

# Lost

## Part One: Missing

The fog was so dense that Julie had to hold her hands out in front of her to avoid the forest that was closing in around her in the darkness. For what had felt like an eternity, Julie had been padding through trees indistinguishable from those that surrounded her at this moment; and the long hours had not been kind to her; her feet barely lifted off the ground, scuffing on the endlessness of the forest and with every step jarring at her to give up but for some reason unknown even to her, she kept moving. Her legs burned with ache and her arms and legs were caked in mud from the countless times her feet had caught on various articles and pulled her to the ground.

Not a single living thing stirred this dark night. The forest was so dead even demons stayed clear of the darkness and the ever familiar feeling of being watched was absent from Julie's heavily paranoid state. Ironically, the forest was calming, it was her sanctuary from all that was evil. The absence of wind however, was unnerving; it was the element that one always wishes would go away but then when it is gone, something feels wrong, very wrong.

The dead silence had been compromised for some time now, how long one could never be sure for time seemed to tick in a different way here. In Julie's semiconsciousness it took a while for her brain to register; a soft crunching of footsteps could be heard, seemingly in the distance although it was closer than Julie anticipated. She stopped dead and in a wild, three hundred and sixty degree turn, scoured the whole of the forest for movement.

The moon shone brightly over her left shoulder, illuminating a small figure a few trees in front. Julie staggered forward, pushing forward to the unknown movement, her heartbeat quickening despite her bizarre calmness.

After minutes of blind pursuit, Julie came to a stop, panting and looked around. The forest was once again dead and the eerie silence was as

penetrating as ever. All was still.

Then Julie shuddered. The shadow of a small child was reflecting onto the ground. Following the elongated shadow, Julie's eyes found a small child standing tall behind the tree to her left. The child stood with its back to her but as soon as her eyes fell on it, the child scarpered into the forest and from sight, leaving only the echo of its shrill laughter piercing Julie's psyche.

Julie took a step forward to run after the child but her ankle bent sideways and she hit the floor awkwardly. She let out a gasp of pain and fell back against the hard ground. Julie seemed to black out for a second and when her mind tried to pull back by concentrating on the prospect of the child, the need to find him, she found herself momentarily blinded by a distant light. Her eyes adjusted and Julie sat up to see a glowing orange light as distant as Julie's eyes could see. She got to her feet and stumbled ahead, the distant light growing in intensity with each staggering step.

After a minute, Julie began to make out the shape of a caravan, from inside a considerably dim light given the distance she had seen it from.

Approaching the dim orange light, Julie could see that the caravan was covered in rust and dirt and its wheels had been long gone, instead it was propped up on stacks of logs. Julie came to a stop and surveyed the small caravan. Three graves sat just in front of it, under a small window, from which the glass was missing and a stream of smoke was coming. The graves were indicated by three crosses made of sticks; small graves most likely containing children.

Julie stepped up through the caravan's small entranceway. Her neck and arms shivered as she saw that the cabin was dark; only a small gas light was glowing on a small table. She stood in a cramped kitchen space; cupboards, a sink and a small stove around the walls, with a small wooden table and material seat in the corner. Apart from a small door, presumably for the bathroom, there was only one more space in the caravan; there was a muddy brown curtain with a staggered purple threaded pattern across it, and from behind the curtain there was a harsh gargling sound. Julie took a step towards it and a shrill screech made her jump. At her feet was a frail black cat, the skinniest she had ever seen. The cat looked up at her, its eyes pleading for release then jolted past her and out the door. Julie took a

second to compose herself and then stepped forward, reaching out for the curtain. She took a breath and drew the curtain back quickly. A rasping whoosh sounded as the curtain rolled away.

A double bed sleeping area was concealed behind the curtain and in it, an old woman lying still. She looked to be in her late seventies with light brown, aged skin. Her eyes were closed and long black hair covered her face. As Julie leaned in to survey the woman further, a fly shot out of the woman's slightly open mouth from behind black teeth, a lot of which were missing or broken.

Julie reached forward and touched the woman's wrist. She tried to feel for a pulse when the woman's eyes snapped open and she grabbed Julie's arm, squeezing tight. The woman's eyes were faded grey, leaving Julie only to assume that she was blind. They rooted Julie to the spot momentarily but then the woman let go and sat up slowly. She got up and crossed the caravan to the small table, all the while saying not a word to Julie, nor looking at her. As she walked, Julie noticed jewellery consisting of bones and dice clanking together on her ankles and wrists. She sat down at the wooden table, which was rotting on the edges, and gestured with a long finger nail for Julie to come over. As Julie walked over she caught a strong sniff of something and looked up to see bunches of herbs strung around the caravan roof.

Julie reluctantly sat opposite the woman who instantly snatched her hand in both of hers. She closed her eyes for a while and then looked up at Julie.

