

Cook Forest in fall is peaceful and serene. But in November 2023, two friends entered. Only one came out alive. Locals thought they knew the story, until the forest revealed the sinister truth. What really happened that night?

**The Deadly Secret in Cook Forest:
The Pennsylvania Wilds Series - Book 2**
By Heather Meldrum Kaminski

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THE PENNSYLVANIA WILDS SERIES
BOOK 2

THE DEADLY SECRET IN COOK FOREST

HEATHER MELDRUM KAMINSKI

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PREFACE

Apart from Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, much of Pennsylvania is considered rural. In these rural areas, the land, changing weather, and local wildlife are part of daily conversations. Life tends to move at a slower pace and the seasons dictate activities. There is a strong sense of community, tradition, and self-reliance.

The Pennsylvania Wilds (“the Wilds”) is 2 million acres of predominantly forested territory in northern central Pennsylvania. It covers about a quarter of the state's territory (roughly the size of Massachusetts), but is home to only 4% of its population. Contained within the Wilds are 29 state parks, 8 state forests, 50 state game lands, 2 National Wild and Scenic Rivers, and Blue Ribbon trout streams.

Cook Forest State Park, Pennsylvania

Cook Forest State Park, nestled within the Wilds, spans an expansive 8,500 acres across Clarion, Forest, and Jefferson Counties. The park is renowned for its magnificent stands of old-growth forest.

The park’s centerpiece, the awe-inspiring Forest Cathedral, is named after its towering stands of old-growth white pines and hemlocks. Many of the ancient trees in the park stand over 150 feet tall, their dense canopy creating a tranquil and sacred aura reminiscent

of a grand cathedral. It is one of the largest remaining tracts of old-growth forest in the eastern United States, and has been designated a National Natural Landmark.

A 13-mile scenic stretch of the Clarion River, a federally designated Wild and Scenic River, flows through the park. It is a Class 1 river, making it accessible for most to enjoy canoeing, kayaking, tubing, fishing, or just playing in the water.

Autumn is prime tourist season in Cook Forest State Park. People flock to the park and surrounding areas for views of the brilliant fall foliage. Hues of crimson, copper, and gold turn sunset hiking into something almost spiritual. Time on the river turns magical with a crisp chill in the air carrying the comforting scents of woodsmoke and damp leaves. No one expects a gruesome death to shatter such sacred beauty but it happened. In November 2023, two men entered Cook Forest. Only one made it out.

“His eyes are on the ways of mortals; he sees their every step. There is no deep shadow, no utter darkness, where evildoers can hide.”

(Job 34: 21-22, NIV)

PROLOGUE

THE TREES KNOW

COOK FOREST STATE PARK

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2023

Twenty-five-year-old Christopher Cooper lay lifeless and limp, his body slumped near the base of a massive Eastern Hemlock tree. Dark red blood covered his left forearm, and the lower half of his body. It had soaked through his shorts, and spread across a wide area of ground beneath him. His left forearm looked shredded. A large eight-inch gash ran parallel to the length of his forearm.

Matthew Dixon stared down at Chris, his best friend of nearly seven years, in horror and disbelief. He felt for a pulse. There were no signs of life. He stared at the endless pool of blood around him, at his mangled, mutilated forearm, and at the vacant expression on his face. It all seemed completely unreal.

He sensed something within him shatter, and then a physical ache in his chest. His heart pounded. He felt like he was going to suffocate. He pressed his hand firmly on

his heart while staring at Chris's butchered arm, as if that would somehow close the wound.

Chris had known his stories, his secrets, and his dreams. Memories of their life together flashed through Matt's mind. Now, he was just gone. He felt so emotionally overwhelmed in that moment. A combination of rage and confusion. Why did this have to happen? How and when did it all go wrong? He felt unhinged, no longer knowing who he could trust. Matt squeezed his eyes closed, balled his fists, and inhaled fury. He exhaled a deafening scream into the vastness of the forest with such force that he lost his balance, and stumbled forward into the ferns.

