

Trapped

The door had never been locked before.

She threw her body against it in a desperate, rhythmic pounding that reverberated through the room like an ominous drumbeat. Her fingernails clawed at the aged wood until her fingertips bled from splinters. Suddenly, the words of the masked man came echoing back to her, and she slid to the floor in a puddle of silent tears.

Three months earlier, Kayleigh had been flying through her ramshackle house, her breath rasping wildly in her throat as she barreled around random corners, her stepfather charging after her. She could still feel the sting of his handprint on her arm, but she was so used to the pain that she hardly paid attention to it. All she could think about was getting away.

This time, Kayleigh told herself, like she did every time her stepfather got angry, *he might actually kill me.*

Kayleigh's mother died of pneumonia- or at least, that's what he told her. A merciless barrage of health problems plagued her shortly after moving into the house, so Kayleigh had no evidence that her stepfather was behind her mother's death.

"Come back here, you tramp!" her stepfather's drunken slur jerked her away from her thoughts. "Always running away, aren't you? You're just like your mother- too afraid to face anything head-on! And you'll die exactly the same way!"

For a moment, his words stopped Kayleigh dead in her tracks. If only she had her tape recorder! However, the distraction had cost her a few precious seconds, and she found herself standing in the attic with nowhere to go as her stepfather came blundering up the stairs. Kayleigh frantically began throwing aside boxes of old knick-knacks, searching for a place to hide. As one stack of boxes toppled to the floor, a framed photograph sailed out and landed with a crash, the glass shattering like a broken icicle. Kayleigh stopped to stare at it for a moment before hurling herself through a rack of cobwebbed clothes. It was a picture of her parents, smiling serenely.

"Where are you, you waste of life?" roared her stepfather as he tripped over the scattered boxes. Kayleigh held her breath, hidden for the time being by the rack of clothes. He would find her eventually. She crawled slowly backward on her hands and feet, not making a sound. All of a sudden, her back touched the hard wood of the wall. Kayleigh closed her eyes. *This is it*, she thought, *I'm done for.*

Trying to keep from shaking, despite the fact that she had been through this time and time again, Kayleigh drew her knees up against her chest and waited. Then her elbow brushed something smooth. Glancing to her left, she saw something that made her heart leap: a doorknob. The door wasn't much larger than that of a cupboard, and Kayleigh had never known it existed; hopefully, neither had her stepfather. She could hear him shuffling closer, so she quietly turned the knob and tumbled through the doorway in one swift motion.

Kayleigh quickly shut the door behind her, hearing a small click as though it had locked automatically. Only then did she notice that the air in this room was different from the musty air in the rest of the house, which seemed to carry the pungent odor of death. The air here was crisper, fresher.

Suddenly, something moved behind her. Kayleigh rose slowly and turned around, terrified. The sight that met her eyes sent chills down her spine. She had hallucinated before

when her stepfather was hurting her, but she had never experienced this kind of ridiculous delusion.

Kayleigh found herself standing in the middle of a forest filled with towering trees. The air was saturated with distant animal sounds. Standing directly in front of her was a full-grown wolf, its black fur streaked with white and silver, and its sapphire eyes almost level with her own.

The wolf rose to its hind legs, its features contorting as it did until a tall man stood impressively in its place. He had mahogany skin and long hair the color of the wolf's pelt. The man was wearing what appeared to be a Native American headdress and a painted mask that covered his entire face, save for a pair of piercing blue eyes.

"Welcome," said the masked man in a low, gentle voice. Kayleigh looked all around her but found that the door through which she'd come had vanished.

As though reading her thoughts, the man continued, "You're safe now. Come with me."

Since she had no idea where she was and felt certain that she would wake up any minute now, Kayleigh started off after the mysterious stranger.

