

**The Road Home**

by

Maddy Torosian

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Sponsor: Monica Ferrell

Second Reader: Elise Lemire

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## My Cover Letter

For my senior project I am completing and editing a novel titled *The Road Home*. This is a story that I have been working on for some time and I am incredibly excited to see it come to life!

I originally began writing this story in the fall of 2017 after I stumbled upon a music video for a song entitled “I Found” by the band Amber Run. The story that played out on the short video hooked me immediately and reminded me of many of the themes that I sought out in fiction and I was immediately inspired. There were also many things I knew I wanted to change about the visual story that I was so drawn to, and once I started creating it, I knew I had to write this piece.

*The Road Home* follows the story of Keith, a down-on-his-luck man who has a less than honest past. When his uncle and partner in crime, Jack, comes to him with a heist, Keith originally turns it down in favor of living an honest life. However, with funds running low, Keith realizes he has no other choice and succumbs to the offer. He joins Jack in what he thinks will be a simple theft job, but only when he is at the scene of the crime does he realize the prize they are after is a child. Jack and Keith kidnap the young girl, Riley and hide away in the forest while awaiting the ransom. When the deal goes sour however, Keith must choose where his loyalties lie.

Keith finds himself the reluctant protector of the girl, Riley, and agrees to get her back to safety in exchange for his own security. As they make the journey home, Keith finds himself slowly growing to care for the girl despite their differences, and he begins to uncover a tangle of secrets and plots much larger and deadlier than he ever bargained for.

There are many themes I wanted to explore when writing this piece. I have always been a sucker for a good found family story, especially one with a father-daughter relationship. I also wanted to emphasize the idea that anyone can overcome their past and create a better life for themselves. Despite their many differences, Keith and Riley ultimately have to become allies in order to achieve their separate goals that, the more they work together, become the same.

Fugitive stories were always very exciting to me as well, as I loved the tense and thrilling atmosphere of someone running from a dangerous pursuer. As I wrote this novel, the plot developed from a simple ransom heist to a story full of betrayal and crime; something much more in-depth, but also more detailed. I wanted my story to be realistic but it was hard to find a lot of information on things that are hidden for good reason. I found myself doing a lot of research on relevant topics that I was quite unfamiliar with like drug trafficking and criminal activities. With a lot of questionable searches, I was able to slowly find the information I needed.

I also found it very important to add music or singing into this novel in some way, both because this was another trope that I enjoyed seeing in stories, but also as a homage to the music video that was a large part of the inspiration for this piece. The best way to do this was for Keith to have a strong familial connection with music. I wrote an original song for this novel that becomes important to the story. This was difficult because I certainly do not consider myself a songwriter, and had never even considered trying to write one myself. Luckily, like Keith, I have a background in playing music. I also was lucky to have a friend who was a graduate of the music program at Purchase that was able to help me.

The classes I took at Purchase were invaluable for me as they were my first experience with workshop and critiques. The opportunities I was given to share my stories with likeminded people was so exciting! While it was certainly scary to get feedback, especially critiques and

suggestions, It was incredibly helpful to learn what was working in my story and what was confusing or needed to change. I was able to delve not only deeper into the plot and characters in *The Road Home*, but other stories I wanted to write. For the first time in my life I was able to share this part of me, and genuinely be proud of what I wrote.

I have always been an avid reader; however, I didn't physically write much growing up. As a child I did record a few stories that were important to me, but as I grew older I forgot about these little works. I still relied greatly on my storytelling for my own enjoyment, but I hardly wrote down much at all. I certainly didn't see myself as a writer, yet I created stories for myself all the time. It wasn't until my plans to join the United States Marines after high school fell through that I realized; I didn't have a plan for what I wanted to do. Even after deciding I wanted to go to college, I had no idea what I wanted to study. It was in a café one day with my mom where I had been telling her about my stories that she asked me: "why don't you write it down?" That was it. I hadn't even considered actually trying to write out these stories and make them into something more. Of course, I went a bit further than my mom had probably intended when I decided not only to write down my stories but pursue a course of study and career in creative writing; but I've never doubted that it was the right choice and I've enjoyed it every step of the way.

Because of my background in reading I have many literary loves that have influenced my writing. The Young Adult novelist Sarah J. Maas inspired me greatly with her writing style and complex characters in her *Throne of Glass* series. She holds a special place in my heart as I began to read her books towards the end of high school and she became one of my main inspirations for wanting to be a writer myself. I was drawn to her narrative style which helped me learn how to write with the voices of my characters. Rick Riordan was a heavy influence on

me throughout my childhood and teenage years with his *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* and *Heroes of Olympus* series. I was drawn to the wit and humor of the dialogue and the balance between seriousness and fun in his stories. Not only did I gain a stronger love of reading because of these books, but I also learned how to place humor in a story. Suzanne Collins was another great inspiration to me with her *The Hunger Games* and *Gregor the Overlander* series. I was drawn to her vivid descriptions and plot twists and inspired to leave readers in the same shock and excitement I felt reading her stories.

Throughout *The Road Home*, I wanted to bring together many of the things that I loved in literature all in one piece. From found family and betrayal to an adventure in the woods, I wanted this story to introduce me as a writer and showcase what made me fall in love with reading. I am excited to have this opportunity to share a piece that means so much to me.

Thank you.

Maddy Torosian

## The Road Home

### Chapter 1

Keith was trying, once again, to remind himself how he had gotten into his current situation.

Leaves, brightly colored in hues of oranges, browns, and the occasional green, rustled in their thin branches. Keith absentmindedly fiddled with the straps on his backpack; the tough threads stiff against his fingers. When he couldn't help it any longer, his gaze slowly shifted toward the small figure on the other end of the clearing.

The girl was sitting down, hugging her knees to her chest. Dirt and decaying leaves stuck to her thin pajama pants where the clothes made contact with the ground. Her bare feet were tucked one over the other, pulled close to her body. Her light hair hung loose around her face, obstructing most of it from Keith's view. He surveyed her from where he sat, trying to make out any sort of expression. He wondered if she was scared. *Of course she's scared, stupid!* He thought.

The girl, as if sensing Keith stare, glanced at him. Keith automatically looked away, trying to ignore the twinge of shame as it pricked his skin. The sooner his uncle got back, the better.

*His uncle*, Jack. The reminder of the man sent a wave of painful conflicting emotions rushed through Keith's veins. He ran a finger through his hair, tugging at the dark strands.

It had been nearly six months since he had last seen his uncle, before these last few days of course. He still remembered the look on the man's face when Keith had told him he was leaving, for good this time. The fight was brutal and ugly. Angry words flung on both sides. In



the lonely months after, Keith had often wondered if his uncle regretted any of the things he had said.

Keith sighed through his nose. None of that mattered now, whatever he'd done, whatever he'd said, it made little difference. Like it or not, Keith was back, exactly where he didn't want to be.

Keith took in the little clearing they were in. The trees grew close together, their trunks stretching tall, leaves shading the dense underbrush: most of which was dead and dry, adorned with fallen leaves. Sunlight peeked through the trees, the air warm even with the faint breeze that ruffled the foliage. All things considered, the clearing appeared bright and cheerful. It made Keith sick.

He turned his focus to the backpack that sat in front of him, hoping for a distraction. Jack was always the one that packed for them on these kinds of *escapades*. His uncle had been doing this type of thing much longer than Keith himself. He had trusted always trusted his uncle's judgment with these sorts of things, for the most part at least.

The black canvas of the bag was rough against Keith's fingers as he ran his hand over the top. It was a military style pack, made for durability. Keith unzipped the bag, and in one quick motion dumped the contents on the ground. A pair of small sneakers tumbled out among the mound of supplies. Keith felt his stomach clench tighter. He recognized the expensive brand printed on the side. They were lightly worn in places and laces were both double knotted together. Refusing to look to where the small figure still sat across the clearing, Keith placed the shoes to the side. He took a deep breath.

*First things first, let's see what we're working with.*

There were the familiar items that Keith expected: A bag of food held the usual: granola bars, jerky, a mix of nuts and dried fruit. There were a few of those “just add water” camping meals thrown in as well. Keith figured the food would last a person about a week if rationed accordingly. Jack always liked to pack on the cautions side, hopefully they’d be long gone before the supplies ever started to run low.

Pushing the food aside, Keith picked up a small metal flask that had tumbled out of the bag. He unscrewed the top and took a whiff, recoiling slightly as the strong scent of alcohol burned through his nose. Whisky, cheap and potent.

Jack had probably meant to put the liquor in his own pack, but Keith wasn’t going to complain. Bringing the mouth of the flask to his lips, Keith found his gaze had drifted back over to the girl who watched him from where she sat, staring at him with piercingly hollow eyes. She shifted her focus away as soon as he met her stare.

Keith put the flask down and turned his attention back to the supplies. A few unopened plastic water bottles had rolled out of the bag, less exciting than the alcohol. Keith also found a packet of iodine tabs for purification if the water ran out and a flashlight.

A small unfamiliar plastic case caught Keith’s attention. He flipped open the lid and was surprised by the contents; A row of small metal hooks sat neatly on top of a spool of clear twine. In a neighboring compartment sat a few silver weights and a rubber worm.

*A fishing kit.*

Keith’s short beard brushed against his lips as a smile slowly spread across his face. He wasn’t sure why Jack had packed the little kit in Keith’s bag. Maybe as a joke?

*Or a reminder,* Keith thought.

He snapped the lid shut quickly, as he pulled his expression back to its usual stiff mask. He tried to ignore the familiar sickening feeling as it rose in his throat. He slid the plastic case into a side pocket of the backpack.

The only thing left was a small bundle of rope that had stuck in the bottom of the pack when Keith had shaken everything out. Keith placed the food and water back in the bag. He once again considered taking a quick swig from the flask as he picked the smooth cylindrical object back up.

He glanced at the girl who was trying, maybe a little too hard, to make it look like she was un-interested in what he was doing. Keith slid the unopened flask into the bag with the other supplies.

*Now what?* He thought. Jack still hadn't returned. Not knowing what their next move was made Keith feel jumpy.

The small pair of shoes sat where he had left them, Keith shook his head. He slid a granola bar into his pocket, picked up the shoes, and stood, stretching his stiff legs.

Slowly he walked over to where the girl sat. She looked up at him her eyes falling on the sneakers in his hand. He crouched down beside her, clearing his throat.

"Here," Keith began, surprised with how rough his voice sounded after sitting in silence for so long. "I-uh, these are yours, right?"

The girl looked up at him warily and said nothing.

Keith placed the shoes on the ground in front of the girl. "Sorry there's no socks or anything." He said. "But, um, you should put 'em on anyway."

The girl slowly reached forward and grabbed them. She said nothing as she pulled them to her chest, Making no movement to slip them on her feet. She remained silent.

Keith silently cursed Jack for dragging him in to this mess, and then leaving him to play babysitter. He took a deep breath and pulled the granola bar out of his pocket. The girl regarded him with a wary expression, her face hard and distant.

“I figured you might be hungry.” Keith held the bar out for the girl to take.

She had refused any food that had been given to her so far; she had to be starving. Her gaze shifted to the food in Keith’s hand, but she remained still.

High in the trees, birds called back and forth to each other. A gentle wind rustled the multicolor foliage.

The girl didn’t move.

After a minute or so Keith’s arm began to ache. He shifted his balance and sat down.

“You’ll need to eat eventually you know.” He said.

The girl just stared at him. Her eyes refusing to meet his own.

A warm annoyance started to creep into the place of any apprehensions Keith had previously felt.

“Fine.” He said, doing little to conceal the frustration in his voice. Keith withdrew his hand and tore open the plastic packaging. The scent of granola and chocolate floated into the air.

Keith bit a large chunk out of the bar and chewed. Meal bars like these certainly weren’t his favorite food item of choice, but they could sustain life, and that was good enough for him.

Keith waved the half-eaten bar in front of the girl’s face. “This is really good you know, you’re missing out!”

The girl glared up at Keith, who couldn’t help the smirk that tightened across his face; bits of chewed granola showing through his teeth. The girl looked away. Triumphant Keith swallowed.

A stillness settled on the clearing after Keith's frustrated outburst, but slowly the birds began their chirping again. Keith looked up towards the branches trying to find the source of the song but could see nothing through the thick blanket of leaves. He reached up to brush a loose bit of hair away from his face; the dark strand was damp with a thin layer of sweat.

*What was taking Jack so long?*

He turned back towards the girl, a sigh escaping his throat. "What's your name?"

The girl stared at Keith, he could see a hint of confusion, mixed with the anger in her eyes.

"Why do you care?" Her voice was clear, but fragile, like a thin layer of ice covering a pond.

Keith raised his eyebrows in surprise, he realized he hadn't actually expected her to answer.

Why did he ask?

He wasn't sure. He already knew the girl's name, but something in him felt it was rude to address her without a proper introduction. He shrugged his shoulders. "Nothing else better to do I guess."

The girl narrowed her eyes, once again resigned to her silence.

"I'm Keith" he said. He considered holding out his hand, then remembered how she reacted to the granola bar and thought better of it.

The girl squinted her eyes at him. After a moment's pause. She spoke: "Riley," Her tone remained wavering, but there was a dryness to it now.

Keith nodded. "Nice to meet you. I guess," He added.

She ignored him.

A gust of wind, blew through the dried undergrowth, stronger this time. Keith enjoyed the cool air against his skin but noticed as Riley tried to pull her nightshirt down against the breeze. She was only wearing a thin long-sleeved top and matching pants. The clothing was obviously not built to shield against weather of any kind.

“What are you going to do with me?”

The sudden question words from the girl sent a shock of surprise and shame through Keith.

“Uh well,” said Keith, unsure of what to say. What should he say? *Sorry kid, your dad’s somehow on the list of one of the most dangerous crime groups in the state and now they want something he’s got.*

Keith grimaced. He wasn’t even sure exactly why they had been asked to go after this girl in particular, Jack had been stingy with the details.

“I guess if your dad gives us the money we need, he’ll come get you and you’ll go home.”

Riley’s expression hardened.

“I mean that shouldn’t really be a big deal, right?” Keith continued. “Your dad’s pretty loaded so it shouldn’t really be a problem for him.” Keith could hear how stupid any sort of justification sounded.

“What if he doesn’t?” Riley said, her voice was slightly stronger now. She held her head a little higher, locking eyes with Keith. “Because I know my dad would never give anything to bad people, no matter what they say.”

Keith faltered, unsure of how to respond.

Heavy footsteps crunching in the woods had them both looking in the direction of the noise. Keith stood as Jack broke through the tree line and into the clearing.

The expression on his uncle's face made Keith nervous. Jack was not in a good mood. Keith walked to meet him.

"What happened?" Keith asked.

Jack narrowed his eyes. "This asshole's stubborn I'll give him that. You think he'd be in a little more of a rush all things considered." His uncle's voice was a low growl, rough from decades of habitually smoking cheap cigarettes.

"He's not taking the bait?"

Jack shot him a sharp glance to let him know how stupid his question was.

Keith shrugged in an appeasing gesture, trying to keep his voice reasonable, "He's probably holding out to see if we'll crack. He's gotta come around at some point."

Keith hoped his words were more convincing than they felt.

"He better." Jack growled, just loud enough for Riley to hear.

The girl gave no indication that she heard him, but any shred of that confident anger she gave Keith had evaporated as soon as Jack had appeared. She once again huddled in on herself, as if trying to make herself look even smaller.

A crooked sneer spread across Jack's haggard face as he continued, his eyes no longer on Keith.

"I'd hate for anything to happen to his little girl."

## Chapter 2

The day Jack had first approached Keith started normally enough.

Keith leaned against a wall in the old run down construction, lot watching two men squabble with each other. He couldn't make out what they were fighting about, and he certainly couldn't be bothered to care. The group of men, and a few women, all stood in the lot. Some chatted with each other, some milled about, some watched the two arguing men. Most were older than, or around the same age as Keith, but a handful looked like they were just out of high school. Keith recognized a couple of them but made no effort to show it. This wasn't a place to make friends.

An old rust encrusted van pulled into the lot. The men stopped fighting. Keith pushed himself off the wall. Most others in the lot stopped whatever else they had been doing and watched as the vehicle slowed to a halt with a tooth grinding screech. The door slid open and a tall white haired man leaned out. "I need five strong hands for a plumbing gig down by Ashton," he growled.

There was a rush for the door. Hands shot skyward accompanied by shouts of the skills the hands, and their subsequent bodies, possessed. Keith muscled his way through the dense crowd, ducking thought the jabbing elbows and swinging shoulders.

The man in the vehicle was pointing at a few individuals who, when chosen, jumped into the open door of the van. One of the men that had been in the squabble, a heavysset balding guy who looked to be about ten years Keith's senior, was chosen. As he hopped into the van, with surprising agility for someone his size, turned, and flipped a rude gesture to the man he had been fighting with before disappearing beyond the door. This made the crowd shout and push forward with even more energy.



Keith slid his way forward ducking to avoid an errant fist. Many of the people he pushed aside cursed him out, but the complaints fell on uncaring ears. Reaching the front of the crowd Keith watched as the fifth body slid into the van.

Seemingly satisfied, the man began to slide the door shut despite the protests and offers still being thrown at him from the crowd.

“Wait!” Keith yelled, raising his voice to be heard over the commotion. “Hard worker,” he offered. “Quick on my feet, and strong.”

The man paused as he surveyed Keith. His eyes narrowed slightly, deepening the already thick creases at the corners. “You got any plumbing experience? He asked.

“No,” Keith faltered. “But I’m a quick learner—,”

The man shook his head. “Tough luck.” He said.

Keith began to protest but the man slid the door to the van shut. It sped away out of the lot kicking up the loose dust and leaving behind the strong sharp scent of burning rubber.

The crowd slowly dissipated with muttered curses and complaints. Different people broke off back to whatever they had been doing before.

Keith trudged back to his spot. He rubbed his forehead with two fingers and a thumb. *Too young to have the experience, too old to invest time into.* He slumped back against the crumbling wall.

Putting his hand into the pocket of his jacket he pulled out the brown paper bag he had shoved there previously. His stomach grumbling as the aroma hit his nose. Keith had been waiting to eat until he had been chosen for a job, but that was looking less and less likely by the minute. He had been here since early morning and now it was almost noon.

He pulled out his breakfast: a classic bacon, egg, and cheese he had picked up at the subway station deli. It was squashed and deformed, from where it had been sequestered in his pocket. The once melted cheese had oozed onto the thin paper wrapping. Keith peeled back the oil-stained paper. He took a small bite of the bagel, savoring the salty bits of egg and meat slowly, knowing damn well that one bagel sandwich would not go nearly as far as he needed it to. Keith sighed through his nose, chewing the food into a tasteless pulp before swallowing.

Keith watched the others mill about the lot. There were a few places like this around the city; where the desperate hopefuls would go to try and find some work.

The man who had been the other half of the squabble now dragged his feet around lonely, he kicked at a soggy cardboard box, hands shoved into his pockets. His face drawn in and blank. Keith recognized the look. It was the face of most of the people around here. A lifetime of being reminded just how worthless you were would do that to you. It was the same face Keith saw when he passed a mirror.

Keith was about to bite down on the last of the sad remains of his sandwich when he shifted his gaze beyond the lot to the wooded park it was connected to. He wasn't sure why he felt the urge to look over at that moment, call it intuition, fate, or just bad timing. What he saw when he looked however made his last bite of lunch jump in his stomach.

Keith swallowed painfully as he pushed himself off the wall, leaning only slightly closer in the direction of the trees. A thin figure was at the edge of the lot watching him, Keith couldn't make out any features but he recognized the body immediately. The figure caught Keith's gaze then quickly moved from the edge of the lot, and into the alley between two of the buildings.

Keith hesitated, was it possible he was imagining things? Maybe. Why else would *he* be here now? After leaving him alone for nearly six months, what had changed? Keith could think of a couple of reasons, none particularly pleasant.

Keith weight his options. He could pretend he didn't see, stay here hopefully get the next job that came through. That would be a leap though, the jobs had come few and far between. Besides, the later it got in the day, the less likely they were to come. He also knew he couldn't risk the man approaching him here out in the open like this. He heaved a painful sigh and began to walk towards where he had last seen the man.

Keith slid into the alley. The figure he had seen was there waiting for him. He looked just how Keith remembered him, down to the sly half smirk that told Keith the man was expecting him.

"What are you doing here?" Keith hissed quietly, hoping to not attract the attention of any passersby.

The man ducked is head and spat into the packed dirt before straitening. Keith watched as familiar eyes took him in. The smile faded slowly from a smirk to a faint one of concern. The expression made Keith's chest tighten. Keith looked back at the man. Not much had physically changed since the last time Keith had laid eyes on him. The body that stood before him was is was thin and wiry, but his posture was held straight. His cheekbones jutted sharply below his eye sockets where deep gray bags permanently sat. Wrinkles mapped his face, gathering around his nose and mouth. His grey beard was stained tobacco yellow around his lips. His hair, streaked the same gray to match, hung in greasy strands reaching just past his boney shoulders. It was his piercing blue eyes, the same as Keith's own that unnerved him; they seemed to cut straight through him.

There wasn't a soft thing about his uncle Jack.

"How've you been gettin' on?" Jack asked, his voice low and rough. The familiar drawl to his speech blending his words to one another.

Keith shifted. "Could be worse."

"Could be better." Jack said. When Keith didn't respond, he continued. "I'm worried about you boy. This ain't no way to live, hiding out in some shit hole, selling yourself out like a whore."

"Why are you here?" Keith asked, taken aback by the harshness in his own voice. His uncle's expression hardened slightly but his voice was calm when he spoke.

"I got a job for you, and from the looks of it, you need one"

"No." Keith felt the old frustration now, commonplace with his uncle, creep in.

"Now hang on" Jack said the familiar crooked smile creeping back onto his face, revealing years of bad dental habits. The old man lowered his voice to barely above a whisper. Leaning close enough for Keith to feel the rush of stale breath on his face as he spoke the price.

That was what made Keith pause; even the largest most dangerous smuggling jobs he had done with his uncle over the years had never paid even half as much what was being proposed to him now.

Seeing his opening, Jack continued in his hoarse whisper, "and they'll absolve your debt, everything. You'd be free, no questions asked."

Keith stared at his uncle in shock. "You're lying," Keith breathed, but the firmness in his tone wavered as he spoke. Keith knew his uncle better than himself; the man's expression was serious.

"How?" Keith asked.

“This thing. It’s uh,” Jack paused for a second as if contemplating the right word, he sucked at his yellow teeth. “Important to Kenny.”

“How’s that?” Keith asked. He could feel that old part of him pulling at him. the rush of excitement threatening to break free. He shoved it down, holding his breath against his increasingly beating heart.

“It’s nothin’ too outside our usual” Jack said, ignoring Keith’s question. “Simple heist job, prolly be gone for a couple days.”

Keith sighed, releasing the breath he had been holding in. He hated how convincing his uncle could be. When Keith was a kid, Jack would always get him to crawl in the tight spaces underneath the old rotting porch of his cabin, *That’s where the best worms always hide*, he would say. *And we ain’t gonna catch any fish without the biggest, juiciest worms you can find.*

Despite the grime, Keith had never minded the way the dirt stuck to his sweaty skin or and the cobwebs that clung to his eyelashes and ears. It made his uncle happy and that’s all that had really mattered. Plus on really warm days, when Keith would emerge from under the porch crusted in dirt and muck, Jack would toss him into the lake and Keith would yelp with excitement as the rush of cool water cleansed the dirt and webs from his skin.

Jack’s expression seemed to soften slightly. “Look I know it hasn’t always been easy, but I’ve always tried to do right by you boy. You know that better than anyone.”

Keith knew that was coming. His hand scratched at the side of his beard. Trying to ignore the all too familiar hollow rush of guilt as it settled in his stomach.

“I get how you think what you’re doing is right,” Jack continued. “And after this, we can go wherever you want. You don’t ever have to go back to them again.”

Keith stared at his uncle, eyes narrowing as he tried to gage the truth of his words. That night Keith left, when everything changed, Jack had tried to stop him. The last time they had spoken, Jack had yelled furiously; calling a traitor for choosing to leave. Loyalty had always been important to Jack, and Keith knew that. But after everything that happened, how could Keith stay? It had not been a kind discussion and Keith wasn't sure he would ever hear from his uncle again, yet here he was, trying to understand him, trying to make amends.

"I can't" Keith said. the weakness in his voice a shameful sting, "I don't care what they're selling."

"Do it for me boy, if nothing else you owe me this much." Jack said softly, the deep growl of his voice sending tightening the guilt in Keith's body with a sharp pang. Even after all these years it still hurt.

Keith looked away. "Not this." he said shaking his head. "Get someone else."

Jack faltered. "I need *you* boy, you're the only one I can trust to have my back, especially with this." His voice was strained in a way Keith hadn't heard before. "I need you with me on this, one last time."

Keith hesitated. *Would this really be that big of a deal?* One last job, then he truly would be able to start over. With that kind of money, he could get a real job. No more of this under-the-table crap, no more being treated like trash because he didn't have any other choice. And he'd be free of *them*. No more looking over his shoulder every time he stepped outside. Keith took a shaky breath.

Tires crunched on gravel and several shouting voices snapped Keith back to reality. He glanced quickly from behind the wall and into the lot. A large pickup had pulled in front of the gathering crowd.

“Find someone else.” Keith said he kept his defiant expression on his face, hoping his uncle wouldn’t see right through it. “I’m done.”

“Just think about it.” Jack said. He tapped the front pocket of his faded jeans, where Keith knew his cellphone sat.

“Don’t hold your breath old man.” Keith said as he turned away from his uncle and began to make his way to the lot.

“It was good to see you boy” Jack said. Keith paused for a brief moment. Closing his eyes and letting out a tight breath. When he opened them, he didn’t have to turn back around to know his uncle was gone.

Keith walked quickly back towards the lot, but he was too late. The truck pulled out of the lot as fast as it had come, passing Keith with a rush of warm air. Trudging back to his spot near the wall Keith released his clenched fists. He hadn’t realized how tight he had been holding them. he pulled the remnants of his sandwich out of the ragged paper bag. It had been completely crushed. Keith reeled his arm back and tossed the food into the little bit of woods as hard as he could.

He wasn’t hungry anymore.

### Chapter 3

The morning was cool and damp. Keith had awoken to the uncomfortable feeling of condensation on his clothes and in his hair. By the time the others were up and moving, the thick clouds that had loomed over them had begun to thin. Still, between the full trees and the overcast sky, the little clearing remained gloomy.

After another delicious breakfast of salted nuts and tough jerky, Jack had left in the direction of his truck with a quick excuse to Keith about calling Kenny and the others to report on the situation. Riley sat in the same spot as she had the previous day, chewing on the last bit of her peanut butter bar. This time when Keith had offered the food to her she had eagerly grabbed it and tore into the packaging without a word. In fact, Riley had not said a single thing since the brief conversation she had with Keith the day before.

Keith watched the girl scarf down the food and wondered if Riley had ever eaten a granola bar for breakfast, or at all or that matter. For a kid whose family probably hired their own private chef or whatever those rich types had, and was used to eating whatever and whenever her heart desired, she devoured the bar like it was the best thing she ever tasted. Of course, Keith realized, this was probably the first thing she had eaten in almost a day, after she had refused to eat anything Keith or Jack had tried to give her the night before. Keith had to hand it to the kid; she was stubborn, almost to the point of admiration.

There was nothing much to do but wait. Keith briefly wished he had his own phone with him just for a little entertainment, but he never brought it with him on a job, especially if Jack was going to be the one to take care of communications. The last thing he needed was a way to be tracked down when he was hiding out somewhere. Now though, with nothing much to do, he would have loved a distraction to take his mind off of everything.

The day was warm enough, but the air had a chill to it, and the overcast sky didn't help. Keith thought about scouting around the area to relieve his boredom. They would be out of water soon and would need to find a source somewhere. After making a halfhearted attempt to move he decided he did not have enough energy for such an endeavor yet. He was tired after not exactly having the most comfortable sleep last night, not to mention no sleep the night before



that. Besides he couldn't just leave Riley, Jack would skin him alive if the girl somehow escaped when he was supposed to be watching her.

Keith could see the girl leaning up against a tree across the small clearing. Her shoes were on her feet now, half hidden in the wrinkled brown leaves. She was picking at the bark, her small finger pulling small bits of it off of the trunk. She certainly didn't seem like she was planning a daring escape anytime soon.

"That's not good for the tree, you know." he said.

Riley scowled, "what are you, some kind of tree expert?"

Keith continued, ignoring her question, "You pull it off at the base like that, it's gonna kill it."

"Why do you care?"

Keith shrugged. He guessed he didn't, not really; it was something Jack had once told him when he was little. He glanced up at the sky, hoping his uncle would be back soon, with good news.

"My dad *is* coming to get me." Riley spoke without looking up at Keith. She had stopped picking at the tree and was now fiddling with a small stick. Her voice held the stubbornness he had seen in her yesterday. "I don't care what that other guy says."

"What makes you so sure?"

Keith hadn't meant it as a challenge, he was curious. He knew his own dad would have probably leapt for joy if Keith was taken off his hands, providing he was still getting some monetary compensation from the government of course. Considering most of that bastard's time had been sent sitting on that stupid recliner of his, any sort of sudden movement would have been a real feat.

Keith reflexively slid his hand in the pocket of his jacket, feeling the familiar shape of the lighter he kept there. His thumb brushed against a dent in the metal casing.

The girl glared up at him. “Because he’s a good person.” He’s not like you.”

Keith felt that warm burn of frustration work its way up his chest. *What did she know about good people?*

“Yeah?” he said. “And how’s he even gonna find you?” He spat back sarcastically.

The stick the girl was bending snapped in her hands, she threw the pieces to the ground next to her.

Keith could see anger burning behind her eyes. Somehow that made Keith want to push even harder.

“He’ll figure it out, he’s smart.” she said.

“Kid, were in the middle of nowhere, your dad’s got no idea where to even start.”

“He’ll find me!” Riley shouted shrilly as she shot to her feet.

Keith regarded her with cool indifference which seemed to make her face pinch even tighter with anger.

“He’s gonna save me and you are both going to jail!” Her hands were balled in tight fists. She looked like she was ready to attack, the idea amused Keith.

He wanted to see her try.

Keith slowly stood, looking down at the girl. The top of her head reached the middle of his chest. He slid his hands in the pockets of his jacket. He moved his arms gesturing through his jacket at her. in a casual *what are you gonna do about it* manor. He was about to retort, goad her even further, when Jack came storming into the camp.

He was moving fast, hopefully that meant good news. Keith turned his attention off the furious girl and onto his uncle. He opened his mouth to ask how it went, but Jack continued past Keith like he wasn't even there and instead he headed directly towards Riley.

The man stopped short in front of the confused girl and struck her hard across the face. She cried out and fell to the ground. Keith felt his hand involuntarily clench around the lighter in his pocket.

“You think your father’s coming for you, you little bitch?” Jack spat down at her. His harsh words rung around the little clearing causing birds to take flight from a nearby tree. “Hate to break it to you it seems like he doesn’t care enough to try and get you back!”

“Jack.” Keith said. He moved in front of his uncle. The man looked at Keith, rage shone on his face contorting his features. There was something else though.

*Fear.* Keith realized as he looked at his uncle.

He hid it well behind cold anger and harsh words, but Keith knew his uncle, and Jack was afraid.

*What happened?* Keith thought.

His uncle glared at him. “Don't you start with me boy,” Jack’s tone softened slightly, but the edge was still there, and Keith felt the sting of the words as he spoke. “I’ve been sticking my neck out for the both of us *again.*”

Keith felt like he had been struck as well.

“You owe it to me to keep your damn mouth shut and do as I say.” Jack stalked away.

Keith released his grip on the lighter in his pocket, feeling the blood rush back into his fingers. Jack’s words still echoed through his mind.

*He was right.*

Steeling himself, Keith walked briskly after his uncle. Who was hurriedly cramming his supplies back into his bag. He suppressed the urge to shrink back as his uncle glared up at him. Keith remained silent, questioning the man without opening his mouth. After a moment, his uncle closed his eyes and shook his head.

“He called the police.” He said, His words were still sharp but his weariness had taken over his uncle’s voice.

“Shit,” Keith breathed.

The man stopped and turned to face him, the anger that colored the features on his face made Keith’s stomach clench. He had to remind himself it wasn’t directed at him.

“He called them this morning.” Jack growled, “Why couldn’t he just do what he was supposed to!”

“They have no idea where to start though right?” Keith asked painfully aware of the panic threatening to break through in his own voice.

Jack didn’t respond. He finished packing his stuff into the bag and zipped it shut.

“Were moving. We have to go deeper in until I get word of what the hell were supposed to do next.” Jack’s tone faltered for a moment so brief that Keith was sure he was imagining things. “We just need a little more time,” Jack said more to himself than to his nephew.

Keith nodded. “I’ll follow your lead,” he said.

## Chapter 4

Just as Keith predicted, the rest of the day after his uncle had first visited him with the proposition had been fruitless. A couple more workers had stopped for help, but none had taken interest in him.

Keith had left the lot long after most of the others had gone. He took the train back across the river and exited two stops ahead of his normal station, heading to his favorite burger joint. He had ordered his regular; a double cheeseburger with the works and a side of fries. The woman that owned the joint, was kind enough to keep a running tab for him, accepting payment whenever he could afford it. Keith tried not to think about the encounter he had with his uncle, but it made him restless. He had walked the rest of the way to his rundown apartment building, trying to keep his mind off of the events of the day.

Keith was about to slide his key into the lock when he realized the door to his apartment was already open. The handle was pushed slightly away from the frame leaving the peeling wooden door loose on its hinges. Automatically Keith's hand went to his waist where he usually kept his gun concealed. His fingers met nothing but air as he remembered the, potentially very stupid, decision he had made to stop carrying a weapon when he decided to go clean.

Bracing himself, he slowly pushed the door open and stepped into the room. The lights were off,

Keith waited holding his breath.

Not sensing any movement, hostile or otherwise from inside the room, Keith flicked the switch with a quick motion. A single bare bulb flicked to life revealing his tiny apartment, or rather what was left of it. Keith let out his breath.

The small room hadn't been much to begin with, but now it looked like someone had driven through it with a bulldozer.

Keith surveyed the scene in disbelief.

The small bed that he'd crammed in a corner to his right, had been pulled from where it had been sequestered, the mattress upturned and the threadbare blanket ripped apart. The door

attached to the only closet in the apartment, had been flung open and his meager belongings had been pulled out and strewn across the ground.

He stepped over a pile of torn clothing and splintered wood, entering the room. Opposite where he stood, the little half kitchen was destroyed. Several of the cabinet doors were ripped off their hinges, the shelves smashed in. The refrigerator had been pulled from the wall and was laying its side between the kitchen counter and the remanence of his bed.

Keith's boots crunched against broken glass as he stepped further into the mess. His table had been upended and someone had snapped one of the legs off. The wooden chair was on its side broken in two. The old worn couch he had pressed up against the wall opposite to his bed looked like someone had run a knife through it, old stuffing pulled out of the mildewy cushions, which had themselves been pulled from the couch and thrown onto the floor. A singular window sat above the couch, once concealed by tattered shades. The plastic blinds had been pulled down from the window. Broken glass scattered across the couch and the floor.

*Well there goes my deposit,* Keith thought numbly.

Facing the couch, the old box tv which had once sat on a little wooden cabinet, was laying on the faded dirty carpet. The tv looked like someone had taken to it with the leg of the table. The screen was shattered and the top was dented in.

Keith stumbled to the couch and sank onto one of the remaining cushions. His elbows braced on his knees. His hands held up his head, covering his mouth. He knew what this meant, the message was scrawled across his apartment loud and clear.

The Wolves had found him.

Keith scratched at his short beard with his thumbnail and stared blankly at the trashed apartment. He had been given one month by Kenny and the other committee members after he

left the Wolves. They had put five years of time energy and money into training him to be the perfect smuggler and thief. If he wanted his freedom he'd have to pay back everything they had done for him. The amount of money Kenny had demanded was ridiculous, and he knew it. Keith could never pay that kind of debt in a month.

So, he had run.

The first couple of months had been the hardest; he had no one to help him. His only real family he had was Jack, who had all but said he never wanted to hear from Keith again. He had had bounced from place to place, never staying put long enough to leave a trail. Slowly he began to let down his guard, found a place to settle into, frequented the same places for work.

Keith sighed. What had Jack called him earlier? *A whore*. A body selling themselves out to the highest bidder, or at this point really any bidder at all.

Keith lifted his head surveying the room. He had done this to others before, old members who had tried to cheat Kenny or the others, people who owed the Wolves in some way or another. The warning was familiar enough to send cold pulses of dread through his veins. This was the last step before you were strung up like the cabinets that hung loosely from their hinges in the ransacked kitchen.

The Wolves thrived on discipline. Anyone they felt had wronged them had to pay the price, if not with money, then with their lives.

Keith rubbed the side of his head. He cursed.

It would be impossible to come up with the money he "owed". Keith put his head in his hands again, resisting the growing urge to yell. Pulling at his hair he took a breath. His uncle's words crept into his mind.

*They'll absolve your debt, Jack had said. Everything.*

“No!” he said aloud, his voice too loud for the small room.

*I can't.*

But what else could he possibly do? He could run, but where would he go? When left the first time he had a little money saved up from his work he did with his uncle and the Wolves. Now he barely had enough left for a decent meal.

*One last job*, his uncle had said. One last job and then he could start over, *really* start over. Whatever this job it must be important to Kenny if he was willing to completely cut Keith free. He had to admit a small, terrible part of him was curious, *what kind of job was so important?* He cursed. Then slowly, Keith pulled his cellphone out of his pocket.

He found his uncle's name easily, it was one of the only contacts he had. His thumb hovered over the call button. Keith stared at the lit up name on the little screen. Cursing one last time, he pushed the button.

Keith could hear the crooked smile in his uncle's voice when he answered.

—

A half an hour later Keith was ready. Jack had given him very few details, and told him where to meet up. He had put his apartment back in order to the best of his ability. Then he had showered and dressed in jeans and a faded t-shirt. He slid an old plaid button-down over his shoulders and pulled on his boots. He found his leather jacket and put it on as well. It was one of the nicest things he owned, old and faded in places but still did the job.

Opening the drawer of his bedside table, Keith pulled out a small roll of tools. Sighing, he slid it into the pocket of his jacket. He also took his gun and tucked it near his waist. Keith grabbed a silver lighter out of the drawer as well. He studied it for a moment, running his fingers over one of the larger dents in its case, before sliding it into his pocket as well. He knew Jack



would bring any other supplies they would need, as usual. That made Keith's life at least a little easier.

As Keith reached for the doorknob he faltered. Was he really gonna do this? Run back to his uncle after being clean for so long? Keith took a deep breath.

*One last job* he told himself as he opened the door.

## Chapter 5

Keith walked in the direction of the truck. The twilight sky shone through the dispersing clouds, showing bits of pink and orange. Keith still had just enough light to make his way through the woods without a flashlight. It took him almost an hour to reach the truck, still concealed under the fallen brush beside the lonely dirt road.

Keith check the car for any signs of tampering or any evidence that someone other than Jack had found the it. Cell service was scarce out here, Jack had been using the truck to drive a ways back where he could get a better connection, before returning it to this hiding spot. The old black pickup was his uncle's baby. It had been given to him by someone he once cared an awful lot about and his uncle still kept in in near pristine condition despite its age. Nothing seemed out of place. The vehicle remained untouched by any outside hands.

Keith shifted some of the dry branches to better access the trunk. He unlocked the latch and crawled into the cargo bed, ducking his head underneath the frame of the truck cap. On hands and knees, Keith moved to the back of the truck. He found an opened box with its contents almost gone. Keith grabbed two of the remaining bottles of beer from the fading cardboard. As he began to crawl his way out of the truck, his hand brushed against a piece of fabric: a crumpled bandana.

Keith looked around the trunk, the square of cloth clutched in his hand. This is what Riley would have seen the entire trip up out here, lying on the cold riveted base, staring up at the dark ceiling of the trunk cap or out the small window.

*She must have been terrified.*

Keith thought about Jack, the way he had hit her. He felt the sting of the strike as it flashed before his eyes. Jack had never laid a hand on Keith like that, though Keith was sure he had thought about it more than once. Especially after he was used to seeing what Keith's own father did to his son, the man had vowed to never harm his nephew in that way.

Keith shook his head, it would be over soon, the kid's father had to come to his senses, they could still put all of this behind them.

Keith slid out of the truck. He tossed the bandana back in the vehicle trying to clear the image of the frightened girl from his mind. He closed the latch behind him and, bottles in hand, moved back in the direction of the camp.

As he reached the clearing, Keith could see the warm orange light of the fire Jack must have built. He could make out the silhouette of his uncle as he placed a handful of sticks over the flame. The addition of the new wood sent bright sparks spiraling upwards with the smoke.

As Keith broke past the tree line, He noticed Riley in her usual spot, arms and legs wrapped in a tight ball to ward off the chill of the night. The girl ignored Keith as he moved past her. Jack turned to face him as he approached. Keith offered his uncle a beer, and Jack accepted with a gruff nod.

Keith and his uncle sat around the fire. Jack took out his fishing knife he kept strapped to his belt, and with one swift motion, popped the cap off of his bottle with the blade. Jack offered the knife, handle first, to Keith who accepted; using it to uncap his own bottle. Keith studied the

knife in the flickering light of the fire. The blade itself was as large as his hand, serrated on one side and smooth on the other. Keith had several fond memories of his uncle using the knife on their weekend fishing trips, prepping their catch to be eaten, or cutting Keith's line when it became hopelessly tangled.

*Don't worry, his uncle would tell him, you're doin' just fine. Try it again.*

Keith flipped the blade around and handed it back to his uncle, who slid the knife back into its leather case.

They drank in silence for a while until Keith got up the courage to speak.

"What's next?" Keith asked at last, staring into the flames.

His uncle was silent for several moments. "I got word." Jack responded, his voice calm, but hard as steel.

"Alright," Keith said.

Jack turned to look at Keith, the shadows from the firelight deepening the lines in his face.

"I was chosen for this one because they knew I'd be able to do what was needed to be done, no hesitation. I chose you, because I knew you'd do the same for me."

Keith nodded.

