

The Cave

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Property of Maysen Matthews

I never should have left home.

I only meant to look for my dog, Riley, who had run off into the woods earlier in the day, but I had somehow become very lost. I managed to find Riley thirstily lapping up water from a puddle about thirty minutes after I had begun my search. She was dirty, covered in leaves and caked in mud, the odd bur embedded in her coat. It took me a couple of minutes to wrangle her, but once I had I promptly attached her leash to her collar and in the process, I became turned around. I tried to call someone or use the GPS on my cell phone but I had no signal, so I tried to retrace my steps to no avail.

It is beginning to get dark so I decide to try and find some sort of shelter. Maybe I can find a hollow tree or make a lean-to with some fallen branches. The people on *Naked and Afraid* do it, how hard can it be?

As I wander aimlessly with Riley in tow, I stumble upon a cave. The mouth of the cave is relatively narrow, and I might not have noticed it if I wasn't looking for some protection. Looking down at Riley I decide that this is as good a place as any, and we make our way towards what will be our shelter for the night.

The inside of the cave is wide but not too deep. I stay towards the mouth so I can utilize the fading light. Scratch marks are etched into the stone cave floor in certain areas. Though there are no large predators in my area, the claw marks still frighten me.

Finding a heavy rock, I slide the end of Riley's leash underneath, ensuring she cannot run off again. Then I find some sticks from around the outside of the cave and attempt to make a fire,

like they do in the movies, but it is not as easy as it looks. Though she is a mess and her odor is less than ideal, I settle on using Riley for heat and she seems content to let me. I pull my German Shepard, a lap dog by no means, onto my lap and snuggle into her grubby fur. I am terrified, but I know that with Riley I will be safe.

When the sun goes down completely the temperature drops considerably. My phone is almost dead, and once it dies I will have no source of light, a thought that causes my stomach to dip in anxiety. Laying my head onto the rough floor of the cave I wrap my arms around Riley and try to get some sleep knowing that the sooner I do, the sooner it will be daylight once more.

Having dozed off, I startle awake at the sound of Riley's deep growl. I sit up and scoot back against the cool wall of the cave before looking around for the danger that Riley alerted me to. It is then that I see a slim beam of light and a shadowy figure approaching the mouth of the cave. Riley lets out a warning bark as the person enters. Light suddenly fills the dark space, and a male voice accompanies it.

"Well, I didn't expect to find anyone else here." Says a man.

The man sets the flashlight on its end and the cave becomes illuminated. Now I can get a good look at the intruder. He is tall and broad shouldered with light brown hair and piercing blue eyes that if I think are startling now, must really be impressive in the daylight. He looks to be in his late twenties, so a few years older than myself.

"Wh-who are you?" I stutter.

"Casey, and yourself?" he says, so casually as if we were in a coffee shop instead of a dank cave.

“Shelby,” I say, barely above a whisper.

“Nice to meet you, Shelby.” he says, with a country twang and a charming smile.

My heart flutters and I am not sure if it is from fear or the flash of his teeth. Either way, I find this encounter very strange. I should be ecstatic that someone has found me, but my gut tells me not to trust this man no matter how handsome I may think he is.

Riley is on her feet now, and she stands between Casey and me. I slip my hand underneath her collar and grip it tightly, partly to keep her under control but mostly to calm myself.

“And who is this?” Casey asks, pointing to my bodyguard.

“This is Riley. Enough with the introductions, what are you doing out here?” I snap.

“Well, I could ask the same of you.”

“I got lost, and I needed to find shelter. Now, answer my question.”

Casey sighs dramatically and shuffles around. I notice that he has a backpack, and I realize he can't be here coincidentally, especially since he said he wasn't expecting anyone else to be here. This makes me even more uneasy, as I think of all the reasons a man would be in a cave in the woods at this time of night with a backpack. Nothing good comes to mind.

“Would you believe me if I said I was lost too?”

“No.” I say abrasively.

“Well, darlin', I am afraid that's all you are going to get.”

“I think you should leave.” I say, tightening my grip on Riley’s collar.

“No can do, darlin’. It is starting to rain, and I have no interest in getting pneumonia.”

“My name is Shelby, not darling, and I couldn’t care less if you catch pneumonia. I found this cave first, and I want you to leave.”

Casey unzips his backpack and pulls something out of it. The metal glistens in the gleam of the flashlight.

A gun.

My blood freezes within my veins instantly.

Riley, sensing the change in the atmosphere, bristles while letting out another deep growl.

“I’d call off your mutt if I were you.” Casey says lazily in that same southern draw.

“Riley, sit. Good girl.” I pull her closer to me as she sits.

“Please don’t hurt us.” I plead.

“I have no intention of hurting you; however, that can change if you do not cooperate.”

“What do you want?” I ask, trying to appear calm.

