

The Left Behind

Greg swerved the SUV to avoid two deer springing into the road. The tires squealed until the vehicle crashed through the guardrail and began its nosedive off the side of the mountain. For those few seconds, it wasn't Macy's life that flashed before her eyes, but the life of the man in the cave . . .

"What should we do?" Macy asked Greg, searching his face for a reaction. Greg's eyes focused downward, traveling along the outline of a body. Wind whipped past the small entrance of the cave and swirled in, shifting the hair along her forehead.

After a moment of silence, Macy repeated herself, but Greg responded by leaning against the cave wall. The effulgent glow of the flashlight altered the features of his face the way candlelight might. Her heart beat furiously as she shifted her attention between the body and Greg. Her eyes stung and a tear fell, but she caught it with her finger as she wiped her cheek.

"Well?" Macy asked.

Greg shook his head. "I don't know." He unzipped a pocket in his vest, pulled out a small black flip phone, and sighed at the lack of reception. Sometimes they would have luck on the main trails, but the way they hiked, they were rarely on the main trails.

"We can't just leave him," she said.

Silence.

Macy stared. The man spent the last moments of his life hunched over in a small, poor excuse of a cave along the Blackwater River. His body surrounded by damp leaves and the bones of small animals.

"Let's think," Greg said, not removing his eyes from the corpse.

The wind stole Macy's attention, and she allowed herself to drift away from the body and listen to the soothing breath of nature. The more she focused, the further she went away from the small cave. She pictured the man walking through the woods, lost and alone. Scared. Maybe blinded by rain as the water erased his trail, or perhaps exhaustion overcame him and he simply stopped to rest. Attacked? Images of a dark haired, scruffy man passed through her mind – a mix of her father and her younger brother.

So many thoughts flooded her head in those few moments. A small pack of gear accompanied the dead man but nothing like they carried. He was ill equipped for a journey this deep into the mountains.

She looked up from the body to Greg. How long had it been since he announced the notion to think? Still lost in his thoughts, Greg remained silent. She focused back on the body.

Did this man deserve to be in the woods, dead in a cave? What type of person was he? Did he pay his bills on time? What type of ailments did he have? How old was he when he came to this curious piece of land? Which spiritual being did he support for his religious president? Who will he dine with in the afterlife? What foul twists in plot allowed him to die so discreetly? Did he die in his sleep or did he cry for help, lips chapped, eyes bloodshot, nature neglecting the fact that he still lived?

Macy blinked back to the SUV falling. Greg's hand reached for hers, and she braced herself on the dash with her other. The truck hit at an angle and crunched up, every airbag erupted. Her body jolted forward and she heard Greg scream. Just as fast as the sounds came, they went, and everything lay quiet except for the steady breath of wind which carried her back to the cave:

Macy and Greg stood above the body, contemplating the value of the bones.

What could they do, anyway? What if the blood of others rested on his hands and they could help solve a crime? What if a murderer stole his life? An eternity of lives tumbled before her. They could pack the body somehow and turn it over to the police, or leave it and take the chance of forgetting the spot. What if he wished to die alone and forgotten? So many possibilities, that all came down to the value of a life, where to place it, and on whom? Was it her responsibility to leave these bones to be fuel for life forms millions of years down the road? What did society teach her about this? What would her parents do? Surely the answer hid in the midst of years and years of schooling.

But she recalled nothing. She understood nothing. She could spend her lifetime trying to understand what happened to this person.

Greg finally spoke: "We need to leave." He stood straight and turned to exit.

Macy stopped him. "What do you mean leave?" Her voice echoed in the cave. "We can't just leave him, can we?"

He looked at her, the flashlight now pointed at his chin. "I'm not getting involved with this. We aren't from here, and we're way off the trail. I'm not spending the rest of our vacation convincing police that we didn't have anything to do with this."

"But-"

"No. This isn't a discussion. We came across some bad luck and now we are moving on." He shouldered past her, stopping at the entrance. "Let's go."

She watched him climb out, leaving her behind with the body. She turned and pointed the light back at the corpse. The man's jacket and beard covered most of his face. Tears rolled down her cheek. She didn't feel right about leaving him, and she didn't know what to do. By acting or not acting, she was choosing the fate of this man's body.

"I'm not kidding, Macy. Let's go."

Macy realized the sound wasn't the wind but the hissing of an engine component losing pressure. She tried turning her head, but pain shot up her back. Her arms couldn't move, not easily anyway. A sob slipped past her lips. She forced herself to turn. Greg's head lay against the steering wheel, facing the opposite direction, blood leaking into his shirt.

The sun dropped slowly behind the mountains, and as it did, she thought about the walls of the cave and the darkness inside. Her eyes grew heavy, and her breathing became labored. One final thought passed through her mind before she closed her eyes: *I wonder if someone will leave us.*

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