

Joe Barbieri

Merkner

Fiction Workshop

11/30/18

One Step at a Time

**Blood at First Sight**

College. Keegan Huxley waited in his usual place, leaning against the emergency phone stand at the Lightrail station. It was rather brisk today, but not too bad. A slight breeze waved the collar of Keegan's jacket, brushing his lips with soft fabric every now and then. The same people showed up at the same times, some talking with friends, most simply nodding to their peers before jamming ear buds in and tuning out. Keegan was no different. Although sometimes he didn't nod back, not because he was rude, more because he was a bit oblivious at times.

Today—like most days—Keegan was leaning against the phone stand, his gray eyes staring off into the distance, scanning the snow topped mountain peaks. They looked like hills from this far out, but he knew that Colorado boasted some of the best mountain ranges in the country. An older Hispanic man nodded towards Keegan, but he completely missed it, entranced in a Pink Floyd song and imagining a story taking place in the mountains. A cabin... He saw a cabin. Maybe a couple? Steamy romance? What if they heard someone crying outside—better yet *something*. A wendigo? Was that too fantastical? Ghosts were overdone.

A sudden burning sensation pulled Keegan from his quickly changing visions of the story he would never get around to writing. The rather painful tingling seemed to be building in intensity, and by the feeling of it, a big sneeze was on the way. Keegan backed up, his arm ready to catch what felt like would be an explosive outburst. A girl walked in front of him, putting in her ear buds and smiling over at him. She always rode this train and was one of the people that stood out most to Keegan. They'd never spoken, but Keegan thought she was really pretty. His friend Scott would probably describe her as "one hot mama".

The big sneeze hit, and it hit hard. Keegan's face flew into the crook of his arm, and he couldn't help but think of himself as a crash test dummy smashing its plastic dome piece into the steering wheel. For a fleeting moment, he wondered if his neck was okay.

"Ah Jesus," Keegan muttered. His dark blue jacket couldn't hide the unmistakable streaks of fresh blood. The cement did an even worse job; soon enough the ground in front of him was dotted with bits of blood. Apparently, Keegan had started the Great Flood with the big sneeze, and it showed no signs of stopping. Blood on his hands, on his *goddamn new* running shoes, and now across the front of his jacket. Holding one arm to his bleeding nose, he threw his backpack down and began digging for anything that would help stop the stream.

He fell to one knee and grabbed the first crumpled paper he could find. The words "Writing Assessment 1 Rubric" were quickly plastered in scarlet as he used some seemingly ancient homework as a makeshift tissue. This wasn't how Keegan had planned his morning, and it didn't bode well for the rest of the day. He already hated college... Now he had to walk around covered in his own drying blood.

A small hand appeared in front of him holding an unopened travel bag of tissues.

“Bless you,” a girl giggled. Keegan tore out one of his ear buds and looked up, still shoving the freshman semester homework against the broken dam that was his nose.

“Thanks,” he replied, although it sounded more like *bank* with his face covered. He felt himself go red with shame. It was her. The pretty girl. One hot mama.

“Are you okay?” she asked, still holding the tissues out for him. With a glare he took the bag and managed to rip it open.

“I’ve been better,” Keegan said, although it came out slurred and muffled under the number of tissues he’d retrieved for his nose.

“Thanks,” he said again (once more coming out as *bank*). He handed her back the bag (now ripped and partially bloody) but she held her hands up.

“No, you keep it. Looks like you might need them more than me. Tell me, is this common?” she asked, still trying to suppress her laughter. She wasn’t doing a very good job, and it was making Keegan more embarrassed by the second.

“Not usually, but I might try it more often. Seems like a good conversation starter,” he said with a glare. The tissues smelled faintly of some sort of lotion, but Keegan didn’t care. They were working a lot better than his sleeve had been.

The girl laughed openly now as Keegan made a futile attempt at wiping the blood out of his jacket. She covered her mouth with one hand and said, “Just say you’re a nursing student or something so no one thinks you’ve gone off and murdered someone.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Keegan said, zipping his backpack up and tossing his old (now blood covered) writing homework in a nearby garbage can.

“You go to school in the city, right? In Denver?” she asked as Keegan stood up.

“Unfortunately,” he replied. Her laughter cut off.

“Why unfortunate?” she asked. Keegan looked away, back to the mountains.

“Hard to pin it down to just one reason. We can sit together if you want, so I can tell you, I-I mean, we don’t have to or anything, you know it would be a little weird, a stranger asking you, look, like we don’t have to, I guess, you know—”

“Sounds like you lost a lot of blood,” she said with a smirk as the train pulled up, beeping loudly to announce its presence.

“Yeah, yeah I guess so,” Keegan replied, trying not to make eye contact with her.

### **The Guru**

“No way dude. I don’t believe it.”

Most days when college ended, Keegan would end up in his cramped basement on the computer talking to his friends. Maybe not the best way to get homework done, but it’d worked for two years, so he showed no signs of stopping the habit. The walls around him were a sad sort of beige color and the old carpet beneath him looked more like a mossy rock than its original dark green hue. Yet, even with the lights above dimming from their old bulbs, life had never seemed brighter for Keegan Huxley.

“You don’t believe that I talked to a girl? That one hurts a little bit Scott,” Keegan said to his mic. He was currently pretending to write a paper for a science class he didn’t enjoy but was mostly having fun amazing his lifelong friend Scott Jager.

“Alright, alright. Listen bro, give me the John Madden breakdown. How did things go? Who is she? Is she a hot mama?” Scott’s voice asked through Keegan’s old headset. Keegan rolled his eyes.

“Yeah you could say that. Her name’s Eva. Hernandez, Eva Hernandez.”

“Shaken not stirred?” Scott asked. That was the thing about Scott. He asked the weirdest questions, almost always dead serious. It was funny, everyone loved it, but it was also scary. Scott could manage to get people’s information with just a series of questions. Keegan always joked that one hour with a stranger, Scott would walk away with their hand in marriage and their SSN to boot.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Keegan asked.

“Come on dude, it’s a James Bond. You know—”

“I know who James Bond is Scott, you dumbass,” Keegan laughed.

“What does she look like?” Scott asked, before saying, “Never mind dude. She’s probs on Facebook.”

“Jesus Scott, now you’re going to look her up online? I shouldn’t have given you a name,” Keegan said.

“Aye man stay cool. I’m just testing you. What does she look like?”

“Testing? Oh boy, okay. Well she has brown hair, light brown hair. Dark brown eyes. Er, light freckles, I guess? I dunno, small-ish lips? Look, I don’t know how to describe people. Family’s from Mexico, uhh, I dunno. What the hell are you talking about tests?”

“Don’t worry about it Keegan. Aren’t you a writer? How do you describe people you write about?”

“Being a writer doesn’t mean I’m good at it,” Keegan replied sadly. Scott snorted.

“Chin up muchacho. You’re in the big leagues now. So, when’s the first date?” Scott asked.

Keegan closed his eyes and slumped in his chair.

“Scott there might not even be a date. She’s just a friend. I mean, I guess I want there to be a date, but like, dude, she just gave me some tissues and we talked about college on the way *to* college. That’s it,” Keegan said.

“Nah. No, no, no. You’re breaking rule number 1 Keegan. You’re friendzoning yourself you idiot.”

“Alright Scott didn’t know that you were the guru of love. Tell me, what should I do next Mr. Love?” Keegan asked. His unfinished paper looked back at him, the cursor blinking sadly on a blank page.

A few seconds of silence followed by boyish laughter from Scott, “Now you’re speaking my language! Okay, here’s how it’s gonna go down muchacho...”

### **Umbrellas**

It had been a few months since Keegan had found himself bleeding profusely from his nose on the train platform. He’d been spending more and more time with Eva since their awkward (adorable if you asked her friends) meeting. Keegan had been loosely following Scott

“The Guru” Jager’s advice, but a lot of it seemed ridiculous. Keegan was no expert when it came to socializing, especially not with women, and extremely not so when they were pretty women. In fact, he would count it as maybe his weakest link. Yet things seemed *natural* with Eva. They clicked. Against all odds, they *clicked*.

Keegan didn’t feel like anything was forced with her. He could ramble about nonsense, stumbling over his words, and she would laugh at his jokes or sometimes criticize his life decisions. She felt comfortable doing her cheesy (amazing if you asked her friends) impersonations and accents to Keegan, and more than once the two had talked in incredibly terrible British accents for entire “dates”.

The dates never felt like dates, although it can be hard to truly coin what a date is between two people. Scott and Keegan often went out for food or games together, doing very similar things that Keegan and Eva would do yet it wasn’t a date.

“Yeah because I have no desire to ever, *ever* kiss your sorry ass,” Scott had said.

That was what Keegan loved though. Eva in all definitions of the word felt like just another friend... Although they both knew that there was something more. Keegan tried to describe it in his own personal writings, but it always came out sounding cliché and dumb.

*A mutual flame shared between us. No, that sounds so stupid.*

*When we’re together, everything feels okay in the world. Wow, good one Keegan. Sounds like a soap opera opening.*

*She and I are like two peas in a pod? No, that one was a joke, I promise.*

“What the fuck Keegan? You’re comparing yourself to a vegetable?” Scott had said.