“I only want to hide out in this cave for a bit, and then I will be on my way. After that you’ll be free to do the same. Understand?”

I nod my head, and then verbally give him my understanding. My back is still against the rough cave wall, and it only emphasizes that there is nowhere else for me to go. There is only

one way in and one way out and there is a man with a gun between me and my escape route. This is going to be a long night.

We sit in uncomfortable silence for a long while. I can hear the rain now, and low rumbles of thunder every so often. There is a dripping sound echoing throughout the cave, indicating that there must be a crack somewhere allowing water to get in.

“How did you end up lost?” he asks, conversationally.

“I...Riley ran away, and I came out here trying to find her.”

“I see you did,” he says, pointing towards my dog.

“Y-yes.”

“I’d tell you why I am out here, but then I’d have to kill you.” he says and I start to shake, unable to decipher whether or not he is joking.

I pull my knees up to my chest, and curl one arm around them, keeping the other secured around Riley’s collar. My heart is beating so fast, I fear that I may have a heart attack. As unlikely as that is, I still can’t get the image out of my head. Me, lying dead on the floor of this grimy cave, my dog tethered to a rock, and no one coming to look for us.

“I’m kidding of course.” He flashes another smile my way, but this time I know that my heart flutters from fear.

“Of course.” I fire back.

“I had to do something that I am not proud of, but sometimes that is the way it goes, sweetheart. I’ll spare you the gory details, but let’s just say if I get caught it won’t end very well for me.”

I squeeze my eyes shut and take a deep, calming breath. I allow myself to curse Riley for a brief moment. If not for her I would not be here. I would have never come into the woods, I would have never become lost, and I would have never sought out shelter in this God forsaken cave that I am now trapped in with a criminal. However, I cannot stay mad at Riley because without her this situation may have been entirely different. That thought causes me to shudder.

Suddenly, Casey flips off the flashlight and once again I am surrounded by the pitch-black night. My heart drops into my stomach, unsure of what he intends to do now that he has blanketed us in darkness. The rolls of thunder are few and far between and I quickly realize why Casey has once again shrouded us in darkness. I hear voices in the distance.

I feel the cold metal of the gun pressed against my temple. I was so focused on the voices that I had not heard him move towards me. He is on my right side and because Riley’s leash is held down by the rock, she cannot get to him.

“I suggest you keep quiet.” His hotly whispered words float against my temple mixing with the cool sensation of the metal, and I shiver at the combination of the differences in temperature.

My breaths are coming out in shallow pants. If I scream, this could all be over. Someone could come and take Casey away, and they could help Riley and me get home. Or it could be all over because my blood and brain matter is painted against the wall of the cave. I would never

have thought that I would be in a situation like this at all, but now that I am I need to make a choice.

I keep myself quiet, until I hear the voices more clearly, and even still until I hear footsteps, and the crunching of leaves outside the cave. I can also see beams from flashlights. Riley huffs and I make my move.

“HELP!”

The footsteps become urgent and soon there are three figures standing in the mouth of the cave. Each figure has a flashlight pointed towards us practically blinding me, but I can make out that the figures have weapons drawn.

“Well now you’ve gone and done it.” Casey says with a sigh.

“Put the gun down, now! Put your hands behind your head!”

Casey doesn’t move. Even though there are three guns aimed toward him, he stays impossibly still. Riley has been frantically barking since I inhaled to scream, and between her and the obvious policemen yelling I have no idea how Casey can be so calm.

“I told you this wouldn’t end well.” Casey sighs in resignation.

Then quickly he removes the gun from my temple and flips it toward himself. A sickening pop echoes through the cave as *Casey’s* blood and brain matter paint the cave wall and my face. I curl over and retch, the hot sticky feeling of his blood on my skin sends my stomach into turmoil. The three officers come rushing towards me.

Tears are pouring down my face creating streaks where they wash away the blood, as the officers call for paramedics to come and assist them. Two of the men wrap my arms around their shoulders and they hoist me up, while the third frees Riley's leash and leads her out of the cave behind us. Once outside of the cave, one of the officers pulls out a rain poncho from his belt and places it over me after another wraps his jacket around me as we wait for the paramedics to arrive. Staring at the open mouth of the cave, I shiver unsure of whether it is from the icy rain or the trauma. My stomach roils again at the thought of what lies inside, at thinking only moments before I had feared that would be *my* outcome. Turning away from the cave I focus my attention on an ATV that is heading our way with what looks to be a box of medical supplies strapped to the back of it.

An EMT approaches me and urges me to sit on the four wheeler. I turn to look at the cave one last time before allowing the woman to usher me away to begin her examination.

A cave, such a strange place for this event to transpire. You hear about caves being places where bears or bats dwell. You hear about ancient cave drawings, and the cave people that used to inhabit them. I never would have thought that a cave would be the place where I witnessed someone die. Then again, since when did life care if you think about these things or not?