

## **Yellmans Pass**

**By Dale Dishman**

The forest grew quiet as he stomped his way up the trail, his girlfriend taking her sweet time behind him. He'd made her go on this hike, wanting her to love the woods the way he does, but all she did was complain.

"It's so hot and muggy in here," she'd say, like it wasn't that way every summer in Southern Alabama.

"I'm tired. How much longer do we have?" she'd ask, sounding more like a child than a grown-ass woman.

He regretted taking her out here. He should have just left her at home to do whatever it was she did all day while he went by himself. He wished she felt the peace in the forest like he did. Maybe then, she'd stop complaining.

The sandy, red pathway they followed was marked at regular intervals by crushed beer cans nailed eye-level onto trees. It was framed by a bright-green canopy of leaves and vines that blocked the sunshine from reaching the ground, forming a dark tunnel that funneled them further into the woods. The trail weaved around like a river cutting through the forest.

"Can we stop for a minute?" she asked, already stopping, not really caring what his answer would have been.

She plopped herself down on a fallen log and took out a bottle of water from her backpack. He stood nearby, watching the water dribble down her chin and down onto her shirt as she drank. The water stain not noticeable amongst the large sweat marks already there.

“Did you notice the little yellow flowers over there?” he asked, hoping it’d brighten her mood a little.

“Oh, those... aren’t those weeds?” she replied, crinkling up her nose.

“I don’t know. I just thought they were pretty. Sorry,” he snapped.

She stared back at him with a look that made him shrink back a little. For someone so beautiful, she could look downright scary.

“Can we just go back now? I don’t want to be here,” she said as her look pierced his soul.

He closed his eyes and sighed. She always had to do this. Hate on everything he liked to do. Ruin it. He met her on a hiking trail just like this for fuck’s sake. She could finish this hike and then when they got back, maybe he’d tell her to just take a hike from his house.

He steadied his stare back at her and replied, “It’s the same distance to the finish as it would be to backtrack, get your fat ass up and let’s just get this done with.”

“You’re a dick. Why do you love these woods so fucking much anyway?” she spat at him.

“Because it’s fucking peaceful out here! Or it is when there’s not someone nagging and complaining 24/7!” he yelled back.

“Ha! Peaceful. These woods aren’t peaceful. These woods eat people like you alive.” She smiled in a way he’d never seen as she stood up from the fallen log.

“You’re stupid and fucking crazy! Would you finally be happy if I were gone? You fucking would, wouldn’t you? Hey, trees! Make her happy, come eat me. Come fucking eat me!” he shouted into the woods.

The forest seemed to take a breath. The canopy overhead grew darker and the wind picked up. His instincts began to shout and then scream as black vines emerged from the ground

and wrapped around his feet. He yelled for her to help him, but she remained frozen in place, eyes wide, as the vines snaked toward her, too.

His heart hammered in his chest as he fought to get out of the vines' grasp. His fingers faltered as he worked to get his boot laces off the hooks and loosen them enough to pull his feet out. As he finally pulled his feet free, he glanced up at her and saw a large looming dark shape approaching.

"Move!" he shouted as he jumped clear of his boots wrapped in the vines and grabbed her.

The darkness and the forest closed in around them as he pulled her down the trail. He willed her to run faster, but it was like she was dead weight. He could feel new vines trying to grab his feet as he jerked her with him. He was panicking now. This can't happen. The woods can't just come alive, right? They were peaceful. Safe. Not this.

A vine grabbed his leg and he fell face first into the dirt, the girl tumbling on top of him. He began to scream and writher as the vines encased his body. He felt her weight come off of him as a mass of black tendrils took her place, encircling him until just his head remained showing.

"Help! What the fuck! Help!" he cried as the vines lifted him off the ground and brought him eye-level with an image from a nightmare. It was both a tree and a man. It had dark-black, bark-like skin with lumpy knobs all over. It smelled of rot and terror. Its eyes glowed a dark red color and it had long yellow sharp pointed teeth that dripped a foamy liquid. It stood around seven feet tall and the black vines that held the man sprouted from the bottom of the creature, like a mass of tentacles.

He felt the warmth of his piss as it spread down his legs. He was going to die here. No, *they* were going to die here. Wait— where was she? Oh, God, he thought, what happened to her?

“Where is she?” he managed to spit at the creature.

It smiled and moved him just far enough to the side to see her just standing alone behind the creature. His eyes grew wide as he beheld her face. She wasn’t scared or shocked, but rather she gave him that look he’d come to know.

“You just had to go ahead and ruin things, didn’t you?” she asked him as she stepped closer.

“What the fuck are you talking about? What is happening?” he replied, looking at the creature again, and then her, seeing her eyes begin to grow red.

“I told you these woods would eat you alive,” she gestured towards the creature.

The creature lifted the man to his open mouth.

“Wait! No, stop it! Please, stop— I’ll do anything!” he screamed as his head entered its foul-smelling mouth.

The vines holding him went still as she peeked around at him, seeing how precariously close he was to the large yellow teeth.

“Do you want to know a secret? You taste best when you’re scared,” she said and the creature crunched down on his head.

Blood splattered on her face as the creature chewed through the man’s neck. The vines began to tear his limbs from his body and red dirt on the path below turned scarlet as more blood pooled on the ground. The air was filled with the gnashing of his bones as the creature consumed the rest of his body and only when it was done, did the forest begin to lighten and finally breathe out.

The creature began to writher and shake, transforming into the shape of a man. He had dark black hair, pale white skin, and his red eyes lit up when his gaze fell upon her, standing nearby. She looked so beautiful he couldn't stop himself from taking her into his arms and kissing her deeply.

“You beautiful demon,” he breathed. “You brought me a snack.”

“I'm sorry I didn't get him out here sooner,” she smiled up at him. “I was rather enjoying pretending to be one of them for a little bit. Did you know they don't eat each other, like at all?”

“Their loss. Will this one be missed?” he asked.

“I'm sure they'll do the whole search team thing eventually, not like they'll find anything,” she laughed and then kissed him again.

He took her hand in his and they set off down the red pathway towards home.