the collar of his jacket. He fell backward into a pile of damp papers, paper clips, and staples. Her mouth was dry. Her hands trembled. “Tommy, what if something is in there?”

“What the hell was that?” Tommy said. He pushed himself off of the floor, took a deep breath, and put a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Alicia, you’re being just a little paranoid, don’t you think? This place seems to have been empty for decades.”

“Then why was the door blocked from the inside? How did that happen, huh? And why was the grate bent?” she said.

His gaze made its way toward the filing cabinet, now slightly pulled from the door, then back to her. “I don’t know.”

“Exactly! If this was an office back in the day, why would anyone have had to lock themselves in here with that filing cabinet? Huh? In the letter I was just reading they were *testing* on something down here. I don’t know what, but if it’s left like this it could be anything.” she gasped and put a hand to her mouth. “What if there's radiation?”

“Really? Radiation?”

“It’s not far-fetched,” she said.

“Have you ever heard of Occam's Razor?”

She scoffed and pulled herself from his grasp.

“I told you what Occam’s Razor is.”

“Whatever, but isn’t it a bit crazy to assume that whatever this is was some nuclear testing facility? Why would it be in the middle of a national forest and not in a desert or something?”

She stared back at him, knowing that nothing would change his mind as he shifted from one foot to the other and stared at the filing cabinet.

She sighed and stepped back to let him at the door.

He pulled one more time at it, its hollow frame belting in the concrete room. He tried the doorknob. It opened, letting a rush of stale air into the room.

“Flashlight please.”

He stepped out of the door, walked to the right, and out of sight, quieter with every step he took away from her.

She took a deep breath.

He was probably right, why would there be a nuclear testing facility out here? But, another question pushed that aside. Why is there an underground office in the forest at all? *Behavioral analysis*? The US government was weird, and had done their fair share of shady shit over the years, but if this were some normal run-of-the-mill testing, it would be a huge lab in the city, right?

She couldn't hear Tommy anymore and rushed through the door and to the right, afraid to be alone in that room. The hallway was nearly black except for the silhouette of Tommy standing at the end.

Broken glass crunched among thousands of papers scattered on the floor as she made her way down toward the only source of light. Dusty panels hung by cords from the ceiling partially blocked her vision, and the maddening noise of water droplets hitting the floor made her want to cover her ears. Every sound seemed to dull and disappear when she saw Tommy in the light.

His camera was held up, its light illuminating not what, but who Tommy was now talking to at the end of the long, paper-littered hall.

A small girl stood at the end of the hall in a large circular room lined with overturned desk chairs and carts holding various tools Alicia had never seen before. She wore what looked like adult pants that had been fashioned into a skirt, and half of a hospital gown that was torn at waist height, revealing a dirt-smeared torso.

Alicia's stomach turned to water.

Immediately, her animal brain said to leave Tommy here. But before she could, he was inching toward the girl and talking in a fake, saccharin-sweet voice.

"Hey, what are you doing down here?"

She forced herself to take a step. One. Two. Three. Her feet felt far away from her. Like she was watching herself in a dream.

She inched down the hall and Tommy kept talking.

"How did you get down here, hun? Where are your parents?"

Alicia was closer now and was finally able to see her features. Her hair was dark black. Her eyes were almost the same color, and on the chest of her gown was the number 43. The girl did not blink, did not speak. She just stared. Right at Tommy, not even noticing her.

Tommy reached out to grab the girl's hand, and before he could, the flashlight flashed sharp, short bursts of light, until it went dark. She could hear a small rustle of feet.

"Tommy?" She stammered. No answer. "Tommy!"

The light came back on, and in front of her stood Tommy and the little girl, hand in hand. She smiled up at him, but when her face turned to Alicia, it flattened into what looked like anger.

Alicia took a stumbling step back. *How the hell was she down here?* She took another step back.

"What, Alicia? We have to help her. We need to call the police."

Alicia could feel her thoughts spinning about in her head and tried to grasp at something solid in the tornado. The office hadn't been in use for twenty-five years now, and this was a living, breathing, little girl, down here. But how? She couldn't see any exits, at least not from where she was. There was no source of food or water. But there she stood. She wanted to leave, now. She felt horrible but she didn't feel safe taking the girl with. The way she stared at Alicia made her sick.

"How did you get down here, hun?" Alicia forced herself to say in her sweetest voice. It came out all wrong and shaky. The girl just stared back.

"Tommy. Come here for a second."

He and the girl took a step forward in unison. Alicia stepped back and almost stumbled over a pile of metal instruments. Among them, she saw a dust-stained nametag. Mr. Jonathan Anderson. To the left was a pile of tiny bones that seemed to be a mix of old and new animal carcasses.

"Without her. Just stay there for a second sweetheart."

Tommy looked at her confused, shrugged, and bent down to whisper to the girl. She giggled and nodded, then started again at Alicia.

