

A Sound In The Dark

Drake Harper drove his Ford Escape through the dark roads of the Pinelands. He still had three beers left in his six-pack, within easy reach on the dashboard.

He was beginning to calm down. As soon as he'd arrived home, Bonnie had started with her nagging. She always came home from her shift at the Shop-Rite in a bad mood. He wished she'd get pregnant, but they both knew that wasn't going to happen. They didn't have the money for the expensive in-vitro treatments.

He knew in her heart she blamed him. It wasn't his fault that he had a low sperm count, or that she had fibroids. It's just the way things were.

In the past, their arguments had morphed into brawls that damn near wrecked the little house they lived in off the highway.

One time he'd hit her.

The violence had shocked both of them, him more profoundly than her. That he could lose control like that scared him so much that he immediately left the small house

and went for a drive, his father's words—*You don't never hit a girl*—running through his mind.

He'd be damned if he let it go that far these days. His work with his brother's construction company was good. He showed up most days, and he and Bonnie had even put away a little money. The last thing they needed was to break the furniture throwing things at each other.

He would never lift his hand to her again.

If Bonnie would just shut up, none of this would happen.

He turned onto a one-lane sandy backroad through the State Park. Even going slow, he'd save twenty minutes this way and be on Route 206 in no time. By now Bonnie would have calmed down and might even be feeling in the mood.

He shouldn't have driven so far, but this time he'd needed some beer. He'd had three of them looking over the cranberry bogs near the Ocean Spray factory. It was a first-quarter moon and the light reflecting on the placid waters of the bogs always calmed him.

Since he was only going fifteen miles an hour, he reached up and grabbed another beer from the ring, and with one hand, pulled the tab. The road here was nothing but sugar sand, so fine that it moved and slid as you drove over it. The last thing he needed was to hit an axle-breaking pothole or slide into a ditch.

The only light was the car's headlights. It was easy to stay on the one-lane path as the whiteness of the sand was framed by the dark undergrowth of woods on either side of the road.

He took a sip of beer, just as the car hit an unseen pothole and bounced. It wasn't a bad bounce, but the beer spilled out of the can and onto Drake.

Great! Now he would smell like a brewery, and that would start Bonnie going off again. He hoped that she'd become contrite since he stormed out and be more interested in sex than squabbling.

That was what they did after an argument, like fighting was foreplay. She'd nag, he'd storm out to get a couple of beers to calm down, and then she'd be crying and begging him not to leave her, and they'd do it.

Something hung diagonally across the road ahead, and Drake was roused from his thoughts of getting Bonnie naked.

He pressed on the brake carefully, not wanting to skid in the sand, and the car came gently to a stop.

A thick branch had fallen from one of the pitch pines. It wasn't all that big, and Drake figured he could push it aside by just driving into it, but he didn't want to scratch the car. It was almost twenty years old, yet the thing still ran like a champ.

He opened his door, beer in hand, and stepped out to look at the branch. It wasn't too big for him to lift.

He went to the back and sifted through his toolbox until he found his hatchet. This would take care of the problem, and he'd be on his way in no time.

He put his half-empty beer on the roof of the vehicle, moved into the beam of the headlights, and froze as a piercing scream rang through the woods.

He spun around in alarm, holding the small hatchet like a weapon. It sounded like a cow being slaughtered, only louder, and much closer than he would prefer.

His breathing was ragged in his ears as he scanned the darkness for movement.

There was none.

He proceeded slowly in the blinding light of his headlights and wished he'd turned down the high beams. He looked up at the tree and saw there were three scars down the front and the wood behind it was pale and white, as if these deep scratches were fresh.

He frowned. Someone had done this. These grooves had to be made with an axe, they were too deep to be made by an animal, even a bear. Besides, there weren't a lot of bears in the Pine Barrens. You had to watch out for encroaching coyotes, but they didn't slash trees.

That meant a human did it. But who and *why*? The branch had been cut recently as well. Were some teenagers hiding in the darkness, cutting down branches to screw with motorists?

He shook his head and began to chop at the pale wood. The branch was more attached than he'd assumed and he began to sweat from the effort.

There was another shriek, closer this time.

Drake stopped and listened.

He looked around again, not sure what that damn noise had been. The headlights kept him from seeing anything around his car. It would be damn stupid if the kids that cut down the branch got in his car and drove away after he'd cleared the path.

"Anyone there?" he yelled, the hatchet held high in his hand.

Silence.

The Pinelands were creepy in March. During the summer, there'd be insects, birds, bats, and all kinds of creatures

buzzing about in a reassuring way, but tonight, the silence was eerie.

And after that bizarre scream...

He went back to work and after a few more hits with the hatchet, the branch fell away. He put the tool on the hood of the car, grabbed the branch, and began to pull.

It was heavy, and it took a moment for him to get traction in the sugar sand and slide the chunk of wood to the side of the road. It left a track where it dragged through the sand.

He stepped into the underbrush and his foot sank into something wet.

“Dammit all to Hell,” he muttered. He had stepped right into one of the hundreds of boggy streams that coursed through the Barrens. He took a step back and carefully pulled his boot out. It was lucky that he was still in his work boots that laced up past his ankle. If he’d been in sneakers, it would have been pulled right off his foot. The soft sand made a perfect quicksand in these bogs, and there were numerous stories of hikers getting stuck.

