

Jack jammed his walking stick under the boulder and heaved. The rock broke loose and crashed into the river with the others.

Jack flinched at the splash. He would never get used to that sound.

Six boulders lay in the river, and still no mine.

The entrance should have been here. Weather, roots, and falling rock had chewed the entrance shut. Somewhere under all that mess sat his family's mine.

Jack's legs shook under him after hours of limping up and down the rocky hill. Torn grass showed every place he'd wasted time.

He reached into his tincture satchel and pulled out a vial of dark amber liquid. He shook it twice and watched the bubbles rise.

"This'll wake the body some," he muttered.

He took one careful sip, pushed the cork back in tight, and dropped the vial back into his satchel.

His last vial. He hadn't been able to pull a roseroot in a long time. Roseroot didn't grow where an old man could easily reach it.

Jack reached into his pack and unfolded a letter. The words hadn't changed since the last time he'd read them.

PAST DUE.

The bank would seize his property unless he paid the debt. Less than a month left.

He rubbed his thumb over the words like he could erase them.

The words stayed put.

He stuffed the letter back in his pack and sank onto a log, rubbing life back into his knees.

He staggered down the hill, never taking his eyes off the river's edge. His hands trembled as the sound of rushing water grew. He closed his eyes, and cold water filled his mouth again. His feet shuffled a few more steps and stopped.

This was close enough.

He took a few steps back. And then a few more. His heel caught on something sticking out of the ground.

Jack knelt, clawing at the high grass wrapped around the metal frame. He gripped it with both hands, braced his foot against a rock, and yanked.

The metal tore free.

His old sled. What was left of it. A rusted strip of metal and a torn rope.

Jack gripped the rusted frame, and suddenly he was a boy again, sliding too fast toward the icy river.

Walter had made that sled from scrap pieces. One for each of them.

He looked at the top of the hill and traced the slope with his fingers down to the river. He couldn't count how many times they'd gone sledding on that hill. Back

then, if Jack got in trouble, Walter was usually close enough to get dragged in after him.

But that was decades ago.

Back then, the snow had come early. Too early. The river only had a skin of ice. Jack's sled shot past the bank and onto it. Then—crack.

The instant rush of ice water stole his breath.

No sound.

His hands slapped at ice that kept breaking around him. Then Walter grabbed him by the coat and dragged him onto the bank. Shivering. Nearly dead.

Jack had not come this close to the river since.

The rusted sled slipped from his fingers. Years since they'd spoken. Foolish argument. He rubbed the bare place where his wedding band used to sit.

He paced up and down the hills several more times. He looked over at the pathway to Walter's homestead.

He would stop by. Ask if he remembered where the mine entrance was. Be on his way if he didn't remember. No small talk. That's all, he told himself.

Maybe he had something of Walter's. Something to return. An excuse.

It wasn't sentimental, it was just a trade.

Jack reached into his satchel, fingers searching for a purple-colored vial. He pulled it out and held it up to the sun. It was unlabeled, but it was valerian, something to help his nerves. He shook it a few times and uncorked it. He was visiting an old friend. Why did he need this?

Jack capped it with the cork and put the tincture away. He ran his fingers along the tops of the bushes as his legs pushed him toward the path to Walter's homestead.

As Jack approached Walter's cabin, he slowed his steps.

Bad idea. Always had been.

He wanted to turn around, but his legs wouldn't stop moving. It all looked familiar, but at the same time, it was new. Sheds and buildings that looked newer in his memories, were falling apart.

Jack stepped closer to the front porch. Broken rowboats were tucked behind the cabin. Unfinished canoes sprawled on the ground. And other half-finished projects were scattered everywhere.

Walter must have finished that large sailboat that he was working on.

Jack rounded the corner toward the fire pit.

He froze.

Next to the pots, Walter lay still on the ground. Someone with long dark hair wearing animal-hide clothes hunched over him. His back was turned, but he was wearing a thick wooden necklace, and an animal-hide pack. Jack knew that boy.