“No, it was a joke. I was joking,” Keegan had replied hastily.

Whatever the feeling was, it was *pure* and *powerful*. Keegan often found himself up at night texting from his bed, something he would never have done in the past. One night, Eva was stressing about finals week, and the two had stayed up till nearly 4 in the morning texting back and forth. The next day, the two had gotten coffee together to make up for the lack of sleep, a knowing look in each of their gazes.

He would dream about her. Dream that they lived together. Were married? Was that a wedding scene?

The first kiss was something else. Comparable only to Keegan’s bloody nose. It had been awkward and quirky, but amazing, nonetheless. Once again at the train station (not where Keegan had imagined it would take place), the two were standing in the rain. It was a downpour; the skies had seemingly opened the flood gates. Eva was in a raincoat, but it wasn’t doing much against the torrents of rain hitting her. Keegan joined her as they waited for the train, which was now late. He knew he had an umbrella in his bag, but something told him that standing together soaked would create a better bond. Sounded exactly like the shitty advice Scott might give out.

They talked and joked, waiting for the train in what they would later find out to be in vain. The trains were closed for the day, and when the two noticed that no one else was on the platform they decided to leave.

“Okay, so this is going to sound really dumb... Never mind. I literally just remembered that I have this stupid thing in my backpack,” Keegan said when they were inside the parking garage. They’d parked next to one another, unintentionally—probably. He pulled his black umbrella free and sadly popped it open.



“Umbrella time, woo-hoo,” Keegan sighed. Eva smiled, then burst out laughing. She reached into her bag and took out a red umbrella, popping it open quickly. Keegan smiled awkwardly.

“Oh man,” he said, not sure what to say. Eva was laughing, loose droplets of rain shaking off her.

“Looks like I failed my chivalry test,” Keegan chuckled. Eva stepped closer, her umbrella spread out at her side.

“Umbrella time... The things you say sometimes...” she grinned. Keegan wanted nothing more than to step back, afraid of what might come next, but also wanting time to speed up so *it* would happen already.

“Yeah well, I’m a real man of words. Only the best and brightest commentary,” Keegan said with a shrug. Eva looked expectantly at him. Her long black lashes were dotted with drops of rain. Keegan wanted to do something, break the silence, but he’d become a statue. A thoroughly soaked statue.

“Yup,” he said, taking a deep breath, “umbrella time...” but he was cut off as Eva leaned in, planting a kiss on his lips.

“Oh,” he mumbled, but she kissed him again. He stood still for a terrifying, explosive, incredible second before kissing her back awkwardly. There wasn’t a guidebook for this, and if there was, he hadn’t read it. In that moment he forgot where he was, lost track of time. The dirty parking garage disappeared all around them. Eva touched his face. He moved to touch hers but forgot about the umbrella he was squeezing tightly in his hand.

The frill of the opened umbrella bumped onto the top of her head and the garage came rushing back in rapid gray waves. The sound of the pounding rain was back alongside the grumbles of the thunder up above. In the distance a car horn beeped. Keegan's eyes shot open, his face becoming hot and red faster than the Colorado Avalanche could lose a hockey game in overtime.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry. Uhh," Keegan let out a long breath. He looked away from Eva, his body shaking with embarrassment. Had the rain become colder too?

"Hey, it's me... Yup, Eva, you just found my secret skill. Umbrella-fu," Keegan said, waving his hand into a finger gun. He waited for the disappointment in her voice, for the "it's okay" or "I should go" but none of that came. He looked over and saw she was leaning against the back of his car, a smirk spread across her face.

"Umbrella-fu seems like a pretty bad fighting style," she said, trying hard to contain her laughter.

"Yeah, yeah it's mostly used against pretty girls to ward them off or something," Keegan said. She rolled her eyes and threw her umbrella down. Keegan did the same.

They kissed again laughing a bit as they did so.

### **Call me Michael Phelps**

As natural as their relationship felt, Keegan oftentimes found himself scrambling to come up with ideas for things to do with Eva. He had a sinking feeling that their usual haunts were

being overused. Variety is the spice of life after all, right? Except now they were hitting stages of the relationship that Keegan didn't know how to approach. Dates were never formally "planned" out, and they almost didn't really feel like dates. Sometimes they'd hang out with one another's friend groups even, and during those get togethers, Keegan sometimes wouldn't speak to Eva for hours. Keegan was in a constant state of anxiety that he was becoming a lazy boyfriend. Boyfriend... He still didn't like to call himself that, and it seemed foreign calling Eva his girlfriend.

Keegan found himself once more in his dimly lit basement on the mic with Scott Jager. The two had been friends since elementary school so he didn't feel bad about spending many evenings with the guy. The two were spit balling ideas back and forth about possible dates, Keegan's feeling too lame and Scott's seeming dramatic to the point of impossible.

"Look dude, limo service is expensive but it would be pretty sick," Scott said.

"Scotty, I'm not renting a fucking limo! I'm a college student, not Tom Hanks. Look, she probably wouldn't even like it anyway," Keegan replied, scribbling answers on a worksheet he had to finish by midnight.

"Okay, but it would be better than a picnic. Especially in the winter," Scott reminded him.

"I dunno, there's a certain romantic aspect to the snow," Keegan said.

"Yeah, hypothermia is pretty sexy," Scott mocked. Keegan rolled his eyes.

"Look, we already threw out picnics. We're going in circles now."

"Speaking of circles, go-karts are always an option," Scott said thoughtfully.

“They’re closed. It’s winter, remember? Hypothermia and all that,” Keegan sighed.

“Water is just melted ice...” Scott said thoughtfully. Keegan snorted.

“Good one genius. I think you’ll get the Nobel prize for that discovery.”

“Nah, nah... A pool party! There’s that rec center place, you know, near Foster’s place? We could rent it for one night, invite our friends. But say you planned it all, girls love it when you include their friends and shit... Most of the time. Don’t overdo it obviously, then she’ll think you’re hitting on one of them, but I mean—”

“Scott-”

“But I mean, I still think it’s a good idea, like think about this—”

“Scott, I get it man. Let’s do it, it can’t be more than a limo, right?” Keegan interjected. Scott laughed deviously.

“Now we’re cooking with gas!” he said happily.

...

Keegan didn’t quite know how to pitch the idea to Eva. He was currently stuck reading a lab report that he had no interest in, and he’d read the same line a dozen times, forgetting it each time he hit the end of the sentence. He was waiting outside Eva’s criminal justice class. The halls were dead quiet save for the gentle rumbling of the heaters. Corkboards lined the walls in this hall, sporting notices for club meetings, work opportunities, and a number of other things Keegan had absolutely no interest in. He tossed the report on the smooth brown flooring and stared out the window to his left. Snow was steadily falling, piling onto the previous clumps that

had come down last night. He saw people rushing to get inside and away from the flurries. One guy slid in a full 360 before falling to his knees.

“Ouch,” Keegan muttered. To his right the wooden double doors shot open and a sea of people emerged, some putting on hats and tuning out, others talking rapidly about the upcoming test. *Upcoming test. That’s not good.*

“Hey there mister,” Eva yawned, slumping down next to him. She threw her purple backpack aside and tucked her knees to her chest. Keegan noticed the slight bags under her eyes. Her hair was a tad messy as well. Was she not sleeping?

“What’s crunchin’,” Keegan replied.

“Noting, but that’s a good idea. Food sounds good right about now,” Eva sighed, now laying her head on Keegan’s legs. She threw her legs out, almost tripping a nervous looking fellow who was clutching a Bible to his chest like it was his last lifeline. He met Keegan’s gaze for a second but scurried away before anyone could say anything.

“What’s up? You okay? You seem tired,” Keegan noted, moving his legs stiffly in an attempt to make them into a better pillow.

Eva shut her eyes, “Yeah. Pretty tired.”

“Homework?” Keegan asked.

“Yeah and... Other stuff. We can talk about it later,” Eva said cryptically. A nervous energy swelled in Keegan’s chest. Was she okay? Hopefully it was just something like a cold... But why would she keep that info from him?

“Well, I’ve been thinking,” Keegan started.

“That’s a first,” Eva said with a sly smile.

“Rude,” Keegan said.

“I’m only teasing,” she replied, placing a hand on her forehead.

“Anyway—I think it’s time for something new. Hang on, that came out weird,” Keegan took a deep breath, “okay. I’ve been thinking about dates. Fun things, uh, I dunno where I’m going with this—how does a pool party sound?”

A moment of silence.

“In the middle of the winter?”

“Yeah—well I mean—it would be inside. This rec center by my buddy Foster’s house—you’ll love Foster—but they have dryers and all that, we won’t be cold...”

“Call me Michael Phelps,” Eva laughed. Keegan stuttered.

“I-uh, what? Michael... So you wanna go?” Keegan was rather amazed that he’d sold her on the idea, especially after the broken delivery he’d given.

“Only if we race at least once,” she replied. Checking that her eyes were still shut, Keegan did a little fist pump to his side.

“Yeah—totally. Okay, but I swim slower than a dying turtle, so it won’t be much of a challenge...”

### **The Confession**

“Okay muchacho, listen up. Three rules: Rule one—stick with her, but don’t get glued. Rule two—she probably has hot friends, and we’re all gonna be swimming in the same room. Don’t look at them at all. In fact, avoid all contact if possible. Rule 3—stay cool. You feel me?”

