

Seven

Even though the inner tube was pretty worthless with a hole, I dragged it along. Actually, *dragged* isn't the right word. I put my backpack on so my hands were free, and then I held the mostly deflated tube over my head, like it was a sun umbrella. Even though we were in a national forest, the path was dappled with sunlight. You can get burned even in the shady areas, I think, and I burn super easily.

Alex turned back, probably to see why I was moving so slowly. "Why are you even bothering to bring that along?"

"For starters, we do have to return this to the tubing people. Also, it's a good source of sun protection."

She shook her head. "Literally the only good thing right now is that the sun is out. But you do you." She turned to face forward and kept stomping along the path. Her flip-flops kicked up little clouds of dirt and pulverized leaves with each step.

Truth was, we were both moving pretty slowly. The trail wasn't well defined, and clusters of rocks littered it—some of which were partially obscured by brush and a carpet of fallen pine needles, so you don't see them till you almost trip. Hidden tree roots were another hazard. I stubbed my toe really hard within a minute. Water shoes do not offer a ton of toe protection, unfortunately. At least not while you're on land. They were kinda slippery, too. I wouldn't want to climb anything while wearing them.

For the first five minutes or so that we walked, the footpath hugged the curve of the river. I started to admit to myself that Alex had been right—following it downstream was the smartest course of action. But then, the path began to pull away.

It happened so gradually that I didn't notice until we were about ten feet from the too-rocky-to-walk-along shoreline. Looking ahead, the path—at least what I think was the path, because the longer we trudged along it, the harder it got to tell what exactly was a trail and what was a random bare patch of mud—veered into the forest. A thick line of trees would separate us from the river going forward.

"Hey, Alex? Hold on a sec."

She stopped and turned to me, wiping at her forehead. Her brow was sweaty, and her face was flushed.

“What is it?” She sounded winded, too.

I dropped the inner tube to the ground to give my arms a rest. My muscles burned from holding it overhead. “Looks like we’re walking into the woods,” I said, pointing. “That doesn’t seem right, if we’re trying to follow the water.”

She stared at where I was pointing to, scratching at a bite on her leg. “Huh,” she said. “I guess so.”

“Maybe this isn’t going to lead us downstream. Should we head back?” That made the most sense to me.

She bit her lip. Alex doesn’t like to be wrong. She’s paranoid about people not thinking she’s smart. “No, I don’t think we should. It’s probably on purpose...” Her face brightened with an idea. “This must be a shortcut!”

That actually made sense. In certain spots we’d passed while floating along the river, trees gave way to sandstone formations. A footpath like the one we were on wouldn’t be safe on a low cliff. (Especially in water shoes.) It would make sense for someone to have cut a path through the forest to meet up with the river again at a less-rocky area. “I think you’re on to something.”

Alex offered me a small smile. “Carry on,” she said. Even though she was already facing away and hurrying ahead, I grinned back at her. *This is just the kind of bonding experience we’ve needed...*

As we walked, I counted in my head. If the shortcut veered away from the river for more than five minutes, we should reassess our plan. Especially because our families still thought we were on or near the river. *One one thousand, two one thousand...* If I got to *three hundred one thousand* and there was no water in sight, we’d turn back. Too bad I didn’t have a watch, and Alex’s drowned phone couldn’t tell the time anymore. She cradled it in the crook of her arm, like she hoped it would suddenly sputter and cough up a bunch of water and riverweed and then be okay. I was surprised she hadn’t tried to give her phone mouth-to-mouth or something.

We moved along the path to a soundtrack of our loud breathing and the crunching of our feet hitting the carpet of needles and cones, damp leaves, and fallen branches. Punctuated by Alex’s flip-flops slapping against her heels. I closed my eyes for a moment and savored my next inhale: pine, fir, and maybe cedar. The scent reminded me of the afternoon we pick out a Christmas tree and set it up in the living room, when all of a sudden our house becomes a forest

wonderland. Then I opened my eyes again, because this really wasn't a hike to attempt without sight. There was so much to see. All the wildlife and plants I'd learned about for my TAG project on the national forest—now was my chance to spot them. *What if I stumble on something super rare, like the four-toed salamander? Better yet, what if we come across a wolf?* I lowered the tube for a second to pat the side pocket of my backpack, to make sure my camera was still there, easily accessible. Too bad the binoculars were somewhere at the bottom of the Wolf River.

