

## Off Trail (Fiction)

I emerge from my mother's bedroom lying. She assumes we're driving to the freshly-paved chophouse parking lot to use their relatively low hills for snow sledding. Half of that was true. My friends *are* driving me to *a* parking lot *to* sled, but we have something a little more perilous in mind.

I stare outside my bedroom window tirelessly, my eyes darting towards every beam of light and distant rumble of tires carving through the snowscape. When I finally see Caleb's dark blue 2006 Dodge caravan pull in behind my car, I throw on my gloves and grab my phone before dashing out of the room, almost crashing into my computer chair on the way out. I hurry downstairs, open the storm door, and walk into the flurry coating my small, suburban neighborhood. Night's typical darkness in concert with the snowfall makes either end of the street impossible to see, despite my house being right smack dab in the middle. The only light comes from the dim street lamps attached to the telephone poles, the plow truck occasionally passing by for its run, and Caleb's caravan. He already picked up Dylan, who was sitting shotgun. I hop in the back and immediately notice the distinct silhouettes of their sleds poking up in the trunk. Dylan brought an orange, triangular one (it kinda looks like a dorito chip) and a dish-shaped one while Caleb has a normal, rectangular one. We're all set.

"Dylan, are you just wearing a jacket?" I look at him with a confused glare.

"Yeah? I've been in way colder with way less on. I can also handle temperatures ten degrees colder than the average person," he smugly replied. I shook my head and blinked rapidly, my mouth uttering only quiet grunts.

“Can you close the door now? So that my seats don’t get ruined?” Caleb’s eyes are wide and mouth slightly agape as he looks at me through the rear view mirror. I close the door as I reply, “Calm your ass, bitch. They’ll be fine.”

“Can you not slam the door?!” Caleb’s eyes are wider and there was a subtle, passive-aggressive laugh to his words.

“I’m gonna slam my foot in your ass if you don’t get movin’.” I droop my face and use the outside of my hands to make a waving forward motion. Caleb gets moving. As we approach the parking lot to pole hill park, we take a little detour. Caleb drives off of the asphalt and onto a trail entering the woods just wide enough for his caravan. Civilization begins to shrink as we go further and the woods beset us from all sides. The white against the night exhales a deep blue hue and the snow offers an eerie, uncanny silence as it absorbs the sound that would normally bring the forest to life. This makes it all the more shocking when a loud, low-frequency shriek races through the trees and spears the back of the van off trail, causing the vehicle to slide downhill for a few seconds before it’s side gently collides with a thick tree trunk, immobilizing it. Our eyes are wide with terror and our hearts boxing with our chests; we’re completely out of breath.

“What the fuck was that?! I exclaim.

“Shit, no-no-no-no-no-no-no!” Caleb is trying to start the ignition to no avail. We all climb out to see what happened. On the back left corner of the van is a shattered window and three massive, wicked claw marks indented into the body of the car.

“What the Hell is that? I yell, looking at Caleb to my left, whose lips are quivering and has tears building up in his eyes. I look at Dylan to my right, who already has the trunk open and

the dorito sled in his arms. I look at him and throw my hands up while squinting and shaking my head rapidly.

“I mean, might as well do what we came here to do. Check this out, guys,” Dylan sits down on his sled and kicks forward with his heels, building up momentum as he slides downhill and out of sight, his hollers of excitement growing quieter with each passing second. My eyes are wide enough for a death stare, but there’s no one to glare at. Caleb got back in the driver’s seat and closed the door, attempting to start the van again. I jog over and open the door.

“Bro, what are you doing?” I ask.

“Trying to get my mom’s van out of the snow.” Caleb doesn’t even look at me as he responds.

“We need to *go*. This thing isn’t gonna start. You saw those scratches!” I look up at the dents and gesture my hand towards them. Caleb doesn’t reply to me. I stare at him for a few more seconds with a furrowed brow before slamming the door and beginning to walk downhill. Caleb looks at me and opens the door to speak, “You’re going the wrong way, we came from up there!” He points up towards the trail.

“I’m not hauling my ass back up there and then all the way down the trail. I’m sure there’s gonna be a neighborhood or something at the edge of this forest and it’s *way easier* to go down. I’ll call you when I find someone,” I give my head a slight shake. Caleb just closes his door and goes back to what he’s doing. I roll my eyes and get moving.

## Dylan

The snow kicks up at me as I scream ecstatically down the hill. I had to be going downhill for close to thirty seconds there; *that* was impressive. I give myself a good pat on the

back before standing up off of my dorito. I hear some rustling in the foliage behind me, prompting me to turn around.

“Yo-ho-ho-ho! Did you guys see that insane ride?” I ask them. I still couldn’t see them though, “Guys?” The bushes grow silent for a moment before the ones closer to me begin to shake violently as a deep shriek bellows in my direction. I turn and sprint in the opposite direction, sled still in my arms. I could see my breath bouncing backwards as I ran through it. I take a nanosecond to glimpse behind me and see nothing, but I can still hear the pounding footsteps or whatever they are dashing through the snow. The shriek comes again, this time seemingly from both sides of me, causing me to look in all directions. I feel my leg then caught on the strap of my sled while at the same time I fall into a shallow but steep hole in the ground, my leg bending backwards as it gets stuck. I feel a burning stretch like I’ve never felt before as I screech in anguish. I let out little cries of fear as I attempt to make small movements, but I can’t do anything. I hear the heavy breath of whatever was chasing me approaching, my eyes widening. The breath gets closer and closer and closer and then eventually goes silent. I close my eyes, preparing for an attack. Silence. I open just my left eye, then my right. Nothing was happening. I begin to feel cold.

## Caleb

I can’t believe this shit. I can’t believe that the car just jolted off the trail, I can’t believe that it won’t start, and I can’t believe those two really just dipped. Oh God, what am I gonna do? How am I gonna pay this shit off? Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuuuuuuuck. I exhale. I keep stepping on the gas while turning the key in the ignition and I don’t even hear a pee out of the van. It’s as dead silent as the rest of these miserable woods. I keep pressing. Pressing. Pressing. I begin to hear something coming out of it, just barely. Little groans of misery as the machinery inside

fought to operate. Just as it was doing this, a large, organic spike shot through from under the hood at high velocity. The spike's white pigments and lightish blue accents camouflage with the world around him, and then retracts just as rapidly as it came. I sit there in shock as a small flame ignites in the hood, its ominous orange glow growing more prominent as the car continues to scratch like a record player.

## Alec

After I left the caravan, the only semblance of human civilization in the entire forest, I began to grow doubtful of my intent. Thankfully, I was reassured of my choice when I finally saw a large digging site with a makeshift mining complex in the middle of a massive and mile-deep sand quarry at the edge of woods. I made my way down and I'm on my way to the complex in the hopes that there will still be someone on site who can help me. It's nearly a mile away from all ends of the quarry, sitting dead in the middle, and I am way too tired to run by this point, so I've just been making my leisurely walk towards it. It felt so distant, though, unreachable. Intangible.

Then I heard it. An explosion echoed into the quarry from the forest behind me. I turn and see a ride glow ascending through the leaves of the trees followed by a small, orange mushroom cloud folding in the night sky. My eyes widen and my mouth opens up. I start to sprint towards the complex, yelling for help. My right foot gets stuck for a moment, then my left. I just barely manage to tear them a step forward before they sink even more. My momentum from running makes me unable to stop before the quick sand starts pulling me down, mercilessly, without discretion. I look at the mining complex once more and then back at the fire beginning to rage in the trees and close my eyes as my head sinks under the sand.