

Snow fell lightly from the grey sky, dusting the pine trees which swayed in the restless wind. The chipped coffee mug in my hands did little to warm me up, and it surely didn't help calm my nerves. All I could think about was the race. The ever famous Crater Creek Trapper's Festival Snowmobile Race.

Every year hundreds of men and women from all over the world flocked to my small home town to indulge in the festivities. Local businesses spent weeks preparing for the new arrivals, decorating store fronts and placing bright decorations on the streets. For a town with a population of roughly five thousand people we sure cleaned up. The streets were alive with colour and sound, the activities and dances continuing on well past when the sun dipped below the frosty horizon. Everyone, local or not, had a good time.

The highlight of the festival took place on the last day – January 10th. This was the day when hundreds of riders and their flashy machines made their way through the town to the old mill access road. There, scuffed in the snow with bright red paint, was the startling line. Snowmobiles revved and men shouted to one another, promising to be the victor and challenging the men parked next to the. As they all took off, one after another, all they could imagine was returning with the lump of cash first place guaranteed: one hundred thousand dollars.

This year I would be racing. It was my first year and nervous was an understatement to how I felt about the upcoming race. I couldn't even bring myself to look at my flashy red machine parked in the front drive where it had sat since Christmas morning. If I did, I might throw up. *Would* throw up. It wasn't fear of the machine that made my stomach twist itself in knots. It was fear of the race itself. I was fairly good on my snowmobile, an even mix of reckless and cautious. I lived for the thrill of whipping through the snow, skimming over the ground like I could fly. Yet I knew well enough that I'd need to be more cautious than usual today.

Getting up from my perch beside the window, I paced to the kitchen. The cold wood floor froze my feet, but I hardly noticed. Just like they had an hour earlier the news station was broadcasting the weather. They were talking about the forecasted blizzard again. Dumping my glass in the sink, I tried to ignore the rambling voice of the weather woman.

She said that she believed the race should be postponed until a milder day. I couldn't agree with her more. Up in the Alaskan backwoods, white out conditions set in fast, and could roar on for days at a time. Being caught in a blizzard – and on a snow machine nonetheless – was a sure recipe for disaster. The race officials had scoffed at the idea, claiming that holding off the race would only cost them money as several competitors had to travel home and wouldn't want to wait for the race to be rescheduled. So it was going ahead, blizzard or not.

With a crash, the front door swung open, bringing a gust of snow along with it. I jumped; my thoughts shattering like glass shards. A boy trudged in, shaking his white blond hair free of snow. I recognized his pale eyes and lopsided grin. Terry Boot. He shucked off his boots, flopping into an empty chair across from me. Duster, my dog, eyed him from his spot on the throw rug. A low growl rumbled in his throat. I didn't know what it was about Terry, but whatever it was, my dog hated it.

"You don't look so hot," Terry joked, punching at my arm. I deflected his hit, throat too dry to answer. He cocked his head to the side, white bangs falling into his pale blue eyes. "What's the matter princess? Scared of a little snow?"

"You know that's not it, Terry," I mumbled, avoiding his teasing look. Terry was the exact opposite of me. Everything about him seemed to scream rebel. From the way he wore his hair long when everyone else wore it short to the way he drove his snowmobile – like he had a death wish or something. Terry was a maniac on the trails and roads, caring about nothing more than how much air he had caught or how fast he could push the machine without it burning out. He had moved here a few months ago, in time for the end of term one in school, and had made a lasting impression from the first day. He liked to fight, he liked to drive fast, and he liked to do things his parents wouldn't approve of. Well, if his parents were around.

He lived in an old cottage a few miles up the road with no more company than what his school books and snowmobile provided him. He claimed that his father was working at some important business in the south and that he hadn't seen his mother since he was a child. It didn't make sense for him to be here on his own, in the literal middle of nowhere.

But here he was.

“Then what is it, Zack? If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were afraid to get on your machine. What’s gotten into that thick head of yours?” I shot him a glare, running my fingers through my dark hair to hide their shaking. “I mean, what’s the worst that could happen out there? You take a fall? No worries, there’s enough wolves in the woods to take care of you if that happened.”

“Shut. Up.” I spat, clenching my hands into fists. Anger pulsed through me. I wasn’t a baby. I would show him. He flashed his crooked grin, getting to his feet. Duster watched him warily, baring his yellowed teeth. I had no idea what had gotten into the old dog. He didn’t have a mean bone in his body yet he acted like some kind of wild dog whenever Terry came over. Terry shot Duster a look of contempt.

“Could you shut your dog up or something? He’s freaking me out.”

“Who’s the baby now?” I asked, shuffling past him towards the door. “C’mon, we better get going. By the time we get to the line the race will be nearly started.” I slid my heavy boots on, shrugging into my jacket at the same time. Finally there was nothing more I could do to avoid it. It was time for the race.

The drive through town was a complete blur, my ears barely picking up on the words of encouragement people on the streets offered to Terry and me as we rolled past. I nearly doused myself in gas at the gas station after zoning out while filling my machine. The attendant on duty chuckled, handing me back the change from my twenty dollar bills.

