

Creekbound
"Step Off the Path"
Pilot

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EXT. PINEBRIDGE - MORNING

A calm summer morning. The small town of Pinebridge hums quietly, birds chatter, the distant creek murmurs, and sunlight warms the sleepy streets. A moving truck is parked in front of a modest, weathered house on the edge of town.

MAC (15) stands on the curb beside a stack of boxes. His jeans are dusty from travel. He looks around the quiet neighborhood, rows of pines in the distance.

LISA (40), his mom, emerges from the truck, wiping sweat from her forehead. She smiles, though her eyes show fatigue.

LISA
You'd think after all these moves,
I'd learn to pack lighter.

MAC
You said that last time.

Lisa laughs softly.

LISA
Yeah well...maybe this is the one.

MAC
You've said that last time too.

They exchange a small smile, a breeze rustles through the trees.

INT. MAC'S LIVING ROOM - MORNING

Boxes line the walls. The air smells faintly of dust. Light filters through the open curtains, giving the room a peaceful glow. Mac drops his backpack by the couch and looks around.

LISA
What do you think?

MAC
It's... nice. Smaller than the last one.

LISA
Smaller's not bad. Easier to fill with memories.

MAC
(tired) Yeah... if we stay long enough to make any.

Lisa pauses, then sits on some unopened boxes.

LISA

You know, I counted the other night. Do you remember how many times we've moved?

MAC

No... I stopped keeping track.

LISA

Nine. This makes nine.

MAC

Nine. Great. Lucky number.

LISA

(softly) Hey. I know it's been hard. I keep saying "this is the one", and I mean it every time. But this time... I think it really might be.

MAC

(skeptical) Why here?

LISA

Because it's quiet. Because my new job isn't halfway across the state. Because maybe you can finally have a summer that doesn't end in cardboard boxes.

Mac looks down.

LISA

And... because I already made you an appointment with a therapist. MR. ADLER.

Mac looks up.

MAC

The therapist?

LISA

Yeah. Just talk, you know? It's been a lot of change.

MAC

You think I need a therapist?

LISA

I think you need someone who listens. You don't really talk to me about what you're feeling, Mac.

MAC

I'm fine.

LISA
You say that every time.

Mac hesitates, then sighs, realizing she's right.

MAC
Okay... maybe I'll go.

LISA
Good. That's all I ask.

INT. MAC'S ROOM - MORNING

Lisa opens the door. Sunlight pours into a small, clean bedroom. Dust dances in the light. The sound of cicadas buzzes outside.

MAC
It's bigger than I thought.

LISA
Told you. Best one yet.

MAC
It's okay.

LISA
You can make it yours, maybe move the desk?

Lisa leans in the doorway, watching him quietly.

LISA
You know, you don't have to pretend to like it right away.

MAC
I just... I don't wanna start liking something if we're just gonna leave again.

Lisa crosses the room, resting her hand on his shoulder.

LISA
I don't plan on leaving this time.

MAC
You never plan to.

Lisa opens her mouth, then stops... the honesty hurts, but she knows he's right.

LISA
Fair point. But... I mean it, Mac, this time is different.

Mac nods slightly. He glances toward the window. The sky has darkened. The air grows still for a moment. Then a soft pat-pat-pat of raindrops begins against the glass.

LISA
(softly) Looks like the weather is
trying to say something.

MAC
Yeah, "Don't get comfy."

LISA
Or maybe "slow down and breathe."

Mac turns to her, uncertain but trying to believe it.

MAC
I'll try.

Lisa smiles faintly and squeezes his shoulder.

LISA
That's all you need to do, kiddo.
Just try.

Thunder rumbles in the distance. Mac's face is reflective, conflicted, a boy caught between hope and hesitation.

FADE OUT

EXT. MR. ADLER'S OFFICE - DAY

The rain has stopped. The world glows gold, puddles shimmer in the sun, and the streets of Pinebridge steam softly in the warmth of summer.

Mac rides quietly beside his mom in their car. The windshield wipers squeak one last time before falling still.

