

# **the mystery of the coyote's ember**

the duck creek mysteries  
book nine

**Don Jones**

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## preface

This book has been made available in numerous locations throughout the Duck Creek Village area—including some “honor shops.” If you purchased this book already—thank you. Thank you very, very much.

If you picked up this book but haven’t paid for it yet, I’d like to invite you to do so. You can send a Venmo to @concentrateddon:



If you’re asked to confirm the phone number, it’s -6783. The asking price for this book is \$15.00 USD. Please put “Coyote” in the Venmo note.

You can also purchase autographed paperback copies of this novel

from my website, DonJones.com. Just click the “Shop” link in the menu.

100% of my proceeds from this book—meaning everything above printing and shipping costs—go to help fund equipage and training for the first responders of the Cedar Mountain Service District. So your purchase really does mean something to everyone who lives, visits, and works in and around Duck Creek Village. And if you’ve decided to pay more than the suggested \$15... *thank you*. Thank you for supporting the people who keep us safe.

## foreword

Welcome to the *ninth* book in *The Duck Creek Mysteries*! I've been joyously overwhelmed by the reception for this series—and the gentle requests by many readers to expand it. So what started as a humble five-book series has now great expanded. I'm hoping you'll enjoy the “Hard Boys meets ‘Murder, She Wrote’ meets Cedar Mountain” vibes—and rest assured, if this is the first novel in the series you're reading, *you're fine*. They're all standalone tales, connected only by their setting in the beautiful Dixie National Forest and the vibrant and amazing Duck Creek Village, UT.

I owe you a huge thanks for purchasing this book. 100% of my royalties are donated, annually, to the Cedar Mountain Service District—once known as the Cedar Mountain Fire Protection District. The first responders in our modern District are real heroes—they train constantly, they pitch in with regional and national emergencies, and if you call 9-1-1, they're the ones who show up to save you. Your purchase of this book has helped fund their equipment and training, and everyone who lives on Cedar Mountain appreciates your help.

Now, a quick note: I haven't used the names of real folks in this novel. While I've included the real names of real business owners in prior novels in this series, in this case I wanted to make sure the fire-fighters in particular could retain some privacy, and I didn't want to seem to be putting words in their mouths. I also needed to make up a

couple of roles that don't actually exist in Cedar Mountain's firefighting team. Finally, I've taken some artistic license with the geography of the area, for the sake of moving the story along.

One of the neatest things about living in this area are the many, many legends and myths. On the surface, Duck Creek Village can seem like a fun day-trip or weekend retreat—and it is!—but underneath all that are hundreds of years of stories. Those of the Paiute people are especially interesting to me, grounded as they are in nature and the unique geography of the area. I've used one of those myths in this story—but I hope I've done so respectfully, and I want to make it clear that I'm leaning into someone else's mythos with the greatest appreciation.

If you're ever on Cedar Mountain, in the Duck Creek Village area, check the calendar on [www.cmfpd.com](http://www.cmfpd.com). In July, for example, you'll find a Pancake Breakfast hosted (usually) at the fire station, along with numerous other community events designed to support the professionals who keep us safe up here. And if you run into me at one of those events (not unlikely), I owe you a fist-bump of thanks. Please ask for it.

I hope you enjoy this latest tale.

Don Jones

May 2026

Duck Creek Village, UT

## chapter one

SOPHIE DROPPED THEM at the station at seven forty-five in the morning, both hands on the wheel and the engine still running, which was her way of making clear that she had somewhere to be.

The Cedar Mountain Service District sat on a flat pull-out just off the main road, maybe a quarter-mile from where the pines got serious about being a forest. It was a plain, functional building — cinderblock painted a tan that matched the dust, a pair of bay doors standing open to let in the morning air, a flagpole in the corner of the gravel yard doing its job without complaint. An American flag moved in the light wind coming off the plateau. A hand-painted CMSD emblem on the cinderblock above the near bay door had weathered to something pleasantly unofficial-looking, like a team logo from a league that cared more about showing up than winning.

Leo stood in the gravel and looked at it for a moment with his hands in his pockets. It was the kind of building that didn't apologize for itself.

"The Country Store opens at eight," Sophie said through the passenger window. "I can't be late my second week."

"Third week," Cody said from the back seat, pulling out his field bag.

"Third week." She said it like a correction she'd already made too many times. "Don't film anything that's on fire."

"That's extremely limiting given our location," Leo said.

"I know. I said it anyway." She put the truck in reverse. "Text me if something explodes."

Then she was gone, taillights disappearing around the curve, a thin plume of dust settling back across the road in her wake. Leo watched the dust settle. Cody was already checking the ties on his bag.

"She's going to hear about everything we do before we get home," Leo said.

"She always does," Cody said. "She has sources."

Leo picked up his own pack and turned back to the station.

\* \* \*

The man who came out to meet them moved the way people move when they've been awake since five-thirty and consider that a reasonable hour. He was in his thirties, solidly built, with the kind of forearms that come from lifting things that need lifting, and he wore his station gear with the same zero-ceremony as his expression. His name tape read KOWALSKI.

"Westbrook," he said, extending a hand to Cody. "We got your schedule from the Forest Service. You're on the snag survey."

"That's right." Cody shook it. "Thanks for accommodating us. This is Leo — he's a — " he paused for a fraction of a second in the way that happened when people tried to describe what Leo actually was, " — he's with me."

Kowalski looked at Leo the way people look at weather they're not sure about. "You going to be in the way?"

"Historically, no," Leo said. "Occasionally, yes. But I make up for it in coffee."

Kowalski considered this. "We have coffee."

"I know. That's partly why we're here."

Something in Kowalski's expression shifted — not quite a smile, more the suppression of one. He stood back and let them through the bay door. "It's in the common room. I'll warn you: it's been on since six."

"Perfect," Leo said.

\* \* \*

The inside of the station smelled the way working buildings smell

— gear and equipment oil and old coffee and a faint undercurrent of something clean that might have been industrial soap or might have just been fresh mountain air cycling through. The common room was to the left of the main bay: a long table with mismatched chairs, a whiteboard dense with scheduling notations, a corkboard bristling with notices and printed advisories and one laminated safety poster that looked like it had survived multiple administrations. There was a small kitchen along one wall, and the coffee maker on the counter was indeed a serious piece of institutional hardware, the kind that brewed by the pot and kept it warm until someone dealt with it.

The mug Kowalski handed Leo was thick ceramic with the CMSD logo on one side and a small chip out of the rim on the other, which made it feel like the most honest coffee mug Leo had ever held. He took a sip and decided the coffee was exactly what it was: strong, reliable, two hours past optimal, and completely fine.

Cody had already spread a laminated topo of the area on the long table and was orienting himself to it with the focused attention of someone who gets genuinely happy around topographic lines. He traced the contours around the station's primary response zone with one finger, asking Kowalski about road conditions, trail access, and which snag sites from the previous season's inventory were still unconfirmed.

Kowalski answered each question with a single sentence, checked his watch twice, and clearly found Cody's methodology sound. This was the fastest route to Kowalski's respect that Leo had ever observed, which was: demonstrate that you know what you're doing and take up only as much space as you need.

Leo took notes on his phone and tried not to take up any extra space.

\* \* \*

Captain Redd came in from the equipment bay at eight-ten, coffee already in hand — his own thermos, battered silver, the kind that had been through enough to have opinions. He was somewhere in his late forties, lean in the way that people get when they've spent twenty years walking terrain that doesn't accommodate extra weight. His hair was cut close and going silver at the temples. He had the particular quality

of stillness that Leo associated with people who'd learned to read fire: the ability to assess something complicated very quickly and then wait for it to tell you more.

He looked at Cody first — a quick, confirmatory once-over. Then at Leo, with the slightly longer assessment Leo was used to.

"You're the one with the social media," Redd said. It wasn't a question.

"Guilty," Leo said.

"Kowalski mentioned you might be documenting the survey."

"Loosely. Ambient content, mostly — the mountain, the landscape. I'm not here to film the station's operations."

Redd nodded once. "Appreciate that." He set his thermos on the table and offered Cody his hand. "Captain Redd. Welcome to the mountain. Anything Kowalski can't answer, come find me."

"Thank you, Captain," Cody said.

Redd looked at the topo map, made one small observation about an access road that had been regraded in July and was now navigable where it hadn't been, and then went back to the equipment bay. The whole exchange had taken under two minutes. Leo had the impression that this was typical.

\* \* \*

The firefighter who lingered was Brennan.

He came in for coffee refill about fifteen minutes after the captain left, and he had the slightly compressed energy of someone who had something on his mind but hadn't decided whether to say it. He was younger than Kowalski by a few years, with the kind of face that defaulted to open and interested — the face of someone who read things. His gear had a small patch on the left sleeve that Leo couldn't quite make out, and his coffee mug had a stamp from the Utah State Historical Society on it, which Leo clocked and filed away.

He listened to Cody's survey methodology questions for a few minutes, nodding along, and asked two or three of his own — good questions, the kind that showed he'd thought about forest ecology beyond the immediate concerns of his job. Where did the snag clusters tend to concentrate after the 2017 burn scar? Were the woodpecker

cavity patterns consistent with the species distribution maps from the Forest Service survey?

Cody answered each one fully, which was how Leo knew Brennan had passed whatever invisible threshold Cody used to decide if someone was worth the detail.

"You been up here long?" Leo asked him, during a natural pause.

"Six years at this station," Brennan said. "Grew up in Panguitch, but the mountain got into me." He said it simply, without poetry, the way people say things that are just true. "It has a way of doing that."

"Seems like it," Leo said.

Brennan topped off his mug, then leaned against the counter with it, looking at the topo map the way people look at things they know well enough to see past the surface. "You're planning to go up toward the plateau?" he asked Cody.

"The survey covers the east slope first, then the plateau's southern edge. Maybe two weeks' work."

Brennan nodded. "I can go over the access with you. Some of the old fire roads have changed since the service maps were updated." He paused. "Also — there's been some activity up there we've been keeping an eye on. Nothing dangerous," he added quickly. "Just unusual. You might run across it."

Cody looked up from the map. "What kind of activity?"

Brennan wrapped his hands around his mug. "Small fires," he said. "Someone's been setting them. Very contained, very deliberate — not accidental. But no one's been around when we respond. They're out by the time we get there." He said it the way you say something that's been in the back of your mind for a while. "It's happened four times this summer."

Cody was quiet for a moment. Leo was quiet too, which Cody would have noticed if he'd been paying attention — Leo was usually the first one to say something.

"Cedar bark," Brennan added. "Each one had cedar bark. That's the thing that got me thinking about it more than the fires themselves."

"Why cedar bark?" Leo asked.

Brennan set his mug down. "That," he said, "is what I keep wondering."