"There were terms," his uncle said slowly. "Instructions I was given." Jack gestured around him. "The rules were simple, we don't reach an agreement by the allotted time, or if the father calls the police, it's over."

Keith looked to the girl. She was laying on her side, facing away from them. She was far enough away that even if she was awake Keith doubted she could be able to hear the conversation; especially over the crackling fire and the night animals calling to each other.

“What you mean *over*?” he asked, his voice quieting anyway.

Jack’s face darkened as the flames began to shrink, “I was told, that if the mark refuses to take the offer, or he breaks a rule,” Jack repeated, faltering for a split second. When he looked back at Keith, His expression was hard. “We get rid of the girl.”

Keith stared at his uncle, the sinking feeling in his stomach growing.

His uncle continued speaking. “If something were to go wrong, we’re supposed to lay low for a while until this whole thing blows over. We know how to do that, plus, we’ll be able to travel fast just us two.”

“what exactly are we supposed to do.” Keith asked in a low voice.

“I’ve got our guns in my truck, it’ll be easy with the both of us.”

Keith felt the dread spread through his body, tightening across his chest. “We can’t—, you don’t mean that.”

Jack stared at him silently, his face was deadly calm.

“let’s just leave her here.” Keith said, trying not to let the desperation he felt color his words. “If something happens to her after that it won’t be on us.”

Jack shook his head, “In a few days, the entire state’ll be out looking for her, she’ll be found.”

“We don’t kill kids.” Keith said. “That was the rule, no one innocent; no kids.” Keith did everything he could to keep his voice steady, a hot anger building in his veins. His uncle knew they had rules. How could he be asking this of him?

“She’s seen both our faces Keith.”

The use of his name startled him, Jack almost never used his name.

Keith looked past Jack to where Riley lay curled up on the ground. Her sides moved up and down, the steady breathing of someone asleep.

“There’s got to be something else we can do.” Keith said, his desperation weakling his tone.

“You know there ain’t,” responded Jack. “we still get payed for completion, either way. There’s nothing else for us to do.”

Keith’s gaze moved from Riley, back to Jack’s face. The man’s expression was hard, his dark eyes unreadable. Jack downed the last contents of his bottle, then stood. He put a hand on Keith’s shoulder. “Get some sleep. Tomorrow, be ready.”

Without waiting for a response, Jack walked past Keith, ending the conversation.

Keith sat by the fire for a long time watching the coals dim, until only a faint glow remained. He didn't want to move though he knew he should rest. The hoots and croaks of the creatures in the trees had become louder as the night progressed. Keith had always found these sounds comforting, but now he could hardly hear them over his own thoughts.

Could he really do what Jack asked, end an innocent life to save his own? His uncle was right, if the girl was found, that was the end for them. They would be convicted, again in Jack’s case. Keith knew his uncle would rather die than end up in prison once again.

*Could her father have any possible idea where she was?* The girl seemed to think so. But Keith knew that Jack had been careful in his planning and the odds of her father somehow knowing where they were hiding his child was pretty low.

Keith felt a twinge of regret at the way he had goaded her earlier. He could see the thin frame of the child, now just barely visible as the fire died. She looked even smaller in the darkness. He could hear his uncle’s soft snoring. There was a time he would do anything for his

uncle, but now? If it came down to it would Keith be able to do what he needed for both him and his uncle's safety?

He had no idea.

## Chapter 6

They headed past the city and up north. Keith wasn't surprised, some of the richest folks in the country lived in this area. As they drove, the spaces between houses became farther apart and the houses themselves became larger. It had always amazed Keith how quick the population dispersed as you left the city borders.

Keith grabbed his old baseball cap he had left resting on the dashboard. He put it on. The faded Yankees logo wouldn't give any hint to his identity when they got wherever they were going. Jack seemed relaxed as he drove. Keith wasn't surprised, they had gone on heists like this together many times before. Keith had preferred to make his money smuggling goods from one circuit to another. It was better than snooping around some rich guy's underwear drawer. Jack was the thief.

Keith looked at his uncle. As he got older, Jack's resemblance to Keith's father failed. Keith figured this was mostly because his last memory of his dad was when Keith had just turned eighteen. It had been over fifteen years since then. Keith didn't know if his dad was even still alive, and he preferred it that way. Jack had always been more of a caretaker to him than Keith's own dad had ever been. Keith had sat in this very seat as his uncle would take him away from that hell hole that was his home, and they'd spend their weekends camping in the mountains far away from Keith's father. Keith let out an involuntary sigh. Part of him was happy to be back in the passenger seat. The thought made his stomach tighten with guilt.

The truck slowed as it turned onto a long driveway. The pavement curved, creating a wide U in front of the house; if Keith could even call the structure that. The large building was magnificent. At least three stories tall, it stood like a palace in the midst of perfectly trimmed gardens. The exterior was mainly brick, white wood and stone.

Keith stepped out of the truck and closed the door behind him with a quiet click. The house in front of him was magnificent. The sweeping drive had led them to a large brick mansion. A few floodlights were on, illuminating the front of the building, but the interior was dim and silent.

Jack stepped out of the driver's seat and squinted at the grand building. "The owner's been gone for a couple of days," he said, his eyes still on the giant house. "the staff should all be asleep by now, their rooms are in the back of the house."

Keith wasn't surprised Jack knew this information.

The man pulled on a pair of blue plastic gloves, like the ones worn by doctors at the hospital. "We'll be in and out before anyone notices."

Keith scanned the front of the building. "Two cameras," he said softly, as he spotted the round lenses hidden in seemingly obscure places. An unexperienced eye would have easily missed them. "One at the front door and one for the drive. He glanced back at his uncle and the truck. "We're outta sight for now, but they'll probably pick up something as we go for the door." Jack rounded the car to stand next to Keith, handing him a square of cloth. And a set of blue plastic gloves. "Suit up," he said.

"Thanks," Keith said dryly eyeing the bandana. "It even matches my eyes."

Jack gave him an obscene gesture before slipping his own bandana over his face, leaving only his eyes exposed. Keith did the same, and pulled his cap low and sliding the gloves on as he walked toward the entrance of the mansion.

The front door sat on a low porch surrounded by four white columns, two on each side. Keith stepped up to it. Kneeling on the ground, he examined the locks. There were two, one much newer than the other. He pulled a small leather roll from his pocket and spread it on the ground. By the light of his uncle's flashlight he could see the glimmer of metal tools. Keith made his selection. He slid the thin strips of metal into the older keyhole, the one in the knob of the door. Keith listened for the sound of the tumblers, feeling for the vibrations along his tools. The mechanism clicked and Keith grinned.

Keith had found his talent for lockpicking when he was a kid and his father had locked him his bedroom before promptly getting so drunk he had forgotten Keith was in there. Keith was stuck in his room for three days before he figured out how to pick the lock using a paperclip and parts of an old pen.

Keith moved on to the more modern lock. It was slightly stiffer and more complex. He twisted his pick in the lock but the pin didn't budge. Swearing softly under his breath, Keith reached for a different tool.

"You're not losing your edge, are you boy?" Jack asked.

"I'd like to see *you* try," Keith said through gritted teeth.

Jack snorted through his nose and turned away from the camera as he lowered his mask. He spit over the railing into a bush.

Slowly the tumblers rotated and the deadbolt slid back. Keith stood.



Jack approached the door sliding his bandana back up over his nose. He turned the knob and the door opened with a slight creak.

“You’re welcome.” Keith said.

Jack just scoffed. “Don’t go getting a big head now boy,” he said. “it’s large enough as it is.” He stepped through the opening into the house.

Keith shook his head. “Losing my edge,” he muttered as he followed his uncle through the door.

The main room opened up in front of Keith. It was massive; two stories tall and ornately decorated. A grand staircase sat on one side of the room, the rest opened up into a spacious welcome area. Keith couldn’t help but let loose a low breath of appreciation. This place was amazing. Keith pried his focus from the magnificent room to the wall by the door. A little box with a lit screen flashed a message in a faint blue light. The box let out a chirp and Keith opened the panel. He knew this system well.

After learning about his innate lockpicking abilities, The Wolves sent Keith to work for some of the most popular security companies. He learned the ins and outs of the different systems, never staying long enough to be remembered. Despite the distain Keith had for the Wolves, the skills he learned while under their thumb had been invaluable.

In under a minute he had disable the alarm and the cameras. He shook his head with a small smile, tearing the bandana from his face. Rich types like this always thought their wealth is enough to protect them. He placed the cover back on the box, the screen now dark. He grinned at his uncle.

They were invisible.

Adrenaline rushed through Keith's chest. He had to admit, there was a part of him that missed this life. The thrill was undeniably addicting.

Keith expected his uncle to make his way through the back of the house, to where the home office or other such business room normally was. That's where these kinds of people normally kept their safes and valuable items. Keith had seen it all before. But instead he watched as Jack stalked straight for the grand staircase, unaffected by his lavish surroundings. He stopped at the base of the large wooden banister and tilted his head as if listening for something.

The giant house remained silent.

Keith listened as well. He could faintly hear the leaves rustle in the wind from outside the door, but the interior of the house was still. He could hear his own breath softly escape from his mouth. Keith wondered what it must be like to live in such a grand place. Did the man they were robbing ever get lonely here? Jack had said that there were workers who tended to the house. *Was that enough?* Keith thought about his own matchbox apartment, worn and cramped. Keith had no love for his shelter, but at least it was so small it was hard to notice the absence of others.

Jack was looking back at him, one foot balanced on first step, He inclined his head sharply, a silent command for Keith to follow. Keith took a step towards his uncle who began to ascend the stairs. Keith wondered briefly where they were going, but he trusted his uncle. *The master bedroom then*, he thought. That was probably where they would be headed. Jack had said the guy was out of town for something or other so it would be empty, and their chances of finding whatever valuable they were looking for was pretty high. The large stairs led to a short balcony above the high front room.

At the top Jack took a sharp right. The hallway was large, but less magnificent. He stopped at the second door, inclining his head. *This was it.*

Keith tried the knob. This door wasn't locked. he pushed it open easily and made a sweeping gesture with his hand to his uncle; *after you*.

Jack entered the room and Keith followed close behind. This room was spacious but had a cozier feel to it. A lamp by the far wall of the room was on, casting a warm glow. It stood on a desk overlooking a large window. Notebooks and loose scraps of paper and were strewn around the desk and on the floor.

Jack bent down and scooped something up. In the dim light, Keith could see he had picked up a pair of well-worn sneakers. His uncle placed them in Keith's pack ignoring his silent confusion.

Keith turned his attention back to the room, searching for anything of value they may be after. A large bed stood in the center of the room, its carved headboard up against the back wall. On the wall above the bed, white wooden letters spelled out the name RILEY. A thick duvet covered most of the bed itself, though several pillows were scattered around top. In the center of the bed lay a girl so enveloped in her blanket and pillows Keith didn't see her at first. Her chest rose and fell rhythmically with sleep. Long brown hair lay loosely framing her face.

Keith took a step back in surprise. "There's a kid in here." He hissed to his uncle. To Keith's surprise, Jack just rolled his eyes.

"Yeah." Jack said. The low tone in his uncle's voice sent a sweep of dread through Keith's stomach. His uncle continued speaking, a sly smile creeping into the corners of his deeply wrinkled eyes. "What else in here is worth taking."

Keith felt a jolt of lightning flash through his veins. *What was he saying? He couldn't actually mean...?* "No." he said, weakly. He looked at his uncle in disbelief. "No way. I don't

smuggle people, you know that!” He spit the words at his uncle as firmly as possible while still whispering.

Keith looked to the small girl in the bed. He couldn’t tell how old she was from where he stood, she slept soundly unaware of the strangers standing in her room.

“We ain’t smuggling, just temporarily displacing.” Jack pulled a length of rope out of his pack.

“Are you insane,” Keith hissed. “how could you not tell me?”

The girl shifted in her bed and the men glanced over at her. Jack turned back to Keith, his voice a gravelly whisper.

“Would you have come if you knew?”

Keith opened his mouth enraged. Then closed it again, still seething. Keith supposed he could just walk out.

*Then what?* He thought. He had nowhere to go. He couldn’t go back emptyhanded. Keith felt his stomach sink. The old man had tricked him.

“Let’s just get this done,” Keith said, his voice brimming with malice.

Jack smirk grew. Slowly, he stalked to the bed. Keith watched him from the entrance of the room. His uncle always had a plan, he just hoped that it was a good one.

In one quick movement Jack pressed his hand down on the girl’s mouth. Her eyes flew open, her scream muffled. As her eyes widened in fear. She tried to pull away from the man but Jack held her firm.

Keith watched as the girl kicked against her covers, but he was unable to move. His limbs felt numb.

Jack suddenly let out a sharp curse, pulling his hands from the girl's mouth in surprise. A white cat, almost unrecognizable by the amount of fluff surrounding its body, sprang from the bed and darted out the door.

The girl let out a shrill scream before Jack shoved a bandana in her mouth.

"A little help!" Jack hissed.

The scream had sent a jolt of panic through Keith, sending him rushing to his uncle's side. He grabbed the girl's flailing arms. He could hold them easily, his glove-covered hands completely enveloping her wrists.

Jack secured the bandana around her mouth in a makeshift gag. He wrapped the piece of rope he had brought around her arms as Keith held them still.

Keith could feel the girl straining against her bonds. Her hands opened and closed weakly as she tried to pull away. Her round eyes were full of terror as they met Keith's. He quickly looked away.

Jack let go of the girl. Keith still held her but the girl had stopped struggling as hard. He could feel her shaking beneath his fingers.

Jack pulled out a creased piece of paper from his pack and unfolded it. With a flick of his hand he pinned a piece of paper above the bedframe with a small folding knife. Jack hoisted the girl over her shoulders like she was nothing. The girl still squirming, he began to move quickly for the door.

"She coulda' woken someone with that yell," Jack hissed, "we gotta move." He disappeared through the doorway.

Keith glanced at the paper pinned above the bed. In the dim light of the lamp he could make out the words typed in a bold font:

WE HAVE YOUR DAUGHTER

DO NOT CALL THE POLICE

YOU WILL BE CONTACTED AT 1200 TOMORROW

YOU SHOULD HAVE LISTENED TO US WHEN YOU HAD THE CHANCE

## Chapter 7

Keith couldn't stop pacing. He tried to calm his thoughts but his heartbeat drummed through his body so fast it hurt. Jack had gone to move the truck for an easy escape and Keith had to be ready when he returned. Maybe, maybe the Wolves would call Jack and change their mind, and they wouldn't have to, have to..." *Shit*. He cursed the father, he cursed Jack, he cursed himself for getting caught up in all this. How had he done this to himself again! He shouldn't have made this damn deal with Jack. Keith's foot hit a protruding stump and he stumbled forward, catching himself and swearing again.

"What's up with you?"

He hadn't even realized the girl had been watching him. She had once again been quiet anytime Jack was around and even when he left she had continued to ignore Keith entirely.

"Huh?" Keith asked, still too lost in thought to have heard the girl's question.

"You're acting weird, weirder than normal I mean."

"No I'm not." Keith said, the weakness in his voice gave away his lie.

Riley crossed her arms. "What's going on." her tone made it clear, it was a command.

Keith gritted his teeth. "Well, Jack is callin' your dad, and hopefully they'll come to an agreement so he can come get you—"

“Yeah you keep saying that.” She said cutting him off. “But shouldn’t you be at least a little more, like, happy or something? I mean, if you’re actually going to be scamming my dad out of his money, that’s gotta be nice for you.”

A branch broke in the woods and Keith nearly snapped his neck turning to see if it was Jack. Nothing was there.

“See, that was weird!”

Keith’s face hurt from keeping it in its pinched position for so long. Could he really do it? Could he do what Jack needed him to do, to save his own skin? He owed the man so much. This was *Jack*, his flesh and blood, his family.

Keith watched the girl as she awaited a response. She looked so fragile sitting in the dead leaves, her body bent in on itself as if her small frame was trying to make herself blend in. When Keith caught her eyes, she held them, her face formed into what she must have thought was a look of intimidation.

Keith’s blood ran cold as he realized he recognized that look. The girl stared him down with the same hard expression he had kept masked on his own face on the rare occasion he stood up to his father. That cool, firm defiance. Not strong enough to mask the fear hiding behind it.

Something within Keith shattered. His pulse beat painfully in his throat as he stared at the girl.

Exhaling a sharp breath, Keith knelt to her level, his eyes fixed on her face.

“Listen.” he said, his voice was hushed. “You’re gonna get up and move, right now.”

“What, why?”

Keith ran a hand through his scalp. He struggled to meet the girl's eyes. "Because when my— when that man comes back..." Keith faltered. He shook his head. "You don't want to be there when he is."

Her eyes widened but her mouth remained set in that stubborn line, "Why should I believe you?"

"It doesn't matter if you believe me or not, but if he comes back and you're still here," Keith swallowed. "He won't see the point in keeping you around to slow him down."

"What do you mean?" The girl's voice held a hollow tone as she kept her eyes on Keith.

The frustration that had been threatening to overtake him rose in his throat. He didn't have time for this. He was trying to help her!

"He's gonna kill you kid, you want that?" Keith spat, instantly regretting the sharpness of his words as she quickly shrank back from him.

"But you need me, to get the money or whatever." Her voice had become higher, less indignant and more scared. It had a shrill tone to it that grated at Keith's ears.

Keith closed his eyes, he took a breath trying to steel himself. "You said it yourself, your father's not gonna cooperate, and if he doesn't, there's no reason for you to be here."

"You're lying! You're just trying to scare me!" The shrillness in her voice was increasing, too loud for Keith's liking. *Why can't she just do what she's told!*

Keith felt the frustration tighten in his chest, overtaking his fear. He reached forward leaning on his hands and knees into where the girl had retreated and spoke in a low growl. "Jack is going to be back any minute, when he does you have two options: you can listen to me and do exactly what I tell you, or you can stay here, on your little princess ass but I'm not going to be responsible for what happens!" He spat the words at the girl. Her face paled as he spoke. For a



second Keith wondered if she was going to cry again, or shut down all together. He held his breath.

“What do you want me to do?” She asked, her voice less shrill, though it shook slightly as she looked up at him.

Keith sat back. *What should she do?* he thought. He had been so hung up on trying to get her to listen to him that he hadn't had a chance to actually come up with a plan. Keith looked hide around the little clearing, what would his uncle do in this situation?

“Get up and hide, go climb a tree so Jack can't see you.”

The girl shook her head rapidly “I can't! I don't know how to climb a tree, are you kidding me?” her voice was becoming shrill again.

“Fine,” he said in a low growl. “Just run. get out of sight and wait. Understand?”

The girl faltered, looking towards the wood then back at him. “Why are you doing this?” Her voice was barely above a whisper, and Keith could still hear the slight tremble in her words.

Keith just stood. Hoping she wouldn't realize that he didn't have an answer.

“Go.” He pointed towards the woods. The girl faltered.

Familiar footsteps crunched through the undergrowth and Keith's blood went cold.

“Now!” He said, louder than he would have liked.

The girl shot up and ran for the edge of the forest, she looked back at Keith for a moment, then disappeared into the woods.

Keith stood in the clearing, he clenched his fists to stop them from shaking. Without the girl's presence he felt very alone.

Jack moved into the clearing. His eyes were dark. Keith tried to quiet that part of himself who wanted to join the girl hiding in the woods.

His uncle approached him. “We need to move, fast,” He growled.

Jack reached a hand forward and Keith involuntarily flinched. His uncle scoffed; narrowing his eyes as he held the gun out for Keith to take. Keith’s hand hovered for a moment over the gun. His uncle pressed the weapon against his fingers and Keith felt the cool metal as it slid into his palm. Jack’s own gun was already in his other hand.

“The sooner we get this over with the sooner we can get the hell out of here.” His uncle said.

He looked around, suddenly realizing that something was missing. “Where is she?” His voice was dangerously still.

“She’s gone.” He said keeping his own voice steady.

“What do you mean she’s gone? Jack spat.

“Let’s just leave, it’s already done,” Keith tossed his gun to the ground beside him.

“Like hell it is! She can’t be far.” Jack began to move again but Keith intercepted him, blocking his path.

Jack looked at Keith, confusion flashing on his features for a brief moment. They were almost the same height, Keith only stood an inch or two above him.

“What are you doing?” Jack asked, his words turning deadly.

“We can’t do this. Killing little kids? That’s not us.” He kept his voice firm and as calm as he could manage.

“Move!” Jack said, trying to push past Keith.

Keith didn’t budge.

“Fine.” Jack spit the venom coated word at Keith.

The first came so fast Keith barely had time to dodge before it connected to his head. Keith grabbed the hand and drove his knee into his uncle's stomach. Jack gasped, stumbling back; the gun dropping from his hand. He rushed back towards Keith, rage coated every inch of his features. With a jolt Keith realized he had seen the same look on his father. Keith unintentionally took a step back. Jack threw his fist at Keith again, but Keith slid to the side. Jack had never been the cleanest at hand to hand combat, but he was surprisingly strong despite his thin frame. Keith swung at his uncle who tried to duck, but not before Keith's fist met his uncle's face.

Jack stumbled back a step. He sneered at Keith who could see a thin stream of blood flow from his uncle's nose; staining the grey hair of his beard a dark crimson. He sprang forward.

Keith tried to dodge the attack but his uncles elbow swung up and slammed into Keith's jaw. His head snapped painfully to the side. Jack grabbed him by the shoulder throwing him down. A sharp crack of pain reverberated through Keith's skull as his head smacked into the ground. Jack was on top of him in an instant, pressing his knee against Keith's chest forcing the air out of his lungs.

"How dare you do this to me!" He slammed his fist into the side of Keith's jaw. Keith gasped, tasting the blood pooling in his mouth. *So much for never laying a hand on me, asshole*, Keith thought dully as bolts of pain shot through his head and down to his chest. He tried to take in a breath but his uncle only pressed down harder on Keith's chest.

Jack gripped Keith's chin preventing him from moving his head. His dirty nails dug into Keith's skin.

"Everything I've done," Jack hissed. "It was for us!" He lifted his fist and Keith steeled his features, refusing to flinch.

Jack faltered and Keith followed his gaze to where Riley stood at the edge of the clearing, watching in horror at the scene unfolding in front of her. Using the distraction to his advantage, Keith grabbed the back of his uncle's jacket pulling him backwards to the ground.

Keith shot to his feet ignoring the nausea in his stomach as his vision blurred. Jack grasped Keith's ankle, trying to rise. Keith slammed his free foot into the side of his uncle's head and the man went limp.

"I told you to hide!" He gasped out a yell.

The girl stood immobile. Her mouth opened then closed like a fish out of water.

He grabbed his gun and swung his pack over his shoulder as he ran to where the girl stood.

Jack groaned from where he lay on the forest floor. He was already beginning to move again, slowly trying to rise.

Keith grabbed Riley's thin wrist. "Go!" He yelled. He took off, pulling the girl with him. And together they ran into the forest.

## Chapter 8

They ran through the woods. The dense undergrowth made it difficult to find footing but Keith was able to keep an almost steady pace. He could hear Jack yelling for him to stop. He kept going. The dull pain throbbed in his cheek with every step but he pushed through it. They had to get as much distance between the clearing as they could, eventually Jack had to give up right? He wouldn't leave his truck too far behind; they just had to outlast him.

Riley yelped as she tripped over a thin fallen branch and Keith stumbled, his hand still firmly around her wrist. She was slowing him down. The drying undergrowth snapped and shook as Jack crashing through the woods behind them, he was getting closer.

In one motion Keith slowed his pace and pulled Riley forward, scooping her up into his arms. She gave a sharp yell in surprise but she didn't fight his grasp. Her body was light enough Keith could hold her with little effort. Her shoulders rose and fell rapidly against his chest as he held her close. Her skin warm to the touch from the run.

Keith was able to go faster now, despite his burden; the distance between them and Jack growing farther. Even so Keith didn't let up. He changed directions as he ran, keeping a steady pace through the uneven ground long after the forest had quieted behind him. His arms ached and the pain in his cheek still pulsed, but he kept going.

By the time Keith finally slowed, the sun was beginning to set, turning sky a brilliant gold.

As he came to a stop, Keith's realized his whole body was shaking.

Riley squirmed and pumped her feet. "You can let me go now." She said.

Keith released his arms and the girl yelped as she landed with a thud on the leafy ground.

"Ow!" She complained, her voice more annoyed than hurt.

Keith ignored her as he doubled over, his hands gripping his knees. His chest rose and fell rapidly as he took in large gulps of breath, the cool air soothing his burning lungs. His heart pounded through his body, his skin pulsed with every beat. Thick droplets of sweat rolled down the back of his neck. His hair was plastered to his forehead and his thin beard was drenched in sweat. He watched a droplet fall from his chin and onto a dead leaf near his feet. He stared at the wet mark left behind on the brown crinkled surface.

Riley stood, brushing her palms against her sides. "You ok?" she asked. "You're not going to have a heart attack or something, are you?"

Keith wanted shoot back some half-assed retort like; *Next time why don't you carry me? Let's see how far we make it then.* But he was still too busy inhaling deep breaths and trying to quiet his pounding heart, to attempt a response.

A breeze sent chills down Keith's wet skin, tugging at his damp clothes as it rustled through the trees. The soft trickle of water met his ears and he raised his head. A small stream cut a path through the forest. Stumbling forward, Keith sank to his knees splashing some water on his face and neck. Pulling the bottle from his pack he gulped down the last of its contents then placed opening under the surface of the slow moving pool. Siting back on his heels he reached again into his backpack and found the packet of the iodine tabs. He dropped one in the bottle and watched dully as it sank to the bottom. The remainder of the water had slaked his more urgent thirst, but his throat still ached to gulp down the water cool from the shaded stream. Instead Keith secured the cap on the top of the plastic container. He had to wait. No amount of thirst was worth risking whatever nasty bacteria might be lurking in the water. *Better to play it safe,* he tried to convince his aching throat. Keith slid the bottle into his backpack and placed his bag on a large rock, savoring the feel of the evening air as it hit his back.

The blood finally quieting in his veins, the realization of what he had done began to sink in. Keith's heart started to pound against his chest again, this time having nothing to do with the grueling exercise he had just endured. He was in the middle of the woods with limited supplies. He didn't know where he was. His extremely pissed off uncle was out there looking for him, not to mention the police were also searching for the kid that just so happed to be standing next to him!

Keith could feel the panic setting in again. In the moment his only goal had been to get as far away from his uncle as possible, but now the realty hit him. *What did I do?*

Riley was looking at him expectantly, the light from the setting sun turning her eyes to liquid gold.

Keith's fingers found the familiar strands of his still damp hair as he absentmindedly clenched his fist at the back of his head. Slowly he stood, releasing his grasp. He unzipped his backpack and dug through it, pulling out the rest of the food. Jack had been the one with the extra supplies and food for the girl, there wasn't much for once person to survive off of, let alone two. Even so, Keith divided the food up and put half of it; few granola bars, two packets of trail mix, some leathery jerky and one of the heat and eat meals and set them on the rock. The remainder he slid back in his pack. Then he stood.

"You can go," he said to the girl. Or stay here, it's up to you." Riley looked at him in confusion. "That's all for you," he continued, gesturing to the food on the rock. "It should last a couple of days."

The girl looked at him eyes widening. "You're just going to leave me here? How am I supposed to get home?"

"I don't know." Keith didn't really care, he had done what his gut had told him to do, and that got him in this mess. Now all he wanted to do was get out of it. If she did make it back or was found, he needed to be long gone.

"Listen kid, I helped you out as much as I could. You're on your own now. If you follow the water that'll be your best bet. Most rivers around here eventually dump into the Hudson, you find that, you find people. People will get you home." Keith slid the backpack over his shoulders.

"So you're just going to leave me here alone?"

"Yep." He said, turning and beginning to walk away.

"Wait!" The girl cried. Keith steps faltered for a moment, but he kept going.

“Please don’t go!”

Keith forced himself to keep walking, he tried to block out her shrill pleas.

“You need money, right?” desperation colored her voice. “I can pay you!”

Keith paused, sighing deeply he turned. “How?” He doubted the girl had rolls of cash stuffed in the pockets of her pajamas.

“My dad.” She said.

“Yeah, your dear old dad, doesn’t seem very cooperative,” Keith said turning away and beginning to walk again.

“If you bring me back, I’ll make sure he pays for my return.”

Keith stopped.

Even if he was able to get back, then what? He really didn’t have a plan. He couldn’t go to his apartment; the Wolves would still be after him; even more so once the word of this latest betrayal reached them.

“He won’t even know you were a part of this.” Riley’s voice had gained confidence as she spoke. “We can tell him you found me out here, and felt bad for me or something.”

Keith didn’t say anything, but he didn’t move either.

“Please.” Her voice trembled a bit.

Keith sighed. He turned to face the girl. She did look pitiful. Her light pink pajamas were stained with dirt. Her hair hung loose around her shoulders, several strands mussed out of place.

A question escaped his mouth before he could stop it.

“Why did you come back?”

Her voice faltered as she met his eyes. “What?”

“When I told you to hide, you came back. Why?”



The girl shifted uncomfortably, the dry undergrowth beneath her sneakers crunching.

“I don’t know.” Her shoulders rose, then fell, shifting the hair around her face. “I saw that other guy, he...” The girl’s face tightened at the memory. “I didn’t want him to hurt you because of something I did.”

Keith was taken aback, why did she think Jack blamed her?

“I don’t know why I came back, but I couldn’t just leave.” She said softly.

Keith took a step towards the girl. “If I do this, I need some kind of assurance that I won’t be turned over to the police as soon as you get what you want.”

“You said they don’t know it was you right?”

“Yeah, that’s what that— *other guy* told me anyway.”

“Good. ‘Cuz dad will believe whatever I say. I can be pretty convincing when I want to be.” A faint smile tugged at the corner of her mouth.

Well Keith supposed that was one thing he could believe. She had gotten him to listen, hadn’t she?

He walked slowly back to where the girl stood. He crouched down so they were eye level. “What are you, ten?”

“I’m twelve!” Riley said indigently.

“Kay, do you know what a contract is?”

She just looked at him. Her eyes set, her mouth firm; a mask of feigned maturity.

“It’s a promise between two people, once you make it can’t be broken, got it?”

The girl’s eyebrows furrowed, she nodded. Strands of her brown hair shifting with the movement.

“If you really can get me the money I need, then I’ll take you home.” The girl’s face brightened. “But I’m relying on you to do your part. I need payment and I need you to tell your father, and the police if it comes to that, that I had nothing to do with... *this*. He gestured to the girl in front of him.

She solemnly nodded her head again.

Keith scratched at the short hairs on the side of his chin. He was going to get back either way, what would it really matter if she came with him? He could always split when they got closer if he felt he needed too. The girl was so loud and slow, it would be easily to get away from her. And if he could get the money, just enough to get him away from the Wolves and his uncle and everything else he had been trying so hard to leave behind—

He held out his hand. When the girl reached for it, he pulled back slightly. “Don’t shake unless you mean it.”

Riley hesitated, she stared at the outstretched palm. Then slowly but firmly she placed her hand in his. Her fingers were smooth against his callused ones, his own hand nearly enveloped hers.

They shook.

Keith stood and slid the pack back off of his shoulders. The sun had nearly set and the sky was darkening. He placed the food back into the bag, zipping it closed. “We should probably make a fire,” he said; more to himself than to the girl. They would need boiling water to make food, plus the nights were getting colder, and neither of them were really dressed for the weather.

“Won’t that other guy see it?” Riley asked

“Jack,” Keith said. “No not if I build it right.”

Keith kicked a shallow ditch into the forest floor, clearing the leaves and other debris from the area. As long as the fire didn't get to big they would be fine, plus Keith had specifically chosen a spot under several over hanging branches, the smoke would be dispersed by the trees before it reached a height anyone would be able to see.

A rustling and the sound of a zipper opening make Keith turn suddenly. In the fading light he could see Riley digging through his backpack.

"Hey, hands off!" He yelled "What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm hungry! The girl whined. "You put the food in your bag."

Keith stalked over to the girl and ripped the bag out of her hands. "No touching my stuff, ever! Keith said. "Now you can make yourself useful, or sit on your ass and be quiet."

The girl sat with a huff.

*Ass it is*, Keith thought.

He sighed and tossed the pack down, returning to his fire. There was plenty of wood for kindling in the seclude spot they were in. It didn't take him long to build as small mound of sticks and twigs.

Keith slid the lighter out of his pocket. It was plain silver, scuffed and dented in multiple places from several years of use. Keith flicked the cap off. The internal mechanism was a bit rusted. He spun the wheel with his thumb. Nothing happened. Keith sighed again, the old thing definitely didn't work like it used to. An image of his father flicking the wheel and the flame sparking as the man held it up to the cigarette in his mouth appeared in Keith's mind. Frowning Keith and tried again; still nothing. He cursed.

"Why do you even have that thing if it doesn't work? Riley asked

"It works," Keith said through gritted teeth. He spun the wheel again with no success.

“Yeah, I can tell.” She said, a small smirk playing at her lips.

“We can’t all have daddy buy us new crap whenever we want.” Keith shot back at her.

Riley rolled her eyes. “Yeah but that Jack guy had a bunch of matches, why didn’t you just take those?”

“Would you give it a rest!” He spat the warning forcefully, anger coloring his tone. He didn’t not what to talk about this with her. Riley didn’t responded, seemingly effected by the outburst.

*Good.*

Keith flicked the wheel and a small spark sputtered into a flame. Keith held the lighter under the pile of kindling he created. Slowly the fire began to spread. Keith snapped the lid of the lighter closed and slid it back into his pocket. The fire’s flame sent a warm calm through Keith’s body.

“Great, now we can eat right?” Riley asked

“Give me a second,” Keith said. The frustration still lingering in his voice. He gathered the food he had set out slid the items back into his pack. He kept the packaged meal out and ripped the tab to open the pouch. The label had identified the meal as “Chili dinner”. Peering inside the package, he could see some dried meat and beans coated in some type of powdered flavoring. The meal looked pretty dismal but still, the smell that had been released when Keith had opened the packaging made his stomach grumble.

Standing, he walked back to the little stream and filled the pouch with water. Then returning to the fire, he placed it among the larger branches in the fire, the flames licking around the colorful packaging. Keith sat next to the fire savoring the feeling as the heat swept along his exposed skin.

“Can’t you go any faster.” Riley said.

He could see her better now in the flickering light. She sat cross-legged in the dirt, her arms folded, either out of warmth or indignance.

Keith sighed, “Haven’t you ever heard the phrase “A watched pot never boils?”

“No?” Riley

“Well it’s an old saying that means; if you’re not going to be useful the least you could do is keep your mouth shut.”

The girl sneered at him. “You’re not the boss of me you know.”

“Oh yeah?” Keith said, feeling frustration burning through his veins, even stronger than the fire’s warmth. “Without me you wouldn’t last one day out here, you made that very clear. That does, in fact make me in charge and therefore the boss of you.”

They sat in near silence until the contents of the package began to boil. Keith quickly pulled it out of the fire. He set it on the ground and blew on his fingers to cool them. When they were safe enough to hold he folded the tops and shook the pouched until he was satisfied that it had been mixed.

They didn’t have any utensils so Keith tilted his head back and dumped some of the food into his mouth. The chili was pretty bland and the consistency was off, but its warmth was satisfying enough. Keith had definitely eaten much worse.

“Hey what about me?”

“Have a little patience,” He growled. Then he upturned the package downing more of the warm sludge. He could have easily eaten the whole thing, but he resisted. Setting the package straight, he handed the girl. “Eat up” he said.

Riley held the package of food looking at its contents like Keith had just handed her a bag of mud.

“What’s wrong now? Keith groaned. “You were just complaining how hungry you were.”

You already ate from this one, can’t I have my own?

“No.”

“Are you sure it’s even edible?” She asked, looking at Keith skeptically.

“You said you just saw me eat it didn’t you?” He said, exasperated.

“Yeah that doesn’t make me feel any better.” She looked back down at the food, grimacing.

Any little patience Keith had left was gone. “Eat, or you’ll run out of energy, slow down, Jack will catch you and you’ll die.” he said dryly. “Is that what you want?”

Riley glowered at him. She slowly tilted the package back and slid a bit of the food into her mouth. She chewed, her face pinching. “This is disgusting.”

“Just eat it.” He said weakly.

Riley pinched her nose as she took another bite.

“Are you always this dramatic?” He asked.

Riley just narrowed her eyes, but thankfully said nothing.

She ate the rest of the meal in silence and when she was finished Keith snuffed out the dwindling flames with his foot. The darkness seemed to close in as the light from the flame died.

“Why’d you turn the fire off.” Riley’s voice still held that slight indignant shrillness that grated against Keith’s skin.

“I don’t wanna burn the whole forest down.” He said, Trying to keep his frustration in check.

“Well couldn’t you have kept it going for a little longer? She whined.

“Why?” He asked. But her voice didn’t respond and the woods filled with the familiar sound of the night creatures.

“Oh, now you’re not going to say anything?” Keith spat loudly. He was exhausted and this girl had a way of tugging at nerves he didn’t even know he had.

“I thought that’s what you wanted!” She shot back.

“I’m saying the least you could do is be a little cooperative!” He said, his voice growing as loud as he dared.

“You’re the one that brought me out here!” Riley’s shrill voice matched his volume.

“You think I wanted to be stuck here with you? Keith spat.

“I don’t know! I don’t know what you want!” She shouted back.

“What I want you to do is shut up and go to sleep! We have to cover a lot of ground tomorrow.” He lay back on the forest floor.

“Good!” She yelled, “Because the sooner I can get away from you, the better!”

Keith could hear the leaves crunch as she flopped onto the ground.

Keith rolled over and pulled his jacket tighter around his shoulders, thinking the exact same thing.

## Chapter 9

Keith trudged along the gradually inclining slope. He did his best not to look back at his traveling companion. Anytime the girl felt like she had his attention, she’d start spouting off with a series of redundant questions, most of which ended in her arguing with him. *Where we going*

*again? How long are we going to be out here? What if that other guy Jack finds us? Can we take a break? Are we going to run out of food? Are you sure you know where you're going?*

Keith wasn't sure if she genuinely even had questions anymore, or was just arguing for the sake of it. He supposed at this point didn't particularly care either way, he was too tired to give into her childish bickering. Keith lifted his foot to easily step over a half-decaying log. Part of him hoped that if he ignored her, maybe she would wander off and wouldn't be his problem anymore. Not that he could lose her if he tried. The girl seemed to stumble through the undergrowth in the forest, like she had no control of her own body. Keith didn't know how it was possible for someone so small to make so much noise. *Was she going out of her way to trip over things?*

Keith resisted the urge to spit out a rude retort he heard a thud of a body drop behind him. He turned.

The girl had fallen on her knees in the dry foliage. The rotting log was broken apart behind her. She must have tried to stand on it, stupidly unaware that old logs were soft and split apart easily. She stood, brushing the bits of old leaves off her light pants, looking sheepishly up at him.

Keith turned away from her and continued walking. The day was temperate despite the season, but Keith frowned as he surveyed the sky. It had been overcast from the moment they woke, but it had darkened over the last couple of hours. Rain certainly wasn't uncommon for this time of year, but it would make things more complicated. Keith hoped the weather would hold off until he got where he needed to.

He had a general idea where they were, but that wasn't good enough. He needed a way to survey the area Jack had brought them to. After clearing their makeshift campsite, Keith had set



off for the low peaks he had seen. If they could get to the top of one before sundown he should be able to survey the area and hopefully plan as to where they should go next. The best thing would be to find some sort of civilization. From there it would certainly be easier to get a hold of the girl's father; though more people would create a new problem. Now that the police were out looking for her, she would raise suspicion from the moment they reentered society. And if they were separated before Keith could make his case to the father, he would be screwed.

A branch snapped behind him. And then he heard a light yelp as a body crashed into him. He stumbled forward. Bracing his feet on the ground he turned sharply. "Would you quit fooling around back there?" It was frustrating enough that he had to slow his pace considerably to accommodate her.

The girl just narrowed her eyes at him.

Keith took a deep breath, trying to calm the warm irritation that seemed to have made a permanent residence in his chest. The sooner he got where he needed to, the sooner he could get her home and be rid of this whole mess.

Keith quickened his pace slightly. Not bothering to look back and see if the girl was keeping up.

*Why?*

The thought echoed through his body with every step he took. Why had he done it? Keith ran an errant hand through his hair, tightening his grip on the strands. He had never really cared for kids of any kind. It's not that he hated them or anything, but they were annoying, and needy and—,

"Sooo..." he heard the girl begin behind him. Keith stifled a groan.

“How much longer is this going to take?” She asked. Her high voice was breathy as she quickened her pace to keep up with him.

Keith continued walking.

“Hey!” She said. Keith heard her footsteps quicken as they crunched through the forest floor.

She ran in front of him, stumbling over an upturned root. She steadied herself and stood blocking his path.

“What’s with you!” She said. “Is it really so hard to answer me? Aren’t we supposed to be working together or something?”

Her face was pinched in frustration and Keith wondered if she thought she was trying to be intimidating, the thought made him smirk, but his smile held no kindness.

“I don’t need to answer anything,” He said, pushing past her easily.

“Why are you such a jerk!”

Keith chuckled coldly, “I don’t need to answer that either.”

The girl stomped her foot, the noise muffled by the decaying debris on the forest floor. “I deserve to know where your taking me.” The girl said, that familiar shrillness in her voice making Keith once again regret all the life decisions that had led him up to this point. “We’re partners, we shook hands on it and everything.”

Keith spun to face the girl, his anger tightening the features on his face. “Let me make this very clear.” He said. “We are *partners* by necessity only. That’s it. I am not your friend, or your dad, or whatever it is you think I am, and I hate to break it to you kid, but you don’t deserve shit. You listen to me, you do as I say, and you don’t ask stupid questions.”

Keith expected her to shrink away from him, maybe even start to cry. He didn't care as long as long as this spoiled, arrogant, princess listened to him.

The girl reflexively stepped back in shock, but she straitened herself, pressing her lips tightly together, her hands curled into tight fists. She stared up at him, her eyes wide but unflinching. "Or what?"

Keith was taken aback by the brashness in the girl's voice. She held her head tall as she glared at him.