The boy rolled up his jacket and tucked it under Walter's head. He had one hand on Walter's chest and the other holding Walter's hand.

"What's this now?" Jack yelled.

Walter didn't budge. The boy stared back. No response.

The boy pointed at one of his many small wooden carvings he wore around his neck. He just kept pointing at them.

What was he pointing at?

Wood carvings? It looked like some people he carved, but his fingers were moving too fast for Jack to focus on.

"Say a word, Walter."

But the boy kept jabbing at his carvings.

Jack turned toward Walter.

"What's going on, Walter?" Jack said.

"Jack," Walter whispered. His body was shivering and his fists clenched. Jack got closer and knelt down. Walter's clothes were damp and smelled like river water.

"Links," mumbled Walter. "Links helped me."

Jack looked back at the boy and repeated, "Links."

He turned back around and braced his hand under Walter's head. Walter reached up with his hand and touched Jack's arm, squeezing tightly.

"Jack." Walter's fingers tightened. "Find. Rose... Rose."

Jack shuffled closer. His knee bumped into Walter's bush knife. He remembered that knife. The one with the pale handle that Walter used to polish until it shined almost white. Jack picked the knife up and placed it behind him.

Walter started speaking again. "Hidden. Garden."

"Find Rose? Hidden Garden?" Jack leaned in. "Walter? Walter?"

There was no answer.

Jack lightly shook him once. Then again, harder than before. Walter's head rolled away from Jack's face.

"Get help!" Jack yelled as he kept shaking Walter.

Jack looked up to find Links, but he was already gone.

And so was the bush knife that had been lying beside Walter.

He stood, looking at all the path exits on Walter's homestead. No trace of Links.

Did Links hear that last part? Rose. Hidden Garden.

Jack stared toward the trees. That was a name he hadn't heard in decades. It was the river cave they stumbled on by accident, hidden behind a wall of vines and roots. Jack hadn't made that climb in years.

He went back over to Walter and knelt. He placed a hand over Walter's chest and stared at his lifeless body. Then he straightened Walter's shirt and jacket, making them look neat, and crossed Walter's arms over his chest, folding his hands tight.

It was silent for a moment until Jack spoke. "Mary left. Can't say I blame her."

A bird chirped.

"Bank's coming for my place too."

Jack chuckled and stared off into the trees.

Minutes seemed to pass, but the sun was already low.

He adjusted Walter's crossed arms, his limbs feeling limp. Something slipped free and tumbled into the dirt. He looked around before picking it up. He held it up to the firelight. A bit of dull yellow gleamed through a fused rock.

A pea-sized gold nugget.

Why did Walter have this? Was this the treasure he was talking about?

Jack held it up again to the fire, squinting as he turned it over. It looked like the kind of nugget they panned for when they were kids. It was small, jagged, and dull with other minerals still attached to it.

For one second, he thought of putting it back into Walter's hand. Then he thought of the letter in his pack.

The words were too loud. PAST DUE.

His heart felt like it was going to explode out of his chest. He lowered his hand inside his satchel.

Paused.

He looked around, scanning the trees. Jack removed his hand from his satchel. He smacked his gums once. Then he tucked the nugget into his pocket.

His gaze drifted back to Walter's body.

Then to his pockets.

He swallowed hard. He couldn't do it, and he looked away as if he'd been caught.

Jack turned toward the fire pit and dropped in logs, sending dry ash into the air. He struck a match, and the dry wood flared up quickly. He coughed as the smoke thickened.

He pulled down a tarp that was covering a pile of logs and dusted it off. He gently laid it over Walter and made sure Walter was completely covered, weighing it down on both sides with logs.

Jack took a final look at Walter's body covered in a tarp as wispy smoke curled over him.

"Do you remember where the gold mine entrance was?"

He waited as if Walter might answer.

"Yeah, me neither. Goodbye, my old friend."

He reached inside his satchel, feeling for the gold nugget.