They broke up around eight-forty to get started on the day. Cody had a morning of survey prep ahead of him, coordinating with Kowalski on vehicle access to the first cluster of snag sites. Leo had nothing specific planned, which was his preferred state of affairs. He took his coffee outside to the station yard and stood in the September morning, which was doing what September mornings do in southern Utah at elevation: performing a preview of autumn while the summer sun tried to argue it into reconsidering. The aspens on the slope above the station had started their turn. A few of them had gone a yellow so clean and sharp it looked manufactured.

Leo filmed thirty seconds of the aspens, a slow pan that started with the station's flagpole and moved up the slope. He wasn't going to post it. He just liked having it.

He was putting his phone back in his pocket when he saw the coyote.

It was sitting on the gravel turnout at the south end of the lot, about forty feet from where Leo stood. Medium-sized, reddish-grey with the classic dark legs, and it was watching the station door with the specific, interested attention of an animal that had decided this was a good spot and wasn't in a hurry to reconsider. Its ears were up. Its tail was level. It was not nervous.

Leo stood very still.

The coyote turned its head and looked at him.

Leo looked back.

There was a long moment of mutual assessment, the way two strangers in a waiting room sometimes look at each other when they both realize they've been there long enough to drop the pretense of not noticing.

Then the coyote looked back at the station door.

Leo heard boots on gravel behind him and turned to find Kowalski coming out of the near bay with a clipboard. Kowalski saw the coyote. The coyote, apparently familiar with Kowalski, did not react.

"How long has it been coming around?" Leo asked.

Kowalski made a note on his clipboard. "Three weeks."

"Does it come inside?"

"No."

"Does it do anything?"

"Watches. Sits. Leaves." Kowalski paused. "Comes back."

Leo looked at the coyote again. The coyote was still watching the door.

"Has anyone fed it?"

Kowalski's answer was precisely one beat too long in arriving. "No," he said.

Leo decided not to pursue this line of inquiry. He pulled out his phone and filmed a slow, quiet clip of the coyote in the morning light — the station building behind it, the aspens above, the flagpole in the corner of the frame. The coyote sat perfectly still for the whole thing, like it understood what a camera was and had made peace with being documented.

Leo lowered the phone.

"Morning shift supervisor," he said quietly.

Kowalski had already gone back inside.

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At nine o'clock, the four of them gathered in the common room around the topo map for a working orientation — Redd, Kowalski, Brennan, and Tomas, the EMT who'd arrived for his shift at eight-thirty and been introduced to Leo and Cody with the same professional ease as the rest of the crew. Tomas was compact and deliberate in his movements, with a careful way of listening that made you want to say accurate things. He'd shaken Leo's hand, asked one question about the social media work (the reach, not the content — a practical question), and apparently considered himself adequately briefed.

Redd walked them through the station's current operational picture: fire season was winding down but not over — the plateau had been dry all summer, and the recent heat had extended the risk window into late September. Two crews were on a rotation schedule. Response times to the east slope were acceptable; response times to the northeast

face, toward the higher drainage country, were longer than he'd like and had been a standing agenda item for two years.

He talked about the snag survey the way he talked about everything: matter-of-fact, specific, no wasted words. The snag data would feed into the next season's prescribed burn planning. Good information. He was glad Cody was doing it.

"The fire sites," Redd said, at the end. Not a question. "Brennan mentioned them."

"I asked about them," Leo said. "Brennan answered. That's on me."

Redd looked at Leo with a brief, appraising expression. "Four incidents. All contained. All on public land. All in compliance with —" he paused, and something shifted slightly in his delivery, " — well, they were out before we arrived, and there was no damage. So there's a limit to what we can do about them officially."

"But you're keeping track," Cody said.

"Kowalski keeps track of everything," Redd said. "That's what Kowalski does."

Kowalski, who had been updating something on the whiteboard, did not turn around. "I have a file," he confirmed.

"I'd like to see the sites," Cody said. "If that's possible. The cedar bark element is botanically interesting, separate from everything else."

Redd nodded slowly. "Brennan can take you to the first two." He looked at Leo. "Your ambient content — it stays ambient?"

"Landscape, light, general mountain stuff," Leo said. "Nothing operational. Nothing that goes up without you knowing."

Redd held his gaze for a moment. He was the kind of person who decided about you once and then proceeded on that basis, and Leo had the distinct sense the decision was being made right now.

"All right," Redd said. He picked up his thermos. "Welcome to the station."

He meant it. That was the thing about the captain — he meant everything he said, at exactly the weight he said it. Leo had met enough people who didn't to recognize the difference.

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The morning moved on. Cody and Brennan got deep into the survey logistics, cross-referencing the Forest Service snag inventory with the station's local knowledge of which roads were passable and which ones were aspirational. Kowalski produced a binder of his own that turned out to contain, among other things, a hand-annotated copy of the 2019 fire weather report, a grid of historical lightning strike locations on the plateau, and a two-page summary of every trail access change in the district going back seven years. He handed it to Cody without ceremony.

Cody looked at it the way other people look at birthday presents. "Can I borrow this?"

"I'll make you a copy," Kowalski said.

Tomas handled the morning radio check and then sat at the common room table with a course manual he was annotating in pencil, the handwriting small and precise. When Leo drifted past and glanced at the page, he caught the words "plant identification" and "traditional use" and "Paiute" in the margin notes, but didn't ask — Tomas's reading had the quality of work, not casual interest, and interrupting work was one of Leo's rules.

Leo spent the mid-morning doing what he did when things were interesting and he was being careful: watching. He refilled his coffee twice. He asked Kowalski a question about the station's response zone boundaries and received a more complete answer than he'd expected, including a hand-drawn sketch of the terrain features that complicated northeast-face response. He wrote some of it down. He filmed a few ambient clips: the open bay doors with the mountain behind them, the whiteboard with its scheduling grid, a close shot of the CMSD emblem above the door.

At eleven, he went out to the yard to get some air and found the coyote still there, or back — it was impossible to know which — in the same spot on the gravel turnout, watching the station door with the same patient attention.

Leo sat down on the station's low exterior bench, the one that faced the yard, and looked at the coyote.

The coyote looked at him.

"What do you want?" Leo asked.

The coyote's ears moved, tracking some distant sound on the plateau.

"Right," Leo said. "Your call."

He filmed another clip. Three seconds of the coyote in the late-morning light, the mountain enormous and indifferent behind it, before the coyote stood, turned, and walked calmly around the corner of the station building and disappeared.

Leo sat for a moment with his phone in his lap. The September air smelled like pine resin and cooling stone and somewhere in it, faintly, the ghost of woodsmoke from a summer's worth of fire calls.

He thought about cedar bark.

He thought about fires set with care and left before anyone arrived.

He thought about the way Brennan had said it — That's the thing that got me thinking about it more than the fires themselves — like a man holding the edge of a question he hadn't quite decided to pull on yet.

Leo had that same quality. It ran in him like a low current, always on, waiting for something to connect to.

He picked up his phone and looked at the clip of the coyote. Thirty seconds of an animal watching a door, unhurried, like it had nowhere else to be and knew something good was coming.

Leo looked at the corner of the building where the coyote had disappeared.

Then he went back inside to see if there was any coffee left.

There was. There always was. That was the thing about a fire station — somebody was always keeping the pot going, no matter what else was happening. It was a small thing and also, Leo thought, not small at all.

## chapter two

BRENNAN DROVE the way people drive who've been on the same roads long enough to stop thinking about them, which meant he could talk and navigate simultaneously without either suffering. The station's utility truck was a '21 F-250 in government white with a high-clearance suspension that had earned its adjustments, and it handled the road up toward the Cascade Falls trailhead with the easy authority of something built for exactly this.

Leo had the passenger window down despite the morning chill. The aspens were doing something extraordinary with the early light — the whole hillside above the road was backlit gold, the kind of gold that lasts about twenty minutes in September before the sun climbs high enough to flatten it. He was filming with his phone propped on the door frame, one eye on the road and one on the screen.

"You film a lot," Brennan observed. Not a complaint, just a notation.

"I think in footage," Leo said. "It's a condition."

"Does it help? With the — " Brennan searched for the word, " — solving things?"

"Sometimes. Mostly it helps me remember what I saw before I knew it was important." Leo lowered the phone. "You hear about the Stone People thing? Up at the Zen Nest last spring?"

"Hard not to, up here. The Village talked about it for weeks."

"About a third of what cracked that open was footage I'd shot without thinking. You just — roll on things, and sometimes the thing you weren't looking at turns out to be the thing."

Brennan nodded slowly, like a man filing information. "Huh."

In the back seat, Cody had his field notebook open on his knee and a topographic printout folded to the relevant section. He wasn't talking. He got quiet the way some people get quiet when they're approaching something they want to see clearly — all his attention pointed forward, waiting.

"How far out was the first site?" Cody asked.

"Trailhead's maybe a mile from the station by road," Brennan said. "The site itself is about a quarter-mile up the trail, in a clearing just east of the first switchback. Easy walking."

"Who found it?"

"Hiker called it in. A couple from St. George, doing the falls loop. They smelled smoke and followed it. By the time they called us and we got up there, the fire was cold. Couple hours old, maybe less." He slowed for a curve, a stand of dense spruce crowding the road on the left. "The thing that got their attention, aside from the ash, was how tidy it was. Everything arranged. Nothing scattered. They said it looked — " he paused, the way Brennan paused when he was being precise, " — intentional. Their word."

"Good word," Cody said.

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The Cascade Falls trailhead was a small gravel lot with a Forest Service kiosk and a wooden sign whose paint had cracked and faded to the point where you had to already know what it said. A single other vehicle was parked there — a dusty Outback with a kayak rack and a Utah State parking sticker, which placed its owner somewhere in the category of outdoorsy and probably not local. Brennan pulled in beside it and killed the engine.

The morning was quieter here than at the station, the road noise

gone and the forest filling the space with its own sounds: the creek audible somewhere below the trail, a Clark's nutcracker working a spruce cone high up the slope, wind moving through the aspens in that specific way that sounded less like wind and more like the mountain turning a page.

Leo got out and stood in it for a moment.

"Nice," he said.

"Yeah," Brennan said, in the tone of a man who'd been saying that for six years without it getting old.

The trail was well-maintained and wide enough to walk two abreast, packed dirt with exposed root-work in the steeper sections. Brennan led them up at a pace that was efficient without being aggressive — the pace of someone who walked trails the way other people walked hallways. The spruce canopy closed overhead, and the temperature dropped a few degrees. Cody was making small notes as he walked, shorthand that Leo couldn't read upside-down but that looked systematic.

The clearing was where Brennan had said it was: a natural break in the tree cover just east of the first switchback, maybe thirty feet across, the ground covered in pine duff and a few flat stones that the trail's original makers had pushed to the edges. In the center of the clearing, the fire ring was immediately visible — not because it was dramatic, but because it was out of place. Everything around it was random and organic, the way forest clearings are. The ring was neither.

