

The Beast

I hold my breath. The rock overhang can't hide me in this hollow beneath. Drips of leftover rain beat time with my pulse. I strain for silence. A footstep? Its hoarse breath? Any sign of the beast.

I press my body against the earth. Wet leaves, stones, and unseen crawling things beneath me.

Tonight was the wrong night to meet Abigail in the woods.

My lungs burn for release. I let out a slow shaky breath, far too loud.

The beast exhales its ragged breath just above me. I tremble. the stench of its breath floods my nostrils again. Clenching my teeth, I force back the urge to vomit.

My dear Abigail flashes before my eyes, torn apart by teeth and claws. I couldn't protect her, only watch.

The beast doesn't move. Only its breath and the foul odor of Abigail's entrails prove its presence.

I swallow my cowardice. With the least stirring of leaves, I lean out of the hollow. Gravity tips me too far and I reach for the rock above me.

My blood freezes. I stare at the beast's clawed paw as it hangs in the air above me. I can't move, can't blink.

I scream. The beast roars in my ears.

I tip out of the hollow and roll down the ravine. Trees and brush beat my face, arms, and legs. The wet leaves are a greased slide. I slam into the rocky stream bed.

How long do I lay here?

This late in November, the trees are bare. Tonight the clouds hide the full moon. I roll over and put my face in a pool of rainwater to ease the stinging. I lift myself up.

What about the beast? What about Abigail? I am too numb to move. Too numb to cry.

Let it take me.

The clouds break just right to let the moonlight shine through. The pool I stare into reflects the cold light.

My breath stops. Heart skips. Skin prickles.

The face of the beast stares back at me from the water's surface. But I am alone.