

## **Kids these days...**

The four boys watched the silver blade glisten in the sunlight breaking through the trees with awe. Tay, the fifteen-year-old boy holding the knife reached forward and grabbed his younger brother Zakk by the shoulder and held the knife up to his neck.

“Now you die pussy,” He growled, then after a pause burst into laughter. The younger boys laughed too, sniggering at the instinctive look of fear on Zakk’s face.

The seven boys stood in a forest clearing in at least six inches of snow. Isaac’s gaze was fixed at the floor just in front of his feet; he wasn’t the same as the other boys. The others were impressed with new swear words and the knives that both of the older boys carried but not Isaac. He wanted nothing more than to be far away from where he stood at that second but his feet stayed glued to the ground.

A bird squawked above them somewhere; a shrill high-pitched tone that rang in the boys’ ears long after the sound had died. Ned, who was the second older boy was halfway through telling a joke when the bird squawked again, holding the note for a few seconds. Ned broke off, ducking to take up a stick that he tossed at the tree above them. Isaac watched as the bird rose into the air, flapped its wings furiously but then returned to the branch a few seconds later.

“So she goes into the bedroom and says ‘hey what the hell are y-“ The bird again screeched at the top of its voice, just as Ned was telling the punch line. He snarled and the boys laughed at how he was shown up by the bird.

“Fuck this,” He muttered folding his own knife and tucking it into his jeans pocket. He reached up and climbed up onto the first branch of the tree. He climbed a little higher then reached up and grabbed hold of the bird. He jumped down from the tree with a thud, his feet sinking into the snow. He showed the rest of the boys the bird.

Isaac just stared in fascination; the bird was so small, its whole body was only the length of his thumb and its head the size of a marble yet it could muster a cry so loud it deafened all of them. He showed it to Tay, who was smiling to himself, a shared joke between the two boys. One of the younger boys, Bren, reached out and stroked the tiny bird’s head. It stayed dead still, watching the boy’s movement with its tiny beady eyes but Isaac could see the terror that it hid behind those eyes, he could feel its fear.

Ned too smiled to himself, running his finger across the bird’s head before wrapping his thumb and forefinger around its neck.

“It’s all right little fella’,” Ned muttered, his smile widening. Isaac could see the bird’s fur sticking out as if statically. Ned grit his teeth and let out a small grunt as he cleanly rung the bird’s neck. Some of the younger boys let out a gasp but Isaac stayed quiet. He had seen this coming and in his mind, had been telling the bird to be strong. Ned and Tay exchanged a look, a laugh, and then Ned threw the bird aside. It disappeared into the snow somewhere to their right.

The other younger boys, even Zakk who was constantly trying to keep up with his brother’s notoriety, tried to shake off their displeasure and prove their heartlessness.

“The little cunt had it coming,” laughed Nathan. Tay laughed and high-fived him but Zakk stepped forward to prove his authority.

“You wouldn’t have done it, you’re too much of a pussy,” He spat.  
“I so would have. You’re a pussy.”

“Enough,” Tay yelled, glaring at both of them. Then he exchanged a sideways glance with Ned.

“So, you guys wanna be in our gang then?” The boys nodded. “Well then you all have to pass initiation. Come on down to the lake.”

The boys looked at one another, their willingness to prove themselves showed strongly but Isaac could see something beyond that. Doubt? Fear?

“Yeah sure, we’ll erm... we’ll catch you up in five yeah?” Zakk said to his brother who nodded and turned to leave with Ned.

“See I told you they were bad,” Zakk said, assuming authority as soon as the older two were out of earshot.

“I guess,” Sam said.

“What? You wanna be bad right?”

“Yeah,” Sam replied, unsurely.

“Well, we’re all going to be in the gang so you better get used to it.”

Isaac let out a breath, closing his eyes and shaking his head.

“What?” Zakk spat, stepping up so that his face was an inch from Isaac’s. “You got something to say tough guy?”

There was a pause and then Isaac said; “Yeah. Yeah I do actually. Your brother isn’t *bad*, he’s vile and cruel and if you want to be him then you’re as stupid as both of them.”

Zakk glared at him, Isaac could feel his warm breath in his face. Then Zakk gave Isaac a hard shove with both hands. Isaac stumbled back a few steps but he stood his ground and pushed the bigger boy back. Zakk had a look in his eyes that perfectly mirrored his brother’s even though Isaac knew that he wasn’t his brother; he could put on as big a front as he wanted but Isaac could see through him.

Zakk clenched a fist and gave Isaac a sharp jab in the nose. Isaac yelped and returned it with a full on punch that he threw at Zakk’s face but he caught it in his palm and used the power of his punch combined with a swing of his leg to land Isaac flat on his back.

Isaac looked up at the sky and the towering figure of Zakk above him. Zakk looked him over then turned.

“C’mon guys, let’s go.” And they left Isaac lying on his back in the snow, warm blood gently dripping from Isaac’s nose and running down his face. He lay there for at least a minute before he gathered the energy to pull himself to his feet. Isaac walked over to the spot where the dead bird lay in the snow. A small coffin in the snow indicated its position where it had landed. Isaac dropped to his knees and took the bird in his hands.

Isaac realised after a few seconds that tears were spilling from his eyes and splashing off the surface of the bird’s feathers. He laid it down gently in the snow and pushed the snow away in a circle, digging with his fingers into the earth. He thought of how innocent the bird had been but how it had been strong in the face of death.

After a minute of digging, Isaac had forged a small but perfect grave for it. He took the bird in his hands and lowered it gently into the hole.

