

**In Darkness It Comes**  
**By Lindsey Pogue**

I wake in darkness. There is no breeze, there are no cricket songs. Not even leaves rustle in the woods surrounding me. It's as if the world stands still, waiting.

Twigs and rocks prick my palms and the backs of my short-clad legs, sticky with sweat in the sultry Georgia night. We were on the soccer field with the children, the tournament coming to a victorious end...

Bracing myself on my elbow, I squeeze my eyes shut and reach to touch the tender flesh at the back of my head. It's throbbing, but not damp with blood like I expect. I squint, trying to see dark streak of blood on my hand, but without my glasses, I can't make out one shadow from the next.

*Where are my glasses?* The scent of damp earth clings to the air, as does something acrid and foul.

Then, I remember.

I bolt upright, patting my chest and stomach. I grab at my legs and then my throat. Then, my hands fly to my mouth so not to let out a single noise that would give my presence away.

*All the screaming...*

It all comes back to me--the heavy footsteps. The way the air shifted behind me and the deep, phlegmy inhale of that *thing* stalking me before something hard and heavy hit the back of my head, and my glasses fell off and everything went black.

My heartbeat stumbles and stops, and my fingernails dig into the dry earth, leaves crunching in my clenched fists as I strain to listen in the otherwise silent night.

There are no more shrieks of pain or gurgled sobs. No more screaming children, crying for help. I hear nothing but the blood rushing through my ears. The erratic spasms of my heart. I practically smell my fear, but I'm alive.

I peer around at the shadowed woods. Yes, I *am* alive, but deep down I know that I am not alone, and I swallow a fearful sob.

I barely saw it in the darkness. The way it's hulking shadow moved so assuredly and with purpose. It was tall, with broad shoulders and claw-like hands, and the sound of it's heavy footsteps hot on my heels makes my eyes burn with tears. I wipe them from my vision, already poor in the darkness, and afraid what might appear if I looked away for a single moment. Would it seize me, tear me limb from limb like the others? It was so human-like, so hungry...

A twig snaps in the distance, echoing over the whirl of the blood coursing through my veins. I hold my breath, unmoving, as I peer around the woods--at long shadows cast by a cloud-covered moon. *Where is it?*

I scramble to my feet only to realize my ankle is injured, maybe broken, and I collapse back down to the blanket of debris with a stifled scream. My gaze darts from shadow to shadow as I pray for a solution. Do I find somewhere to hide? Try to find help?

I have to get out of the woods; it's all that matters. I need my phone, my car...

If I can get back to the field and my purse, discarded on the sidelines, I will have both. Driving miles away from here almost makes me smile, until I remember...

*Teddy*. I think of my younger brother, scared and alone. Possibly even dead. Once again, I have to clamp my lips together and swallow the impending cries of anguish. Heartbreak. Fear.

Are there other survivors, like me? Scared children who are holed up and hiding some place, waiting for their parents to find them, parents who might never come?

*Teddy likes to hide*. It's a necessary reminder. So, of course he's still alive. He's hiding somewhere, waiting for me to come find him.

With renewed fervor, I blink the dampness from my eyes, and cringe as I climb back to my feet. I'd rather feel the biting pain of breaking bones than leave Teddy to a worse fate, like

William's. The sounds of the Ref's body thudding to the ground beside me, of flesh tearing and gurgling pleas, haunt me.

I peer around again. *Where are the bodies? Where is the blood?*

Then I hear it again. At first, I think it's only my imagination, but the ear-piercing cries that echo through the woods are unmistakable.

I resist the urge to scream for me and my brother, praying it's not him, and ignoring the curtain of hair that clings damply to my face, I limp back toward the field as quickly as I can. Each step pure agony, my constantly sprained ankles during high school track nothing compared to this. There's another scream and I hurry my pace.

Whatever that monster is, it's not of this world, or rather, it's nothing natural. I peer east, at the rounded edges of the CDC mostly hidden behind the maple and birch trees that surround the park. Maybe it's the result of a cure gone grossly wrong--a vaccination the CDC is testing on...*people?*

Ankle throbbing, I hobble as quickly as I can toward the faint glow of the field lights that beckon me back to where it all started. The minutes of awkward limping feel more like unbearable hours, until my heaving breaths are interrupted by the rough, crackling sound of static.

I pause, gripping onto a tree trunk to steady myself as I glance behind me into the darkness. I don't see anything, but my eyes remain glued to the shadows as I strain to listen.

I hear it again, a garbled voice this time, too far away to tell what they're saying. Then more static. *A radio.* Someone is alive.

And if I can hear them, so can *it*.