Looking up, he glanced in all directions, saturating his senses with the smells, sights, and sounds of the forest. The air smelled of peat and pine. He looked up at the majestic white pines and hemlocks that surrounded him. He stared, as if the answers to his questions could be found in the vast expanse of the Forest Cathedral. The towering conifers stood in silent witness to the atrocity that occurred in the early morning hours. Matt's confusion and questioning were met with absolute silence.

Several moments passed. Then, Matt heard something like a low whisper. The sound grew louder. It was a strong, cold wind blowing through the pines, making a whooshing sound as if the forest was exhaling.

The strong wind blew his hat off, and lifted his open jacket. Bracing himself, he walked against the wind, and retreated into his tent.

In his tent, Matt realized he was alone, deep in the forest, and began to panic. He used every trick he knew to calm himself. He took several deep breaths, closed his eyes, and thought about fishing on a boat in the sunshine with his father. He just needed to get help. Once he got to the road, he could either walk to the ranger station, or to the car where he could drive to the top of the hill on Forest Road, or to Route 36 to get cell service.

Their campsite was several miles from the road. They were camping in an unauthorized area to avoid being near the heavily trafficked Indian and Rhododendron Trails. He quickly looked around, assessing what he would need for the hike. His pack already had the essentials for navigation and first aid. He threw a few protein bars and water into his pack, strapped on his Smith & Wesson 642, tightened his laces, and set a course south through the backcountry to intersect the trail.

Before heading out, Matt looked at Chris's body. A wave of anguish hit him. He knew not to touch anything, but felt like he should cover his beloved friend. What if an animal got to him? Realizing he was starting to spiral, he left the campsite.

After what felt like hours trekking through forest and understory, he intersected the blazed trail, and began running toward the ranger station, grateful for the cleared path. As he approached the ranger station, he slowed. His lungs felt like he was inhaling razor blades. He reached the outer entrance of the ranger station, pulled open the door, and charged the desk. Ranger Clint Beck had just arrived, and was getting ready to host a guided nature walk along the Clarion River to spot river otters and bald eagles. Twelve eager participants would be arriving soon.

"Ranger, I need help! My friend, he's dead!" Matt blurted out.

"Whoa, what? What's this now?" Ranger Clint asked, a half puzzled, half bewildered look on his face.

"My friend is dead. We were camping up in the Cathedral. I woke up to take a leak, and saw him slumped over in a pool of blood."

"Slow down, son. What campsite? How you know he's dead?"

"No campsite. We were stealth camping. We aren't registered here." Matt took several breaths. "We were camping near the old logging road." He sucked in wind, trying to breathe. "I ran over to him but he wasn't responsive and he had no pulse."

Ranger Clint stared at Matt. The young man was drenched in sweat, with blood on his pants and jacket cuffs. *What the hell was going on here?* He didn't want to take his eyes off the man. In addition to the blood, the guy had a bulge on his left side, like he was conceal carrying. He quickly glanced at the clock. In thirty minutes, twelve people were going to be arriving for the guided hike. He couldn't waste time talking. He got on the landline, and called 911.

"Clarion County 911. What is your emergency?"

"This is DCNR Ranger Clint Beck at Cook Forest State Park. I need assistance immediately. I have a young male at the ranger station reporting he woke up and found his friend dead. The incident reportedly occurred in the Forest Cathedral, off the logging road. Send someone now."

The Forest County Sheriff happened to be patrolling along River Road, and was the first to the ranger station. He spoke with the ranger and Matt, noting the blood on Matt. He asked Matt to surrender any weapons. Matt handed him the concealed 642, along with his heavy-duty Swiss Army knife. The Sheriff then patted him down, and confiscated his pack.

