

*The Trees*  
*a teaser for Vampire Diaries: Nightfall*

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"Watch out!" Bonnie cried.

"Matt, look out!" Meredith shouted.

"Whoa--" Matt pumped the brakes, cursing, both hands wrestling with the steering wheel as Bonnie ducked and Meredith braced herself. Matt's replacement for the old rattletrap car he'd lost was just about as old as the first and didn't have airbags. It was a miscellany of junkyard cars pieced together.

"Hang on!" Matt yelled as the car skidded, tires screaming, and then they were all flung around as the back end swerved into a ditch and the front bumper hit a tree.

When everything stopped moving, Matt let out his breath, easing his death-grip on the steering wheel. He started to turn toward the girls and then froze. He scrambled to switch on the map light and what he saw held him frozen again.

Bonnie had turned, as always in deepest distress, to Meredith. She was lying with her head on Meredith's lap, hands locked onto her friend's arm and shirt. Meredith herself was sitting braced, leaning as far as possible backward, her feet stretched to push against the floor beneath the dashboard: her body bowed back in the seat, head flung backward, arms holding Bonnie down tightly.

Thrusting straight through the open window like a knobby, shaggy green spear or the grasping arm of some savage earth giant was the branch of a tree. It just cleared the base of Meredith's arched-back neck and its lower branches passed over Bonnie's small body. If Bonnie's seatbelt hadn't let her turn; if Bonnie hadn't flung herself down like that; if Meredith hadn't held onto her . . .

Matt found himself staring directly into the splintered but very sharp end of the lance. If his own seatbelt hadn't kept him from leaning that way . . .

Matt could hear his own hard breathing. The smell of evergreen was overpowering. He could even smell the places where smaller branches had been broken off and were oozing sap.

Very slowly, Meredith reached out to break off one of them that was pointed at her throat like an arrow. It didn't break. Numb, Matt reached to try himself. But although the wood wasn't much thicker than his finger, it was tough and wouldn't even bend.

As if, he thought dazedly, it's been fire-hardened. But that's ridiculous. It's a living tree; I can feel the splinters. "Ow."

"Can I please get up now?" Bonnie said quietly, her voice muffled against Meredith's leg. "Please. Before it grabs me. It wants to."

Matt glanced at her, startled, and scratched his cheek against the splintered end of the big branch.

"It's not going to grab you." But his stomach was churning as he fumbled without looking for his seatbelt fastening. Why should she have the same thought as he had: that the thing was like a huge, crooked, shaggy arm? She couldn't even see it.

"You know it wants to," Bonnie whispered, and now the slight shivering seemed to be taking over her whole body. She fumbled backward to undo her seatbelt.

"Matt, we need to slide," Meredith said. She had carefully maintained her painful-

looking bowed-backward position, but Matt could hear her breathing harder. "We need to slide toward you. It's trying to get around my throat."

"That's--" But he could see it, too. The freshly splintered ends of the smaller branch had moved only infinitesimally, but there was a curve to them now, and the splinters were pressing into Meredith's throat.

"It's probably just that nobody can stay bent backward like that," he said, knowing that this was nonsense. "There's a flashlight in the glove compartment--"

"The glove compartment is completely blocked by branches. Bonnie, can you reach to unfasten my seatbelt?"

"I'll try." Bonnie slid backward without raising her head, fumbling to find the release button.

To Matt it looked as if the shaggy, aromatic evergreen branches were engulfing her. Pulling her into their needles.

"We've got a whole freakin' Christmas tree in here." He looked away, out through the glass of the window on his side. Cupping his hands to see better into the darkness, he leaned his forehead against the surprisingly cool glass.

There was a touch on the back of his neck. It was neither cool nor warm, like a girl's fingernail.

"Damn it, Meredith--"

"Matt--"

Matt was furious with himself for jumping and then freezing. The touch was . . . scratchy.

"Meredith?" He slowly moved his hands away until he could see in the dark window's reflection. Meredith wasn't touching him.

"Don't--move left, Matt. There's a long sharp bit there." Meredith's voice, normally cool and a bit remote, usually made Matt think of those calendar pictures of blue lakes surrounded by snow. Now it just sounded choked and strained.

"Meredith!" Bonnie said before Matt could speak. Bonnie's voice sounded as if it were coming from underneath a featherbed.