With renewed urgency, I gimp to the field, biting my bottom lip and grinding my teeth. I clench my jaw--anything to keep the searing pain from escaping my lips. That thing is still in the woods... I have to shut them up. *They're no good to me if they're dead.*

The field is close, I can see the top of the light posts that brighten it, though it's eerily devoid of laughing children and parents shouting at the referees. There are no whistles piercing the night air, no cheers of encouragement.

There is nothing but the garbled voice on the radio as I draw closer, more audible now. "-quarantined and ready for removal."

"Ten-four. Alpha team is three minutes out." They are male voices, and formal, though lacking any urgency, which gives me an unexpected sense of relief. Military personnel are trained for this stuff. My heart swells and my eyes burn with unshed tears of indescribable joy. *Someone* is here... help is coming--I am saved!

As I reach the edge of the woods, I stop in the protective shadows of the trees. They seem somehow darker between the bright light cast through the foliage.

A giant white tent is constructed in the center of the field that wasn't there before. *Quarantine*. This isn't just the soccer field anymore, it's a crime scene of sorts, reeking with the onslaught of death. And, it wasn't just field lights I could see from afar, but floodlights illuminating a mass grave of decay.

Blood stains the manicured grass. Bodies, large and small, are scattered about, contorted in unnatural ways. Their clothes and exposed skin are splattered in crimson, their limbs torn off and entrails discarded. It wasn't eating them, but killing for sport. Once again, I wonder why it didn't kill me.

I swallow the bile in my throat, trying not to retch as I breathe through my mouth. *So much horror, so much death*. My eyes land on Tarah Kay, bake sale queen and PTA Mom of the Year lying on her back a few yards away from me. Her head is turned, facing me, and her eyes are wide and staring blankly in my direction--at me.

Then, she blinks.

I cover my mouth in order not to scream.

“Help...” she gurgles. “Help...me...” Her fingers twitch against the grass, and blood glistens on her throat.

“Tarah?” I choke. My muscles coil with revulsion, my body trembling. I know I can’t help her, but the voices--they’re coming. Those people can help her.

“Help...” she rasps again. Her nostrils flare, and I’m about to go to her, knowing I can’t leave her there to suffer or die alone, when I hear voices again, live ones, this time.

“Yeah, over here.”

Automatically, I crouch back into the foliage as two people in white suits step into view, stopping beside Tarah’s body. Something at the edge of reason keeps me from exposing my presence as I watch one suit pick up Tarah’s legs without a care, and the other grab her hands before they carry her away.

I hobble to the other side of the tree, still ensconced in shadow as I watch them carelessly toss Tarah Kay, alive and breathing, onto a heap of other bodies. She pleads with them through gasping breaths, but they don’t seem to notice or care. Tears blur my vision and I force myself to blink them away, covering my mouth to keep from shouting.

Most of the bodies in the heap are decapitated, as if their heads were simply torn from their bodies. There are men and women, and the small arms and exposed legs of children. This time, I can’t help it. My body lurches. Much stomach surges. And I forget about silence and hiding for a moment as I lose what little contents are in my stomach from lunch. It’s like I can smell all of their fear, clinging to their bodies even in death. And yet, more disturbingly, how many of them are still alive?

Squeezing my eyes shut, I sob in silence. Praying this is all a bad dream. Knowing none of this is possible, and I am living in a nightmare.

*Wake up, Kira. Wake up!* I want to shout it out loud--no, scream it from the top of my lungs when another white suit comes out of the tent, and I brace myself for what might happen

next. The suit has a clipboard in hand, writing intently. "When you're finished collecting the bodies," she says, stopping a few yards from my hiding place, "burn them."

*Burn them?* I want to scream at her, to run over and shove her face into Tarah's and *show* her what a dying yet still alive human being actually looks like. But her callousness is more unsettling than even the monster, and I fear what she'll do to me if she finds me here.

"What about R5?" One white suit asks.

"He's done his duty," she says blandly. She continues to scribble as if the minefield of dead bodies she stands in is nothing more than test subjects who have met a noteworthy end.

Unexpectedly, her head slowly shifts toward me, like she can hear my thoughts. Her eyes meet mine, but she says nothing. I can feel her satisfaction somehow, even sense her smile.

"Finish collecting the bodies," she orders suddenly, and as if they were figments of my imagination, the three of them disappear from sight, my mind reeling.

That's when I feel the air shift behind me and hot breath presses against my neck. Chills disperse over my body, like the feather touch of fingernails trailing over skin.

Blood is metallic against my tongue as I bite my bottom lip, and with my fingernails digging into my palms, I force myself to turn around.