LISA
You'll be fine, okay? Mr. Adler's a
good listener.

Mac sighs.

MAC
I know.

LISA
Just... try to talk to him.

MAC
Okay.

Lisa smiles faintly, knowing that's all she can ask. Mac steps out of the car, sunlight touching his face. He squints a little, taking in the smell of wet pavement. For a moment he just stands there, breathing.

INT. MR. ADLER'S OFFICE - DAY

The office feels alive, plants climb along the window ledge. A fish tank hums slowly near a bookshelf overflowing with psychology journals and half-read novels. The air smells faintly of coffee and rain.

Mr. Adler (41) sits in an old leather chair, notebook balanced on his knee. His desk is cluttered but warm, a framed photo of his family sits beside a ceramic frog.

MR. ADLER

So... Pinebridge, huh? How are you settling in?

MAC

We've been here since this morning. I'm still... figuring out where everything goes.

MR. ADLER

In the house?

MAC

In my head.

MR. ADLER

And how many times did you have to move?

MAC

According to my mom, nine.

MR. ADLER

That's a lot of new beginnings.

MAC

It is. Every time I try, but it feels like it doesn't matter.

MR. ADLER

That's the tricky thing about starting over.

Mac glances at the fish tank. Small orange fish weave through the plants. Sunlight shines across the water.

MR. ADLER

You see them? They swim in circles all day. Small space, same pattern, but they always move forward. They never stop.

MAC

So what, I should just keep swimming?

Mr. Adler smiles.

MR. ADLER

Not exactly. But sometimes you have to step off the path you're used to. Try a different direction.

Mac tilts his head, curious.

MR. ADLER

You don't find new places by staying where it's safe. And sometimes, you have to get lost before you find where you're supposed to be.

MAC

You mean... like actually getting lost.

Mr. Adler chuckles.

MR. ADLER

Maybe. Take a walk, see the town, explore a bit. Don't rush to fit in, just look around. Let the place show you what it is.

MAC

That doesn't sound so bad.

MR. ADLER

It isn't. Pinebridge might surprise you.

Mac nods slowly, thoughtful. He looks out the window, sunlight spilling across the damp streets, the world fresh and glowing after the rain.

EXT. PINEBRIDGE FOREST TRAIL - LATE AFTERNOON

The sky is clear now. The rain has washed everything clean. Golden lights filter through the treetops. Drops of water sparkle on the leaves. The distant sound of the creek hums softly, steady, inviting.

Mac walks along a narrow path, notebook under his arm, sneakers damp from the grass. He moves slowly, taking it all in, the smell of wet earth, the shimmer of sunlight in puddles.

MAC

Step off the path... get lost.

He stops where the paved trail ends and a smaller dirt path winds towards the woods.

MAC

Guess this is as good a place as any.

He steps off the main path and into the trees. The air cools instantly.

Mac finds a fallen log near the creek and sits on it. He opens his notebook and sketches, the bend of the trees, the reflection of sunlight on the current, the way roots twist like veins through the soil.

A small breeze ripples the water. A leaf drifts down and lands on the drawing. He smiles faintly, brushing it away.

MAC

(softly) Not bad, Pinebridge... not bad at all.

He flips to a new page and sketches a group of trunks rising from a single base, forming a strange natural shape, almost like a platform.

MAC

That's weird...

He looks up, scanning the canopy. Something wooden glints through the leaves, planks, rope, maybe a bridge. Distant, half hidden.

Before he can move closer, a sharp whistle echoes through the trees. Mac startles, dropping his pencil.

RILEY (16), confident and easy-going, steps out from behind a tree.

RILEY

Hey! You're the new kid, right?

MAC

Yeah... I was just... drawing.

RILEY

Drawing? Out here? Most people don't wander this far.

MAC

I wanted to see what was past the trail.

RILEY

Then you're my kind of person.

Riley studies the sketch in Mac's notebook, raising an eyebrow.

RILEY

You've got a good eye. Come on,
there's something you should see.

MAC

What is it?