Something cool dropped onto Keith's hair. Instinctively he put his hand to the spot, it was wet. He pulled the hand from his scalp and looked at clear coating of water on his fingertips. Another drop splashed onto his hand. Than another. And another.

"Come on!" Keith growled at the girl. They had already wasted too much time.

"No!" The girl crossed her arms in a childish gesture of defiance.

"What?" Keith said.

"I'm tired and I'm hungry! We've been walking for hours, and you won't tell me anything about the plan or what we're doing." Riley stepped off the path and sequestered herself at the base of the tree, sheltering her from the large droplets that had begun to fall faster, spattering against Keith's hair and body. She sat on the ground, crossing her legs and arms. "I'm not moving!"

"Yeah?" Keith shouted. The frustration that had been tightening in his chest burst. Keith surged forward and grabbed her by the wrist, yanking her out from under the tree. She yelled and tried to pry his arm off of her. He dragged her into the open. Raindrops began to splash onto her clothes and skin. She beat at his hand with her fist, tugging away with her strength.

“Stop it, just stop!” Keith spat, raising his voice even louder to be heard above the downpour. The girl continued to struggle against his grip. Growling in frustration Keith let go. The girl stumbled backwards and fell ass first onto the muddy, rain soaked ground.

She glared up at him, her hair now thoroughly drenched. It stuck to the side of her forehead as she pushed it away from her eyes. The motion left a dark streak of mud above her right eyebrow.

“Leave me alone.” She yelled.

“I tried to!” Keith yelled back. “You were the one who wanted me to help you!”

“Yeah well if I realized what a jerk you were I wouldn’t have asked you to stay!”

“Please, you’re a scared, helpless little kid, you knew exactly what I was like when you asked for my help.”

“I’m not a little kid!”

“If you don’t want me to treat you like a little kid then stop acting like one!”

Slowly the girl stood, she wiped the palms of her hand on her drenched pajama pants, leaving dark streaks of dirt.

Keith turned away. He began to trudge in the direction of the hill. The rainfall made it harder to hear if the girl was following, but Keith had a feeling as stuck up and stubborn as she was, she wouldn’t let herself be left behind. Especially in this weather.

They moved in relative silence for a while. Keith wondered if Jack was out there looking for them right now. His uncle would have to stick closer to roads and trails if he didn’t want to leave his truck behind, but the man had grown up in woods like these.

Keith bit back the uneasy feeling that they were being followed. He involuntarily glanced back, but beside the soggy little girl, and the splashing droplets, the woods remained still.

The path Keith was forging gradually became steeper as they began to climb the hill. It was slow going as the rain had slicked the leaves on the ground, creating muddy puddles and thin streams of water.

They reached the top of the incline a little before dusk. Just as Keith had feared; the visibility was ass. Rain pelted them and the wind had picked up, cutting through Keith soaked clothing. He stepped further out onto the top of the hill. A few trees grew here and there, but the area he stood was clear enough. The dirt was packed hard, though little pools of water had filled on the ground. Ahead of him a couple sturdy trees stood overlooking a cliff face.

Keith stepped through the pelting rain, squinting past the trunks. He saw faint outlines of a few distant hills but not much else. Keith cursed. The sun was going down and Keith didn't know where to go next.

Turning back to where he had come, Keith could see Riley appear from the ridge they had climbed. A gust of wind whipped her rain soaked nightshirt and she pulled her arms close to her body. She looked to Keith; her eyes questioning, but her mouth set in a tight grimace. If the look was aimed at him, or the cold, Keith didn't know.

*Probably both.*

She stopped beside him, but maintained a healthy distance from the cliffs edge.

"We should make camp." He said after a moment.

"Here?" Her voice still held an indignant sharpness to it.

Keith shrugged. "Good enough place as any."

Riley looked unconvinced. "Don't you think it's a little," She looked around. "Wet?" she said.

Keith shot her an annoyed look.

“I know I know, no questions.” She said, her words sharp with bitterness. She had a point, in her own way, as much as Keith hated to admit it. The rain had lightened a little but they were certainly more exposed to the elements up here and it would make sense to seek better shelter. But that would mean they’d have to hike all the way back down to the base of the hill, which would take too much time, especially with Riley’s innate ability to trip over everything in her path.

“For someone who acts like they know so much, you seem to be doing a pretty terrible job at this.” The girl muttered, loud enough for him to hear above the rain.

He threw his arms up in the air exasperated. “What do you want from me?” Keith snapped. He stepped closer to the girl and she backed up, despite the defiance in her eyes.

“Do you even have a plan?” she spat at him.

“Yes! Kind of!” Keith said, all too aware of the defensiveness in his own voice. “I don’t know!” he shouted. He was tired and wet, not to mention hungry. Why did he have to be the one to do all this shit, while she followed him doing nothing but getting on his last nerve.

“Do you have a better idea? Or any idea at all?” he sneered at her.

The girl hesitated but said nothing.

Yeah, Keith said. “That’s what I thought.”

Keith took another step towards her and the shelf of rock they were standing on crumbled.

Keith fell, sliding down the side of the cliff. He stuck his arms out clawing at the dirt, desperately trying to cling to anything around him. His hands grabbed at chunks of stone and dirt, but the cliff was slick with the rainwater. Keith’s side slammed into a thin, but solid, tree trunk; forcing the air from his lungs. gritting his teeth, he tried to grab the trunk but it cracked and

he lost his grip, sending him sliding further down the steep incline. He tucked his hands around his head, protecting his face and neck and squeezing his eyes shut. His body slammed into the base of the cliff with a painful smack that reverberated through his bones.

Gasping for breath, Keith groaned. Raindrops lightly pelted his face. He heard the faint thump of a smaller body next to him. He opened his eyes. Riley was lying in a heap not far from him. She shifted, coughing. Her chest was rising and falling rapidly.

Keith slowly sat; ribs aching from where they had collided with the tree trunk. He took several deep breaths, trying to fill his lungs.

“You ok?” Keith croaked, once he was able to speak. The girl nodded. Keith could barely make out her eyes, wide with terror in the dying light.

Slowly, she pulled herself to her feet. Leaves and muck stuck plastered in her hair and large patches of mud stained her clothing, but she seemed relatively unharmed. She brushed her dirty hands on her pajama pantlegs.

Keith slowly stood as well, his body aching with the movement.

The girl looked up at him. “What now?”

## Chapter 10

Keith woke early. The rain had passed and the sun now shone brilliantly through the leaves. There was a chill in the air, made worse by Keith’s still damp clothes. He had pulled off his leather jacket hoping it would dry faster separated from his body. The long-sleeved button down stuck uncomfortably to his undershirt and arms as he shifted. He debated shedding another layer but the cold morning air persuaded him otherwise.

Keith took a deep breath, savoring the crisp smell of drying wood and decaying leaves. Nostalgia for better days, simpler days, washed over him at the scent. Keith exhaled, he couldn't get distracted. He had more pressing issues at hand.

The previous night, the rain had not let up for hours. The light of his flashlight had done little to help him, so Keith was unable to scout the area. He also hadn't been able to make a fire or cook the remaining dinner; so instead they ate soggy trail mix and sat in miserable silence. Even when the rain did dwindle and stop, Keith was still soaked to the bone. He had slept restlessly.

Keith surveyed the steep hills and wooded cliff faces that surrounded them. The place they had fallen from was steep and carpeted with forest growth. Just as many trunks lay on their side as still stood. He could see the trail they had made, broken branches and fallen rocks littered their path. Keith rubbed his sore ribs. They could try to climb where they had come from, but the wooded path was concealed in shade and would be still slick from the downpour. It was possible; Keith could try to attempt the path, but he was doubtful even he would be able to climb it. Riley wouldn't stand a chance. Keith scratched the back of his head and scanned the area for a safer way back up, but the thickly wooded incline was much too steep for any attempts to scale it.

Behind him was the same. Another sheer slope littered in fallen trunks and slick undergrowth. They might be able to make it a couple feet up before sliding right back down to where they started.

Keith cursed softly. That left the cliff face that stood in front of him. This one was a bit different from the others. Light stone stood out jaggedly against the rain darkened dirt. The face



was incredibly steep, but large chunks of the stone jutted out of the cliff's edge. These slabs were unnaturally angular.

“I think it's some kind of quarry.” Keith said to himself.

“What?”

Keith had almost forgotten the girl was there, she had been wonderfully quiet this morning.

“It's a place where people used to mine for rocks to make buildings and things.”

Riley scrutinized the cliff face “Does that mean there are people nearby?”

Keith shook his head. Quarries like this were not uncommon of the area and this one looked long abandoned. “They probably made it ages ago,” He said.

It was too small to have been made by modern machines; most of it was overgrown with thick shrubs and thin wiry tree trunks. But, there was that section of bare stone that Keith studied now. It solid wall, several of the cut portions of rock looked large enough to place a hand or foot.

Keith stepped closer to the craggy cliff. He set his fingers against one of the low slabs. It was cool, but dry. The old cut rock was surprisingly smooth. Keith tugged on it with all his strength but the slab held firm. He tentatively reached up and placed his other hand on the next slab. A small shower of pebbles and dirt fell on him and he held his breath, squinting his eyes against the barrage. The firm slab was easy enough to grip. Keith hoisted himself off the ground, placing his foot against the first outcropping of stone and pulling himself slightly higher. He looked up, the wall was at least forty feet high and there was no guarantee the slabs higher up would hold. Keith hopped back to the ground.

He considered his options. He could try the cliff they had fallen from again, but with the densely packed trees and the slippery undergrowth the chances of success were slim to none. The more they failed, the more energy they would expend and with dwindling supplies it would be long before they no longer have the strength to try. Then they'd really be trapped. Was it possible they would be found? Keith supposed that there always a slim chance, but by who? If police or search and rescue made it this far into the forest they would be saved, but he doubted the law enforcement would give him the same benefit of the doubt he was hoping Riley's dad would. And if Jack found them they'd be sitting ducks.

Tugging at the short scruff on his chin, Keith stalked back to where his backpack lay and unzipped the damp canvas. He dug through the bag, trying to ignore the dwindling food supply. There was only one ready meal left, a couple of packs of jerky and nuts, and a handful of granola bars. At the rate they were going they would be completely out of food in a few days.

*Well get out of here before then,* he thought, trying to quell the rising panic in his throat. *We may have to pick up the pace a little, but there had to be a town around here or something right?*

Keith didn't exactly feel optimistic, but he pushed the concern from his mind.

Keith pushed a hand to the bottom of his bag and his fingers wrapped around what he was looking for. He pulled the long cord of rope from the backpack and set it on the ground. After replacing the remaining items, Keith unraveled the rope. It wasn't long, maybe twenty feet, but it was sturdy. Keith tugged at it a couple of times as a halfhearted confirmation. He looked back at the quarry wall one more time then shook his head. *This was a terrible idea.*

Riley watched him silently. Keith could tell by the way her lips pressed together and her cheeks puffed that she was fighting back the urge to question him.

Something about this made Keith smile; but this time the usual frustrated tightness in his chest seemed to have vanished. She was trying her best to accommodate him, the least he could do was return the favor. He beckoned the girl forward with a jerk of his head. She approached him and he kneeled. Lifting his backpack, he slid the straps over the girl's shoulders. She stumbled slightly at the unusual burden but didn't argue or try to pull it off. Her body shifted slightly as he adjusted the bag. Her head was cocked, her eyes on his.

"We need to get out of here," he said. "And there's really only way I can see." Keith gestured with a thumb to the cliff face behind them. He watched as Riley's focus shifted to over his shoulder.

"You're going to climb it?" she asked.

Keith tightened the straps of the backpack the best he could so the pack could sit snugly on her shoulders

*"We're gonna climb it."*

Keith saw panic widen her eyes as she focused back on his face.

"You'll be on my back. I'll secure you with this," he held up the rope. "We'll be tied together," He said. "So you can't fall."

Her face blanched as she stared at the cliff behind him. Her mouth was open slightly. She took a few shaky breaths.

Keith supposed if she refused he could try to force her; but if she didn't cooperate, or she panicked, they would both be as good as dead.

"It will be ok." Keith tried to steady his own voice to one of calm and confidence.

The girl didn't look so sure.

“I told you I’d get you home,” He said. “We shook on it and everything right? You’ll be safe. I promise.”

The girl swallowed. She met his eyes, warm amber into sharp blue.

“Ok,” She nodded.

Keith placed a hand on her shoulder and gave it a little squeeze. Then he straitened the rope and wrapped it around her waist, securing it with a knot. He slid one end through the canvas loop on the backpack and underneath her arms. He turned away from her, still crouched.

“Hop on.”

He heard her hesitate, small feet shuffling in the dry leaves behind him. Shifting his weight Keith crouched slightly lower. He felt the unfamiliar weight of her body as she slipped onto his back, wrapping her thin arms around his neck.

Keith stood, holding her legs to keep them from sliding down. She was relatively light, just as he had expected but she held on with her arms and legs with surprising strength. The backpack on her shoulders offset his balance slightly, but he shifted the weight the best he could.

Keith wrapped the remainder of the rope around the front of his chest and once around his waist before securing it with another knot. Jack had drilled the importance of different knots into him when he was a kid, and Keith had just rolled his eyes not seeing why one knot over the other was going to help them catch more fish. Now though, he was glad he paid attention.

“You feelin’ ok back there?”

“Yeah.” Came the weak reply.

Keith approached the cliff. He could feel the girl’s rapid breathing in the rise and fall of her shoulders against his back.

“Here we go.” He said.

She tightened her grip around his neck. “We’re going to die.” She squeaked.

“Were not gonna die.” Keith scoffed, trying to sound as confident as possible. “Just hold on tight and I’ll do the rest.”

Keith could hear his uncle’s voice in his head. *Once you make that decision, it’s final. Doesn’t matter how much of a dumb-ass decision is it, you follow through. Aint no looking back now.*

“No looking back now,” he repeated to himself. He took a steadying breath.

“Ready” he asked.

He felt the girl nod, her forehead brushing against his ear.

Keith placed his hand on the small ledge of stone and hoisted himself up. His foot found the solid slab of stone and he straitened himself further. His other hand reached up and he pulled his body up. He could feel the girl shift slightly against him.

Hand over hand. He slowly pulled them both up the wall.

It was slow going. He tested a hand hold, but it wasn’t deep enough. His fingers slid against the smooth stone. The girl’s breath was shallow, little wisps of air brushing the hair against the side of his head. His hand caught hold of a flat edge and he pushed off of his stone footing, pulling them up another few feet.

Sweat trickled down his forehead, he was suddenly very thankful for the chill in the air.

“How you doing back there?” he called, his voice shallow and breathless.

“Just keep going,” came the shaky response.

Keith chuckled. Pulling himself up further, he glanced down. They were not quite halfway up the cliff, the ground below them seemed to be much farther down than he would have thought. A fall from this height would most likely be debilitating, if not deadly. Keith returned

his attention to the wall. His palms were wet with sweat. He wiped his free hand against his jeans. Before shifting his grip and grabbing at the next ledge.

He secured his finger on the chunk of rock and pulled up. The thin ledge crumbled. Riley screamed as Keith slipped, swinging away from the wall, his one remaining hand clenched tightly on the stone slab.

His feet dangled, scraping at the sheer stone. Riley clung on to him so tightly he couldn't get any air into his throat.

He yelled weakly, his hand desperately grabbed for anything sturdy. His palm made contact with a thin branch that snaked out of the wall. He wrapped his fingers around it and clung to it with all his strength.

It held.

Keith pulled them closer to the wall. One of his feet found a hold, his other foot slid against the stone until it caught on a small ledge.

Keith's heart was racing. He coughed weakly. He still couldn't get breath into his lungs. Clutching the branch tightly he let go of the stone hold with his other hand. His fingers were raw and red as he tapped at Riley's arms weakly. "Can't breathe," he choked out.

The girl loosened her grip slightly and Keith gasped, drawing in sharp breaths of air.

They hung from the branch for a moment. He could feel the girl trembling against his neck.

"It's ok," He said hoarsely. "We're ok."

Slowly, Keith reached up; testing the ledge before trusting it with their weight. The rock held firm. He pulled them up. His shoulders ached as he hoisted them to the next ledge.

*Just a few more feet.*

He could see the top of the cliff, it was maybe ten feet away.

*Come on.*

He missed his footing and they slipped down against the wall. The girl's knees dug into his ribs. The spot that had slammed into the tree throbbed sharply but Keith ignored it; tightening his grip on the wall. A bead of sweat slid down his cheek and onto his lips. He could taste the warm saltiness on his mouth. Keith slid his foot onto a short slab, and strained. "Almost there," he said breathlessly, unsure if Riley could hear him.

Keith reached up and his fingers grasped into the top of the cliff. He pulled them up with all his remaining strength. He hoisted his body up with his other elbow. Arms burning and ribs aching he held his breath. With one final hoist he pulled them up and over the edge.

Keith slid away from the cliff on his hands and knees. When they were several feet from the edge, he pulled the rope from his body. The girl slid off his back and onto the ground. Keith collapsed onto the dirt.

He lay on his back, his heart pounding in his chest, his whole body seemed to pulse. He put a hand to his sweat soaked hair trying to calm his breathing.

He turned his head and looked over at Riley. She was lying next to him, also breathing heavily. Her body was shaking and her face was pale. She looked back at him, eyes wide. Keith wanted to say something reassuring, but he wasn't sure he could even speak.

They stared at each other.

Still panting heavily, Keith attempted a crooked grin. The girl still looked terrified but slowly a small smile of disbelief spread onto her face. Something about her expression made Keith's own grin grow.

They had done it.

A weak chuckle escaped Keith's body. Then another. The girl let out a breath, smiling back at him; her eyes bright. Something welled up inside of Keith and he couldn't help it:

He laughed.

It was a real full body laugh. The girl stared at him, then breathed out a laugh of her own. It was musical sound, quivering and high but at the same time, full. In that moment, it was one of the best sounds Keith had ever heard.

His own laugh was rough and loud, jarring to his own ears. He couldn't remember the last time he had genuinely laughed this hard. The girl leaned her head back, as she cracked up.

Eventually the outburst quieted as they both caught their breath.

"Well, I told you we'd make it." Keith said.

They stared at each other, and then both erupted in laughter again. Riley snorted, which only made her laugh even more uncontrollably.

Keith watched her face; lit up with mirth. Her expression was wild, her eyes wet. Keith could only imagine what he looked like, his own face hurt from laughing so much.

Eventually they calmed, and the noises of the forest could be heard once again. Keith stood, his body protesting at the movement. He held out a hand to the girl. A smile still played on her lips.

"Come on," he said, gesturing softly with his chin.

The girl took his hand. Keith felt her cold fingers slip against the raw calluses of his palm. He steadied her as she stood. She had slid off the backpack while she had been on the ground and Keith reached down, slinging it onto his back.

The view from the top of the hill was beautiful. A colorful carpet of trees covered the ground in vibrant hues of orange, red, gold and green. The peaks of the other cliffs, including the



one they had fallen down sat to the right of their vantage point, obscuring some of the view. To the left the forest seem to thin slightly. Unfortunately, there was no sign of civilization that Keith could find. He couldn't even see the old dirt road were Jack had left his truck.

*That's probably for the best.* He thought. The farther they were from Jack, the better. Even if it did take them a little longer to get back. Below them in the distance, a thin river cut through the dense swath of trees.

"There," Keith said pointing to the stream of water. "If we can get to it, following that river will give us our best bet."

"Right," Riley said. "We follow the water, we find people."

Keith remembered he had told her something very similar when he had first tried to leave. "Exactly." He said. "You up for it?" He gestured with his head to the other side of the ridge they were standing on. The slope was densely packed with brush and thick tree trunks, but it certainly looked less treacherous then where they had come from. The girl looked up at him, she waved her hand in the direction he had gestured too.

"After you," she said.

## Chapter 11

It was nearly dark by the time Keith decided they should rest for the night. He knew that they should keep going. The quarry had taken precious time from them, but his arms and legs ached from the climb and his ribs were still sore from where he had bruised them; throbbing at his side with every breath he took. The girl too had been slowing and Keith knew that if he forced her to keep going she would only drag behind further. Plus, she had been relatively amicable and Keith didn't want to push it.

Riley immediately collapsed onto the leaf-carpeted ground, causing a gentle crunch among the foliage. “Finally,” she groaned, her voice muffled. “I didn’t think we’d ever stop walking; my feet feel like they’re gonna fall off.”

“Yeah, yeah” Keith said with a lazy wave of his hand. His own body ached to follow her lead but he resisted the temptation. The air had turned frigid. Their clothes had long since dried but the evening chill cut through his shirt. He pulled his jacket slightly tighter over his chest.

Surveying the area with his flashlight, he hissed a low curse of frustration. The growth here was too young for any firewood; he’d have to go searching for better kindling. Huffing, he began to scrape at the ground with his boot, clearing it of any fallen debris.

Riley, who had continued to mumble complaints into her leafy bed, sat up and squinted at Keith, who sensed her question before she asked it.

“We need to get a fire going.” He said.

Riley sat up, “Right” she said. She had pulled the sleeves of her own shirt over her hands to shield them from the cold. The cuffs were stained dark with mud, one of them had a tear in the seam. She fiddled with the torn sleeve as she spoke her voice faltered slightly. “I could help, y’know, if you need it.”

Keith was shocked. What had gotten into the kid? Why was she suddenly interested in being useful?

“Well, we’re gonna need some firewood.” He said.

“I can do that” Riley said getting to her feet.

“Ok,” Keith said, still suspicious at this change of character. “You’ll have to go looking for it. “There ain’t much around here that I can see.” He shone his light around the forest floor. There were a few sticks here and there, but the pickings were slim. “You won’t have to go far,”

Keith continued. "They don't need to be big or anything, about this size will do" Keith held out his hands about a foot apart, the movement caused his flashlight to swing, making the shadows of the trees in front of him jerk wildly. "You won't need too many either, I'd say four or five at the most."

"Alright" Riley said, her brow pinched with determination. "That shouldn't be hard."

*Yep*, Keith was definitely confused. He certainly wasn't about to complain about it though, if it meant he had less work to do.

"Here, take the light," he said. He motioned a throw to her. She held out her hands and he tossed gently. She grabbed for it but missed. It landed with a soft crunch in the leaves, momentarily darkening the campsite. She bent down and quickly grabbed it. Straightening she turned, shining the light back at him.

"Stay as close as you can" He said squinting. And be quiet."

"Yeah I know," Riley said "It's not a big deal, I got it."

"Ok well, thanks. I guess," Keith said, unsure of what else to do.

Riley rolled her eyes and walked out of the small clearing into the dark forest, Keith watched the light if the flashlight become dim until it had almost disappeared entirely.

Keith went back to clearing a place for the fire.

*What is up with her?*

This was definitely the first time she had shown any interest in helping out. In fact, up until now she had seemed quite content to sit on her ass and watch as Keith tried his best to keep both of them alive. He shook his head. Maybe the climb out of the quarry had finally made her realize that she had no chance of surviving, let alone getting home, without him. *Or maybe she's finally cracked.*

Keith could still see the light faintly bobble up and down through the trees. He remembered what he had said to her earlier, how he had made a big deal about the fact that she couldn't even climb a tree. "*Jeeze kid, you are useless aren't you.*" Keith winced, he had been pretty harsh, But the girl was hopeless! No survival skills, not even a good intuition. Of course, that wasn't her fault, but still Keith couldn't help but wonder how she had survived so far. Keith sighed. Was it possible that she wanted to show him she could do something? He had been pretty mean to her, was this some sort of way to prove herself? Keith had never seen her show interest in anything he was doing, but she had never really tried before. Maybe she was—,

A sharp scream echoed through the trees. Keith shot to his feet. He looked around, where was the light? The woods were dark around him.

Keith took off in the direction of the scream. "Riley!" He yelled.

Was it Jack? Had he found her? How had he snuck up on them? Keith could see the faint light creating monstrous shadows against the dark trees. "Riley!" He shouted again, running through the woods towards the source of the light. Small branches and leaves whipped at his face and neck but Keith could hardly feel them. He could see the glow flashlight now, it had been dropped on his side, half buried in a pile of leaves, blocking the light. He could see the faint silhouette of the girl standing next to a fallen log. Riley looked panicked but she seemed to be alone.

Keith reached Riley, panting hard. He looked wildly around. "What happened?" The girl's eyes were wide. Keith didn't see signs that anyone else had been there. Had she somehow hurt herself then? Keith quickly scanned her body for blood or any signs of damage, but other than smudges of dirt here and there, nothing seemed new or out of place.

"Kid, what happened?" He repeated, trying to keep the panic out of his voice.

Riley's lips trembled, "I was breaking a branch off of that log, you know, for the fire."

She spoke in that rapid-fire way of hers; her voice shrill and shaking.

"And then something crawled out of the log and onto my hand, I think it was a spider, it was so big" A shudder ran through her frame. "I could feel its legs, it had so many, and it was fuzzy. It was disgusting! I got it off, but I dropped all the wood." She pointed to a collection of sticks and small branches at her feet.

Keith tried to make sense of the babble. He blinked.

"Hang on, you're telling me you screamed, because a spider crawled on you?" Keith asked in disbelief.

"Yes," Riley said quietly.

"So, nothing's wrong." Keith clarified, feeling hot anger growing in his throat.

"Well I mean," Riley began but stopped as soon as she saw Keith's face. "I just got scared." She said quietly.

Keith seethed. "You got scared." He repeated; his voice low, words sharp. "You were supposed to get some firewood, and come back. That was the easiest thing I could possibly ask you to do, how did you screw that up? I told you to be quiet! That was the one thing you needed to do, be quiet and bring back the damn wood!" Keith's voice rose.

The girl took a step back, her eyes wide.

Keith grabbed her shoulders.

"I thought you were hurt!" He spat. "I thought Jack had found you! Is that what you want? You can't scream like that because of a damn spider! We're in the woods, that's where spiders live!"

Keith was yelling now, but he didn't care if anyone heard him. In fact, he hoped Jack *did* hear him! He could have her for all Keith cared! He had been an idiot to think he could trust this child with anything.

"Do you not understand what will happen to you if were caught? Maybe I didn't make it clear to you, if Jack catches you, you will die. Is that what you want kid? Cause honestly, that would make my life a whole lot easier!"

The girl let out a small gasp and Keith realized he had been roughly shaking her, his hands gripped tight to her thin shoulders.

Her face was flushed. Her eyes were brimming with tears.

"You..." Keith began, but his voice cracked. Riley sniffed, her shoulders bobbing slightly with the movement. Keith felt how hard he had been gripping them. He let go, and blood rushed back into his fingers.

"Look." he said firmly, the anger cooling from his voice. He held the palms of his hands up slowly. "I didn't mean to get mad. I was just scared and I didn't know what to do."

He reached a hand forward and Riley flinched. The motion sent a sharp stab of guilt through Keith's chest. He placed his hand as gently as he could on her shoulder. "I thought something had happened to you and I just—" He let out a breath. "I don't want you to get hurt ok?" A tear slid down the girl's cheek and landed on Keith hand. The heat of the tear sent a shock through his body. He knelt in front of the girl so they were more or less the same height. Her amber eyes were dark and her mouth was open slightly, her breathing shallow.

"I'm sorry," Keith said. The girl stared at his face, her eyes seemed to look deep inside him, searching for the truth. "I mean it." He said. There was something about her quiet sadness that sent a cold shock of an emotion he couldn't place rushing through his body. Looking at her,

he immediately wanted to take everything back, somehow make it ok again. “I was just upset, it wasn’t your fault,” he said shaking his head.

“I wanted to help,” she said quietly. “I wanted to show you I could do something by myself.” She sniffed again and looked away.

“Hey, you did.” Keith said, gesturing to the small wood pile the girl had dropped. “I mean this is the perfect size for firewood,”

She looked up.

“Honestly, I’m impressed.” Keith continued.

“Really?” Riley asked a hint of a smile tugging at her lips.

“Really. Help me carry it back?” he asked.

Riley looked at the wood apprehensively for a moment, then bent down to grab the remaining sticks.

Keith picked up the fallen flashlight with his free hand and pointed the light back in the direction of their campsite. He inclined his head and Riley began to move.

After a moment of silence, broken only by the songs of the night bugs and the shuffling of dry leaves, Riley’s spoke.

“Would you be better off if I died?”

The reminder of his words tightened his chest painfully with regret.

“No.” Keith said, slightly harsher than he meant to. “That’s why you’re here with me, so that won’t happen ok?” Keith stopped moving. “I said I’ll keep you safe and I meant it.”

“Yeah?”

“Hell yeah.”

“So, you’re not gonna try to get rid of me?” Riley asked.

“Oh please, you’re too annoying to get rid of.” Keith grinned as he began to move again. “I’d be way too bored without you.” He nudged her playfully with his elbow and Riley let out a small chuckle. The noise released all the tightness from his chest and Keith felt like he could finally breathe again.

## Chapter 12

Keith chewed his granola bar. Doing his best to prolong the flavors of peanut butter and chocolate on his tongue. They had opted to eat on the road this morning, trying and make up for the time lost yesterday. Normally Keith would have been pissy that they hadn’t gotten as far as he wanted them too yesterday, but he was in a surprisingly good mood.

The girl walked next to him, sucking on her own granola bar like a popsicle. She hadn’t brought up last night, and neither had he. If she was angry at him for what he had said she hid it well. She stuck the bar back in her mouth again. She looked content, as if she were also in a good mood.

This part of the forest was not as heavy wooded so it was easy enough to keep pace. The day was clear and despite the pervasive chill and the tree cover, the woods were bright. If he forgot why was out there, the hike was almost enjoyable.

Keith realized he had started to hum softly through the bites of granola. It was an old song. One he hadn’t thought about in years, yet the words came to him as clear as the tune.

*Why now?*

The song seemed to rush through his veins. Softly, and slowly at first, he began to sing:

*For all the roads I’ve traveled*

*The only thing I’ve learned that’s true;*



*The only road that I'll ever know,  
Is the road that leads me home to you.*

“You sing?” Came a gasp from his left. The girl mouth was open in a broad smile.

Keith shut his own mouth tightly, but the expression on the girl’s face was not malicious. She seemed genuinely interested, if not a little confused.

“I,” Keith cleared his throat. “Not in a while. It’s an old song.”

“I’ve never heard it before.”

“No,” Keith said. “I, uh, my mom wrote it.” He spoke cautiously. “She called it, *The Road Home*.” Part of him waited for the pain that always accompanied this kind of conversation to shut him down. But the way Riley’s expression softened when he spoke, her head tilted to study his face, somehow made him feel steady and calm.

“She wanted to be a singer.” He said “She used to play the guitar and sing her songs to me. She taught me how to play a bit too.”

“You can play guitar? I’ve always wanted to play something cool like that! When we get back maybe you can teach me!”

Keith faltered, nearly tripping over a gnarled fallen branch. “I’m sure your daddy would pay someone much better than me for real lessons.”

The girl was quiet for a moment, before speaking up again. “What happens when we get there?” she asked.

“What’da mean?” Keith asked.

“When we get home, where will you go?”

Keith contemplated how much he wanted to tell the girl. He realized he didn't really have much of a plan. The goal had always been to somehow start over, but part of him he'd never thought he's get far enough to actually try.

"I don't know", Keith said. "Somewhere new."

"Like California?"

Keith chuckled. "Maybe."

They walked in relative quiet for a little bit. Riley began to slow her pace. Her eyes down.

"Somethin' on your mind?" Keith offered.

"Why did you take me?"

This question made Keith pause. *Why had they taken her?* Jack had been pretty tightlipped about the whole ordeal. Probably for good reason. Keith began to slowly walk again.

He had never smuggled a person before, never the less a kid. He had the rules he set before he joined the Wolves and that was one of them. No killing people who don't deserve it, no sexual exploitation of any kind, and no smuggling anything, or anyone, living. They had never pushed him too hard on this, his skills made up for it, besides there was plenty he was still willing to do. And several of the Wolves he worked with had no such rules when it came to their occupation. So why had they conscripted Jack, and subsequently him, for this job? And what did they want so bad that they were willing to kill a little girl over?

"I think someone wants something your dad has, probably money. I guess they just thought you were the best way to get to him."

"There was this one thing." Riley began and Keith glanced over at her as she continued. "A couple weeks ago these guys came to my house. My dad talked to them for hours. I thought

they were just people that worked for him. I mean, lots of different people come to the house for meetings and stuff, so I didn't think it was that weird. But these guys were different. When they left, they seemed really angry. They swore at my dad and told him he was making a mistake. I didn't really know what they were taking about. But that other guy, your uncle, he was there.

“What?”

“I watched them leave from the balcony, he looked at me before they left. It was him.”

Keith shook his head. Jack knew what was going on. Whatever he was a part of, whatever he had dragged Keith into, was something bigger than the “simple heist” his uncle had said it was.

“Did anything else weird happen after that?”

Riley scrunched her face trying to remember. Her foot caught on a large rock and she stumbled forward. Keith reached out, grabbed her arm and steadying her. She straightened, looking embarrassed. They continued walking.

“The lady my dad had hired to look after me, she didn't show the day before you guys- you know- *took me*.” She narrowed her eyes at Keith. “I'm used to taking care of myself, I really prefer it. So, I didn't really care when she wasn't there” She said. “When my dad left this last time, he said it was urgent and that whatever he was doing couldn't wait. Though he always says that. Even though— oh my gosh!” She stopped in her tracks, her mouth open.

“What is it?” Keith asked. Had she remembered something important?

“The art show! I can't believe I forgot!”

“The what?”

“There's this big art show my school does every year. And you have to be selected personally by the art teacher and only the top five students in each grade get their stuff shown

and this year I made it! And it's like this whole big thing, they serve like canapés and stuff and you dress up fancy and get to show your family all your pieces which they display like a real art gallery.

Keith had no idea what a canapé was but this art thing did sound like a big deal.

“My dad knew, I told him about it and he promised he wouldn't miss it.” Riley's voice fell, the excitement that had burst from her while talking about the show was gone. “I wasn't really surprised. I just thought... it was so important, you know?” She looked up at Keith. “Not that it matter's now.”

Her face held that familiar tightness. For some strange reason, seeing the poorly hidden pain on the girl's face made Keith wince.

“I didn't know you liked art.” He said.

“I draw stuff,” She shrugged.

“You any good?” He said, smirking at her.

“Well I got into the art show didn't I.” Her face spread into a small smile, and the tightness in Keith's chest loosened. His own grin matched the girl's, but he watched her face slowly shift again, back to that solemn sadness.

“He gone a lot huh?” Keith said softly.

“Yeah, I guess. Even when he's there it's like he's not really *there*.” Like when I talk to him, it's like he doesn't actually hear me. After my mom died he kind of just stopped paying attention to me. Which I mean, I guess is cool, a lot of my friends' parents are super annoying when it comes to rules and stuff, at least that what they say.” The girl paused, then softly said, “He's probably happier that I'm not around.”

“Hey.” Keith stopped, he turned to the girl. “There’s no way. He definitely wouldn’t have called the cops if he didn’t care. He probably just doesn’t know what to do.”

The girl’s expression softened slightly but she still didn’t look convinced.

“I lost my mom too.” Keith offered. he wasn’t sure why he said it, he supposed he just wanted the girl to feel less alone. He fought against the rising pain and tightness in his throat that threatened to stop the words from escaping.

“She died?”

“She left. I was ten years old.” His voice was low and gruff. He coughed to try and play off the emotion edging his words.

“Why’d she leave?” Riley asked.

Keith hand automatically went to his jacket pocket, his fingers clinging to the cool metallic case. “My dad,” He said softly. Wasn’t exactly an upstanding man.” He could feel Riley’s eyes on him, by the couldn’t bring himself to meet them. “My mom stayed as long as she could, I guess one day she just had enough.”

“She left you.” Riley said softly.

“Yeah, she left me too.”

“I don’t really remember my mom.” Riley said. “I was pretty little when she died. She was sick, my dad tried everything to save her, but he couldn’t do anything. I think that’s why he got so closed off. Because she died you know?” Riley fiddled with the dirty sleeve of her shirt. “I have a few memories of her, but sometimes I feel like I don’t even remember what she looks like. People tell me I look like her but I don’t see it.

Keith nodded, he didn’t know what to say.

“Is your dad still alive?” She asked him.

“I don’t know,” He said. “I left as soon as I could too.” He hadn’t spoken about his family in years. *Why was it so easy to talk to her?* He was probably saying too much, but he continued anyway. “He didn’t care much for me; kept me around to get money from the government. My uh, my uncle was the one that really took care of me.

Keith watched the faint grimace appear on the girl’s face at the mention of Jack. She looked over her shoulder quickly. Before returning her attention to Keith.

“He’s not a bad person, he just—” Keith felt the ache of guilt press against his chest. “He lost a lot too.”

Riley was quiet. Keith could hear animals call to each other in the trees. Branches swayed with a gentle gust of wind. Keith breathed in the crisp air.

“Keith.” The girl said at last.

“Yeah kid?”

“Can you sing again?”

Keith looked at the girl in surprise “Why?” Few people knew he could sing, even fewer ever asked him too. It was not something he shared often.

“I liked it.”

“Really?” Keith searched for any sign of insincerity on the girl’s face, but her expression was soft and seemed genuine.

“Really, really.” She said.

Keith studied her for a few more moments. “Ok,” he said. Keith let memory of the music flow through his body. He closed his eyes. He could still see the way his mother looked when she sang; her eyes bright her mouth curved into a soft smile. Keith took a breath, opened his eyes, and sang.

## Chapter 13

Keith awoke with a start when something large fell from the tree above him and crashed into his lap with a yelp. He cursed and bolted forward.

Riley looked up at him sheepishly, a small grin playing on her lips.

“The hell?” What were you doing?” He asked, more startled than angry.

“You said climbing trees wasn’t so hard, and that it would be a helpful skill to have! So, I thought I could try while you were still sleeping” she said.

“And you chose my tree to practice in?” Keith said indignantly.

Riley pouted. “It was the only one with branches I could reach.”

Keith looked up, the tree he was leaning against did have several branches at little girl height. He could see about ten feet above him where a broken branch was hanging loosely, swaying in the breeze. Keith sighed. “You all right?” He asked.

The girl rubbed her arm, a few errant twigs stuck out of her tangled hair. “I’m fine.” She said. Her pout had deepened, and a bright shade of red had spread across her cheeks.

Keith expected the all too familiar feeling of annoyance to boiling to the surface of his chest, but it didn’t come, instead he looked at the girl, flustered in front of him and he let out a hoarse laugh. “Well I guess that’s one way to learn.”

Riley’s brow furrowed and her face set into her usual scowl. “Oh, like you could do any better old man.”

This retort only fueled Keith’s laughter. “Not in a tree like that.” He chuckled, pointing. “You see how thin these branches are? he said. “It’s a miracle you made it up that far.”

“Oh.” Riley said. She looked away the redness in her cheeks deepening.

Keith shook his head, the mirth still on his face. *She really did try.* He thought. The wind blew her long hair out over her face as she sat on the forest floor, embarrassment still coloring her cheeks and pursing her lips.

“Hey,” Keith said standing. He brushed the fallen leaves and sticks off of his pants. “It takes practice, just like anything. Honestly I’m impressed you made it that far.” He held out a hand to Riley.

Riley hesitated, eyes flicked from Keith’s face to his hand, he gestured gently with it. She slid her fingers into his and Keith pulled her to her feet.

He took the water bottle out of his backpack and handed it to her, she drank deeply, finishing off the container.

Keith refilled it in the little river, dropping the iodine tab into the bottle and replacing it in his backpack. He did his best not to think about the dwindling food supply. They had shared the last ready meal two nights previous and last night they had eaten the rest of the jerky. Now all they had left were the granola bars and a half eaten bag of nuts. They only have a day or so until they’d be completely out. Of course, that was if Riley didn’t inhale it all sooner. Keith looked through the swaying tree branches overhead. The sun was still on the rise.

“I’ll tell you what,” Keith said, withdrawing one of the remaining bars from his pack and tossing it to the girl. She stumbled as she grabbed at it, the bar bounced off her fingers and into the dirt. Riley bent down and scooped it up, brushing the debris off of the wrapper. Keith shook his head, “maybe, I’ll teach you how to climb trees the right way.”

“Really?” Riley asked skeptically.



“Yeah why not,” he said. “But... you gotta prove to me you can handle it, that means no whining or complaining.” He said. We have a bit of a ways to go to make up for time. If you can keep up with me without running your mouth off, I’ll teach you what I know.”

“I thought you said you liked my complaining” She said, a smirk snaking its way onto her face.

“Oh please, you musta hit your head fallin’ outa that tree.” Keith said swinging his backpack over his shoulder.

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The wind whipped the autumn leaves like boughs of confetti. They floated lazily down through the trees, occasionally catching the light on their colorful surfaces. Riley’s thin pajama shirt rippled in the wind, the light pink pattern was stained a dull brown, streaks of dirt smudged at her elbows. She walked beside Keith, her eyes on the ground, careful where she stepped in the thick undergrowth. To her credit, the girl hadn’t complained once all morning. In fact, she had kept relatively quiet. Keith thought about asking if she was doing alright, but didn’t want to interrupt her concentration.

Keith’s stomach grumbled painfully, he had forgone his own breakfast, in hopes of preserving their supply a little bit, but he didn’t know how long he could really go without food. He knew how to hunt a little, but the only weapon he had was his gun, and using it would be like sending up a flare to Jack saying *here we are, come get us*.

Keith scowled surveying the forest floor. They had been following the river, which was more of a large stream. They kept their distance when on the move, the underbrush too dense near the water to walk comfortably. If it were summer, those bushes would be teeming with wild berries and they would be able to survive off those and the other undergrowth of the forest, at

least for a little while. But now, everything had long since been picked over. Keith sighed in frustration, but something half-remembered tugged at the back of his mind. There was another source of food Jack had taught him a while back, something that could be found no matter what time of year it was.

Keith picked up the pace, walking slightly ahead of the girl. He scanned his surroundings for any familiar signs. It wasn't long until he found exactly what he was looking for. Keith recognized it by its thick cracked bark. *Perfect.*

"Here," he said stopping in front of a large tree. Riley nearly bumped into him her eyes still planted on the ground.

He faced the girl. "You held up your end of the bargain, it's time I held up mine." He pointed at the tree, it was a large elm, several thick branches sprung out near Keith's head.