Scott’s rules rang around the edges of Keegan’s head as he sat at the edge of the water. The pool party had been going well until a few people (from both friend groups) showed up with alcohol. Keegan had been hesitant about it, but Scott had opened the doors with his usual big toothy grin. With his blonde hair and sparkling blue eyes, Scott really looked like the cool surfer dude tonight. Keegan wished he had half of Scott’s charm or his physical look.

Even if he did though, none of that would matter tonight. After Eva had absolutely destroyed him in a race, the two had hung out with Keegan’s friends for a bit. Foster, Sam, and Scott were all great people. Funny, charming, witty, all things Keegan never felt like he had. Foster was a slightly tall fair skinned guy who almost always sported a long brown beard. He often chose to wear round rimmed thick lensed glasses, and tonight was no different. He was tossing a soggy ball back and forth with Sam, Keegan’s only real friend from college minus Eva and some of her friends. Sam was a skinny black guy with a huge personality and a smile to match. He was a history buff in college, but now was a partially drunk water polo expert.

Scott, as always, was flirting with a few of Eva’s friends. He was “tactically tipsy” as he would call it, inebriated enough to have fun, but still function well. Right now he had a guitar in hand and was singing to three swimsuit-wearing girls, one of them being Eva. Keegan watched her flip her long brown hair back and lean back on her hands. She looked—for lack of a better word—very much like a “hot mama” tonight. Keegan was uncomfortable with her swimwear

being so revealing, especially with several drunk buffoons walking around the spacious pool room.

The interior of the place was unremarkable. Gray and white walls, a large pool in the center, and several flimsy tables surrounding it. There were groups of designated drivers ready to take their friends home. Not enjoying alcohol himself, Keegan had inadvertently placed himself among those people. He watched sadly as Eva threw back another beer. She looked across the pool and met his gaze, winking.

“Bro, your girl... She’s pretty hot. She has a nice ass,” Foster said, scooting closer to Keegan.

“You’re drunk,” Keegan replied bitterly.

“Doesn’t change the fact that she’s a good ass catch bro,” Foster said.

“Okay. Yeah, thanks,” Keegan replied.

“Look man, I’m just saying, I’m so happy for you. Make me the godfather to your kids,” Foster whispered, as if someone was listening in. Keegan patted Foster on the back gently.

“I’ll add you to the list.”

As the night went on, Keegan got more concerned for Eva. She was clearly drunk now. It was getting late, and Keegan was ready to leave. She had gotten hard to talk to now, she was in the stage of laughing at everything and sputtering nonsense. The place started to empty pretty fast, staff coming in and cleaning up. Keegan swam across the pool and pulled himself up next to Eva, a friend of hers named Pearl, and Scott.

“Keeegan, HIGH FIVE me BRO!” Scott said, holding up a hand.



“Eva...” Keegan began.

“You know, your hair is a lot curlier drunk,” Pearl said, looking Keegan up and down. Her multicolored hair looked kind of strange wet; like weird seaweed.

“Thanks, Eva we should get out of here,” Keegan said.

“Keegan... You’re funny, you know that? You’re the funniest person I know,” Eva hiccupped.

“BRO...” Scott complained from Keegan’s side.

“Yeah, I’m a real standup comedian. Now let’s laugh our way home,” Keegan said, gently pulling Eva up. He wrapped her in a nearby towel.

“Yeah, I guess we should go,” Pearl mumbled.

“KEEGAN!” Scott yelled, “give me a HIGH FIVE! Just one, please.”

“...Okay Scott, come on, you too,” Keegan said, slapping his hand before pulling him up from the stone floor.

“You got those two?” a random face called from across the pool. Keegan nodded.

“My car...” Eva said.

“We’ll get it tomorrow. Place is okay with that,” Keegan explained. And so, the three of them began the arduous journey to the bathrooms where they could change and dry off. Keegan was shocked at how hard it was to help both Scott and Eva to dress. They were like stubborn children, especially now that Scott was no longer “tactically tipsy”, he was full on drunk.

Keegan took nearly a full hour to gather all of their belongings and get them into his truck. Scott fell asleep almost immediately after getting belted in. Keegan helped Eva into the passenger's seat, made sure she was alright, and then got behind the wheel. Eva kept insisting she felt fine, and that she was ready for another drink. Keegan calmly told her that she was drunk and didn't know what she was talking about.

"M-my head hurts Keegan," Eva mumbled as he kicked the truck into gear and pulled away from the rec center. Scott would stay in the guest room at Keegan's place. His parents wouldn't care. Eva—she would have to stay with Keegan tonight. There was no other way.

"Yeah, maybe because you're drunk," Keegan sighed. He turned the radio on. The Rolling Stones were playing lightly from the speakers.

He cranked the heat up. Eva looked like she was freezing, shaking from head to toe.

"I know-I know, I shouldn't have drunk so much," she slurred.

"You're telling me," Keegan said.

"Did—did I do something dumb?" Eva asked with a shudder.

"Yeah, you drank too much," Keegan replied, stopping at an empty red light. The temptation to run it was strong; Eva looked like she was going to be sick. She'd gone all pale.

"Oh my god, I can't believe I left Pearl back there. And Karina, Jesus..." Eva trailed off, leaning her head against the window.

"Shh, they'll be fine. Eva—do you need to throw up?" Keegan asked wearily. He hated the sound of people getting sick, it almost always made him sick in turn.

“Maybe—maybe just a little. I dunno, I drank toooooo much,” Eva said. Keegan dug through his center console and found an old Wal-Mart bag. The light was green, but he didn’t care. Eva was more important.

“Well get to it,” Keegan said, handing her the bag.

“Keegan, I’m sorry. I know I’m a mess—”

“Don’t apologize. Don’t. Just, don’t worry about it. I’ll get you home, just get sick and whatever,” Keegan said dismissively. He held her hair back as she retched up the foul-smelling liquids into the old bag. *Please don’t have a hole.*

He gagged, hating the sound, the smell, all of it. But he had to hold it together... For Eva.

“Wow, it tastes like, pretty bad,” Eva whispered, her voice phlegmy sounding.

“Big surprise,” Keegan replied. He started driving—slowly.

“I just wanted to have some fun—I feel like I never, well.... You like fun Keegan. I know you do, you’re a funny guy.”

“Yup. I’m a comic all right.” On the way home, she got sick once more. Scott let out a loud snore from the backseat. The two were quiet for the rest of the trip. Keegan stopped to wipe a line of spit from Eva’s chin. She was shivering harder now. The heat couldn’t get any higher. They were so close. God, Keegan hoped his parents were asleep. He didn’t want them to see Eva like this.

“Come on, one step at a time,” Keegan muttered to himself, pulling into the driveway. It felt slick with ice.

“Don’t get out without me,” Keegan said gently. He parked rather fast and hurried over to her door. Taking the puke bag from her hands, he unbuckled her and picked her up in his arms to the best of his ability. He tossed the bag in the outside trash on the way in.

“What about Scott?” Eva blurted.

“Shh. My parents are sleeping,” Keegan whispered as they walked through the dark entryway. He rushed down a small flight of stairs that led to the living room. Within seconds a light was on, and Eva was holding herself up on his mom’s couch.

“Your place... You didn’t have to take me here—err, bathroom. I-I need a bathroom,” Eva stuttered. Keegan wrapped his arm around her and took off her watch quickly as he led her to the downstairs restroom.

Round 3 of the vomit was just as bad as the first two. Once he made sure she was okay, he rushed back outside and dragged Scott inside.

“Ger’ off me, I’m fine,” Scott grumbled.

“Bullshit,” Keegan said back. Scott fought him all the way upstairs until he found the guest room bed, and he was out like a light once more. Keegan let out a deep sigh. He heard his dad snoring from down the hall. Good. They were still asleep. He headed back downstairs and into the basement. Eva was wobblily standing near the couch again, pale as hell, but looking more alert now.

The next half hour or so consisted of Keegan forcing Eva into some of his warmer clothes, getting a change of clothes himself, and finally trying to distract her with the TV he had in his room. The basement was pretty cold, but under the blankets and with all her new layers, he

hoped it wouldn't be a problem. He could tell Eva was sobering up slowly, but she was still pretty far gone. When she kept losing interest in the TV, Keegan decided to shut it off. His small square room went mostly dark, only lit by a small nightlight by his old queen-sized bed. The sheets were all messy (he hadn't been expecting guests) but Eva didn't care. Honestly, his room was kind of a mess in general right now.

Keegan had propped pillows against his headboard and was leaning on them, Eva below him, her head on his chest. She gripped his shirt with one hand every now and then, as if trying to resist getting sick. With one arm, Keegan stroked her head gently, his other jammed awkwardly in his sweat pants pocket. This was all new territory; he had no idea how he should be acting or what he should be saying, so he decided not to say anything.

"Keegan," Eva whispered hoarsely. He rested his hand on her side now, making small circles on her with his thumb.

"Yeah?"

"You know that creative writing class I'm in?" she asked.

"Yeah?" Keegan said, not knowing where this was going.

"Well, you know that story you wanted to read so much?"