Somebody had chosen these stones. That was the first thing you understood when you got close. They were roughly the same size, roughly the same grey-tan color, and they'd been placed in a circle of about two feet across with the kind of spacing that looked like care rather than convenience. The ash inside was pale grey, cold, and there was still a faint smell — not smoke exactly, something drier and older. Cedar.

Leo crouched at the edge and breathed it in. "You can still smell it."

"Cedar bark holds the smell," Brennan said. He pointed to the outer edge of the ring, where a few dark, shaggy fragments still clung to one of the stones. "That's what's left. Fibrous stuff — burns slower and longer than you'd expect from how light it is."

Cody was already down on one knee, not touching anything, photographing methodically. He started at the stones and worked outward in a slow spiral, the way you'd document an archaeological site. Leo watched him do it and had the same thought he always had watching Cody work: the patience. The absolute, unhurried patience of a person who believed that if you looked long enough and carefully enough, the thing would tell you what it was.

"Any tracks?" Leo asked Brennan. "When you got here?"

"The hikers had walked through before they called us, so the area around the ring was already compromised." He said it without judgment — the hikers weren't wrong to approach, they just hadn't known what they were walking into. "We found a partial boot print on the far side, toward the tree line. Wore off before we could get a full pattern."

"Direction?"

"Northeast." Brennan looked toward the trees. "But that's the direction of the trail continuation. Could've been anyone."

Cody stood up, dusting his knee. He looked at the clearing without saying anything for a moment, turning slowly, looking at the treeline in each direction. He had the expression Leo associated with Cody-seeing-more-than-he-was-letting-on, which was a specific and useful expression to be able to recognize.

"What's the elevation here?" Cody asked.

"About eight-four, eight-five hundred feet," Brennan said.

Cody wrote it down. Then he looked up at the sky — not scanning it, just noting where the sun was. He wrote that down too.

"Sightlines," Leo said.

Cody looked at him. "From this clearing, if you face northeast, you can see — " he oriented himself, stepped to the clearing's northeast edge, looked out through the gap in the trees. The view opened up: ridge, then plateau, then sky. A long way. "You can see a long way," he finished.

"Any particular reason that matters?" Brennan asked.

"Maybe not," Cody said. "Maybe yes. Ask me again after the second site."

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They drove from the trailhead up to the Duck Lake overlook via the service road, a fifteen-minute drive that gained eight hundred feet and turned the landscape from mixed forest to open plateau in stages — the pines thinning, the scrub oak taking over, then giving way to the wide-sky country that sat at the top of Cedar Mountain and felt like a different world from the canyon country below.

Duck Lake itself was a small, high-altitude lake in a shallow basin — clear water reflecting the September sky, ringed by sedge grass and a few determined willows, the kind of place that looked like it existed mainly to be perfectly itself. The overlook was above it, at the lip of the plateau's eastern edge, where the land dropped away suddenly and the view opened into something vertiginous and enormous.

Leo had been here before. He'd filmed it twice, in different seasons. It was the kind of view that defeated filters because it was already more than a camera could hold: the plateau edge, the canyon below, the Colorado Plateau stretching southeast in layers of red and ochre and brown until it blurred into the sky at the limit of vision. On a clear September morning it was all sharp edges and long distances. The sort of landscape that made you aware of how far your eyes were capable of going.

He stood at the overlook rail and looked at it.

"I know," Brennan said, coming up beside him.

"Every time," Leo agreed.

The fire site was fifteen yards back from the overlook rail, in a flat area between the trail and a large, lichen-covered stone that served as an informal bench for hikers who wanted to sit with the view. Same configuration as the first: a careful ring of stones, cold ash, cedar bark fragments. A little larger than the Cascade Falls site — the circle was closer to three feet across, and there were more bark fragments, darker and more fully burned.

"This one was burning when the call came in," Brennan said. "Low flame, controlled, well inside the ring. No one was there. By the time we got up the service road, it was out — but just out. Still warm." He crouched beside the ring. "This is the one that made Kowalski start a file."

"What was it about this one?" Leo asked.

Brennan considered for a moment. He had the habit of considering before he answered, which Leo had already identified as one of Brennan's best qualities. "The bark," he said finally. "At the Cascade site, there was just a little — a few pieces at the edge, like it had been used as kindling. Here, the bark was the primary fuel. The ash pattern showed that. And there was so much of it, more than you'd gather casually. Someone prepared this." He looked at the ring. "Someone brought it."

Cody was already in his documentation spiral, working outward from the ring with his camera. When he got to the large lichen-covered stone, he stopped.

"Brennan," he said. "Come look at this."

They came around to where Cody was crouching beside the stone's northeast face. In the shadow there, where the lichen thinned, there were scratch marks in the rock surface. Not deep, not crude — deliberate lines, fine enough that you'd walk past them without noticing at the wrong angle of light. Five marks, in a pattern that was neither random nor recognizable as any alphabet Leo knew.

"We saw those when we documented the scene," Brennan said. "Captain said to photograph them and leave them alone. We didn't know what they were."

"Neither do I," Cody said. "Not yet." He photographed them from three angles.

Leo looked at the marks, then at the fire ring, then out at the overlook. The view from here was even longer than it had seemed from the rail — from this slight elevation, looking northeast, you could see further up the plateau, to where the ridge curved and the landscape changed. On a clear day you could probably see clear across to the next drainage.

"So whoever made this," Leo said slowly, "sat here with a fire burning and looked out at that." He gestured at the view.

"Seems like," Brennan said.

"And the first site. You can see northeast from that clearing too."

Brennan looked at him. "I don't know that I'd thought about it that way."

"Cody thought about it."

Cody, still photographing the scratch marks, said: "I'm thinking about a lot of things. Most of them are going to need a map."

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They ate lunch at the overlook — sandwiches from the station's communal refrigerator that turned out to be better than the refrigerator had suggested, plus a thermos of coffee that Brennan had thought to bring and which Leo immediately identified as coming from a different, better supply than the station pot. He said so.

"My wife," Brennan said simply. "She has opinions about coffee."

"Sound opinions," Leo said.

They sat on the large stone — Brennan on the top, Leo on the slope, Cody on the ground with his notebook open — and ate with the view in front of them. The September light had moved around to a higher angle now, and the canyon below was starting to show the kind of depth that only happened when shadows fell at exactly the right slant. Leo filmed a slow pan of it and knew he'd post this one.

"The cedar bark," Cody said, after a while. He was looking at his notebook rather than the view, which took a particular kind of focus. "I want to ask Tomas about it. He had plant ethnobotany materials this morning — I saw them."

"Tomas knows the territory pretty well," Brennan said. "Plants, traditional uses, that kind of thing. He's been studying it for years." He said it with a respect that wasn't casual.

"Does he know about the sites?" Leo asked.

"The crew knows about them. We briefed internally after the third one." Brennan paused. "Tomas got quiet when we talked about the cedar bark. I noticed that. He didn't say anything — just got quiet."

Leo and Cody looked at each other.

"What kind of quiet?" Leo asked.

Brennan thought about it. "The kind where you know something but you're deciding whether it's yours to say."

The wind came across the overlook and moved through the sedge grass around the lake below, and for a moment the sound was the only

thing happening. Leo put the lid back on the thermos. Cody turned a page in his notebook.

"Two sites," Leo said. "Both with cedar bark. Both oriented to the northeast. Both in clearing or overlook positions with long sightlines to the northeast." He looked at Cody. "That's a pattern."

"It might be a pattern," Cody said. "Two points make a line, not a pattern. We'd need a third."

"There is a third," Brennan said.

They both looked at him.

"Captain mentioned it. Three weeks ago, farther northeast, toward the plateau edge. I wasn't on that call — Kowalski and Redd responded." He folded his sandwich wrapper methodically and pocketed it. "It's a longer drive. A different kind of terrain."

"Can we go?" Leo asked.

"Not today. The road past the plateau needs a specific key for the gate, and it's on Kowalski's ring. But I can set it up for tomorrow if the captain clears it." He looked at Cody. "If you wanted to bring your map."

"I always bring the map," Cody said.

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On the drive back to the station, the light had shifted to late-afternoon gold, longer and lower, turning the plateau grasses the color of good whiskey. Leo had his phone out again, not filming — just looking at what he'd shot during the day. The Cascade clearing, the stone ring, the cedar bark fragments clinging to the rock. The scratch marks on the overlook stone. The long view northeast both times, the horizon that went on until it stopped.

He thought about the word Brennan had used: intentional. The hikers' word, adopted by the crew because it was the right word.

Not accidental. Not casual. Something that had been decided in advance by someone who knew what they were doing and had brought what they needed and made what they'd come to make and then left. The fires hadn't been burning long — both were out before the crew arrived, or nearly out. Whoever it was hadn't wanted to be there when

the station showed up. But they hadn't hidden the sites either. You found them easily once you knew to look.

Leo turned this over for a while.

"What are you thinking?" Cody asked from the back seat.

"I'm thinking whoever made these isn't trying to hide them," Leo said. "They're not in the backcountry, not off-trail, not somewhere you'd only go if you were looking. A couple of hikers found the first one by following the smell. The second one is at one of the most visited overlooks on the mountain."

"Agreed," Cody said.

"So they're not secret. But the person making them doesn't want to be there when anyone arrives."

"Which means," Cody said slowly, "either they're doing something they think won't be understood, or they're doing something they know will be understood by the right person, and they're not sure we're the right people."

Leo let that sit.

"Heavy," he said.

"Maybe," Cody said. "Or maybe it's simpler than that and I'm overthinking it."

"You don't overthink things. You think the right amount and then you think a little more as insurance."

Cody was quiet for a moment. Then: "The third site," he said. "I want to see the third site."

"Tomorrow," Brennan said.

They came off the plateau road onto the main road, the canyon dropping away to their left and the station visible ahead through the pines. The flagpole caught the last angle of afternoon light, the flag moving in the cooler air that came down off the ridgeline every evening at this hour.

Back at the station, Cody borrowed the large-format topo map from the station's map cabinet — Brennan's idea, approved by Kowalski with a nod — and spent twenty minutes at the common room table marking the two sites in grease pencil while Leo drafted his post for the day. The post was just the overlook panorama, nothing about fire rings or cedar bark or scratch marks on stones. Just the view,

and the caption: the mountain doesn't run out of new ways to be itself.

He posted it. Put his phone face-down on the table.

Across the room, Cody drew a line connecting the two marks on the topo, then extended it, gently, in the direction Brennan had indicated for the third site. He looked at where the line went. He didn't say anything about it.

But he left the grease pencil out.

## chapter three

### TOMAS MADE TEA FIRST.

Not station coffee — actual tea, from a tin he kept in his locker, a dark loose-leaf blend that smelled like something between woodsmoke and cardamom when he opened the lid. He filled the electric kettle from the tap, set it on the counter, and waited for it without rushing while Leo and Cody arranged themselves at the common room table and Brennan leaned in the doorway with his arms folded, having apparently decided he wanted to hear this too.

