

THE RIVER

A person with long blonde hair, seen from behind, wearing a black coat, stands on the left side of the frame. They are looking towards a large waterfall cascading down a rocky ledge. The waterfall is surrounded by lush green vegetation and colorful flowers. The sky above is a vibrant mix of yellow, orange, and red, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic.

by Keith Burns



Have you ever felt like you just didn't belong and there was more out there for you? As Seth's aunt lay dying, she reveals that the life he knew was not really his life at all. With just a name of a man he needs to find, he will go on a journey of self-discovery, hurt, and pain, but in the end, realize his destiny was far greater than he could have ever imagined.

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CHAPTER 1
THE RUNAWAYS

Dell and Shannon were packing up their bags in the back room of her mother's house. It was two o'clock in the morning and Shannon had loaded Seth up into her pack, which she wore over her shoulders, while Dell quickly threw their clothes into a bag to take with them. After what Shannon's mother had told them the night before, they knew it was time to leave. There was no way Shannon was going to let Seth have that miserable, lonely existence that her mother had foretold after seeing the mark on Seth.

Shannon never understood her mother's visions so she didn't really believe that Seth was destined for that life. There was no way Shannon was going to let that happen to her beautiful baby boy.

While Shannon was looking around the room making sure they had everything they needed, Dell came into the room and whispered to her, "It's time, do you have everything we need?"

"Yes, now be quiet. You don't want to wake up Judy or Mama."

She took Seth out of the pack and swaddled him up as warm as she could in the darkness of the room Dell and Shannon shared in the back of the cramped little hut where she grew up. It was raining very hard outside and the wind was blowing, but she knew if she didn't go now, her mother would tell the elders in the morning about her vision and Seth's mark.

Dell grabbed his wrap and wound it tightly around his head and neck. He didn't want to leave in this weather, but he also knew what would happen to his boy once the elders got a hold of him. He would be taken away from them and educated and "prepared for his destiny". Dell

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and Shannon didn't believe in all of the stories that the elders told about a magical village where they lived.

Dell knew about a village on the other side of the mountains called Casco. He had met a Sheppard from there just a few months ago.

He knew if they could just make it there tonight they could find a place to stay until morning. The village would send people out to search for them, especially after Sarah told them about her vision so they needed to leave right away.

They quietly snuck out of the hut, thankful that the howling wind was hiding any noise they made. Dell continued to lead Shannon and Seth to the edge of the village; the one that was opposite the waterfall and mysterious mountain that Sarah had foretold. The wind was driving the rain which stung their faces as they walked out of the village and up the trail to save their son from a life of solitude and loneliness.

Suddenly, Sarah jolted awake in her bed remembering the horrible vision that her angel had shown her. She jumped up and ran into Judy's room to wake her up.

"Judy, Judy wake up! Shannon and Dell have run away with Seth. You must go and stop them. They are in danger! There is going to be a terrible accident and it is up to you to save them."

Judy woke up, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes, trying to make sense of what her mother was saying. When she finally made sense of it, she jumped up and frantically threw her clothes on. As she was running towards the door, she grabbed her coat and her mom began yelling to her, "They are on the Northern trail. They are heading to the village of Casco. Hurry Judy! Please hurry, they are in grave danger!"

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Dell and Shannon were putting some good distance between them and the village. The trail that they were on was very slippery. Suddenly, Shannon slipped and fell and Dell reached down to pick her up.

Dell shouted to Shannon over the wind, "we have to keep moving Shannon; It will get better once we are off of the mountain." Shannon slipped again so Dell picked her back up and they made their way around the narrowest and steepest part of the trail. Dell knew that if they could just make it around this part, it would get easier for Shannon and Seth. He pushed them on around the bend and just as they stepped onto the wider part of the path, Dell looked up the mountain side. As the lightning lit up the night sky, Dell saw what looked like a river coming down the mountain.

Trees and rocks were rolling down the side of the mountain faster than Dell could move out of the way. He turned around and shoved Shannon back onto the trail just as the mudslide swept him off the side of the mountain and down into the darkness. Shannon screamed as she watched Dell fall off into the blackness. She clutched Seth tightly to her chest as the ground gave way underneath her feet. She felt herself sliding down until her feet found solid footing on a tiny ledge just a few feet below the trail. She looked all around seeing if she could see Dell anywhere.

Shannon started calling for help, screaming into the wind and the rain. She began praying to God to help her, to save her and Seth. She began to cry as she grabbed onto the side of the slippery mountain trying to get a hold of something to help her get back to the trail. She thought about Dell and how he gave up his life to save her and

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Seth, the pain in her heart was worse than anything she had ever felt before.