"I still want to see it," Keegan said. Eva sobbed. Keegan's heart dropped to his stomach.

"No, no, I-it," she took a ragged breath, "this guy read it. He said it was *horrible*. Like, he actually said that. My own idea, my own idea... He said it was horrible," Eva cried softly, tears making the face of Keegan's Colorado Avalanche shirt wet.

“Come on now, it was just one paper,” Keegan whispered. She clutched a ball of his shirt in her hand.

“I wish I was more like you, my writing, it’s so bad. And my mom... My mom says I won’t make it through college if I keep f-fucking up,” Eva shuddered.

“I’m pretty garbo myself babe. I know you, I know you work hard. You’ll do fine, everything is going to be okay,” Keegan said, “you know, there’s this Grateful Dead song called ‘Touch of Grey’, in it they sing about a lot... But they say, I will survive, I will get by. You’re going to get by, I know you will.”

Eva cried harder for a minute, “I never wanted you to see me like this Keegan. I-I’m such a failure... Such a fuck up.”

“No, stop saying that, you’re just drunk baby, you’re just drunk,” Keegan said, fighting the urge to cry.

“The other day, when I s-said I’d talk later. Keegan... Keegan my d-dad died. In jail.”

A crippling moment of silence.

“I n-never really knew him, like I t-told you, he was in and out of m-my life. But it still, it still hurts, Keegan. I-I don’t know how to say this, but my grades, my dad, like...”

“You don’t have to say anything Eva,” Keegan breathed.

“No, like, sometimes I just feel so, so *tired*. I just want to go to sleep, I just want to go to sleep and, and not wake up,” Eva said, stopping herself.

“I know Eva, believe me, I know.”

“I’m such a mess, I’m so sorry for being such a burden to you. I’m just a burden to people, you must hate me Keegan,” she said, relaxing a bit on Keegan’s tight chest.

“I could never hate you,” Keegan said, his voice barely audible. Eva didn’t respond, and her breathing slowly evened out. Asleep. She’d finally fallen asleep. Not able to hold back any longer, Keegan blinked tears out of his eyes, but more and more came to replace them. What she’d said... Her dad...

How long had she been like this? How long, and it took this drunken shit for Keegan to finally see it? How long had she been depressed like this? A million questions raced through Keegan’s mind as he struggled to find rest. He felt horrible for her, angry at himself, and scared for the future all at once.

Keegan didn’t sleep that night.

### **3 Years Later...**

#### **Graduation Day**

College. They were all finally finished with it. Today would be the first step into the shiny visions they had for the futures. Today, the reading of their names would be more important than it has been before. Their names were given at birth, they were welcomed into the world by their families, now those names would be shaking hands with the administrators and stepping into the life they’d been building for so long. Each name being read signaled that person’s rebirth, not from mother into the world, but from system into the workforce.

In these moments, the students celebrated with family, looked ahead *together*. This wasn't just an achievement for the student, it was an accomplishment for the whole family. A day for all, not for one.

Alas, Eva Hernandez sat alone.

Keegan stole glances at her when he could. Despite the situation, she seemed happy. Ecstatic even. She cheered loudly for her friends and smiled warmly at those who passed her.

"Poor girl, no family here to support her," Daniel Huxley, Keegan's father, said from his son's left. Keegan tore his gaze away from Eva, embarrassed that his family had seen him staring.

"Yeah," Keegan replied. Eva... Her family was complicated. Her father, an alcoholic and a bit of a drifter, had died in jail three years ago. He'd never been a stable father for Eva or any of her sisters. Her mother was in the hospital today and was unable to attend. Her sisters, well, one was in California and the other wasn't on speaking terms with the family. So today, Eva sat alone.

Three years. Three years Keegan and Eva had been together. Their friends had gone from teasing them about the relationship status to teasing them about marriage. Keegan liked to pretend that marriage would never happen. He knew Eva was who he wanted to be with for the rest of his life, but the thought of getting married scared him to death. He'd landed a spot with an online news publication in the sports column, so he was making money, but diamonds weren't cheap. Would she even want a diamond? Might be too flashy for her. Keegan was afraid to do anything, but also afraid to bring the topic up.



Those worries could be stowed for now though. Today was about getting out of college. That's it.

After years of standing against the emergency phone booth at the train station, years of enduring classes he didn't enjoy, years of trying (and often failing) to make friends, Keegan was *finally* out. He took a moment to think about it all. He could still see that stupid emergency phone booth, still see the garbage can next to it—a piece of bloody homework sticking out the top. There she was—Eva—holding out a travel pack of tissues. His jacket, shoes, shirt, pretty much everything covered in his own blood. The Big Sneeze... It had kickstarted the relationship. Everything, the giggle fits, the late-night movies, the teary-eyed texts, the drunken pool party, the sex, the jokes, the bonds, the *absolute* unity... It had all come from that sneeze. Keegan smiled, barely believing the luck behind it all. If Eva hadn't stopped to help him, she would be blending in with the rest of the crowds today. Just another happy face going someplace in life that Keegan wouldn't care about or see ever again.

"Eva Hernandez!" a black suited man called from the stage. There was a loud cheer, Keegan and his family being the loudest of the bunch. The graduation was being held outside, and Keegan noticed birds flying out of the surrounding trees at the sound of the rambunctious cheering. The sun blazed overhead, illuminating the stage in a welcoming orange glow. Keegan watched as the love of his life climbed the steps; she stopped to shake the hands of multiple people before moving to the podium.

The man who'd read her name, a tall dark-skinned man with graying hair, handed her the small blue book with her diploma. Keegan thrust his fists into the air while his dad whistled. Eva looked right into his eyes, her gaze twinkling in the setting sun. Keegan felt tears trying to push

their way out. Eva gave him a radiant smile and held the diploma above her head like a trophy. She gotten first place. Keegan's parents cheered, shouting her name gleefully.

Eva Hernandez might've been without her family today... But she wasn't alone. Keegan wanted to make sure she never felt alone again.

### **Blood at First Sight... Again**

The apartment wasn't much. Well—it cost *too* much—but living wise, it wasn't much at all. The kitchen was small, but it would make do. There was room for an office in the bedroom though it made him really feel like he was always at work. Lately the place had been getting kind of trashed. Things needed to be cleaned, shower doors needed to be replaced (the landlord said he'd get on it two weeks ago), and there was still a stack of cardboard boxes in the front entrance.

Keegan didn't know where to start. His work was always calling. Hey, write this, hey pal we need you for an interview here, oh Mister Huxley could you fill in for the police chief interview? He worked from home most days and yet *home* didn't look lived in. The mess was only getting worse, *and* he was running out of freezer food. College had been bad, but at least he'd been able to feed himself. Keegan wondered if this is how everyone felt starting out.

From his dark office, Keegan heard a door open. She was back. He checked the clock on his monitor.

*1:04 AM*

“Fucking hell,” Keegan muttered, rubbing his eyes. He grabbed an old plastic Halloween cup from his desk, checked for spiders, and brought it to the kitchen. The very full sink greeted him, the scrubby sitting forgotten inside a pot. Keegan sighed and tossed the cup aside. He sadly began cleaning the mess up, his hands doing their best not to get anything done. He’d been working all day, the news post he worked for, they’d really run him through the hoops today. All he wanted to do... Was go to sleep.

“Hey,” she said from behind him. *Not good. That voice, she’s mad. Stay cool.*

“Hey,” Keegan replied. He didn’t look back. She was like this some nights. Better to keep the chit chat at a minimum.

“You look like hell,” she said from behind him. A twinge of annoyance flared up inside of Keegan, but he took it out on scrubbing the strainer in front of him.

“Been working all day,” Keegan said. Silence.

“Couldn’t even take a shower though?” she asked. Keegan shut the water off rather hard.

“No Eva, I couldn’t. I had to do a lot of shit today, I got two articles returned, my pay was nearly docked for it, I had to make phone calls with self-absorbed assholes for hours, and I argued with that shitty landlord for an hour after lunch. So no... I didn’t have the time,” Keegan said, turning to look at his longtime girlfriend, Eva Hernandez. She was leaning against a wall in the “living room” they’d gotten with the apartment. It was mostly bare as of now with neither person having the time to unpack anything. The apartment’s drab brown walls and boring linoleum floors didn’t do much for its aesthetic. Too bad there was little they could do to improve that.

She looked dead tired, her eyes mirroring how Keegan felt right about now. Her hair was still tied in a tight bun. Her service weapon was on the table, already unloaded. Keegan eyed it wearily.

“Look—I didn’t mean to snap at you like—”

“No, no it’s fine,” Eva said, her words scary calm, “I know being on the phone is *really* quite hard.”

“Oh, fuck off,” Keegan sneered. Eva’s tired gaze lit up. She pushed herself off the wall, walking fast to the table.

“I work far longer than you do Keegan, and all I ask... *All* I ask is that our apartment get cleaned up. Just a little. Is that really too much for you?” she asked, her voice shaking.

“Hmmm, well now that you mention it... YEAH! Yeah it is! With all the other fucking shit I have to do, yeah it is,” Keegan said, his voice growing more venomous with each word. Eva snorted.

“Wow... Just wow.”

“By all means princess, the sink’s right here, the vacuum is in the closet. I still have a project to finish editing, so BY ALL MEANS, help yourself,” Keegan said, waving his arm dramatically to point to the sink.