"This one?" Riley asked skeptically, staring at the tree Keith had chosen. "But it's so tall."

"Well yeah, it's a tree," he said. "You do want to learn how to climb don't you?"

The girl nodded, perhaps a bit to aggressively. "Just tell me what I need to do."

Keith walked up to the dark Elm. "You've got your size going for you, but you've also gotta learn how to balance while you're up there." He stretched his hand out pointing to the nearest branch, it sat slightly higher than his head. "You want to put your weight on the part of the branch that's connected to the tree, that's where it's the strongest. He slapped his hand in the crook of the branch demonstrating the stability. The thick bark was rough on his palm. The further you go out, the less it's gonna be able to take your weight. Got it?"

The girl nodded.

“Always have at least two of your own limbs on the tree at all time, though the more, the better. And take it slow, there’s no need to get fancy with it.” Keith stepped aside to give the girl a direct path to the tree. “I’ll be right here if you need anything.” he said.

Riley slowly approached the tree. She squinted up at the nearest branch and reached for it, but her fingertips barely brushed the bark. She jumped, wrapping her hands around the branch; but her grip wasn’t secure and her fingers slipped. She fell landing on her back. Riley gasped as the air was forced out of her lungs. She stood, leaves coating the back of her clothes. Her palms were streaked with red from the coarse bark.

Keith saw the frustration pinch her face as she glowered at the tree.

“Here,” Keith said kneeling underneath the lowest branch and cupping his hands. “The first branch is always the hardest to reach.”

Riley placed her foot in Keith’s hand and he stood, hoisting her up. Small arms wrapped around the thick branch and she swung her free leg wildly as she tried to slide herself into a secure position. Her shoe slammed into the side of Keith’s head with surprising force.

Keith stumbled back, letting go. “Watch it kid.” He said.

Riley pumped her legs erratically until she was able to wrap one, and then the other firmly around the branch, sliding herself into a sitting position. “Hey, that wasn’t so bad.” She said.

Keith grunted, wiping the footprint off his cheek. He looked up at the girl perched in the tree like some kind of fairy.

“So, one of the interesting facts about the Elm tree” Keith said, “is that the bark is edible.”

Riley peered at the rough skin of the tree skeptically, “really?” She pinched her face in disgust.

“Really.” Keith said. “And you’re gonna get me some.”

“Okay” Riley said, drawing out the word. She began to pick at the bark of the trunk.

“Not from there” he said feeling a smirk tug at the corner of his lips. “Up there.” He pointed to a part of the trunk about thirty feet from the ground. “And if you don’t get it for me, I’m gonna eat your granola bar.”

“What!” Riley said, that familiar shrillness creeping into her voice. “No way, I can’t go up that high. You want the bark so bad, you get it yourself.”

Keith smirked. “I’m just an *old man* remember? I can’t climb this stuff anymore.” Riley scowled at him. “Why do you need the bark that’s all the way up there?” “I want the fresh stuff; all the bark down here has been chewed up by animals and shit, I don’t want that.”

The girl narrowed her eyes at him.

“You want lunch?” he said. “Get me my bark.”

Riley stuck her tongue out at Keith who just crossed his arms.

The girl turned to face the nearest branch, at Keith saw her shoulders shift as she took a breath.

“It’s just like the monkey bars at school” he said in what he hoped was an encouraging tone.

“It’s really not,” she mumbled just loud enough for Keith to hear. Then slowly, she reached a hand up to the next branch and began to climb.

Keith watched Riley wedge her feet into the secure corners of the trunk hoisting herself higher with every movement, pulling herself over knots and thin twigs. She began to climb faster. Keith watched her closely. She certainly was stronger than he gave her credit for. somehow the girl who was so clumsy on the ground moved smoothly through the branches.

Riley reached the spot Keith had pointed to faster than he thought she would have, and began to pick at the rough edges of the tree bark. The pieces peeled away from the trunk easily.

“There, I did it!” She called to Keith triumphantly.

Even from her height, he could see the pride shining on her face.

“Here I can drop them to you,” She said turning to face Keith far below her, but froze. The bark pieces slid out of her hand and landed with a muffled thud at Keith’s feet.

“Great job kid.” Keith called to her, scooping the bark off the ground. It wasn’t much but at the very least it would give his stomach something to do. “You can come back down now.”

“I don’t think so.” she said her voice thin.

Keith looked up the girl’s face was pale and her hands griped the branch so hard they shook. The wind whipped strands of her hair wildly around her head.

“How— how do I get down.” She squeaked.

“You’re fine” Keith said trying to sound calming, “just go slow.”

She didn’t move. Her eyes locked on the ground, her fists clenched against the branch so hard the leaves trembled.

“Don’t panic,” he said. “it looks higher up that it is. Take your time. You can do this.”

The girl still didn’t move. Her eyes were wide, Keith couldn’t tell if she was even breathing.

“Close your eyes.” He called up at her.

“Are you insane!” came the shrill response.

“Just try it.” Keith exhaled. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. He had forgotten how fragile this kid could be in his apparent excitement to teach her something. He did his best to not let his feelings show, he could kick himself for putting a little faith in this child later. “Feel the branch, slide your hand down until you feel the next one”

Riley, eyes squeezed tight, turned to the trunk of the tree, and trembling in the strong breeze, she slowly slid one arm and then another around a neighboring branch.

“There you go!” Keith called. “Now slip your feet down to the next branch.”

The girl cling to the tree tightly as she timidly reached one foot down. Planning it solidly on the branch below her.

“See that wasn’t so bad!” he called.

“I guess,” she said, her voice steadier now.

Slowly, very slowly, the girl descended the tree. She faltered at times when the branch below her couldn’t be felt. Every once in a while she would peek down at the tree, until Keith watched as she kept her eyes open for good, the confidence once again returning to her body as she swung her foot into the crook of the next branch. Eventually she slid back to the low branch next to Keith.

“See kid, you did it.” The relief and, *was it pride?* he felt, overwhelmed any of the frustration he had felt.

Riley looked up at where she had been. “I guess it wasn’t that bad,” she said.

Keith dug in his bag until he found one of the remaining granola bars. He held it up to the girl. “come get it,” he said.

Riley wrapped her arms around the thick branch she was perched on and swung herself off. She landed on the forest floor the momentum of the swing sent her falling on her butt. She stood. Sweat beaded her forehead causing errand strands of hair to stick to her face. She had more red scratches along her forearms and a tear in the knee of her pants. But now that she was back on the ground that triumphant demeanor had returned; the fear now just a memory.

“The more you climb the easier it’ll get. He said as handed her the bar of food.

She ripped open the packaging and tore off a piece, shoving it in her mouth with enthusiasm.

“Want some?” he asked holding out a strip of the bark.

“Yeah thanks, but I’m good,” she said, her nose crinkled with disgust at Keith’s offering as she bit another chunk off her granola bar.

“Whatever,” Keith said, waving the bark in a casual motion.

He ripped off a piece of the soft fleshy underside of the bark, wishing he had Jack’s knife with him. The light tan pulp peeled off the rough exterior in uneven strips.

Keith suck a piece in his mouth. The bark had a faint sweet taste to it, and the moisture was surprisingly refreshing. It was hard to chew though, and he had to force himself to swallow the rough pulp. *Well at least it’s something*, he thought.

Keith ran his free hand through his hair as he sucked on another piece of bark. They needed to get going, it was now well past noon and they had stayed much longer than he had wanted to.

“We should keep moving.” He said.

“But I’m tired” Riley whined, mouth full. “I need a break.”

“We just had a break.” He said.

“It wasn’t a break for me!”

“You’re the one who wanted to learn how to climb.” He said, annoyed.

“Well now I need to recover!” she spat back at him.

“We can take another break in a couple of hours” he said, slinging his backpack over his shoulder.

“No, I want to rest now!” She said, her voice sliding into that all too familiar shrill whine.

“Well tough.” Keith said starting to walk in the direction they had been going. Riley stood still.

Keith kept walking.

The girl stomped her foot on the ground and Keith turned.

“We need to keep moving.” He said, frustration coloring his words. Did she not understand that the longer they stayed the more they were in danger?

“Too bad,” She said, her hands balled into tight fists. “I won’t.”

“You’ll move when I say so!” Keith growled, but the girl didn’t shrink back.

“I’m not afraid of you, you know! So, you can say whatever you want, but I’m not moving!”

Keith debated swinging the girl over his shoulder, but he knew she would probably scream, which was exactly what he didn’t want. “Can’t you at least try to cooperate!”

“Oh please—,” she began.

The rustle of leaves in the forest distracted Keith. The girl kept speaking but Keith tuned her out, his whipped his head to the source of the noise.

Riley didn’t seem to notice, as she continued her speech. “—and you’re always so mean.”

“Shh.” He hissed, but Riley kept talking.



“I feel like the least you could do is compromise with me, it’s not all about you, you know.”

There it was again, the unmistakable sound of a boot crunching through the undergrowth.

“Riley!” He said, his urgency making the girl falter in her essay.

*There was no time.* He desperately looked around and then, in one quick motion, he scooped up the girl and dove into a cluster of tall undergrowth.

The thicket of dry bushes was dense enough that it covered the two of them easily. Keith lay on his stomach. He held his hand tight over the girl’s mouth and put a finger to his own lips. Her eyes were wide with fear. The forest sounded normal, birds chipped and sung, the wind whistled through the branches shaking the dry leaves. Had he been imagining things?

Dry foliage crunched, closer this time, and Keith silently swore. How could he have been so stupid? They shouldn’t have stopped.

The footsteps came closer and closer. *Could it be someone else? A hiker maybe?* Keith scoffed. They were in the middle of nowhere, days from any kind of civilization. No one in their right mind would be out here.

He could see the boots now and his heart sank. They stopped, and Keith watched them shift as their owner surveyed the area. They began to move again in the direction of their hiding place.

The scuffed brown boots came to a stop in front of Keith, a few inches away from his head. He tightened his grip on Riley, who seemed to stop breathing entirely. The shoes were unmistakable; faded leather was caked with dried mud. Fraying laces wrapped around the ankles to keep them secure. Keith would recognize those boots anywhere.

“I know you’re here,” the rough voice growled, and Keith felt Riley tense in recognition.

Jack had found them.

## Chapter 14

“Come on out,” Jack called. His boots shifted, then slowly turned and crunched back a few steps.

Keith could feel Riley’s chest rise and fall rapidly. He stayed silent. Jack hadn’t seen them, they still had a chance. He could now see his uncle’s thin frame through the tangle of branches. Keith heard Jack muttering to himself, but he couldn’t make out the words. He watched as Jack surveyed the area. His eyes scanned the ground, searching for any sign of them.

Keith desperately hoped that the rapidly falling leaves had at least partially obscured their path. Keith had been careful to step in places that would not mark his passing, but he could not say the same for his travelling companion.

Jack paced, his grumblings becoming louder and angrier. Keith made out the words “deal” and “quickly” but he didn’t know what they meant.

*It doesn’t matter*, Keith thought. If Jack couldn’t find them, he’d have to leave at some point, right? Keith swallowed, it was a waiting game now. *Who would break first?*

Jack took out his phone and flipped it open. He shook his head then shoved the phone back in his pocket. He coughed and spit into the leaves, then he turned and began walking back the way he had come. Keith held his breath as the man slowly walked away from where he lay. They did it, they just need to wait a little but longer and they’d be in the clear.

Jack suddenly stopped, his eyes fixed on the forest floor. He bent down, and Keith watched as an age-worn hand picked something up off the ground.

It was a piece of bark.

Keith heard his blood pounding in his ears. It was one of the pieces Riley had gotten for him. Half eaten and still damp from being freshly picked.

A wicked smile spread across Jack's face.

Keith tensed as Jack began to slowly walk back in the direction of their hiding spot. They had to get out of here, fast. It would only be seconds before Jack would find them. His focus turned to Riley who had gone completely still. Her eyes darted to his, he had seen an expression like this before, reflected in the eyes of a doe staring at the barrel of a hunter's gun.

He looked at her and then at the path, and then at her again, hoping, she could comprehend what he was trying to say. Her eyes shone with fear but they seemed to reflect an understanding. Or was Keith just desperately grasping for anything? Either way he was about to find out.

Keith released his grip on her mouth and slid her hand to his wrist and nodded slightly. In one sharp movement Keith shot to his feet and they darted from their hiding place and ran.

Jack shouted, quickly following in pursuit.

Pushing the girl ahead of himself, Keith looked back. The old man was frustratingly fast.

Riley leapt over a fallen log catching her foot on the splintered surface. She stumbled forward. Keith grabbed her arm steadying her quickly.

They ran as fast as they could. Keith could see a break in the trees not too far ahead, maybe the clearing would hold smoother footing. Riley dashed toward the clearing, Keith close behind. He could hear Jack shouting at them as he crashed through the undergrowth.

Keith didn't really have a plan for where they were going, just that they needed to get away from Jack. They were running away from the stream they had been following, but Keith

couldn't focus on that now. Maybe they could out run him like they did last time. It would just be a matter of distance then.

Keith could hear the sound of rushing water ahead. If there was another river, they may be able to cross it, and that would certainly slow Jack down. Keith couldn't place this new river from when he had surveyed the land before, so it must have been hidden or too far for him to see. He didn't care about that now, the only thing that mattered is if they would be able to cross it fast enough.

As they ran closer to the clearing, Keith could hear the noise of the river grow louder and louder, but Keith felt an uncomfortable nagging feeling in the back of his mind.

Something felt wrong. The sound still seemed distant somehow. Keith felt like he was forgetting something important, something he had once learned about this region of forests.

Keith shook his head and kept running. Whatever it was, he would figure it out when he wasn't being chased by his murderous uncle.

The ground had already become smoother, and Riley was fast with fear biting at her heels. She was nearly a foot in front of Keith now. Heading directly for the clearing.

The sound of the rushing water grew louder. But not nearly as loud as it should have been and now there was a strange echo about the waves as they crashed into each other.

Keith remembered the quarry they had climbed out of and the way the cliffs been so hard to gauge the when they were at the top. He felt his stomach drop.

Something was definitely wrong.

"Riley!" Keith yelled.

She slowed slightly as she turned her head to look back at Keith, no longer watching where she was going.

Keith pushed forward with all his strength, he felt like everything was moving too slow. *Faster!* He had to reach her.

“Stop!” he yelled as he reached forward, his fingers grasping Riley by the shoulder and pulling her back, just as the clearing opened up into a sheer cliff face.

Riley yelped and clung to Keith as the momentum from her feet caused loose dirt and rocks to break away from the edge of the cliff and bounce down the side of the sheer face, splashing into the rushing river below. He gripped her close her heart beating rapidly as her chest rose and fell.

Keith could hear Jack gaining on them, yelling for them to stop.

They were at a dead end.

The river had to be almost a hundred feet below them, and the other side of the cliff was at least twice that across.

Keith cursed, but it was lost to the rushing water and wind. Even from up here the crashing of the river was booming.

“Look!” Riley shouted. She pointed upstream. In the distance, an old railroad bridge sat suspended across the chasm. A long metal beam curved in a giant half-circle over the river. The supports bracing it against the cliff’s edge.

Jack was closing in.

Without saying a word, they took off again, running along the edge of the cliff toward the bridge.

It had clearly been long abandoned. The faded red metal was stained with coppery rust. As they got closer, Keith could make out the large wooden planks lay flat across the surface; some broken and dangling, others dark with rot threatening to giveaway at any moment. The

wooden pieces were overlaid with two long strips of metal, jagged and broken in places; the tracks that trains must have run on long ago.

“Come on,” Riley said slowing slightly as she reached the mouth of the bridge.

Under any other circumstance, Keith wouldn't have dared trust his life to this suspended death trap. But now, this bridge might be their one chance of escape. The small metal railing lining either side of the bridge was the only thing protecting them from the fall to the rushing water far below.

“Stay inside the tracks!” He called as Riley stepped onto the bridge. Keith watched as Jack turned and began to run towards them.

Keith cursed and stepped onto the bridge; the wooden planks creaked under his weight. He swallowed and took another step. The river rushed far below him, visible through the slats in the bridge. It didn't look incredibly wide, the river, but it was moving fast. The water churned and crashed as it rushed past large boulders and fallen logs. The precarious footing hindered their speed considerably but slowly they slid their way across the tracks. Riley's arms were outstretched like a tightrope-walker's.

They were over a third of the way across the bridge when Jack reached the mouth.

“What are you doing!” He called to them. “This is insane, you're gonna get yourselves killed!”

Keith kept moving slowly forward, keeping an eye on Riley. The piece of wood he had landed his foot on snapped and he jumped back as the plank fell from the track. He held his breath as it slammed into one of the metal supports with a hollow clang.

Riley glanced back at Keith, her face was pale and her teeth chattered, out of fear or cold Keith didn't know. He inclined his head for her to keep moving.

“Stop this! Jack yelled. “I just want to talk.”

Keith didn't look back. He could hear Jack curse as he climbed onto the bridge as well.

The wind whistled strongly around them, now that they were out of the protection of the trees. Keith's hair whipped against his forehead and his jacket flapped wildly around him.

They were nearly half way across now, but Jack was catching up.

Keith stopped moving. He pulled his gun from where he had tucked it into his waistband. In one swift movement he turned to face Jack and pointed the weapon at his uncle.

“That's close enough.” He said.

Jack stopped advancing. He kept one hand loosely resting on his own gun at his waist. He raised the other raised slightly in an appeasing gesture.

“Now, there's no need for that” Jack said.

“Back up.” Keith said with a jerk of his gun. “Just leave us.”

“You wouldn't shoot me.” Jack said, and Keith faltered.

Hell, he had joked about shooting his uncle on more than one occasion; but could he actually do it? After everything Jack had done, everything they had been through together...Keith grip faltered on the handle. If it really came down to it, Keith wasn't sure he could do his uncle any real harm.

“Just go.” Keith said, hoping his words sound less desperate than they felt.

Jack shook his head, “I can't do that.” He called.

Keith stole a quick glance at Riley. She had stopped moving and was standing maybe ten paces behind him. Wind tugged at her pajamas, her sleeves fluttering. She held her arms tight to her chest.

Jack took a step forward and Keith turned his attention back to his uncle, straitening the barrel of the gun.

Jack froze.

“What would killing her do for you now?” Keith said. “You can still leave this all behind.”

Keith wasn't sure if that was exactly true, but his uncle had been careful through all of this, it was very possible they still had no idea who took the girl.

Jacks expression was calm when he spoke. “You remember our *old friend*? He reached out to me when he heard about our little predicament. He offered us a solution.”

“Tailor?” Keith asked, his voices strained to be heard over the hash rushing of the water. *He couldn't be serious, could he?* But even has he thought the words his uncle nodded faintly. And Keith felt his stomach tighten uncomfortably.

He had never actually met the man personally, but immediately imagines of gaunt faced women and children hiding in the shadows of the much too small room filled his mind. Tailor ran one of the largest human trafficking rings on the east coast, and the only real threat of the Wolves. Keith had delivered of him in the few years before he had found the Wolves. Keith had even been offered a job working exclusively for them but he had turned him down.

Tailor was the reason Keith had rules.

“He offered us triple what the Wolves are paying. And he'll help us disappear.” Jack said.

Keith faltered his gun lowering slightly. That amount of money was invaluable, it was certainly more then he could be expecting to make out of his current predicament. “Why?” he called to his uncle.



Jack's crooked smile played at his lips. "He didn't say, I didn't ask." All I know is that this girl seems to be *valuable* to him.

Keith glanced back at the girl. Riley's eyes darted nervously from him to Jack.

"Come on boy," his uncle said as gently as he could while still being heard over the rushing river. "Let's put this whole mess behind us. We could start a new life."

Keith winced. He straightened his arm, looking down the barrel of the gun towards his uncle. "No." he said, spitting out the word like a weapon.

His uncle sighed. "Well the way I see it we got ourselves two options. You step down off your high horse and realize this is the last chance you'll get. Or," Jack raised his gun with surprising speed and Keith involuntarily took a step back; his free hand rose slightly shielding Riley.

"I take her from you."

Keith eyed the gun in his uncle's hands. Jack was getting desperate. He had done some pretty stupid things before, but how far was he willing to go? Keith knew by now to never underestimate his uncle. He had to get Riley out of here.

Keith stepped back again and the plank underneath his foot gave way. Keith fell through the bridge. He desperately grabbed for anything to stop him and his arms caught the cold metal of a support beam. He gasped, a dull ache radiated through his bones as he clung to the metal with all his strength.

"Keith!" Riley yelled. Rushing to the edge of the hole his body had created.

Keith pulled himself into a standing position. He placed his feet firmly on the support and cried out in pain. His right leg, the one that had broken through the track, was a mess of blood. A large tear in his jeans revealed a large gash, the hot liquid already rushing down his leg, filling

his boot and staining his cuff a dark crimson. Keith swore and shifted his balance to keep his weight off of the injured leg. He must have caught it on the broken edge the thin piece of rusted metal that held the tracks together. He couldn't think about that now. He turned his attention to the girl above him.

"I'm ok," he coughed.

Keith watched through the wooden planks as Jack advanced. Riley reached forward and grabbed something.

*The gun!* Keith must have dropped it when he fell.

She picked it up of the broken track and held it in front of her with both hands.

"Stay back!" The girl shouted.

Jack continued to move forward.

"I said stay back!" The girl repeated her voice trembling.

Jack stopped. The only thing separating His uncle and Riley was the hole in the tracks. Jack tucked his own gun back at his side and held his hands up in mocking surrender.

"Alright, alright. calm down," He said, his sly smile still playing at his lips.

"Leave us alone." Riley said.

Jack shook his head. "No can do."

Keith could see Jack studying the gap in the bridge, trying to figure out the safest way around.

"Riley go!" Keith yelled up to the girl.

She glanced down at him her fingers still locked tight around the gun.

“You really think he’s trying to help you? Jack waved his hand in Keith’s direction. “Please, I’ve known that boy since he was younger than you. He never does anything for anyone other than himself.”

“Get out of there!” Keith yelled to the girl.

If she ran, she could probably disappear into the woods before Jack could get to her. *But then what?* How long could she really survive by herself?

“Come with me.” Jack said, his voice softening. “My friend doesn’t mean you any harm. Neither do I.” He kept his eyes on the gun in the girl’s hands. “He’s just heard a lot about you is all. His been wantin’ to meet you himself.”

“Why me?” The girl asked.

“Now that’s not for me to say, but you come with me you’ll know soon enough.” Jack said. “I’m sure I bet your hungry. We’ll get whatever you want, just say the word.”

“Don’t listen to him!” Keith tried to keep his voice steady as the pain from his leg flooded throughout his body making it hard to concentrate. His fingers were going numb. Jack kicked some debris into the opening and Keith closed his eyes as pebbles and bits of wood rained down on him.

“Stop playing around,” Jack said. “You’re a smart girl. Make the mature decision and come with me.”

“Riley.” Keith said, cursing the weakness in his voice. “I’ll find you, just go.” The ruthless wind tore at her hair, tossing it wildly around her shoulders. She breathed heavily, looking sharply from Jack to the path behind her.

Keith held his breath. *Come on kid*, he thought. *Go!*

Slowly the girl lowered the gun.

“That’s right.” Jack said. “It’ll be alright.” It almost sounded to Keith like his uncle was talking to himself instead of the girl.

“Kid!” Keith called panic rising in his voice.

Riley closed her eyes and slid herself into the opening, one hand gripping the wooden track as she swung forward, her feet brushing against one of the metal supports.

Keith reached out and grabbed her, setting her down on the beam. Wincing as the movement sent pain shooting through his leg. He searched her face for her intention. She looked at him grimly, that terrible, wonderful, stubbornness setting her features. She handed him the gun.

“What the hell are you doing?” Jack yelled to them.

Keith wasn’t sure if he was addressing Riley or himself. It didn’t really matter. He slid the gun in his pack and then stepped out onto the edge of the beam. Far below them the water churned and crashed. He couldn’t see the bottom of the river from here, that was good at least. And the area below seemed relatively clear of boulders. Riley stepped out next to him.

“It looks higher than it is.” she said in shaking voice.

“Yeah.” Keith said. He held out his hands and small fingers slipped into his own. He gripped them tight. If he angled himself right, he could position himself under the girl, giving her a hopefully gentler landing.

Keith looked back one final time. If this is where he died, he wanted his uncle’s face to be the last thing he saw.

“Don’t be an idiot.” Jack called, panic clear in his voice over the rush of the water.

Keith lifted his hand in an obscene gesture. He turned back towards the river and gave Riley’s hand a quick squeeze.

Then together, they jumped.

## Chapter 15

Riley gasped, her head breaking through the surface of the water. She flailed her arms desperately trying to slow the rapid push of the river. A strong surge pulled her down beneath the waves again. She struggled against the current, kicking her legs desperately. The muffled roar of rushing water pounded against her ears. She pushed up with all her strength, fighting against the river as she forced her head above the water. She was moving fast, the bridge already far behind them, almost completely out of sight. Riley struggled against the current, pumping her arms and kicking her feet to stay afloat.

*Where was Keith?*

Riley desperately swiveled her head, squinting against the spray of the river. Autumn leaves rushed past her, some catching on large protruding rocks or old drenched logs of wood.

*There!*

The frame of the man was laying on his back in the water. His eyes were closed. His hair and beard darkened by water and, *was that blood?* The body itself did not make any attempt to fight the rushing water.

“Keith!” Riley cried, choking back the water as it tried to force its way down her throat.

The man did not respond as the river carried him quickly downstream. His head disappeared beneath the water.

“Keith!” Riley shouted again, pushing through the water trying to get to where she had last seen him. The man reappeared further down the river, still unmoving. The rapids pulled her under again and she clamped her mouth shut against the frigid wave. She opened her eyes,

squinting against the murky water. She could make out large indistinct shapes as she passed them; some still and rooted to the ground, others moving. She tried not to think about the fish and whatever else might be living in this river. Her lungs aching, she fought her way through the current. Pushing off the bottom of the river, Riley shot to the surface.

She opened her eyes grimacing against the bright daylight. She could just make out the faint shock of a brown jacket bobbing in the water. She swam towards it.

After a while the river widened, it still flowed at a rough and steady pace, but it had slowed noticeably since she had first entered it.

“Keith!” Riley called out again. There was no response from the man.

A large fallen tree stuck almost halfway out into the river. Its dead branches like gnarled old man’s fingers stretched for the far bank. Keith’s body caught in the tangled web of wood. Water rushed past him, but he stayed motionless.

Riley was glad she had grown up with a pool in her backyard. She kicked forward. Using the flow of the river to her advantage. She pushed her arms in front of her, scooping with her hands through the water. She nearly overshot the fallen tree and had to desperately grab the branches with all her strength as the rushing water pulled at her clothes and hair. Using the long slimy sticks, she pulled herself along until she reached Keith.

“Hey!” She yelled at him, shaking his shoulder with her free hand. His head bobbed slightly but there was no response. Riley looked around desperately. They weren’t far from the river bank to her left. Riley slid herself next to Keith’s head and grabbed the strap off his backpack. She pulled and the man began to move.

He was easy enough to drag through the water. She held the backpack with one hand and grabbed at the tree branches with another. She kicked her feet against the current until she felt

solid ground. When she could stand, she turned and with both hands on the strap, pulled Keith to shore. The higher up on the bank she pulled the heavier the man became. She was able to get him most of the way out of the water before collapsing onto the ground from the effort. The guy was heavier than he looked. His legs and feet still sat in the river but the rest of him lay on the shore.

Riley called his name again but there was no response.

She knelt next to his chest. He looked pretty bad. He had a new cut on his forehead, blood tricked from it, seeping into the water-soaked waves of hair that stuck to the side of his face. Riley looked apprehensively towards his feet. His right foot was still in submerged a shallow pool, but the water was already stained a dark red. Riley hadn't seen what had happened to his leg on the bridge, but she remembered the tightness of pain in his expression before they had jumped.

Riley watched the man's face. A faint hint of that grimace remained, but he seemed calmer than he was when he was awake. His mouth was closed. Beads of water dripped from his short beard and down his neck. Riley watched for any sign of life. *Was he even breathing?*

She had seen people do CPR in movies but she wasn't sure if she would remember how to do it right. She held a hand out over his mouth and waited. A faint rush of warm air brushed past her palm. Relief flooded Riley's body. He was breathing. *He was alive!* She pulled back her hand.

"Keith," she yelled, "Keith!" Her voice felt like it was pitched higher than normal, making her throat sore. She wondered if she should be quieter, if that man, Jack, would hear. But they were long past the bridge; it would have to take him several hours to even get close enough to hear them, and that was if the rush of the river didn't completely drown out her voice. Despite the slight slowing of the water, it still roared beside her.

“Come on!” Riley yelled at the unresponsive man. She grabbed his shoulders in the way he had once done to her and shook them “Wake up!” She shook him harder but he did not stir.

Riley sat back, tucking her knees into her chest. She was soaked through and now that they were out of the water, the sharp breeze cut directly through her thin coverings. She ran an arm over one of the sleeves. The shirt had once been a pale pink, but now it was stained a muddy brown. Her cuffs were torn and filthy. Her pants, had not fared much better. One of the knees had a large tear in it, revealing raw red lines bright against her pale, water cooled skin. Riley put her chin on her knees, wrapping her arms even tighter around her legs.

What was she supposed to do now? A light breeze brushed against her skin and she shivered against the cold, damp fabric of her clothes. They would need to find shelter. The place she sat was too exposed.

She turned, looking at the woods behind her. There was a pretty steep hill leading away from the river. It didn't seem too densely packed with trees and bushes and things like that.

Riley glanced down at the man that lay beside her, he didn't look like he be going anywhere anytime soon. She swallowed the tight fear that had crept into her throat and slowly, she stood.

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“Keith!”

The voice swam through Keith's subconscious distant and muddled. Some faint thought tugged at his mind, trying to pull him back to consciousness. He fought against it, he wasn't ready to get up yet. He felt a shove, and then another one shaking his body. He did his best to ignore it, he was too tired. He just wanted to sleep.

“Keith!”



The roar of the river crashed against Keith's pulsing through him with a deep throb. He opened his eyes and light flooded down through the branches of a few sparse trees. Keith was surprised by the orange tinge in the sky. The sun was already setting. How long had he been laying here? The memories came flooding back.

*Riley! Where was she?*

The bridge was nowhere to be seen, but the river was still rushing furiously past. Keith could see a large fallen tree sticking out of the water, slowing the pace of the river, pooling it into a gentler current by the shore. Keith turned his head as gingerly as he could manage. A familiar form was kneeling next to him, her face pursed into a tight grimace of concern.

The girl looking down at him was soaking wet, dirt and leaves stuck to her pajamas. Her eyes widened as they met with his own.

“Keith!” Relief flooded Riley's expression. “You wouldn't wake up! I tried to pull you from the river, I got you out as far as I could but you wouldn't move and there was so much blood I didn't—,”

Her voice trailed off as her eyes flicked to his forehead then down to his legs. Keith could feel the cool flow of the river as it ran over his feet. He tried to move out of the water but a sharp stab of pain shot through his right leg, causing him to involuntarily gasp. Riley flinched.

As slowly as he could manage, Keith lifted himself up onto his elbows. A spot above his ear pounded with every breath, but it was the intense pain that radiated up from his leg that caused him to move tenderly.

When he had sat up as far as he could manage, he looked to his feet and bit back a curse. His boots were still submerged in the small offshoot of the river, and the water running over his right leg was flowing away a dense stream of red. His pants had been torn midway down his calf

to his ankle and blood was spilling out a steady pace. Keith could see bits of ragged flesh peeking out but couldn't get a good enough look to gauge just how deep the damage was. Riley's face was pinched with concern and Keith could have sworn her skin, already pale from being wet and cold, had blanched even further. Keith tried to smile for her sake, but it felt like more of a wince.

"How long have we been here?" Keith asked, his voice hoarse.

"I don't know." Riley shook her head and loose strands of her damp hair brushed past her shoulders. "We were in the river for a while. We got caught in that tree," she pointed to the dark branches sticking out of the rushing water.

Keith looked around the little alcove. The sandy shore ended in a thick covering of trees that led back to the forest, but Keith realized with a sinking stomach that he had no idea where they were.

Jack would be following the river searching for them. They had to find somewhere to stay unseen, at least for the night.

"I looked around a little while you were out," Riley gestured to the woods behind her. "I found a spot, I don't know if it's good or anything, but it's got like, cover so it's not as cold, and you can't see it from the river."

Keith looked at the girl in surprise.

"I didn't want to leave you" Riley said quietly. "But I thought you'd want to know."

Keith took another crack at a smile and felt his head complain. "You did the right thing kid." He tried to sit up with the waterlogged backpack still on his back. He dragged his legs out of the pool of water and made it into a sitting position. His leg screamed at the movement and he bit back another curse.

“How far?” he asked Riley.

“Not very,” she said. “It’s up a hill though.” She gave him a worried look and Keith saw her eyes flick to his leg again.

Keith looked up, the sun had already begun to disappear behind the tall branches on the other side of the riverbank. His leg had begun to burn after being taken out of the frigid water. He watched the blood stream down his leg and into the open lip of his boot. They’d have to move quickly. There was nothing he could do to help his leg here. With the sun going down, visibility would quickly become limited. He needed to set up camp before he could even attempt to figure out what to do next.

“Well then, lead the way.” Keith gestured in the direction of the forest behind them.

Keeping as much of his weight off of his right side as possible, he stood. It was slow going, and for a moment he thought he was successful. But as soon as he got to his feet his vision went dark and he felt his body sway and begin to topple. Small hands pressed against his back, they weren’t strong, but they steadied Keith as his vision cleared and he regained balance. He put as much weight as he could on his un-injured leg and placed his hand on Riley’s thin shoulder. He did his best to not put too much pressure on the girl, but he felt her shoulder bob a bit as it compensated for the added burden. The girl’s head barely reached the top of his chest but with her hand against his back he felt steady.

With Riley’s help, they began to move slowly out of the alcove and into the woods. With every step, Keith felt invisible hot shards of glass sear into his leg. His breath became shallow as his focus narrowed to putting one foot in front of the other. As the terrain began to steadily slope upward, Keith fought to keep his footing. He leaned more of his weight onto Riley’s small frame and felt her shoulder tremble with the burden. Keith’s free hand latched onto a sturdy branch and

used it pull himself forward. His head ached and his vision swam but he kept the steady pace, reaching out for more thin tree trunks and branches to aid his balance. *One more step*, he thought, *just one more*.

“We’re almost there,” Riley huffed. “Do you see those boulders?”

Keith struggled to lift his head. There was an outcropping of large rocks surrounded by the dense trees. Keith tried to respond but found he was too winded to speak.

“Almost there,” Riley said again under her breath.

As they approached the outcropping Keith could see what Riley had been talking about. Tucked away against a low cliff face was a three-side cave with an opening high enough to walk in without risking hitting the top of his head. The cave itself was shallow but spacious enough to fit several people comfortably.

They entered the shelter and Keith staggered to the far wall collapsing. He propped his back against to cool stone; stretching his legs out in front of him toward the opening they had come through. The entrance of the shelter took up almost the entire front of the cave, while the back and sides were craggy stone, with occasional patches of dirt and moss. Keith could see down the hill a little way but the trees and boulders were thick and blocked the sight of the river from view.

“Nice job kid,” Keith said weakly. He saw a small smile appear on her face.

*At least that’s one problem out of the way*, Keith thought. Although temporary, the shelter would give them protection and keep them out of sight.

The sharp bolts of pain continued to stab through his leg; throbbing in time with his aching head and bringing Keith back to his most pressing problem.

The leg lay motionless in front of him. Blood now oozed out of the rip in his pants and onto the dirt floor. In the dimming light, the liquid looked black. He had to do something to stop the bleeding, He had no idea how much he had already lost but he knew he would have to stop it soon or things were going to get a lot worse, if that was even possible.

Riley sat motionless against the cave wall to Keith's right. Her amber eyes trained to his face, waiting to see what he was going to do. Keith took a deep breath steadying his thoughts and trying to calm the hammer pounding against his skull. He needed light if he was going to be able to do anything useful.

"Kid, you think you can get some firewood by yourself?"

"Yeah, it looked like there's some sticks and stuff around." Riley stood and made her way to the opening.

"Don't go far." Keith said. "Stay where you can see the cave." Riley slipped into the evening woods. "And Riley?" he called after the girl, curling his mouth into what he hoped was a playful smirk.

She stopped and turned back to where he sat, the setting sun illuminating her silhouette against the darkening trees.

"Only yell if there's a real emergency, ok?" Riley narrowed her eyes and stuck out her tongue, though her expression wasn't angry. She disappeared beyond the rocks.

## Chapter 16

Keith felt a shudder run through his body. He tried to steady his breathing but his mind raced with the images of what had happened at the bridge.

Jack had tried to kill them. He had tried to kill *him*.

Any other time, Keith would, and had, trusted his uncle with his life. He knew his relationship with Jack hadn't always been perfect, it was Keith's own damn fault that Jack had any reason to mistrust him. But even with what had happened, he had never doubted that his uncle would have his back. They were family.

*Maybe it was a bluff*, Keith thought. His uncle had seemed desperate, but the more Keith thought about it, the less it seemed like some kind of trick and that felt worse than his leg.

Riley stumbled back through the door with an armful of twigs and branches. A small stick fell behind her as she moved to stand beside Keith. She dropped the remaining pile on the dirt.

Keith surveyed the wood. "Not bad." He winced at the weakness in his own voice. "You remember how to build a fire?"

Riley scrunched her brows together. "Yeah I think so," She said. The girl began to assemble a small stack of sticks in the center of the cave. The opening was sheltered enough that the light from the fire wouldn't be visible until you were right in front of it, and by the time the fire really got going it would be too dark out to see the smoke. Keith nodded in faint satisfaction.

When he felt the structure was ready, Keith gently pulled the old metal lighter out of his damp jacket pocket. Keith doubted for a moment whether or not the lighter would still work after being submerged, but when he flicked open the top the inside seemed dry. It still took him several tries before there was a successful spark, but he expected nothing less from the piece of junk.

Keith held the little blaze from his father's lighter to the tinder and watched as the flame spread across the pine needles and dry leaves Riley had placed at the base of the pile, slowly growing. The wood was old and dry and caught fire quickly. Soon the little shelter was lit with

the decent flickering flame and Keith was confident he could see well enough to assess his situation.

Keith pulled off his backpack and damp jacket, heavy from the river, and laid it out to dry in front of the fire. The throbbing in his head pulsed in a dull beat with every breath he took. He placed his hand against the spot above his ear the pain was radiating from. The ache grew and Keith could feel dried blood flake onto his fingers as he felt the sizable bump. *Nothing too crazy*, he thought. He must have smacked his head when they had jumped into the river. At least it didn't seem to be bleeding anymore.

Keith brought his hand back down to his side and as gently as he could, slid his injured leg towards his chest. The pain was blinding, but he was able to slowly get his calf close enough to his body to inspect. Riley watched from the other side of the fire. Her shadow, giant behind her, danced on the stone wall of the cave. Her face was tight with an expression of pain that Keith could only figure matched his own.

The bottom of his pant leg was so torn that there was no salvaging them, so Keith ripped the blood soaked fabric away from the wound. As soon as his leg was clear Keith clamped his jaw shut to fight the sudden urge to hurl.

The gash stretched from the middle of his calf to his ankle, stopping just above his boot. Blood still streamed in a steady path down his leg, soaking his dirty sock and staining it a dark crimson. Forcing himself to take another steadying breath, Keith leaned closer.

Chunks of flesh had been torn away from the opening of the wound where the broken metal on the bridge had ripped through his skin. It was deep. The swelling skin spreading the gash open further. In the light of the fire, Keith could see the pale pieces of fatty tissue that had been torn out of place, soaked in blood.

Keith cursed weakly. What the hell was he supposed to do now? He leaned to where he had set his pack, knowing damn well there would be nothing helpful inside. He pushed past the few remaining granola bars and felt a different, yet familiar, stab of fear as he remembered their food shortage.

*First things first, he thought. You can't find more food if you die from blood loss.*

He found the little silver flask of whiskey Jack had mistakenly put in his bag what felt like years ago. He had forgotten it was in there, but it wouldn't really help much in his current situation.

Keith swore again at the utter helplessness building in his chest, trying not to imagine what would happen if he wasn't able to walk; stuck out in the middle of the forest still several days from any useful civilization. What he needed was some kind of medical kit, but he knew there was nothing like that in his bag. Keith felt the anger and frustration grow with the fire coursing through his leg and the pounding in his head. He wanted to throw the whole useless bag into the river. He gripped the side of the bag and felt a hard object in one of the smaller pockets. Keith unzipped it and reached in, pulling out the little fishing kit his uncle had added to his bag as a joke.

Slowly, Keith opened the plastic lid of the case revealing reveal the little sections; each packed with the specific item. The rubber worms, the little metal weights, a spool of clear fishing wire, all lay in neat stacks. And there, shining in the light of the fire, sat a row of metal fishing hooks.

Keith picked one of the hooks out of the case and held it up to the light. The curved silver metal was needle thin with a single barb forming the sharp tip. Pressing on the curve of the hook with his thumb, Keith felt the metal bend easily. He straightened the tip out a bit, keeping a slight



angle to the hook. He took the fishing wire and unraveled it. Measuring out more than he thought would be enough, and bit the rest off with his teeth. He set the remaining spool in the plastic box.

Unscrewing the cap off of the flask of liquor, he brought his leg as gently as he could to his chest. The gash dripped a stream of blood onto the ground as he moved. Grasping his knee with one hand he took the flask in the other. He poured as much of the amber colored liquid as he dared over his leg.

The searing pain shot through his body like someone had pressed a burning piece of metal into his skin. Keith gasped and let out a breathless string of curses.

The alcohol cut through the flow of blood on his leg, momentarily washing the flowing red out of the gash. As Keith watched, the burning began to subside and the dark blood began to appear over the lip of the wound again. He had to act quickly.

He took the end of the thin fishing wire in one hand and the bent hook in the other. He tried to thread the line through the needle, but his hands had begun to shake. He blinked and squinted his eyes. It was hard to focus on what he was looking at. He held his breath and brought the fishing wire to the needle. The tremors in his hands worsened and he almost dropped the needle. Releasing a sharp breath, he lowered his hands.