She yelled out again for help, screaming in vain against the howling wind. Somebody, anybody, please God, help her get out of this mess. She reached up the mountain side in vain one more time for something or anyone to help her, when suddenly a hand grabbed onto hers. She looked up into the rain and wind, and she couldn't believe her eyes. It's Judy, she was soaked to the bone laying onto the trail and reaching down to Shannon.

"Give me your hand. Give me your hand Shannon."

"You're not strong enough, take Seth up first."

"No Shannon, give me your hand, I will pull you both up."

The ledge that Shannon was standing on started to crumble under her feet as the rain washed away what was left of her footing.

"Give me Seth Shannon, and then I will pull you up."

"Not until you promise me something Judy. Don't take him back to the village. Don't let them have him. You have to promise me Judy. Promise me you won't do that to him."

The ledge that Shannon was standing on gave way and she slipped and then caught herself on a tiny ledge with her free hand.

"Take Seth, Judy. Please take him away from all of this. I can't hold on much longer. Promise me Judy you won't take Seth back there. Promise me you will take him away from this place. Take him to America. Take him somewhere where he can have a normal life."

Her hand slipped a little on the ledge as Judy strained to reach her sister.

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"I promise Shannon but I'm not giving up on you yet. Now give me Seth and I will get you up here next."

"Promise me Judy, Say it!" She screamed at Judy.

"I promise Shannon, now give me Seth so I can save you."

Shannon gave Seth a long kiss and held him close to her and whispered into his ear, "I love you more than anything Seth, be happy. Your Mamma loves you baby boy."

Seth was crying because he was cold and his mother was squeezing him so hard. Shannon slid the pack off of her shoulder and up to Judy, with Seth swaddled tightly inside.

Judy grabbed the pack with Seth and put it up onto the trail behind her. As she turned back to reach for her sister she saw the ledge that Shannon was holding onto start to crumble under her sisters hands. Judy quickly reached down and grabbed onto her older sister's wrists. Shannon knew that she was too big for her little sister to pull her up and she could see that Judy was starting to slide down the mountain. Shannon knew Judy couldn't pull her up and the ledge that she was standing on wasn't going to hold out much longer.

"Judy, let go. I'm too much for you to pull up."

"No, Shannon, don't let go. I can do it."

Suddenly, both Judy and Shannon realized they could no longer hear the wind or feel the rain. Judy saw a light suddenly start to build up behind Shannon's head and a peace came over her face.

"You have to let me go Judy; you need to take care of Seth. Promise me you will take care of him. Don't tell him about the village. I don't want him to go back there."

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Promise me Judy and let me go. I love you Judy, take care of Seth.”

Judy could feel her sister letting go, and she screamed out, “No Shannon, don’t let go. I can pull you up.”

Judy started to slide some more down the mountain. As she tried to crawl back up to the trail, the ledge that Shannon was standing on washed away. Judy could feel Shannon slipping out of her hands.

”No Shannon! Don’t let go!”

”Judy take care of Seth, I love you. Take care of him”

As she said that Judy could feel her let go of her wrists and slip out of her grasp and slide down the mountain into the darkness below.

”No, Shannon!” Judy screamed into the storm.

The wind and rain were all around her as Judy watched her only sister slide down the mountain side and into the blackness. She started crying so hard as she reached for Seth next to her on the trail. He was crying and wailing in the rain, soaked to the bone and shivering. Judy scooped him up and started to find her way down the trail. She picked her way around the mudslide that killed Dell and Shannon and found good footing to lead her down the trail toward Casco. It was so dark she couldn’t see where she was supposed to step. She hugged Seth and the pack he was in close to her as she walked along the trail. Judy walked a few more steps and stopped under a ledge out of the rain. She began crying and shaking uncontrollably with the wind and the cold and started to pray for help. Her mother always raised her with the belief that angels were around us and would help us if we asked. Guardian angels sent here to help us and protect us from harm. But the one thing that Judy’s mother always told her was that angels couldn’t help us unless

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we asked for their help, so Judy started to pray and ask her angel to help her find her way to Casco.

"Please help me angel, I don't know where I'm going. Help me please."

And just as she said this, a light appeared down the trail. It got brighter and brighter until Judy could see a shape appearing in the light. What she saw was the most beautiful man she had ever seen in her life. He was standing there on the trail smiling at her and motioning for her to follow him. She took a few steps out onto the trail towards him and he turned and started down the trail. The white light surrounding him lit up the trail around them like the sun at noon and as Judy walked behind him, the rain and wind seemed to stop. She had this incredible feeling of love and peace as she followed him down the trail toward Casco. She couldn't explain it, but somehow this was what she was meant to do.