“Yeah, thanks. Fuck you too,” Eva said, grabbing her gun and walking past him. Keegan wanted to say something else, get the last bite in, but something stopped him. His hand twitched out. He grabbed Eva’s shoulder.

“Eva wait...”

“Don’t! Just, don’t,” she said, flicking back, her hand swatting at his hand.

“Eva, Jesus, okay. Listen for just a minute, please,” Keegan said. She stopped at the door to their room, one hand grabbing the door frame.

“What?” she asked dismissively.

“What are we fucking arguing over?” Keegan asked, trying to keep his voice steady. There was a moment of silence, broken only by the dripping of the faucet.

“Your responsibilities?” Eva said, her voice still indifferent. Keegan rolled his eyes, glad her back was turned.

“No... *Our* responsibilities. We own this place together. A team, remember?” Keegan said, taking a seat at the table, the scrubby still squeezed in his hand.

She sighed, “Right. Our responsibilities.”

“I-I mean look at this, we’ve become one of those shitty couples on reality TV. Shouting and shit over the goddamn dishes,” Keegan said, his voice finally steadying out.

“Yeah, yeah. It isn’t like us,” Eva admitted. She turned to face him. Strands of hair had gotten loosed from her bun. Her body... She looked tired. Worn down. Just like Keegan. They were both in the dumps right now.

“Come on, sit down,” Keegan offered. She slowly paced back to the table, taking the seat across from him. Keegan could see her much better now under the kitchen lights. Her brown eyes looked barren and exhausted. She gave him a distant glance.

“Come on, lets just talk. Just like the good old days,” Keegan said.

“What, college days?” Eva said with a laugh. Not a happy laugh, more like an exasperated disappointed chuckle.

“I don’t know, just, like we used to. We’ve lived together for months, and I feel like I haven’t really talked to you since we got here,” Keegan said. Eva rested her head in her hands. He noticed her police uniform looked fresh. Had she changed before coming here?

“Yeah, you’re right,” she said back.

Before Keegan could say anything, she spoke again, “First murder case today. Working directly with the station’s detectives. Gang hit. Shitty part of town, kind of place I grew up in as a kid. The guy we found, riddled—just full of bullets. Blood, there was blood everywhere. Part of his face was on the fucking wall. I was in that room—in that house for two hours today. Some of the guys on the force, they’re cracking jokes while their hands are covered in this guy’s blood. They’re talking about the football game while they take pictures of the guy’s eyeball sticking to the-the f-fucking wall!”

Keegan stayed silent, the feelings of anger and frustration long gone.

“I asked myself, is this really what you want to do? Be a detective? What if that’s me some day Keegan, joking about the sports game you wrote an article for while I pick a guy’s jaw off the floor for the evidence crew?” Eva whispered. Despite the gruesome aspect, she wasn’t crying.

“Just gotta take things one step at a time, you know?” Keegan said, reaching out for her hands. She took his hands, the scrubby now sitting on the table.

“I know, it’s just... A lot happened today. I shouldn’t have yelled, I’m sorry. Like, yeah. Sorry,” Eva said, giving his hands a light squeeze.

“No. It’s fine. You’re right, I could’ve done more today. I just get so wrapped up in my work... Not that it’s anything like what you did. I just—we just need to pace it. Cliché time, but we’re learning every day, you know?”

“Yeah. I couldn’t do your job, not for a minute,” Eva admitted with a small smile. Keegan felt himself break into a stupid grin. Weird, he hadn’t done that for a long time.

“Don’t worry, the same goes for me. I’d would’ve passed the hell out.”

“Don’t worry, I almost did,” she said back.

“Well, the shower door still doesn’t shut all the way, so careful when you go in. I’ll finish these dishes up. I promise I’ll get the place cleaned up tomorrow. Nice and good,” Keegan said.

“Let me help,” Eva said, “I don’t have to go in until later tomorrow.”

“Cool, you’ll be like the cavalry this place has always needed,” Keegan said with a sigh of relief.

“Remember the Alamo!” Eva said with a smile. The two shared a kiss, a kiss just as meaningful as that first rain soaked one had been in the parking garage all those years ago.

### **Return of the Guru**

“Dude, arguments happen. As long as you made up over it, it’s fine. Put that shit in the rearview mirror, you feel me?”

Spring. It was a pleasant day, warm sun with a gentle breeze. Keegan had taken the morning to help the landlord with the shower door mess and had called his old friend Scott Jager afterwards. The two hadn't spoken for a long time... Too long. Scott was an electrician now working with a union, he was almost always busy. The two would send each other jokes they found online or Snapchats when they could, but that was about it. It seemed like Scott's phone was off most times. Not talking with him close to every day had made a bigger impact on Keegan than he ever considered. Scott was someone he could confide everything in. Every worry, every dumb thought, and everything in between.

A small-ish dog park in Denver acted as their impromptu meeting place. Neither had a dog and both looked out of place. They sat together on a bench removed from most of the action, watching dogs of all shapes and sizes playing in the central part of the lush green park. Keegan had been talking for what felt like hours about the arguments and distance between he and Eva. It worried him; they argued more now than they ever had before.

"It's just like, I don't want things to fall out between us. Without her..."

"Don't think about a 'without her' pal. That's your first mistake. Think of the solution, not the problem," Scott said. Funny what a few years and some change could do to a person. Scott had always looked like an out of place surfer guy in Keegan's circle of people; now he looked very much like the stereotypical soldier on the face of an Army commercial. His once flowy blonde hair was cut short and he sported a professional looking beard. Thin and to the point. His eyes hadn't changed a bit though and looking into them sent Keegan right back to 5<sup>th</sup> grade to a sweltering day on the playground.

"Hey, are you listening?" Scott said, snapping his fingers in front of Keegan's face.



“Yeah, yeah I am,” Keegan replied.

“Look dog, you might need to clean this up,” Scott said, flicking a finger through Keegan’s now long wavy brown hair, “and maybe get a shave. If things aren’t working out, change em’ up. Chicks dig it when you work to impress them.”

“You know, why aren’t you with anyone?” Keegan asked, watching a couple pass a frisbee back and forth. Scott let out a barking laugh.

“Me? Too antsy. I can’t settle down with one girl.”

“Not even for a little?” Keegan asked.

“Hey, we’re talking about you pal, not me. I don’t need couple’s therapy right now,” Scott said bluntly.

“No Scott, I’m being serious. What’s the deal with you? Have you met anyone?”

“I’ve met a lot of people, hard not to,” Scott said sarcastically. Keegan didn’t push the subject. He could tell Scott was getting defensive. Weird how a guy with as much game as Scott didn’t have a girlfriend. In fact, he’d never really had a partner.

“Back to you and Eva... Shit’s not gonna fix itself. You’ve gotta put in the effort. Houses don’t build themselves, same with relationships,” Scott explained. The analogies—he was full of them today.

“So, what’s your plan?” Keegan asked. Scott leaned in close, clamping a hand around Keegan’s shoulder.

“Okay, there are a couple of routes to pick from. Route 1-fast and easy, get her a gift. Anything she likes, get her a good ass version of it. Route 2-the road less traveled, and maybe for

a reason: take her on a date. Not some cheap ass hypothermia picnic shit, I mean a *date*. Route 3-max speed no cops: get her some lingerie.”

Keegan laughed openly at the last recommendation. Eva would laugh at it too. It was one of Scott’s jokes.

“I’m serious bro. Legit, send her signals. When she opens that shit up, things get jalapeno again in the bedroom, you know? Shows her passion, shows her you want to make things right.”

“I’m not sure I follow on that one,” Keegan said nervously. The thought of trying to buy his girlfriend sexy underwear without her around. Even with her around, it sounded awkward as hell and like something Keegan would NOT be good at.

“As long as you get the right size... That’s key. Too large and she’ll think that you see her as fat, too small she’ll think that you think she has small er, measurements,” Scott said.

“Shit sorry, I must’ve forgotten my measuring tape at home,” Keegan said back.

Scott waved his hand dismissively, “Trust me, if you just go and do it, it’s easier than it sounds. You’ll know. Honestly, I would combine all the routes I listed, make a highway of love!”

A highway of love. Keegan sighed. What was he getting himself into?

...

A highway was perhaps just what he needed though. The date would be easy. Scott had directed him to a nearby fireworks show happening later in the week. He had also secured a spot where the Keegan and Eva would be able to watch the show without anyone else around. He

called it the “grassy knoll (except no one gets shot) of love”. Deciding that getting a gift in time might be too hard, Scott had told Keegan that the cleaning of the apartment would have to do. The plan (which now felt like a heist) was to take Eva to the romantic grassy knoll (except no one gets shot) of love and then take her home after the show, drink a little wine, and reveal the lingerie. If she was into it, drink more wine, if not, Keegan was directed to “act natural”.

“What does that mean?” Keegan asked. Scott frowned.

“I dunno man, do your socially awkward shit and act natural. She’ll dig it, I promise.”