"Sheriff, we need to get to that campsite," Ranger Clint said urgently. "It's north, back into the Cathedral, past this trail near the logging road." He handed the

Sheriff a map of the park with a large "X" where Matt had indicated the campsite was located.

"Let me get on the radio, see what I can do," said the Sheriff.

Within hours, a team of first responders had located the campsite and Chris's body. The Pennsylvania State Police would eventually arrive on the scene as well.

"Merciful fucking hell," said State Trooper Davis, shaking his head. "What the hell happened here?" He carefully surveyed the scene, making sure not to disturb any evidence.

"Looks like a damn massacre. This kid do this to himself?" the Sheriff asked.

State and local police began collecting evidence, and photographing the scene. They also questioned Matt extensively.

The coroner pronounced Chris Cooper dead. The manner of death pointed to massive blood loss from self-inflicted cuts to the wrist, with no signs of struggle. When they moved Chris's body, it left a large ring of blood around the base of the hemlock tree. The blood had soaked deep into the soil, penetrating the tree's roots.

Police found a small notebook in Chris's belongings containing sketches of flora and fauna, ecological notes, hand-drawn maps, and both scientific and personal writings. One of the final entries, dated just days earlier, read like a suicide letter:

*I walk the line between life and death, a child
of blood and shadow. I raise bones, summon
spirits, but silence is all that answers.*

*Surrounded by rot, emptiness gnaws
beneath my ribs. Feared by the living,
followed by the dead, I belong to neither.*

*I eat to quiet hunger, drink blood to feel,
speak to the dead because the living have
nothing to say.*

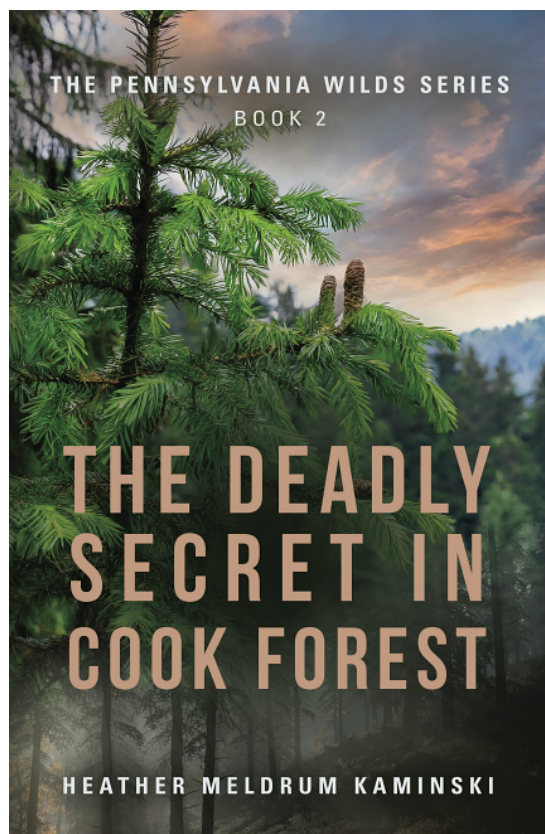
*Still, I search the dark for one whisper to
answer the only question that haunts me:
Why am I still here?*

After a thorough review of the evidence, Chris's death was officially ruled a suicide by exsanguination. Matt was eventually released. Everyone who knew Chris struggled with the concept that he would take his own life. It didn't make sense to anyone, given how he lived. Others pointed out that it is not entirely unusual for someone to suffer in silence, and choose death.

Matt was devastated and barely functioning. He needed a break from life. He traveled to his family's home in the Grenadines, hoping to find solace in the company of his loved ones.

Jessica Richland, a close friend of Chris's, refused to believe he had died by suicide. Over the previous few months, they'd formed a deep connection. Just days before his death, they spent time together discussing heavy existential topics. From her perspective, Chris had been feeling optimistic about life.

During the initial investigation, Jess was never formally questioned about Chris's death as it appeared to be an open and shut case. But, Jess refused to accept that.



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