After walking for a while, Judy realized that she was dry and that Seth was dry and warm and sleeping in her arms. She looked up and spoke to the man in front of her.

"Who are you? Are you my guardian angel?"

The man that she was following turned and smiled the warmest and most beautiful smile that she had ever seen, but said nothing. As he turned back around, Judy saw a glimpse of snow white wings underneath the duster that he wore, and she knew everything would be okay and that she and Seth were safe.

They walked on through the night and Judy kept thinking about what Shannon had told her, what she had promised her. Nothing was going to stop her from keeping her promise to her sister. Seth was going to get out of this country and they were going to go to America, just as Shannon wanted. There was nothing that was going to get

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in her way. She didn't know how or why, but walking with this angel she felt that she was doing the right thing.

As the sun rose in the East, Judy could see the village of Casco in the distance. She had been concentrating on taking safe steps to protect Seth for so long she didn't even notice how long they had been walking. She looked up into the sun rising over the mountains and couldn't help but feel that everything was going to be alright.

Judy continued to follow the angel down from the mountain trail to a grassy field where a flock of sheep and goats were grazing. On the other side of the field she could see a small farmhouse and barn. At the edge of the field, the angel stopped and turned around. He reached inside his duster and pulled out an ancient looking scroll wrapped with a ribbon. As he gave it to Judy, he pointed to the farmhouse.

"Take Seth to the farmhouse. Inside there is a man who will give you food and shelter."

He reached up and gently stroked Judy's cheek and smiled that same beautiful smile that he greeted her with last night. He then reached down and placed his hand on Seth's head. Seth stirred and snuggled closer to Judy's chest. The angel looked into Judy's eyes and said, "Take care of this child Judy, there is a Plan for him."

As he said that, a brilliant white light started to build brighter and brighter from behind his head. It got so bright that Judy couldn't see anything. She shielded her eyes from the blinding white light. As it faded she was able to look around, trying to find this angel to ask him all of the questions that were swimming around in her head, but he wasn't there anymore.

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She looked to the farmhouse and a man was coming out to meet her. She walked up the trail to the farmhouse and the man came up and introduced himself to her.

“Hello, Judy. I was told you were coming. And this must be Seth. Simon came to me last night and told me to expect you and that you would need some help. Come in and rest, you both must be very hungry.”

Judy followed the man into his farmhouse without really knowing why. She felt safe and protected by this man, like he was really here to protect them.

CHAPTER 2

BACK TO COLORADO

Seth flew back from California as soon as he had gotten word about Judy. She was very sick and wasn't expected to last very long. Jim, their neighbor, had called him to tell him he needed to come home now because she was asking for him.

He had ended up in California after one of the many trips that he had done over the last few years since graduating high school. He was spending his days surfing in the mornings and bartending all night to make ends meet. As his Aunt liked to say "he was finding himself." Seth didn't think it was supposed to take 8 years to "find yourself."

Most of the friends that he had grown up with had gone on to college, gotten married, and were moving on with their lives. Seth was just moving from one dead end job to another. He always thought there was supposed to be something more out there. Just over the next hill, around the next bend, or on the "other side of the fence". He could have easily taken the job down at the factory in Denver. But he had bigger plans and ideas. He moved out to Wyoming for a few years, working as a ranch hand and various odd jobs. He always thought that he was meant to do bigger things he just didn't know what that was supposed to be. He couldn't see himself chained to a machine in a factory somewhere; he wanted to be outside in nature. It was where he always felt the most comfortable.

As he walked up to the house from his rental car, Seth couldn't shake the feeling that something big was going to happen to him. He opened the door and stepped inside, everything was the same. He hadn't been home in more than 7 years and yet everything was just as he remembered. The old couch in front of the stone fireplace.

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The reclining chair was right next to it, facing the picture window with its view of the trees and hillside below. It even smelled the same to him, like fresh baked bread. His Aunt would always make her own bread, never buying that “store crap” she said. “Besides I have to put my ‘special ingredient’ in...love.’ And she was right about that, her bread always tasted the best to Seth. It was something that he had missed these last few years.

Walking through the living room he could hear his Aunt and the nurse talking quietly in the bedroom. He walked down the hallway past the pictures of him, from 1 year old to 16. His Aunt would make him take a picture every year on the day after his birthday; he always hated it. He turned the corner and stepped into the bedroom. His Aunt was lying on the bed with the nurse sitting next to her holding her hand. She lit up when she saw Seth and the nurse turned and wiped at her eyes.