Unfortunately, in order for the heist to be pulled off, Keegan needed to bite the bullet and go to the lingerie place. Amidst all the bright lights, flowery perfumes, and dainty (sometimes skimpy) underwear options, Keegan found something that might be okay. He was secretly grateful for the overpowering smell of fruit and flowers; he was sweating more and more with each passing moment. This—THIS had been the SINGLE greatest test of his will and trust in the relationship. More and more Keegan felt like the captain of a sinking ship, but Scott’s endless encouragement kept him going. The staff seemed aware of Keegan’s anxiety and did their best to help him. He stumbled over every few words and tried not to make eye contact. He didn’t want any of the ladies here remembering him, despite the fact that he’d probably never set foot in this store again.

Firework night was approaching far too fast. He brought it up to Eva who (blushing slightly) agreed to go. What she didn’t know was that Keegan had a secret spot for them to watch the show. He hoped that the surprise would sweep her off her feet—and he hoped he was ready to catch her if it did. Acting natural and staying cool in times like this, they weren’t strong points in Keegan’s boyfriend game.

The night zoomed up quicker than Keegan wanted it to and slapped him hard in the face. He stood in the bathroom staring at the rectangular mirror, razor in one hand, shaving gel in the other.

“Come on man, stay cool. It’s just a date, no need to get worked up,” Keegan muttered, shaving away lines of his scraggly facial hair.

“Compliment her, not too much don’t force it, but make sure she notices that you’re noticing,” Keegan ordered himself to do in the mirror. Mirror him shaved back.

“Act suave, sexy, oh god, I hated saying that,” he mumbled.

“Babe who are you talking to?” Eva called. Her voice was uncomfortably close to the closed bathroom door. Keegan swallowed hard, nearly cutting his neck as he did so.

“Uh, no one. Well, me, I guess. Singing to myself, or something,” Keegan called back, his voice growing weaker the longer he spoke. He heard Eva snort.

“Okayyyyy,” she said, “we’ll leave in five, yeah?”

“Pository ghost rider,” Keegan yelled back. Eva laughed. He thought he heard her mumble “pository” before walking away. *Come on man, just act like you’ve done this before... Cause’ you have.*

The heist began well. More than well, pretty good. Keegan almost took a wrong turn, stopping in the parking lot of a Best Buy to get his bearings straight before heading down the correct road. He noticed how well Eva’s pants fit her form when they were getting out of the car and had to stop himself mid-compliment after losing all his confidence.

“Nice...” Keegan said slowly.

“Babe, where are we? This is the wrong park,” Eva said, ignoring her stuttering boyfriend.

“You’re right, but I’ve got a bit of a secret I think you’ll like,” Keegan said. He held his hand out. Eva adjusted the collar on her checkered polo shirt before taking his hand. She looked hesitant but the smirk on her face told Keegan she was into it so far.

“We’ve just gotta take a little walk,” he said. The park was mostly empty, the lights giving off a creepier feel than Keegan wanted. They had to go off the beaten track a bit to find the hill that overlooked the lake. At first glance it looked like the trees blocked off the view, but some shoe leather detective work by Keegan and Scott had proven otherwise. In the distance the first fireworks were set off.

“I should’ve brought my hiking shoes,” Eva joked. Keegan squeezed her hand.

“Trust me,” he said. They pushed past the trees and emerged onto a small clearing, right on the edge of the hill. Across the way they saw the other park, packed with people. Keegan spotted kids running back and forth, and several people dancing. Yeah, this place was a lot better. Much more romantic.

“Alright, color me impressed,” Eva said with a smile. The fireworks lit up her face as the two laid on the slightly dry grass.

“Thought you might like it more here. No kids, nothing like that,” Keegan said, resting his hand around her shoulders. She moved closer to him.

“This—this is great Keegan. I love you,” Eva said. To his side, Keegan did a small fist pump with his free hand.

“I love you more,” Keegan said as a massive green firework exploded overhead. The two laid in silence for a bit, watching the multicolored explosions dot the sky. Some made shapes, others sparkled magnificently, some simply made big *booms* as they went off.

“I wish we could spend more time like this,” Eva sighed. It was true, the workload between them was massive. They hardly ever got to do things like this anymore. Eva was around dead bodies and criminals more than her own boyfriend. She hated it, but it was her calling, her job. She was the hardest working person Keegan had ever known. He hated seeing her stressed, seeing her tired. Some nights he lay awake next to her, the drunken night after the swim party back in college running its dialogue through his head. He’d never spoken to her about it. Any of it. She’d told him about her dad later, not knowing she’d already confided the details with him.

Keegan worried about her endlessly. Police officers and detectives weren’t exactly *liked* in America anymore. Their job was just as needed though, and maybe twice as dangerous now. Without her... Keegan stopped thinking about it. There would be no ‘without her’.

“You know, we could always get married,” Keegan said. His heart did a backflip in his chest, his stomach dropped out of his body, and his throat tightened up as if trying to strangle him from saying anything else. Eva shifted her gaze away from the fireworks.

“Keegan?” she said slowly.

“I-I mean, I didn’t mean like, now. I guess, I was just saying, you know, hypothetically speaking...”

“Is this a proposal?” Eva giggled. That giggle, that same little laugh... A younger Keegan Huxley had heard it years ago, holding a piece of old homework to his bleeding nose. Somehow it told Keegan that everything was alright... It was all going to be okay.

“I mean... Yes?” Keegan said. Eva laughed into his neck.

“No ring?”

“I’m something of an origami artist, got any paper on you?” Keegan said lamely. Eva laughed even harder.

“Oh my god... Keegan, you’ve always had a way with words. I know you don’t think so but, you do,” Eva said tenderly.

“Those schmucks at the newspaper hired me for something I guess,” Keegan replied.

“You really want to spend the rest of your life with me?” Eva asked, getting more serious now. Keegan looked directly into her eyes.

“Yeah, I think so,” he said. She sat up.

“No ring, no house yet, we almost never see each other... The odds are against us,” she said matter-of-factly.

“I’m not just an origami artist you know, I’m a gambling man myself.”

“Oooh, what am I going to say then, mister high roller?” Keegan smiled.

“Well, I’d wager every sensible part of you is wanting to say ‘no’ to a loser like me, but somehow I’d guess you’re gonna say yes?” Keegan said. Eva rolled on top of him, the fireworks completely forgotten in the background.

“Blackjack!” she said before kissing him.

“So that means yes?” Keegan asked in between kissing. She looked up into the sky and let out a long sigh.

“Yes, you dummy, don’t you know the rules to Blackjack?” Eva chuckled.

“Bah, I must’ve dozed off when learning that one,” Keegan replied. The two stood up, kissing and laughing all the way back to the car.

Weeks later when Keegan would talk to Scott again, Scott would be horrified by Keegan’s extreme departure from the plan, but eventually ecstatic about the results of the date. It would go down in his books as “one hell of a story”. Keegan would never forget that starry night. Not for all his years.

## **Life**

Life’s a train ride. Not always a smooth one. Sometimes it’s more of a train derailment, and if you don’t keep up, life has no qualms passing you by. It’s got plenty of passengers to please, and plenty more to let down. There are no stops on this ride. One minute, Keegan was struggling in his relationship with Eva. The next they were dancing together at their wedding party. Just yesterday Keegan was waiting nervously outside Eva’s criminal justice class, wondering if she wanted to hang out more often. It seemed to be only a few hours ago that Keegan found her crying on their bed. She’d lost a close friend in the police force in a gang shooting and blamed herself.

Moments of extreme sadness and pain were almost always countered by moments so joyous Keegan didn’t believe they were actually happening.

“Keegan... Oh my god—I-I’m pregnant!”



Keegan may or may not have passed out. Eva had needed to wake him up, giggling as she did so. She was always the stronger one in the relationship. Keegan was the one who cried during movies, the one who felt guilty after accidentally killing a spider, and now the one who lost consciousness at the news of his wife becoming pregnant.

Life Express chugged along, strong as ever. Keegan got promoted after a story he wrote concerning the death of a well-known doctor in the area, Adrian Abrams. It felt wrong—profiting off someone’s death, but he and Eva needed the money. In his head, Keegan thought of it as a parting gift from the beloved doctor.

Love... Life... These were the things defined not by the big moments, but everything in between. The arguments, the dates, the tears, the joys... Life happened fast, but that didn’t mean it had to be bad. In a world full of anger, distrust, and cruelty, Keegan and Eva Huxley wanted their daughter Sophia to grow up kind, smart, and happy. The world welcomed people with one arm open, the other holding a knife. The trick was getting the world to drop the knife.

It wasn’t easy, but nothing good is easy. Keegan held his wife’s hand and forced himself to stay standing. Childbirth was... Terrible. Loud, frightening, messy, and the shouts... Eva *didn’t sound good*.

“Hey doc, is this-is this okay?” Keegan asked weakly in between the loud laborious breaths of his wife. The doctor, an older woman smiled lazily at him.

“Sure is,” she replied. On the other side of the bed, a nurse was whispering encouragements in Eva’s ear. Keegan stayed silent as his wife gritted her teeth and pushed little Sophia Huxley free. When he saw the writing pink body, he was at first disgusted (were they all this weird looking?) but soon he was crying alongside his wife. Sophia made her first cries,

gasping at the new world around her. From the warm safety of her mother to this cold, blue room. She was washed, wrapped up, and checked while the doctors helped Eva. Keegan was asked to leave, and the nurses had to help him out; his legs had become jelly.

