



After Dark
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Nighttime is never a good time to jog in Quincy Park. It's dark and the paths are unlit. The main trail curves in towards the center of the park, far from the road. If a jogger twisted an ankle out there, it could be morning before help arrived. And there are other dangers.

Maybe it was the full moon or the recent warm spell that made her want to get out of her apartment and enjoy a little fresh air and exercise. Maybe she just wanted some time to herself. Whatever her reason, it was a bad decision. I smelled her perfume before I saw her come around the bend in the trail. She was a graceful runner, slim and attractive. I watched her from a distance as she made a right turn down the trail by the creek, her ponytail bobbing behind her. She didn't see me. People rarely do.

But they saw her. Three of them, half-drunk and unafraid. They called out something to her from the gloom by the side of the trail. She ignored it, but I could hear her pace quicken. Fear. A faint whiff was all, but I knew what it was. They would sense it too, and it was the only excuse they needed.

The men were faster than I expected, lean and strong. The jogger glanced quickly over her shoulder, and took off at a full sprint. Instinct. Fight or flight. She ran down the trail, ducking branches and dodging the pot holes in the neglected pavement. She glanced back for an instant. The three men were still chasing her. She tried to run faster, but she was starting to tire. I could smell her body become hot and flushed, and her sweat became acrid. The gang was closer now, and closing in. The girl made a gasping noise, trying to scream but having no wind for it. She didn't look back, but she must have heard the tall one right behind her. He was almost on her now. The other two were not far behind.

She began to slow down. I could hear the loose clop clop sound of her shoes hitting the pavement. The tall one reached out and grabbed her by the arm. She gasped out "No!" but he jerked hard and spun her around to face him. "Hey hey, where are you off to?" he said. He wasn't even out of breath. The jogger's reply was in her other hand. She brought it up quickly and let loose with a load of some spray in the guy's face. "Ow, you bitch! You fucking bitch!" He wasn't expecting that, and the kick in the crotch looked like a surprise also.

She might have gotten away, except for the other two. By now they were on her, sizing her up, trying to decide how to take her. Finally, the bigger one just lunged at her. She tried the pepper spray again, but his

momentum carried him through it and into her. They struggled for a moment as he tried to catch her arms and pin her to the ground. She bucked and twisted, trying to bounce him off of her. She stopped when she saw the knife.

Number Two held the knife in his hand and waved it in the girl's face. The blade seemed to glow in the moonlight. "Do you understand what this means?" he asked the girl. She had started to cry. She looked up at the two of them and nodded. "OK, you just do what we say, and you won't get hurt." The big one slowly eased off her while Number Two kept the knife pressed to her face. "Get up," he said. She stood up slowly. She looked wobbly from having been tackled and was sobbing softly.

"Where's Hector?" the big one asked.

"I'm right here goddammit," Hector answered. He had red, swollen eyes and was breathing heavily. Mucus was dripping from his nose.

"Where's she at?" he called out.

"Relax man," Number Two said. "She's right here, she's not going anywhere." Number Two and the big one were on either side of her, holding her arms. Hector walked over to her with some difficulty.

"You little bitch," he said. "Just for that, I'm gonna make it hurt." He slapped her, hard.

"Easy, easy," the big one said. "We've got time." The girl was hanging her head low, her sobs barely audible. Number Two seemed to be in charge.

"Let's go. Move her back into the woods, away from the trail." He motioned to Hector to switch places with him. "Don't let go this time," he said in a mocking tone. "Man, fuck you!" Hector answered.

Number Two and the big one laughed. The girl resisted some as they led her off through an opening in the brush. Number Two rubbed the knife blade slowly across her breasts. She got the message.

I moved forward slowly, staying low to the ground. They were headed towards the creek. The air was heavy and damp there, and sounds were muffled. They marched her to a small clearing near the bank. It was entirely shielded by sapling trees and tall grass. "That's far enough," Number Two said.

Hector looked up at the moon and then tried hard to peer through the trees. "Man, this place is fucking perfect."