There was an old box on the floor next to the bed. It looked like it had been in storage for years. The nurse got up and placed the box next to his Aunt on the bed. She motioned for Seth to sit next to her. The nurse got up and walked up to Seth “She has been waiting for you to arrive. She wouldn’t even take her pain medicine, so that she would be awake when you got here.”

Seth walked up to the bedside and looked down at this thin frail woman on the bed. She barely looked like the strong woman that had raised him from the day of the accident that took his parents away. This was the woman who had comforted him when he had the bad dreams, and loved him no matter what he chose to do in his life.

Seth sat down next to her as she smiled up at him. He took her thin hand and kissed it and held it to his chest. The tears came quickly and he was having trouble smiling

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back at her. The years that he had been away, and the regret flooded over him in an instant. Why did he stay away? Why hadn't he visited more? Because he was a self-centered little bastard, that's why.

Aunt Judy whispered up to him, "My boy, I've missed you so much, it's been such a long time."

"Yes it has Aunt Judy, I'm sorry. I should have come sooner...."

"It's ok Seth; you had to find your place in this world. We all do."

Seth was sobbing now, "I can't lose you Aunt Judy, I won't have anyone else. I don't know what I would do without you."

"My time is done Seth. I've done my job raising you the best that I know how. You've grown up into a good man and that's all I ever hoped for you."

"Aunt Judy what do I do now? Where do I go?"

"That is for you to find out, Seth. Follow your heart it will tell you where you belong."

Judy reaches down and opens the box. "Seth, do you remember those dreams that you always had growing up? About the village with the river running through it surrounded by tall mountains?"

"Yeah, they always scared me. They were so clear and real, it was like I had been there before. But like you said it was just a dream. Not real and nothing to worry about."

"You had been there before Seth that is where you were born. You still have family there Seth, your grandmother and grandfather, uncles, aunts, and cousins." "Go to find them Seth, they will be able to help you find your place in this world. They are where you belong; they are your family Seth."

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Judy began to cough violently, unable to catch her breath. This continued for a few moments, but it felt like an eternity to Seth. Finally, she began to calm down.

"Seth, in this box is all of the information that you will need to find this village. It isn't well known to everyone. It isn't even on a map that I have ever found. That's why I have put directions for you to a nearby village. There is a man there who will help you find your birthplace. And there you will finally find peace."

"Aunt Judy, I don't understand. All this time I had other family? Why didn't you tell me? Why did you lie to me about this, about the dreams?"

"It was a promise that I made to your Mother the day of the accident. She made me promise never to tell you about the village, she didn't want you to try to find it. But I know now that you must find it. I know that is what you were searching for all this time. I'm sorry Seth, I'm sorry that I lied to you and I'm sorry that I didn't tell you more."

She took a ragged breath in and her eyes closed in obvious pain. "I don't have much time left with you. The angel told me that my time to go is coming soon. Try not to be sad Seth; I'm going to a place where there won't be any more pain. I love you Seth. I have loved you as my own son. Please promise me that you will go find your family, promise me Seth."

"I...I'll think about it Aunt Judy. I can't promise you...I'm scared I don't know what to do anymore."

"Just listen to your heart it will guide you. And listen to the Angels Seth, they will send you a sign. I love you Seth very much...I'm very tired now, I'm going to take a nap. Please sit with me until I go to sleep."

"I will, I love you very much."

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As Judy closed her eyes, Seth could see her breathing was becoming slower and slower. A look of peace came over her face, and it appeared that all of her pain was finally over. She took one more long deep final breath and died with Seth holding her hand to his chest. He began to cry, harder than he has ever cried. He couldn't stop himself. The pain in his chest was like nothing that he had ever felt before.

He leaned over and kissed Judy on her forehead. "Goodbye Aunt Judy I promise I will find them...I promise." He pulled the blanket up to cover her and walked slowly out to the kitchen. The nurse was there pouring a cup of tea on a tray to bring to Aunt Judy. She looked up at Seth and saw in his face that Judy was already gone. She began to weep quietly while Seth walked past her and out the front door. He walked up the trail that he used to walk when he was a child. Up to his secret place where he would go to think and talk with his parents when he got lonely. He sat up there for a while, crying and remembering all the things that his Aunt had done for him. He thought about what she had said about more family and the village. Was it real? He hadn't just imagined it? Where was this place and why did he always dream about it? The dream was always the same; he was walking down one of the mountains on a well-worn trail. He could see the houses spread out before him in this beautiful valley. The trees and flowers were all over the place and always in bloom. There was a river running down the valley, and as he followed it up the valley and up the opposite cliff, he could see the waterfall. It looked to be coming out of the side of the mountain and it was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen. As he approached the village he could see that there was a festival. People