Hours later, they took turns holding their newborn daughter.

“Look, she has your eyes,” Keegan said gently. Eva laughed a bit.

“We can’t really tell too well yet, she still looks really—really baby like,” Eva concluded.

“Imagine when she grows up, she’ll talk about how her mom is a hero, and her dad, I dunno he writes news or something,” Keegan joked. Eva lightly slapped his arm. The two shared a kiss.

“I don’t think I’ll ever forget this night. April 11<sup>th</sup> mark the date,” Keegan said.

“You’re telling me, it hurt like a bitch,” Eva joked back.

Scott Jager, a few of Keegan’s close friends, his parents (along with Eva’s mother), and Eva’s sister Marissa were there the next week. They all made jokes and congratulated the new parents.

“Oh my, she’s heavy, no?” Eva’s mom said, “big and strong, just like her mama.”

“I’d pay to see her in MMA. I mean, not like, right now—you know, like if she’s into it in the future, my old ass, Uncle Scott cheering her on, yeah? Yeah,” Scott said to the awkwardly quiet room.

With a child came a whole new angle to Keegan and Eva’s relationship. Many sleepless nights and stressful days followed Sophia’s birth. She liked crying at the most inconvenient times, and Keegan—who had become something of a stay at home dad—silently wished she

would grow up faster. This baby nonsense—the diapers, the spit up, the crying—it was hard to keep up with.

“No, no, you want them to stay young. You’ll miss these days,” Keegan’s mother told him over the phone. Keegan sighed, not wanting to believe her, but knowing she was right.

Eva cherished every moment she had with her child. Her maternity leave didn’t last long, and she wanted nothing more than to be back home, playing with her daughter. She’d been moved up the ladder in the police department; she was almost always doing murder cases now. It paid more, but it wasn’t easy. It was never easy. Every day she saw the world at its worst, and she feared the day that Sophia would have to face it.

With time came experience, and money. The Huxley’s moved to a small home in a suburban area. No more shitty landlord, no more teenagers playing metal music at 2 AM. For once in his life, Keegan finally felt like he was ahead of the curve. Sophia, who was now learning how to walk and run, loved the new place.

“Come on now honey, one step at a time now,” Eva said, helping her daughter take her first steps.

“I can see it: she’s gonna be a track runner,” Keegan decided, sipping water while he watched Sophia separate from her mother’s grasp. She gripped her shirt with one hand, her eyes scrunched up in concentration. She wobbled for a bit, but Eva didn’t move in to support her. Keegan was worried she might fall, but a few small shuffles later, Sophia walked right over to his open arms.

“Jesus, she-she did it! O-oh man, I think I’m gonna cry again,” Keegan said joyfully.

It took only what felt like minutes for Sophia to take her first steps through the doors of Kindergarten. Keegan cried as he watched the gray metal doors swallow his daughter away. Eva tried her best to comfort him, knowing that he was sensitive to this kind of stuff.

“It had to happen eventually. We couldn’t just keep her locked away you know,” she said with a little poke to his chest.

“Y-yeah I know. I just worry about her, that’s all.”

“I know, I know. Keegan—I don’t think I’ve ever brought this up but thank you. Like, seriously thank you. I know that being a stay at home dad maybe wasn’t your idea, you got roped into it, but... It means a lot. For both of us,” Eva said, wrapping an arm around his waist. The drab brown bricked building looked down on them, alongside the other first day of school parents who were standing in the parking lot.

“I-it’s nothing. I wouldn’t want anything else. You’re the breadwinner after all, we need each other more than I think either of us really knows,” Keegan said with a snuffle. Eva let out a long sigh.

“Isn’t that the truth,” she said, kissing his cheek as they walked back to the car.

### **The Darkest Days of his Life**

What happened when everything seemed to be on the edge of falling apart? How does one respond to tragedy?

It was nighttime when he sprang from bed, his heart beating without feeling. It happened so fast. Life is moving faster now than it ever has before. Sophia peeks her head from her bedroom down the hall, now a young girl getting ready for her second year in middle school.

She's bleary eyed, clearly confused as to why her dad is running around the house at 2 AM. She tries to ask him what's wrong, but he doesn't have time. His brain is overloaded with emotions: terror, anger, a sinking feeling of emptiness...

"No time sweetie, err, hang on, please be quiet, please," Keegan said, scrambling to get a jacket. His phone didn't charge; looks like he didn't plug the charger in all the way. It had died right after he'd gotten the call.

"Fuck!" he swore loudly. The family cat, Jigme stood wide eyed by Sophia's feet. His gray and black fur was ruffled defensively, clearly displeased at being woken up, but also knowing that something was very, very wrong. Animals are much better at sensing emotions than people are, they simply can't express it in words.

"Dad, please tell me what's going on," Sophia says nervously, following her shaking father around the house.

"Sophie, I need your phone," Keegan said, trying to keep his voice even. She waited for a moment.

"Tell me what's going—"

"SOPHIE! I DON'T—we don't... We don't have time for this, bring me your phone. Right now!" Keegan shouted. Sophie backed away, nearly tripping over Jigme. She'd never seen her dad like this. He'd never yelled at her. No. Mom was always the stricter one, and even she had never been *this mad*.

"Ok, ok," Sophie mumbled, running to her room as fast as she could. Keegan took a seat at the dining table, his head in his hands. Sophie ran through her room, digging around for the

phone. Finally, she found it (fully charged) under her clothes for tomorrow's school day. Somehow, she felt like she wouldn't be going to school tomorrow.

Time ticked by. The phone rang. No one picked up. Keegan called again, not waiting to leave a message.

"Hello?" his mother answered, her voice groggy and grumpy sounding.

"Ma, it's-it's me. Keegan. I, I need your help," Keegan stuttered.

"Keegan? Why're you calling this late?"

"Eva, ma, Eva's in the hospital. She—she uh, she got," Keegan took a steadying breath, but his voice still sounded childish and scared, "she got shot. Car, her car... They crashed. I need you to watch Sophie for the night. I need to go to the hospital."

There was no debate, no more talking. An understanding silence settled between them before Keegan's mom hung up. Keegan couldn't stop himself from crying. Sophie, who'd been hiding by the hall entrance despite her dad telling her to go back to bed, was crying too. She knew her mom was a cop, knew it was a dangerous job. This couldn't be real though. Mom was a superhero. She couldn't get hurt. Ever.

Keegan was easily fooled by his daughter. It gave him peace of mind to think that she had gone back to bed, but in all reality, she had been sitting motionless under her blankets, hoping desperately this was all just a bad dream.

He ran two red lights, nearly caused an accident, but he kept driving. This wasn't okay, he knew that Eva would hate him for driving like this. He knew Eva...

He just wanted Eva to be alive when he got there.

Keegan was sure he set a new record of some sort for cursing in a parking garage. No spots were open, and he forced himself into a place that might not have even been a proper parking place. He didn't care though, they could tow the car if they wanted. The hell with them.

"Sir, please relax. Give me your name first."

The receptionist didn't get it. He didn't have time for that. Was she this stupid all the time? Maybe they should be in the business of getting a new desk worker.

"Listen, my name, fuck... My name is Keegan. Huxley, take my last name, I need to get to the surgery floor, my wife—"

"Sir, please calm down. I'm sure everything is going to be—"

"Hey fuck you. Okay? Fuck you and give me the visitor's badge or whatever the hell I need," Keegan said angrily. A few people in the waiting room gave him distasteful glances. The receptionist pursed her lips.

"Mr. Huxley... The elevator is that way," she said, pointing towards one of several winding halls that led away from the packed waiting room. Keegan turned without saying a word. People coughing, sneezing, the beeps of the doors, people speaking over the intercoms... He needed quiet. It was driving him insane. All the sound, all the people.

Only a few floors to go. The elevator smelled faintly of a strong alcohol-based antiseptic. He was alone for most of the ride, only joined by an extremely tired looking nurse.

"Long night," the nurse said to him, his voice empty sounding. He had short brown hair and subtle stubble across his face. Keegan noted the way the nurse's hair looked—sweaty. He'd been working for hours, probably non-stop.

“Long night,” Keegan replied hoarsely. The two sat in silence for the rest of the ride until Keegan got off on the surgery floor. The halls here were a dark blue, but still well lit. It was much quieter in this waiting room, a TV played early morning news in the corner and a few older people sat spread out in the chairs.

A black reporter appeared on the screen of the TV and said, “Thanks guys, and yes, this is serious. The neighborhood where the shooting took place has had a spike in gang activity. Police have made several arrests in the area, and security has been increased. Earlier this morning, a police unit of two responded to an apparently faked emergency, and before the officers could leave their car, they were hit by a drive-by shooter. Witnesses say the shooters were driving an unmarked black van. One officer, Eric Young was killed at the wheel, his partner at the time, Eva Huxley was shot but steered the car to a stop, avoiding a crash into a resident’s back yard. Huxley was taken to a nearby hospital and is said to be in critical condition. The shooters got away...”