The two of them trekked over fallen trees and through tunnels formed by massive boulders. As they crossed a creek on a path of smooth stones, Kayleigh glanced downward and stopped, awestruck. The water rushing beneath her was the clearest water she had ever seen, and caught in its current were dozens of iridescent fish, their array of colors glistening in the sunlight. Kayleigh was beginning to wish that this wasn't a hallucination. She had never been exposed to so much beauty, but more importantly, she had never felt such peace. It was the kind of peace that was on the faces of her parents in that old photograph, the kind that had died in the house long before Kayleigh's mother did.

The masked man spun around to face Kayleigh. "This," he said, gesturing in a sweeping motion, "is Haven. At least, that's the translation in your language."

By now, Kayleigh was disconcerted by the vividness of this delusion. Again, the man seemed to hear her thoughts and respond to them in his soothing rumble.

"You are not imagining this. Not many are fortunate enough to find Haven, but you have."

"But... how?" asked Kayleigh, her head spinning. How could this place possibly exist? How could everything she was seeing be real?

"It's simple," the man answered calmly. "You needed a way out, you found it, and you decided to take it. All it took was your choice."

"Where did my house go?" Kayleigh inquired numbly.

"Nowhere. It will still be right where you left it when you are ready to return. Haven is a safe place for anyone who needs it and is willing to risk entering the unknown to enjoy it. However, it is not a one-way journey."

She was starting to understand things more clearly, but Kayleigh was still bursting with curiosity. "So... what do I *do* here?"

She saw the edges of the dark man's eyes crinkle with a smile. "Whatever you want," he answered. "The animals in these woods are perfectly tame. You can be completely alone if you so desire, completely free. If you ever need someone to talk to, though, I will always be here."

Kayleigh nodded slowly, allowing the message to sink in. *Free. Safe.* For the first time she could remember, Kayleigh was both. Sensing her growing excitement, the masked man smiled again and vanished into the forest.

By the time this new reality hit her, Kayleigh was exuberant. She ran unhindered through the trees, laughing for the first time in years. She lied in the grass and looked up at the cerulean sky, until she had the sudden thought that she wished it would rain. Almost immediately, raindrops began to fall, slowly at first, then in an endless downpour that bathed Kayleigh in a cool, cleansed feeling from head to toe.

Finally, after the rain stopped, Kayleigh curled up in a grassy patch beneath a propped-up log and fell into a blissful slumber. For the first time in her memory, she slept without dreaming.

Maybe hours, maybe minutes later, Kayleigh awoke to find, outlined in a tree trunk right in front of her, a door the same size as the one through which she'd entered Haven. She understood that it was time to go back. Kayleigh put one ear against the door but heard nothing, so she slowly cracked it open. Peering through the crack, Kayleigh saw the same rack of clothes she had been hiding behind, still undisturbed. She cautiously crawled through the doorway and tiptoed through the silent house, where she was thrilled to find her stepfather fast asleep on the couch.

From that day on, Kayleigh fled to the attic whenever her stepfather was on the verge of attacking her, which was practically every day. To her shock and delight, she found that the door was always unlocked. Each time Kayleigh returned to Haven, she tried to explore a different area. The place seemed to stretch indefinitely in all directions, and there was no limit to its wonders. Whenever a single thought of returning to the house crossed Kayleigh's mind, though, the door would reappear, and Kayleigh would begrudgingly climb through it.

On a few occasions, when Kayleigh was feeling lonely, the masked man appeared and walked along beside her. For a reason Kayleigh could not explain, an overwhelming feeling of security seemed to surround him. Sometimes the two of them would walk silently, simply enjoying human companionship, but as time went on, Kayleigh told him more and more of her story. He usually listened silently, but a few times, when Kayleigh was describing her previous attempts to escape her stepfather's rage, the man's eyes seemed to freeze over like ice.

Once the masked man practically knew as much about Kayleigh as she knew herself, she began to ask him questions about Haven.

"Are there other people like me here?" she asked once.

"Of course," was his reply.

"Then, where are they?"

