

## CAMPFIRE

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CW: violence, mentions of fire and burnings

### I. PRELUDE

“A party?” I asked.

“Yeah, a party,” Nick said. He stirred his coffee, tapping the spoon on the edge of the cup. “We can go up to my camp. My parents went down to Toronto, so the place is mine.”

He waited, staring at me for my response. “Uh, yeah sure, sounds fun.”

“Do you want to help?” he asked.

“Why?”

“Why? I can’t do it all myself. I got Yarovsky to help too.”

“Wait wait, hold up” I said. “You want someone helpful and your first thought was Yarovsky?”

“He’s got some muscle on him, but we could use your creative insight.”

“Fine,” I said, “I’ll do it.”

“Do what,” called a voice. I turned my head around and it was Campfire. He towered over me with all his bulk and height. His head was freshly shaven into a military buzzcut. He slid into the booth beside me, completely unannounced, and I shuffled aside to make room for him.

“Nothing you need to worry about, bud,” Nick said in a cool tone. He took a sip of his coffee, side-eyeing me to keep my mouth shut. People didn’t like talking to Campfire but he was one of those people that you knew since you were a kid so even if you didn’t like him you had no choice but to tolerate him. It was easier than telling him to fuck off. We still tried to avoid him whenever possible.

“What’s new with you? It’s been a while,” I said. My tolerance meter for Campfire had been refreshed after spending the last four months at school. Nick, on the other hand, looked angry. His eyes stared with annoyance with every word said and move made by Campfire.

“Oh y’know, the usual,” he said. “Actually funny story about that. I caught a deer last month.”

“Oh yeah, that’s cool,” I said, humouring him.

“No, you don’t understand,” he said staring directly at me. “I was on my sled when I spotted it, so I chased it down. Once I got close enough, I jumped and—” He motioned down with his hand, violently stabbing the air. That poor deer.

“You’re not fucking Rambo, Campfire,” Nick said. “Cut the bullshit.”

“I swear to God it happened,” he replied. “Just ask my stepdad, he was there.”

“Yeah? I bet he’d say the same thing as me,” said Nick.

“We got its head mounted,” Campfire sneered. “You can find it in my basement.” He got up and walked towards the cashier where a waitress was leaned over the counter boredly.

“So, when is it?” I asked.

“The twentieth. The party starts at nine, but I’ll come and get you. We’ll drive up for six.”

“Deal.” We shook on it.

## II. THE CAMP

We had spent the last hour setting up for the party. Everything was going perfectly according to plan until we heard the rocky crinkle of a car coming up the laneway.

“Who’s that?” Nick asked, his hand against his forehead shielding out the sun. If he had ever worn his hat as it was intended, then he wouldn’t have to worry. But he was always like that. I don’t think I’d seen him wear his hat forward since he was in grade three.

The rumble slowly crept closer and a rusty black pickup truck emerged from behind the cabin, pulling up to an empty space beside Nick’s car. The door opened slowly, and it was none other than Campfire, sticking his bald head out from the side watching his door to ensure that he didn’t scrape the other cars.

“What the fuck, Campfire,” Nick shouted.

Campfire grabbed a six-pack from the floor of his truck and shuffled his way out, making his way towards us. He looked extra greasy today. Not to mention the zip-off cargo shorts and his sock tanline. “What?” he asked. “I’m here for the party.”

“No one invited you,” Yarvosky said. “Not to mention it doesn’t start for another two hours, you tit.” He pushed his dirty blond hockey flow of his face and crossed his arms.

Campfire pulled out his phone and clicked it on. “Oh, I didn’t realize that I was so early, haha.”

“You’re friggin’ brutal, Campfire,” Nick said. “Why are you even here?”

“Oh, I overheard Robyn mentioning it at the diner the other day. I thought it sounded fun. Just like the good old days. Right, boys?” Campfire patted Nick on the back but Nick did not look too impressed. He stared back at Campfire before turning to me.

“Robyn,” he called. He pulled me aside to the workshed, away from Campfire’s curious ears. “Take Campfire inside the cabin and entertain him. We’ll finish setting up and moving stuff.”

“Are you insane? Why am I in charge of him?”

“Well, maybe be more careful the next time you decide to open your mouth and blab,” he said. “Now we’re gonna have to deal with a wasted Campfire all night. He’s bad enough when he’s sober.”