Tears. They wouldn’t stop now. Keegan shakily stood up and found an outlet near the TV. He plugged his phone in, grateful that he had at least something like this to take his mind off things. Yet, once the phone was in, his mind was deadest on Eva once again. He couldn’t believe it. She’d been shot... Fucking shot in the chest... And she still managed to keep the car from hitting anything. Sophie always called her mom a superhero. She was right. Eva was a hero.

A hero facing death.

Time crawled by. Seconds slowly passed, taunting Keegan. He saw a doctor call back a thin old man. The two walked slowly, as the old man’s legs seemed determined to fall from underneath him.



Seconds became minutes.

His mom was probably at the house by now, trying to explain things to Sophie. Except she already knew. She was going through the same feelings that Keegan was right now, and she had no one but Jigme to cry to.

Minutes became hours.

Keegan really needed to use the restroom. He quietly asked the receptionist where the bathrooms were. She told him gently, a knowing look in her eye. He stopped to get water on the way back, the hallway echoing the bottle's *thunk* as it fell from the vending machine.

When he got back to the waiting room, a tall dark-skinned doctor was standing by the reception desk. The man looked to be around Keegan's age, maybe a little older. He was bald but sported a salt and pepper beard. He looked very tired but held a small smile on his face. He leaned against the reception desk and motioned for Keegan to come over.

"Hey," was all Keegan could say. He couldn't hold eye contact with anyone, embarrassed by the fact that he couldn't seem to stop crying.

"Mr. Huxley?" the doctor said. His voice was deep and strong sounding, not matching the overall look of exhaustion he gave off.

"That's me," Keegan replied, his hands shaking inside his pajama pants' pockets.

"My name is John Krug. I'm the surgeon who was assigned to treating your wife," the man said, holding out a large hand. Keegan shook hands lightly. Everything inside of him wanted John to tell him the news, but he was dead terrified to hear it as well.

"Ah. Err," Keegan mumbled, not sure what to say next.

“Your wife’s one hell of a fighter. I don’t say this often, Mr. Huxley, but it’s a surprise that she lived. She’s going to be all right, might need some physical therapy and probably a therapist after this, but she’s going to make it.”

Keegan dropped his water bottle. Luckily the lid was secure, because it would’ve made a mess. Keegan—losing control now—grabbed John’s arms and sobbed into his shoulder. The doctor hugged him.

“Thank you, Jesus Christ, thank you. You saved her, y-you saved her,” Keegan kept saying. He became incoherent after a bit, but John held him steady.

“Your wife wasn’t ready to die, Mr. Huxley. I’ve never seen anyone cling so fiercely to life like she did tonight. I reckon in a few more hours you’ll be able to see her, but she won’t be 100 percent yet,” John said, gently releasing Keegan (who had to hold himself up on the reception desk).

...

As it turns out, Sophie was right; she didn’t go to school that next day. She skipped school every day she was able to visit her mom. It was scary seeing her wrapped up in a bed. She looked so frail... So different. Sophie was used to her mom being the strongest one in the house. Whenever dad couldn’t lift something or needed help with something, he either wished out loud that mom was home, or if she was, got mom to come and help him. When Sophie learned what happened (both from the news and from her parents) she questioned whether her future plans to go to the police academy were still what she wanted. She’d seen the pain it had caused dad, and to see mom weakened to the point of needing help to learn how to walk again...

“Come on mom, you can do it!” Sophie cheered from the sidelines. They were out on a high school soccer field. No one was there today, and the hospital people had gotten permission to use it for their PT patients.

Eva was holding onto Keegan and her physical therapist like they were life buoys. Sweat was building on her face and she growled in frustration. Her legs had been messed up pretty bad when she’d directed the police car into a creek to avoid running into people’s yards. She wasn’t expected to be walking this early, but she had committed herself to proving all the doctors wrong.

“Mrs. Huxley, if you can’t do this...” her physical therapist started to say.

“No. I’m not giving up, because *I can do this*,” she said through gritted teeth. Keegan said nothing; he knew there was no getting his wife off this. She’d set her mind to it, so it was getting done. That’s just the way she did things. She looked over to him, her gaze softening a bit.

“Let go,” she said to Keegan. He nervously held onto her arm.

“You sure?” he said back. She nodded, her ponytail bouncing confidently.

“Yeah. Yeah let go,” she said again. Keegan slowly released her. The therapist did the same. Eva wobbled on her feet for a second, her body struggling to balance.

“Remember what we always say babe... Just one step at a time,” Keegan said. Eva lifted her leg. It wasn’t smooth, it wasn’t pretty, but she did it. She stepped forward, surprising herself with the step. Her right foot came next. It was slow and awkward, but each step came just a little faster. Sophie cheered, the therapist stood stunned, and Keegan walked alongside his wife, overjoyed at her progress.

“You got it! You’re doing it!” Keegan said, taking her hand whenever she seemed close to falling.

“O-oh, okay. Yeah, I’ve got it,” Eva said with a little laugh. She looked over at Keegan. He smiled warmly as the two embraced.

Keegan knew that he wouldn’t be complete without Eva. She was his soulmate in every sense of the word. Their love was special—they were passionate, honest, true...

And inside... They were still two kids on the train. Eva, shaking Keegan’s not bloody hand, introducing herself again. He’d been reluctant to sit with her, not being good socially, especially not with women. They’d shared silly small talk, awkwardly wanting to keep talking but neither knowing how to express themselves.

Eva took another step, more confidently this time. Keegan followed.

They were friends before they were in love, and friends always had each other’s backs. Eva had helped Keegan on all of his science work back in the day, and he’d proofread all her papers. The two shared everything together, all the joy, the pain, the frustration. They shared it all and took life *one step at a time*. This was their passion, their secret, their love. This was their power together.

“I knew you would be okay. I love you,” Keegan whispered. Eva took a wobbly step towards him.

“I love you more,” she said.

### **Epilogue: One Step at a Time**

College. Sophia Huxley stood in her usual spot, leaning against the big sign that held the map of the railways. It was rather brisk today, but not too bad. A slight breeze moved the collar of Sophia's jacket against her cheek. She'd gotten the jacket from her dad. It was still a little big on her, but he was confident she'd grow into it. She checked her phone. Five minutes until the train came.

Sophia had a major love/hate relationship with college. She definitely enjoyed learning and the experiences she had there, but balancing her work, her internship, and the college work wasn't easy. Today was finals day. Despite studying for hours, she didn't feel confident at all. Her mom had always said that she'd inherited dad's genes for confidence; what she meant was that Sophia was too hard on herself, and never felt like she did good enough.

So today was no different. The tests seemed like impassable doors to the next semester, and Sophia felt like a mouse trying to find a hole in them. Somehow, she always managed to slip through though, and today would be no different. Hopefully.

3 minutes.

There was a rather frantic tap on Sophia's shoulder. She tore her eyes away from her phone and jumped back, not knowing the person who'd touched her.

"Hello?" she asked rather sharply. A girl stood—kind of slouched—a few feet away, her arm held to her face. Her backpack was sitting forgotten by her feet and there was a look of desperation in her eyes.

"Scuse' me, I'm sorry, do you have a tissue? I've got a, uhh, a pretty bad nose bleed," the girl said, although it was a bit hard to understand through her sleeve. Sophia snapped out of her gaze and dug around in her own backpack, retrieving a pack of tissues.

“Here,” she said, offering the pack to the girl. Nose bleed girl took them gratefully, gently opening them, making sure not to rip the bag. Sophia looked at her carefully, hoping she was alright. The girl was a bit shorter than she—very pretty—she was Asian, with straight black hair and currently donned a slightly bloody Pokémon jacket.

“Oh god, is it all over my face?” the girl asked. Sophia realized she was staring at her, and tore her eyes away, now focusing on an incredibly boring looking guy in the back, waiting near the stairs.

“Uh, no. No, you look good,” Sophia said, inwardly slapping herself for her wording.

“Oh... Thanks. You’re a life saver,” the girl said, handing back the pack of tissues. Sophia held her hand up.

“No, you keep them. Might start bleeding again. You know how nosebleeds are.”

“Oh, okay, thanks a ton,” the girl replied as the train pulled up.

“You getting on?” Sophia asked. The girl nodded.

“Cool. Let’s sit together,” Sophia offered. The girl flashed a pretty smile back.

“I was going to suggest the same thing,” she laughed.

“What’s your name? Love the jacket by the way, the blood adds a nice little touch,” Sophia joked as they sat down.

“I wish it did,” she laughed, “I’m Emily.”

“Sophia. Nice to meet you,” Sophia said, shaking Emily’s non-bloody hand. Her touch was light and soft. Emily smiled.

“Weird way to make friends with someone honestly,” Emily laughed.

“Yeah, my parents have this saying... They say take things one step at a time, they say it a lot. We kinda got thrown together though, huh?” Sophia said with a laugh. Emily smiled.

“Well, sometimes big leaps are better than small steps,” she said. Sophia smiled back.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

The two talked all the way to class, where they found out that they had the same pre-nursing lecture next semester. It was the beginning of a long and fruitful relationship, but neither of them knew that right now. Life, as it always has—and always will—chugged along. Somewhere, someplace, Scott Jager was joking with his lifetime friend Keegan Huxley on how they’d both be in nursing homes pretty soon, and Police Chief Eva Huxley was giving a speech to the new class of detectives at her police academy. Life, despite all its hurdles and flaws, went on.