It was late afternoon. Redd had gone out on a non-emergency call, something to do with a downed tree on the south access road. Kowalski was in the equipment bay doing the kind of end-of-shift inventory that Kowalski apparently did every day without being asked, the faint sound of his clipboard and his systematic footsteps audible through the wall. The station had the quality late-afternoon working buildings get when the busy part of the day is over but nobody's gone home yet — a settled, purposeful quiet.

"You're going to ask me about the cedar bark," Tomas said. He wasn't looking at them. He was watching the kettle.

"Brennan said you got quiet at the briefing," Leo said. "When it came up."

"I did." He got three mugs down from the cabinet, considered, and

got a fourth for Brennan without turning around. "I was deciding whether it was mine to say."

"And?"

The kettle clicked off. Tomas poured carefully, the steam rising in the still air of the common room.

"And I decided it was more important to say it than to hold it." He brought the mugs to the table, set them down, and sat. He looked at Leo. "You're going to want to put your phone away."

Leo looked at it in his hand, then at Tomas.

"Not because anything I'm going to tell you is secret," Tomas said. "It's not. It's been written down in academic papers and retold in children's books and you can find parts of it in ten minutes online if you know what you're looking for." He wrapped his hands around his mug. "But there's a difference between information and a story, and I'd rather you heard the story first."

Leo put his phone in his pocket.

Tomas nodded once, like a decision confirmed. He looked at the table for a moment, not at any of them, and then he looked up — not at Leo, not at Cody, but at some point in the middle of the air between them, which was where storytellers look when they're finding the beginning.

"There's a story the Southern Paiute tell," he said, "about how fire came to the people."

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In the old time, there was no fire.

Not in any home, not around any camp. If the nights were cold — and in this country, the nights were cold — you piled on what you had and you waited for morning. You ate what you could eat without cooking it. You had heated stones, and that was all.

The people knew fire existed somewhere. They'd seen the smoke from distant places. They'd seen, sometimes, ash drifting down from the sky — pale grey flakes falling through clear air, coming from somewhere beyond the ridgeline, beyond the distance they could travel to reach it. They knew fire was a thing. They just didn't have it.

And Coyote knew this.

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Coyote was always watching. That was his nature, and you had to understand his nature before you could understand his story. He wasn't watching because he wanted to help — not exactly. He watched because watching was what he did, and what he watched, eventually, he could not ignore. He saw the ash falling. He stood on the hunter's line where they were driving rabbits, and he looked up, and he saw it, and he cried out to the others.

Come, he said. Look at this.

And they gathered, and they looked, and they agreed: there is fire, somewhere, and we do not have it.

So Coyote said: Let us go and find it.

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Tomas paused and drank his tea. Outside, the wind moved through the pines, and the station settled into its evening sounds. Brennan had straightened up from the doorway at some point and drifted to the table, standing at the corner of it with his mug in both hands. Cody's notebook was open but his pen was still. Leo had his hands flat on the table.

Nobody said anything.

Tomas looked at the middle of the air again.

---

They assembled a party to make the journey. Eagle went first, because Eagle flew highest and could see the farthest, and they needed to know the lay of the land. Eagle went up and up until he was out of sight — and came back knowing no more than when he left. The distance was too great. Chickenhawk tried. Woodpecker tried. They came back the same way: empty-handed.

But Coyote had already decided. He knew the direction — north-

east, where the ash had come from. He could smell something in that direction, faint as a memory, that the others couldn't catch. He organized his party: Eagle, Woodpecker, Chickenhawk, Blue Jay, Roadrunner, Jackrabbit, and several others. He told them: we are not going to take the fire by force. We are going to be guests.

And they brought their firedrills with them — the tools you use to make fire from friction, from spinning a stick in a socket until the heat builds and the wood catches. They brought them to prove they had fire of their own. So the fire-holders would not suspect.

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The fire-holders lived at the end of a long journey northeast. When Coyote's party arrived, they were received well — the hosts fed each guest according to their nature: seeds for the birds, cedar berries for Coyote. They played games through the night. They gambled with stones and small mounds of earth, taking turns guessing, laughing, competing the way guests and hosts do when they are pretending everything is ordinary.

But the fire-holders were not fooled.

They watched Coyote. They said to each other, quietly, in the way of people who have something worth protecting: these visitors have not come to play. They have come for the fire.

Coyote heard the whispers and laughed. He said: We have fire of our own, see? — and showed them the firedrills. He demonstrated. And the fire-holders nodded and watched and did not fully believe him, but continued to be gracious, as hosts are.

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Tomas set his mug down and looked at his hands. Not with any drama — just the way a person looks at their hands when they're thinking about what comes next. The room was very quiet.

"This is the part," he said, "that I think matters for what you've been finding."

Cody's pen moved. Then stopped.

Before dawn, while it was still dark, Coyote went to the fire.

He had prepared himself. In his hair — the thick, coarse, dark fur of his head — he had tucked cedar bark, wound through carefully so it would catch without falling. He had done this openly, walking around the camp with the bark visible, letting everyone see. They'd noted it and said nothing. What were they going to say? He was a guest. Maybe it was decoration. Maybe it was custom.

Cedar bark burns.

Coyote knew this. He had always known this. The bark of the cedar is light and fibrous and holds a flame the way few other materials do — it catches quickly, and it releases a smoke that carries, a smell that travels. The Paiute people used it for starting fires, for carrying fire from one place to another, for keeping an ember alive in the dark. You could tuck a smoldering piece into cedar bark and carry it for miles without it going out, if you were careful. If you knew how.

Coyote leaned over the fire.

The cedar bark in his hair caught.

And he ran.

His party scattered ahead of him, down the trail they'd planned in advance, each one taking a position. The fire-holders came after them, fast and angry, because they understood now — they had always suspected and now they knew. Coyote ran with fire in his hair, the flame small but real, through the middle of the pursuing crowd, and the bark did not go out.

He passed the flame to Eagle, who carried it further. Eagle passed it to Woodpecker, who passed it to Chickenhawk. Each one ran their leg of the relay, each one passed the ember forward before the fire-holders could catch them, and the fire-holders fell back because the relay was too long and too fast and each time they caught up to one animal, the fire was already in the hands of the next.

On and on, across the country, the fire traveled.

Then the rain came.

It came the way rain comes in this country — sudden, complete, without apology. The sky opened and the water fell and the fire-holders had called it, or the sky had simply decided, or both. The ember that had been passed from hand to hand and carried across so much ground began to fail. One by one, the small fires that each animal had been carrying went out in the water.

One remained.

Jackrabbit.

Jackrabbit ran through the rain with the last ember of all, and the rain wanted it, and the fire-holders wanted it, and everything was against him. He looked for shelter. He looked for cover. And he found the only thing available to him, which was himself.

He tucked the ember beneath his tail.

He ran.

And when the rain stopped, and the pursuit had finally ended, and Jackrabbit was alone in the dripping world with nothing but the impossible small warmth he'd been carrying — he uncurled, and the ember was still there. Still alive. Wet world and cold air and a dead sky above, and one coal that had not gone out.

He brought it to the people.

From that coal, they made fire.

And from that fire, they have never been without it since.

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The fire station's common room came back into focus the way a room does when a story ends — the fluorescent light overhead, the scheduling whiteboard, the smell of old coffee and metal. Brennan set his empty mug down on the counter behind him with a small, careful sound. Cody looked at his notebook, at the single line he'd written, which Leo couldn't read from across the table but which appeared to be two words.

Leo looked at Tomas.

"Cedar bark," Leo said.

"Cedar bark," Tomas agreed.

"The fire was carried in cedar bark."

"And cedar bark was left at every one of your sites." Tomas held Leo's gaze. "That's not coincidence, and it's not decoration. If someone left cedar bark at a fire site on this mountain, they know the story. And they intended the bark to mean something."

"Where does the story come from?" Cody asked. "Geographically — is it from this area?"

"The Southern Paiute," Tomas said. "Their territory covered most of what is now southwestern Utah, including this plateau. Cedar Mountain — this mountain, the one we're sitting on right now — is within the ancestral homeland of the Paiute people. The cedar forests up here, the ones you can see from the station yard, are exactly the cedars the story is about." He paused. "The bark in your fire rings didn't come from far away. It came from here. Which means whoever made those fires gathered the materials on-site."

"Gathered them recently," Leo said. "The bark at the overlook site was still fragrant."

Tomas nodded. "Cedar holds its oils for a while after it's cut. If it still smelled, it was probably gathered within a few days of the fire."

Cody had turned to a clean page in his notebook. He was writing quickly now, the focused shorthand of someone organizing thoughts before they could escape. "The geographic orientation of the sites," he said without looking up. "Northeast both times. The story goes northeast — the fire-holders were northeast, the ash came from the northeast. If someone is re-enacting this journey on the landscape —"

"Then the sites would be oriented to follow the story's direction," Tomas said.

"Yes."

"And there's a logic to where they'd be placed. The story has specific beats — the discovery of fire from afar, the gathering of helpers, the journey, the deception at the fire-holders' camp, the relay, the rain, the salvation of the last ember. If you were marking those beats on this landscape, you'd put each site at a location that corresponded to that part of the story." Tomas looked at the table. "The first site — the one

near the Cascade Falls trailhead. From that clearing, you can see the plateau to the northeast."

"The place where the ash would have come from," Leo said slowly. "If you were standing there and you looked northeast and you saw ash drifting down from somewhere beyond the ridge."

"That's where the story starts."

Nobody said anything for a moment.

Brennan spoke from the counter. "So what's the third site?"

Tomas looked at him. "I'd need to know the location."

"Northeast of the overlook," Brennan said. "Toward the plateau edge. A rocky prominence — Eagle Point, we call it. Known nesting area."

Something moved in Tomas's expression. "Eagle went first," he said quietly. "In the story. Eagle went up first to try to find the fire, before the journey began."

The room was very still.

"An eagle nesting area," Leo said.

"Yes."

"And we're going there tomorrow."

Tomas looked at him with something careful in his face. "I know," he said. "I heard Brennan setting it up." He paused. "When you go — photograph everything. Whatever cedar bark you find, whatever configuration. Don't disturb anything." Another pause, smaller. "And pay attention to how the site is oriented. If I'm right about what this is, the orientation will matter."

"What do you think it is?" Leo asked.

Tomas picked up his mug, found it empty, and set it down again.

"I think someone is walking the story," he said. "I think someone is placing these fires not as a stunt or a gesture or a puzzle, but as an act of — " he considered the word, " — devotion. To the story. To the land. To what the land carries." He looked at Leo directly. "And I think you need to decide, before you go any further, what you're going to do if you're right."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that some things are meant to be followed. And some things are meant to be witnessed from a respectful distance." He stood,

picking up his mug for the sink. "I don't know yet which this is. But I think you should be asking yourself the question before the answer is handed to you."