"It's all right. I just have to--hold it away," Meredith said. "Don't worry. I won't let go of you, either."

Matt felt a sharper prickle of splinters. Something touched his neck on the right side, delicately. "Bonnie, stop it! You're pulling the tree *in!* You're pulling it on Meredith and me!"

"Matt, *shut up!*"

Matt shut up. His heart was pounding. The last thing he felt like doing was reaching behind him. But that's stupid, he thought, because if Bonnie really is moving the tree, I can at least hold it still for her.

He reached behind him, flinching, trying to watch what he was doing in the window's reflection. His hand closed over a thick knot of bark and splinters.

I don't remember seeing a knot when it was pointed at my throat . . .

"Got it!" a muffled voice said and there was the click of a seatbelt coming undone. Then, much more shakily, the voice said, "Meredith? There're needles shoved all into my back."

"Okay, Bonnie. Matt," Meredith was speaking with effort, but great patience, the way they'd all been talking to Elena. "Matt, you have to open your door now."

Bonnie said in a voice of terror, "It isn't just needles. It's little branches. Sort of like barbed wire. I'm . . . stuck . . ."

"Matt! You need to open your door *now--*"

"*I can't.*"

Silence.

"Matt?"

Matt was bracing himself, pushing with his feet, both hands locked around the scaly bark now. Thrusting backward with all his strength.

"Matt!" Meredith almost screamed. "It's cutting into my throat!"

"I can't get my door open! There's a tree on that side, too!"

"How can there be a tree there? *That's the road!*"

"How can there be a tree *growing* in here?"

Another silence. Matt could feel the splinters--the slivers of broken branch--biting deeper into the back of his neck. If he didn't move soon, he would never be able to.

In dimness, Matt and Meredith thought of the idea at the same time. She was faster, but they spoke almost together.

"I'm an idiot! Matt, where's the seatback release?"

"Bonnie, you have to fold her seat backwards! There's a little handle, you should be able to reach it and pull up!"

Bonnie's voice was hitching now, hiccupping. "My arms--they're sort of poking into--my arms--"

"Bonnie," Meredith said thickly. "I know you can do it. Matt--is the handle right--under--the front seat or--"

"Yes. At the edge. One--no, two o'clock." Matt didn't have breath for more. Once he had grabbed the tree he found that if he loosened pressure for an instant, it pushed harder on his neck.

There's no choice, he thought. He took as much of a deep breath as he could, pushed back on the branch, hearing a cry from Meredith, and *twisted*, feeling jagged splinters like thin wooden knives tear his throat and ear and scalp. Now he was free of the pressure on the back of his neck, although he was appalled by how much more tree there was in the car than the last time he had seen it. His lap was filled with branches; evergreen needles were thickly piled everywhere.

No wonder Meredith was so mad, he thought dizzily, turning toward her. She was almost buried in branches, one hand wrestling with something at her throat, but she saw him.

"Matt, get--your own belt! Quick! Bonnie, I *know* you can."

Matt dug and tore into the branches, then groped for the handle that would collapse the backrest of his seat. The handle wouldn't move. Thin, tough tendrils were wrapped around it, springy and hard to break. He twisted and snapped them savagely.

His seatback dropped away. He ducked under the huge arm-branch--if it still deserved the name, since the car was full of similar huge branches now. Then, just as he reached to help Meredith, her seat abruptly folded back, too.

She fell with it, away from the evergreen, gasping for air. For an instant she just lay still. Then she finished scrambling into the backseat proper, dragging a needle-shrouded figure with her. When she spoke her voice was hoarse.

"Matt. Bless you--for having--this jigsaw puzzle of a car." She kicked the front seat back into position and Matt did likewise.

"Bonnie," Matt said numbly.

Bonnie didn't move. Many tiny branches were still entwining her, caught in the fabric of her shirt, wound into her hair.

Meredith and Matt both started pulling. Where the branches let go, they left welts or tiny puncture wounds.

"It's almost as if they were trying to grow into her," Matt said, as a long thin branch pulled away, leaving bloody pinpricks behind.

"Bonnie?" Meredith said. She was the one disentangling the twigs from Bonnie's hair. "Bonnie? Come on, up. Look at me."