“Scared, son?”

You have no idea, I thought. “Yes,” I muttered lamely, feeling ashamed. His worn face broke into creases as he smiled. I felt like I recognized him from somewhere.

“Don’t be. The race is nothing. I’m sure you’ll do fine.”

“Thank you,” I replied, forcing a smile onto my face. Terry was already starting his

machine by the time I returned Leaping onto mine, I followed him. We cut through the only main drag in town, speeding down the highway towards the outskirts. All too soon we came upon the huge sign reading directions to the old mill access road. Terry let out a cry of excitement I could hear over the sound of our snow machines as he turned. I follow him, the sinking feeling in my gut only getting worse. Something was going to go wrong. I could feel it in the pit of my stomach.

The starter's line was a tangle of bright snow mobiles and racers clad in winter jackets. Harassed looking race officials weaved back and forth, pinning numbers onto the backs of racers' jackets and dealing out survival kits. An older man approached me and Terry, sticking the number twenty six onto my back. He clapped me on the shoulder then moved on to Terry. He let out a low whistle.

"That's a nice machine you got there. What year is she?"

"1982, runs like a charm," Terry gloated proudly, patting the black side of his idling machine. The man whistled again, and then moved on. Terry edged closer to me. His pale blue eyes focused on me. "Listen up, Zack. Just drive your best. I know you're good. I'll see you on the other side, alright?"

I nodded, staring ahead as the line-up for starting began to form. I slid into my place at twenty six. Terry had gotten a bad draw and was somewhere around forty. Although it wasn't a bad pull for him considering he drove faster than anyone I'd ever seen before. Finally, the countdown started. Twenty four...twenty five... now!

Revving my machine, I sped down the path, head low and eyes squinted. In seconds I was roaring down the trails, cutting corners and weaving between trees. I laughed to myself. What in the world had I been worried for? This was absolutely nothing.

Soon enough I came to the first pit stop. Soup was being handed out in small cans to the racers who had already pulled in. A pair of ambulances equipped with thick snow tires sat beside the cabin, reminding me just how dangerous this race could be. It didn't help my

stomach, but I tried my best to brush the feeling off.

Accepting a can of soup, I pulled off my goggles, pushing my helmet up over my head and resting it in my lap. The cold air bit at my ears, but I didn't mind. It was a nice change. Kicking back, I sipped at the soup, savouring the flavour.

Suddenly, there was a loud scream, and the sound of shouting. I jerked to my feet, splashing hot soup on myself. It stung, burning a hole through my mitt. Ignoring it, I walked away from my snowmobile, wanting to know what the commotion was about.

When I saw what it was, I didn't want to know any longer. Sprawled on the snow, his snow pants soaked with blood was Terry. His forehead glowed with sweat, his teeth bared in pain. A set of nurses bent over him, saying something in a soothing voice as they tried to calm his thrashing. My stomach flopped, the chicken soup threatening to make its reappearance. Just below his knee a white chunk protruded out of his snow pants. His bone.

"You've got a compound fracture," the nurse explained, her jaw quivering. "We need to get you to the hospital now. What's your name?"

"No!" Terry howled, clawing at the nurse. He had the look of a rabid animal in his pale eyes. "No, you aren't taking me out of the race. You can't! I need to finish!"

"You will bleed out if you aren't rushed in," the nurse snapped, a team of men carrying a stretcher rushing over. They lifted Terry onto it, strapping him down for good measure. He kicked and screamed, both in pain and denial. I didn't know what had gotten into him. Was he really that concerned over the race? There was always next year.

After he had been taken away, the ambulance's sirens blaring, the nurse turned to the crowd who had assembled behind her. "Show's over, folks! Let that young boy be a reminder to you that driving recklessly never ends well. Drive safe!"

As I clambered onto my machine Terry's screams echoed in my ears. I shivered, nervously adjusting my goggles. Not wanting to dwell on my fear I shot off back into the trails, wanting nothing more than to be done with the race.

Not an hour later the forecasted storm blew in. The trails were nothing but white and howling winds. I couldn't see two feet in front of me. With every turn my heart pounded in my chest. I was terrified.

Snow whipped past me, making my skin sting as it worked in under my helmet. Slowing down the machine, I coasted along. I had come to a fork. Going left would loop me around back to the city. If I wanted, I could quit here and now. Boy, did I ever want to.

Yet something in me seemed to tug me towards the right fork. I knew what lay right ahead of it. The infamous Crater Lake: the very same lake that Evan Caldon had lost his life on thirty years ago. As I rolled along, I felt my stomach turn again. Everyone in Crater Creek knew Evan's story, and it came into my mind with vivid detail as the trees began to thin.

Thirty years ago, Evan had signed up for his first race. His conditions had almost been identical to mine. Evan had made it through the first leg of the race without a problem. Until the blizzard had set in and he had nowhere to wait it out. Knowing that there was a pit stop on the other side of Crater Lake, Evan had tried crossing. The ice was weak due to high temperatures the day before and Evan had fallen through, drowning before anyone could come along and save him. Some of the old timers who sat in front of the coffee house and gossiped between one another swore that his spirit haunted the lake, and that he was always looking for another victim that he could drag into his icy grave.

