

Ben's parents had never let him do anything fun. Not that there was much to do in southern Minnesota, in the small town of New Ulm. But this time was different. Ben's best friend Tony Grant had a lake house way north at the North Shore, about 2 miles inland from Lake Superior. Tony and Ben had got their parents to let Ben come along this fall after several weeks of persuasion. His parents were not mean, but they just did not give Ben as much freedom as he would like. They finally agreed to let him go on the trip for the week. So here he was, on his way to the lake house.

The truck had barely stopped moving when the backseat door opened and Tony and Ben jumped out. Tony's older sister Clare and his little brother Colin followed soon after. They all started for the house. When Tony had shown Ben the room he'd be in and they had put away all their stuff they went outside onto the veranda. There was a patio table with a folded-up shade umbrella over it that probably wasn't used much in the cold Minnesota weather. The lake was about thirty yards away with a dock and a shed where the boats were kept. Tony kept walking, into the thick evergreen forest that surrounded the lake. Ben followed, wondering where Tony was going.

When Ben caught up to Tony the trees were so thick it might've been nighttime. It was only five o'clock, but the night would fall soon. Tony looked over his shoulder at Ben.

"It's only about half a mile up this trail," he said.

"What is?" Ben was dying to know.

"You'll see..."

Now they were going uphill. A tiny trail that was covered with gnarled roots wound its way up and up until it took a turn and Ben couldn't see any further. The trees were still too thick, even above the trail, to see anything ahead of them. The older trees rose up and up, blocking out most of the cloudy sky.

Now Tony and Ben had been walking some time and Ben wondered just how high up they were. The trail was anything but a steady incline, making it impossible to guess. They had to be up quite a ways. For the most part, they had been silent on their hike, focused on making it up the difficult terrain. Now Tony stopped and turned around.

“It’s just up this rock,” he said. Ben could see it now, up over the rock that was now sitting in front of them: A tiny bit of a clearing from the trees. But the rock was about four feet taller than him and he couldn’t see much past it. Tony went first, struggling a little bit to find a foothold, but he was up and over the rock. Now that Ben was closer he could see that the rock was actually a big slab of rock that sat on the side of the slope. He climbed up after Tony and followed him to the edge.

The view from the rock was definitely worth the hike. Ben could see now that they had climbed very far up and the view was amazing. There was a valley they were right over, a swampy area with a lake and some mossy green patches by the edge of the water. From this altitude, there were some patches of fog that partially obscured the ground far below. Past that was a small mountain range that was starting to get snow at the tops. Ben could see a boardwalk that cut through the marsh below, but it only went about halfway before circling back.

“This is all ours,” Tony said. “My grandparents bought it a while ago and my family’s been sharing it ever since. I’m not exactly sure, but I think the property goes until that ridge over there,” he went on, gesturing at the peaks opposite them.

“Wow.” It was all Ben had to say.

“Dad said he’ll take us out hunting at some point, if you want to,” Tony said.

“Sounds awesome,” Ben replied.

The boys sat by the edge a while, talking and throwing rocks over the cliff. Eventually Tony got up and said,

“We should probably head back now, it’ll be pitch black by the time we get back to the house,” with a nervous glance upward.

The sky had already taken a darker shade of gray, and the wind blasting the ridge was like needles against Ben’s face. He was wearing a sweatshirt, but the cold penetrated through the fabric easily. It was definitely time to go back.

Tony went first, down the rock and back into the trees. Ben followed and instantly realized just how dark the forest was. The light from above the trees seemed to dwindle with every step, as they walked further into the woods. Eventually, the dark was so total that Ben

could just barely make out Tony's gray sweatshirt ahead of him. Suddenly, a bright beam of light erupted out ahead of them. Tony turned around and the flashlight shone in Ben's eyes.

"Hey, point that somewhere else!" Ben said, with just an edge of relief in his voice.

Tony pointed the flashlight at the ground between them.

"Lucky I thought to take this," he said, "I didn't think we'd be out this late."