"Be at peace friend." He muttered before pushing the earth back onto the bird. Its dead black eyes disappeared under the ground and snow, as it was lost from memory.

Isaac stood, the tears gone from his face but a newly present look of angry determination. He wiped the blood from his face and let his hands ball into fists at his sides, his fingernails dirty with earth, as he started down the path towards the lake.

The lake was rather an overstatement; it was rather a large pond, roughly forty-five feet in diameter. When the lake came in to view, Isaac could see the figures of the boys in the distance. He walked closer, through the trees but froze as he heard near voices. He ducked just in time, behind a large collapsed tree, as Ned and Tay crossed into view.

"Well, what we gonna do about your bro?" Ned was asking.

"He'll be fine, he can take care of himself," Tay replied.

"But what if he doesn't make it off the ice and gets stuck with the others?"

"Then he'll have to swim won't he?" Tay said impatiently.

"Well, what if the others try to swim?"

There was a pause.

"Then we'll cut the little fuckers." They both laughed and walked on.

Isaac waited until they were a good distance away before following them a good twenty feet behind to be safe. Isaac stayed in the trees; about fifteen feet from the lake but watched closely as Tay stepped up and addressed the boys.

"You guys ready then?" The boys looked unsure. "Come on, you wanna be in the gang? Then you have to pass initiation, you have to cross the frozen lake, every one of you."

"I dunno," One of them said.

"Oh c'mon you babies," Zakk said, taking a sure step onto the ice and walking carefully on. The other boys followed cautiously.

Isaac watched as Tay walked in line with the boys on the edge of the lake. It took them maybe a minute of careful footing to reach the centre of the lake. By this time, Tay had overtaken by the perimeter and reached the other side. He nodded to Ned and reached into his pocket. From where Isaac was sitting he could only see the knife that Ned drew from his pocket and opened in front of him. He knelt on one knee and stabbed it into the lake's ice. He then stood and raised a leg high and smashed his boot into the knife. It chiselled deep into the ice, making a huge crack that crept along the surface.

Isaac presumed that Tay was doing the same on the other side and it hit him like a freight train what they were doing.

"Hey what the fuck!" He heard one of the boys yelling. Ice had started to break away on Tay's side, leaving a long gap of water separating the boys from the other side. A couple of them turned back, one of them running forward. His foot broke through the ice and sunk beneath the water. The new hole in the ice joined with the cracking from Ned's knife and they slowly split apart, leaving an island on which the four boys were stranded.

Isaac saw Zakk throw himself to the ground to sensibly distribute his weight, as the ice island began to split further.

"Help! What the fuck are you doing?"

Isaac could not watch any longer; he reached down and took up a large rock in his fist and crept forward. Ned was too beside himself with a mix of excitement and tragic regret to notice Isaac standing behind him. He raised the rock high above his head and brought it down hard on the back of his skull. He felt the impact absorbed by Ned's skull just before he hit the ground unconscious.

For the first time that day, in fact ever, Isaac felt power running through his veins. Blood dripped from the rock that was clenched in his fist. He let it roll out of his hand and disappear into the snow. He already had his eye on what he wanted. He reached down and with force, drew the knife from the ice. By the time he had straightened up, Tay was already running around the perimeter of the lake towards him, holding his own knife wildly in his outstretched arm.

Isaac wheeled around, ignoring the screams from the boys on the lake. He snatched up a long stick, calculating how much time he had before Tay reached him. He didn't even want to think what would happen then. He pushed the stick out as far as he could into the water and Nathan lunged for it but the momentum pulled him under the water, still holding the stick. Isaac pulled with all his strength and two seconds later, the boy emerged, coughing and shuddering. He reached a hand out to pull Nathan out and just as he was clambering onto the bank, Tay slammed into Isaac hard.

Isaac felt himself in the air for at least a second before his body smashed into the water, his weight and clothes dragging him down instantly. The cold hit him like a sledgehammer. His mouth opened instinctively to cry out and he let in a mouthful of ice-cold water. His hand tightened on the knife handle and his body rushed with ice-cold warmth. He felt the cold like nothing he had ever imagined; as Isaac wondered whether this was what hell was, he kicked with his feet hard and re-surfaced.

Tay was crouched by the lakeside, holding the silver blade in Isaac's face. "You failed," He said simply and raised the knife but Isaac reached up and swinging his own knife in a wide arc, slashed his blade across Tay's forearm. Blood sprayed out of his wrist as Tay dropped the knife. It disappeared into the lake's cold emptiness. Seizing the opportunity, Isaac grabbed hold of Tay by the shirt and pulled him into the water. Tay immediately began to sink but held tight onto Isaac, pulling him again into the dark lake. The burst of cold was less this time, as he had been exposed to it for the last few seconds but the numbness was still unbearable.

Isaac tried to break free of Tay's hold, pushing at him with his free hand but Tay held on tight. Isaac reared back and stabbed the blade deep into Tay's chest. He felt the blade sink in like it would a pig's heart and cleanly back out. Blood spat from Tay's mouth; a small cloud of red in the dark water but soon dispersed in the water's depths. Tay instinctively let go, opening his mouth to scream and filling his mouth with water. Isaac kicked off Tay's shoulder and seemed to be lost in space and time for a second before he exploded out of the water above. He let out a huge gasp as air filled his lungs and a hand reached down to pull him out of the water.

Isaac lay, soaked to the skin and panting hoarsely as he stared up at the blinding sky. Somewhere in the distance, a bird was screeching its song. A smile spread across Isaac's face as his vision clouded and then blackened.