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Winter blankets Brute, Alaska in a shade of darkness so bleak you can't tell tonight from tomorrow, but it's not like the locals worry themselves to keep track of the passing of time. Up here the days have feelings, and it feels like a Monday, or it feels like a Friday, with some days in between lacking any sort of feeling at all. When you don't plan further ahead than you next drink, there's no need in stressing over specifics.

There's only one road that leads anywhere in Brute, and it's not paved. But, those who venture down that dashboard rattling route are, more likely than not, headed for Rose's Cafe. In the seemingly eternal darkness of winter, Rose's Cafe is the beacon of light for the tiny yet doughy frozen town.

"Did you hear â€˜bout the latest attack?" asks the waitress of the three men sitting in the booth by the door. She wears a delicate pink apron, her blonde hair piled carefully in a bun at the nape of her neck. She's beautiful, anywhere else her thick arms and husky voice would be considered average, but here, she shines.

Brute is a logging town on the outskirts of an endless pine forest that stretches to the farthest edges of the unchartered Alaskan horizon. The pines up here have hefty limbs and trunks that are wider than most houses and for that, they are worth more dead than alive. Once cut, they are transformed into log cabins, tables, chairs and just about any other object that one could possibly want, need or use. The pine loggers are ever present at Rose's, enhancing the atmosphere with an array of bright flannel shirts and hats with flaps that cover the ears. Anything to keep the cold out, but somehow the harshness of winter always seems to seep in anyway.

"Two more gone," says Tug, cupping his tin coffee mug in his rough, tar stained hands. It's rumored that he got the nickname Tug from tugging down a pine straight from its roots with nothing more than his bare hands. Nobody knows what his real name is, and with arms the size of tree trunks themselves, nobody bothers to ask.

Typically, the darkness of winter is a time for stiff drinks and long stories, but this winter the loggers of Brute are not so relaxed. Grizzly bears have been attacking the loggers as they venture out into the forests to stalk their next load of pine. Three loggers have been mauled in half as many months, and the news of two more attacks is starting to make even the most ruthless Alaskan loggers a bit uneasy.

"This has got to end. We should kill every last one of those uncivilized beasts," says Bruce, gritting his teeth and stabbing his fork into a breakfast steak. Bruce is the current head of Brute's logging crew. He has a temper of a grizzly himself, and an appetite to match. The appetite is instinctual but temper flares can be blamed on the fact that this is the month of Brute's logging contest. The man with the most chopped trees is the winner, and the competition is stiff. The loggers will do just about anything to be

named Brute's head logger, and Bruce will do just about anything to keep that title for himself.

"I heard they called in a specialist," says the waitress, handing Bruce his regular, a coffee cake topped with extra powdered sugar. "There's some sort of animal behavior scientist coming up from a zoo in California."

"We don't need any of that kind up here," says Bruce. "Give me a shot gun and a trap, and I'll teach any animal how to behave," he says, releasing a laugh deep from the wilds within. "Right Ned," says Bruce, slapping the man to his right square in the middle of his back.

Ned was the leading logger in the Brute logging contest with seventy five fallen trees in just three weeks, but he hasn't said a word or chopped down a tree since last week when he almost became a victim to the grizzlies himself. A couple of park rangers tracked him down and wanted to ask him some questions about the attack, but even then he was as silent as a chopped tree himself. Ned just sat there, head down, twitching a bit. The only evidence that he got attacked is the three inch wide, foot long gash on his left leg. They found deep gashes on his truck too, and there's no mistake that those marks came from a grizzly.

Silence falls upon the cafe. In walks a woman with a large stature and lumbering gait. Susie Schmidt, the widow of the first logger to be mauled to death in the forest. She takes a seat at the counter, her dark hair spilling over her broad shoulders.

"Hi Susie," says Bruce, walking over to the counter. "What's a pretty lady like yourself doing up here?" He plops his heavy body down next to her.

"I can only sit alone in that cabin for so long," she says, smiling a crooked smile. "It gets lonely up here in the winter."

"All alone huh? Those heartless beasts," says Bruce, rubbing his hand along the side of her square face. "If I can do anything to comfort you, you just let me know," he says, patting her on the cheek bone with his thick index finger. He winks at her with wild eyes that are darker than the winter sky. She winks back.

"Looks like we've got company," says the waitress, pawing away the window curtain and peering through the frosty glass to a truck outside.

The residents of Brute can sense an outsider from a mile away, just like the grizzlies that roam through the pine forest. They have an uncanny ability to sniff out anyone that doesn't belong, a threat.