And of people who just vanished.

He returned to the road, shaking his foot to kick off some of the mud. He’d have to leave his work boots outside when he got home, because if he tracked mud on the floor, Bonnie would go off on him again.

He cursed as he retrieved the axe, headed for the driver’s door, and reached to the roof for his beer.

It wasn’t there.

He peered around in the darkness. He looked to see if the can had fallen and wished he’d grabbed his flashlight.

He looked into the woods again to see if, just perhaps, a teenager had indeed cut down the branch, and then stolen his beer. He opened the car door and peered in as the light inside came on.

His two remaining cans sat on the dashboard.

He pulled one free, shut the door, popped the tab with a hiss, and took a swallow.

There was a sound above him like the wings of a large owl. He looked up, hoping the first-quarter moon would give him enough light to see whatever might be flying by.

Remembered tales of the famed Jersey Devil ran through his mind, unbidden. As a young man, like many others, he'd sat around a campfire on a dark night telling and retelling the legends of the cursed creature with a head like a horse and wings like a bat. And claws. The creature had claws that could rip a man apart, and a long tail that could knock you off your feet.

Drake chuckled.

That's what this was. Some teenagers had carved the tree and knocked over that branch to frighten some 'Piney' out of his wits and have him run off with tales about a near-encounter with the monster of legend.

He yelled out. "All right, you brats. You had your fun, good job, had me going. I'm getting out of here and going home."

He turned around and froze.

A massive seven-foot-tall silhouette stood near the front of the car.

Drake's mind whirled, his first thought was that it had to be a bear, up on its back legs and ready to attack, but there

were horns on the shadowy head, like a buck's rack. He fumbled for the hatchet. He put the can on the roof of the car and held up the axe in front of himself with shaking hands.

A three-fingered claw came forward but did not reach for him. Instead, it moved to the beer as Drake trembled.

The clawed fingers wrapped around the can, lifting it to the oversized head. It was *massive*. Shaped like a horse or a large goat, the mouth opened and the thing poured the beer into its gaping maw. In the reflection of the headlights he saw a gleaming row of sharp teeth.

Drake was rooted to the spot, shaking uncontrollably as he stared up at the monster. He needed to take a piss *now*. He attempted to speak, but his voice quavered.

"Y-you like beer?" he asked as his heart beat double time in his chest. "I g-got another, in th-the car."

The creature had finished its drink and peered at the empty can, the red color of its eyes seeming to glow from within.

The creature threw the can into the woods.

Holding the hatchet in front of him, Drake moved to the door. If he could get out the last beer and distract this thing, he'd be able to get back into the car and get the hell out of there.

He gently pulled the door open. The car light reflected on the face of the creature as it growled and moved closer to Drake. Drake groped for the final can of beer, trying to keep the hatchet between him and the beast.

"Easy, easy," he soothed. The light from the car only gave Drake a better view of what stood before him. It had a long neck like a horse, and the two arms that bent backwards, moving like knees instead of elbows. The three-fingered hands

resembled the talons of a huge bird. Shaggy brown fur covered the thing's body, and a large tail waved behind it in the darkness.

It growled again, drooling from the equine snout, as Drake fumbled for the can without taking his eyes off the monstrosity that stood before him.

He slowly extracted the plastic holder with one beer can hanging off it. He left the car door ajar. The monster's flaming eyes moved from Drake to the can.

This calmed Drake a bit. "You want this, d-don't you?"

The creature turned to him and growled again.

"It's okay...it's for you," he said as gently as he could. He pulled the can from the ring and popped the tab. It hissed as it opened, and the creature shied back from the noise.

Drake put the can on top of his car.

If I get out of this, I will have the greatest story ever.

Drake held the hatchet with both hands as he carefully took a step back from the monster, whose attention was now riveted on the can on top of the car.

It stepped forward and leaned against the driver's door, shutting it with a 'click' and blocking it with its massive frame. With its talon, the creature grabbed the can, gave a fiery glare at Drake, and brought the cylinder to its mouth.

As the driver's door was now blocked, Drake decided he only had one chance: the passenger door. He could get in there and shut himself safely in the car. When the creature's head leaned back to drink the foamy liquid, he ducked, dashed behind the tailgate, and rushed to the door on the far side of the car. He yanked it open and the light came on inside the car as he dove in.

A sharp pain tore through his left leg as he lunged into the vehicle, and Drake cried out. The monster, with shocking speed, had come around the car and grabbed his leg with one of those clawed hands.

The creature gave another screech, louder than the last one, which echoed through the woods. Drake kicked out with his right leg to get free and felt he may have actually struck the creature in the chest, but that didn't even slow it down as it yanked Drake bodily from the car.

Drake fell to the ground, sand and debris blowing into his eyes. The creature pulled him up into the air like a rag doll. His hands flopped uselessly, and the axe fell from his fingers.

Drake looked down to see his car below him, the headlights still on and the passenger door wide open. Above him, the huge bat wings flapped and hauled the pair of them into the dark sky.

The car grew smaller and Drake lost control of his bladder, the warm pee traveling up his chest as he screamed in terror.