“Keith?” Riley stood over him a mix of fear and concerned played on her face. The expression made her look older somehow. Keith looked up at the girl. “Can you do this for me?” His voice was rough whisper. He didn’t wait for a response as he placed the hook and thread in the girl’s hands.

“Why?” Riley asked as she eyed what he had given her. Keith couldn’t respond. He leaned his head back against the stone wall behind him and closed his eyes, trying to gather any strength he had left.

After a moment Riley poked his shoulder. “Here’s your fishing hook.” She held out the line, now threaded and tied through the makeshift needle. Keith nodded his thanks as he took it from her.

Keith leaned as close as he could to the gash on his leg but he couldn’t get a good angle. He twisted his shoulders to get a better view, but the movement shot a wave of pain and nausea through him and he felt lightheaded. He could feel sweat begin to form on the back of his neck. Blinking, he tried to make himself sit forward. He brought the hook to his leg. The sharp point was angled to pierce his flesh, but his hands were shaking so hard he couldn’t place the makeshift needle where he wanted it to go. Sweat dripped down his neck. The pulsing pain echoed throughout his body and he couldn’t tell where it was coming from anymore. The world narrowed to a dull aching throb. He tried to press the tip of the hook against his leg again but his hands only shook harder.

Keith’s vision blurred and he slumped back against the stone wall savoring its coolness against his damp skin. How the hell was he supposed to do this?

Keith felt his gaze wander around the small shelter. His eyes felt heavy, he just wanted to sleep. He caught Riley’s gaze.

“I need your help kid,” he gasped out, trying to steady his voice. “You’ve got to do this for me.”

Riley just stared at him “What do you mean?”

“I need you to stitch me back together.”

Riley shook her head, “I can’t.”

Keith chuckled weakly, “Come on it can’t be that hard. Haven’t you ever sewed anything before.

“I learned to sew buttons at school but I wasn’t that good at it,” she said.

“Ok, well it can’t be much harder than that right?”

Riley still didn’t move, frozen in place except for her head which she slowly shook back and forth.

The pounding in his own head was making it hard to think. “Riley, I can’t move. If you don’t do this, I’m gonna lose too much blood and I will die.”

A look of terror crossed her face and she opened her mouth as if to speak but then closed it again.

“I’m sorry kid, I really am, but it has to be you.”

Slowly, the girl crept forward and knelt down beside Keith’s leg. Keith placed the makeshift suture kit in her hands again. She looked like she might be sick.

“Wait a sec.” Keith said, He reached down to grab the flask and raised it to his lips taking a quick swig. The whisky was cheap and tasted terrible, but the alcohol’s burn was a refreshing distraction from the agony coursing through his body.

“Ok” Keith coughed, “Now.”

Raising the needle, she placed it against Keith’s skin.

He could feel the girl hesitate. “You’ve got to do it right now kid.”

She looked up at him.

“Please,” he said.

The sudden stab of pain against his wound was so intense Keith’s vision darkened. He let out a groan and Riley slowed. “No keep going.” Keith choked out. “I’m alright.” Riley, teeth clenched, stabbed the little hook through his leg and Keith bit down hard on his teeth. His leg screamed and he felt the room sway. He tried to focus on something, anything, else. Keith felt

his fingers scrape at the dirt on the hard cave floor. The pain was unbearable. His breath was becoming shallower, threatening to stop entirely. He squeezed his eyes shut and coughed out a groan as he fought the urge to move away from the girl. He could feel the girl falter slightly as she adjusted for his movement. His hands balled into fists and he clenched them together digging his ragged fingernails into his palms. He opened his eyes. Another stab sent a wave of pain so intense that Keith cried out. He had to make it stop.

*For all the roads if traveled,*

The softly sung words broke through Keith's pain, he dully registered the girl's voice.

*The only thing I've learned that's true;*

He let out a cry and the girl's voice grew slightly as she worked by his leg.

*The only road that I'll ever know,*

Keith focused on the words, forcing himself to take a steady breath through gritted teeth.

*Is the road that leads me home to you.*

Keith could see Riley, her face illuminated in the flickering light as she sang. A sort of fearless determination hardened her childish features. Her eyes narrowed with focus as her hands moved. Her hair draped around her face and every once in a while, she would shift her shoulder against her cheek to push a stray strand of it to the side. Her small hands were slick with blood but she didn't seem to notice. They moved smoothly, one hand pinching the wound closed the other working the needle through.

Keith could feel his heart pounding in his chest. Another wave of pain hit him and nausea crept up his throat. He held his fists tighter. A small groan escaped his lips and he felt Riley continue her steady singing until, finally, Riley sat back slumping onto her knees the makeshift needle in her hand. She looked up at Keith.

“I think I did it,” she said barely above a whisper.

There was a hint of triumph in her voice that cut through Keith’s daze. His body was covered in sweat. He weakly inspected her handiwork. The gash had been closed, it was bumpy and uneven but the makeshift stitches held and the bleeding had almost completely stopped.

Riley’s hands and arms were covered in blood, a streak of it had gotten on the front of her shirt.

He looked up at Riley. “You did great kid,” he said weakly.

Keith could see the relief spread across her face. “You really think so?”

“I couldn’t have done better myself,” Keith said. “Hell, I couldn’t have done it at all.”

Keith tore a strip off of the bottom of his button down shirt at the cleanest part he could find, and reached forward with much effort wrapping the fabric around his calf, then tying it off to secure it in place. Keith tried to look at the girl but his head felt like it had been submerged in water. He squinted at her.

“Kid,” he said. “I don’t know what I would have done without you.” He tried to smile, but an intense feeling of exhaustion overtook him and he collapsed.

## Chapter 17

Riley exhaled as she stepped out of the shelter. Her breath formed in front of her mouth like smoke in the morning air. It reminded her of the cigars her father used to bring out when important guests visited the house. The only time she ever saw him smoke was around others. She had always disliked the smell.

Riley held her arms against her body as she walked further out into the morning. It was getting too cold to be outside without a coat, but there was not much she could do about that. She tried to ignore the pervasive chill as it easily ate past her thin clothing.

She could hear the river below her, but the rushing water was hidden from view. Riley glanced back at the shelter that had been their home for the night.

Keith had still been asleep when Riley had woken, she had debated trying to wake him but had decided against it.

She turned away from the direction of the river. Scanning the forest. She needed a tree; which apparently was easier said than done, despite the woods around her. Most of the trunks around her were too thin, or their branches hung much too high for her to reach. Slowly walking further from the shelter, Riley found one that looked fairly sturdy. The branches were just low enough that if she jumped she could grab it.

She took a deep breath.

Riley jumped, arms wrapping around the thin layer of bark that coated the tree. She held on to the branch with all her might. Slowly pulling her legs up, she wrapped them around the trunk. Then she slid her body up and over the rough perch. Adjusting herself into a sitting position she brushed the bits of bark off her hands. Her palms stung. She shook them trying to clear the ache from the bark and the cold that seemed to eat at her fingertips. She turned inward to the trunk of the tree, and stood carefully. Reaching for the next branch, she placed her hand in the crook in the trunk, just like Keith had showed her, and pulled herself up. She had never had an interest in climbing, trees or anything else for that matter. It seemed like a good way to get yourself hurt. Now though, she didn't have a choice. Hoisting herself higher, she stuck her foot near the base of the trunk. She tried not to think about the height. She took another steadying breath and forced herself to not look down as she continued to climb.

Riley stopped when she even with the was colorful leaves in the tree tops next to her. She involuntarily glanced down. She could see the river below her, rushing past the fallen tree that

from here, looked like a little twig. Riley took a shaky breath. She could couldn't feel her fingers, she was grasping the trunk so hard.

She *really* didn't like heights.

Riley tore her eyes from the ground. She had to figure out where they were. She surveyed the forest in front of her. The large river they that had brought them here snaked and flowed cutting through the forest in a valley much gentler than the sharp cliffs where they had jumped, until it disappeared behind a steep hill a bit away to her left. The multicolored leaves blanketed the few rolling hills. The colors were duller now mostly yellows and browns, an occasional a shock of dark green among the thinning leaves.

Despite her clenched stomach, A rush of strange excitement soared though Riley's body. There was something about being up so high that was thrilling. The view was pretty incredible. Wind whipped at her hair, long strands flowing as she clung to the thin trunk, balanced herself. as she scanned the treetops.

*There!* To her left, almost too far to make out, stood the top of a small shingled rooftop.

Riley gasped, she could feel the excitement that had welled in her chest spread across her face in a triumphant smile. She couldn't tell how far away it was exactly; it would definitely take them a long time to get there, and that was if Keith could even walk. Riley felt her stomach flop at the memory of the jagged wound that cut through the man's leg.

She looked down at her hands still tightly clenched to the tree. She had done here best to wash the blood off her hands, but bits of red still remained under her dirt packed fingernails.

Riley glanced back out over the river, willing the feeling of nausea to calm. She could still hear the way Keith cried out in pain, every time the needle went through his skin. The way he tried to fight against her touch. Riley was glad she hadn't eaten breakfast yet.

She took a shaky breath. She had done what she was supposed to, what she had asked him to, and despite all the pain he had thanked her.

He was going to be ok. They'd find a way to get to those houses, and then home. Everything was going to be ok.

Riley's gaze trailed to a thin dirt path near the river. The road much further down the river than where Riley sat in her tree. It seemed to be facing away from the town. There was something sitting on the packed dirt, it is was hard to see what it was at this distance. Riley squinted to make out what she saw and when she recognized it, she bit back a word she had heard Keith use; one she knew she wasn't supposed to say. Though if there was any time to use a word like that, it was now; because what Riley saw in the distance, unmoving in the valley, was a truck.

A big, black truck.

The vehicle seemed to be pulled slightly to side of the path. It didn't look like there was any attempt to conceal it. Riley fought to keep the fear from taking hold of her. If the truck was here, *he* had to be too. She held her breath scanning the forest floor. At first, she couldn't see much. A tree branch shuddered here and there, as squirrels chased one another. Riley was a healthy distance from the river and valley that followed it, which made it even harder to find what she was looking for. She held still, the sharp wind bighting at her exposed hands and face.

*There!*

Near the river bank, a single figure moved slowly. Riley couldn't make out the face, but she knew it had to be Keith's uncle. The gaunt frame of the man was familiar to her now.

The thinning leaves made it slightly easier to see the form as he stalked slowly up the river. Towards her, *towards the shelter*.



She had to get down, now. If Jack made it up to their camp he would find Keith completely defenseless.

Riley had to do something, *but what?*

She squeezed her eyes tight and released a shaky breath. Slowly, she began to descend the tree, feeling for the branches before grabbing on to them. Riley opened her eyes as she slid herself down. When she reached the last branch, she slid her body over the side and vaulted herself forward with her arms. Her feet crunched into the dry leaves as she hit the ground. She waved her arms for balance but didn't fall. She couldn't see the truck or the man from here but she knew she didn't have a lot of time.

Quickly making her way back to the little shelter, Riley peered into the opening. Keith still lay unmoving in the dim shade of the cave.

"I'll be back" she whispered, even though she knew he couldn't hear her. "It's going to be ok." Then she turned from the mouth of the shelter and darted towards the direction she had seen the man.

She made a wide berth, cutting through the forest instead of going directly for the water. When she had seen the man, he seemed to be following the river upstream. She needed to get him to move away from the direction of the shelter.

She was heading past where she had seen him. She knew when he saw her she had to make it look like she was coming from the opposite direction of the little cave. She tried to move as quickly and quietly as she could. She crept closer to the river, peering through the trees. She could see where the man was; upstream now and walking away from her. *Was it possible he wouldn't find the shelter?* It was pretty concealed and away from the riverbank enough he

shouldn't be able to spot it the way he was headed. Maybe she would just watch him, if he seemed like a danger, then she would actually do something.

Riley stepped to the side to get a better view of the man. Forgetting to watch where she was stepping, her shoe knocked into a chunk of rock and the stone slid away from her. It wasn't loud but the man turned immediately.

Riley shrunk back. As the man stared back in her direction. Maybe he didn't see her. She watched the man's eyes, the same blue as Keith's, met hers. They were both still for a second. The man slowly raised his hand in front of him.

"Hey there." he called to her softly. Riley couldn't move. She clutched the trunk of the trees she had been hiding behind and stared back at the man.

"I've been lookin' all over for you, I wanted to make sure you were ok." he said. He took a step forward and the strength returned to Riley's legs. She bolted.

The man yelled out a curse and Riley didn't have to look back to know he was in pursuit.

Riley ran through the forest, she crashed through dry dead shrubs and stomped on fallen branches. Now she didn't care if she was being loud, she just needed to get him to follow her.

She slid down a shallow incline and nearly slammed into a tree. Bracing against it with her palms, she continued her rapid pace, her hands stinging from the impact. She could hear the man behind her, he was getting closer.

What if he caught up to her?

Riley urged her feet to go faster. She tried not to think about it. *At least Keith would be safe.* She sucked down rapid breaths. The sharp air grating against her throat. The man was still gaining on her. and she was getting tired fast. She wished she had a better plan.

She could see an opening where the dirt road passed through the forest. An idea crept into her head. She changed course slightly, heading directly for the path. I

t didn't take long to reach the packed dirt road. it was easier to run here, but she was even more exposed. There was nowhere to hide here; but she wasn't planning on hiding. The man crashed through the woods behind her. Heart pounding in her chest Riley swayed on her feet as she ran, she didn't know how much more she could go before she would have to stop. She coughed, her lungs burning as she pushed herself forward until she could see it; the truck, sitting lonely to one side of the road.

Riley ran directly towards the vehicle. She could here Jack crashing through the woods behind her. She pushed herself to run faster. Her legs burned and her breath came rapid and shallow. She reached the truck as Jack appeared out of the forest onto the dirt path.

Riley pulled at the handle of the driver's side door. It was locked. Riley quickly looked around the path. She glanced back at the man. He yelled something she couldn't make out. She quickly reached down and grabbed a rock the size of her fist from the side of the path. The stone was jagged and rough. Quickly returning to the truck's door, she bit back a feeling of guilt as she smashed the sharp edge of the stone into the glass. The window cracked but it held. She slammed the rock into the glass again and it shattered. Dropping the stone, Riley climbed onto the metal footrest and peeled the bits of crumpled glass from the frame. Reaching in, she popped the lock up and slid to the side as she opened the door. She slid into the seat slamming the door behind her.

Riley glanced desperately around the cab. She could hear the man approaching, yelling wildly at her.

She had to be fast.

Where did Keith say his uncle liked to hide the spare key? She slid her hand underneath the passenger seat and felt where the thin carpet of the floor had been pulled away. She reached underneath the fabric and felt the metal key fob brush against her fingers.

Pulling it from its hiding place, Riley jammed the key into the ignition and turned it fast. The truck roared to life. Riley glanced into the mirror on the door. She could see the man rapidly approaching, Anger contorted his features.

She looked at the two pedals by her feet. Her father had let her sit up front when he drove a couple of times, but Riley had never really payed attention to how it was done. She slammed on the pedals with her feet. The larger one was harder to push down. The thin one made the car engine sputter and rev, but it didn't move. She tried the thin pedal again. The engine roared but there was no movement from the truck. Riley looked around the cab desperately for what she was missing. Burnt cigarette butts sat in a cup holder. An old Yankees had sat on the dash by the passenger seat. There was a metal rod in the center of the cab. Letters were in a row next to the rod. It was stopped next to the P.

"P for park." Riley muttered remembering something she had seen on a tv show.

She yanked on the handle but the rod didn't budge. *What was wrong now?* Her driver had made it look so simple. She could see Jack in the mirror, he was close enough to touch the trunk of the car now.

Panic flooded Riley's body. She pressed one foot on one pedal, one foot on the other. The engine revved as she grabbed at the rod and pulled it back as hard as she could. It slid, Riley watched as the light on the dash quickly blinked from P, R, N, to D.

The car lurched and shuttered. She took her left foot off of the large pedal and pressed her right foot down hard. The truck lunged forward speeding down the dirt road.

Riley yelled in surprise, taking her foot off the gas. The car slowed and she pressed her foot back down, lighter this time. The car sped forward at a steady pace.

Riley glanced briefly in the mirror to her left. He tried to chase after the car but she was quickly leaving the man behind. She faced forward, looking through the windshield as she sped down the dirt road. She had to brace one foot against the floor of the cab, lifting herself partially off of the seat so she could reach the pedals and see out the windshield at the same time. A thrill rushed through Riley's body and she whooped, laughing at the adrenaline that coursed through her. The truck bumped along the uneven road, kicking up dust. She turned the wheel gently to keep the vehicle as straight as she could.

*This isn't so hard*, she thought.

The car bumped over a deep pothole and Riley turned the wheel against the pull of the engine. The truck lurched to the left and Riley yanked the wheel hard in the other direction. The car jerked to the right and off of the path.

Riley screamed as the vehicle crashed into the underbrush and slid down the embankment. she griped the steering wheel as it moved wildly.

The cab violently slammed into something solid, halting its movement.

Riley coughed as she opened her eyes. She couldn't see anything at first. Thick gray smoke billowed from the front of the truck, surrounding her. Her head had slammed into a white pillow-like thing that had come out of the steering wheel. She sat up. The windshield was broken. Large splintering lines spread across the glass. Her left shoulder ached sharply and Riley felt something wet and warm slide down the side of her face. She put her fingers to the spot above her eye and they came away a bright red. Riley took a shaky breath. She tried to open the door but it was stuck fast.

Riley put her head and chest out of the door's empty window, then swung her feet through the frame. Pushing herself from the vehicle she landed on the leaf covered ground and stumbled forward. Her knee on her left leg ached as she hit the ground. She sucked in a sharp breath and stood.

The outside of the truck looked even worse than the cab. The entire front was crushed and folded in on itself against thick base of a tree. Layers of the bark had been ripped away from the tree revealing the soft light interior of the trunk, the car smoked wildly, dark grey plumes billowing in the wind.

Riley wondered vaguely if Keith would be able to see the smoke from the shelter. She must be pretty far away from it at this point. She limped away. The pain in her shoulder sending sharp jolts through her arm. The soreness in her knee seemed to be fading as she moved which had to be a good sign. She picked up the pace. She had to get as far from the wreckage as she could before Jack caught up to it. She couldn't see the man, but knew it was a straight shot from where she had left him on the dirt road to where the truck currently sat. Riley took one last look back and then disappeared into the forest.

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Riley walked for hours. She held her shoulder with her opposite hand as she moved. The blood on her head and hands had dried but her body throbbed with a dull ache as she trudged through the forest. She had more or less run through the forest for the good part of an hour trying to put as much distance between Jack and herself as she could. She had changed directions frequently in hopes that if he was still somehow following her he would be thrown off. When her adrenaline had run out and she couldn't run anymore she walked.

Once Riley was confident that she had lost the man, she began to make her way back. Panic had set in briefly when she realized she had no idea where she was in relation to the river, but she had forced herself to remain calm. She had climbed a tree, which had taken a significant amount of effort, but she was able to spot the river in the distance and after allowing herself a brief rest, she had been able to set her course back.

She dragged her feet in the leaves.

She was exhausted.

Her stomach had held a painful hollowness for a while now and her throat was dry. The sweat had long since dried on her skin leaving her once again shivering.

She wondered if Keith was worried when he woke up and found that she was gone. He'd probably be angry when she got back. Maybe she should have grabbed some more edible bark or something as an apology for being gone so long.

She trudged up the riverbank. Would he be angry about the truck too? Maybe she shouldn't tell him the details of what happened.

By the time she could see the little shelter, the sun had nearly set. Riley wondered if Keith had started a fire yet. They had left enough kindling from the night before that he shouldn't have to move much to get it going. However, when she reached the mouth of the little cave it was dark.

"Keith?" She called, entering the shelter. She squinted her eyes, waiting for them to adjust to the dim interior. The man lay exactly where she had left him, motionless on the ground. She approached him slowly, a terrible feeling growing in her stomach. She knelt by his head.

"Hey," she said, shaking his shoulder gently. The man didn't stir.

"Keith, I'm back." She shook his shoulder harder.

Nothing.

Panic began to creep into her chest. She placed a hand above the man's mouth and nose waiting. Her fingers were too numb with cold. She couldn't feel if he was breathing or not.

"Wake up." She said louder. She pulled at the collar of his shirt. His head lolled slightly with the movement.

"Keith." She felt tears begin to form. Why wasn't he waking up? She quickly drew her hand back and smacked it across the side of his face. Her fingers burned, but the man did not respond.

"Please," she gasped. Tears had begun to flow freely down her cheeks. She stared at his body searching for any signs of life. He remained still. "I can't do this alone." She pleaded through her sobs.

Riley leaned closer to him, staring at his chest, trying to make out any movement in the fading light. His dirt stained t-shirt didn't seem to move.

She put her ear to his chest. Was his chest warm or were her cheeks just heated from her tears? She held her own breath and waited. The frogs had begun to sing their nightly songs and she could hear the faint rush of the river.

"Come on, please." She whispered, her voice trembling.

She heard a faint thump, then another one. She didn't dare let out her breath as she listened. The gentle steady thrum from his chest seemed to pulse through her body with every beat.

She sat back on her heels ignoring her bruised knee, and choked out a sob. He was alive.



She cried, hot tears streaming down her face and landing on the man's arm and her own legs. Her body shook uncontrollably at the flood of emotions washing through her. She let the sobs rack her body as she knelt on the floor of the little shelter.

When her tears subsided, she slowly wiped the wetness from her cheeks and stood. She gathered some of the branches she had found the night before and built a small stack on top of the burnt out stick from the previous night. When she was satisfied with the stack. She found Keith's old lighter and flipped it open. The wheel was rusted and scraped against the metal as Riley struck it. When she was finally able to get a flicker of a flame she held it to the mound of sticks. The fire started slowly at first. It crackled as it slowly spread.

Riley scooped closer to the growing flame, stretching her fingers out to the satisfying warmth. The flame spread along the branches lighting up the cave as the heat spread through Riley's body. An involuntary shiver went down her spine. She stretched her feet even closer to the flames, savoring the feeling.

Her stomach growled so loudly it started her. She realized she hadn't eaten a single thing all day. Sliding over to where Keith's backpack sat, she hesitated at the zipper. Keith didn't like her going through his stuff, and he might not be happy when he found that she had taken food without his permission. Her stomach grumbled again and Riley slid open the zipper.

He would just have to understand.

Riley pulled out one of the few remaining granola bars. *Only two left.* She would have to figure out more food tomorrow. She inhaled the bar too quickly and even after it was gone, her stomach still felt hollow. She ached to reach for another bar but she made herself stop. They would need the remaining bars, however scarce, if they weren't able to find any other source of food.

Riley uncapped the plastic water bottle and drank, hoping the liquid would satiate her remaining hunger. She made sure to leave some water remaining in the bottle. Keith would probably be thirsty when he woke.

She looked at the man lying in the shadows of the shelter. She could now see his chest rise and fall gently in the flickering light of the fire. A gust of wind blew through the opening of the cave and threaten to extinguish the flame as it shuttered wildly; sending shadows dancing aggressively on the stone wall.

Riley slid closer to the fire stretching her body forward to absorb as much warmth as she could. Keith's hair brushed back from his face with the wind. He wore his torn button down, but it was open. Riley watched as the edge of the shirt flutter momentarily as before the breeze quieted.

Riley stood, the difference in temperature as she moved away from the flame made her shiver. She reached down and picked up Keith's jacket from where he had laid it out the night before. It was heavier than she thought it would be, but it was dry. She walked to Keith and draped the jacket over the man's shoulders and chest. The worn brown leather covered his upper body almost completely, leaving his legs and the tips of his fingers exposed.

Riley felt herself sway with exhaustion as she stumbled back towards the dwindling flames. She knew she had to kill the fire before she too fell asleep. Keith had told her the dangers of leaving a flame lit and she definitely didn't want to take any chances with Keith unable to move. She stomped at the remaining flicker of fire with her foot. Sparks rose in the air but the flames were easily extinguished. Darkness overtook the shelter and Riley winced at the cold air that seeped through the opening of the cave and in into her bones. She stood in the spot she had claimed for herself but couldn't bring herself to curl up on the cold dirt floor.

She watched Keith for a moment, stepping closer to where he lay. Slight apprehension tugged at her chest but Riley brushed the feeling aside as another harsh gust of air swept into the shelter biting at her skin. Without giving herself a chance to chicken out and face the cold alone, Riley slid herself underneath the jacket and tucked against Keith's frame.

His body felt solid as she moved up against it. His smell was familiar to her and somehow comforting; like dry leaves and smoke from the fire. She could feel the faint warmth of his body against her sore shoulder and she tucked closer to him, hoping her own heat in turn would help keep him warm. She rested her head in the crook of his arm. Her body felt heavy with exhaustion.

She could hear it, the soft thump of his heartbeat as his chest gently rose and fell. *He is ok. We are going to be ok*, she thought. And under the protection of the jacket and the warmth from the body next to her, Riley fell asleep.

## Chapter 18

Keith woke with a start. Daylight streamed in from the opening of the little cave. How long had he been out? His throat was painfully dry and his head throbbed dully. Looking down he saw his leather jacket spread out over top his body. He tried to piece together the hazy memories of the night before. But he could only recall flashes of what had happened.

He remembered the jump from the bridge and Riley helping him to the shelter. A flash of a fishing hook, the girl kneeling over him, singing. The unbearable pain that had radiated through his body from his leg.

His leg!

He gingerly tried to sit up but his body felt too heavy. Panic spread through his chest, why couldn't he move? He shifted the jacket with his left hand and caught a faint shock of tangled light brown hair in the morning light. Gingerly he peeled back the makeshift blanket and found Riley snuggled against his side, her body tucked into itself her head nestled on his arm.

Keith took in the sleeping girl. Her hair framed her face, revealing a calm, relaxed expression. She seemed to be smiling faintly in her sleep. She looked even younger when no strong emotions were held in her features. He brushed a stray strand of hair away from her face. She had a cut on her head above her eye and a mottled purple and brown bruise had begun to form around it. *Had that been there yesterday?* It must have.

He gently tried to shift his arm and the girl's eyes fluttered open. She looked up at him and blinked, her eyes growing wide.

"Keith!" The girl surged forward and threw her body onto his, wrapping her arms tightly around his neck.

Surprised Keith didn't dare move as the girl embraced him.

"You're ok! She said. "I knew you'd be ok."

Slowly, Keith wrapped his free arm around the girl. "Of course I'm ok," he said.

The girl pulled back and an odd expression played on her face.

"What?" he asked.

"You've were out for a whole day." She said. "I tried to wake you but..." The girl trailed off.

"What do you mean?" Keith said again.

"The bridge?" Riley said. "That was two days ago. You were really messed up I guess."

The girl stood and there seemed to be a new confidence about her in the way she moved.

She brought Keith the water bottle and he took it, troubled. If he had really been out all day, what did that mean for them? They were still here; Jack hadn't found them, that was something at least. Keith pressed the bottle to his lips gulping down the remaining water.

"Kid," he said after catching his breath. "What happened?"

The girl hesitated for a moment, then flopped down on the dirt floor. "I'll tell you, but you have to promise you won't be mad," she began.

"Why would I be mad?"

The girl's mouth revealed a faint, shy smirk as she filled Keith in on her previous day's adventures.

Keith did his best to hold his tongue and let her tell the whole story; only breaking his respectful silence with an occasional interjection of surprise or concern that made Riley stop her account and squint at him in annoyance.

When she finished, he let out a laugh of disbelief. "I can't believe you killed his truck. Do you know how long he's had that thing?"

Riley looked concerned, but he let out another laugh and she seemed to relax a little.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

"No, I'm fine."

"You sure?" He eyed the cut on her head.

"Yeah, just some scrapes and bruises, it doesn't even hurt that bad anymore." She brushed her hand against her left shoulder so quickly Keith wasn't sure if she even noticed she had done it.

Keith shook his head. That was dangerous, what you did. If you had been caught..." Riley looked away from him, her cheeks slightly colored.

“But, kid?” Keith said. She looked up at him. “You are seriously badass!” He felt a warm rush of pride spreading through his chest as he spoke. “I owe you my life.” He looked into the girl’s eyes, golden in the morning light. “I mean it.”

“I was just trying to think what you would do” she said.

“Well you were amazing,” he grinned.

The girl studied him for a moment, perhaps judging the sincerity of his words, before asking a question Keith had been thinking himself.

“Now what?”

Keith scratched at his beard. He had been trying to ignore the throbbing in his leg, hoping it didn’t feel as bad as it actually was. Taking a deep breath, Keith braced his good leg underneath him and tried to stand. He leaned against the wall trying to pull himself up, cursing with the effort and the sharp stab that tore through his leg. Riley stood to help, but he put up a hand.

“No. Let me do it,” he gasped. Keith strained slowly. Then, when he felt stable, he let go of the wall. He gingerly took a step and his weight held. He let out a breath. Keith took another step and his leg buckled underneath him. He fell to the ground. His leg sent a nauseating shock of pain up his body as he collapsed.

“Shit.” He spat.

Riley watched him, a wince of sympathetic pain plastered across his face.

“Ok, new plan.” He breathed, slowly pulling himself into a sitting position. “First things first, we need to get more water and food.” He said.

“I did see a couple more of those trees with the bark,” Riley said quite unenthusiastically. “I could climb—,”

Keith chuckled cutting her off. That'll be our backup he said. "I have a better idea."

Keith had Riley bring her his backpack. He pulled out the plastic fishing kit.

"That river down there," he said opening the little plastic case, is bound to have something we can eat." He spread out the gear on the ground in front of her.

Keith named the different parts of the kit, showing Riley what each piece was used for. He demonstrated how to tie a clinch knot around the hook with the fishing line. Then he had her practice several times until she was able to do it without any instructions the way Jack had once done for him. He showed her how to place the hook inside the soft plastic of the lure and where to place the metal weight on the line. He explained the best places in the river to set the fishing wire and how to tie them off to branches so they won't tangle in the water, as well as how the trap would bob when a fish was caught.

They ate the last of the granola bars while they worked.

Keith beckoned her forward. She stepped closer to him and he placed his jacket around her shoulders. Riley started to protest but Keith just shook his head. "It's getting cold out there," he said.

He watched Riley venture out of the shelter, the much to big jacket draping almost to her knees. Her arms completely hidden the sleeves. The little fishing kit sticking out of one, the empty water bottles out of the other. He wondered what he looked like when Jack had taught him to fish by himself for the first time. The unexpected thought made his chest ache.

Keith sat in the entrance of the cave. His gun rested on his lap which made himself feel slightly more useful. He had cleaned it, making sure it hadn't become damaged in the river. Everything seemed to be in working order.

He sighed sharply. He couldn't see Riley or the river from here. He'd just have to trust that she would be ok by herself. She had held her own so far.

Riley re-appeared after a little while. She informed Keith about where she had set the traps. She also brought the now full bottles of water. Keith showed her how to purify the liquid with the tablet. Then she disappeared again, returning to her fishing lines. Keith could hardly believe this was the same girl he had first taken from his uncle.

When the girl caught her first fish, a brown trout hardly bigger than her hand, she carried it up the hill to the shelter where Keith sat, her expression a mixer of excitement and disgust as she held the slippery animal. Keith laughed and congratulated her.

By the time the sun had begun to set and the sky had turned brilliant hues of orange and pink, Riley had managed to catch two more fish. The largest of which was not quite half the size of Keith's forearm, but it was more than they had had to eat in days.

Riley set the fire as Keith prepared the fish the best he could. He wished he had Jack's knife or anything sharp enough to properly gut the fish. Instead he used a jagged stone to scrape the scales off the best he could. Then he took a few long sticks and placed them through the mouths of the trout. Once secure, he set them over the flames.

While they waited for the fish to cook, Riley regaled Keith with her day's adventure. She excitedly explained how she had nearly fallen in trying to grab one of the traps and how she had to reset them twice because something kept eating the plastic worms but somehow not getting caught.

Keith watched the girl, his face creased as an expression of interest settled on his face.



When the fish were fully cooked, their outside blacked from the flames, Keith took them from the fire and stuck them in the dirt near the opening of the cave. The brisk air blew through entrance, blowing steam from the grilled trout.

Riley was telling him about the family of deer she had seen drinking from the river.

“I swear one look right at me and it wasn’t afraid!” She exclaimed, waving her hands wildly for emphasis. “It was so cool!”

Keith nodded to show the girl he was listening as he tested the temperature of their meal with his hand. They were still hot, but tolerable to hold. He took one, stick and all, and held it up to his mouth. biting into the steaming fish.

The meat was pretty bland without any seasonings, but the warmth was satisfying enough to compensate for any lack of flavor. Keith chewed the soft, pale meat and swallowed. He picked up offered one of the remaining fish and held out to Riley.

The base of her nose wrinkled as she took the fish from him. Keith could see her emotions battling in on her face.

“It ain’t too bad,” he said. “Tastes much better than it looks.”

She closed her eyes and took a small bite, slowly chewing. She opened her eyes again, looking at the trout apprehensively.

“I just wish it wasn’t staring at me.” She said as she chewed.

Keith chuckled. “Come on,” he said. “That’s how you know its fresh.”

He took another bite. Then held the fish up to his head so the fish face was level with his own. “Doesn’t this face just scream *eat me?*” He asked the girl. He put a hand on the bottom of the fish’s mouth and moved it up and down as he spoke, putting on a ridiculous voice: “Look at me, I’m delicious.”

“Ewww,” she protested, cackling. Her head tilted back slightly as she laughed. Keith joined her with that rough laugh of his own.

“Come on eat up,” he chuckled. “Before I finish mine and get hungry again.” He took another bite out of his trout and the girl did the same.

They devoured their food in relative silence, Keith listened to the now familiar music of the forest come alive.

They split the remaining fish between them. Keith hoped tomorrow he’d actually be able to help Riley catch more. The girl had become quiet for a while now as apparently her hunger overcame her apprehension.

Keith wiped his fingers on his already dirty jeans, savoring the feeling of cooked food in his stomach for the first time in days. He stretched his arms out towards the fire, the chill of the fall night seeping in through the opening. He heard a sniff and found Riley staring into the fire, tears streaming down her face.

“Whoa, hey! What’s wrong?” he asked in surprise.

“It’s my fault” Riley said softly, brushing a closed fist against her wet cheeks.

“What do you mean? What’s your fault?” Confusion coloring Keith’s words.

Riley sniffed again. “All of this” she said. “If I hadn’t made such a big deal about climbing a tree, then he wouldn’t have found us. and you wouldn’t have gotten hurt.” Riley’s lips trembled. “And up on the bridge, I had the gun but I couldn’t—, I didn’t do anything and now we’re stuck here.”

“Hey, look at me,” Keith slid closer to the girl putting a hand on her shoulder and lowering his head to look at her. Her amber eyes glowed in the dying light of the fire. “None of this is your fault. Let’s get that very clear. You shouldn’t even be here. What you did, everything

you've done for me kid, is amazing. You pulled me from the freakin' river all by yourself, stitched me up, risked your own life to lead Jack away and then single handedly took care of both of us, while I sat on my ass all day. I'd probably be dead at least twice now if it wasn't for you and hell I'd deserve it. This is not your fault kid, it's mine."

Riley stared at him for a second, then suddenly fell into Keith's arms. Her head pressed into his chest, her thin arms wrapped around his body shuddering as she sobbed into his shirt.

Keith embraced the girl. "It's alright." He said gently. "You're alright." He stroked the girl's hair which was surprisingly soft despite the tangles and the dirt. The top of her head brushed against his chin, tickling his beard. Keith held her until her sobs quieted.

She pulled away. Her eyes puffy and red but her expression was calmer and held a hint of that stubborn pride that Keith didn't realize he missed until he saw it back in its rightful place. She sniffed rubbing her nose.

"We should get some sleep," Keith said and Riley yawned in agreement. She slid down next to him tucking herself close. Keith positioned himself so he could see out the front of the cave, while still keeping the girl warm. She pulled the jacket tighter, her head resting against his arm.

Keith could hear the distant rush of the river. The wind blew the leaves off the trees and Keith watched their silhouettes fall, slowly drifting to the ground.

The glow of the fire slowly died.

Keith's body still thrummed with the deep ache. His leg felt hot with pain. He rested his head against the wall of the cave. Riley's breathing was soft and steady next to him in the dark. Somehow knowing she was there, made him feel safe and calm.

"Goodnight kid," he whispered to the girl.

## Chapter 19

The walk back down to the river took longer than Keith had hoped. He had to rest several times and when they finally reached the riverbank, Keith had collapsed onto a large rock, panting and cursing. Riley, who had stopped asking where they were going around the time the cursing had started, was watching him warily. After the girl had returned from setting up the traps in the river. Keith and told her had something important to show her, before slowly limping out of the shelter and in the direction of the river.

Keith had led them upstream from where they'd washed ashore. The rapids here flowed loud and strong. They crashed into each other with a deafening roar as the water turned to white foam, carrying colorful fallen leaves with them.

Keith surveyed the ground, and when he spotted what he was looking for he called to Riley, yelling to be heard over the powerful current.

"The pinecones." Keith said pointing at the bristly egg-shaped cones that littered the ground. "Take one and set it on top of that tree stump." Keith pointed to the old stump near the bank of the water.

Riley scrunched her eyebrows, making her nose crinkle.

*Yep, Keith thought, she definitely thinks I've lost it.*

The girl opened her mouth, then closed it again as if thinking better of asking why.

Riley scooped up a pinecone and placed it onto the stump, steadying it with her hands before returning back to where Keith sat.

The pain that coursed through his legs seemed to fade to a dull throb as long as he stayed still. So Keith moved as little as possible; gingerly pulling his gun out from where he kept it

tucked in his waistband. The dull black surface was warm from where it had rested against his body.

It was a basic hand gun, nothing special. Jack had bought it for him when he had turned 16, and the thing still worked like a charm. Riley's approach slowed when she saw the gun, her amber eyes flicking to Keith's own. Keith could see the streak of his dried blood on her pink pajama shirt, hiding underneath the jacket.

Keith held the gun out for her to see. "This is a Smith and Wesson 9 millimeter pistol. It's a semi-automatic." Keith said, tapping a finger to the trigger. "When you pull the trigger, the gun will automatically re-load." Keith slid the magazine from the bottom of the grip. "This," he said placing the gun next to him, "is where the bullets are stored." He poured the bullets out into his palm. The golden cylinders of metal glinted in the sunlight. Keith held out a bullet for Riley to hold. She pushed up her sleeve as Keith dropped the bullet into her open palm.

Riley's eyes widened as she rolled the bullet between her fingers.

"It's bigger than I thought it would be and heavier." The girl bounced her palm up and down as if testing the weight, then looked back at Keith. "It's kind of pretty."

Keith's lips twitched. In all his years of shooting, he had never heard a bullet referred to as *pretty*. "This gun can hold thirty of these little suckers," Keith said. "Right now, we got twenty-nine."

*Twenty nine bullets, that's more than enough*, he thought. He had planned to use up some bullets today. Plus, if it came down to it, he knew he only really needed one. Keith shook that possibility from his head.

Keith counted out nine bullets and slid the rest into the pocket of his jeans. He placed the remaining bullets, including Riley's, into the magazine, before sliding it back into place. The girl

watched as his hands moved over the gun with ease. He remembered the fear in her voice last night when she had had sobbed into his shirt:

*“I had the gun. I didn’t do anything and now we’re stuck here.”*

Keith held the gun up so Riley could see it. “The most important part of the gun is the safety” Keith said tapping his finger to the ridged button. “When the safety is on, you can’t pull the trigger no matter what.” Keith placed his finger on the trigger and squeezed. “But once you take the safety off,” Keith flicked the button and felt it click. Now you can shoot.” He slid the safety back on and lowered the gun. “Always make sure your safety is on, unless you’re planning to fire, ok?”

“Why are you telling me about your gun?” Riley asked.

“Because,” Keith said, holding the pistol barrel towards himself, for the girl to take. “You’re going to learn how to shoot it.”

Riley stepped away from the handle shaking her head quickly back and forth, her hair shifting with her movement. “No, no I can’t. You remember what happened last time. Plus, my dad said they’re dangerous, so I shouldn’t.”

“Last time you couldn’t shoot ‘cause you didn’t know how to use it,” Keith said. “I’m gonna show you how to, so if you need to defend yourself you can.”

“But you’ll be with me, so you can just do it.” She said.

Keith sighed. He set the gun down and took Riley’s arm. He rolled the long sleeves of the jacket up to her elbow, then took her other arm and did the same. “If something happens to me, you gotta be able to take care of yourself.” He took the gun and placed it in her hand. Riley flinched as the metal touched her skin, but she didn’t let go.

“Hold it in your right hand, yep kinda like that,” Keith said as he moved her hand into place. “Thumb stays on this side, and you want your finger to stick out straight on the other; that’ll help you keep the gun straight.”

The girl adjusted her fingers curling the rest of her hand around the base. The gun looked out of place, too large in her hands. Keith realized with a jolt this is what he must have looked like when Jack had first taught him to shoot. A deep stab of sadness and guilt rushed through him at the memory.

“Now put your other hand around like you’re giving a big hug to your fingers.” The girl cupped her left hand around her right. “Looks really great kid,” he said.

Riley grinned.

“Squeeze your fingers nice and tight,” he said. “Try pulling the trigger to see how it feels.”

She pulled at the lever with her finger. “I guess this isn’t too bad,” Riley said begrudgingly.

“You remember that pinecone?” Keith asked, pointing to where the girl had placed it on the stump. Riley nodded. “You’re gonna try and hit it.”

Riley looked back at Keith, a flicker of doubt shone in her eyes.

“You can do this,” Keith said. “Look down the center of the gun and place the end right where you want to shoot.” He leaned forward and clicked the safety off. “Whenever you’re ready, pull the trigger.”

Riley faltered, “Won’t he hear the gun go off?”

Keith smiled and shook his head. “Why’d you think we came down here? The river’ll keep Jack from hearin’ anything.”

Riley chewed her lip nervously but nodded. “Ok” she said, turning back towards the tree stump. She steadied the gun and fired. The gun jerked back and Riley yelped. She let go, dropping it on the ground.

Keith held back a chuckle.