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were dancing and singing. Children were running around playing games. As he walked through the crowd many of the people smiled and waved at him as if they knew him. He always felt so at home in this dream. It was like he had lived there all of his life. And in the dream right before he woke up there was always that man. He was always in the same place too, just beyond the houses, standing on the other end of town. He had blonde hair and bright blue eyes and there seemed to be a bright white light around him. He was always speaking to Seth, but he could never hear what he was saying. He could hear the children yelling and running around him and the music from the festival. But he could never hear anything coming from this mysterious man. Seth would work his way through the crowd and he would shout to the man, "Who are you? What are you saying," but the man would just smile and wave to him, beckoning him to follow. But Seth could never get to him. He would always wake up at that point. It always bothered Seth that he had seen the man's face before, but couldn't place where. Aunt Judy was always a religious person as far back as Seth could remember. She would read the bible to him when he was young. She would also tell Seth to ask his guardian angel to stay with him when he felt scared at night.

Aunt Judy always believed in angels, she would say that they were always with us watching out and protecting us. Seth wasn't so sure about that, but he did say the Guardian Angel prayer with Judy and that would help him get back to sleep after one of his "dreams". It always seemed to make him feel better - protected and safe.

Seth had been sitting in the woods so long and lost in his own thoughts that he didn't realize the sun had begun to set. He walked back up to the house. The nurse had

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taken care of the funeral arrangements as Judy had instructed her to do and Aunt Judy's body and she were gone by the time he returned.

There was a note on the fridge telling Seth the time for the funeral and where it was to be held. Seth walked to the pantry and looked through the cabinets for something to eat. He wasn't really that hungry but he knew he should try to eat something. He found a bottle of scotch instead and filled a large glass and sat down in the chair by the window.

He sat there and cried and drank more to kill the ache that was in his chest. He realized that he was exhausted by everything that had happened today and put the drink down and walked to his room. It was exactly as he had left it when he left on his search for "that thing" so long ago. He collapsed onto the bed and quickly fell asleep. At once he was in the dream again, yet it was different this time. He could still hear the children screaming and yelling while they played around him, but it looked clearer somehow even more realistic than before. Seth was walking past one of the houses and as he looked into the doorway he saw Aunt Judy standing there smiling at him. He was about to walk over to her when he heard this voice from the edge of the village. He turned and saw the man standing there as he always was and he was calling to him. But this time Seth could hear what he was saying. The man shouted and waved to him.

"Seth, Seth, over here. It's time. It's time Seth."

Seth started walking toward him and called out to him, "who are you? It's time for what? What is your name?"

The man smiled at him and his face seemed to light up from within with that white light, "My name is Simon. I am

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your guardian angel and I'm here to show you the way. We have been waiting for you."

"Waiting for me? Why? Where are we going?" Simon turned and pointed up to the mountain and as he turned, Seth saw a pair of snow white wings folded neatly on Simon's back, partially hidden by the duster he wore.

Seth jolted awake covered in sweat. It took him a minute to remember where he was. He looked out his window at the full moon shining on the lawn and rubbed at his reddened sore eyes. He thought he saw someone walking on the lawn back by the woods. He ran downstairs and out the back door and skidded to a stop on the wet grass. He looked across the lawn to the place where he thought he saw the person. The wind was blowing gently through the trees and Seth could swear he heard a voice whisper quietly,

"Seth it's time to go. It's time."

He heard a movement over near the trees and he thought he saw something large and shining brightly in the moonlight, move quickly into the trees and disappear. As it disappeared, so did the voice, and all that was left was the light breeze blowing through the trees.

Seth went back into the house and sat down in the chair again. The scotch bottle was still there, so he poured himself a drink hoping it would help him settle down. His heart was racing a mile a minute. What he saw outside and the dream he had just before, were swimming around in his head. Seth drifted off to sleep again, and this time his dreams were not of the mysterious village, but of his childhood, playing on the mountains around his Aunt's house with his friends.



Have you ever felt like you just didn't belong and there was more out there for you? As Seth's aunt lay dying, she reveals that the life he knew was not really his life at all. With just a name of a man he needs to find, he will go on a journey of self-discovery, hurt, and pain, but in the end, realize his destiny was far greater than he could have ever imagined.

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