She felt her muscles shrink with fear.

"What?" Tommy said. He stopped in front of her.

Alicia leaned in to whisper.

"You see that name tag on her? Subject 43?"

"Yeah, why?"

"The letter I read mentioned that number. Something happened. In *nineteen-ninety-two*."

"Nineteen-ninety-two?"

“Right.”

He shrugged. “We can’t just leave her down here.”

Alicia thought they could, and felt guilty immediately that she would think this way about a little girl. When she saw her standing and staring at her down the hall, that guilt faded as quickly as it came.

“Look around you, Tommy. This is not normal. None of this is normal!”

“We don’t do normal, Alicia. Think about how good this could be for us.”

Her mind went blank.

“Are you thinking about the channel right now?”

“Our channel.”

Alicia clenched her fist.

“You’re insane. This is insane. Everything, the last year. All of it. I’m going.”

“You can’t go now. You have to help me with her.”

“I’m not getting anywhere near her. You can deal with it.”

Alicia snatched the flashlight from Tommy’s hand and began walking towards the door that they came in. As soon as her hand reached for the doorknob the light flickered again, and she heard a rustling of feet that set the metallic taste of terror on her tongue. She prayed to god it was Tommy who had moved.

The lights came on again and the little girl was halfway down the hall.

“Did you do that?” she yelled.

All she did was smile at her, and it caused her hands to tremble. She dropped the flashlight, bent down fast, and picked it back up.

“Tommy! Tommy, please. We have to leave. She can stay here while we go get help.”

“What?” his voice echoed in the hall.

“We need to call the police. Now. We need to call them now and get her help. I can’t do it.” Alicia pulled her phone out and tried to open it up. “Mines dead. Try yours.”

They both looked over their shoulders at the little girl who stared at them. Tommy pulled his phone out. “Gone,” he said.

Alicia took another step back, “Hey, little girl. We’re going to be right back, okay? We’re going to find help.”

They both began inching towards the door, their fronts facing toward her. The light flicked off again and Alicia shrieked. It came back on, and the girl stood right before them.

“Stay here,” she said. “All of my friends leave.” Her voice was not like a child’s. The dry tone sounded deeper than a little girl and filled with anger.

“We’re going to be right back, I promise,” Alicia said.

The little girl's fists were clenched. She was shaking, and licking and biting at her lips.

Alicia looked at Tommy and finally saw what she had been waiting for since meeting him. His lips were trembling. His breath rasped out of him. He took another step back and the girl lurched forward at them.

All of the breath left Alicia’s lungs. She turned and ran down the hall towards the door they came in, Tommy completely forgotten as she stumbled over discarded papers.

She could hear the ripping of clothes and stopped. He screamed in agony. She looked back and what she saw was not a little girl anymore. Her back was hunched unnaturally, each piece of vertebrae sticking out of her skin like small spikes. Her mouth was unhinged at her jaw. Each tooth looked to be as sharp as a needle and was tearing at Tommy’s arm. This monster’s fingernails stretched into long, jagged knives that plunged into Tommy’s stomach.

All Alicia could do was stand, slack-jawed with her eyes bugging out of her skull, until it tore into Tommy again.

She looked everywhere for something she could use to stop it. A small beaker lay on the ground. She picked it up and threw it as hard as she could, not at all confident in her throw. The glass shattered like an explosion in the tight concrete hall, and the monster screeched and fell back.

“Get up, Tommy. Get up!”

He could barely make it to his feet and they stumbled towards the door. The monster was up now and brushing long shards of glass from its bleeding skin. A low, rumbling growl came from the monster’s mouth, and it began galloping down the hall on all fours.

The door was just feet from them when the thing jumped and knocked them both down. Alicia watched in horror as the flashlight slipped from her hand and sucked all the light in the hall with it as the batteries tumbled out onto the concrete floor.

Tommy moaned close to her, but because of the echo, it seemed to come from all around her as if he was some benevolent spirit suffering in purgatory. She scrambled to her knees and searched the best she could in the dark, cutting her knee on broken glass in the process, but before she could reach and grab him, it jumped on her back and swiped at her neck. A large gash opened that stung like fire.

She grabbed for it wildly but couldn’t get a grasp. The room seemed to close in on her as another nail pushed itself into Alicia’s collarbone. Her head seemed lighter.

She clawed back as it reared its head, baring its rotted, sharpened mouth, and went for Alicia’s neck. This was it. An image of her life flashed in her head. The life she could have had if Tommy hadn’t dragged her down here. She closed her eyes and the monster shrieked in pain.

Tommy stood with blood cascading from his abdomen. He plunged a large shard of broken glass into this being's back. It left Alicia and latched onto Tommy's front. He stabbed, stabbed, and stabbed, but it did not stop it from sinking its teeth into his neck and tearing out a large red chunk of his skin.