RILEY

It's hard to explain. You'll see
when we get there. It's a bit of a
walk.

Mac glances at his half-finished sketch, then at the woods
ahead. He tucks his notebook under his arm.

MAC

Lead the way.

Riley grins and starts along a narrow path winding between
ferns. The forest deepens, shafts of sunlight cut through
the mist, droplets still falling from the branches. Birds
call overhead.

As they walk, their voices fade beneath the hum of the
woods, almost like the forest is alive.

They walk past some moss, then suddenly the moss glows
faintly.

The glow is soft at first, pulsating like a heartbeat.
Emerald green, almost alive.

A single drop of water lands on it, and the glow flickers,
spreading faintly across nearby roots before fading again
into shadow.

EXT. FOREST - LATE AFTERNOON

The light fades as Mac and Riley continue deeper into the
woods. The trees grow taller, their roots thicker, almost
forming natural walls. Fireflies blink through the misty
air.

RILEY

We're close. Don't freak out when
you see it.

MAC

Why would I freak out?

RILEY

Because no one expects this to
exist.

The two round a tree and Mac sees it: "The Tree House
Complex".

EXT. THE TREE HOUSE COMPLEX - LATE AFTERNOON

Mac sees dozens of interconnected tree houses stretching across the trees, suspended by ropes and wooden bridges. Lanterns glow between branches. Ladders creak as members move between levels. It's like a miniature town built in the forest.

Mac is awestruck.

MAC

This is... unreal.

RILEY

Welcome to The Tree House Complex!

They step onto a rope bridge. Below a few kids play cards on a wooden deck. Others carry supplies. The place hums with quiet purpose, organized chaos.

RILEY

Everyone here does their part.
There's the lookout tower, that's
the saloon, down there is the shop.

Mac glances down. A sign made of planks reads: "PAT'S PLACE - TRADE AND SUPPLY." A few teens are lined up, exchanging small bags, batteries and food cans.

MAC

You actually run stores here?

RILEY

Yeah. Gotta keep things running.
Pat keeps inventory, Maya handles
first aid, Darren leads...and the
rest of us just try to keep the
place from falling apart.

They reach the main platform, the largest structure at the center. A lantern glows beside a hand-painted sign: "THE SALOON." Music plays softly inside, a cassette player running off a car battery.

INT. THE SALOON - LATE AFTERNOON

Inside, the saloon feels like a clubhouse built from scraps, mismatched furniture, maps on the walls, jars filled with nails and marbles. Teens laugh, talk, plan. At the far end, leaning over a desk covered in forest maps is DARREN (16), sharp-eyed, steady, with an air of quiet authority.

RILEY

There he is. The boss.

MAC
He doesn't look that scary.

RILEY
Give it a minute.

Riley leads Mac forward. Darren looks up, eyes narrowing slightly.

DARREN
Who's this?

RILEY
New kid. Found him sketching by the creek. Thought he should see the place.

DARREN
You thought?

RILEY
He's alright, Darren. Just curious.

Darren studies Mac, long silent. Mac shifts under his gaze.

DARREN
You from town?

MAC
Yeah. Moved in today.

DARREN
You tell anyone you came out here?

MAC
No. Just my mom.

DARREN
And what'd you tell her?

MAC
That I was exploring.

Darren leans back, crossing his arms.

DARREN
Exploring's fine. Just don't get lost where you shouldn't.

RILEY
Come on, give him a break. He's new, not a spy.

Darren smiles slightly.

DARREN
We said that about the last one.

Darren looks at Riley.

DARREN

Riley, why don't you show him around? If he's staying he should know the layout.

MAC

Wait... I can stay?

DARREN

You seem decent enough. We're short on guards tonight. You can bunk in the watch loft.

Mac is trying to play it cool.

MAC

Sure...yeah. Sounds good.

RILEY

See? He fits right in.

As the two leave, Darren turns towards the back wall of the saloon. A large map of the forest pinned up with strings connecting different points. Near the bottom corner a small wooden door is half-hidden behind a crate.