A light breeze tickled my limbs, and I was thankful for it, because ever since we'd left the river, I hadn't been mobbed by flies. Maybe that was also thanks to the spiders in the forest—there were webs everywhere, glinting in the sunlight. Cool, but also creepy.

One hundred sixteen one thousand. Still no sign of the river, and I couldn't hear its rushing water anymore. But there was still plenty of time for the path to weave back to it.

Alex was really charging ahead; “walking with a purpose,” as my mom would say. I did my best to keep up behind her. Because she was so confident in her movement, I didn't look closely at the path itself. I just followed along, even though there did seem to be a growing number of obstacles in our way: tree roots perfectly positioned to trip a hiker, large rocks sticking up out of the ground, sunken holes in which you could twist an ankle.

Two hundred thirty-four one thousand. A bead of sweat dripped from my forehead directly into my eyeball, and the sunscreen stung. I couldn't wipe the rivulets away because I was holding up the inner tube again. The breeze had disappeared, and it felt muggier than it had along the river. I heard a whiny buzz by my left ear—a mosquito. I shook my head back and forth because I couldn't swat at it with my arms in the air.

“Ow!” Ahead of me, Alex stopped short and then pitched forward, landing on her palms. Her phone dropped onto the ground.

“Are you okay?” I tossed the tube aside and hurried to squat next to her.

“No!” She clutched her big toe. “I just, like, stabbed my foot on something.”

“Let me see.” I scooted around and bent close to her mud-covered feet. She pointed at her purple-polished big toenail. Below the edge of the nail, where the polish was chipped, was a spot of bright red. “Yeah, I think you got a scrape.”

She groaned. “I'm probably going to get rabies now.”

I held back a laugh. “Uh, not likely. Rabies is from animals, like raccoons. Maybe you mean tetanus, which can be in dirt.” She gave me a horrified look. “You've been vaccinated. It's

fine. Once you wash off your toe, put on some ointment—nothing to worry about.” I stood up slowly. “Did you bring any Band-Aids?” Her bulging tote bag, after all, was like a pop-up drugstore.

She shook her head. “Just makeup and stuff.” So I guess just the cosmetics aisle.

“Wait! I still have that mini first aid kit in my backpack.” I worked the straps off my shoulders and pulled out the kit. Opening it, I realized the kit had already been used. Only two bandages were left inside, no ointment. But I did have a few remaining squirts of hand sanitizer. Better than nothing. “Here. Use this stuff.”

“Thanks,” she said, taking the tiny bottle and bandage from me. She squirted a big blob of sanitizer out and doused her toe with it, wincing.

I tried to remember what number I’d been at when I’d stopped counting—287, maybe? Close enough to three hundred, and we’d definitely been walking for more than five minutes. I turned in a slow circle, taking in our surroundings. Trees and ferns as far as my eyes could see. No river. I strained to listen, only hearing the sounds of the forest: the drone of insects, bird calls, rustling branches. And Alex, squirting more of the sanitizer gel for her hands. I think she used it all up. Then she crumpled the bandage wrapper and handed it out to me, like a little kid does with their mom. Or a princess would do with her handmaiden.

I still took the crumpled wrapper and stuck it in my backpack pocket because I didn’t want to risk littering in a national forest.

“Maybe we should head back to where we came out of the water,” I said. “We’ve been walking for a while, and there’s no sign we’re going to hook up with the river again.” I was slightly worried that in the meantime, while we’d been in the woods and out of view, our families had made it back upstream and now they couldn’t find us. I closed my eyes again to better listen, to see if I might hear them calling. Nothing. How long had it been since they’d made the turn, and we hadn’t? Probably more than an hour. I thought about the life vest that had floated downstream. *Mom must be totally freaking out.* I felt really bad for her, and everyone else. Especially poor Lucy, who had been told to keep an eye on us. Yes, she’d done a terrible job of it, but in her defense, she probably didn’t think we’d lose a phone, capsize our tube, exit the water, ruin the tube, and then have no way to return. All those Swiss cheese disaster holes had lined up. Our situation wasn’t the fault of one person.

