Night Trail

Darkness hung between the trees, like some living thing. A beast stalking its prey. Jane shuddered, glancing back over her shoulder, trying to see the path behind. But it was hopeless.

Turning back toward where she thought home was, she swallowed. It was a stupid bet, that she couldn't walk home through these woods, in the dark, without getting lost.

Pride. That's what it was. Stupid pride. Jane pushed a branch out of her way, and walked on. She should have just let things go, for once. Leaves swayed in the breeze, fighting against the dim light of the crescent moon. And the leaves were winning.

Each step brought her deeper into the forest, into the darkness.

Her heart beat pounded in her ears. Every shadow moved. Every eye of every creature in the forest watched her, unseen, but felt like icy daggers on her back.

"Hoo! Ho, Hoo!"

Jane's body went ridged. An owl flew from a nearby branch, and her chest relaxed. She'd been in these woods at least a hundred times, in daylight. There were no wolves, no bears, no reason to be afraid. It was just her imagination. There was nothing to fear. Nothing that wasn't here during the day.

Tree branches cast web like shadows on the leaves littering the forest floor, filling the trees with illusions. It was just tricks of her mind, nothing more. She glanced up at the sky, hoping to use the moon to plot her course.

A root caught the toe of her shoe. A scream ripped from her throat as she tumbled to the ground, landing face first in the underbrush. Her knee smashed against a rock, but she jumped to her feet, panting and rubbing her knee. Stupid root. Stupid tree. Stupid bet.

The silver rays of moonlight showed a path ahead, clear of branches, but dark. Like a tunnel. Jane's knee throbbed. She hated the idea of going in there, but less than falling on her face again.

Limping into the darkness, goose bumps prickled up her arms, covered the back of her neck. Somewhere behind her, a coyote howled. The sound traveled through the air like the moan of a long forgotten soul, drifting through the trees. An unearthly chill shot up her spine, sweat moistened her brow, but Jane ran down the only path open to her. The tunnel of darkness.

Everything faded into a nightmare of howls, crackling leaves, and shadows as she ran. She lost all track of time, direction. Everything. Only the need to run.

Until all at once moonlight hit her face.

Jane limped to a stop. On the trees just ahead the letters B-E-W-A-R-E shone bright in the light, one letter on each tree trunk. So out of place, for a moment she just stood there, staring at them.

"Boo!" A familiar figure jumped out of the darkness. " Ha," Austin laughed. " I got you good, Babe! You should see your face!"

"Very funny," She growled, massaging her knee. "What are you trying to do? Kill me?" But Austin was laughing too hard to answer.

"Laugh it up, Jerk." Fuming, she picked up a stick and threw it at him. "I'm done." She stood up, double checked the moon to get her bearings and marched off toward home, determined not to let him see her limp.

Austin stopped laughing. "Aw, come on, Babe, it was a joke."

Jane didn't answer.

"Oh, so now you're just gonna stomp off into the woods? That's real mature."

"Good bye!"

"I won't be here when you get scared and come running back," He called after her.

Jane bit her cheek and kept walking, muttering under her breath, "Well, I won't be there when he gets home tonight, *Babe*." As she left, an eerie and evil laugh broke through the dark woods……