“How?” I asked. “The guy is a creep and was eavesdropping on *our* conversation. Why can’t you grow a pair and tell him to fuck off? You’re the one who is so concerned about him ruining your party.”

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Just take him inside, I’ll figure it out.”

My face began to feel hot with frustration. I stepped towards Nick until I was within inches of his face. I may be small, but I could still be threatening. He

looked down at me, lips parted and buck teeth on full display. "You better," I said.

We walked back towards the boys, who were now crouched on the ground but gathered just as awkwardly as we had left them. In his daze, Yarvosky spotted us approaching and his eyes lit up with a sudden realization.

"We got a problem, bud," he said as he jogged towards us. "I forgot to mention it when we checked earlier, you're out of propane and we couldn't find any spare tanks."

"Shit," Nick said. He pursed his lips. "We'll have to get a new one in town"

"We don't have time for that though," said Yarovsky, "We have to finish setting up."

Nick stood silently tapping his foot. "Hey, Campfire," he called. "Since you decided to crash our party early, why don't you and Robyn go into town. Consider it your admission fee."

I let out a laugh and faked a grin. "I don't see why he needs me to go with him. Campfire's perfectly capable of picking up some propane by himself."

"I think you should go. Just in case he gets lost on the way back," he said, looking at me with smug satisfaction. He stood with his weight on his right side and arms crossed. His pasty skin had already turned red like a cooked lobster from spending all day in the sun.

Campfire smiled and clapped his hands together. "Well, it's settled then," he said. He walked over to the shed where the rusted tank sat in an old milkcrate and began to drag it over to his truck. "Let's go, Robyn."

I followed Campfire, where he was struggling to get the bulky tank into the bed of his truck. It was hard to watch but after a minute he finally got it. I stood by the passenger side door as he shimmied his way between the two vehicles and climbed into the driver's seat. I was about to grab the door handle to let myself in but noticed that it was missing. "Hold on a second," he said, his voice muffled by the glass. He leaned over the passenger seat and pulled on the inner latch, pushing the door open as he did. "There you go. C'mon in."

"Thanks," I muttered, climbing my way into the truck. I'm not sure I wanted to know, but I asked anyways. "What happened to the handle?"

The engine revved as he turned the key. "Oh, that?" He laughed. "Man, I just opened the door one day and it tore off. Guess I'm just that strong."

The inside of Campfire's truck was... well... I don't know what was on his dashboard, but it looked grimy as fuck. It looked like dried spit. There were bits of chips and fast food containers on the floor and old receipts crumpled in the cup holders. And the odour, I couldn't place it. It existed somewhere between stale cigarette smoke and a beer league hockey bag. He must have seen the look of disgust on my face in one of his mirrors as he chimed in, "Yeah sorry, it's a bit of a mess. If I knew that a girl was gonna be in my car I would've tidied up a bit."

"Oh, no. It's fine," I said. It wasn't fine though. All I could think was thank God I was up to date on all my shots because I wasn't confident that there wasn't some disease lurking in the filth. Campfire finally managed to get out of his spot and as he drove up to the road, I looked back to see Nick and Yarovsky all waving

us off but it wasn't until we were finally on the road that it hit me: Oh my God, I am trapped in a car with Campfire at the wheel.

### III. THE STATION

The sun was just beginning to set by the time we pulled up to the station. The drive was not as bad as I had anticipated. It turns out that it takes very little encouragement to keep Campfire going. Sure, he wouldn't shut up, but you just act like an old Grandma at dinner. Just nod your head and say 'yeah' occasionally so he thinks you're listening even though you didn't hear a single fucking word he said. Considering it was a Friday night, it was oddly empty.

Campfire drove up to one of the pumps and turned off his car. "You don't mind if I fill 'er up while we're here, do you?" He asked. I shook my head. The last thing I needed was to be trapped on the side of the road with Campfire.

I figured he could deal with the tank, so I walked into the store to find a snack. An old antenna radio played the local classic rock station. There were three aisles that stood in the center of the shop filled with candy and other last-minute items that you might need on your trip. To the back of the store was a little coffee stand where you could press a button and magically a cup of coffee would spawn from it. To the far left of the shop were a couple of refrigerated units filled with cold drinks and bags of milk. A man in a blue polo sat behind the cash with his feet kicked up on the counter. He paid no attention to me as I walked in.