“It’s all right,” he called to the girl. “The kickback takes some gettin’ used to.” Keith stood and slowly made his way to the gun. He grunted with the effort as he knelt and picked up the pistol from where it lay on a bed of dried leaves. Standing, he clicked the safety on and limped to where Riley stood. she held her left shoulder, her expression pinched. She moved her hand quickly when she noticed Keith’s gaze.

He placed the gun back into the girl’s empty palm, putting his hand on the girl’s other shoulder. “Why don’t you try it again.”

Riley looked at him her face still flush with annoyance. “It was too loud,” she complained. “I’m not going to hit the pinecone if I can’t even hold onto the stupid gun.”

“You just gotta practice. You’ll get used to the way it feels.” Keith slid back onto his boulder.

“But I can’t—,”

“Come here.” Keith said, holding out a hand to the girl. Riley didn’t move, she just stared at him. Keith tried to quell his frustration. He was tired and his leg was pulsing with hot bolts of pain, but he knew getting angry would make her resist. He took a breath and kept his hand outstretched.

After a moment Riley slowly walked to where Keith sat.

“Turn around, face the target again,” he said.

The girl rolled her eyes but turned to face the tree stump.



Keith placed his hands on either side of her head, pressing them against her ears. He shifted one of his hands so the girl could hear him. “Try again.” He said, before replacing his hand over her ear.

Riley slid her hand to the safety and pushed it off. Keith could see her body still with anticipation. The shot rang out again but this time Riley kept the gun in her hands. The pinecone remained on the stump unharmed, but it wobbled with the force of the bullet passing close by. Keith released his hands and Riley turned to him, a small smile beginning to grow on her face.

“Did you see that? It moved! That means I was pretty close right?” The girl’s smile was infectious and Keith found himself grinning back at her.

Keith adjusted her position and Riley shot at the target again. On her fifth try, she blew the pinecone clean off the stump.

Riley whooped with excitement and danced around in celebration.

Keith laughed and clapped her on the shoulders, “you’re a natural shot kid,” he said.

Riley set a new pinecone on the stump and returned to where Keith was sitting. Keith could see the flush of excitement still coloring her face.

She aimed at the stump again, refusing his assistance.

He let her stand on her own and watched as she shot and missed. She immediately took aim again without faltering.

Keith could see the soft leather of his jacket rise with her shoulders as she took a deep breath and then fired again and then again until the pinecone burst as the bullet shot through it.

She turned back to grin at him, then set a new target on the stump.

When she hit it twice in a row she turned back to Keith, her cheeks flushed.

“That was pretty good right?” She asks as she moved to set up another pinecone.

Keith stifled a laugh. “Yeah I’d say you catch on pretty quick.”

The girl’s lips curled into a mischievous grin. “I’m probably already better than you.

“Now hold on,” Keith said, but the girl continued.

“I bet *you* couldn’t even hit it from here on your first try.” She said, indicating the pinecone she had set up.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah!”

Keith smirked. He held out his hand and Riley placed the gun in it. He stood shakily, balancing his weight on his good leg. He didn’t take his eyes off the girl beside him as he aimed the gun. He pulled the trigger and the pinecone went flying.

Riley frowned slightly, staring at where the target once stood. “Yeah well, you’ve had more practice.”

“Just a little,” he admitted good naturedly. I’ll tell you what, a few more years of practice and I bet you’ll be better than me.

Riley scoffed at him. She was silent for a moment, Keith could tell something was bothering her.

Keith gave her a questioning look. A quiet invitation for her to speak.

“Did Jack teach you how to shoot like he taught you to fish and stuff?” The girl asked.

Keith sighed as he sank back down on the low stump.

“Yeah.” He said, “He did.”

“Why?” The girl stared at him, her eyes level with his.

Keith sighed. “I think he thought I didn’t have a choice.”

Riley looked troubled. “Was he really that bad? Your dad, I mean.”

Keith scratched at his head feeling the fading bruise above his ear. He studied the girl, wondering how much he should tell her. He sat back and slid the gun into his lap, clicking the safety on.

“When I was a kid,” Keith said. “After my mom left, I was stuck living with my dad. As much as I resented my mom for leaving, part of me was always glad she did, if it meant she was safe.” Keith swallowed, his finger absentmindedly running along the smooth metal of the gun. “See my father, he wasn’t what you’d call an honest man, He made his living sellin’ drugs and other hard to get types that desperate people would pay highly for. He tended to sample his goods pretty regularly, wasn’t a stranger to alcohol either.

“Why didn’t you just leave?” Riley asked softly. She was sitting now, watching him Keith shook his head. “I tried a couple of times, never could stay away for long. See my ‘ol man got money cuz I was a kid and livin’ with him, so he always made sure I came back home.”

He tugged at the hair on his chin, shifting slightly on the stump. “The only good thing I had going for me was my uncle.” Keith gestured to the river behind the girl. “Jack hated his brother, my dad, probably more than I did if that was possible. Keith sighed. “If anything, Jack was the one that raised me, treated me like is own. Some weekends, he’d take me to this little cabin of his upstate and we’d just fish the whole weekend.” Keith realized he was smiling as the memories washed over him.

“So, you see,” he continued. “In my mind Jack was the only real family I had. But of course, I still had to go back and live with my dad during the week.” The autumn air blew through Keith’s torn button down, and he could feel goosebumps rise along his forearms. Riley watched him with rapt interest as he continued.

“When I was seventeen, almost eighteen, my dad gave me one of the worst beatings of my life. He just got angry, thought I did something he didn’t like.”

Keith shook his head, remembering how his eye had swollen so much he couldn’t see.

“I shoulda waited,” he continued. “I shoulda kept my head low till I turned eighteen, but instead I got this stupid idea.” He looked at the girl who watched from where she sat. “It wasn’t fair, I thought, that my dad could get away with everything he’d done. I wanted him to pay for the way he treated me and how he drove my mom away. So, I found out where his next deal would be and I called the cops, hoping they’d finally catch him and put him away for a long time.”

He felt the old ache in his chest at the memory. “The thing is, I got cocky. I wanted to be there to see him get arrested. I wanted to look him in the eyes and show him I won.” Keith faltered.

“What happened?” Riley whispered. Her amber eyes glued to his face as he spoke.

“Well,” Keith said, “My dad caught me and when he realized what I had done he pulled a gun on me. I would have died except...” Keith paused.

He sighed, exhaling the painful breath of air.

“Except Jack knew what I was doing and he knew that I was stupid. He saved my life. I think he might have actually killed my father, but the cops showed up. The cops that I had called. When they got there, all they saw was Jack beating my dad to a pulp. Jack had already gotten in trouble with the law a lot, so they didn’t have a hard time taking him away.”

Keith sighed. He rubbed his shoulders trying to warm the chill that had settled over him.

“Jack got locked up and I left. He was only supposed to be in for five years but he ended

up practically doubling his time because his attitude wasn't exactly the best. When he finally he got out, he had changed."

Keith looked at the girl who sat silent.

"It was my fault." He said. "Jack wouldn't have gone to prison if it wasn't for me and I know he blames me for it. When he finally did get out no one would hire him. He started dealing in some shady stuff just like my 'ol man, and I owed him. We struggled for a couple years, then we found the Wolves. Jack got pretty tight with them, I stayed because I needed the money. Tried to leave, almost made it out." Keith shook his head.

He reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out the lighter. He held it out for the girl to see. "This was my dad's" he said. "I took this when I left as a reminder to never be like him." Keith slid the lighter back into to the pocket of the backpack. "But I guess it didn't work." Keith shook his head.

Riley was quiet for a moment. When she spoke, she looked up at Keith, her warm eyes meeting his own.

"I don't think I could've survived out here without you." Riley said softly. "That doesn't sound like something your dad would do."

He felt guilt stab at his stomach.

"I don't know," he said. "don't forget, I'm the reason you're out here in the first place."

"You're also the reason I got away." She said.

*And now you're stuck here with me,* he thought. She didn't deserve that. Keith knew what he had to do.

He slowly stood grimacing. "I've been thinkin' he began. "If you'll allow it, I propose we make a small amendment to our contract.

“What do you mean?” Riley asked, her face a wash of confusion.

“I don’t know if I can get you home anymore,” he said a hand on his bum leg. “But what I can do is find a way to contact your dad. You said you saw some houses. There’s gotta be something there we can use to let him know where you are.”

“You mean it?” Riley asked shooting to her feet. Keith felt an unexpected sadness at the bright smile that spread across her face. She was going to go home, that was the whole point wasn’t it?

“I really do.” He said. “First thing tomorrow, well head there and see what we can do.” For now though, how ‘bout we go see what your traps caught.”

They walked in the direction of the fishing lines, the girl seemed to spring with new found energy as she darted ahead. She stopped every so often to look back at him her expression bright as he slowly limped after her. Keith examined the bullets as he walked. He counted them as he placed them back into the magazine. Fifteen bullets remained.

That was still more than enough.

## Chapter 20

Keith was out of breath, half from the strain it took to drag himself along with his injured leg, and half because he had exhausted his entire colorful vocabulary in frustration. Riley kept pace beside him, an amused smirk seemed to be permanently etched onto her face as she watched Keith.

She had long given up trying to offer him help.

The undergrowth had evolved from dense foliage to a small deer trail as they slowly made their way in the direction Riley had set. Keith still wasn't really sure where they were, but he trusted that Riley knew what she was doing.

The path eventually widened and small signs of civilization began to appear: Litter amid the brush, old unfamiliar footprints. Soon enough Keith could make out the shape of a roof through the trees.

The forest ended abruptly as the dirt path dropped down a small embankment opening up onto an old road. It looked like there had once been pavement, but now all that was left was cracked slabs of stone and deep potholes.

Riley slid down the little incline with ease and looked back for Keith to follow.

He twisted his expression into a grimace, the hill was small, but this still wasn't going to be fun.

Holding his breath Keith placed his good foot on the slope then slowly brought his other foot forward. He gingerly moved his good foot down the slope, but as he went to move his injured leg, he lost balance. With a yell, he slid on his ass down the trail, landing in a heap at Riley's feet.

Riley held out her hand. Her mirthful expression softening Keith's mood. He placed his hand in hers and she stumbled with the weight of his body as he stood.

"Not. One. Word." He said, trying to sound as stern as he could.

Riley pursed her lips from growing into an even larger smile, seeing right through his bluff. To her credit though, she kept silent.

Keith surveyed the area. The side of the road they stood on was more of a glorified driveway if anything. It ended in a couple of dilapidated houses with sagging roofs and half-

boarded window. The only potential sign of life was a rusted car in the overgrown yard of one of the houses. But, the tires of the vehicle were decayed and the windshield was covered in dirt.

The homes looked like they could have been nice places to live if they had just been taken care of. They turned away, walking in the direction of the rundown street.

Keith felt more animal than human as he stalked down the road. His eyes constantly darted to the trees, his body tense, ready to escape back into the safety of the forest at a moment's warning. Riley walked with more poise, though she definitely seemed on edge too. Keith could only imagine what they looked like to an outsider. It was obvious by their appearance, not to mention their smell, that they hadn't showered in days. Their clothes were dirty and torn, and they were both covered in blood stains. Keith obviously wasn't doing so hot, as he limped down the street. Riley had a twig sticking errantly out of the back of her tangled hair. Not to mention she was obviously not wearing the appropriate clothing for a stroll through the woods.

They walked down the path until they were met with an intersection of slightly newer road. There was still nothing around but overgrown lots and an occasional rundown building. A gas station sat next to the newer road.

Keith surveyed the store. It was in rough shape, one of the windows was broken; jagged shards of glass stuck out of the frame. The exterior was covered in dirt and other unpleasant looking stains. There were only two gas pumps and one of them had a cardboard sign hanging from the handle that read: OUT OF ORDER.

Keith approached the building peering into one of the windows that wasn't broken, but the double paned glass was thick and smeared with dirt making it hard to see through. It looked like the lights were on but Keith couldn't tell for sure.



Riley had wandered over to the front of the building. “The sign says they’re open,” Riley said, pointing to the door.

Keith glanced at it skeptically. “I don’t know kid,” he began, but before he could finish Riley had already grabbed the handle and pulled. The door opened smoothly and a little bell on the doorframe chimed. Keith limped up behind the girl grabbing the door, as she entered the building.

The interior of the little store had a musty smell to it and many of the surfaces were covered in a layer of dust. A single cashier sat at the register, separated from the rest of the store by a plastic partition with lottery tickets and cigarette prices taped to it.

The worker looked as ancient and rundown as the building. His thick beard was a tangle of gray and the remaining hairs on his head were tied away from his face which was marked with deep creases. He gave them a nod as they walked in, but made no effort to speak.

Keith inclined his head to the man. If the cashier was surprised by the physical state of his new patrons he hid it well, though Keith figured in a rundown place like this, you couldn’t be too picky with who showed up.

The store itself was certainly nothing special. Rows of metal shelving held an assortment of food, drinks and electronic gadgets. Several glass refrigerators hummed with life, the dim lights inside of them displaying various canned beverages. Faded signs hung from the ceiling advertising different discounts. The counter in the back of the store held a soft drink machine and a slushy maker that, unsurprisingly, held a sign that proclaimed it was also out of order.

Keith felt his stomach do a backflip at the sight of the food before him. He watched as Riley’s eyes grew large as she scanned the contents of the shelves. She hesitated looking up at

Keith who waved his hand, “Get whatever you want,” he said. Riley took off down the aisle. Keith hobbled behind her.

Riley grabbed packages off the shelves with wild abandon, barely stopping to read the labels. Wrappers crinkled and crunched as she scooped her chosen food into her arms. Before long she had a sizable collection of junk food held tight to her chest.

“I didn’t really know what most of this stuff was, but it all looked so good. She said, as she held out her spoils.

Keith shrugged, and opened the lip backpack for her to deposit the goods. Riley faltered, glancing in the direction of where the cashier sat. They were well hidden from his view by the rows of shelving, but Keith still watched as Riley’s mouth tightened into a small frown.

“We have to pay for this, right?” She said.

“You got money?” He asked, watching the realization of what he was implying form on her face. “Hey if you don’t like it, you can put it all back and we’ll leave,” He said.

Riley glanced up at Keith again, then quickly deposited her spoils into the open bag. “That’s what I thought,” he said. She stuck her tongue out at him before darting down the next aisle.

Keith scanned the shelves, he grabbed some cheese flavored crackers and completely bypassed the shelf that held the granola bars. If he never ate another granola bar again, it would be too soon. Riley returned a couple of times to deposit more armfuls of colorful packaging and cans of soda.

Keith turned down a new aisle and scanned it till he found what he was looking for, a pre-paid cellphone encased in thick plastic, advertising that it was, “charged and ready to go” He

tossed it in the pack. Keith grabbed a bottle of extra strength pain meds and threw them in as well, momentarily wishing he had access to something much stronger.

Riley met back up with him near the entrance of the store, the pockets of the jacket she wore bulging.

“You ready?” He asked. She nodded, he turned for the door.

“Hey!” The cashier called.

Keith stopped, his stomach sinking.

“You two seem familiar, you ever come up this way before?”

Keith let out a slow breath, they weren’t caught yet. “Nah,” he responded without looking at the old man. “Just passing through.”

The cashier was silent and Keith turned, watching as the old man’s eyes passed from Keith’s face to Riley’s, His gaze lingered on Riley for longer than Keith would have liked, He looked unsatisfied, as if trying to remember something.

Keith tightened his grip on the strap of his backpack. Is there a way he had heard about them? He didn’t seem to recognize Keith but Riley had caught his attention, and that couldn’t be good.

“Have a good day now,” Keith said eager to get his attention off of the girl.

The cashier seemed to break his consideration and turned to Keith with his hand. “You too.” He said.

Keith opened the door, the little bell ringing again. A truck drove by and Keith froze.

The truck was a bright red and a completely different make than Jack’s. not to mention it was actually running.

Keith felt a sigh of relief rush through him; but Riley, who had been following close behind, smacked into Keith's back as he stopped abruptly. The momentum of the sudden halt caused a few packages of colorful candy to fall out of the overstuffed pockets of the jacket.

Riley froze as she glanced up at the cashier who was still watching them.

He stood quickly as Riley stuffed her hands into her overflowing pockets, trying to conceal the evidence.

"Run!" Keith hissed, and the two took off out the door.

Riley was considerably faster than him now, as she darted up the street; her hands shoved tightly against the jacket, trying to stop the contents from escaping.

Adrenaline spurred Keith's moment doing his best to ignore the shards of pain igniting in his leg as he put weight on it. Riley looked over her shoulder, and began to slow as she saw Keith falling behind.

"Keep going" He called to her. She turned and darted back into the trees. Keith followed taking once last look behind him, the cashier had not pursued. They reached the embankment and scabbled back into the forest. Keith felt much safer under the protection of the trees. He slowed his run slightly, panting.

They kept up the quick pace, as fast as Keith could manage, until he stumbled and collapsed to the ground. Pushing himself onto his hands and knees, his chest heaved as he tried to will the nausea from the pain to pass.

Riley knelt next to him and pressed something cold to his forehead. The cool glass sent a shudder through Keith's body. He felt his breathing start to slow. After a few minutes he shifted his weight into a more comfortable position. He held the source of the coolness in his hands. The label was a familiar pattern, *Root beer*.

“Nice score” He said, his voice weak, “I love this stuff.”

Riley sat on the ground next to him. She reached into her pocket for one of the packages of food she stuffed in there. Keith grabbed her wrist to stop her.

“Hey!” She said looking at him indignantly.

“Wait,” he said. “There’s something we have to do first.” She faltered as he reached into his bag and pulled out the packaged cellphone. He tore open the plastic casing with some difficulty and slid the small device out. He held his finger to the “on” button praying the advertisement was indeed correct about it being charged. After a moment, the screen lit.

He grinned at the girl who looked back at him in excitement.

As they waited for the phone to boot up, Keith reminded Riley the name of the street they had traveled, from where he had gleaned it from the rusted road sign. He also did his best to guess the county he figured they were in based on the town.

“There’s a little field between back there, in between the woods of the side of the road.” he said remembering the spot he had seen. “Your dad should be able to find it if he’s got a GPS.”

Riley nodded.

He handed the phone to the girl. She took it in her hands and began to press the buttons before stopping.

Keith watched her “don’t tell me you don’t know the number” He said.

“No, that’s not it,” she responded softly. “What if he doesn’t want to hear from me? What if he’s mad?”

Keith tried to steel his face into what he hoped was a reassuring expression. “Kid he’ll be so excited to hear from you he won’t know what to do.”

Riley let out a small smile, “you think?”

Keith nodded. “Call,” he said gesturing to the phone.

Riley punched the numbers into the keypad and held it up to her ear

Keith held his breath. *What if doesn't didn't pick up? What if he doesn't believe what Riley has to say?*

Riley's expression lit up. “Dad?” she said into the phone.

Keith couldn't hear the response. He searched the girl's face.

“Daddy?” Riley said her voice breaking. “It's me!”

Keith felt a now familiar sadness shoot through his chest. He swallowed it.

Tears welled in the girl's eyes she said, “I'm ok, I'm ok really!” She steadied her voice “I met someone, he's helping me,” she said glancing at Keith. “He's been trying to help me get home,” Riley continued. “But he's hurt dad, so he can't take me the rest of the way.”

Riley frowned.” No dad it's ok. She paused. “I don't know, but were safe.” She paused again “Dad!” Riley scoffed, a bit of her stubbornness breaking into in her voice. “No dad please just listen to me.” She relayed the information Keith had given her, about where to meet up. She spoke excitedly, repeating the time they would meet. Then she frowned again. “No, don't. Please. I don't want to deal with the police too, I just want to go home.

Keith glanced at her, his breath shallow.

“Promise me dad, please.” Keith watched her expression her eyebrows tight. She broke into smile again, relaxing.

“Thank you!” She spoke fast with excitement again. “I can't, I don't know how much battery this thing has and I should save it just in case, so I should go.” She stopped, listening.

“It's ok, I'll see you tomorrow Dad,” she said, her voice breaking again.

“I love you,” she said into the phone.

Keith looked away.

Riley took the phone away from her ear and pressed the end button. Then suddenly she sprang into Keith's arms.

"Thank you, thank you!" She cried, half excited, half sobbing.

Keith wrapped his arms around the girl and held her tight, but all he felt was a familiar lonely ache cement itself into his bones.

She pulled away looking up at him with gratitude filled eyes. He forced a smile, trying not to let the sadness show.

"Now I think we've earned some dinner", he said.

Her expression fell slightly, surprising Keith. "Shouldn't we keep going? She said. "We could get to the meeting spot tonight, that way we'll be ready when he gets there."

"No," he said more firmly than he meant. "We'll have plenty of time to get there tomorrow." He said in a softer tone. "Plus, we probably shouldn't get close to the town again until we need to, that cashier may be looking for us."

While it wasn't a lie, they could easily get there tonight. Even with accounting for Keith's pace, it should only take a couple of hours. And he figured the old man at the gas station probably cut his losses. But still, something selfish in him made him want to stay put.

Riley's face momentarily fell, but then her expression softened into one of kindness that only made Keith feel worse. "That's ok," She said, "you need to rest anyway. Want me to make a fire?" Keith nodded and the girl stood.

Keith pushed the guilt deep down, *no harm in waiting till tomorrow*, He told himself.

Keith upturned his backpack emptying it onto the ground. It was an impressive spread. His hands shook with hunger as he sorted through the packages of junk food and candy.

The woods were just beginning to get dark when Riley lit the fire. They kept the flame low, but just bright enough to illuminate the feast before them.

“Dig in” he said, twisting the top off the now warm bottle of root beer. He upturned the bottle into his mouth. The caramel colored liquid went down smoothly, despite the carbonation. Keith had never tasted something so good in his life. The sweetness of the soda rushed through him with a satisfying wave.

Riley grabbed a bright orange bag of cheesy puffs and ripped open the packaging. She shoved a handful of the artificially flavored snacks into her mouth.

“Wow, she said, spitting flecks of orange as she spoke.” These taste even better than I thought they would.”

“You’ve never had them before?” Keith asked reaching for the puffs.

“Hey get your own,” she said, snatching the bag away from him.

Keith mimicked her by sticking his tongue out, then grabbed a bag of chips.

Opening them he dumped the bag in his mouth. The sharp saltiness was perfect after the sweet beverage.

“I’m not really allowed to eat stuff like this at home.” Riley said shoving another handful of cheesy puffs in her mouth. Her lips and fingers were coated in orange dust.

“Oh really?” Keith asked slyly. “In that case, let me enlighten you.” He grabbed a root beer and opened it for her.

She gulped it down shaking her head in surprise. “Whoa” she said, giddy with excitement. “That’s amazing!”

“Right?” Keith said. He took another swig from his bottle and swiped a package of mini frosted cakes with colorful sprinkles. Opening it, tossing one to the girl.



“You ever had one of these?” he asked.

Riley shook her head, studying the cake in anticipation.

“Kid you’re missing out!” Keith said with a laugh, “Does your dad let you eat anything fun?”

“Oh please. When we get back I’ll have to take you to where I like to eat.” Riley said smugly. “Then you’ll know what *real* good food tastes like.”

Keith faltered, *what did she think would happen when they returned?* He honestly had no had no idea himself. He shoved the whole cake in his mouth, the sugary icing distracting him.

Tomorrow, that was a question for tomorrow.

Keith picked out several more items for Riley to try and she took the tasting game very seriously. The bitesize cheese cracker sandwiches were good, but not her favorite because she thought the cheese tasted strange. Anything chocolate she scarfed down but stated that she had much better chocolate at home, causing Keith to shake his head. She liked the flavored chips and gave any candy that was a fruit flavored extra attention, especially if it was sour. Out of everything they ate though, root beer was her favorite. She was on her third bottle by the end of the taste test.

Keith laughed and went along with the game eating, anything she didn’t deem “worthy” of her consumption.

They ate until they were almost uncomfortably full and Riley, despite her excitement, could barely keep her eyes open. Keith gathered up the remainder of the food and wrappers and stuffed them back into his pack. Once the fire was taken care of, he propped himself against a tree and stretched his legs out in front of him. He had downed several of the pain killers with

dinner and the ache in his leg seemed to be less pronounced. Riley slid to where Keith had propped himself and rested herself against his shoulder.

Keith was starting to fade into sleep when Riley spoke.

“Thank you for taking care of me. She said softly.

Keith was surprised, he realized this was the first time she had ever thanked him for something.

“Well what was I supposed to do,” he said gruffly. “Leave you to the bears?”

Riley yawned causing her whole body to shutter. “Nah you’re too nice.”

Keith chuckled, “Just don’t tell anyone ok, I gotta keep un an image.” Riley closed her eyes. Keith wrapped an arm around the girl, and brushed her hair out of her face.

“I’m glad I met you.” She said faintly, her eyes closed.

Keith looked at her. “Me too, kid.”

## Chapter 21

The morning air was cool and peaceful. Keith lay against his tree for a moment, savoring the way the wind gently rustled in the trees. They were becoming bare now, as more leave lay carpeting the ground than remained in the branches. With the thin layer of dew coating the dead undergrowth, Keith knew he should feel uncomfortable in just his t-shirt and tattered button down, but he didn’t mind it. The sharp chill of the air felt good on his aching body, and even his leg seemed to throb less painfully.

Riley had gone off to scout the area and Keith felt that now familiar ache of pride and pain as he looked into the direction the girl had disappeared too. She had woken before him, and

had been antsy to get going so Keith had sent her off scouting to give her something to do. *This was it, he thought, She was finally going home.*

Keith gritted his teeth. This is what he wanted, *wasn't it?*

Keith dragged his leg closer to his body. He unwrapped the bloodstained cloth and taking a shaky breath as he revealed the wound. The pain was all too familiar now, it rushed up his body, pulsing through his veins. Dried blood crusted around the gash, the dark hair on his leg pasted to his skin. The edges were raised, marking a thick, jagged line down his calf.

Unscrewing the cap of a water bottle, Keith poured the cool liquid over the mess of blood. The dark flakes began to loosen and fall away; the water a faint crimson as it rolled off his leg and onto the dry leaves. The skin around the wound stayed a dull red.

The frigid water was a soothing distraction from the throbbing ache. It revealed the thin clear lines of fishing wire, stained with dark streaks of dried blood. The stitching had held well.

A small smile crept onto Keith's face. They kid had done a good job.

Keith replaced the makeshift bandage around his leg as gingerly as he could. He grasped the thin branch of a nearby tree, using it to pull himself to his feet.

Riley appeared out of the trees. She had the same smile spread across her face that she had worn all morning. Keith couldn't help but share the expression when he saw her.

"Any luck?" he asked

"I couldn't see the town from here," she said. "But I saw the path we came from. we should be able to follow that and get roughly back to the houses. From there it's just finding the place!"

Keith started to respond, but something made him pause as Riley's expression shifted. Her eyes grew wide, fear contorting her features. Her mouth opened to shout in a warning and Keith whipped his body around to find himself face to face with the barrel of a familiar gun.

Instinctively he pulled Riley behind his back with a hand. He reached for where he kept the gun but there was nothing to grab.

"You know I had almost given up on you two." Jack said. He waved the gun in a broad motion as he spoke, but he kept it trained on Keith. "I spent the better part of two days looking up and down that damn river but couldn't find nothin."

Keith's eyes shifted from his uncle, to where his own gun lay, next to the tree he had been sleeping on. He could feel Riley quickly follow his gaze.

"And then this one," He gestured sharply with the gun to Riley before training it back on Keith. "Somehow figured the best thing to do was to destroy my only means of transportation." Jack's words were hard, but his tone was eerily calm as he spoke. "The funny thing though, is: despite all the damage, the radio still works."

Riley's eyes met Keith's. She shifted her eyes between him and the gun.

"So yesterday when I was trying to get the damn engine to start," Jack was saying, "A local report goes out for two thieves that robbed a convenience store nearby."

Keith's chest tightened. He noticed as Riley slowly began to slowly move backwards. Her eyes now planted firmly on Jack.

"How did you know it was us?" Keith asked. A stupid question all things considered, but Keith needed to keep the man distracted.

"Who else could it be," Jack's tone had turned cold. "You must have been pretty desperate."

“You’re one to talk.” Keith said. “I’m sure the police are still out looking for you. You could have been long gone by now, cut your losses even without your car. But, you’re still out here. How long until they find you Jack?”

The older man’s expression tightened. Instead of responding, Jack’s gaze shifted to Riley before Keith had a chance to move.

“Whoa now, not so fast,” Jack said, swinging his arm to point his gun at Riley who froze only a few feet away from where Keith’s own weapon lay.

Keith sidestepped and raised his arms trying to turn his uncle’s attention back to him.

“Don’t” Keith said. The desperation in his own voice made him grimace.

“One last time, I’m asking you boy, come with me, lets end this.” frustration edged his uncle’s as he spoke. Jack’s face was pale, deep creases lined his forehead as he grimaced. The man’s anger seemed to have subside as some new, more urgent emotion spread across his face.

Something about his uncle’s expression made Keith uneasy, but he didn’t have time to figure out why.

“Not a chance in hell” Keith spat.

“I had a feeling you’d say that,” Jack sighed. He raised his gun, pointing it firmly at Keith’s head.

Keith resisted the urge to take a step back. His mind raced, trying to think of any way out of this. Jack’s face still held that strange almost pained expression, but the tight firmness his mouth was set in Keith knew too well. The man was not bluffing. Keith was out of options; He was going to die.

Keith looked to where Riley stood behind him. Hoping she’d understand.

*When he shoots, run.*

Riley's eyes were still wide with fear. but her face was pinched with that same determined stubbornness.

Keith should have felt calmed by this, but instead he felt uneasy. *Did she understand what he needed her to do? She had to.*

The click of a disengaging safety brought Keith's attention back to Jack. He had to trust Riley now. Keith set his face, determined not to show his uncle the fear that beat through his body with the few remaining beats of his heart. Riley would run. She knew where the meet up was. *She would be safe.* That thought quieted the pounding in his chest enough that he could look his uncle in the face without faltering.

Jack steadied his hand and Keith held his breath determined not to close is eyes.

"Wait!" Riley stepped out from behind Keith, who reached for her desperately.

She darted past him with ease.

Jack turned his attention to the girl, but kept his gun firmly on Keith.

"I'll go." Her voice calm and clear as the crisp morning air. "I will go with you," She said again. "but only if you promise you won't kill him."

Jack's gun faltered.

Keith was still trying to process what was happening in front of him.

"If you shoot him, I'll run." She said, her voice steady as she stared down the man. "I'm fast, you already know you won't be able to find me."

Riley spoke with such confidence that Keith didn't doubt she meant what she said.

"Take me wherever you want, I won't even complain," she continued. "Just leave him here."

Jack's timeworn features softened slightly as he contemplated her proposal .

Keith could hear his own words pleading with his uncle when he first told Keith his plan:  
*Just leave her here.*

Keith blinked as the words fully sunk in. “No,” he said in a tone much weaker than he wanted. He raised his voice. “Riley please! Don’t!”

That stupid, stubborn girl stood her ground.

Jack stepped towards her but kept his gun trained on Keith. “That sounds fair enough to me,” he said. “But you know if this is a trick, I’ll kill you right here and then go after him.” He inclined his head to where Keith stood. “I doubt he can get far with that leg of his.”

Riley nodded. “It’s not a trick” She said firmly.

“If you go with him you’ll never see your dad again” Keith shouted.

Riley’s expression faltered and for a brief moment Keith could see a reflection of the scared little girl he had first brought into the woods. Then it was gone.

Jack raised the gun at Keith again. A firm invitation for him to shut up. “Your choice,” he said.

Keith ignored the gun aimed at his head. “You’ll get killed, or worse. Please kid.” Keith didn’t even try to hide his desperation anymore. She could still run, there was still a chance she could be safe.

Riley locked eyes with him and gave a weak smile. Then she stepped towards Jack.

“Don’t” Keith’s voice broke.

There was nothing he could do.

Jack lowered his gun but kept a firm grip on it. He stooped down and with his other hand he grabbed the gun where it lay. Then he took the handle of Keith’s backpack, sliding it over his shoulder. He took a step forward to where Keith stood.

“Be seein’ you boy.” He said. A faint grin played on his lips, though there was a strange sadness to his expression that if Keith wasn’t so terrified and angry, would have questioned. Instead his mind raced for any possible options. If he rushed Jack right now, he would have surprise on his side, but in his weakened state Keith wasn’t sure had be able to overpower his uncle. And Jack still had a loaded gun. He’d probably still be able to shoot Keith, and Riley if she tried to run. Keith desperately searched for a solution. But he could think of nothing where Riley would be safe.

Keith put as much contempt into his expression as he could manage. “I’ll find you,” he said. “Both of you.” He looked past his uncle to Riley who stood stiffly. Her features still hardened with determination. Keith’s oversized coat hung on her shoulders, billowing softly in the breeze. Keith could just barely see her hands, balled into fists to stop them from shaking.

Jack just shook his head and in one swift moment he brought the gun up and slammed the base of it into the side of Keith’s head.

Keith crumpled to the ground motionless.

## Chapter 22

Keith woke alone.

“Riley!”

He didn’t even realize he had shouted her name until a small flock of birds flew from a nearby tree, frightened by the sound. Keith sat up rapidly and was immediately greeted with a nauseating rush of pain and dizziness.



He gritted his teeth and pulled himself to his feet, groaning with the effort. Gulping down deep breaths, he tried to stay calm; but panic had taken hold of his chest causing his heart to beat painfully through his body. Keith limped forward desperately looking around the forest.

“Riley!” he called again, but his voice was weak with defeat. He knew his actions were useless. They were already gone.

*Riley.*

Keith’s bad leg caught on the lip of a rotting log and the soft wood gave way. He stumbled, falling to his knees. He hardly registered the pain as it rushed through him, numbed with the realization of what had happened.

*No.*

He had done this.

“No!” He yelled. He slammed his fist into the ground.

*Shit.* Keith’s hands were shaking. How could he have let this happen? He was supposed to protect her. Last night she had been so eager to leave, to get to where her father would be as soon as possible.

And Keith had said no.

Keith had been the one to make them stay. He ran shaking fingers through his hair, clutching at the strands in a tight fist. They could have made it, they could have gotten to the rendezvous point like the kid wanted and they would have been safe. But he had made them stay. *He* had led Jack to them out of foolish desperation by risking their safety in that store. And then he had refused to continue on, for what? His own *feelings*?

Keith’s chest was so tight he could hardly breathe. She would have been safe now if it wasn’t for him.

Keith looked desperately around the wooded area. He could still see her standing there, putting her salvation on the line to save Keith's miserable life. *Why?* His face ached from being pinched with grief, wet from hot tears.

*She was gone.*

He heard her voice, calm and determined, standing up to Jack. A completely different girl from the quivering child that had been dragged out here in the first place.

Keith took a shaky breath, then another. He wiped his wet cheeks, the dirt underneath his fingernails turning to mud. He brushed the dampness from his hands onto his jeans.

She was gone and he needed to do whatever it takes to get her back. Keith looked at the sky, gauging the time. It was not yet noon. He slowly pulled himself up. Steadying himself against the trunk of a tree.

Keith took another shaking breath, and began to walk.

—

Keith had been dragging himself through the forest for what felt like hours when he finally spotted the clearing. He followed the signs of civilization from the trees, not wanting to risk being spotted before he was ready. A consistent burn had settled into his leg, hot dull throbs of pain radiated through him with each step he took. Keith didn't care, the feeling kept him going. It reminded him of what he needed to do.

The spot they had chosen was not large. It looked like it had once been cleared for a parking lot or maybe the beginnings of a house, but the lot had seemingly long since been abandoned. Slabs of cracked concrete paved the ground, long overgrown with dried grass and wiry bushes. It was secluded enough from the center of the small town, that Keith felt a slight comfort. He definitely didn't want to be spotted by anyone that wasn't supposed to be here.

As he approached Keith could see the figure standing alone. The man was wearing a simple collared shirt and a crisply pressed pair of pants. He looked put together without being over the top, with surprised Keith slightly. He wasn't sure what he had been expecting, it's not like the guy was gonna show up in a three piece suit.

As Keith broke through the clearing, the man's head shot in his direction. A look of alarm spreading across his face at the sight of the unfamiliar person approaching him.

The man was cleanshaven and a pair of thin framed glasses sat on his face. Keith was taken aback at how young the man looked, he couldn't have been much older than Keith himself. His hair was darker than Riley's but his eyes were the same, that familiar golden amber color. He watched those eyes quickly study him with caution from behind the lenses, surveying Keith as he came to a stop a respectful distance away from him. Keith wondered what the man thought of his ragged appearance.

Keith raised his hands slightly in a calming gesture. "I'm here to help you." He said.

"Where is she?" The man asked firmly.

Keith could hear Riley's clear diction in his voice as he spoke. It only made Keith's heart sink deeper with shame. He faltered for a moment. Could he get this man to trust him, and do what he needed him to do? He had to try.

"Gone" Keith said.

The man took a step back. Suspicion, then fear flashed across his face. "what do you mean?" He said. "She called me, I spoke to her last night"

"I know" Keith said. He took a small step forward but Riley's father took another step back. Keith paused. Raising his hands slightly higher to convey his innocence.

“The man who took her from you, he found us.” Keith said. “I—,” His voice broke and he swallowed. “I couldn’t stop him.”

“What do you mean?” The man’s voice had become hard. “Where is my daughter?”

Keith couldn’t meet the man’s eyes. “I don’t know.”

The man’s head darted around the clearing as if he was expecting a trap.

“But I’ll find her, Keith continued. “I promise, I just... I need your help to do it.”

“Why?” He asked his question the way Riley did, as a command. “What do *you* want from me?”

“I know where he’s gonna to take her, but I can’t get there on my own. Keith swallowed “once the handoff is made it will be too late.”

The pain that flashed in the man’s eyes made Keith’s chest tighten sharply.

“Why would I trust you?” He asked

“Riley did,” Keith said.

A dark expression fell across the man’s face. “And where did that get my daughter?”

Keith grimaced. The guilt flooding over him. He was right. Keith had done nothing but hurt the girl since he met her.

“Please, you need my help. This is your only chance you get to see her again.”

“you’re lying. “The man said. Though his tone was calm it was cut with anger. There was something else that Keith could sense, a hidden emotion the man was trying hard to conceal.

“I’m sorry,” Keith said “for everything, please, let me help you now.”

A deep sigh seemed to go through the man, “I’m sorry too,” he said.

Keith started to ask what he meant when the man raised his hand in a quick gesture. Several figures appeared from the other side of the clearing, all uniformed officers; their guns trained on Keith.

“The man who took her had a partner.” Riley’s Father said and Keith’s heart sank. “I’m not a fool to think you had given up when I refused to pay.”

“You said you wouldn’t bring the police,” Keith breathed weakly as the officers approached him.

One grabbed Keith roughly and pulled his hands behind his back. Keith didn’t try to resist. He kept his gaze on the man.

“You said you would bring my daughter. So, I guess we both made promises we couldn’t keep.” The man turned and began walking away.

“I’m on your side!” Keith yelled after at the man. “I want to help you!”

The man did not stop.

“Wait! “Keith yelled. “If you try to do this on your own you won’t find her. You’ll never see her again! Please!”

The man paused.

The officer who had handcuffed Keith pulled him forward roughly. Keith stumbled, trying to keep up. The officer’s fingers just dug harder into his arm as he pulled Keith along. The covering of trees on the other side of the lot gave way to a path which was lined with three police cars.

*Stupid!* Keith thought. He should have taken the time at least to scout the area before meeting with the man. But he was in such a rush he hadn’t even thought about it.

The officer pulling Keith along, slammed him up against the side of one of the cars.

One of the other cops began reading him his rights, nothing Keith hadn't heard before, while the first officer began patting him down and going through his pockets. Keith knew there was nothing much for him to find.

The man pulled out a granola bar wrapper and a bottle cap from the root beer. The officer studied the cap for a second, and Keith knew that that piece of metal alone might also be enough to incriminate him as the thief at the convenience store as well.

Keith didn't care, there was nothing much more they could do to him at this point.

The man reached his hand back onto the pocket and pulled out the lighter.

Keith felt a shock of panic go through him. The officer placed it on the top of the car besides Keith's head, as he continued his search. Keith stared at the lighter. He thought he had placed it into the bag, but in all the excitement of last night he must have slid it back into his pocket out of habit.

He could see his silhouette in the dull metal surface of the casing. Not his full reflection, but his outline was visible. He watched his faint image shift and disappear as the officer picked it up.

"Wait," Keith said, his voice poorly containing his desperation. "Please I need that."

The man ignored him as he handed the lighter to one of the other officers.

Keith was pulled back as the first officer opened the door to the police car. Keith caught a glance of Riley's father watching him from the side of one of the other police cars.

Keith rose from the car and one of the officers tightened his grip on him.

"Listen to me!" Keith shouted, using the last of his strength to push the desperation out of his tone. "Riley is in danger! She is going to die; do you understand that? If you truly want to find her, you need to stop the man who took her before it's too late. I'm your only shot at getting

to him.” He pulled away from the officer and took a step towards where the man stood. The officer next to him raised his gun.

“If you don’t trust me, trust your daughter!”

Keith was quickly grabbed again by two of the officers. He was shoved into the backseat and the door was roughly slammed shut in his face.

He watched the officers talk to each other, and to Riley’s father, but Keith couldn’t hear anything they were saying. A terrible hopelessness crept through him. He strained at the cuffs but that did nothing but irritate his wrists.

Keith already knew inside of car was reinforced well enough there would be no breaking out. Black metal bars lined the windows and the opening between where he sat and the front of the car. Plexiglass also further separated Keith from the driver’s seat.

Keith watched as Riley’s father slid into the passenger seat of one of the other police cars.

The cars began to move and Keith watched his only chance at saving Riley disappear. A dull numbness had sunken deep into his body, stronger than the throb in his leg.

He had lost.

The leaves on the trees became a blur outside the window as the car picked up speed. Keith faintly wondered where they were taking him.

*Back to the city? Somewhere closer where they could lock him up quick and get the whole thing done with?*

Keith halfheartedly struggled against his restraints for a moment, then stopped.

*Did it even matter? There’s no way of getting out of this.*

*So what.* So what if he got locked up. They couldn't do anything worse to him now. The car moved faster as it pulled onto the ramp for the highway, the same one that Keith had taken what felt like years ago now.

