

## The Woods

The trees, slender and gray, rising out of the darkness. The endless rush of water in the nearby stream. A great nest of grasping arms, clutching each other like desperate lovers. There's a feeling in these woods of being free; of being far away from the rest of civilization. But, if this was an escape, it was one you might never return from because the woods would never allow it. You would be trapped. There are beautiful trails here, littered with lush foliage and wildflowers, but there are some paths that nobody travels. There are little ravines, little but deep, that lead to places nobody sees. If you were to hurt yourself no one would ever know you were lost. No one would ever find you. You would be trapped.

Tony Dalton stood at the top of the reservoir and looked down, following the gentle falls into the tangled mess of woods below. It was like looking into a trap; having the benefit of seeing the trap before falling into it, which is why Tony was having second thoughts about walking into it anyway. He just kept thinking about those kids and reminding himself why he was doing this. He closed his eyes, shook his head and, with a deep breath, started down into the forest.

He went with slow and calculated steps as he lowered himself down the hillside; moving from rock to rock to steady himself. The ground between was coated with mud and slick leaves and there was little else to grab onto in the event of a slip. More than anything, he knew it would be a long way for someone to fall, so he couldn't afford to take any chances rushing. About halfway down, his left foot lost traction and flew out from under him. Although he fortunately managed to fall back against the incline instead forward, his pack of cigarettes dropped out of his coat pocket and disappeared into the dark thicket beneath.

He was finding it hard to deal with his frustration so he just rubbed his face and balled his fists. He was going to need those cigarettes to get through this case but losing them wasn't the only thing that had gotten to him now. For the first time he was seriously wondering why he was even doing this. After all, what did he really expect to find? He rested for a moment, looking over the gray expanse and the steep drop that still separated him from the stream below. He squinted as a ray of sunlight poked suddenly through the trees and washed over his eyes.

"They're dead," he muttered to himself. "This place is a death trap." It would be easy enough for anyone to slip and break their neck there. The thing that puzzled him was, there were no bodies. They had already brought a search team down there once, combed the area and found nothing. But this feeling kept bringing Tony back to the woods. He couldn't shake the notion that there was still something the others were missing. "They're here," he said aloud, nodding his head and looking back up the way he came. "They're here, but they're already dead."