"Stop it," I whispered to myself, trying to shake away the thoughts of vengeful ghosts swirling in my brain. At last, the lake came into view. I paused on the brink, closing my eyes. All I had to do was get across the lake and I'd be fine. Two minutes tops if I went slow. I could do it. There was no such thing as ghosts.

Guiding my machine down the steep bank, I glided onto the ice. It held as I waited for any telltale signs of cracking or shifting ice. Growing up in Alaska meant I had learned to be careful around water, especially in the winter. I knew even a few minutes in the water would be fatal.

Moving on, I let my thoughts wander. I thought about my mom, just off her shift at the motel, probably worried sick about me. Duster would be lying in his usual spot by the fire. My dad would be making his way home from the next town over, and he's join mom and watch the race reports to try and see any possible information on me that they could. I wanted nothing more than to be home with them instead of out here.

A dot of black appeared on the horizon. Confused, I slowed my machine. I frowned to myself, removing my hands from the handlebars. What would a person be doing out here all alone in the lake in this weather?

A familiar voice wafted across the howling winds, reaching my ears. Everything in me froze. "Warm day we're having isn't it?"

I watched the boy make his way closer to me, my heart thudding slowly. This couldn't be happening. This wasn't real. Someone had put something in my soup or something to make me hallucinate.

The boy tipped his head over, his white blonde hair falling in his eyes. "What's wrong, Zack? You look like you've seen a ghost." With that, he let out a laugh, the sound piercing my heart with dread. Terry had a broken leg. Terry was not standing here in front of me, perfectly fine, both of his legs firmly on the ground. Not a drop of blood was on him.

"You can't be here," I said, my words slow. "It's not possible." I watched as he came closer to me, drumming his fingers on his arm. He looked amused for some reason. Like he knew something I didn't.

"And why is that? Because I broke my leg? Hah," he laughed, pale eyes mocking me. "You didn't believe that, did you? Oh, you really are stupid, Zack. I never thought this would be as easy as it was."

I had no idea what he was saying. My mind was firing blanks. All I knew was that I was very scared. I wanted to go home.

Terry continued, pacing back and forth in front of me. "I can tell by the look on your face that you don't know what I'm saying. My name isn't Terry Boot, you fool. I only used

that so I could get in close to someone stupid. Someone like you, who had a knack for snowmobiles and would sign up for this dumb race. Someone I could fool.”

Something clicked as he spoke. My mouth was dry as I found the words I was looking for. “You’re...you’re not...no way. Ghosts aren’t real.’

He smirked. “How do you know that? I’m just as real as you are, Zack. Oh, it’s going to be so nice to have some company. Thirty years alone really does get tiring, you know?”

With a flicker and another haunting laugh, he disappeared. My heart galloped like a runaway horse as I leaned forward, flicking my snowmobile back to life. It roared; launching forward and away from whoever or whatever had just been talking to me.

Something flopped onto the seat behind me. “Let’s go for a ride, Zack,” a raspy voice hissed in my ear. I would have screamed if I could, but my throat made no sound. Something tightened around my neck, cutting off my air. I gagged, the machine wobbling as I tried to dislocate the thing around my throat. My hand clawed madly, finally finding what was choking me.

It was fingers. Icy, dead, fingers. Coughing, I reached for the brake. Instead, the opposite happened, the machine snarling as the speed increased. My eyes widened in terror. It was like it was possessed or something!

Evan’s icy fingers tightened around my neck, making it hard to breathe. My vision began to darken around the edges as we raced on, the machine gliding on its own in a mad pattern that made me feel sicker than I already did. I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t-

An icy mouth of black water had opened directly in front of me. I understood then what was going on. Evan planned on drowning me. He’d acted like a real living person for a few months, earning my trust, plotting his way along. Luring me into the race on purpose so he could have another victim. I watched numbly as we raced closer and closer, Evan howling with joy. I wondered what they would think when I didn’t show up at the second pit stop. What they would say to the news officials when the search party figured out what

had become of me. How my family would react. Would they think I'd gotten lost in the storm? No, they'd know better than that. At least, the old timers' would know what had happened. They would know that young Zack Bennett had been dragged to his death by the spirit of Evan Caldon.

As the machine hit the water, my heavy clothing pulling me down under the dark waves, I closed my eyes. It was so cold, and I was sinking like a stone. I should have never said hello to the fair haired boy from California who in the end had turned out to not be a boy after all. I was doomed from the minute he walked into the school.

Deeper and deeper I went, sinking into the heavy blackness which suffocated me. Somewhere in the darkness I heard Evan laugh as another boy crossed over from the land of the living and came to join him in his icy prison. I let the darkness swallow me, wondering if next year another hopeless soul would join us beneath the ice. I hoped for their sake that they didn't. Nobody should have to die like this.