"Yeah. Are you sure this is the right way?"

"Oh, come on man," Tony said with a short laugh. "We're not gonna get lost out here, we just have to follow the trail."

"I don't know, Tony. There were a couple forks back there, are you sure we took the right one?"

"Don't be such a wimp, Ben. We'll be back before you know it." Tony turned around and kept walking, pointing the flashlight ahead at the trail.

After that, the boys were mostly silent as they made their way down the steep terrain. Ben couldn't see much, other than whatever Tony pointed the flashlight at. Ben looked up at the cloudy sky and knew that the moon wouldn't be giving them much help.

The trail took turn after turn and Ben was still very uncertain about Tony's knowledge of the trails. He wished he had brought his phone on the hike, but it probably wouldn't have done him any good. Reception out here in the wilderness must be next to zero, he reasoned. Tony probably had his, but they wouldn't be able to call home on it anyway.

Ben was startled from his thoughts by Tony's shout from ahead on the trail. He looked up and the first thing he noticed was that the light had gone. He squinted, trying to see, but Tony was nowhere in sight. Frantically Ben spun around, suddenly very alone in the woods. Suddenly the flashlight clicked back on, this time off to the side of the trail. Now Ben could see that there was a sharp drop-off on the right side, and the beam was shining up through the branches at the ledge.

"Hey! Ben! You up there?"

"Yeah, I'm here." Ben hurried to the ledge. "Are you OK?"

Tony was scratching his head at the foot of the ditch.

"I'm fine, just bruised my shin a little."

“What happened?”

“I wasn’t really paying attention to where I was walking, and I stepped on the ledge and it caved. I don’t really know how I’m going to get back up to the trail, that ledge is pretty steep.”

It was true, the ditch was almost ninety degrees steep, and from the light of the flashlight, Ben could tell there was hardly anything to hold on to. Ben started to panic.

“What should I do? Go get help?”

“No, no, you’ll never be able to find your way back to the house. Just stay here and I’ll try and find a way up.”

Tony experimentally tested his weight on a root that jutted out of the side of the ravine.

“Try and find something to pull me up. I don’t think there’s any way I can climb up myself.”

Tony tossed up the flashlight to Ben. Ben looked around on the sides of the trail and eventually found a branch that could probably support Tony. He walked back over to the ditch and handed the other end to Tony. Ben stood by the edge and started to pull up as Tony half-walked up the ditch. He had almost made it when Ben dropped the flashlight and it landed face down in the ditch. After that, everything else went wrong. Ben swiped for the flashlight on the way down and lost his balance. Tony stumbled back from the lack of support and they both landed at the bottom of the ditch.

Ben was the first to get up. “Crap,” was all he said. He picked up the flashlight and looked around. They were surrounded on three sides by walls of dirt and were ankle-deep in water, which seemed to have a steady flow through the ditch. It continued to follow the trail for maybe fifty feet, but then curved away from the trail in the opposite direction.

Tony got up. “Doesn’t look like we have much choice but to follow the ditch, I guess.”

The boys made slow progress through the water, which by the looks of it probably filled the ravine at one point in the spring. Ben noticed Tony’s slight limp from the fall, and for a second considered finding some kind of shelter for the night. But it was a ridiculous idea. The night was frigid and would only get worse as the hours went by. It didn’t look like there would be anywhere to go, either. The thin pine trees offered little shelter and were nonexistent in the ditch, anyway.

After walking for about half an hour, the ditch opened up into the marsh. Ben shined the flashlight across the swamp, and with great relief saw the boardwalk far ahead. If they could get across the marsh, the boardwalk would surely lead them back to the main trail. Tony stepped forward and tentatively set a foot on the spongy moss that covered the area.

“It holds. We might be able to walk across on it if we’re careful.”

Ben stepped onto the moss. “Hey, it’s kind of bouncy!”

“Yeah, it is!”

They started walking out into the middle of the swamp.

“It’s like my trampoline back home,” Ben said as he jumped.