EXT. THE TREE HOUSE COMPLEX - LATE AFTERNOON

Riley and Mac walk along a bridge between platforms. Kids talk below, the sounds of laughter echoing through the trees.

RILEY

So that's Darren, not as scary once you know him. Don't touch his maps though, or he'll bite your hand off.

MAC

Noted.

PAT (17) passes by them and waves briefly. He's busy.

MAC

This place... it's like a real town.

RILEY

Yeah. Built by kids, run by kids. We look out for each other.

MAC

You really live out here? All of you?

RILEY

Some go home at night. Some don't
have homes to go back to.

Mac glances at the saloon, just as, through the window, that
faint green light flickers again.

MAC

Riley... what was that?

RILEY

What was what?

MAC

Nothing. Must've been the lanterns.

EXT. THE SUNSET PLATFORM - SUNSET

Riley leads Mac out onto the highest bridge, The Sunset
Platform, a wide deck where dozens of kids gather every
evening. The sky is awash with orange and pink, the forest
below glittering with light. A gentle breeze moves through
the trees.

RILEY

We come up here every night when
the light's good. Makes you forget
the rest of the world exists.

MAC

It's... beautiful.

RILEY

Yeah. For a few minutes, it feels
like time stops.

Mac walks toward the edge, leaning toward the wooden
railing. The view stretches endlessly, forest, lake and the
faint shimmer of the creek below.

ROBIN (15), sits a few feet away, sketching the horizon. She
looks up and glances politely.

ROBIN

You're new.

MAC

Just got here.

Robin spots Mac's sketchbook.

ROBIN

You draw too?

MAC

Yeah. Helps me think. Or not think,
I guess.

ROBIN

Same. I like to draw the edge of things, stuff people don't really notice. Trees at dusk, reflections in water, broken windows. They always tell better stories than faces do.

MAC

That's... really specific.

ROBIN

I've got a lot of time to notice things.

She goes back to her sketch, the forest, the lake, the faint shimmer of the creek below them. Mac watches for a second, then gestures toward her drawing.

MAC

That's really good. You've got the shadows perfect.

ROBIN

Thanks. It's easier when you've seen enough sunsets to know how fast they disappear.

MAC

You talk like you've been here forever.

ROBIN

Maybe I have. Maybe I haven't.

A small silence. The golden light hits her face as the wind shifts. There's something mysterious in her tone, not cold, but careful.

MAC

You live here?

ROBIN

Not exactly. I spend time between here and somewhere else. Trade runs mostly.

MAC

Trade runs?

ROBIN

I bring stuff from outside, tools, batteries, stuff others need. Let's just say I know a few people who don't exactly follow the complex rules.

MAC

So like pirates?

ROBIN
Guessed correctly.

MAC
So, you work with both sides?

ROBIN
Sometimes. Doesn't mean I belong to either.

MAC
That sounds lonely.

ROBIN
It's quieter that way.

Mac looks at her, then back out at the setting sun, pink light filtering through the trees. For a moment neither of them speaks. The quiet feels natural.

MAC
Maybe quiet isn't always bad.

Robin smiles softly.

ROBIN
Maybe not.

Riley returns, holding two cups of something fizzy.

RILEY
You two bonding or staring dramatically in the sunset?

MAC
Both.

ROBIN
Mostly the dramatic part.

They laugh, short, genuine, the tension broken. Riley hands Mac a cup. They all turn to watch the sun behind the forest.

As the sky deepens to purple, the crowd starts to drift away. Riley nods towards a loose plank at the back of the deck.

RILEY
Come on. I'll show you something.

Mac follows, giving Robin one last look. She gives a small, knowing nod, turning back to her sketch.

INT. THE SECRET PLACE - DUSK

The sunlight fades to a dim violet glow through the cracks above. Dust floats lazily in the air as Mac follows Riley down a narrow ladder. Their footsteps echo softly against old wood.

MAC

You're sure this is safe?

RILEY

Define safe.

MAC

Stable. Not about to collapse and kill us.

RILEY

(laughing) Then no. But that's part of the fun.