The officers chatted lightly to each other, seemingly unaffected by what was happening, the situation they were causing. Keith felt a small burning ember of anger sputter through his body. *How could they think what they're doing is helping anybody?* They had no idea what they were about to do. *Why didn't anyone listen to him!*

There it was again, that anger, quiet but stronger now, pulsing through him. His arms began to ache from the pressure of being held tightly in place behind his back.

Keith sat in his quiet stupor. He watched as more signs of civilization began to appear. Keith began to recognize the road signs. He watched as they passed. The farther they drove the more numb Keith felt. Slowly, more and more houses lined the side of the road, then became closer together. As they drove farther, an occasional apartment complex began to break way through the scenery. The highway became crowded with cars, trucks, and busses.

Keith peered through the plexiglass and out the front of the car. The vehicle he was the last in the line of the three police vehicles. Keith remembered seeing Riley's dad get in to the one that was leading the little procession. *If he could just talk to him, explain what really happened, maybe...* The vehicle he was in began to slow as they turned onto the exit ramp.

The cops in the front seats spoke to one another in hushed tones. Keith tried to make out the words they were saying but the plastic partition muffled their already quiet words. Keith turned his attention to the side window. The side of the road was unremarkable. A low shoulder separated the pavement from the dry weeds that carpeted the side of the road. The grassy lawn ended in a concrete paneled fence. Keith could see the tops of houses behind the partition. His



body shifted forward as the car slowed. The traffic light ahead of them had turned yellow as the first two police cars sped through. It blinked to red and Keith's vehicle slowed to a halt.

The cops exchanged looks.

Keith tried to read their expressions but he couldn't see much through the partition. The light flicked back to green and the car began to move again, though it wasn't long before the vehicle veered off to the shoulder of the road, slowing before coming to a complete stop.

Keith looked around apprehensively. The other cop cars were completely out of sight now. The officers both exited the vehicle and the older man from the passenger seat approached Keith's door. He opened it, his gun drawn on Keith.

"Out." He said.

"What?" Keith asked, staring up at the man.

"Now." He said, flicking his gun sharply.

Keith's eyes moved from the man's face to the weapon pointed at him. He slowly slid out of the seat and stood without looking away from the man. The other cop, the woman that had been driving caught him by the arm, pulling him away from the vehicle. The older cop motioned with the gun and began to walk in the opposite direction of the road. Keith tried not to wince at the pain that cut through him with every step as they escorted him further from the car. A cluster of scrawny trees separated their view of the road.

Keith's eyes darted back and forth between his two captors. *What was going on?*

The older man stopped moving and with a flick of his chin the woman let go of Keith's arm, she took a step back drawing her own gun on him as well.

"Go on now," the older cop said, motioning to the little barren field of dried grass behind him.

Keith didn't move. "What are you doing?"

The uniformed man smiled in a manner that made Keith's blood run cold as he took a step towards him. "Run," he said.

Keith shook his head slightly in confusion. His hands still cuffed behind his back.

"Why?"

The cops shared a look. Keith watched the woman's hand tighten around her gun, and a realization dawned on Keith far too late.

"You're not really cops, are you?"

The man's grin was confirmation enough.

"Kenny sent you, didn't he?" Keith had heard rumors that the Wolves had members in the police system but he had never seen any evidence of this being true. "Why do you care what I owe? Just let me go, none of you will ever hear from me again." He said.

"This ain't just about the debt anymore." The older man said.

Keith faltered, shaking his head slightly in confusion.

"This thing is bigger than you Keith," the man continued. "You shouldn't have messed it up."

Keith's eyes darted from one captor to the other trying to make sense of the words. "Why do this?" he asked.

The woman scoffed, "The others need to you as an example, and this way you won't be running around to get the girl into more trouble than you already did."

Keith tried to make sense of the words. What did his debt have to do with Riley? Were Kenny and the others really that angry that he had double crossed Jack? He had just assumed that they didn't really care what happened to her as long as it affected the father. He tried to steady

the pounding in his chest. He certainly wasn't going to figure it out now; he had to get out of here fast.

Still, there was something bothering him.

"And what are you going to tell the other cops," he asked. "assuming there are any left that ain't crooked.

The man smiled, his arm straiting as he aimed the gun. "It was a damn shame" he said. "You slipped us, tried to run, didn't get very far."

"You really think they'll believe that?" Keith said, trying to keep his voice steady.

"Doesn't matter," the man said, clicking the safety off, "it's what happened."

Without giving himself a chance to reconsider, Keith ran at the man.

He slammed his shoulder into the arm that held the gun. The weapon fired next to Keith's face as they both fell to the ground.

Keith grimaced as the sharp shot echoed in his ears. Sliding away from the man, he tucked his knees up, he pulled his cuffed arms under his body and in front of him. He rolled away from the man. Gritting his teeth at the familiar fire in his leg. He swung his good foot, kicking the woman's feet out from under her. He pulled himself to his feet, knocking the gun away from her hands. He lunged for it, but she sprung forward grabbed him. The woman pulled him back, her hands clasped around his elbows, pressing them tightly to his sides, his wrists straining against the metal cuffs. The man had seemed to recover quickly as he stood, aiming the gun once again in Keith's direction. Keith twisted. He tried to wrench himself free from the woman's grip but she held strong.

Yelling, Keith brought the foot of his good leg up slamming it as hard as he could into the man's stomach. The assailant coughed and his hand that held the gun wavered. Using this

opportunity, Keith brought an elbow behind him, driving it into the woman. He felt her grip on his arms loosen slightly. With all his remaining strength, he tore from her grasp and ran.

Movement was slightly easier now that his cuffed hands were in front of him. He could hear the Wolves shouting after him as they gave chase. Another gunshot rang out and Keith veered off course, hoping he would be harder to hit. He didn't dare to look back. Ahead of him, was the solid concrete barrier. Beyond it, thick swaths of tree lined yards adorned most of the houses in the area. The fence was at least a foot taller than Keith, but if he could get over it he would have a good chance of escape. Another gunshot rang out and Keith flinched at the sound.

He approached the wall as fast as his leg would allow him. When he had gotten as close as he could without slowing, he jumped. His fingers caught the flat top of the fence. And he hung on with all his strength. Slowly he began to pull himself up. A gunshot rang out and a chunk of concrete next to his face exploded.

Keith braced his elbows against the top of the fence, hoisting himself up. With a final push he vaulted himself over the fence. He didn't even try to land on his feet as he crashed to the ground on the other side. He jumped up, barely registering the pain that cut through his leg with the adrenaline coursing through his veins. Without looking back to see if he was still being pursued, He ran.

## Chapter 23

Riley tried to keep her heart steady as she walked through the forest. They had been moving nonstop ever since they had left Keith where he lay. Riley tried not to think about the man crumpling to the ground, motionless. *He's ok.* She reminded herself. *He's alive and he'd be ok.*

Her shoulder thrummed with a dull ache as she dragged her feet along the ground; snapping sticks and catching her toes on whatever debris she came across. She wished she knew where they were, but this part of the woods was unfamiliar.

Riley glanced up at the older man. Her captor walked in front of her, glancing back every often to make sure she was keeping pace. He hadn't said anything to her. Sometimes he mumbled to himself but she couldn't make out what he was saying.

Riley tried to keep herself calm. She needed to figure out what to do next. Keith always seemed to have a plan, and if he really was coming for her, the best she could do was stall them enough for Keith to catch up to them.

She took a breath, trying to will herself to speak up. She stared at the familiar backpack slung across the older man's shoulders.

"When we get there, what will you do?" She asked.

The man didn't stop moving. "I don't gather." He said gruffly. He had an accent that she hadn't noticed before. It strung his words together in a drawl, extenuating the "ah" sound in his response.

She swallowed, trying to calm her rapidly breathing heart. "I mean, you're bringing me to this man, right? The one Keith was afraid of." Her captor scoffed lightly at this but Riley continued. "You said he wants me for something, so what? Are you going to just drop me on his doorstep and leave?"

"Something like that." Jack said in a low voice, his attention obviously not on the conversation.

"Why," Riley pressed. She watched the back of the man, his long grey hair shifting as he shook his head.

“You should be grateful; *this man* saved your life. If it weren’t for him, you and I would be having a very different interaction.” Riley eyed the gun sticking out the side pocket of Keith’s backpack. She knew Jack had another one somewhere, probably tucked into the waist of his pants the same way Keith had kept his. Her gaze drifted and she caught sight of the leather sheath on his hip, the handle of a knife sticking up from it.

Riley clamped her jaw shut so tight it hurt. This man had really been prepared to kill her if it meant his own freedom was on the line. She thought about Keith’s story. The sadness in his expression every time he spoke about his uncle.

“Why didn’t you kill him?” The question came out of her mouth before she even realized what she was saying.

The man stopped. He said nothing, but Riley could tell something about what she said had affected him. “You could have taken the chance that I was bluffing, but you didn’t.”

“Were you?” he asked without looking back.

Riley ignored the question as she continued. “Keith told me you used to be close. How you took care of him when he was younger.” She could see the man’s shoulders tighten beneath the straps of Keith’s backpack. *Keep talking*, she thought. The longer he was distracted the more of a chance Keith had of catching up to them. “He also told me what happened, between you and him. How you went to prison.”

The man suddenly turned back facing Riley. A strange expression was spread across his worn face and Riley stiffened.

“And what,” leaning in to her. “You feel sorry for me now or some shit?”

Riley resisted the rising urge to back away. He knelt in front of her, his face inches from hers. She could smell his breath, sour and tainted with the smell of old cigarettes. The same stale smoke smell as the inside of his truck.

“You’re so sure you can trust that man, that you’ll believe anything he tells you.” Jack scoffed, Riley could see the edges of his beard was stained yellow where they met the corners of his mouth.

“I know I can trust him more than you.” Riley grasped at the cuffs of the jacket tightly in her palms, trying to steady her voice.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Jack said. “Just because Keith conned you into thinking he was some kind of friend or protector does not mean he is a good man.”

Riley said nothing.

“How much do you really know about him, other than what *he*’s told you?”

The cold blue eyes scanned her face.

“You think he’ll come for you,” he scoffed. “That man doesn’t do anything if it ain’t gonna benefit him.”

Riley glared at the man. He regarded her with a hard stare.

“He’s got his freedom now, he ain’t coming for you.”

“Liar.” She said, spitting the words at the man.

Jack reached forward grabbing her roughly by the arm. She refused to flinch despite the fear coursing through her body.

“Believe whatever you want, but I don’t got no reason to lie.” He hissed pulling her forward. “Now we still got a lotta’ ground to cover, so you’re gonna quit dragging your ass and get going. He pushed her in front of him. She stumbled as he let go.

“Yeah, and what if I don’t?” She turned to face the man. She tried to put as much hatred into her words as she could, though all her former confidence had gone from her body.

Jack pulled his own gun from where it had been tucked behind him. He waved it at the girl. “Keith ain’t here,” He pointed the gun lazily at Riley. “So, if do you try to pull something, it’ll be as easy as this.” He pressed his finger down on the trigger. With the safety on nothing happened, but Riley still flinched.

Jack tucked the gun back at his waist, his face still set in a cold grimace. He began to move again. Stepping past her. Riley slowly followed.

They walked in silence for a while. Riley tried to concentrate on the familiar sounds of the forest but her heart continued to race. She glanced back often, but there was no sign of anyone following them.

*He is coming.* Riley told herself firmly, but that terrible cold that had crept into her chest seemed to stick in her throat now. She tried to swallow it but the dread stuck fast. *It didn’t matter,* she thought. It didn’t matter what he had done, or what he did or didn’t tell her. He was coming for her and she had to be ready.

She eyed the man in front of her. He was trudging along steadily. If he was getting tired he certainly didn’t show it. Keith’s gun still sat tucked into the side pocket of the backpack. She picked up the pace closing the distance between her and the man. The gun was just above eye level. She put her hand out, it was so close she could practically feel the cool metal of the handle on her fingertips.

Her hand sipped quickly to her side as the man turned to glance back at her. She looked up at him, keeping her face a mask of calm displeasure. He turned away, the backpack swinging



closer to her again. Riley took a quiet shaky breath, trying to calm her trembling hands and pounding heart.

She stretched her arm in front of her again, reaching for the gun.

## Chapter 24

The adrenaline had long worn off by the time Keith finally saw the large brick structure that marked his destination, half hidden behind the neatly trimmed trees. He was panting and his clothing was damp. It had taken him much longer than he had wanted to get here. His leg had slowed him down the more he walked. And most of his journey had been through the backs of people's yards. Keith had realized he didn't even know what day it was. He hoped it was a week day, and the houses would be empty with their inhabitants away at work and school, but he couldn't risk it. So, Keith had to take his time, hiding in shadows and behind fences to avoid the possibility of being seen.

The large estate before him looked exactly the same as the last time he had seen it. Though he could get a better look at it now in the daylight. The large double doors he had entered on his first visit were closed and no doubt locked, but Keith wasn't planning on using them again. Trying to get through that entrance would leave him too exposed, and his tools were still in whatever was left of Jack's car. Instead Keith slunk around to the side of the house.

He slid to the left of the building and around the corner. Tall windows looked into a large sitting area. Keith peered through them quickly. A large couch faced the window, decorated with a few strategically placed pillows. A few armchairs were sat in the room as well, similarly adorned. It could have been a cozy scene but everything looked too stiff, too clean. Keith saw movement as an older woman entered the already spotless room with a caddy of cleaning

supplies. Keith ducked underneath the sill and hid silently amongst the neatly trimmed bushes, clutching his hands tightly to his chest to stop the metal that connected his cuffs, keeping them from clinking together.

After several moments of hearing nothing, he began to move forward again; sliding low underneath the windows. When he reached the corner, peered he around it. Keith stood crouched at the edge of an offshoot of the house. Down the brick siding, the wall exceeded again, and jutted further out to the back yard. And then squared off again.

The backyard of the house was even more as magnificent as the front. The large lawn behind the house was neatly trimmed, and still green even this late into the year. A large inground pool occupied a section of the yard. The water was surround by stone and a small waterfall trickled softly from one end next to a protruding diving board. It was way too cold to be swimming but Keith had to resist the faint childish urge to throw himself in. Keith wiped his grimy hands on his even grimmer pants and continued to survey the yard.

A smaller structure sat on the patio next to the pool. It held what looked like a bar, and some sort of small kitchen on the outside. The back of the yard was covered in more bushes and a few trees that stood up against the large fence. The same one that surrounded the rest of the grand property. Keith couldn't even begin to imagine what it would be like to live in a place like this.

He jolted himself out of his stupor, he certainly didn't have time to keep getting distracted. Slowly, he surveyed the windows at the back of the house near the corner he had just come from. These ones were smaller than the windows he'd seen in the sitting room or whatever that was. The room itself was dim and he couldn't make out too much. He spotted a dark outline of a large desk in the middle.

*Perfect.*

Now he just had to get in.

Windows weren't that hard to break in to, but his hands were still tightly cuffed in front of him, severely limiting his range of motion. Despite the restraints, he was able to get the screen off the frame without a sound, he placed it gently next to him.

The window itself was nothing special. The lock was halfway up the sill on top of the lower pane. He could reach it easily from here but he was on the wrong side of the glass.

Keith quickly searched the ground around him, if he could find a thin piece of stone or something he could slide it in between the slabs of glass he's be able to flick the lock open. Unfortunately, the well-groomed grounds yielded no results. Keith tried not to let the desperation he felt welling in his chest distract him.

If he wasn't able to get in, what the hell was he supposed to do?

In frustration Keith pressed his hands up against the window. It slid open a crack. Keith stared at the glass. *It wasn't even locked.*

The security system let out a quiet chirp from inside the room and Keith ducked back underneath the sill. He waited. The system chirped a couple more times but no one came. Keith grinned as he stuck his fingers underneath the window and pried it open even further. The alarm chirped again. Keith hoisted himself up and slid into the room. Standing, he closed the window behind him and the chirping stopped.

Keith examined the room. Tall wooden cabinets and bookcases lined the wall to his left. Some shelves held books and magazines, others held awards and similar trinkets. A door, to what Keith assumed was to the rest of the house, stood closed on the far wall. A couple more awards hung here and there but the walls were mostly bare. The desk Keith had seen stood in front of

him. a computer monitor sat in the middle of it. A couple of books lay to one side, next to a lamp; several large stacks of papers sat in trays on the other. The top of the desk looked like someone had tried to make it look orderly, but failed. Several folders were strewn across the surface and the stacks of documents were overflowing. Many more papers had spilled out onto the other parts of the desk and the floor.

Keith's eyes landed on two framed pictures on the desk; tucked away amid the clutter.

The smaller one held a picture of a young girl. Maybe four or five years old. Keith's chest tightened sharply as he recognized her. The girl's cheeks were still full and round in the way little kid's faces were, but it was unmistakably Riley. She wore a white dress and her short hair was done up in a ponytail. She was standing in front of a carousel horse, holding a half-eaten ball of cotton candy. The large grin on her face, revealed several missing teeth. Keith felt a wave of uncontrollable emotions washed over him. He closed his eyes for a moment.

When he opened them, he looked away from the picture. His gaze turned to the larger frame. This one held the image of two figures; arms around each other. Keith recognized one immediately as the man he had met in the woods, Riley's father. He was younger in this picture, maybe mid-twenties, and wore a suit. In this image, the man looked very much like the way Keith had pictured him. His posture made him look very distinguished, but his face was soft. He was smiling deeply. His gaze was not on the camera but on the woman next to him. She wore a formfitting red dress, light brown hair hung loose, but styled perfectly, as it framed her shoulders. Her whole look was somehow simple, but stunning at the same time. She was smiling brightly at the camera, her arms wrapped tightly around the man next to her.

*Riley's mother.*

There was something else on the desk, next to the larger frame. Without thinking, Keith reached down, one hand following the other, the cuffs that connected them sliding against the desk, displacing a few papers. He picked it up. It was a woman's ring; a row of diamonds glinted from where they were set in gold. Intricate patterns were etched down both of the sides. Keith examined the piece in his hands. He had never been one for fancy jewelry, but the piece was undeniably beautiful. He held it up to get a closer look when he heard a soft click of the doorknob turning.

Keith dropped the ring on the table and retreated into the corner of the room, concealing himself in the shadow of one of the bookcases. The room was still dim enough that unless the light was on, he hopefully wouldn't be seen right away. The door opened and Keith held his breath.

Riley's father walked in.

Keith watched as the man slowly closed the door behind him. He looked about as tired as Keith felt. Standing at the doorway for a moment, he pushed his glasses up and rubbed his eyes with a hand. His shoulders slumped as he placed his glasses back onto his face. His expression was pinched with a pained tightness. As he took a step towards his desk, Keith moved out of the shadows.

The man's expression changed to fear, and Keith once again saw Riley's face in the way the man's eyes went wide, darting around the room.

The man immediately stepped back. His hand reached for the doorknob.

"Don't," Keith said. His voice was colder than he had meant it to be, but he couldn't risk it. If the man called for help it would ruin everything.

Surprisingly the man's grip on the doorknob faltered.

“I’m not here to hurt you,” Keith said softening his voice slightly. “But you need to listen to me. If you let anyone know I’m here, you are never going to see your daughter again, do you understand?”

The man’s expression hardened as he tightened his grip on the doorknob.

Keith realized too late, how his words sounded. “It’s not a threat, it’s just the truth,” Keith said trying again. “I want to help you, please let me.”

Riley’s father stared at Keith, his eyes moving from his dirty clothes and skin, to his bloody bandaged leg, his cuffed hands, his wild hair and matted beard, and finally, his eyes.

“Please,” Keith repeated softly.

The man released his grip on the doorknob. He let out a deep sigh, closing his eyes and covering his mouth with his hand.

“Is she still alive?” he asked through his fingers.

“Yes.” Keith hoped with all his heart that he was telling the truth. The man took a step towards Keith, the desk still separating them.

“Then where is she.” Any confident demeanor the man had kept in the words was gone. He sounded defeated.

“I don’t know.” Keith said. “My—,” He faltered. How could he possibly explain what had happened; who Jack was? He took a deep breath. He had no idea if he could trust the man who stood in front of him, but spoke again anyway.

“This wasn’t what was supposed to happen.” He said softly.

“So it was you.” The father said.

“Yes.” Keith said. “An old, acquaintance, of mine, he planned the whole thing. I didn’t want to, but he needed help. I was desperate and I didn’t think…” Keith paused. “If I had known what would happen, what was going on, I would have tried to stop it.

“So where is she know,” he asked again.

“The other man, the one I was working with, he took her,” Keith explained. His hands moved as he spoke, the chain connecting them clinking softly.

“When you wouldn’t pay, he wanted to—,” Keith faltered. Trying to choose his words carefully while also getting the severity of the situation through. “He thought it would be in his best interest to get rid of her. I stopped him.” Keith didn’t want to explain just what that had cost him, and he certainly didn’t want to make himself out to some good person in all this. “I was able to keep her safe for a while,” Keith said. “But he found us.”

“You don’t know where she is then?” The man said.

“No,” he said. “I think know where he plans on taking her.”

“And you expect me to trust you?” The man’s voice was tinged with bitterness.

“No,” Keith said again. “I don’t.” He looked up at the man. “Trust your daughter. She believed I could get her home,” Keith did his best to keep the tremor out of his voice. “Just like she believed you’d be waiting for her.”

The father’s expression was cold. “And look where her trust got her, gone and in danger.”

“I’m here now.” Keith said, firmly. Warm anger growing in his chest, “I am doing everything left that I can.” He looked at the man, past the thin glasses to the familiar color of his eyes. “I could have run, but I didn’t. Why else would I have come back?”

Riley's father shook his head, his expression turning even more sour. "You think I haven't tried everything within my power to find her and bring her back to me?" He hissed, his voice rising to match Keith's. "You have no idea what I have done for her."

"Well it wasn't enough!" Keith spat, trying to keep his voice down so the whole house wouldn't hear him. "You need my help. Your daughter is going to be taken away and sold into a life she cannot survive."

"How are you sure?" The man asked, anger still bit at his words, but Keith thought he heard a faint waver in his voice.

"My—," Keith paused he tried to calm his voice. "My partner's desperate, after you refused to make a deal with the Wolves, he pursued us. I didn't know why at first but apparently, there's this man, He's this longtime rival of the Wolves and I guess he reached out and offered a deal for Riley. I don't know why but this man, Tailor, he's dangerous he—,"

"What."

The sudden interjection from the man made Keith pause.

Riley's father stared at him, an unexpected look of shock was etched into his expression. The color had drained from his face, making him appear sickly in the shadows of the room. "What was his name?" The man said quietly.

Keith stared at Riley's father.

He goes by Tailor. I don't know if that's his last name, or—." Keith stopped talking as the man in front of him pressed his hands against the desk, lowering his head. His chest heaved his voice trembled as he spoke.

"No."

Keith was confused. How did this man know who he was talking about?



“What is it?” Keith asked.

The man shook his head, he didn’t meet Keith’s eyes. His fingers clenched the edge of the desk so hard they shook.

“Hey!” Keith said, trying to knock the man out of his stupor. “You need to tell me what’s going on. I can’t help you or her if I don’t know what I’m dealing with.”

The man looked up at him and the expression Keith saw there made him want to retreat back out the window.

What had he gotten himself into?

The man took a shaky breath. “When I was younger, back when I first met Riley’s mother. I was just starting out. I had nothing.”

Keith pictured his own bare apartment, not much larger than the room they stood in. He found the man’s words hard to believe, but he said nothing.

“When my wife got sick, I didn’t know what to do. She was constantly in the hospital and between that and the treatments...” The man faltered, he looked back at Keith. “And we had a young child to take care of. We had no money, they threatened to stop treating my wife if I couldn’t pay.”

Keith watched the man as he spoke, the desperation in his voice made his words cold.

“It was her idea, my wife. She said she knew someone who could help get us, He would set us up, give us enough to pay for her treatments and get my company off its feet.” The man shook his head.

Keith didn’t need to ask to guess who they had gone to for help. A deep sense of dread had started to settle in his stomach.

“She was sick and I was desperate. I trusted her judgment.” the man continued. “We made a deal, well my wife did actually. He would give us what we needed, whatever we needed and in exchange...” The man stopped.

“She would give herself to the man, let him do whatever he wanted with her in exchange for his assistance.

Keith swallowed. He knew Taylor had some, *unique* ways of setting debts, but he had never heard of someone settling a debt with their own life.

“The terms were set, He gave us ten years before he would take her.” Riley’s father looked up at Keith, meeting his eyes. “I only agreed because I thought if I had the money I’d be able to save her. I was sure that was enough time to find a way out of the deal.” He said softly. “The thing is she knew, even then that she wasn’t going to survive. She didn’t tell me ‘till much later, she didn’t want me to worry. She believed in me and felt that if we got the money I’d be able to take care of Riley.” His voice wavered as he spoke. “She bet her life against this man. Knowing she wouldn’t be there when he came to collect. She thought that she had outsmarted him. And for a while I thought she had too.”

The tone of the man’s voice and the look on his face told Keith otherwise. The knot in his stomach tightened.

“About five years ago, he contacted me.” Riley’s father said. He told me he knew my wife is dead and—,” The man grimaced looking away from Keith. “And that it didn’t matter, the debt still needed to be paid.”

Realization hit Keith like a bullet. “He wanted Riley,”

The man closed his eyes, his expression set in a pinched grimace. “I offered him money. More than he ever gave us. I offered him myself in her place, but it didn’t matter.”

“What does he want with her?” Keith asked.

“I don’t know,” the man said. “Your Wolves came to me, they offered protection for her and me if I paid them.”

Keith remembered what Riley had told him, about seeing Jack at her house.

*Jack! Did he know all of this?*

Keith went to lift a hand to run his fingers through his hair but his arm stopped short, his handcuffs clinking.

“I refused,” Riley’s father said. “I thought we would be fine on our own.”

“Why?” Keith asked without thinking.

The man met Keith’s eyes again. “Working with people like this, *criminals* like this, is what got us into this situation in the first place,” he said coldly.

*Criminals like me*, Keith thought dully as the man continued.

“She was taken by the Wolves as a warning for refusing their offer. Your man said she would be returned if I agreed to pay them for her safety and for the *protection* they said they could give.” The man grimaced, “I wanted to finally do the right thing. I called the police, that’s what you’re supposed to do when something like this happens isn’t it?”

“They’re in the police.” Keith said. His head still reeling from all the man had told him.

“Those people you brought to have me arrested tried to kill me.”

The man seemed to hardly register Keith’s words.

Keith thought about Riley, her unwavering determination to save Keith’s life, even at the risk of her own. She was counting on him to find her, that hadn’t changed.

“It hasn’t been long,” Keith said, trying to keep his tone steady. “And they’re on foot. There has to still a chance we can get to her before it’s too late.”

The man was still braced up against the desk, his shoulders low. He spoke without looking at Keith. “How could we possibly find them now?”

Keith could probably get back to where he had been left, but after that he wouldn't have much to go on. Still, he couldn't just give up now.

“I don't know,” he said truthfully. “but we have to work together to do it. For Riley.”

Keith extended his hands. One out in front of the man, the other tethered close by, still connected by the cuffs.

“Are you with me? He asked.

Riley's father faltered for a moment. Glancing from Keith, to his outstretched hands. Keith suddenly remembered the conversation he had with Riley what felt like years ago.

*Do you know what a contract is? It's a promise between two people, once you make it can't be broken.*

The father extended his hand over the desk.

“For Riley.” He said softly, his expression still tight.

He gripped Keith's own outstretched hand firmly. The man's grasp was surprisingly strong. His clean hands stood out against the grime of Keith's own callused ones. They shook, and before they could let go, the ring of a cellphone echoed through the room.

## Chapter 25

Keith and Riley's father both froze. They locked eyes for a moment and Riley's father let go. He reached for the phone in his pocket. Pulling it out he surveyed the screen. He looked up at Keith.

“It's the number Riley called with.” He said.

Keith watched as the man touched the accept button and held it up to his ear. He couldn't hear the speaker's voice, but he watched as the man's eyes went wide, looking back at Keith. The man held the phone out over the table and pressed the screen again. Keith recognized the voice immediately.

"I know you have him." Jack's voice said through the phone.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Riley's father said, his eyes still on Keith, who just opened his mouth slightly and shook his head in confusion.

"Right," Jack said, I'm sure you don't."

Keith scanned the desk; his eyes fell on a small metal paperclip holding a few sheets of paper together. He reached down and slid the clip off. Riley's father didn't seem to notice.

"Why are you calling?" The man asked into the phone.

"I've been thinkin'," came the response. "And as much as it pains me to say this, I need my man back." Keith's shook his head slightly in confusion as he listened to his uncle speak, *what was he talking about?*

"I propose a trade," Jack's voice continued over the phone. "What's yours for what's mine."

The man looked across the table at Keith who was still fiddling with the paperclip.

Keith's eyebrows pressed tightly together a mix of confusion and concentration. *Why would Jack want him?* He thought. *This had to be a trap.* Keith did his best to quiet the growing concern as he met the man's gaze. This could be their best shot. It was certainly the only way for sure to know where Riley was being held.

"What if I agree to this?" Riley's father asked.

Well, then I let you know where to find us. But first I gotta be sure you'll be able to hold up your end, I need to know he's listening in on this."

Keith paused the movement of the makeshift metal pick in the lock.

He sighed. "What are you up to Jack?" he said.

"Good to hear your still kickin'," came the answer.

Keith rolled his eyes. He did not grant his uncle a response. Instead he went back to sliding the piece of metal through the lock in the side of the cuff.

"Alright," Jack said. Seemingly satisfied with the interaction. "you bring my man and I'll give you back the girl."

The man across from Keith didn't respond.

"Do we have an agreement?"

Riley's father tilted his head slightly, his expression still tight, but his eyes looked to Keith in a silent question.

*Should I do this?*

Keith nodded his head slightly hoping he was right.

The man paused and took a deep breath, "Tell me where to go."

Jack gave the man instructions on how to get where he would be waiting. Keith listened as he worked on the lock. They had made some distance since Keith had been left behind. But they were still a good four hours by car, in a remote part of the woods.

*They should have made it farther than that by now.* Keith thought. This whole thing felt off. But Keith shook off the feeling. What else could they do?

"I'll see you two soon then." Jack said. The line went dead.

Keith threw the open cuffs onto the desk. "I guess we should get going." He said.

---

Keith sat in the passenger seat of the sports car. It wasn't the fanciest or most expensive vehicle that had been in the garage, but it was fast. The seats were a soft leather and it was one of the most comfortable things Keith had felt in days. He had spent half of their drive already trying not to fall asleep.

The man sat next to him, his eyes planted firmly on the road. He had said very little since they had started their drive. One of his hands gripped the wheel, the other rested on the windowsill, propped up by an elbow. Keith studied the man's face. His hair was brushed out of the front of his head and close cropped by his ears and neck. His glasses were rimmed with a simple thin gold frame, that made the color of eyes stand out even more. His mouth was set in a tight line. Keith wondered what he was thinking.

When Keith had told Riley's father his plan back at the house. The man had, unsurprisingly, been wary at first; especially when Keith told him he wanted the man to stay in the car while Keith met with Jack alone. The man had argued with him once again until Keith had finally yelled, much louder than he should have: "It's too dangerous! You can't do anything for your daughter if you're dead!" That had made the man pause, long enough for Keith to convince him he knew what he was doing. "I'll go ahead." He had told the man. "Once I know Riley is safe I'll be able to deal with Jack."

After agreeing to stick to Keith's plan. Riley's father had led him through the expansive house and into the garage. The collection of cars, all gleaming in the light of the room, smooth and clean without a scratch on them, was enough to make Keith stop short.

Riley's father had chosen a blue, two door Mercedes and motioned to Keith, who was still trying to not gape at the contents of the room, to join him. Keith had offered to drive when he had seen the car they would be taking, but had been abruptly shut down.

Keith settled into his seat, the forest had already begun to take over most of the side of the highway. He had to be prepared for whatever his uncle was planning.

"What does he want with you?" The man asked breaking the silence.

Keith ran a hand through his tangled hair. "I don't know, He said. "I'm not sure how he even knew I was with you. I assume he still has some contact with the Wolves. They must have told him at least part of what happened, I guess he just put together the rest." Keith tugged at a strand of his hair, brushing it away from his face. "The last time I saw him, he tried to kill me, so whatever it is, it can't be good."

The man looked over at him, but Keith ignored the stare, looking straight ahead. He watched as the trees passed by them in a blur.

"Why did you help my daughter?" The man asked from the driver's seat.

Keith said nothing.

"She said you were trying to get her home." The man glanced down at Keith's bandaged leg quickly before returning his eyes to the road.

Keith remained silent. *Why had he done it?* He had asked himself the question several times since he first ran with her through the woods, but could never get an answer.

"She wasn't supposed to be there." He said. Whatever you, or anyone else did; she didn't deserve what happened, what was going to happen."

Riley's father said nothing.



Keith wondered what his uncle was planning. Why did he suddenly need Keith so much he was willing to give up the one last shred of security he thought he had? Keith tried to calm the uneasy tightness in his chest. Whatever it was he would find out soon enough. There was only so much he could plan without knowing what his uncle was really after.

Keith leaned back into his seat and closed his eyes.

## Chapter 26

The woods were unusually quiet as Keith walked through the densely grown trees. A faint rustle of wind shook the remaining leaves, but other than those occasional dry whispers, the forest felt abandoned. Keith bit back the cold apprehension that tightened his stomach as he continued. There was still enough light out to see for now, but Keith knew it wouldn't last. He wished he had his flashlight. He should have thought to bring one with him before they left the house. Keith let out a low breath, too loud in the near silent forest. *It didn't matter now.* The chill from the wind bit at Keith's bare skin. He hoped Riley still had the jacket he had given her. Keith continued to force his lungs to take deep steady breaths as he walked.

*What did he want?*

Why did he ask Keith here if this whole time he was seemingly bent on getting him away from the girl? If Jack had done anything to her...

Keith realized his hand was at the back of his head, a fistful of hair clenched tightly in his grasp. Keith slowly released it, flexing his fingers.

He momentarily wished Riley's father was with him. Even if the man didn't have any experience, some small part of Keith didn't want to face his uncle alone. He pushed the thought aside. The father would be nothing but a distraction and potential danger, especially because he

didn't know what his uncle was going to do. Keith had reviewed the plan one last time with the father, before leaving the car behind and venturing into the woods alone.

Keith followed the directions his uncle had provided. His mind still racing despite his attempts to quiet it. *This was a trap of some kind, it had to be.* Keith scratched the side of his wispy, now overgrown beard, feeling the tight grimace on his face. This was a trap, and Keith was walking right into it.

The trees around Keith gradually began to thin as he walked, until he found himself in the opening of a small clearing. The place looked like it had once been an old campground or something similar. Dried grass and weeds sprouted up in patches among the packed dirt and protruding slabs of rock. A couple of haggard, errant trees stood in the clearing. A rusted metal picnic bench sat to the side, upturned and broken. In the center of the campsite an old rusted trash barrel was lit with fire. Keith quickly scanned the area but saw no one.

Keith knew his uncle had to be close by. And if Jack was here, so was Riley. Keith took one last steadying breath and then stepped into the clearing. He slowly moved through the abandoned campsite.

There was no sign of Riley, or Jack, other than the fire that sputtered in the cracked metal of the old trash can. Keith stopped in front of it. The welcoming heat beckoning him closer. The forest behind him remained seemingly undisturbed.

Keith felt the subtle shift in the trees. Without turning he spoke.

"I got your message." He said. He could make out a familiar scoff as he turned to face the man.

Jack stood near the entrance that Keith and come from. He looked more or less the same as when Keith had seen him last. His canvas jacket hung loosely around his thin frame. His gun, Keith noted, was gripped tightly in a hand that otherwise hug casually by his side.

He was alone.

“Where is she?” Keith said firmly, working to keep his tone calm.

Jack smirked. “Patience boy.” He said. “She’s fine.”

Keith narrowed his eyes at the man. “We had a deal,” he said. “I ain’t gonna do anything you say, till I see she’s safe.”

“I know.”

The man studied Keith as he watched. Familiar eyes scanning his body.

“What do you want?” Keith asked.

His uncle’s shoulders seemed to sag slightly. “What happen to you Keith?” Jack’s voice was still firm, but it seemed to have softened as he spoke.

Keith shook his head slightly. “You’re the one that changed, not me.”

Jack sucked at his crooked teeth, but said nothing.

Keith took a step words his uncle. “It’s not too late,” he said, hopping his words would come across as sincere, and not as desperate as the tightness in his chest told him he was.

Jack shook his head. “Tailor is already is on his way. Giving him this, it’s the only way out now.”

Keith studded his uncle. The deep lines in his face. His stringy grey hair brushing against his shoulders as he shook his head. He was trying to keep his composure but Keith could see his crooked teeth clenched in firm grimace. He was holding back.

Something clicked as Keith realized with a sudden jolt why his uncle all of a sudden was willing to make this deal of his own, He needed to get Keith back out here, because—,

“You lost her, didn’t you?” he said. Despite himself, Keith felt a crooked smile creep its way onto his face.

Jack didn’t respond, he didn’t need to. The way his jaw tightened, and his eyes narrowed just slightly was enough of a confirmation. Keith let out a breathy laugh, too sharp and tight to be mistaken for true mirth.

“She escaped! Oh, this is perfect,” Keith said. “Who’s losing their edge now?”

Jack stalked forward, any feigned calmness was gone from his voice. Keith held his ground.

“Enough.” His uncle growled. The gun was raised now, Keith stared at it with disinterest. He had lost count of the number of guns that had been pointed at him today. He had the upper hand, Jack wasn’t going to kill him now.

“You’re gonna get her back.” His uncle said.

“No.” Keith said. he could feel the smile still on his lips.

“Maybe you didn’t understand me before. The deal is already set, his uncle hissed through bared teeth. “He knows where I am, where we are. If we don’t have her: Tailor kill us, then he will find her.”

Keith faltered. He knew his uncle was speaking what he thought to be true at least. In the short time he and jack and worked for the man, Keith had never known him to not get what he wanted. Was it possible he could still find Riley and get her away from Jack before Tailor showed up? The girl most likely wouldn’t have gone far and Keith knew that if he called out to

her, if he was alone, she would come to him. Keith stared at his uncle. The flames from the fire behind Keith reflecting in his narrowed eyes.

Keith felt his hair brush against his ears as he shook his head. He had to trust Riley. She had trusted him with her life despite everything he had done. It was time for him to do the same.

Without giving his uncle a chance to react. He lunged forward, grabbing for the man's wrist, swiftly pushed the gun above his own head. With his other hand he grabbed his uncle roughly by the throat. Sweeping his good leg forward he collided his foot into his uncle's knee. As the man stumbled from the blow, Keith slammed Jack up against one of the solitary trees in the clearing. Jack gasped at the shock and the gun dropped from his hands. Keith tightened his grip around his uncle's throat.

"This is over! You've lost." Keith hissed at Jack, who spat at him, malice burning in his stare.

Keith tried not to wince at the sharp guilt he felt in his chest.

He slammed Jack's head up against the tree again "Enough!" he shouted. The man's chest heaved as he blinked from the shock of the impact.

A foot swung into Keith's injured leg and uncontrollable bolts of pain shot up into his body. He gasped, loosening his grip just enough for Jack to tear free.

His uncle rushed forward and swiped his leg underneath Keith's injured one. Keith crashed to the ground. Jack brought the heel of his boot down on Keith's face, slamming it into his nose.

"You think you can take me out?" He yelled. "I taught you everything you know!"

Keith gasped for air as he was dragged forward. He could feel hot blood stream out of his throbbing nose.

Jack dropped him roughly onto the ground.

Keith tried to rise but his uncle pressed one of his heavy boots down on Keith's ankle, his other one dug hard into Keith's injured leg again.

"It was supposed to be us!" His uncle spat as Keith yelled in pain.

His vision was coming in and out. He tried to focus on his uncle's face.

"After everything I've done for you! I trusted you!" Jack landed one final blow on Keith's leg before releasing him. Keith gasped for air.

"You've made your choice." Jack said. He was quieter now. His voice still sharp but had an almost un-noticeable sadness to it that Keith had hardly ever heard from his uncle.

"I can't let you go now," the man said, almost took softly for Keith to hear, "You'll just come after me."

Keith rolled to his knees only half making sense of his uncle's words. He tried to stand but he stumbled. As he braced his hand on the ground to steady himself, a familiar click sounded much too close to his face.

Jack stood above him the gun pointed directly at him. A dull shock ran through Keith; his breathing ragged as he stared down the barrel of the gun, and his uncle behind it.

*This is it.* He thought.

The gunshot rang out in the little clearing and Keith instinctively squeezed his eyes shut flinching.

He heard his uncle shout. Which didn't seem right. He took a breath which didn't seem right either.

Keith's eyes shot open. Jack still stood above him holding his own forearm tightly. Blood spilled through his fingers shining in the light of the fire. The gun he was holding lay silent on the ground beneath him. Keith's head snapped to where the shot had come from.

Riley stood on the edge of the clearing. Her small hands clasped tightly around a gun, still out in front of her. Her eyes were wide but her mouth was set firm.

"Kid!" Keith shouted, his voice betraying his excitement.

"Keith!" She cried, her own voice catching. Her face broke out into a smile.

Keith pulled himself to his feet and began to take a step forward, when Riley shouted a warning.

Keith swung around catching his uncle's arm as his fist came towards Keith's face. He pulled his uncle forward, trying to knock him off balance. Jack stumbled but stayed upright. He reached for Keith's neck but Keith ducked.

"Get out of here!" He yelled to Riley, who hadn't moved.

She opened her mouth to protest but Keith cut her off. "Get to the road, your dad's there, he's waiting for you!"

He saw her pause as the realization of what he said kicked in.

"How?" She yelled.

Jack landed a blow to Keith's chest.

"No time," he coughed. "Go."

She faltered as Keith slammed his elbow into his uncle's gut, causing the man to double over, momentarily incapacitating him. Jack yelled, gasping for breath. He grabbed Keith's hair and pulled him back slamming his fist into Keith's jaw.

Keith's head snapped back and he fell to the ground.