I walked up to the second aisle, my hand wandered past the vibrant packages of M&Ms and Kit Kats, carefully considering each one. I picked up a package of Starbursts and felt around, trying to estimate how many were inside and to see if it was worth the gas station premium I would be paying. I peered out the window to see Campfire fiddling around at the pump. It seemed that he hadn't even started to fill up the truck. When I looked up to my side, there was a man standing beside me. His greying hair was carefully gelled back. He wore a full piece suit, a sophistication which he had paired with a camo hunting jacket. I hadn't seen anybody else in the store other than the attendant and there were no other cars in the parking lot. I had not heard the song of the bell to indicate the arrival of anyone else either.

I wandered around the store more trying to waste time, so I decided to investigate the coffee machine to see what types of beverages they had to offer. I tapped the buttons and placed a cup in the little holder. It took a few seconds for it to think but it soon began to dispense coffee and milk. I was hesitant to call it a latte, but I didn't really care as long as it did the job. As I grabbed a lid from the little caddy beside the machine, I noticed the man, once more beside me.

"Sorry," I muttered as I scooted out of the way. The man slowly pressed the buttons and held the cup under the spout but the liquid it dispensed was not coffee; it was black and gravy-like. Within seconds the cup overflowed with liquid spilling over onto the man's hand, but he didn't react. He turned to me and said, "Nice weather we're having, eh?" He just stood there, smiling wide-eyed with a toothy grin, unconcerned. His grin turned to a tight-lipped smile and he

brought the cup to his mouth to take a sip. A little liquid escaped him and dripped down the corner of his mouth. His eyes never broke contact with mine until I turned away.

The doorbell sang. I turned around to see Campfire's heavy figure standing by the doors as he entered the station, ticket in hand for the propane. He squinted his eyes and stared at me. I could tell from the expression on his face that he was trying to figure out what was going on.

"Hey, I should get some snacks too!" he said. He walked over to the chip aisle.

"Campfire," I called in a slight whisper.

"Should I get Barbeque, or All Dressed?" he asked in his normal, brash tone.

"Um, I don't know," I said. "Have you seen that man? He's kinda freaking me out."

We looked up. The man moved to the refrigerators, where he stood with the doors wide open. I could feel the chill from here. Campfire watched him. "What's he doing?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "He's been following me around the store this whole time."

Campfire nodded. "You go pay. I'll be right behind you, and we'll head back."

I don't think I had ever seen Campfire act so seriously, but I was thankful that he listened. He took the earbuds that hung out of the neckline of his shirt and put them in his ears. I scavenged for money in my wallet as I walked up to the front counter. All I had to do is pay for my things and wait for Campfire. Five more minutes at most, then we leave.

When I got the cash register the attendant at the cash was no longer there. Instead, it was the man in the camo jacket. "Are you ready to pay?" he asked.

"Uh, yeah? Where's the attendant?"

"I am the attendant," he said.

"Oh, uh yeah obviously." I let out a nervous laugh as he grabbed the bill from my hand. The cash register jingled as he opened it. He took the bill and stretched it taut to smooth out the crinkles then placed it gently into the tray, completing each step with precision. When he finished, he looked back up at me.

"Today is your lucky day. You should buy a scratcher," he said.

I could feel my heart beat faster I turned my head to look to Campfire, but he was completely absorbed in trying to decide on his snack. "Oh, no, I don't think so," I said. "I'm not much of a gambler."

"But today is your lucky day. You should buy a scratcher."

I found it hard to believe that it was my lucky day, but I caved into his demands. "I guess you're right," I said. He smiled brightly and lifted the large plastic case covering the lotto tickets. He pulled one out and gently placed it in front of me. He then grabbed a loonie out of the register and placed it beside the ticket.

It was the standard scratcher. It had five boxes with little icons of money bags peppered on top. The card seemed to yell at me with its big flashy text

“CASH CASH MONEY” and alleging that I could “WIN UP TO 1 MILLION.” I began to scratch away at the film that covered each box, leaving silver shavings all over the counter. The first three boxes revealed a variety of numbers all randomly order, none of them were winners though. I hesitated at the fourth box but I could feel his gaze on me, watching my every movement. It was too late to stop now. At first, the fourth box was the same as the others with a random assortment of numbers but then a letter appeared, then another.

R-T-R-N

I felt a claw grab my wrist. I looked up and the man in the camo jacket still staring at me. “It’s your lucky day,” he repeated. I tried to pull my hand away but the more I struggled the stronger his grip became.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I kept struggling but he kept gripping. I could feel the pressure building up in my arm and my hand was started to go numb. I used my free arm to grab one of the lighters from the little display box and tried to get it to start.