They step down onto the hidden lower deck. The Secret Place. It's small, half-covered in vines, with broken boards and carved initials everywhere. A few old lantern hooks hang from the ceiling, long rusted over.

MAC

This is... incredible. It's like a whole other world under here.

RILEY

Yeah. Nobody else knows about it. Not even Darren.

MAC

You never told him?

RILEY

He's got enough on his mind. And some things are better kept quiet.

Mac walks slowly around, running his fingers along the carvings. One symbol catches his eye. A tree with spiraling roots.

MAC

What's this?

RILEY

I found that the first time I came down. It's on a few beams around here.

MAC

Looks...old. Older than everything else.

RILEY

Yeah. This whole level feels different. Like it's before the complex was even built.

MAC

Maybe it was. Maybe whoever made this place... started it.

RILEY

(quietly) Maybe. Or maybe the forest made it.

Mac gives a small laugh but looks at the carvings, thoughtful.

MAC

You really come down here alone?

RILEY

Sometimes. When it gets really loud up there. When everyone is shouting or arguing about guard shifts or food runs. Down here, it's just... quiet.

MAC

Yeah. I get that.

RILEY

You do?

MAC

When we move somewhere new, my mom always says "it's a fresh start."

Riley sits against a beam, listening quietly.

MAC

But every time I unpack my stuff, it just feels emptier. Like the more we start over, the less of me there is left.

RILEY

That's rough, man.

MAC

It's fine. Just... I don't know. I guess I wanted this place to be different.

RILEY

You picked a good forest for that.

MAC

Yeah?

RILEY

Yeah. There's something about Pinebridge. You'll see. The forest... it listens.

Mac laughs softly.

MAC

You sound like my therapist.

RILEY

You've got a therapist?

MAC

Yeah. Mr. Adler. He told me sometimes you have to step off the path, even if you don't know where it leads.

RILEY

(smiling) Guess you took his advice literally.

MAC

Guess I did.

A moment of quiet passes. They both look around the place, the carved walls, the dangling vines swaying gently. The forest hums gently outside, the sound of distant frogs and rustling branches.

RILEY

You know... if you want, this could be our spot.

MAC

Our spot?

RILEY

Yeah. Nobody else comes down here. We can fix it up, maybe hang a lantern, clean the boards. A place to breathe.

Mac smiles slightly.

MAC

A Secret Place.

RILEY

Exactly. Just between us.

MAC

Deal.

They bump fists sealing the pact. A soft wind passes through the cracks, making the vines sway. The faintest green shimmer pulses from a patch of moss near the far corner, neither of them notices.

MAC

You ever wonder how stuff like this gets forgotten? I mean, someone built it. Someone cared enough to carve all of this.

RILEY

Maybe they left it behind on purpose. Maybe not everything's meant to be found again.

MAC

Yeah... or maybe it was waiting for someone to come back.

Riley looks at him for a long moment, then smiles.

RILEY

You think like a storyteller.

MAC

You think like a ghost hunter.

They both laugh quietly. Above, muffled voices echo faintly from the main platform as others start heading back for the night.

RILEY

Come on. We should head up before Darren starts wondering.

MAC

Right.

They climb the ladder back to the surface, their footsteps creaking softly.

As the two leave, the weird carvings start glowing faintly in the dim light, catching a brief emerald glint.

EXT. THE TREE HOUSE COMPLEX - NIGHT

The forest is alive with sound, crickets, frogs, the rustle of wind through the branches. Lanterns flicker across the Complex, painting soft circles of gold in the dark.

Mac sits on the edge of the Watch Loft, flashlight in hand. The beam cuts across the trees below, catching glimpses of movement, leaves, insects, nothing more.

Riley climbs up the ladder, yawning.

RILEY

You good up there?

MAC

Yeah. Just me and the forest.

RILEY

That's how it always starts. Then
the forest starts talking back.

Mac laughs.

MAC

I'll take my chances.

RILEY

Wake me if you hear anything weird.

MAC

What counts as weird?

RILEY

You'll know.