"Put her on the ground," Number Two directed. She tried to kneel, but Hector and the big one pulled her down backwards, her arms held out wide. She was lying flat on her back now, looking up at Number

Two as he stood next to her feet. Hector and the big one adjusted themselves, pinning her arms to the ground. Number Two crouched down, the knife in his hand. He waved it in her face.

"Do it man," Hector said. The big one let out a low laugh. Number Two raised the knife. I could see the blade in the bright moonlight. He slowly brought it down and moved his arm forward. I watched her body grow taut as the blade rasped on the fabric of her sports bra.

"Yeah," Hector said loudly. "Do it!"

"Man, shut up," Number Two said. "Someone might hear you."

A twig snapped in the darkness. Number Two looked up and stared hard at the trees by the creek. He didn't see anything. He shook his head and looked back at the girl lying limply below him. He scooted backwards a little bit, and reached out one hand to her waist. He was still holding the knife up so she could see it.

I couldn't control it any longer. The sound seemed to come from someplace deep inside of me. A low, almost quiet, growl. I felt my eyes narrow and the hair on my neck stand stiff and straight.

"Man, what the fuck is that?" Number Two said with an irritated look around. "Go check it out." He motioned to Hector with the knife and pointed vaguely in my direction. Hector stood up, and Number Two took his place at the girl's arm. The big one reached over and clamped his large hand over her mouth.

Hector stumbled through the grass towards the edge of the woods. He was silhouetted by the moon and I watched him as he made his way across the clearing. He stopped and I could see him straining hard to look into the woods. I leaned against a small tree, and it rustled gently. "Who's there?" Hector called out in a loud whisper. Nothing. I reached out and clawed a fallen log. Hector heard it. "Man, this ain't fucking funny! Who's there?" He reached in his pocket and pulled something out. I heard the distinctive click of a switchblade locking in place. Hector moved closer. "I'm not messing around with you. Who's there?"

I was crouched low, my muscles taut. I fought hard to control myself, to keep quiet. Hector looked hard at the brush, trying to make out my shape in the dark. I could smell it now. Fear. "Man, this is bullshit," Hector said finally, and turned to walk back to the others.

I leapt out. He was so close that I was on him before he could even turn around. I hit him low and hard, knocking his legs out from under him. He fell heavily on his back, dropping his knife somewhere in the grass. His face was wide eyed and his mouth was open. "N-n-no! Get the fuck away from me," he yelled out as he tried to back away. I sprang

and sank my fangs into his throat. He tried to push me off, but it was too late. I dragged him for a few feet closer to the woods, then shook my head violently from side to side. I felt his spine snap with a satisfying crunch and dropped him in the damp grass.

I turned to face the others. They had heard the commotion and had stood up. They were coming my way, moving quickly across the clearing. The moon was high and full and I could see both of them, fanning out, coming fast to find me. I looked up and howled with excitement. I could still taste the kill in my mouth and the scent filled my nostrils. My brain was full of the red fog. The hunt was on.

The big one saw me first. He had picked up a tree limb along the way and was holding it like a baseball bat. "Jesus, look at the size of that sonofabitch," he said half to himself. I circled slowly, cautiously.

"Just keep him busy man, don't let him get behind you," Number Two said. "I'm going to get a rock or something."

I was watching both of them. A low and menacing growl came from deep inside me. My ears were flat against my head, and my hair was erect. Number Two was slowly backing away, being careful to keep his eyes on me.

"Man fuck a rock, shoot him," the big one said. I could smell his fear. I crouched low, then charged.

He swung the branch in a wide arc and it connected solidly against my left shoulder. Pain exploded along my arm as the momentum from his swing carried me off to one side. I turned around to face him, nursing my shoulder.

The big one was pleased with himself. "Well motherfucker, what do you think about that?" he said with menace. I looked at him then glanced back at the clearing. Number Two was back with the girl now. He had forced her to her feet, was pushing her in front of him. "I'm talking to you, motherfucker," the big one continued. I lifted my arm painfully. The movement made me wince.

"Not so bad now, are you motherfucker?" He moved closer and I could smell his sweat and adrenaline. He started to bring back his bat. He looked like he was going to enjoy this. I looked directly in his eyes. Then I stood up.