The doors bells clink together in an unorganized burst of sound, and the Beware of Grizzlies sign slaps hard against the wooden door. All eyes turn to look. The outsider takes a seat at the corner booth away from the cold drafts that linger near the door. He buries his face in a menu, seemingly unaware of the curiosity sparked by his presence. He removes his hat, revealing thin white hair that struggles to mask a gaping bald spot on the top of his head. A jacket that reads animal control on the front, with a logo of a hand and a paw print intertwined, covers his small frame.

"What are you doin' here?" asks Bruce, walking up to the booth, stalking his prey. The buttons on his flannel shirt struggle to contain the bulging curves of his stomach.

"Oh stop it, don't scare him," says the waitress. Steaming coffee hisses as she pours it into a tin mug, handing it to the man. Tangled blue veins under the pale skin of her hands mimic the twisting logging routes that slice through the Alaskan snow.

"I'm sorry sir, was I scaring you?" asks Bruce. He sits across from the man so he can dissect his movements. The man doesn't answer him. "What brings you to my town?"

"Your town?" asks the man. His blue eyes flicker with concern. "That's what I said," says Bruce. He rolls up the sleeves of his flannel shirt to reveal thick, round forearms covered in a forest of black hair. The man look startled. He begins talking.

"I'm Don Lake, and I'm in town, your town, surveying the grizzly population," he says. A sip of coffee births a face of disgust. They like it strong up here, the blacker the better. "I'm preparing a report about grizzly behavior in this region of Alaska."

"What can you tell me about these damn beasts that I don't already know?" asks Bruce. Bruce has been logging the pine forest since he was a teenager and he's convinced with every thread of his flannel that nobody knows more about the forest and its grizzlies than he does. He slaps the table with his large hand, scaring some of Don's coffee out of the tin mug. Don notices how long Bruce's finger nails are, how sharp.

"Well," Don pauses. "It appears the attacks are a result of habitat destruction. The bears, especially large, aggressive males are becoming more and more protective of their territory."

Bruce stares at Don the same way he stares at a tree right before he cuts it down. "You mean to tell me that I am not welcome in my own damn forest? That's my territory," says Bruce. He leans back in the booth, folding his large, hairy arms across his chest.

"Sir, uh, Bruce is it?" says the man, adjusting his round glasses to read the monogrammed name patch on the left side of Bruce's flannel shirt. "It's not that you're not welcome in the forest, but the loggers need to be aware that certain behaviors are attracting these aggressive bears."

"What the hell would I do to attract one of these beasts?" asks Bruce. He turns his head and restlessly watches as Trevor, Bruce's rookie logger, strikes up a conversation with Susie.

"Grizzlies are attracted to different scents, especially the smell of sugar." Don notices crumbs of coffee cake scattered about in Bruce's untamed beard.

Bruce turns to Susie. "You hear that Susie? You better stay out of that forest, you sweet thing," he winks again and she returns the gesture.

"All of the men that were attacked had food on them, in their pockets or vehicles," says Don.

"I thought I asked you to tell me something about the grizzlies that I don't already know," says Bruce. "Susie, why don't you get that boy something to go? Something that'll tide him over while he's out chopping," he says, pointing to Trevor. The waitress places a muffin in a bag, handing it to the man.

"Thanks boss," says Trevor, raising the bag in the air as he leaves the cafe, disappearing into the snowy abyss outside.

"If I ever see you step foot in my town again, I'll see to it that those grizzlies aren't your only problem," snarls Bruce from behind gritted teeth. He squints his eyes causing wrinkles to appear on his already roughen face. "Now get out," he yells, pointing to the door.

"I guess I'll be going then," says Don, adjusting his glasses once more. He places two crisp dollar bills on the table and bolts for the safety of the wilderness outside.

"Two more gone," says Bruce, smiling as he watches Don scurry away into the darkness.

Before reaching his truck, Don passes a forest ranger that has come to inform Bruce that the state is outlawing logging in the pine forest.

"Be careful in there," Don says to the man.

"Careful," he laughs. "What's there to be afraid of?" The ranger swaggers into Rose's Cafe.

Don pauses to watch the pallid flakes of snow dart across the night sky. He hears Bruce's growl resonate from the innards of the cafe and spill out into the darkness of the unforgiving winter.

In Brute there seems to be a little bit of grizzly in everyone, and the line that separates man from beast is thinner than the flakes of snow that saturate the air. Sometimes you don't even have to go outside to enter into the wild.
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