Riley heads down. Mac sits for a moment, shining his light across the canopy. The glow bouncing off the rope bridges and railings. The night feels heavy but calm. He relaxes slightly, leaning back against a post.

The flashlight flickers once, then dies.

MAC

Great.

He taps it. Nothing. Shakes it. Still nothing. The Darkness creeps in around him, deeper, thicker. Somewhere far off a owl hoots.

Mac sighs and heads down the ladder.

INT. TREE HOUSE STORE - NIGHT

The store is dimly lit by a single hanging bulb. Shelves made of crates hold scavenged goods, flashlights, batteries, snacks, rope, cans of soda.

MAC

Pat? You around?

No answer.

Mac moves behind the counter, searching through a box of batteries. His flashlight dangles from his hand.

Behind him, a faint creak, wood shifting. He freezes.

MAC

Riley?

Silence. Then, another sound. A soft scrape, like a shoe on wood.

Mac turns slowly. Nothing there. He exhales, a nervous laugh.

MAC

Okay... chill out. You're fine.

He finds a new pack of batteries, rips it open. As he loads one into the flashlight a hand suddenly clamps over his mouth.

Mac's eyes go wide. Another arm grabs his shoulders, dragging him backwards into the shadows.

Muffled struggle. A voice hisses near his ear, low, rough, teenage.

JACE (17) and LUKE (16) step out of the shadows

JACE

Shh... we're not here to hurt you.

The voice is rough, older.

LUKE

He's smaller than I thought.

JACE

Doesn't matter. He's new, clean.
They trust him.

They drag him to a chair, tying his wrists. The tape goes over his mouth. His flashlight falls and rolls beneath the counter, the beam flickering weakly.

JACE

Listen, kid. They tell you Darren
is keeping everyone safe? That this
place is paradise?

Mac glares, breathing hard through his nose.

JACE

It's a lie. They're hiding
something. You've seen the light,
haven't you?

Mac's eyes flick instinctively toward the floor. The Outcasts smirk.

LUKE

He did.

JACE

Then he'll understand soon enough.

They haul him up, chair and all, dragging him out the shop and across the bridge. The Complex creaks around them, empty, silent.

INT. THE SALOON - NIGHT

The saloon is nearly dark. Tables are overturned, the maps on the walls sway gently in the draft. The outcasts drag Mac inside. One of them kicks a crate aside, revealing the small door.

JACE

There it is.

LUKE

You sure about this?

JACE

We didn't come this far to turn back.

They open the small door. A gust of cool air rushes out, carrying the smell of damp earth and something faintly metallic. Below, a narrow staircase spirals into darkness, lit by a soft green glow pulsing deep beneath the floor.

Mac's eyes widen. He mumbles through the tape, panicked.

JACE

(mocking) Don't worry, kid. You'll get to see it too.

They descend the steps. Luke turns to Mac before disappearing too.

Silence. Just the faint echo of their footsteps fading deeper. The green light pulses through the cracks in the floorboards.

Mac breathes hard through his nose, ropes tightening as he struggles. The chair creaks beneath him. The lanterns flicker once...twice... then steady again.

He stares at the door, his eyes locked on that faint green light. Then, a low rumble. The floor trembles. Dust shakes loose from the beams above.

Mac freezes. The rumble deepens, low and guttural, like something is turning beneath the wood. The emerald glow flares brighter, blindingly bright for a moment, then dims.

The silence that follows is suffocating.

Mac's breath quickens. Then dust particles begin to lift off the floorboards, slowly rising upward in the light, swirling like they're caught in an invisible wind.

Mac's wide eyes reflect the green light, the floating dust drifting around him like stars. A hum grows. It starts deep, then slow and low, then deeper again.

Mac sees the two climb the stairs, noticing a bright emerald glow leaking from one of their bags.

The two leave through the main door, and Mac is left to be found in the morning.

As Jace and Luke move farther away from the room beneath, the saloon starts returning to normal.

The silence is unsettling.

MAC
(muffled) What just happened?

FADE TO BLACK