The shaking began again in Bonnie's body, but she let Meredith turn her face up. "I didn't think I could do it."

"You saved my life."

"I was so scared . . ."

Bonnie went on crying quietly against Meredith's shoulder.

Matt looked at Meredith just as the map light flickered and went out. The last thing he saw was her dark eyes which held an expression that made him suddenly feel even sicker to his stomach. He looked out the three windows he could now see from the backseat.

It should have been hard to see anything at all. But what he was looking for was pressed right up against them. Needles. Branches. Solid against every inch of the glass.



Nevertheless, he and Meredith, without needing to say anything, each reached for a backseat door handle. The doors clicked, opened a fraction of an inch; then they slammed back hard with a very definitive *wham*.

Meredith and Matt looked at each other. Meredith looked down again and began to pluck more twigs off Bonnie.

"Does that hurt?"

"No. A little . . ."

"You're shaking."

"It's cold."

It was cold now. Outside the car, rather than through the once-open window that was now completely plugged with evergreen, Matt could hear the wind. It whistled, as if through many branches. There was also the sound of wood creaking, startlingly loud and ridiculously high above. It sounded like a storm.

"What the *hell* was it, anyway?" he exploded, kicking the front seat viciously. "The thing I swerved for on the road."

Meredith's dark head lifted slowly. "I don't know; I was about to roll up the window. I only got a glimpse."

"It just appeared right in the middle of the road."

"A wolf?"

"It wasn't there and then it was there."

"Wolves aren't that color. It was red," Bonnie said flatly, lifting her head from Meredith's shoulder.

"Red?" Meredith shook her head. "It was much too big to be a fox."

"It was *red*, I think," Matt said.

"Wolves aren't red . . . what about werewolves? Did Tyler Smallwood have any relatives with red hair?"

"It wasn't a wolf," Bonnie said. "It looked--backwards."

"Backwards?"

"Its head was on the wrong side. Or maybe it had heads on both ends."

"Bonnie, you are *really* scaring me," Meredith said.

Matt wouldn't say it, but she was really scaring him, too. Because his glimpse of the animal had seemed to show him the same kind of deformed shape that Bonnie was describing.

"Maybe we just saw it at a weird angle," he said, while Meredith said, "It may just have been some animal scared out by . . ."

"By what?"

Meredith looked up at the top of the car. Matt followed her gaze. Very slowly, and with a groan of metal, the roof dented. And again. As if something very heavy was leaning on it.

Matt cursed himself again. "While I was in the front seat, why didn't I just floor it--?" He stared hungrily through branches trying to make out the accelerator, the ignition. "Are the keys still there?"

"Matt, we ended up half in a ditch. And besides, if it would have done any good, I'd have told you to floor it."

"That branch would've taken your head off!"

"Yes," Meredith said simply.

"It would have *killed* you!"

"If it would have gotten you two out, I'd have suggested it. But you were trapped looking sideways; I could see straight ahead. They were already here; the trees. In every direction."

"That isn't possible!" Matt pounded the seat in front of him to emphasize each word.

"Is *this* possible?"

The roof creaked.

"Both of you--stop fighting!" Bonnie said, and her voice broke on a sob.

There was an explosion like a gunshot and the car sank suddenly back and left.

Bonnie started. "What was that?"

Silence.

" . . . a tire blowing," Matt said at last. He didn't trust his own voice. He looked at Meredith.

So did Bonnie. "Meredith--the branches are filling up the front seat. I can hardly see the moonlight. It's getting dark."

"I know."

"What are we going to *do*?"

Suddenly Matt could see the tremendous tension and frustration in Meredith, as if everything she said should come out through gritted teeth. But her voice was quiet.

"I don't know."

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Damon was edgy, but he couldn't find any reason to be. The only disturbance in the aura of the woods was the tiny crying of a mind inside the car, like a trapped bird with only one note. That would be the little one, the redheaded witch with the delicate neck. The one who'd been whining about life changing too much.

Damon gave a little more of his weight to the tree. He'd followed the car with his mind out of absent interest. It wasn't his fault that he'd caught them talking about him, but it did degrade their chances of rescue a bit.

He blinked slowly.

The bird was crying again.

Well, do you want a change *now*, or don't you, little witch? Make up your mind. You have to ask nicely.

And then, of course, *I* have to decide what kind of change you get.