Jack began to turn towards Riley who seemed frozen in place, her eyes still locked on Keith. Keith desperately lunged forward, grabbing at Jack's ankle. His hand caught hold of one of his mud crusted pantlegs and he reached forward with his other arm, wrapping it around the leg and pulling his uncle off balance. Jack fell. Keith pulled himself forward and before his uncle could recover, he slammed his fist into the side of the man's head. He landed the blow again and again until the man fell still.

Panting Keith stumbled to his feet and stepped away from his uncle's unmoving figure. He stood, trying to ease the sour feeling in his stomach.

Riley ran to him with a sob, wrapping her thin arms around his waist.

He held her close. "You're ok. It's ok now" he said breathlessly.

Keith knelt down, placing his hands on either side of her face. His knuckles were stained a dark red with blood, he tried not to look at them. "Are you ok? Did he hurt you?" He scanned her with his eyes, brushing aside a stray lock of hair. Her cheeks were dirty and flushed with red and the cut on her head was dark in the flickering light of the fire, but Keith didn't see any new injuries.

"I'm fine." She said clutching his wrists, her eyes shown with tears. "I thought he was going to kill you. I had to do something, I'm sorry!" She said.

He wrapped his arms around her again, pulling her into an embrace. "You did nothin' wrong kid." He felt her shake as she sobbed into his shoulder. When she quieted he pulled back, stealing his mouth into a gentle smile. "Let's get you home."

The girl looked up at him, her cheeks wet but her expression calm. She nodded.



Keith stood. He would get the girl to the safety of her father, then come back and deal with his uncle. He glanced back at the man where he lay, still unmoving on the ground. He placed a hand on the girl's shoulder and began to guide her in the direction of the road.

They were nearly out of the clearing when Keith stopped.

Something felt wrong. The woods were still silent. Keith began to turn his head when movement caught his eye.

Without stopping to think, he pulled Riley back, tucking her into his body as a gunshot rang out. They fell, crunching into the fallen leaves that littered the ground.

Keith shot to his feet, ignoring the nausea and pain from his leg threatening to overwhelm him. He spun to face his uncle. Blood streamed down the side of his uncle's face, and from his nose and mouth. A furious sneer stretched across his lips revealing his crooked teeth also stained red with blood. Keith heard Riley cough from behind him. He took a step towards Jack, placing himself between Riley and his uncle.

"You ok kid?" He asked back to her. He kept his eyes set on Jack who took a labored step forward, gun still pointed at them.

There was no response from the girl.

"Riley!"

"I'm good!"

Keith let out a quiet sigh of relief.

"What's your plan now boy?" His uncle hissed, pink foam spraying from his lips.

*What is my plan?* He thought.

Riley's gun, *his gun* Keith realized, lay on the ground where she had dropped it, less than twenty feet away from where he stood. If he could just get to it, he'd at least have a chance to get Riley to safety.

Keith glanced back at the girl and she caught his eyes. Her cheeks were still slick but she didn't look afraid. He quickly darted his eyes from the gun to the girl and raised his brow. Riley inclined her head in a faint motion.

*She understood.*

In an instant, Riley darted to the side, directly for her gun. At the same moment Keith rushed for Jack.

Jack shot the gun again, somewhere in-between the two of them. Neither faltered.

Keith reached his uncle and tackled him.

Jack's gun fell from his hand. Keith gritted his teeth, ignoring the stabbing pain in his leg and the pounding in his head. Jack gasped as the air rushed out of his lungs pushing Keith off. Keith stumbled as Jack pulled himself to his feet.

His uncle grabbed the top of his shirt, slamming him against the old picnic table. Keith collapsed to his knees and before he could stand, Jack pulled the table back and the heavy metal landed on Keith's injured leg.

Keith yelled in pain as Jack pulled himself up to his feet surging towards Riley.

Another gunshot rang out as Riley shot at Jack again, missing. Jack reached forward wrapping his hand around her wrists, snapping them down sharply.

Riley yelped in pain as she dropped the gun. She kicked at Jack's legs but he swept his feet under her and forced her back as she fell to the ground.

Keith strained against the metal table, pain shortening his breath as he pulled at his leg with all his strength.

“You ain’t worth it” he seethed.

Riley skittered backwards. Her face contorted in terror.

“Stay back,” she yelled. And Keith heard strength and anger forcing its way through the fear in her voice. “Get away from me you piece of shit!”

Keith could see Jack gun on the ground, just out of reach, if he could just— ,

He yelled again as pulled at his foot. Bolts of heat searing though his veins.

Riley flipped her body and scrambled forward, her arm desperately outstretched, reaching for the gun. Her fingertips barely brushed the metal barrel of the weapon, when Jack reached the girl and pulled her back by her ankles. Riley turned her body and She swiped at him with her broken nails. She caught him in the throat, leaving four bloody lines across his neck.

“Bitch!” Jack spat.

Riley made one final lunge for the gun, but Jack grabbed her by the waist and dragged her away. She flung her limbs wildly and Jack fell off balance landing on his back. Her hands still gripped tightly around the girl. With one sharp movement Jack forced the girl off of him and slammed her head against one of the sharp slabs of rock protruding from the ground. The girl went limp as Jack pushed her away from him.

Keith’s leg pulled free and he surged forward, grabbing Jack’s gun and pulling himself desperately to his feet.

Riley lay where she had fallen, her form unmoving in the flickering light of the flames. Jack cursed as he stood and walked towards where the other gun still lay.

Keith shot wide, in-between the man's fingers and the weapon they were stretching towards.

The man paused. He faced Keith, straining. A hot rage burned in his features.

"Enough." Keith said, not even attempting to conceal the desperation that colored his voice. "It's over."

Jack glared at him. The fury that shone in his blue eyes, was so similar now to Keith's own father. The look would normally make Keith want to shrink away in fear. But now, standing in front of his bruised and bloody uncle, the man he had once trusted more than anything, it just made him sad.

"Stop this." Keith said. "You can still leave."

Jack's shoulders seemed to sag slightly, but he didn't seem afraid. "You don't know what you've done." he said. The fury seemed to have gone from him, a tired bitterness now colored his features.

Keith ignored him aiming the gun at his Uncle's chest.

"Are you going to kill me boy?" Jack asked.

Keith's arm faltered.

He should.

He should kill Jack, for everything he had done. If he let his uncle go, he could easily try to retaliate; come after him or Riley. He might even try and work with Taylor, though one you disappoint that man once you don't usually get a second chance.

"Give me one reason why I shouldn't." Keith said.

He might not even go to jail for it. If he did kill his uncle, Keith would be defending himself and Riley.

He glanced over at the girl's still form and guilt shot through him. He fixed his eyes on his uncle and straightened his arm disengaging the safety with a click.

Jack's face clenched as he eyed the gun, then Keith. "I'm your kin, that not enough for you?"

"You ain't my kin." Keith said softly. "Not anymore."

Jack shook his head. "You can't just deny who you are boy. You and me, we're the same. It don't matter if you want to believe it or not."

Keith felt an aching sadness come over him, at one point all he wanted was to be just like the man that stood before him.

"No." He said. "It's over."

His uncle's gaze flicked from the gun to his face again. The cold eyes matching Keith's own. He watched Jack shift slightly, a guarded cautiousness setting his features. Keith held the gun firm, aiming it at his uncle's chest.

*It would be so easy. Riley would be safe.*

But even as he thought the words, he knew he couldn't do it. He didn't care if that made him weak, or soft, or whatever else his uncle would call him, but he knew he couldn't kill the man that stood before him.

His uncle watched him apprehensively.

Keith knew what he had to do; he would give his uncle a choice: Leave him and Riley and never look back, or Keith would turn him in. No doubt he would take that deal.

Riley groaned softly, the leaves underneath her crinkled as she began to move.

Keith's attention shot to the girl as relief flooded through him.

*She was ok!*

Distracted, Keith's arm faltered. In one swift movement Jack closed the distance between them and Keith realized what was happening too late as he felt his uncle's knife plunge into his stomach.

Keith gasped as the unbearable shock shot through him. He stared at his uncle, now so very close to him.

"Now it's over. Jack said. his expression was bitter. He pulled his blade back letting, go of Keith.

Keith collapsed to his knees. His hand automatically pressing to the hole in his body, trying to stem the flow of blood as it rushed out of him. Jack knelt down next to Keith and put a hand on his shoulder, propping up Keith's body so he could see his face clearly.

"This isn't how I wanted it to end." He said. His voice was solemn but not apologetic. "You did this to yourself."

Keith tried to respond but his ragged breathing made it impossible to speak. Instead he put as much malice and contempt into his face as he could.

Jack shook his head and let go of him.

Without the support Keith fell forward onto the ground.

Keith strained, watching through blurring vision as Jack stalked slowly towards Riley's small form. The girl's eyes were open and she was pulling herself of the ground. She tried to push herself away faster as she registered Jack approach.

Jack reached for the girl as she tried to back away and with one hand grabbed her by the hair, lifting her.

Riley screamed in pain.

“No.” Keith breathed weakly, trying to force his limbs to move. Every breath sent searing pain through his body. He clawed himself forward, dragging himself with all his strength.

Something laying in the dry grass caught his eye. It glinted metallicly in the flickering light of the fire. Keith pulled himself towards it.

Jack dragged the girl up. She yelled, clawing at his hands still gripped tightly around her hair. Jack’s hands didn’t budge.

“This is your fault!” he growled, at Riley or his dying nephew, Keith didn’t know.

Keith let out a soft groan through gritted teeth as he pushed his uncooperating body forward. If he could just get reach it.

Jack held out the knife, which caught the light, it dripped with dark red blood.

*My blood.* Keith thought weakly. He propped himself up on an elbow dragging himself forward and his fingers closed around the cool metal object.

The blade moved toward the girl’s throat. Riley whimpered in terror.

The gunshot rang out.

Jack’s body jerked forward and fell to the ground. Blood pooled around him, seeping from the bullet wound in his back and staining his light jacket.

There was no movement from the man. His eyes were open, The tight expression of hatred still frozen on his face.

The clearing was silent.

Riley slid back from where Jack’s body lay. Her chest rose and fell rapidly as she tried to distance herself from the man. Her breath was sharp and her eyes were almost impossibly wide as she swung her head to where the bullet had come from.

Keith stood, his one outstretched hand clasped tightly around the gun he had taken from where it lay on the ground.

“Keith!” Riley cried.

He blinked at her, but his vision was blurring. The gun slid out of his hand, landing back in the dry grass and leaves with a dull crunch.

As Riley pulled herself to her feet. Keith could see dark blood staining her face. He stumbled forward trying to reach the girl. His hand propped against the trunk of a solitary tree, the rough bark scraping against his calloused fingers. He attempted another step forward without the help of the tree and collapsed to the ground. Any remaining strength he had was gone.

“Keith!” Riley shouted, darting towards where he lay. Keith tried weakly to prop himself up but his arm gave out and he slid with a curse back to the ground.

He lay on his side, his whole body pulsed with a deep unbearable pain. He gasped, his free hand still at his side, blood seeping through his fingers.

Riley reached him and slid to her knees next to his face. “Keith,” her voice was shrill but steady.

He studied her. Part of a deep slash was visible on her left arm, blood soaked into her shirtsleeve half hidden by his jacket. The cut on her forehead had opened and was dripping a line of blood down her chin.

“Are you alright?” He coughed. His voice breathy and thin. Keith jacket which still hung from her shoulders was surprisingly undamaged. Her thin pink nightshirt on the other hand was torn and covered in blood stains. It was hard to tell what was from her and what was Jack’s.

“I’m fine.” She said.



Keith nodded. “That was dangerous, what you pulled back there.” He said attempting a grin.

“I stole the gun.” She said. “Then I ran.” A faint smile had broken out on her face as well. “I hid in the trees, so he couldn’t find me.”

“Nice job kid.” Keith said, doing his best to steady his breathing. “You definitely saved both our asses back there.”

“You should have seen the look on his face, when he found out he had lost me,” She said her eyes shining with a hint of mirth.

Keith coughed out a laugh.

Riley’s eyes darted to where she had lay moments before and her smile faded. “I knew you were going to come back for me.” She said softly.

Keith tried to speak but pain shot through him. His chest tightened and gasped, coughing. The movement set his body on fire.

“Hey!” Riley said in surprise and concern as Keith continued to choke out a horse string of coughs.

He could taste the bitter coppery flavor of blood on his lips as he tried to steady his breathing.

Keith watched as Riley’s eyes followed his arm to where his hand pressed against his stomach. Her eyes went wide at the sight of the pooling blood. Her gaze shooting back to Keith’s face. Keith could see the panic building in her expression.

“You’re hurt! You—,” She trailed off as her eyes darted to his stomach again. He could tell from her expression she was realizing what he already knew.

“It’s ok.” She said.

Keith tried to ease the pained expression he felt pinched in his face.

“You’re going to be ok.”

The wail of sirens sounded faintly in the distance. And Keith let out a breath of relief; the air from his lungs stirring the leaves on the ground. Riley’s father had held up his part of the deal.

“See, help is coming” Riley said. “Just hang in there, alright.” She began to stand looking desperately around the campsite. “There has to be something we can use to help stop the bleeding.”

“There’s no time kid.” Keith breathed softly. The blood was rushing out of him too fast.

Riley shook her head. “I can fix you up again,” She looked around the campsite wildly. “I can use the fishing stuff like I did before.” Her voice was thin as she spoke.

“Kid,” Keith said hissing sharply in pain as he tried to move. More hot blood soaked through his fingers. Keith stilled.

“You’ll be fine,” The girl said, her voice quick with desperation. “We just need to wait until the police get here, they’ve got to have an ambulance or something, right?”

“Kid.” Keith said again.

“I can, I—,” Her chest was rising and falling rapidly. She started to stand.

“Riley.” Keith said softly. Reaching forward with all his strength he grabbed the girl’s hand with his own. “It’s ok.”

“I can help you just tell me how!”

Keith shook his head. “There’s nothing you can do.”

“No!” In the light of the fire Keith could see the tears were streaming down her face. They mixed with the blood on her cheek as they spilled down her chin.

“Riley,” Keith said.

The girl sunk back to her knees, a sob escaping her throat. She grasped his hand tightly. “Please,” she whispered, “just get up.”

Riley’s father appeared at the edge of the campsite. He moved from the woods, surveying the clearing as she slowly made his way towards them.

“I thought I told you to stay in the car,” Keith croaked at the man.

Riley spun around. “Dad!” She cried when she saw the man. She tried to stand but kept her grip tight in Keith’s hand. She slowed and knelt back down, but turned so she could face her father. “Dad, we need help!”

The man’s focus moved from Riley, to Keith, to the body sprawled several feet away from them. When he turned back to them, Keith could see that the man had gone pale. He looked like he was going to vomit as he hurriedly gulped down several breaths of air.

“Dad please.” Riley said.

The man looked from his daughter, “The police are on their way,” He said weakly. They should be here soon.”

The sirens were indeed getting louder.

“See!” Riley said facing Keith again. “You’re going to be ok! Just a little longer.” She looked around the clearing wildly again, “We just need something to stop the bleeding.”

Keith caught the man’s eye. He shook his head faintly, his hair brushing softly against the dry grass and leaves.

The man’s face was grim. He understood.

Keith tightened his grip on the girl’s hand, causing her to look back at him.

“Riley.” He said. “Go with your father.”

Flashing red and blue lights began to light up the trees around them.

“No.” Riley said, “No I’m staying with you.”

Keith forced out a weak chuckle. “You’re not gonna break our deal on me now, are you? He inclined his head slightly, trying not to let the pain show at the movement. “I got you to your dad, you have to go with him now.’

“No,” Riley sniffed. “The deal was you get me home. You have to finish it.”

“You don’t need me anymore, kid. You can finish it yourself now.”

Riley sobbed and shook her head. Warm teardrops spilled onto Keith’s wrist. His arms felt weak but he held onto her as tight as he could.

Keith could hardly move. A wave of fatigue washed over him. It was becoming harder to not give into it. His eyes struggled to stay open, but he forced himself to keep his focus on the girl.

“Hey,” he squeezed the girl’s small hand, her eyes met his. “You’ve made my life worth somethin’ kid, I can’t ever thank you enough for that.” T

he girl’s, lip trembled as the tears streamed down her cheeks.

“But you go home now,” Keith said. “Go home and forget about me, forget about all of this.”

Riley sobbed.

Keith studied the girl’s face one last time, taking in everything: her wet cheeks with errant strands of hair stuck to them, her pursed brow and trembling lips, all the dirt and the blood so out of place on her young face, and her amber eyes so familiar to him now, locked on his own. The hardness in her expression made his chest tighten with sadness. She was different now, stronger, was it worth what it had cost her?

“Please,” Her voice broke. “I can’t leave you.”

The flashing red and blue lights were brighter now. They cascaded off the leaves, casting shadows through the campsite. He could hear shouting too as the officers approached.

Keith’s breath was slowing, he felt his chest heave as it moved up and down. He realized he couldn’t feel the pain his leg anymore. In fact, all of the sharp aches and throbs seemed to be gone from his body. That probably wasn’t a great sign, but Keith didn’t care anymore.

He was so tired.

He focused his attention on Riley’s hand in his. Her tight grip was a calming feeling.

Keith gave the girl’s hand one last squeeze. Then looked to where her father stood. A solemn expression etched on his pale face. Keith nodded and the man stepped forward.

“Your dad’s gonna take you home now.” Keith said as the man approached Riley.

“No!” She said sharply. “I’m staying with you!”

Keith forced out one last small smile.

“Goodbye kid,” he said.

Riley’s father grabbed the girl gently by her shoulders.

“Come on Riles.” He said “we have to go now.” He began to pull her softly away.

“No! Let me go!” She screamed. She twisted against her father’s grasp. He wrapped his arms around her tighter and pulled her back.

“No, NO!” She shrieked as she was pulled backwards. She grasped Keith’s hand as tight as she could, but her skin was slick with tears and blood. Her hand slipped away from his and his arm fell limp to the ground, still outstretched. He didn’t bother to move it.

Riley twisted and kicked as her father pulled her back. She was screaming at him but Keith couldn't hear what she was saying anymore. His eyes had become too heavy to keep open. He could hear the officers approaching, and Riley still sobbing and yelling.

*She was safe.*

A sigh of relief seemed to rush through Keith's body. He let his eyes close. Keith took a shallow breath, then his body ceased to move.

## Chapter 27

Riley sat on the stiff hospital bed numbly. The doctor moved around her, gently examining her body. Riley had been given a cloth gown to change into but she refused to take the jacket off. So she had just sat there, unmoving, on the paper covered bed in the exam room until the doctor had been forced to continue the examination as she was. The woman moved slowly around Riley, muttering under her breath as she took in the damage. *Laceration, suspected concussion, abrasions.* Most of the words she whispered Riley knew, though there were some she didn't.

When the doctor began to examine her shoulder, Riley let out an involuntary gasp at the sharp pain her light touch caused. The doctor, with the help of a nurse, convinced Riley to pull her arm out of the jacket and as the doctor gently slid her shoulder out of torn nightshirt Riley was able to make out the deep discoloration of ugly blue, purple and brown bruises that marked her shoulder. The doctor let out a low breath.

“What is this from?” She asked. Her voice stiff.

Riley didn't look at the woman. “Doesn't matter,” She said. Her voice barely recognizable; too low, too hoarse to truly be hers.

The doctor and nurse exchanged looks but thankfully did not press her further.

When she had first sat on the examining table they had asked questions, so many questions. “How did this happen?”, “What did they do?”, “What did *he* do?” She answered dully when she could manage, a word or two at a time. But any breath that left her body seemed to drain the energy from her, making it even harder to speak, so she mainly just sat in silence. It didn’t matter, they would form their own opinions on what had happened no matter what she said, they could never understand anyway.

Riley sat still as the doctor returned to her examination. There was a poster on the wall in front of her. A giant cartoon dog stood on its back legs, paw up in the air in front of several colorful numbers with markings next to them. Riley eyed the animal dully. It grinned back at her, cartoon eyes huge, almost glowing in the florescent light of the room.

When the doctor completed her survey of Riley’s body, she stepped to doorway where Riley’s father stood, silent and still, watching their every move.

They had ridden to the hospital in silence. One of the police men that had examined the scene had insisted that Riley ride in his car; something about legal procedure and other things Riley had only half heard. Her father had agreed as long as he could ride with her, and the police officer had opened the door to his car, gently ushering her inside.

If this had been before, Riley would have been shocked at her father’s decision to let a stranger, even if it was a police officer, drive his own car. Their driver was the only person she had seen her father allow use of any of his cars. But now, Riley had watched as her father handed the keys to another uniformed officer. She sat in the uncomfortable seat in the back of the police car, staring out the window watching uniformed men and women walked the clearing. Riley didn’t recognize the name on their uniform. It wasn’t the town, or even the county she lived in.

She didn't care why, it didn't matter. Blue and red lights flashed, reflecting off of the dark tree trunks. She could hear muffled words being exchanged between the officers. She was too far from the scene they were surveying to actually make out what they were doing. She squeezed her eyes shut tightly as a wave of sadness and guilt rushed through her body. She didn't want to know. She opened her eyes again, watching the lights cast long shadows into the dark forest. She recognized a tall boxy vehicle among the police cars. She had been right, there was an ambulance.

Not that it mattered now.

The car door opposite to where she sat opened and Riley's father slid into the seat.

He looked at her, his expression tight and sorrowful, He said nothing. Riley wasn't sure if she wanted him to. What could he possibly say.

The car began to move. There was a plastic partition between the police officer and where she and her father sat. She stared at it blankly. A hand enveloped her fist from where it sat against her stained pajama pants. She flinched at its sudden presence, but she didn't pull away as her father kept his hand on hers. Riley didn't look at him, but something in her chest seemed to release and she unclenched her hand, clasping it to her father's tightly.

The sharp smell of rubbing alcohol brought Riley back to the hospital room. The nurse was cleaned her up the best she could, wiping the dirt and grime from her forehead; the dried blood flaking away from her skin as they gently rubbed at it with the pungent alcohol pads. Riley hardly registered the sting as the nurse cleaned the cut on her head. She watched the doctor speak in hushed tones with her father. What were they saying? She wasn't sure if she even wanted to know.



“Good news is, this one’s shallow enough you won’t need stitches.” The nurse smiled at her kindly. Riley focused on her face. Her voice was light and she smiled softly, her eyes crinkling at their corners. Riley watched the woman falter slightly as she continued.

“Your arm though, I do need to take care of that.” She smiled again, brushing a hand gently against her cheek, “But don’t worry, you won’t feel a thing. The nurse stood and pulled a rolling tray over to the bed where Riley sat.

The metal tray held a little clear package. A thin curved needle sat protected behind the plastic. Riley stared at it, the florescent light reflecting off of its clean surface.

The nurse reappeared in Riley’s frame of vision, now with blue plastic gloves covering her hands. In one of them she held a small syringe.

“Just a little pinch,” she said.

Riley barely felt the needle as it entered her skin. She remembered her hatred for doctors and the threat of shots when she had visited for checkups in the past. Now that fear seemed silly, childish. It was just pain, nothing more.

“There,” the nurse said. Soon you won’t feel a thing. The woman smiled kindly and placed the syringe on the tray.

Riley looked down at her arm. The gash was easy to see now that it was clean. It stretched almost the entirety of her forearm elbow to wrist, a striking red against her pale skin; which looked too light, now clear of the dirt and grime. She could still see the knife as it slashed in front of her, her arm going up instinctively. The sharp pain that spread up her arm, as she stepped back. She could see the man, the look on his face as he stepped towards her. The blood already on his knife mixing with her own.

Riley looked away, focusing the nurse sat in front of her as took the plastic packaging in her hand. She gently tore it open, removing the needle and pulling a thin dark line of thread from a separate package.

“How are you feeling?” She asked.

Riley knew the nurse meant her arm, if it was numb yet, but something in Riley’s body balked at the question. How could she possible feel anything other than that dull tightness that had seemed to settle into her body in the woods when—. Riley swallowed.

*How was she feeling?* There was nothing for her to feel.

Riley shrugged in response to the nurse as the woman tapped at the wound on her arm.

“You let me know if you can feel anything, ok?”

Riley eyed the woman’s gloved fingers as she placed her hand near the gash, moving the thin needle closer to her arm.

The nurse glanced back up at her. “You don’t have to watch,” she said.

Riley ignored her, her gaze still fixed to her arm.

The woman eyed the her apprehensively, then picked up the curved metal needle from the tray. She placed it against Riley skin and pushed the tip through the delicate tissue. The nurse was right, Riley didn’t feel the needle at all. She stared at the gash on her arm as the woman slid the needle through the other side of the wound and expertly tied the thin tread with a small pair of silver scissors.

The needle slid into her skin again and Riley was no longer sitting on a clean bed in a bright hospital room. She was back in the little cave. The dim light flickered, shadows dancing on the stone wall. She saw Keith in front of her, could hear his protests as she tried to hold him still, his sharp grimace as she pushed the fishing needle through the ragged skin on his leg. She

remembered the feeling of the blood as it dripped onto the ground and seeped underneath her fingernails. How her mouth had opened almost without her realizing it, the song that burst forth from her lips, a desperate plea to quite the pain she was causing.

Riley felt something cool and wet slide down her cheeks. She put her free hand up to her face and realized she was crying. She was back in the too clean, too sterile hospital room.

The nurse looked up at her in concern. “Does it hurt?” she asked.

Riley shook her head.

“Don’t worry honey, I’ll be done soon.” The woman looked at her with such compassion and pity Riley felt her stomach clench. She couldn’t meet her eye. She looked to where her father and the doctor still spoke. The doctor was writing something down on a clipboard while her dad gestured, keeping his voice low. Riley tried to make out what he was saying but the words refused to reach her ears.

“There.” The nurse said, breaking her concentration.

Riley glanced back down at her arm. It had been wrapped in a white strip of gauze. The clean bandage stood out harshly against her dirt covered hand and ragged fingernails.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

The nurse stood from her seat and patted a soft hand against Riley’s cheek once more before leaving the room, taking the cart with her. Riley watched the metal hook laying on the tray as it disappeared past the doorframe.

She slid her arm back into her nightshirt, her shoulder protested as she put the jacket back over it.

Riley’s father walked over to where she sat the doctor following.

“I really do think it would be a good idea for her to stay the night,” the doctor was saying to him, “just for observation.”

Riley looked up, dread sharpening her breath. Her body ached with exhaustion and pain. She wanted to protest but she couldn't find the strength to open her mouth. Her chest felt so tight she thought she might stop breathing.

*Please, she thought, don't make me stay.*

Riley caught her father's eye, hoping her desperation was clear.

The man's expression softened, his eyes smoothing behind the thin gold frames of his glasses.

I will keep a close eye on her,” he said. “But I think she would prefer to be in her own bed tonight.”

“If I may—,”

Riley's father stepped past the doctor and to where Riley sat. He held out his hand. Riley took it with her own uninjured one. The smooth figures holding her tightly were familiar yet somehow the only thing the feeling of them did was make Riley's heart ache.

“I will call if we need anything,” he said to the doctor, and not waiting for a response he faced Riley again.

“Come on,” he said to his daughter. Let's go home.

## Chapter 28

It was all muddled. *The woods, the girl.* The memories were hazy, seeming to flit away as soon as if he tried to focus on them. *The bridge, the river.* A familiar discomfort seemed to

radiate through him. *The store, the car.* Something wasn't right, the discomfort grew to a sharp pain. It flowed through him, threatening to stop his breath entirely.

*The knife.*

Keith's eyes shot open.

His whole body ached; dull throbs of pain shot from his side, his head, his leg. Keith lay still, willing his body into calm. When the throbs that ran through him subsided he slowly moved his head, taking in his surroundings.

The room he was laying in was plain. A large window was covered by hanging plastic shades, obscuring the view from outside. Sunlight streamed through the openings in the slats, illuminating the room just enough for him to see it clearly. A large metal rod stood next to the bed he lay on, bags and tubes all ran from it and down to the metal rail next to him. With a quiet hiss of discomfort, he found his hand closest to the rod had one of these tubes sticking out of it, connecting him to whatever was in the bags. He moved the hand gently, flexing his fingers as the tape that kept the tubes in place stretched.

At least he could move.

Keith gingerly examined the rest of his body to the best of his ability. He was wearing unfamiliar clothing. A thin blanket covered his lower half. He shifted to pull the blanket away and a sharp cut of pain erupted from his side, nearly overwhelming him.

In a flash he saw Jack, felt the knife plunge into his stomach, heard the gunshot as the weapon discharged from his own hand.

Saw the body lying on the ground.

Keith sank back in the bed closing his eyes, forcing himself to take a breath, Somehow, despite everything, he wasn't dead.

Keith put his hands to his face, or at least tried too. His hand that was had line in it moved easily enough despite its restraint. The other hand however stopped short, his wrist caught on something. Keith opened his eyes, pulling at his hand. A metal cuff clinked softly with his moment. The other end of the cuff was attached to the metal frame of his bed. He strained against it weakly but it held fast. Keith let out a breath.

He surveyed the other side of the room. Next to his head on the right side of his bed, a large machine blinked. He was attached to this one too, wires ran from his chest up to it. It was silent, but he watched the line on the monitor screen blink as his chest rose and fell.

*He was alive.*

He took a steadying breath, trying to keep the green line on the screen next to his bed steady. He twisted his wrist weakly in its restraint. He didn't know who had brought him here and the cuffs couldn't be a good sign.

His eyes fell on a door in the corner of the room, there was a counter next to it on the wall, with some cabinets above it. But other than the metal sink, the counter itself was clear. The rest of the room was equally devoid of anything useful. Keith brought his left hand slowly to his head, running his fingers absentmindedly through his hair. The stringy strands brushed against the tape that kept the thin tube attached to his skin, leaving a small streak of dirt behind. Keith moved the hand in front of his face. The needle attached to the line stuck smoothly in his skin, kept in place by the canvas tape.

He eyed the thin stick of metal protruding into his skin. It was more or less the right size, but would it be strong enough? *There was only one way to find out.* Keith brought his left hand to his right, using the thumb on his cuffed hand to slowly pick at the tape surrounding the needle.

The door to his room clicked as the lock disengaged and Keith quickly separated his hands, settling back into the bed.

A woman entered the room. She was clearly a doctor of some kind; with the long white coat and crisp plain scrubs underneath. She surveyed Keith from the doorway, her expression calm and unreadable.

Keith said nothing as the woman approached him.

“You’re awake,” She remarked as she inspected the monitor next to Keith’s bed.

“An accurate observation,” Keith croaked, his voice gravelly and hoarse, catching in his throat as he spoke. He hadn’t realized how dry his throat was until he tried to speak. He coughed dryly, jarring shocks shooting through his body.

The doctor walked over to the counter opening a cabinet above it and pulled out a paper cup. She ran the sink, filling the cup to the top before extinguishing the flow of water. She approached the bed holding out the cup of water for Keith to take.

Keith eyed the woman, who just looked back at him with slight impatience creased in her face. Keith reached across his body with his left hand, taking the cup.

He downed the water desperately, his throat not even giving him a chance to breathe as he drank.

*How long had he been here?*

“Do you know where you are?” the doctor spoke, her voice firm as she looked down at him.

Keith shook his head, his throat still tight.

“Westchester Medical Center. You know where that is?”

Keith squinted, he had heard of it. If he was here, where was—? He coughed trying to clear the roughness from his voice.

“Is she ok?” Keith whispered roughly.

The doctor narrowed her eyes slightly, “Who?”

“The girl.” Keith said, his voice slightly clearer. “The one that was with me. Is she alright?”

The woman shifted, hesitation pressing her lips tightly together.

Keith’s heart began to pound faster in his chest. *Had something happened? Did the Wolves or Tailor find her?*

He struggled to sit up despite the shocks of pain from his body.

The doctor put up her hands, a silent command to stop him from moving. “Yes,” she said. “The girl is fine, she is with her father.”

Keith sat back into the bed, a breath of relief exiting his lungs. He nodded. Pulling at the cuff that kept his wrist captive. “Am I in trouble?” He asked, holding up his shackled hand to the best of his ability.

“That’s not for me to say.” The doctor said.

“What can you say?”

“You suffered hypovolemic shock and extensive blood loss from the trauma to your abdomen.” She said.

“I was stabbed,” Keith clarified.

“Yes.” The woman said. “You also arrived with a fever due to the wound on your leg. The only reason your condition was not worse was the way you treated it. If an injury like that



had been left open, the infection would have spread significantly faster and you would most likely be dead by now.”

Keith felt a faint wisp of a smile curl at his lips, immediately cut with guilt and pain at the thought of the girl.

“You are very lucky to be alive,” the doctor told him.

Keith didn’t need the word of a professional to know that much. Keith looked down at his body. It was still mostly covered in the thin hospital blanket but he could feel the faint throb of pain pulse through his side. He moved his right foot gingerly and felt the familiar ache, though much less prominent in comparison now.

Keith spoke without looking up at the doctor. “The man, the one who did this?”

“Dead.” The woman said. “Before the police arrived on the scene.”

Keith nodded. He already knew that too. The doctor asked him something but Keith didn’t hear it. When he didn’t respond, the woman walked back to the sink and filled another cup of water, returning to Keith.

“Rest, you’ll need as much as you can to recover.” The woman said her voice still firm. She reached over and placed the cup in Keith’s free hand, before leaving the room, the door closing behind her with a soft click.

Keith swallowed, the drink cool in his hand. He tried to lift the cup but it felt like it was filled with cement.

—

There was a sharp rap on the door before it swung open. The doctor, same one as before, entered followed by another person; A man Keith immediately recognized.

“You come to bring me a get-well soon card?” Keith asked addressing the man behind the doctor, “Maybe some flowers?”

Riley’s father stared at him unamused.

Keith shook his head as he eyed the man. “how is she?” He asked.

Riley’s dad regarded him solemnly. He turned to the doctor, who eyed him then exited the room.

The man pulled the door closed behind him.

“She’s fine. She’s— still processing everything that has happened. But, she’ll be ok.”

“I know she will,” Keith said. “That kid’s strong, she’ll be alright.”

Riley’s father nodded, his expression was still hard but his eyes seemed to shine behind the frames of his glasses.

“Am I going to be arrested?” Keith asked the man.

Riley’s father stepped closer to the bed. “I suppose, that’s up to you,” He said.

Keith regarded the man. Trying not to note all the similarities between him and his daughter. He sighed. “What is your name?”

The man folded his arms, “William,” He said.

Keith shook his head involuntarily. “Of course it is,” he muttered. If the man heard the remark he made no indication. “Well, *William*,” Keith said, the name sticking to the back of his throat. “I was never a part of it. The Wolves, your deal, I didn’t *want* any of it. If I never have to see any of it again I will gladly take it.”

The man faltered narrowing his eyes at Keith, who just looked back at the man. He had already proven himself more than enough times to the man who stood before him.

“Why are you here?” Keith asked.

After a prolonged pause the man spoke. “I—, My daughter is safe because of you,” He hesitated unfolding his arms and holding his hands towards Keith. “If what you say is true I am very much in your debt, and despite what it may seem given my recent track record, I do try to fulfill my debts when I have them.”

Keith watched the man, his hands gesturing with his words as he spoke, almost as if they had a mind of their own.

“I know I could keep you from seeing her,” he was saying, “but, I’m sure you would find away. I just don’t want to see her in danger anymore, and... and if you’re around her ...” The man trailed off.

Keith let out a breath. What this man was offering him, a chance to see her again, to be a part of her life. He felt his chest lighten with relief. But, instead of following it Keith shook his head.

“Will she be safe?”

“The Wolves have gone into hiding after word of everything that happened got out. I’ve hired security to stay with her and we are working on a new system for the house. She will be protected at all times until all of this blows over.”

Some small worry still nagged at the back of Keith’s gut, but he pushed it away. Riley’s father seemed to finally be taking this threat seriously. He was obviously scared and that was good. Fear and caution are exactly what would keep them safe. And he was right, if Keith stayed around, it would only put her in danger.

“The best way to keep her safe now is for her to forget about... all of this.” Keith said, ignoring the sharp tightness that had returned, settling back into his body, this time to stay. “If

she believes I'm dead, then- that's good. That will protect her." Keith said, trying to keep his voice steady.

William said nothing but Keith could see the relief wash across his face.

"What do you want then? Anything at all," he said.

Keith looked into the face of the man who stood in front of him. "To disappear," He said. "Start over. You help me do that, you'll never see me again."

The man studied him, then nodded. "What do you need?"

## Chapter 29

Keith brushed his hand against the stiff fabric of his jeans. They were an unfamiliar brand, much like his new jacket; it's cool leather sliding against his arms as he walked. He didn't dare to ask the price of the outfit he wore, didn't want to know. He had told Riley's father to be as simple as possible when supplying him with new clothes, and he supposed he had to give the man a little credit; it was almost his style.

Keith slowly walked up the drive. Uniformly groomed trees lining the sidewalk and beyond them a large lawn spread out, manicured and nearly clear of dead leaves. The building at the end of the drive was large and ornate, it matched several others, all the same light brick. Keith made his way towards the building in front of him, frowning as he still moved much too slow for his liking. His gait was not as smooth as it used to be. The doctor had told him that he would most likely keep the limp as an effect of the damage done to his leg. Keith supposed it could be much worse, he tried think of it as just something else for him to get used to, like the new clothes.

As Keith walked up the street, he could hear the doctor's voice when she had showed him the ragged scar that stretched along his leg; telling him how they could still fix the stitches to make the damage appear more subtle. Keith had refused, strongly, and the doctor had left it alone. He had stayed in the hospital for nearly three weeks before finally convincing the doctor he was capable of taking care of himself. He had left with strict instructions on how to keep himself healing properly and Keith assured the doctor that as long as he was out of that place, he would do anything needed to keep him from coming back. He still felt it as he moved, the dull ache in his side, the weakness in his step, all reminders. He was almost done, almost ready to leave everything that happened behind. He just had to do this one last thing.

Several other pedestrians crowded the sidewalks, mainly sticking to their small groups as they also made their way to the grand building. Keith followed them, studying their faces as they spoke and laughed with one another. They were mostly adults, parents. Here and there a child would be accompanying them, excitedly talking about various things as they pulled their adults along, their faces concealed by the hoods on their thick puffer jackets. Keith tried to ignore them.

The crowd slowly flowed into the large building, its double doors open wide to welcome its visitors in. As Keith approached the stairs to the entry, he paused.

Keith hadn't exactly told William what he would be doing, the man probably would have protested. He had, however, confirmed with the man that Riley would be far away from this place, on this day. It was a weekend after all.

It was still a stupid idea, not to mention risky should anyone recognize him. Not that anyone would, or could.

William had brought him the newspaper, two days after he had first woken, open to the article with the heading: **Kidnapped Girl Finally Returned Home Safe After Two-Week**

**Long Search.** There had been a photo of Riley underneath it, a school picture of some kind. She was grinning widely her hair braided past her crisp uniform.

The article fabricated a thrilling story of its own: How the girl of the wealthy CEO had been taken from her bed and held for ransom in the Catskill wilderness; where she was found by a well-meaning man who risked everything to bring the girl back to her father, ultimately giving his life to stop the man who had taken her. It was all very dramatic. The article had used his full name, calling him a hero; which was ridiculous. Keith was no hero. The one thing he did appreciate however, was that there had been no picture of him. Anyone who knew him, his name at least, would believe he was dead and he could still appear unremarkable in a crowd.

Still, Keith pulled his cap down slightly lower over his forehead. He walked up the stairs of the large building. As he stepped through the doorway with the other parents and families, no one gave him a second look. Keith pushed the remaining apprehension from his mind. He was unremarkable, unimportant.

The interior of the room spread out before him was grand. It looked like a ballroom more than a school gymnasium. The walls were decorated with gold trim against antique wood framing. An ornate chandelier hung from the ceiling. In the room itself, easels and boards sat in rows and on cloth covered tables. Each artist had their own area where their work was on display.

Keith roamed the makeshift gallery. He eyed the pieces as he passed. There were all kinds of paintings, drawing, and even sculptures. Keith had personally never gone out of his way to appreciate art like this. But, he listened as parents oohed and awed as their children, the artists themselves, explained their various projects.

A man in a suit walking past him stopped and offered a silver tray with a selection of mini hotdogs wrapped in pastry. Keith pulled one from the tray with a nod of thanks and popped the whole thing in his mouth.

He recognized the pictures before he even saw her name. A framed self-portrait; her cheeks full, her hair long and smooth as it framed her chin. Keith's gaze settled on her warm eyes. The shade wasn't exactly the same, but the color was similar enough; captured in the smooth paint of the piece.

His chest tightened and he moved on the next picture.

A large easel held a canvas with a painting of a white cat sprawled out on a bed. Keith smiled as he studied it. The brush strokes making the fur look wispy and soft. Keith resisted the urge to touch it.

He turned his attention to a board that held several smaller pieces. Some were done in color but several were pencil sketches. Keith recognized William in one of the drawings. His glasses were off and he was smiling. The sketch was simple and imperfect. Still, the likeness was obvious. Keith certainly couldn't do anything like this.

He inspected the other drawings. A dancer, a couple of girls around Riley's age, arms around one another, a fancy bowl of fruit.

Keith eye caught a small sketch at the corner of one of the boards. It looked to be the view from outside her bedroom window. A tree, plain and unremarkable. Smooth lines created the outline, with shorter strokes to shade different crevasses. Its branches were full. Keith placed his hand gently on the picture. He imagined Riley drawing her pencil across the paper, creating the likeness of what she saw.

Without fully realizing what he was doing, Keith pulled the picture from the board. The tacks that held it in place tumbling to the floor. He held it in his hands for a moment, waiting for something in him to say this was a bad idea.

Nothing happened.

He quickly slid the drawing into his jacket, tucking it against the side of his body. The movement made his side ache. He pulled his jacket tighter around his body. Stepping away from the display he made his way for the door.

No one noticed him as he walked through the crowd, everyone too wrapped up in their own conversations and inspections of the various other art on display. He could feel the piece of paper against the side of his body and tucked his arm slightly closer.

As Keith stepped out of the building, he stopped at the top of the stairs. He eyed the road in front of him. He had no idea where it would take him, but with the new clothing on his back and the drawing safely in his arms, he realized he was finally ready.