

Missing [The Run Series, #5]

by Lynne Stahl



Anna was gone.

Mac sat bolt upright and threw off his blankets. All traces of sleep had disappeared from him instantly, replaced by a rush of panic. Where could she have gone? Maybe she just needed some time to herself, he thought, but the idea rang hollow in his head. His creeping doubts from the night before returned.

Anna had been wounded by a zombie. Was she infected? Was she already one of them? What should he do? What *could* he do?

"I have to find her," he said to himself. But did he have to go alone? Mac thought for a minute. He definitely didn't want to bring Jeremiah into harm's way, but he also knew that he and Dennis should not leave the young boy all by himself.

Mac gritted his teeth, clenched his fist as if to prove he could use it, and let out a sigh. It was now or never.

He fumbled around for the tiny keychain flashlight they had grabbed at the gas station. He wished desperately that he had something bigger. The light of the tiny beam barely reached his own feet when he pointed it down at them. Kneeling, he swung the flashlight across the dirt around Anna's blankets and finally saw the footprints she had left in the soft ground.

The footprints looked strangely uneven, and he felt his stomach drop when he realized that she must have been dragging her injured leg heavily to make such long, deep marks. He wondered if she was

as scared as he was. He began to wonder if people stopped being scared once they turned into zombies, then shook himself and stood up. If there was any chance that he could still help Anna, he needed to move fast.

Walking parallel to the footprints, Mac set off into the woods. He took one last look back at the pile of blankets where Dennis and Jeremiah were still asleep, trying to will them not to notice his absence. He crept along slowly as the trees grew thicker around him. He moved slowly to avoid making noise, but thoughts screeched through his head at dizzying speeds. He tried to convince himself that it might not be too late. Maybe Anna was fine. He worked to summon his earlier hope that she had just gone for a walk, but it seemed less and less likely. What would he do when he found her? If worse had come to worst and Anna had become a zombie, would he be able to bring himself to fight her? Even scarier - did he have any chance of winning?

As he walked, Mac began to hear the faint sound of running water in the distance. He realized that he must be nearing a stream or a creek. He followed the noise and was soon able to make out a soft glow: moonlight reflecting on water. He drew in his breath when the beam of his flashlight passed over what he knew instantly was a human- - or zombie- - shaped figure. Mac stood as still as he could, trying to decide what to do. The figure was bent over and seemed to be looking down, unaware of his presence.

Mac paused. If the figure was Anna, he didn't want to startle her. But if it was a zombie - or worse, a zombified Anna - he didn't want to get within arm's reach. He checked his shoelaces to make sure they were tied and braced himself to run away if necessary.

"Anna?" he called softly.

Dennis awoke with a startle. It took him a moment to figure out where he was and why he was sleeping on a pile of dirty tarps. "Should've stayed asleep," he mumbled to himself as the grim details of the previous day came back to him. He thought about trying for some more rest, but his stomach objected with a loud growl. They had been too exhausted to eat before bed, and now he was starving. He shook Jeremiah gently. He could use the boy's help to get a fire going. Jeremiah only muttered and rolled over. Maybe Mac would be more cooperative.

The hunger in his stomach turned into cold fear. Mac's blankets were empty, and he was nowhere to be seen. Anna was gone, too. He knew that Mac wouldn't have left without telling him unless something was seriously wrong.

"Jeremiah," he hissed, "you have to get up now. Something's wrong."

The boy sat up and rubbed his eyes, hair sticking out in all directions. "What is it?" he asked in confusion.

"Mac and Anna," Dennis replied, "they're gone."

Jeremiah blinked. "Maybe they went for a walk?" he suggested hopefully.

Dennis shook his head. He didn't want to alarm Jeremiah, but there was no time for false hope. He considered the possibilities. Had zombies gotten to Mac and Anna while they were sleeping? He doubted it. Zombies weren't known for their stealth - he definitely would have woken up to their loud groans and heavy, clumsy footsteps. That meant that Mac and Anna must have left of their own will. But why?

He shook his head again. At this point, all that mattered was finding their friends. "Let's go," he told Jeremiah, pointing to the truck. Sensing his urgency, the boy cooperated without further protest. He gathered an armful of blankets and secured them to the bed of the truck with the ratty old rope that had held the bundle together.

Dennis paused. Which direction should they go? As Jeremiah hopped into the truck's passenger seat, Dennis strode over to collect the blankets that Mac and Anna had slept in. There was no point in abandoning their few supplies. As he bent to gather them up, he spotted the imprint of a shoe in the dirt. Tracks! Just one pair of footprints at first, starting from Mac's blankets, and then another starting from Anna's. Dennis frowned. Where they joined up, the two sets of footprints were strangely close together - too close for two people to have been walking next to each other at the same time. One of them must have left the camp first, then the other followed later. But why?