He rinsed the mug, set it in the drying rack, and went back to his shift.

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They sat at the table for a while after Tomas left. Brennan had gone back to the equipment bay — he had gear to log before end of shift — and the common room was theirs. The fluorescent light hummed. The coffee maker kept its coffee warm, pointlessly, for whoever might want it.

Cody looked at his notebook. He'd written, Leo could now see, the words orientation and devotion, with a line connecting them.

"He's right," Cody said. "About the question."

"I know."

"We're going to Eagle Point tomorrow and we're going to find another site, and it's going to fit the pattern, and then we're going to have to decide whether to keep following it."

"I know."

"I want to keep following it," Cody said. "That's my honest answer. I want to see where it goes. But I also want to make sure we're thinking about why, and not just doing it because it's interesting."

Leo thought about that. "It is interesting."

"Very," Cody agreed.

"But that's not enough."

"Probably not on its own, no."

Leo leaned back in his chair. Through the common room window, the mountain was going blue-grey with the end of the afternoon, the sky above the ridgeline moving through the first, tentative colors of a September sunset. He thought about ash drifting down from somewhere beyond the ridge. He thought about standing in a clearing and seeing it and thinking: there is something out there that we don't have yet.

"The story starts with someone watching from a distance," he said.

"Seeing something they can't explain, and deciding to go toward it instead of away from it." He looked at Cody. "I think that's what we're doing. I don't think we're wrong to do it."

Cody considered this for a long moment. Then: "Okay. But we do it carefully."

"Always," Leo said, in the tone he used when he meant it and they both knew it might not be entirely accurate.

Cody gave him the look that deserved and went back to his notebook.

Leo picked up his phone. He had a notification from his post — the overlook panorama, already doing well. He looked at it for a moment, then put the phone back down.

He thought about cedar bark tucked into dark fur. He thought about a fire catching in the dark, and a figure running through a crowd, and the long relay of an ember passed from hand to hand across a country that was, it turned out, this country. This mountain.

He picked up his phone again. Opened the camera. Thought better of it.

Some things you kept in your head for a while before you decided what to do with them.

Outside, the last light left the ridgeline. The station's exterior lights clicked on automatically, the way they did every evening at this hour, and the gravel yard filled with a clean, flat glow. Somewhere in the dark at the edge of the lot, a coyote was either there or not there.

Leo didn't go look.

He already knew the answer.

## chapter **four**

THE MORNING AFTER Tomas told the story, Leo woke up thinking about cedar bark and lay in bed for ten minutes thinking about it before he admitted to himself that he was going to be thinking about it all day and he might as well get up.

He made coffee at his own place — a rented cabin about a mile from the station, on the village side of the ridge — in a pot that was strictly better than the station's but not as good as he sometimes told people. September mornings at this elevation had a specific quality: the air was cold enough to mean it but the sun, when it came up, was still warm enough to argue back. He stood on the small porch with his mug and watched the argument happen over the ridgeline and felt, as he often felt on this mountain in this season, like he'd ended up somewhere that suited him better than anywhere else he'd tried.

He texted Cody: Eagle Point today. You eat already?

Cody's reply came back in forty seconds, which meant he'd also been up for a while: Yes. Bring the grease pencil from the station table. I forgot it there.

Leo had not touched the grease pencil. He did not mention this.

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The drive to the station took eight minutes, less if you didn't slow for the curve by the creek, which Leo always slowed for because a marmot had taken to sitting on the guardrail at that spot at unpredictable hours and he had, twice, nearly collected it. He had not filmed either near-miss. Some things were better not documented.

He arrived to find a truck he didn't recognize parked in the visitor space by the station entrance — newer than the government vehicles, a well-used Tacoma in a dark green that had faded to something almost military, with a roof rack carrying a neatly organized set of gear: dry bags, a coil of rope, what looked like a lightweight packframe lashed down with orange straps. The kind of truck that said its owner went into the backcountry regularly and had figured out the system.

Inside, the voice he didn't recognize was already in conversation with Redd in the common room, and the conversation had the easy, collegial rhythm of two people who spoke a common language. Leo got coffee from the pot — marginally better than yesterday's, which meant Kowalski had made a fresh one at some point — and listened for a moment from the hallway.

The voice was asking about fire weather for the coming week: the pressure system building to the northwest, the overnight lows on the plateau, whether the recent humidity had done anything useful for the fuel moisture numbers in the northeast drainages. These were specific questions from someone who understood what the answers meant.

Redd was answering with his characteristic economy, one fact at a time, and in the pauses between answers Leo could hear something he didn't often hear in Redd's tone: the faint but real quality of a conversation he was actually enjoying.

Leo went in.

The man at the table was somewhere in his early forties, lean and weathered in the sun-and-altitude way that was different from the gym-and-protein way, with dark hair going grey at the sides and the kind of smile that arrived quickly and looked like it meant it. He was wearing a fleece that had seen significant field use and trail pants with a repair patch on the right knee from what had clearly been a proper tear rather than a fashion choice. His hands, wrapped around a station mug, were the hands of someone who worked with them.

He looked at Leo with an immediate, open interest. "You must be the social media guy," he said. Not dismissively — with the genuine curiosity of someone who found unexpected things interesting.

"Guilty," Leo said, which was becoming his standard response to this.

"Dex Hartley." He extended a hand across the table. His grip was the grip of a man who shook hands all day with clients and had calibrated it to exactly the right pressure — firm, warm, brief. "I run wilderness survival courses out of this district. The captain here tolerates me."

"Hartley's courses are solid," Redd said, in the tone he used for facts. "He knows the terrain."

"High praise from Redd," Dex said, and the way he said Redd's name — casual but respectful, the familiarity of someone who'd earned the right to it — told Leo something about how long he'd been coming here and what kind of relationship he'd built.

"Leo," Leo said. "I'm up here doing ambient content. Mountain, community, that kind of thing. Cody Westbrook and I are working with the station on a snag survey this month."

"Westbrook — the ornithologist? From Cornell?" Dex nodded. "I heard about the falcon thing last summer. That was impressive work."

"He doesn't like it when people call it impressive. He says he just documented what was there."

Dex smiled. "That's what impressive usually is."

Leo sat down across from him and decided, in the instinctive way he made these assessments, that he liked Dex Hartley. This happened occasionally and was not always a reliable indicator of anything, but it happened clearly enough that he noted it.

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Redd went back to the equipment bay at some point, the way Redd went back to whatever needed doing whenever he'd given a conversation what it needed. He had the gift of leaving without it feeling like a departure. Dex watched him go with the expression of someone who respected an exit well-timed.

"How long have you been running courses up here?" Leo asked.

"Seven years. Started with weekend programs — fire starting, navigation, emergency shelter. Now I do three and five-day backcountry intensives." Dex turned his mug in his hands. "Clientele has shifted. Used to be mostly hardcore outdoor types who wanted to push their skills. Now I get a lot of people who've realized that they spend their entire lives in environments that are completely dependent on infrastructure they don't understand, and they find that unsettling." He paused. "Which is the right reaction to have, honestly. I'm just the one who does something about it."

"What does a five-day intensive look like?"

"Day one: navigation without electronics. Day two: water sourcing and treatment. Day three: shelter and fire. Day four: food — what's available, what's safe, what you're missing from your assumptions about what wild food is. Day five: integrating everything, moving through terrain with a purpose." He said it the way he'd said it many times, but with the cadence of someone who still meant it. "I take small groups — four clients maximum. I want everyone to actually learn, not just watch."

"Where do you operate? Which part of the district?"

"Varies by season and conditions." Dex tilted his head. "Right now, late summer and into fall, I favor the east slope and the plateau edge. The terrain's varied, the weather's interesting, and the fire ecology up there gives me good teaching material. You can't talk about backcountry survival on Cedar Mountain without talking about fire." A small pause. "The captain gives me a very useful briefing every time I come in. Which is why I'm here."

"Smart," Leo said.

"Cheaper than getting caught out," Dex said, without any vanity in it. He drained his mug and set it down. "What's your read on the mountain? You've been up here a few days — what are you seeing?"

It was a good question, asked with the genuine interest of someone who collected information about places they cared about. Leo thought about cedar bark and the scratch marks on the overlook stone and the line Cody had drawn on the topo map, and answered a different version of the question.

"It's beautiful and it's got a lot going on underneath," he said. "I'm still finding out what that means."

Dex nodded slowly, like a man who recognized an honest answer even when it was also a careful one. "That's Cedar Mountain," he said. "It rewards the patient ones."

He said goodbye to Kowalski on the way out — knew him by name, knew to find him in the equipment bay — and the sound of the green Tacoma pulling out of the lot carried in through the common room window with a clean, unhurried quality.

Leo sat with his coffee and thought about the east slope and the plateau edge.

Then Cody arrived, slightly breathless from the walk from his own cabin, and the day got properly started.

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They drove to Eagle Point with Brennan.

They returned to the station at half past two. Cody went straight to the common room table and the topo map, which was beginning to acquire the look of a document with a real argument in it. Leo stood in the station yard and looked at the afternoon light on the mountain and thought about what they'd seen, and what Cody's grease pencil mark was going to mean when it went on the map, and whether Tomas was right about the question they needed to be asking.

He was in the middle of this thought when he noticed the coyote.

It was in its usual spot on the gravel turnout, sitting in the afternoon sun with the specific, boneless ease of an animal that had decided this was home and was comfortable with that decision. What was different today was the light — the September sun at this angle was full on the turnout, and the coyote was lit from the side in a way that made it look less like a wild animal passing through and more like a portrait. The reddish grey of its coat went warm and amber. The dark of its legs went rich and deep. Its ears were relaxed. Its tail was settled.

Leo stood and looked at it for a moment. Then he did something he'd been resisting for three days, because he hadn't wanted to do it

casually: he got down on one knee, framed the shot carefully, and filmed a full sixty seconds.

The coyote did not move. It sat in the light and looked at the station door, and occasionally its nose moved with the small, constant work of a nose that was always processing, and once it turned its head and looked at Leo for three or four seconds with an expression of complete, unhurried neutrality, and then looked back at the door.

Leo stopped the clip. He watched it back, crouching there in the gravel.

It was, he thought, an exceptionally good sixty seconds.

He sat on the low exterior bench and wrote a caption. He wrote three drafts of it and deleted two and kept the third, which was: Morning shift supervisor. Very serious about his work. Then he thought about the story Tomas had told the night before, and the cedar bark, and the ember that Jackrabbit carried under his tail through the rain, and he added a second line: Coyote keeps showing up. Probably means something.

He posted it.

Then he went inside to see what Cody's third mark on the map looked like.

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The post did what posts occasionally do when they catch something real: it moved. Not immediately — these things rarely happened immediately, despite what people thought about the internet. It started with Leo's existing followers, who knew the mountain content and were primed to respond to it. By early evening it had been shared enough times that it had left that primary audience and was finding new ones. By the time Leo checked before bed it had collected four thousand likes and a comment thread that had gone in seventeen different directions, some of them delightful and some of them the internet being the internet.

