

Talking Trees

His message said it was urgent, that he couldn't explain, but I had to come over right away. And I had to come alone.

Driving down the gravel road to his house, I wonder, "What is it this time?"

His car is out front, and the dog is running loose as usual. But he doesn't answer the doorbell. And, even though the sun is setting, there are no lights on inside.

So I circle 'round the back to see if he's writing on the back porch – lost in his own thoughts. I see the old weather-beaten dining table, along with the two wooden chairs where we've had so many passionate conversations. But the only thing on the table is a compass – like the one I used years ago in Girl Scouts – and a handwritten note that begins with, "March precisely north. Take one step for each month since you were born.

I look around the property behind his house: A dozen chickens peck around in the overgrown grass. Beyond that, a dense forest stretches out for miles to the north.

"What the heck?" I do some quick math in my head. "You want me to take 288 steps off into the woods?"

I call his cell, but it goes straight to voicemail. "Where *are* you? I've had a long day, and I'm not in the mood for this."

Against my better judgment, I stomp off the deck. But just as I reach the treeline, I notice letters painted across tree trunks: "TRUST ME"

"Talking trees?" I mumble as I try to remember how many steps I've taken. "That's not creepy at all."

I pass through the painted phrase – which somehow helps relax me – finish the paces, and look back at the note which says, "Now turn 45 degrees to the northeast and take one step forward for each day since we've met."

I struggle to remember what I learned during the orienteering badge class. Turning to the left, I see a row of trees that say, "BEWARE." So I reset myself to the north, then turn to the right to see trees that say, "THAT'S BETTER."

"Think you know me, huh?" I say, feeling a smirk grow across my face.

I start walking deeper into the forest, thinking about what he said to me that first *moment* we met: "What do you want more than anything else in life?" The question was as intense as the look in his eyes. It was terrifying and exhilarating all at once.

That was the first of many serious conversations, many of them heated, most of them lasting late into the night with nothing to light his face but the moonlight that fell on that rickety back porch.

Turn 90 degrees to the northwest and take one step forward for each time I cooked you dinner.

"I'm a sucker for great barbeque," I say with a rumble in my tummy.

Turn 90 degrees to the southwest and take one step forward for each short story you critiqued for me.

"You have a way with words," I say crushing the autumn leaves under my feet. "It makes me want to jump into your mind."

Turn 90 degrees to the northwest and take one step forward for each fish we caught on our float trip.

"Most of them were too small to keep," I say with a laugh, "but it was still time well spent."

Turn 90 degrees to the southwest and take one step forward for each day since I met your parents.

"You're the first boyfriend they actually liked."

Turn 90 degrees to the southeast and take one step forward for each photo of us together on your profile.

"You sure did your research."

Realizing I've ended up roughly where I began in the woods, I look at the mapping app on my phone to see that we've drawn a heart over the property.

The sun falls below the horizon as I emerge from the woods.

Waiting for me in the backyard, he says, "Thank you for trusting me."

I glance behind him to see the back porch lit up with candles and a large crowd of our family and friends.

"You've trusted me this far ..." He gets down on one knee and opens a tiny box. "Would you join me on another journey?"