Well, except maybe me. I’d bounced the tube, after all.

Alex sighed. “We’ve already walked this far. Does it really make sense to turn around?”

“What if they’re back there? Looking for us?” Imagining my parents and Nolan anxiously waiting on the riverbank made my chest tighten. When Nolan had gotten separated once at the Fourth of July fireworks, I’d panicked. In the fourteen minutes it had taken for my dad to find him, patiently waiting on a nice older couple’s picnic blanket, I had curled up in a ball on ours and bawled. The idea that something bad had happened to my little brother was unbearable. I really hoped our families weren’t feeling like that about us right now. Especially because we were totally fine. Just a bit off-course.

Alex swatted at a fly—a horsefly, the bigger ones you find in the deep woods. The bugs had come back with a vengeance. The mosquito buzz surrounded us like radio static. “Would the others even know where we got out of the river?” Alex made a good point. It’s not like there was a sign or anything, only a small natural cove, and we’d left nothing behind—not even footprints in silt. Unless my binoculars washed up, there’d be no trace of us.

“I just wish we knew this path was heading where we actually need to go.” I stared ahead, like I was hoping to see a marker tacked to a tree, telling us that we were on the scenic Blah-Blah Trail, and in only one quarter of a mile, we’d be back to the banks of the Wolf River. But this wasn’t a trail like that. I turned to look at the way we’d come.

All I saw were trees, tall and dense and overgrown. Their branches crossing one another like the silk strands in those spiderwebs. I didn’t see any kind of recognizable trail. Which didn’t make sense because we’d followed one to this spot. At least, I’d thought we had, as I’d followed behind Alex. I stared down at my feet, studying the ground, then zooming out a bit, to find the edges of the path. The forest floor was indistinguishable. Dainty, long-stemmed white-and-yellow wildflowers filled every space that wasn’t covered in moss. There wasn’t even a faint line to help us know which way to walk, to stay on the path. Because there wasn’t any path. Not anymore.

“Alex,” I said slowly, even though my heart was starting to pound. I’d been so focused on watching exactly where my feet were, to avoid tripping, that I hadn’t paid much attention to anything around them. I’d just assumed that to Alex, in the lead, the trail had been clear. “Which way did we come?”

She turned and pointed with such total confidence that my shoulders relaxed. “That way.” My eyes followed her outstretched arm—and saw just a bunch of nondescript pine trees

surrounded by curlicue ferns.

“Are you sure?”

Her mouth wavered with the beginnings of a frown. “Yeah...well, I think so.” She scratched at her elbow.

“So where’s the trail now?” I asked, trying to sound very calm and not at all judgy, but my voice was rising higher with each word and I couldn’t tamp it down.

Alex stayed silent, staring past the trees. Her mouth hung open a bit, then closed, like she was about to say something but realized it wasn’t quite right. “Huh. It’s really hard to tell...It got kind of tricky back there, like, I didn’t know if we should go left or right at one spot...” Her voice trailed off.

“Why didn’t you stop then?” I asked, incredulous. “When you weren’t sure?” Once the path faded, we should’ve turned around and traced it back to where we started. Not guessed at where it should go next. That’s how you get lost.

She shrugged defensively. “It’s like on a standardized test—if you’re not sure, you make an educated guess. I made a couple of educated guesses. When in doubt, always choose C. Like Mr. Macht used to say in science class.”

I squeezed my eyes shut while I sucked in a deep breath. “Alex—those weren’t actual instructions. He was making a joke.” I opened my eyes and stared at her.

She looked wounded. “Oh, and I was too *dumb* to know that.” She grabbed at a nearby twig and twisted it anxiously in her hands. “Why are you acting like this is such a big deal?” she asked, but in a way that told me she didn’t want an answer; she wanted me to stop acting like it was a big deal. To make her feel better, regardless of the situation.

But I couldn’t do that. The worried look on her face told me I didn’t have to say what I said next, that she already knew, but I said it out loud anyway.

“Because now we’re lost.”