



'Leaves'

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She knew she was being followed. It had been clear to her for some time now – her first footstep into the wood was echoed by a twig snapping under a misplaced boot, just loud enough to catch her attention. Her breaths quickened. Not so much at the sound of the figure behind her, but strangely the thought of craning her neck to identify them, the thought of meeting their eyes, knowing they had been fixed on her for so long. A shiver rifled through her body, a force demanding that she pull herself together. A deep breath. The air was cold and sharp through her nostrils, a short pain that was gratefully received. Exhaling, she forced her shoulders to drop and tried to lose herself; a trick that had saved her so many times from pain and stress. Discarded leaves litter the forest floor, murky fragments of the beautiful green trees they once formed together. Motionless, they await a gentle breeze to lure them into an aimless wander, allowing them to catch a glimpse of what they once were, before they fall once again to the carpet of the dead.

Dead. The girl was dead meat.

Intense dread tackled her gut, hauling her from her daydream. What if they wanted to rob her? Or to kill her? The image of a blade, shining in the sunlight, only inches away from her abdomen, made the girl want to vomit. Suddenly, it was much too much. The constant footsteps were behind her were ringing in her ears now, along with the intense beating in her chest. The girl could feel herself slipping, but not in the way she wanted. Instinctively, her eyes darted around the woodland again, urging nature to offer any form of distraction; the leaves twitched nervously in the gentle breeze, omniscient tree trunks froze, for they could see the figure that stalked behind her.

She fumbled frantically in her coat pocket for her phone, desperate for an escape, even if it meant admitting to her parents that she wasn't home. It wasn't her fault – she had needed the walk to clear her head. The woods had rescued her endless time but not today. Today they trapped her. It was as if the branches were building barriers around her, the carpet of brown and orange gathering at her feet, intent on tripping her and dragging her to the ground to lie with them.

Silence.

Not in reality, but in the girl's head as hope slipped from her heart and plummeted to her stomach, landing in a tight knot. Her pockets were empty. The only thing she could pull out was a small button, caked in fluff, a pathetic self-defence weapon. An excruciating image of the mobile, glistening on her bedside table branded her brain and caused muscles to ache. Nothing could save her now.

Her stalker's footsteps grew louder, closer. The girl's strides grew wider faster and soon, without properly planning to, she was running. The wind rushed past her ears and the leaves seemed to follow too.

"Wait! Stacey, please!"

The girl finally turned around. Panic. Relief. Fury.

"Don't look at me like that. I'm the best friend you've got."

The girl stared at her stalker, willing to collapse on the ground like a dead leaf from a tree so she could trample on her.

"Friend." The girl scoffed. She had lost the rights to that word so long ago.