

Friends for life

Danica Hehre

Prologue

The forest was burning. Great heaping clouds of ash billowing out and smothering the home-giving boobabs scattered across the forest. It wasn't my fault. It wasn't. I wasn't there when it happened, the match wasn't mine. I'd always assumed no one would set the forest on fire, not on purpose anyway. Especially since the summer's been warmer than usual. Assume is a very powerful word. It can make you lose something you need, or forget something important, and, when said to someone else, it can make them seem....well, it can make them seem like the person I seem like now, uncaring, cruel. Despite the fact that I don't remember giving anyone a match, and I don't believe I would have, it isn't cold enough for a fire, and it certainly isn't now. I huddled closer into the wet rock, listening to the sizzling and crackling of age-old trees. I swallowed, guilt seeping in despite the fact that I had nothing to do with it. Maybe if I could crouch in enough, I would be safe, maybe not, maybe dying in my sleep is a better alternative to living with those people. The people who don't like me, who look at me weird and think I don't notice, who think I have no idea about the thoughts they direct at me. Friends, I have learned, pretend to have your back just to stab it.

I couldn't breathe from the smoke, from the fiery burn travelling through my whole body. What was really the point in breathing anyway? I crouched closer in, fighting the temptation to step outside, and pretend, just for a minute, that everything was as it should be. That the oaks were standing tall in their splendour. And the clovers were growing thick around the stumps. The streams were burbling past, and the birds and the little critters were skittering about through the thick lush undergrowth. But, when you look at logically, a minute is all I would have. I knew that when I died of old age there would be a small unmarked grave waiting

for me somewhere way out of town, where no one would remember me.

True, I haven't been the nicest person, sorry. But I've never felt obligated to be nice to people who don't understand me, who don't want to understand anyone not like themselves. I crawled closer to the inferno, watching the illusions of beautiful forest life suffer and burn to a crisp. I knew, in some vague, disconnected way, that the forest would grow back. But I had to push myself to believe it, so I let it slip away. I heard a whimper pierce through the crackling fire, I looked around but saw nothing. Shadows danced and distorted, I saw my own shadow fall across the tree canopy. Wait...that wasn't my shadow, but it was certainly human. I lifted my head and saw a human figure sheltering under a bush, half ashes now. I crawled slowly out from underneath my rock ledge, gazing up at the blackened trees in despair. I heard branches cracking overhead, about to fall on the human. The blaze would swallow him up. I blinked back tears, telling myself it was just the smoke, I jump through the once beautiful tree canopy, and pushed the person away, away, away. Away from the mess I'd made. I scabbled at the ground, trying to move, the branch cracked once more, and I felt the sudden rush of adrenaline and blood as I tried to, couldn't, and maybe, I thought, I didn't want to anyway.

Chapter one three years later

“And how would you describe this experience from one to-“

“Ten out of ten doctor, ten out of ten,” I deadpanned, nervously clenching my hand in and out. Three years later and therapy was still going, sure life's traumatic, but not this bad. I couldn't think of anything else to say, other than to tell him I wish he would just SAY SOMETHING DIFFERENT ALREADY. It's not that hard, other than the survey, the only think I know about my therapist is that his name is Dr Smith. I wonder how many times people ask about Lost in Space. Whatever, it's not my problem. I got up from the itchy

chair, slung my backpack over my shoulder and headed towards the door.

“Wait Mr Montgomery,” Smith got up to block my path. “Where are you going?”

“Places.” School wasn’t on today, Saturday was just two days away, if I could make through the rest of therapy. I smirked, I was going to need therapy for therapy. Dr Smith opened his mouth to object, but I shouldered past him and yanked at the doorknob. It was locked, of course it was. I turned in a slow circle to face the good doctor.

“I’d like to know which places,” he insisted. A cold chill creeped up the back of my neck.

“Home, where else?” I lied, tugging at the clear plastic tube hanging off my backpack. The door clicked behind me and I raced outside, maybe it’s silly to be afraid of my own therapist. Whatever. I caught a cab back to my house, dropped the bag on the front stoop and took off at a run. No one would want to see me inside, I didn’t care and I didn’t want to see them either.

As I raced through the back alleys, over fences, crates, small sheds. The burn scars on my shoulder blades and legs burned, and reminded me of the fire in the forest three years ago. Finally, I came to the forest, half of the burned or diseased trees had been chopped down for palm oil plantations. I stared, but didn’t walk in. Flashing intense images chasing through the forest, my brain weaving illusions of the burning tree trunks, crouching down to escape the inferno, the fire singing my hair and burning away at my body. I didn’t see him die, the man who saved me. I fled in fear as far away as I could until the taste of ash had faded on my tongue, until I’d collapsed in burning white-hot pain to the ground, and waited, waited, waited. Waited for the tears and the fear to leave. I don’t know where I landed, somewhere in a back alley at the forgotten end of the street. I dragged myself to the hospital. I learned, two days later, that I was the cause of someone’s death. Not that relations between me and my family have ever been good, but I became the nightmare child, the demon-spawn. They

didn't realise that the only reason I was even in the forest that day was because of them.

I gritted my teeth, watching the burnt husks of trees. I heard a moan inside and found myself running, running toward it. I couldn't explain it, I just felt myself pulled toward the shriek of pain. I made it to the clearing where I'd heard it, no one was there. Maybe I'd imagined it, maybe I really was crazy, maybe....I shook my head, feeling a deep intense urge to leave, to leave and never come back. The bushes rustled, and inside I could see a pair of obsidian eyes, eyes the colour of midnight. I backed away. But they followed me, I could feel them imprinted in the back of my eyelids. I stumbled and tripped, cowering in terror. I closed my eyes and, nothing. Well, definitely not nothing. Out stepped a gorilla, clear as day. I quailed, remembered that gorillas really hate humans, and actually, so do I.

"Hey?" I said tentatively reaching out a hand. I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping my death would be quick and painless. But death never came. Instead the gorilla let out a moan and stared mournfully at the forest. The gorilla looked into my eyes and slung his arm around me. I couldn't think, I couldn't feel, I was trapped back when the forest was burning, smoke clogging everything, and I thought that maybe, with everything that had happened in my life, maybe this wasn't the weirdest, or the worst.