One of the delightful ones was a wildlife nonprofit that had shared it with a caption about urban-interface coyote behavior and the impor-

tance of not feeding them. Leo found this deeply ironic and did not respond to it.

Kowalski texted him at nine-forty-seven PM, which was later than Leo would have predicted Kowalski sent texts. The message was: Do not post the station address.

Leo replied: Already didn't.

Kowalski replied: Good.

A pause of about two minutes, which Leo spent wondering if that was the end of it. Then: The caption was accurate. He does take his work seriously.

Leo stared at his phone for a moment.

He typed back: Did you just compliment the coyote?

The reply took four minutes and was: Good night.

Leo set his phone down and laughed at the ceiling of his cabin for a while. Then he picked the phone back up and went to the station's Facebook page, which he'd looked at once before without much expectation, and found that Kowalski — sometime in the last hour, without telling anyone — had posted a photograph of the coyote. It had been taken from inside the station, through the common room window, at an angle that showed the gravel turnout and the mountain above it. The coyote was in frame, small but unmistakable. The caption, in Kowalski's apparent Facebook voice, which was identical to his in-person voice: Station resident. Not on the payroll.

It had forty-seven likes.

Leo shared it immediately, credited the station's page, and added: My colleague has a gift.

By morning it would have three hundred.

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Brennan sent him the Discord invite at ten-fifteen PM with a message that said: You wanted in on the fire weather chat. Prepare yourself.

Leo accepted.

The group was called Cedar Mountain Fire Weather Watch, which was a functional name, and it had twenty-three members, which was

more than Leo had expected for a hyperlocal weather monitoring chat on a mountain with a permanent population of maybe two hundred. He scrolled the backlog for fifteen minutes and found, in order: a seventeen-message argument about the accuracy of the Weather.gov model versus the NAM model for plateau forecasting, a photo of what one member claimed was a lenticular cloud forming over Brian Head that two other members disputed was lenticular at all, a running thread about the creek gauge at Duck Creek that had been going since July, and a four-part message from someone identified only as GertrudeW about the behavior of her cat Biscuit in the twelve hours preceding the last significant wind event, which Gertrude believed was diagnostically relevant and which three other members had engaged with in complete seriousness.

Leo read the Biscuit thread twice.

He introduced himself with a brief message and a short video clip from the station yard — mountain, flagpole, the edge of the gravel lot. Nothing that identified the station specifically. He said he was working with the crew on the snag survey and would be up on the plateau periodically and happy to share field observations if they were useful.

The response was immediate and enthusiastic. Seven different members replied within three minutes. One sent him a link to a barometric pressure model he'd never heard of. One asked if he'd noticed any wind shear near the plateau edge in the afternoons. One — a message from an account called WeatherKid\_15 — sent him a two-paragraph summary of a pressure system developing to the northwest that was, according to WeatherKid\_15's calculations, likely to bring significant rain to the northeast face of the mountain in approximately ten days, and asked if Leo could let him know if the crew's weather instruments showed anything consistent.

Leo read the two paragraphs carefully. They were specific, well-reasoned, and cited their data sources. The conclusion might or might not be accurate — he wasn't equipped to judge — but the methodology was clearer than a lot of professional weather writing he'd encountered.

He forwarded it to Brennan with a note: Who is WeatherKid\_15?

Brennan replied: Fifteen-year-old kid in the village. Has a full weather station in his backyard. He's usually right.

Leo looked at the message from WeatherKid\_15 again. Ten days, northeast face, significant rain.

He thought about the cedar grove at the end of the trail. He thought about Jackrabbit running through the rain with the last ember.

He put his phone on the charger and lay in the dark for a while, listening to the mountain do its nighttime things outside the cabin window — the wind, the trees, the distant indeterminate sounds that were either wildlife or the mountain settling or both — and thought about what it would mean if the trail had an ending, and whether ten days was enough time to find it.

He didn't have an answer.

He went to sleep.

The mountain kept its counsel, the way it always did, patient and enormous and entirely unbothered by the questions of the people who moved across it in the dark.



## chapter **five**

**EAGLE POINT WAS** not a trail destination. There was no sign for it, no kiosk, no designated parking. The name was the crew's name for it — a rocky prominence on the eastern shoulder of the plateau, reachable by a combination of service road and a half-mile of hiking that was technically cross-country, meaning you picked your own line through the scrub and rocks and hoped your sense of direction was as good as you thought.

Brennan's was. He'd been up here enough times that his feet seemed to know the route independently of his eyes, which were occupied with pointing out things: a cluster of whitebark pine at the edge of their elevation range, the long scar on the ridge face where a rockslide had cleared a swath of brush two winters ago and the regrowth was just beginning to show in earnest, the faint diagonal line across a boulder field that was either a game trail or an optical illusion and was probably both.

Cody catalogued all of it, some in his notebook, some just in the way he watched things — the naturalist's habit of filing without forcing, storing observations in a structure that would produce conclusions later, when you weren't trying.

Leo filmed the walking for about three minutes and then put his phone away. There were mornings on this mountain when filming felt like putting a pane of glass between yourself and what was happening,

and this was one of them. The air at this elevation had a dryness that was its own kind of clean. The light was early enough to be golden but high enough to show the country clearly, and the country was showing itself as the kind of terrain that rewarded the effort of getting there — not dramatic, not postcard-perfect, just genuinely itself. Plateau grass going amber with the season. Jumbled grey limestone outcrops softened by lichen in shades from pale green to almost orange. Everywhere the smell of sage warming in the sun.

"How much further?" Leo asked.

"You can see it from here if you know where to look." Brennan pointed northeast. On the skyline, a formation of rock rose perhaps thirty feet above the plateau surface — not a cliff, not a peak, more like the plateau itself had gathered its material at that point and pushed up, as if making a point. "That's Eagle Point."

"I can see why they nest there," Cody said.

"Every year. Same ledge. The crew checks it during fire season patrols — we know which years it's active."

"This year?"

"Active through July. Fledglings were out by late August."

Cody made a note, the practiced two-second shorthand of a man who annotated instinctively. "Good productivity," he said, in the tone he used when data aligned with what he'd hoped.

They kept walking.

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The prominence, up close, was more interesting than it had looked from a distance. The rock was a pale grey limestone shot through with layers of a darker material that ran in almost-horizontal bands, giving the whole formation a stacked quality, like something assembled with intention. The eastern face was near-vertical, dropping maybe forty feet to a bench of scrub before the slope continued down into the drainage below. The ledge system on that face — a series of irregular horizontal breaks in the rock — was exactly the kind of architecture that raptors preferred: sheltered, elevated, with a clear sightline to the hunting ground below.

Leo stood at the base of the formation and looked up at the ledges and thought about Eagle going first, rising higher and higher, trying to see where the fire was.

He didn't say this out loud. He'd been keeping that kind of thought internal since Tomas's story, which felt right. The story wasn't his to narrate over everything he looked at. It was just there, running alongside what he was seeing, a second track he was aware of.

Cody had already moved around to the north side of the formation, where the rock relented into a gentler slope and you could reach the base of the ledge system without climbing. He was photographing the ledge face from below — not the fire site, not yet, just the place. The way he documented every site they visited: start with the context, work to the detail, never the other way around.

Brennan waited in the sun on a flat shelf of rock with the patience of a man who had spent a professional career waiting for conditions to develop. He had his thermos. He did not appear to feel the need to fill the silence.

"Fire site's in the clearing on the south side," he said, when Leo looked at him.

Leo went around.

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The clearing on the south side of the prominence was larger than the previous two sites — forty feet or more across, floored with fine gravel and sparse alpine grass, sheltered on the north by the rock face and open to the sky on every other side. The kind of place that would be warm in the morning and cool by afternoon, where you'd feel the sun fully and also feel the wind when it shifted. A natural gathering spot, if you were the kind of person who read terrain the way the mountain wanted you to.

The fire circle was at the center.

It was the most elaborate they'd seen. Not larger in diameter — the ring of stones was about the same size as the overlook site — but more fully realized in every other way. The stones had been chosen with care: flat-topped, roughly uniform, placed with consistent spacing in a circle

that was as close to geometrically even as you could achieve by eye and hand. Inside the ring, the ash was pale and thorough, the complete burning of material that had been given time and air. And around the perimeter of the circle, not inside it, a series of cedar bark bundles had been placed at intervals — eight of them, each about the size of a closed fist, each positioned with the same care as the stones.

Not kindling. Not remnant. Placed.

Leo crouched at the edge and looked at the arrangement without touching anything. He was getting better at this — at the discipline of looking before moving, before reaching, before doing anything that would change what was there. Cody had been a good teacher by example, never saying much about it, just demonstrating every time what methodical attention looked like.

The bundles were positioned in a pattern that was symmetrical but not simply so — it wasn't four pairs at the cardinal points. It was something more complex. Leo counted the intervals between bundles and found they weren't equal. Some were close together, some farther apart.

He photographed everything. Then he photographed it again from a different angle, lower to the ground, which was how Cody had told him once that you caught details that eye-level missed.

He caught something.

On the stone at the far northeast of the ring — the stone that faced, if you extended the line, back toward the overlook and then down toward the trailhead — there was a mark. Not the same as the scratch marks on the overlook stone, which had been fine and linear. This was a shallow impression, almost circular, worn rather than cut, as if the surface had been rubbed smooth by repeated contact with something soft. A thumb, maybe, or a smooth stone used as a tool, over a long time.

Leo stared at it. He thought: repeated. Not once. Many times. The same spot, the same contact, worn to smoothness.

He photographed it carefully and said nothing.

Cody arrived at the clearing a few minutes later and went through his documentation without being told — the same spiral he always used, outward from the ring, patient and complete. When he reached the northeast stone he stopped in the same way Leo had stopped,

crouched in the same way, and after a long moment said: "Do you see the wear pattern?"

"Yes."

"This site has been used before," Cody said. "Not just this season. That kind of wear takes years."

Leo looked at the ring and thought about what Redd had said: this mountain has been telling that story for a long time. He hadn't understood what the captain meant then. He thought he was starting to.

"Tomas said the same thing essentially," Leo said. "Not those words."

"He knew." Cody stood, dusting his knees. "He told us enough to see it without telling us what to see. Which was the right way to do it."

Brennan had come around to the clearing. He looked at the site with the quiet expression of a man encountering something he'd been briefed on but hadn't fully visualized until now.

"The bark bundles," he said. "That's new for this site. When Kowalski and the captain responded, they noted the fire ring and the ash, but no bark bundles outside the ring."

"Someone came back," Leo said.

"After the initial fire. Added to it." Brennan looked at the bundles, then at Leo. "Why?"