*Click click.*

Nothing. He pulled me in closer, and I could feel the edge of the counter cutting into my abdomen. I tried to use whatever strength I could muster to push myself off the counter, but the bastard hung on.

*Click click.*

Nothing. I tried to turn my head to look to Campfire. “Hey asshole, want to help?” I asked, but I had no way of knowing if he even heard me.

*Click click.*

A light! Like some hickish superhero, Campfire hopped into action and charged at the man body checking him as hard as he could. He might have been built like a plow but the man in the camo jacket’s grip remained. I brought the light to his hand and he lit up like a forest in the dry season. It was in that inferno that he vanished. It was as if he had never existed.

It felt like I was living in double speed, everything around me was dizzying. My heart trembled at the horror I witnessed. My face wet with tears. I didn’t even notice that I had been crying until I had touched my cheeks. I looked to Campfire, desperate for some sort of recognition, some sign of solidarity, any confirmation that I wasn’t going bat shit insane. But Campfire didn’t seem to be fazed by anything. He just stood there like it was no big deal. Like it was just another Friday night.

He stared at the place where the man in the camo jacket once stood. “Well, I’ll tell you this much,” he said. “The boys are not gonna believe this.”

#### IV. THE RETURN

I could tell we were back at Nick’s camp when we pulled up to a stretch of the once empty road that was now full of cars and trucks parked on the shoulders of the road. Campfire pulled into a free spot, grabbed the propane out of the back, and we walked the rest of the way. I could smell the scent of smokey oak from the road. When we got to his camp it was full of familiar faces. The yard was transformed from the state it had been in earlier. Christmas lights had been strung up around the trees and glowed in wonder. A film of orange bathed the

yard with the light of the fire. I figured our arrival would go unnoticed but within seconds we spotted Nick walking towards us with a tipsy assertiveness.

“What took you guys so long? The party started an hour ago,” he asked as I walked past him. I headed towards the cabin and went straight for the fridge, scavenging around containers of hot sauce and condiments for my beer. I could hear his footsteps following me as I entered the cabin and when I turned around and he stood patiently waiting for my explanation.

“Yeah sorry, we kinda got held up,” I said, the beer fizzing as I popped the lid off.

“What did Campfire do? Do I need to kick his ass—”

“No, no, no,” I said. I took a swig and leaned back onto the counter. “It’s not Campfire. I’m fine. Just some weird shit happened, alright?” I looked up to see Campfire’s bald head peeking into the cabin. I lifted my hand in acknowledgment.

“That’s a little vague,” Nick said.

“I don’t really feel like getting into it right now, Nick. Can we just save it for another day?”

“I’m serious, Robyn.” He placed his hand on my shoulder. “I just want to make sure you’re okay. I know that I was being an ass earlier when I made you go with Campfire. You were right, I should’ve just told him to fuck off.”

I smiled and shook my head. It didn’t matter what I said, he was going to laugh and make a big fuss about it either way. Maybe it was that the liquor went to my head way too fast or maybe it was just frustration with Nick’s superiority complex, but I said it. “You know what, Nick? He’s just an excitable guy. And how do you know that his stories are all bullshit? *You* weren’t there.”

Nick let out a cartoonish laugh. “Fuck, I really should’ve listened to you! You’ve spent way too much time with him. You even *sound* like him, fuck.”

I wished I could’ve slapped that expression off his face. I think he was waiting for me to reveal that I was just kidding. That now that I was back, we could all have fun. Instead, I lifted my beer. “Cheers,” I said, before pouring out the contents all over his shoes. He looked like he wanted to say something, but somewhere between his brain and his mouth, the words got jumbled into a mass that wouldn’t come out. When the bottle was empty, I marched out of the cabin.

Campfire leaned against the cabin himself outside. “What’d you do that for?” he asked.

“Don’t worry about it, bud,” I said. “There are better things to do. We’ve already wasted enough time here.”

He looked puzzled. “But what about the propane?” he asked.

“It’s yours now,” I said. “Let’s go back into town. You’re good to drive, right?”

He nodded.

We walked through the crowded yard, parting through the mass of bodies, each indistinguishable from the next. I looked back towards the lake where the light of the fire danced across the shore and the trees. It was then that I swear I spotted something in the bush. The orange glow on the face of the man in the camo jacket as he stared back at me.