

Down the River

Allison took a deep breath. The air conditioner was on full blast, but with the ninety degree, summer weather in West Jefferson she couldn't breathe. She could barely get a sip of fresh pine into her lungs because things were moving too fast. Not literally.

The car chase down the hips of North Carolina's mountains wasn't too much. This was one habit that her father had yet to shake off. The weekend right after school let out for summer, she was packed in the car like another item tossed into the melting ice cooler. From Charlotte to West Jefferson, her father trekked through the highways and dirt patched roads trying to get to their cabin before the sunset's pastel orange beat them to it.

But this time the passenger seat was no longer occupied by her. Instead someone her father had met at a Christmas party filled it. Victoria. The strings of hair that fell over the leather seat like bleach dripping out of a cup, were nothing like her mother's brunette curls. And while she knew that this moment would come eventually, in Allison's mind she could still feel her heart jumping in her mouth and the nerves skittering down her damp chest as her mother took a sip of red wine and signed the divorce papers.

Now as she threw her duffel bag over her shoulder and entered the dimly lit cabin, she closed her eyes. Everything for a moment was as it used to be. When she opened them to see the light turned on, her father patting her shoulder and Victoria kneeled beside the lab puppy – a gift to her – she frowned.

Allison cleared her throat. "I'm not feeling well."

Her father took a step towards her. Allison moved past him and trudged up the stairs. She went into the only room on the second floor. She lifted the blinds and saw dusk shine a few salmon-pink rays behind mountains. Before it got too dark she spotted the surrounding trees. They seemed to have grown, their bark scaling towards the barren sky. Once her father had told her that they were so tall, because Paul Bunyan had planted them himself.

"Ali, dinner's ready."

Allison crawled to the door, unlocked it and opened it just enough to get a whiff of dinner. Moist, warm meat filled the house. Allison crinkled her nose and shut the door. By eleven she figured they were going to be passed out, the gas station coffee no longer

in their system. Then, when they were asleep, she would bring up her duffel back and make a feast out of potato chips and a green apple.

Allison rested her head against the bare floor and peered at the dust bunnies hiding under the bed. The thought of grease on her fingertips made her mouth water. She could almost taste the salt from the chips and the light crunch each one would make after she'd let it sit on her tongue.

Someone knocked on her door.

Allison's head shot up from its post on the floor. "Who is it?"

Her father opened the door, Victoria's head peering over his shoulder. "What's the matter, honey? Aren't you hungry?"

She shook her head.

"Can you at least sit at the table with us? Be a polite host for our guest?"

"I rather stay up here – get some rest."

"On the floor?"

Allison sat up. She grabbed the cotton sheets and blankets her mother had left in the closet and threw them over the bed, tucking the corners in just like she learned how to do in second grade.

"Well, then," her father narrowed his eyes at her, "perhaps you'll feel better in the morning. We got a big day tomorrow. We'll finally be able to do some kayaking."

Victoria clapped her hands together. "Oh! Can I use the scarlet one?"

"That one belongs to my mother."

There was a pause. Allison's eyes widened. Her trembling fingertips touched her lips. Cold sweat trickled down her forehead.

Her father's grip tightened around the doorknob. "Maybe Victoria can borrow it."

With that, he slammed the door. The floorboards shook. Allison bathed in sweat. The room felt as humid as it was in the car. She pushed back the blinds and opened the window. Cool air swam into the room. With the porch light on, Allison could see the scarlet kayak perched on top of the car. If she steal one day to herself, forget about the divorce, Victoria, and the puppy barking downstairs she could breathe again.

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Allison pushed the kayak down the mud-caked rocks. The river was rapid this summer's morning. It carried the kayak about half a mile away before she could even get in.

She turned to Sammy, the Lab puppy that had jumped out of the empty cardboard box and followed her. "Stay here."

It jumped around in tiny circles, before sitting still with a whimper.

Allison jumped head first into the water. It seemed as though it had just started melting after winter. Her skin bloomed with goose bumps and she trudged over the slime green pebbles. Her foot caught under a tangle of weeds and she slipped. Her arms thrashed back into the water and her head pounded against the river floor. Besides the underwater noise of the river moving, like the sounds of the running faucets Victoria leaves on, there was a pounding inside her temples that resembled car tires screeching on ice. She swam to the surface, her hair being a net of red thread that the salmon avoided. The only warmth Allison felt when she broke for air, were the cuts that were sure to bruise.

Sammy ran to the edge of the riverbed and barked. He padded his foot into the water, edged away, and then trotted back. Allison put a finger to her lips and with a whimper he was quiet.

She reached for the kayak that had stranded itself beside the bank in front of the cabin. She dug her fingers into the mud, trying not to cringe at the water bugs skittering over her scratched hand. She trudged back to where she left Sammy, making sure to stay hidden by the bank and pine trees.

Sammy's tail thumped against the ground, spraying dirt into the air. Allison grinned and motioned for him to jump into the canoe after dumping the water and cobwebs out. She squeezed out the excess water from her T-shirt and shorts.

"Ali, breakfast is ready."

Her father's voice echoed into the woods. If she craned her neck to the right, past the tree trunks, she would see the lights fluttering to life in the cabin. Allison threw the brown bag with lunch into the kayak. She threw on her mother's old sunglasses, navy fly-fishing hat and sweater.

Twigs crunched.

Allison turned. "Didn't you read my note?"

Her father stood pushing a tree branch behind him. His brown eyes, just like hers, were wide. "Are you crazy? You can't go out by yourself. You barely know this area."

"I need this." Tears brimmed Allison's eyes. It felt like the last year had been a series of stale holidays mixed in with pasting on stale smiles for her father getting his own apartment and her mother moving hours away from what Allison had always known. "Just for a few hours."

Allison slid into the kayak. With a steady grip on the paddle she pushed off into the stream.

"Ali!"

Her heart hammered. Her father reached for the scarlet kayak. His fingers grazed the stern before the water whisked it off into the center of the river. Allison bit her blue lips. She thought that being sixteen would have made her too old for tears. Once she paddled over the incline hidden by the alcove of trees, the water became still. But most importantly she no longer heard her father calling after her.