Cody answered, slowly, working it out as he spoke. "In the story, Eagle goes first. Eagle tries and fails — he can't reach far enough to see where the fire is. He's the first helper assembled, the first one to try. If someone is marking that beat of the story at this location —" he looked at the bundles, "— the extra material might be honoring that. The trying. Not just the place but the act."

The clearing was quiet. A raven called somewhere beyond the eastern face of the prominence, the sound bouncing off the rock and arriving at them from two directions at once.

Leo took one more photograph of the site, wide, with the prominence in the background and the mountain below it and the sky above. Then he turned away from it, because he'd learned in three days that there was a point past which looking became something other than witnessing, and you had to know when you'd reached it.

The old fire lookout tower was a fifteen-minute walk northeast of Eagle Point, along the plateau edge, accessible by a faint trail that Brennan knew from memory. It had been decommissioned years ago when the Forest Service shifted to aerial and satellite monitoring, but it had been maintained as a historic site — the four-legged steel base, the enclosed cab at the top with its wraparound catwalk, the lightning rod standing above everything in formal readiness. The tower had the quality of structures that outlive their original purpose and acquire a different, harder-to-name one.

From the base you could see in every direction without obstruction, which was, of course, why it had been built there. The plateau spread south and west, the canyon country fell away to the east and northeast, and on a clear September morning you could see ranges that Leo could name only approximately and a horizon that made distance feel theoretical.

Cody photographed the tower for his own records — snag survey notation, something about the standing dead timber within the tower's historic fire-detection radius. Leo walked the perimeter, getting a feel for the ground, the way things lay.

The base of the tower had a ground-level storage alcove — a low, enclosed space built into the base structure, accessible through a heavy timber door secured with a hasp and a padlock. The lock was open. Not broken — open, the shackle hanging through the hasp but not engaged.

Leo stopped.

He looked at the open lock for a moment, the way you look at something small that shouldn't be wrong but is. Then he called, without urgency: "Brennan."

Brennan came around from the east leg of the tower base. He looked at the lock. His expression didn't change in any dramatic way, but something in it focused.

"That's supposed to be secured," he said.

"When were you last up here?"

"July, maybe. Routine patrol." He crouched to examine the hasp. "No damage to the lock. Someone had the combination or got lucky."

He pulled the timber door open. The alcove beyond was about the size of a large closet, unheated, the air inside cool and slightly stale. Wooden shelving along three walls, empty except for a few rusted brackets and some old Forest Service signage stacked in a corner.

And a CMSD cache box.

It sat on the lowest shelf, towards the back — the same configuration Leo had seen in the station's equipment bay, a heavy-duty weather-proof case in olive green with the CMSD stencil on the lid and a numeric combination lock on the hasp. It looked exactly like it belonged there, which was either because someone had placed it with that intention, or because a cache box in a storage alcove read as natural regardless of whether it should be there.

Brennan went very still.

"Is this one of yours?" Leo asked, though he already knew the shape of the answer from Brennan's stillness.

"It's one of ours." Brennan straightened up slowly. "It's not one of ours that should be here."

He didn't touch it. He looked at it with the focused attention of someone reading a situation carefully before doing anything about it.

"The inventory map has all active cache sites flagged," he said. "This location is not on it. This box was decommissioned — the plateau edge caches were pulled two seasons ago, access issues made them impractical for rapid response." He paused. "The box was supposed to come back to the station."

Leo took two photographs — the box in context, showing the alcove and the shelf, and then a close shot of the stencil on the lid. He did not photograph the combination lock. He already knew he wasn't going to write about this today, and he didn't want imagery he'd have to decide about later.

"Do you want to open it?" he asked.

Brennan considered. "Not without Kowalski. This is a documentation situation." He pulled the timber door mostly closed, leaving it as they'd found it — open lock, closed door. "I need to report this when we get back."

"Should you lock it?"

"If it's been accessed, locking it now doesn't recover what's

happened. And I want to be able to show the captain exactly what we found." He looked at Leo. "This doesn't go on your page."

"I already decided that." Leo pocketed his phone. "What is it? What do those boxes carry?"

"Depends on the cache designation. This one, if it was configured as a standard plateau cache —" Brennan's voice was even, the evenness of a professional keeping something contained, " — water treatment supplies, basic medical kit, emergency shelter, hand tools. Communications equipment. A hand radio, possibly."

Leo heard the word medical. He heard the word radio. He heard the way Brennan said the word possibly, which was not the sound of uncertainty but the sound of a man who was fairly sure and would have preferred not to be.

"That's not nothing," Leo said.

"No," Brennan said. "It's not nothing."

They stood in the shadow of the tower base for a moment, the plateau wind crossing the open ground around them. Above, the lightning rod stood against the sky in its perpetual attitude of official readiness, pointing at whatever might come.

"Two things," Cody said from behind them. He had come around without either of them noticing — quietly, the way he moved through terrain he was paying attention to. "Two things are happening in the same landscape and we've been thinking of them as one."

Brennan looked at him.

"The fires are a story," Cody said. "That cache is a different story."

"Or the same story told by a different person," Leo said. He wasn't sure why he said it. It had felt true when he said it and he wasn't ready to explain why.

Brennan looked between them, then back at the alcove door.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get back."

---

They walked back to the truck in a different silence than the one they'd walked out in. The earlier silence had been the comfortable kind, the silence of people moving through good country without needing to fill

it. This one had weight in it — not dread, nothing as dramatic as that, but the specific gravity of a situation that had just become larger than you thought it was.

Cody pulled out his topo map as they walked, the folded section already marked with the morning's work, and added a third grease pencil point: Eagle Point. He looked at the three marks, at the arc they described, at where the arc was pointing.

"Northeast," Leo said.

"Northeast," Cody confirmed.

"Where's the cedar grove?"

Cody traced the arc with his finger, extending it past the current marks, past the plateau edge, down into the drainage country on the northeast face. His finger stopped at a point on the map where two contour lines indicated a sheltered depression — a drainage coming off the slope, with a small creek marked in blue. A faint notation in the map's original print: cedar.

"If the pattern holds," Cody said, "and if the story's beats correspond to real geography the way Tomas thinks they do —" He tapped the cedar notation. "That would be where the last site is."

"The rain scene," Leo said. "Jackrabbit and the last ember."

"Yes."

Leo looked at the map. Then he looked up at the mountain — the slope dropping away from the plateau, the drainage below, the cedar-dark smudge of vegetation in the fold of the land where the contour lines crowded together.

He thought about WeatherKid\_15's rain forecast. Ten days.

He thought about a last ember, saved against everything, and what it would mean for a story like this one to reach its ending.

"We need to get there before the rain," he said.

"Yes," Cody said. "We probably do."

The truck was visible now through the scrub, white against the plateau grass, Brennan already at the driver's door with his keys in his hand — the keys that included, on the same ring, the key to the plateau gate, and other keys whose purposes Leo didn't fully know but were beginning to seem important.

Leo put his phone away.

He had two things in his head that didn't fit together yet. He was patient enough to wait for them to show him how they connected.

The mountain was patient too.

It had been patient about this for longer than any of them had been alive.

## chapter **six**

THE REPORT TO Kowalski took eleven minutes.

Not because it was complicated — Brennan had it organized in his head before they got back to the station, the facts in sequence, the photographs already pulled up on his phone. It took eleven minutes because Kowalski listened to everything twice. The first time for the facts. The second time, Leo suspected, for anything Brennan might have unconsciously smoothed over in the telling. Kowalski was the kind of listener who heard the shape of what was said as much as the content.

Leo and Cody waited in the common room. Cody updated his notes. Leo made fresh coffee — actually fresh this time, rinsing the pot first, a gesture he felt was warranted — and stood at the window watching the yard while it brewed. The coyote was not on its turnout. The mountain above the station had gone from morning gold to the flatter, more honest light of mid-morning, which showed the terrain more accurately and less kindly and Leo generally preferred.

He could hear, through the wall, the specific quality of Kowalski's silence in response to what Brennan was telling him. It was not the silence of a man receiving unexpected news. It was the silence of a man receiving confirmation of something he had already partially suspected, and who was deciding what to do with the confirmation.

After eleven minutes, Kowalski came through to the common room, looked at Leo, looked at Cody, and said: "I'm going to do a full

field check of all active cache sites this week. Both of you are welcome to come, if Brennan can spare the time."

It was not a request. It was an announcement that happened to include them.

"Whatever you need," Leo said.

Kowalski nodded, poured himself a coffee, noted that the pot was clean, and went back without commenting on it. Through the wall, Leo heard the sound of a filing cabinet opening.

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He posted the Eagle Point photographs that afternoon.

Not the cache, not the fire ring, not the cedar bark bundles — those were in his camera roll and would stay there for now. What he posted was landscape: the formation itself against the September sky, the plateau spreading south from its base, the view from the top of the approach across the drainage country. One photograph of the lichen on the rock face, close enough that the color gradients were visible, the orange and green and pale grey of it together making something that looked more painted than grown.

The caption was simple: Eagle Point. You earn the view on this one.

He tagged it under the ongoing series — Following the Ember, which had been accumulating a modest but attentive following, the kind of audience that read captions rather than just double-tapping the image. He'd been deliberate about that. The people who found the series through the mountain content tended to stay; the people who found it through the coyote post were more diffuse, here for the animal and less interested in the landscape thinking. Both were fine. They were different things.

The comments came in through the afternoon in the usual patterns — the regulars first, then the secondary wave as people shared it to their own feeds, then the occasional stranger who'd arrived from somewhere unexpected and left a comment that revealed they'd read more than the current post. Leo answered some of them, let others stand, scrolled through the thread with the half-attention of someone who'd been

doing this long enough to know what needed a response and what didn't.

He almost missed it.

It was in the comment thread on the overlook post, not the Eagle Point one — his second post in the series, the Duck Lake panorama. Someone had gone back through the older content. The comment had gone up an hour ago from an account he hadn't seen before:

@Jackrabbit The place in your second photograph — the one you didn't caption, just the flat stone with the long view. That stone has a name. It means the place where you first understand how far you have to go.

Leo read it twice.

Then he went back to the post, found the photograph in question — the overlook shot, yes, and in the background, half-framed, the large lichen-covered stone near the fire ring — and read the comment a third time.

*The place where you first understand how far you have to go.*

He went to the @Jackrabbit profile. No photograph, no bio, no location. Following: zero. Followers: three. The account had been created six weeks ago and had never posted anything. The three followers were accounts that appeared to be similarly dormant — no photos, no activity.

The account existed to leave this comment.

Leo set his phone down on the common room table, picked up his coffee, and looked at Cody, who was across the table reading something on his laptop with his reading-face on, which was different from his thinking-face in ways that were useful to know.

"Cody."

"Mm."

"Someone commented on the overlook post."

Cody looked up.

Leo turned the phone around.

Cody read it. His expression moved through two or three things in

quick succession, none of them large, all of them legible to Leo after three days of watching him think. Then: "When did this go up?"

"An hour ago."

"While we were here."