"Wherever they want to be," the masked man answered cryptically, refusing to give any further explanation.

Even though his answers were generally short and vague, the man answered every question Kayleigh threw at him. Yet, when she began to wonder about the origin of the man himself, he would look at her with his bright blue eyes and say, "I am here, and that is all that matters. I have no past as far as you are concerned." It was this way of looking through her and reading her mind that both terrified Kayleigh and drew her to the dark man, a man whose name she did not even know but who, for some intangible reason, she trusted more than anyone else in the world.

One day, a few months after she first discovered Haven, Kayleigh finally worked up the courage to ask the man something that had been gnawing at her since her first excursion.

"Why do I have to go back? Why can't I just stay here?" she blurted out.

The man answered evenly, "Haven is only a temporary escape. Your home will always be in a different world, and sooner or later, you will have to go back and face it." His words

reminded Kayleigh so much of her stepfather's that she shuddered, but she still had one more question.

"How long can I keep coming here?"

His eyes smiling, the masked man answered, "As long as you want. Haven will always be a refuge for the innocent. As I said, there will come a day when you have to face reality. Only when you have faced your fears but remain innocent will Haven be open to you permanently, if you so choose to return."

Kayleigh nodded, though still a bit confused. Suddenly, the door appeared in the tree in front of her.

"It looks like this is where I leave you," said the man, sounding weary all of a sudden. "Remember what I told you."

"Thank you," Kayleigh breathed, unexpectedly overcome with gratitude, before leaving her safe haven behind.

As she was leaving the attic, Kayleigh noticed the photo of her parents still lying on the floor. She carefully lifted it from the shards of broken glass, pulling them away and taking it out of the frame. As she did so, a folded sheet of paper fell to the floor. When she unfolded it, Kayleigh found herself staring at a note written in her mother's handwriting. It read:

My darling Kayleigh,

If you are reading this, then I have already passed on. You need to know that there is nothing you could have done to help. There is something wrong with this house. You need to get out of here while you still can. Also, John is not well- I wish I had known that before we moved in with him. He cannot control his temper, and I'm afraid that he is going to hurt you like he hurt me. I'm too weak to leave now, and I know I won't survive his abuse much longer, but please, leave while you can. Your father had some friends on the Indian reservation- just mention his name and they'll know. Be safe, and know that I love you more than anything in the world.

Mom

The sobs wracked Kayleigh's body like an imprisoned monster trying to escape. After she calmed down, though, she realized that she had finally found what she needed: proof.

Kayleigh tore down the stairs, the note clenched in her fist. He hadn't let her leave the house in over three months, but she was finally making a break for it. She was in the hallway that led to the front door- she was going to make it! Just then, a hulking figure moved into her path.

Kayleigh stopped just in front of him, glaring at her stepfather with her head held high. "You killed her," she said softly.

John's eyes flashed in anger. "That's right, I did. But you won't live to let anyone in on that secret." That's when Kayleigh noticed the long knife in his hand.

He lunged at her, bloodlust in his eyes, knocking her to the ground. Kayleigh desperately tried to push away the arm holding the knife; the blade was coming closer and closer to her face, and she could feel John's hot, ragged breath. *No more running away*, she thought.

Using every ounce of strength she never knew she had, Kayleigh kicked both legs into John's stomach, twisting the knife toward him at the same time and sending him tumbling backward, falling on top of him as she did. His eyes were wide with shock and terror. Looking down, Kayleigh saw the handle of the knife protruding from his chest. In an instant, the light left his eyes.

Horrified, Kayleigh ran to the attic, threw aside the rack of clothes, and grabbed the knob of the little door. It was locked.

Throwing herself against it repeatedly, the words of the masked man finally came back to her: *only when you have faced your fears but remain innocent. Innocent.*

Kayleigh dissolved onto the floor, crying uncontrollably. She was trapped again, but this time, it was her own doing. Utterly, completely trapped.

Trapped... or free at last?