Brow furrowed, Dennis hurried to the truck. He remembered how worried Mac had been the night before, even after they had used the hand sanitizer to clean Anna's wound. He hadn't seemed to share Dennis's relief that the sanitizer would kill any germs that might cause an infection.

Infection. The word rang in Dennis's head. Of course! Anna had been injured by a zombie. Wasn't that how the plague spread? Was she a zombie now? If so, could she - would she - infect Mac, too?

Dennis leapt into the driver's seat and peered out, tires whirring against the soft dirt. He steered the truck along the path of footprints as quickly as he could amid the thickening trees. The bumpy ground jolted the old truck around, and Jeremiah squealed as a particularly nasty bump lifted him straight off his seat and practically out the window.

"Buckle up," Dennis ordered, "this ride may get even bumpier."

As they progressed, Dennis felt breathless - a combination of the truck's jostling and his own rising panic. They had no weapons, no way to defend themselves. He ran through a mental list of the items they had grabbed from the gas station, but none of them would help. Out of habit, he punched on the radio and then remembered that it would just produce static. Petey "The Muskrat" Coltrain's bluegrass station and all the others had ceased broadcasting weeks ago as the plague intensified.

But it wasn't static. Somehow, it was playing music! And not just any music, but a lively bluegrass tune that he recognized from his time listening to The Muskrat's station while he and Mac were back at the farm.

"Well, at least we have a soundtrack," he said to Jeremiah, strangely cheered by the familiar song. Jeremiah seemed unimpressed. Turning his full attention to the path ahead, Dennis focused his gaze

and braked slightly. Ahead and to their left, he could make out a stream flowing through the trees in the distance. He squinted. Something was moving next to the water. Were those people? They were - it was Mac and Anna!

Dennis and Jeremiah stared in horror. Anna had a hand firmly around Mac's throat.

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Ed. : *The tale continues in Part 6, "Changes."*

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Who is missing at the beginning of the story?

- A. Mac
- B. Dennis
- C. Anna
- D. Jeremiah

2. Whose perspective does this story show?

- A. Anna's
- B. Mac's and Jeremiah's
- C. Just Mac's
- D. Mac's and Dennis's

3. Read these sentences from the text.

"The footprints looked strangely uneven, and [Mac] felt his stomach drop when he realized that [Anna] must have been dragging her injured leg heavily to make such long, deep marks. He wondered if she was as scared as he was. He began to wonder if people stopped being scared once they turned into zombies..."

What conclusion can be drawn based on these sentences?

- A. Mac thinks Anna may have become a zombie.
- B. Mac thinks he can save Anna from other zombies.
- C. Mac thinks Anna is braver than he is.
- D. Mac feels sick when he sees or thinks about injuries.

4. This story has two climaxes, or points when the tension is at its highest. One climax is when Mac softly calls out "Anna?" by the stream. What is the other climax?

- A. when Dennis wakes up to find Mac and Anna missing
- B. when Mac wakes up to find Anna missing
- C. when Dennis turns on the radio to find a bluegrass song playing
- D. when Dennis and Jeremiah discover Mac and Anna by the stream

5. What is the main idea of this text?

- A. After waking up in the woods with a bad injury, a girl named Anna runs away to find help.
- B. After waking up in the woods to find their friend missing, three boys worry that their companion has turned into a zombie.
- C. After waking up in the woods, two boys worry that they may be attacked by a crowd of plague-ridden zombies and become infected.
- D. In a truck ride through the woods, a young boy is annoyed that the radio no longer plays anything but bluegrass music.

6. Read these sentences from the text.

"Mac paused. If the figure was Anna, he didn't want to startle her. But if it was a zombie--or worse, a zombified Anna--he didn't want to get within arm's reach. He checked his shoelaces to make sure they were tied and braced himself to run away if necessary.

"Anna?" he called softly.

Dennis awoke with a start. It took him a moment to figure out where he was and why he was sleeping on a pile of dirty tarps."

Why might the author have switched to Dennis's perspective at this point in the story?

- A. to confuse the reader about the setting of the story
- B. to leave the reader in suspense about what happens with Mac and Anna
- C. to show the reader how Mac and Dennis have very different personality traits
- D. to give the reader a sense of calm about Dennis's safety

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence.

Mac is worried that the figure by the stream may be a zombie, ____ he tries to stay out of arm's reach.

A. so

B. but

C. though

D. before

8. Describe what Anna's footprints leading away from her blankets look like.

9. What do Dennis and Jeremiah see at the very end of the story?

10. What has most likely happened to Anna by the end of the story? Support your answer with at least two pieces of evidence from the text.