'Your son is missing no?' She asked. Julie was taken aback for a second, surprised at the sudden speech. The woman spoke with a rich south-american accent.

Julie for the first time since seeing the woman felt a strong flush of sympathy for her and as if sensing this, the woman squeezed her hand and looked up slightly.

'Yes. Yes, he has been missing for weeks. I need to find him.' There was another long pause, in which the woman sat completely still, eyes closed, before she spoke again.

'I cannot help you...' And just as Julie opened her mouth to intervene,

added 'but I can help you to help yourself.' And without saying another word, she got up and crossed the room to the small stove where she placed a small metal kettle. She returned to her seat and re-took Julie's hand, closing her eyes again.

'You need to look deep within yourself and you will find the answers you are looking for.' She began humming under her breath, a low groan that grew in intensity until the whole caravan shook violently. She stopped suddenly and opened her eyes. Julie looked into the deep empty pits that were her eyes and saw nothing, no feeling, no life. The kettle was whistling furiously and rattling on the stove but the woman got up slowly and strode over to the kettle in time. She gently lifted it off and placed it on the plastic surface beside. There was a sizzling and the plastic melted to a black colour.

The woman reached up and took a cup from the small cupboard and with her back to Julie, she could not make out what exactly the woman had put in the cup but she quickly took up the kettle and poured boiling water onto the mixture. There was a brilliant green steam that rose from the cup and dispersed into the air.

The woman coolly lifted the cup and carried it to the table where she laid it down in front of Julie in what she could only describe as the most gentle and collected manner she had ever seen.

'You drink,' she ordered in her empty south-american tone. Julie peered into the cup to see a bright, psychedelic green colour, an ocean of brilliance in which her eyes were lost. There was no bottom to the colour, only endless depth. Julie lifted the cup to her lips and reluctantly took a sip. The liquid slipped down her throat. It was not hot but at the same time it wasn't cold, it was as if she was only imagining drinking it. It had no taste but inside Julie felt a sweet relief run through her body. Her mind rose out of her body and everything blurred a little.

'Now my little flower,' the woman said, taking Julie's hand and turning it over so that it was flat, palm up. She looked towards Julie but not directly at her however Julie could feel her staring deep into her soul. The woman touched her own chest and followed the material of her dress down to her waist where, from inside she withdrew a short knife. Julie watched it carefully as the woman held it out to Julie's palm. The knife had

engravings down the blade in symbols Julie did not recognise and the handle seemed to be crafted out of an eagle's claw. She lifted the blade and pressed it to the top of Julie's palm then paused.

'Debes encontrarlo' She muttered, her eyes snapping shut suddenly and the flame on the gaslight flickered out quickly. 'Debes encontrarlo' she repeated again and again, pushing the blade into Julie's palm so that it pricked her skin. She then dragged the knife slowly down, her muttering faster and louder. Blood trickled down Julie's hand and she tried to pull away but the woman's free hand closed on her wrist like a venus fly trap, her long nails digging deep into Julie's arm. Julie felt the sharp sting and winced, in her discomfort taking a big swig of tea and feeling the same satisfaction from deep within. Her fingers tensed as the knife continued to tickle her palm. The woman was no screaming 'debes encontrarlo' and the skies cracked with thunder.

Then it stopped and the woman's dead eyes opened. She let the knife fall from her grip and it clattered to the table. She ran a long dirty fingernail up Julie's palm and touched it to her tongue that reached out hungrily like a snake, the blood spreading in a blackness across her tongue. Then her mouth and eyes closed simultaneously and a strange look of self-proclaimed omnipotence spread across her face.

She dropped Julie's hand and Julie's head fell back against her shoulders and her eyes rolled into the back of her head. The woman muttered something in spanish as she crossed the room to the bed and returned holding a small package that was a red handkerchief stained in brown. She sat down and touched Julie's hand with her old, frail fingers. Julie's head snapped upward and she inhaled suddenly as if she was trying to suck the atmosphere in. Julie jerked her hand back and pressed it to her chest, the blood dripping in-between her fingers and hitting the table in droplets.

The old woman untied the handkerchief and pushed it across the table towards Julie. The handkerchief fell flat and from it rolled two goat's eyes still with stringy fat surrounding the back of each. Julie stared hard at them for a second and then looked up at the woman.

'They helped me to see but I not need them, they are useless to me. They help you to see when you cannot?' Julie paused then wrapped them

up in the handkerchief and stowed them away in her pocket.

‘Thank you.’

‘Now go child, find your path.’ Julie stood and started toward the door but the woman raised a hand.

‘You didn’t finish your tea,’ she said simply. Julie stood for a moment, looking into the woman’s dead eyes. They showed no sign of reaction whatsoever, they seemed so empty but maybe there was something beyond that. Not wanting to ponder on the chilling thought, Julie drained the remainder of green liquid and left the caravan. The only thing in her mind was more of an instinct than a thought, to get the fuck out of there.