The big one froze, looking up at me. His mouth moved, but no noise came out. I snarled and slapped the branch from his hand. He tried to turn, but my claws had already found his soft belly. With a roar, I slashed down and across his torso. His guts spilled onto the ground in front of him. I left his crumpled body and ran after Number Two.

He and the girl were making their way through the brush and back to the trail. I could hear his curses as the saplings snapped across his face. I fell back and entered into the woods. It was easier that way. I moved quickly and easily between the trees, savoring the moist earth beneath my feet and the breeze against my skin. They were still coming through the brush when I made it to the trail. I eased into the shadows and waited.

He broke into the open about 25 yards from me. The girl wasn't with him. I watched him as he looked up and down the trail, trying to make up a plan. Not far from us, the trail met up with the bike path. If he got to the bike path, he had a chance to get to the road that circled the park. Sometimes the police patrolled there. He looked up and down the trail again, and took off for the bike path.

I sniffed the ground for a moment, savoring the moist smell and the surge of the kill. I smelled him, faintly now. I trotted over to where he had come through the brush. Cautiously I smelled for the girl. It was a strong scent, and I picked it up easily. I made my way slowly through the brush, careful not to show myself. I paused, and could hear her gentle sobbing.

She was crouched down by some bushes and was holding her arm across her body. She had been hit with something in the face, and I could smell the blood. Clouds had darkened the moon, and I approached to just outside her vision.

"Who's there?" she cried out.

She leaned back into the bush and grabbed for a rock or stick with her good arm. I watched her silently for a few moments. She was a survivor like me.

I was turning to go when the moon pierced through the clouds, illuminating me in the silvery light. I looked at her face for just a moment. Horror. Fear. I vanished into the woods.

Number Two was now quite a distance away. I picked up his scent at the trail. He was following the bike path, headed for the road. I set off after him, excitement causing me to yelp unexpectedly.

I ran hard, the thrill of the chase pushing me forward. I smelled his fear before I saw him. I slowed and moved cautiously. I drew low to the ground, and approached him from the rear. He was too tired to run anymore and had his back against a tree. In the dark, I could hear his labored breathing and the raspy sound as he swallowed. The smell was of urine and sweat and metal. My eyes narrowed. Urine was good. He had pissed himself. Metal meant he had a gun. I growled.

I heard the hammer cock back and jerked when the first shot went off.

It missed wildly. He was shooting into the dark, trying to frighten me off. He probably still thought I was a mad dog. I listened for a moment for the sound of the hammer being pulled back. I could hear a siren in the distance. The girl must have found someone and called the police. I had time. The sound was still too distant for Number Two to even hear.

Bam! Another shot. Still too high. I crawled lowly and slowly over to one side. The guy was panting and muttering to himself. It sounded like a prayer. My lips curled back, and I let out a low growl. He rustled against the tree, but couldn't tell where the sound came from. Bam! Missed.

"Who's out there?" he called out. "What do you want?" I waited. The sirens were louder now. He heard them too. "You hear that?" he said. "You hear that? The police are coming." I heard it. The police were better shots than Number Two. I was running out of time.

I looked to my left. There was an opening in the trees that I could get to, but I would have to run in front of Number Two to do it. Bam! Close this time. He must have seen my movement. Without pausing to think I sprinted across the trail for the opening. Bam! Bam!

I felt the tingle starting in the small of my back. Damn! Number Two let out a triumphant yell. "Got you, you sonofabitch," he shouted. "I got you!" I pushed as hard as I could for the safety of the forest. In the distance I could hear the voices of the police.

I circled around behind Number Two. The police voices were closer now. "Hey, over here," Number Two started to shout. "Over here!" I made my way to Number Two's tree. The pain had moved from my back into my stomach now. I stood up with some difficulty. My vision was starting to blur. I stumbled forward, just as Number Two looked around the tree behind him. He would have screamed, but I tore out his throat.

The pain was intense now, and I began to feel nauseous. I turned away from the tree, and half-ran, half-stumbled into the woods. I could hear the police behind me. They had found Number Two. I pushed harder, deeper into the safety of the woods, but the pain was too much. I fell to the ground, and the world went black.

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