Tommy screamed, but the only thing that came out was a breathless gasp.

Alicia reached down, scrambling on the floor to search for the flashlight until she felt its slick metal casing within her grasp. She reared back and swung its metal end as hard as she could. It connected solidly with the monster's skull. It fell to the side and slumped into the wall.

She wanted to cry, shed a tear for Tommy as she watched him writhe in pain on the dirty concrete floor, but fear sucked every bit of moisture from her body.

She grabbed Tommy under his arms and dragged him towards the door.

The thing stirred.

She pulled one more time and screamed to try to muster more strength. He slid an inch but not much more. He was too heavy.

"Tommy. You have to get up."

He shook his head. His eyes were closing slowly, then opening in a flash.

The little monster shook violently and got up on one knee.

Alicia was bawling, unaware of it as her heart thumped in her ears.

She pulled with every bit of strength she had. They were finally at the door. Tommy was going in and out of consciousness. She pulled again, and his upper half was in the doorway. They were going to make it.

Just as that thought made its way into her head, Tommy's legs were dragged into the hall. A gurgled scream emanated from his throat. His eyes were wild, but in them, she saw deep, deep sorrow and regret.

He disappeared into the hall with one final tug from the monster, screaming and begging for Alicia to help him.

She stumbled out into the hall after him, but before she could, dizzying black spots appeared in her vision as the sound of the monster tearing into Tommy rang through her ears. No scream answered back.

She slammed the door shut and slunk down the wall. She tried, she had tried so hard to get him to listen, but he wouldn't. All she could do now was save herself. She slapped herself and got up. The filing cabinet was still close by, and with strength half fueled by fear and rage, she pushed it into the door.

The door shook, hard.

The monster hit again and pushed Alicia an inch away from the door. She looked around the room for anything to help her. The computer sat in the center of the floor, with its cord hanging just out of reach. She might be able to use it to block the door further.

She reached and missed. She reached again and missed it by mere centimeters. The door shook again, screeching against the filing cabinet Alicia clung to.

She couldn't reach the computer.

She tried to think about what she had seen in the room before, anything that could assist her. The door shook again, and this time the door handle shot out of its place and rolled onto the floor.

A small hand made its way through the hole where the door handle used to be and grabbed onto Alicia's backpack, ripping it from her back, and slamming her head into the wall next to the door. White snow clouded her vision, like television static. Her consciousness was slipping again as the monster shrieked in anger. The door budged slightly, enough for her to get her arm in and grab Alicia. For every passing moment, she begged to stay awake. Just stay awake. And slowly, with every inch of strength she had left, she dug her nails into its arm. It shrieked and dropped her.

Alicia tried to slam the door shut, but it had wedged its arm in its way, and with every kick of the door the arm stayed, crushed and wilting like a flower.

Alicia whipped around, her vision blurry in the flickering light of the fluorescent above. On the desk was the screwdriver. The monster burst through the door and jumped straight towards Alicia, all four of its limbs leaving the ground, aimed directly at her throat. Alicia grabbed the screwdriver, held it out in front of her, and closed her eyes.

She waited for the thing to scratch at her arm, rip her throat out, and end this nightmare, but on the end of the screwdriver, it sagged on her arms like a weight. It made no sound.

Alicia opened her eyes, and there the monster stood with the screwdriver hanging from its eye socket, its feet lifted off the ground as if it were a marionette doll waiting for its master.

She dropped the screwdriver and slid against the wall, crying and gagging.

This monster that lay on the floor in front of her, did not look like the monster she had seen anymore. The claws had retracted, the spines disappeared, and now all Alicia saw was a little girl. Had she murdered this thing, this half-girl half-monster? She and Tommy came down here and disturbed its home, and they killed it for it.

She stood shakily.

What could she have done? Try harder to get Tommy home? No, it would never have happened, and even though she stayed with him, he still died. She thought of him, all by himself in the hall, but she couldn't go back for him. She just couldn't stand to see it.

She took one last look at the dim, damp hall, and crawled into the tunnel leaving them both to rot in the forest.

It took her two hours to find civilization, and what she did find was an empty road, with no sign of human life anywhere. Despite the fact her feet screamed from within her boots, her shoulder ached and bled, and Tommy was gone, she felt as though a weight was lifted off of her.

She was lost, so hopelessly lost, with nothing and no one around her to help, and a dead phone in her pocket, but it wasn't her fault. None of this would have happened if it wasn't for Tommy. She cursed herself as she tried to catch her breath for going along with it as long as she did. But what could she have done instead? Just quit and leave when she had the opportunity to do what she loved? No. She had her hopes, and Tommy had ruined that.

She thought as she walked down the road that she had a chance now. A chance to really do what she wanted with her platform, without Tommy to stop her.

As she listened to the forest whisper with a small, triumphant smile growing on her face, something rustled in the bushes behind her, unnoticed.