They both half-walked, half-jumped across the marsh. They were about fifteen feet away from the boardwalk when Tony came down on a branch sitting on the top of the moss. He fell down, and then punched through the top of the moss. Shouting and flailing his arms, he went under headfirst. He dropped the flashlight, and suddenly everything went pitch dark. His legs were still above the water, stuck on the branch, and he was suspended in the frigid water upside down.

Above the water, the moss had started to sink in a ten-foot circle from the tear. Ben was torn between diving in for his friend and going for the boardwalk. His ankles were already in water and he could see next to nothing after the flashlight went under. He made up his mind and started for Tony, or at least where he thought he was. With a gasp, he stepped into the hole and dropped below the water. He hit Tony on the way down and they both sank several yards below the surface before hitting mud at the bottom of the lake. Ben had no idea where Tony was, but even beneath ten feet of water he could hear muffled splashing from somewhere close by. He wanted desperately to return to the surface for air, but he knew Tony was caught and he had to find him. He started swimming in circles, his arms spread out in front of him, trying to find him. The water was unbearably cold, so he barely felt it when his hand struck the branch, but he found Tony and wrenched his sweatshirt free. Ben, his lungs aching, kicked furiously for the surface. He came to the surface under a layer of moss, and frantically ripped through with numb hands to reach air. Ben gasped. Tony came up about ten feet away, coughing up water. Ben was so cold he could barely speak, but they made eye contact and

started grimly for the boardwalk. When they reached the boardwalk, they clumsily pulled themselves out of the water and onto the wood planks.

Neither spoke as they sat there, shivering from the unbearable cold. They had reached the trail, and the house was probably ten minutes away. But they still weren't safe. It was probably past midnight by now, they had no light, and most of all, they were at high risk of hypothermia.

Eventually Ben got his shaking knees to stand up. Tony got to his feet as well, and they slowly made their way towards land. Shortly after they stepped off the boardwalk onto the trail, they saw a light up ahead. They started running as fast as their tired bodies would let them (which was not that fast) towards it. As they got closer, Ben saw Clare and Tony's dad, Jared with a flashlight.

"What do you think you're doing, son? Where were you? What happened?"

Tony tried to field his dad's questions as best he could, but he could barely speak.

"We were worried sick! What the heck were you thinking?"

Eventually Jared saw that the boys were too cold to speak in complete sentences and gave up his interrogation.

"We'll talk later. Looks like you boys need some sleep."

The four started walking tiredly back up the trail. Jared and Clare had been up half the night looking for Tony and Ben, so they were almost as tired as the boys were. By the time they got back to the cabin, it was 1:30 in the morning and everybody was dead tired.

Ben and Tony slept in until 12:30. They could tell Jared was annoyed at them, but nobody talked about the night's events that much. Except for Mrs. Grant, of course, who was absolutely mortified that something like that would happen to her son and his friend. They went hunting the next day, and Ben stayed the rest of the week. When Ben was dropped off at his house on Sunday, his parents were waiting for him in the kitchen.

"So Ben, did you have fun?" his dad asked when he walked in.

“Yeah, it was great,” Ben said warily. He had been afraid that his parents would be mad or something like that after what happened. Surely they knew. Ben had seen Tony’s mom talking on the phone to his parents the morning after the incident.

“So we heard about what happened,” his dad went on. “I just want you to know I’m really proud of you. You showed some great independence out there and I guess we didn’t know you could handle that. I’m sorry we never let you do stuff by yourself before.”

Ben was shocked. He had expected his dad to read him the riot act, about what the heck were you thinking and you have no sense at all, but he was doing just the opposite. He didn’t know what to say.

“It’s just really cool to know my son has grown up,” his dad finished.

“You’re not mad?” Ben said, still in utter disbelief.

“Well, no, just glad you made it. And another thing. Do you think you’d be up for a backpacking trip this summer?”

“Would I? That’d be awesome!”

“Great,” Ben’s dad said and got up. “Getting lost sounds fun.”

Ben thought for a moment. He decided that he couldn’t agree more.