"While we were here."

Cody looked at the profile, at the three followers, at the creation date. "Someone made this account to say that one thing."

"Or they made it six weeks ago against the possibility that someone would come along who was worth saying it to."

Cody sat back. "That's more interesting."

"Yeah."

The common room was quiet except for the coffee maker's idle hiss. Through the window, a Clark's nutcracker landed on the station's exterior storage rack, looked around with the aggressive competence of a bird that operated on pure confidence, and left.

"Are we going to try to find out who it is?" Cody asked.

Leo had been thinking about this since the moment he'd read the comment. "I don't know," he said. "My first instinct is yes. My second instinct is that the account being what it is — anonymous, made for this, three followers that are basically ghost accounts — is itself a communication. Someone is choosing how much to show."

"And if we push past what they've chosen to show —"

"Then we're doing the thing Tomas warned us about." Leo turned the phone back around and looked at the comment again. "The place where you first understand how far you have to go." He thought about the overlook, the view northeast, the ash drifting from somewhere beyond the ridge. "They know the story. They know this particular part of it corresponds to that specific stone. That's not information you find casually."

"No," Cody agreed. "It's not."

"So we watch the thread. We don't chase the account. If they want to say more, they will."

Cody nodded slowly. "Okay." A pause. "Reply to it?"

Leo looked at the comment. Thought about it. Typed: Thank you. We're listening. And posted it before he could second-guess himself.

The comment got one like, from @Jackrabbit, within thirty seconds.

Leo stared at his phone.

"They're watching the thread in real time," Cody said.

"They're watching the thread in real time," Leo confirmed.

They looked at each other across the table with the shared expression of people who have just understood that someone else is also playing, and has been for longer than they have, and is considerably better at it.

---

Dex came back to the station the next morning.

This was not unusual — Brennan had mentioned that Hartley stopped by whenever he was in the district, which was often, and that the crew had long since absorbed him into the informal category of known regulars who were neither staff nor strangers. He knew where the coffee was. He knew not to get between Kowalski and his morning inventory. He knew that Redd's briefings were worth listening to completely and responding to precisely, and he did both.

He was there to collect an updated fire weather advisory printout — the formal version, with the CMSD's local overlays, which was more useful for course planning than the public forecast. Redd had it ready. The transaction took five minutes and involved an easy, informed exchange about the pressure system building to the northwest and whether it would deliver meaningful rain to the plateau or drift south.

Leo watched this from the doorway with his coffee and noticed, as he had noticed before, how naturally Dex moved in this environment. It was not performance — or if it was, it was the kind of performance that had been practiced long enough to become authentic. He knew fire weather the way people know things when they depend on the knowledge, not when they've studied it. He knew the crew by name and by function and by the specific, respectful shorthand that develops between professionals who work adjacent to each other over years.

He noticed Leo noticing.

"You look like a man thinking about something he hasn't said yet," Dex said, when Redd had gone.

"Occupational hazard," Leo said. "I think visibly."

"What's the topic?"

"I've been hiking around the plateau edge. Lookout tower area, Eagle Point." Leo kept his voice easy. "You know that terrain?"

"As well as I know anything up here," Dex said. "I route some of my longer courses through the plateau edge. Great teaching terrain — the exposure's real without being technical, the navigation's interesting, and the fire ecology up there is some of the most legible on the mountain. You can read fifty years of fire history in a half-mile transect." He smiled. "I usually lose at least one client to pure fascination somewhere between the lookout tower and Eagle Point and have to wait for them to catch up."

Something in Leo registered this — the lookout tower and Eagle Point, mentioned together, in the same route. He let it go for now.

"The tower's a good spot," Leo said.

"Incredible views from the cab. I take every group up. Makes the navigation lesson land differently when you can see where you've been." Dex folded the weather advisory into his jacket pocket. "You doing a full traverse of the plateau edge?"

"Eventually. We're following something."

"The bird survey?"

"Partly."

Dex looked at him with the open, interested expression that was his default, and Leo had the sense he was being assessed in the same way he was doing the assessing — two people with reasonably good instincts, finding each other's edges by feel. Then Dex said: "Let me know if you want a guided read of the fire history up there. It's easier with someone who knows where to look."

"I might take you up on that," Leo said.

He wouldn't, not now. But he meant it in the version of the world where everything was simpler than it appeared to be turning out to be.

Dex left. Leo went to find Cody.

---

Cody was in the equipment bay, of all places, in conversation with Kowalski about the field check schedule. Leo arrived to find them standing over a printed site map with Kowalski's notations in the margins — the same obsessive precision applied to spatial data as to everything else — and Cody asking sensible questions about terrain and access.

Leo waited until there was a natural pause. "Can I pull you for a minute?"

They went out to the yard. The coyote was back on its turnout, which Leo registered and then set aside.

"Dex just mentioned his course routes go through the lookout tower and Eagle Point," Leo said. "He said it casually. It may mean nothing."

Cody was quiet for a moment, in the way that with Cody meant he was combining what he'd just been told with something he'd already been thinking about.

"What?" Leo asked.

"Yesterday," Cody said. "At the lookout tower alcove. When we came around the corner and I saw Brennan looking at the lock." He paused. "I was still a few feet back. I had a different angle. There were boot prints in the dust at the edge of the alcove floor — just inside the door, where someone had stood when they opened it. Recent. The dust was only partly settled back into them."

Leo waited.

"I photographed them. High-end trail shoes, distinctive tread — a herringbone centre channel with a lateral lug pattern I haven't seen on standard hiking boots. More of a fast-packing sole. Not cheap."

"Okay," Leo said slowly.

"This morning, when Dex was here, I watched his feet."

The yard was quiet. The coyote's ears moved.

"Cody."

"I'm not saying it was him. The print was partial and I didn't get a full pattern match. I'm saying the sole configuration was consistent." He said it the way he said things when he was being a scientist rather than a person with a hunch, which was a distinction he maintained carefully. "The brand is Salewa. It's an Italian mountaineering company."

They do a trail running line that's popular in the technical backcountry crowd. Not common up here — most people on this mountain are in standard hiking boots or trail runners. You don't see a lot of technical fast-pack soles."

"So it's unusual."

"It's distinctive. There's a difference." Cody looked at him. "I'd need to see the full sole pattern to say anything with confidence. What I have now is a partial match and a coincidence. Two coincidences, counting the route."

Leo looked at the station building. Through the common room window, he could see Brennan at the table, head bent over something. Kowalski was back in the equipment bay. The captain's truck was in the lot. Everything looked exactly as it should.

"What do we do with it?" he asked.

"We don't do anything with it yet," Cody said. "I want to see the sole pattern properly. And I want to see what Kowalski finds at the other cache sites before I start drawing lines between things."

Leo thought about the comment from @Jackrabbit. Two different threads, both new, both pulling at something. He'd told himself this morning that he had two things in his head that didn't connect yet and he was patient enough to wait.

He was less patient than he'd thought.

"Okay," he said. "We wait. But Cody — when you get a chance to see his shoes properly —"

"I'll tell you."

"Before you tell me you need more data."

Cody gave him the look. "Before I tell you I need more data."

The coyote stood up from its turnout, stretched with the full-body luxury of an animal unbothered by the concept of urgency, and walked around the corner of the station building out of sight.

Leo watched it go.

He thought: two things in the same landscape, being patient at different speeds.

He went back inside.

## chapter **seven**

IT WAS TOMAS who asked to see the photographs.

Not the site photographs — Cody's careful documentation of the fire rings and cedar bark bundles, which he'd already shared with the crew after each visit. Tomas wanted to see Leo's photographs. The ones Leo had taken without thinking, the ambient frames he shot the way other people breathed, the images he sometimes looked at days later and found they contained things he hadn't consciously registered when he pressed the shutter.

"All of them?" Leo asked.

"From the sites. And from the approaches. The walking." Tomas was assembling his tea things at the station kitchen counter, the tin open, the kettle filling. "Sometimes what a place looks like on the way in tells you as much as the place itself."

Leo handed over his phone unlocked. Tomas took it and stood at the counter scrolling through with the focused, unhurried attention he brought to everything, not commenting, just looking. The kettle began its low pre-boil murmur. Cody arrived from the yard with his field notebook and his topo map rolled under one arm and his laptop under the other, slightly out of breath in the way he got when he'd been thinking hard on the move.

"Good," Tomas said, when Cody came in. "I wanted both of you."

Cody set everything on the table. "I have the map. And I got Kowalski's annotated copy of the watershed survey — he said I could use it for reference."

"Good." Tomas brought the tea, set it down, sat. He still had Leo's phone. He held it up, showing a photograph Leo had taken on the approach to Eagle Point — not the prominence itself, not the fire ring, but a shot taken mid-hike, looking northeast across the plateau. In the frame: the pale sky, the distant ridge, the plateau grass moving in the wind. An unremarkable landscape photograph, if you weren't paying the right kind of attention. "This angle," Tomas said. "What were you looking at?"

"The view," Leo said. "Northeast. I was thinking about the story — about seeing the ash come from that direction. It was one of those moments where I felt like I was standing where someone had stood before."

Tomas nodded. "You were. Or close to it." He set the phone on the table face-up, the photograph still visible. "I want to tell you the rest of the story. The part I didn't tell the other night, because I needed to see where you'd been before I talked about where you were going."

Nobody said anything. The kettle finished.

Tomas poured.

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He spread Cody's topo map on the table first. He looked at it for a long moment — the three grease pencil marks, the arc they described, the cedar notation in the drainage on the northeast face. Then he reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and produced a folded sheet of paper, a photocopy of something older, the original's age visible even in reproduction: hand-drawn lines in a style that was neither purely geographic nor purely illustrative, something in between. A map, but not exactly a map.

He laid it beside Cody's topo. The correspondence was not immediate but it was there, once you looked — the same plateau, the same drainage system, the same rough northeast orientation, rendered in a different visual language.

"What is that?" Leo asked.

"A copy of a copy," Tomas said. "The original is in a collection at SUU. It's a route map — not a navigation document, more of a mnemonic. A way of remembering the sequence of a journey." He smoothed the photocopy with one hand. "It's associated with this story. With the fire-theft journey. The scholar who documented it believed it recorded an actual route across this landscape — the path Coyote's party would have traveled."

Cody leaned forward over the two maps, his eyes moving between them. "The drainage here —" he pointed to a feature on the photocopy, a curved line that might have been a creek or might have been a path, "— corresponds to this watershed." His finger moved to the topo. "And this feature — the prominence —"

"Eagle Point," Tomas said.

"Yes." Cody looked up. "Your third grease mark is in exactly the right place."

The common room was quiet. From the equipment bay came the faint sound of Kowalski's methodical presence — the clipboard, the footsteps, the system of a man keeping things in order.

"Tell us the rest," Leo said.

Tomas wrapped his hands around his mug.

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After Eagle Point — after the gathering of helpers and the decision to go — the party traveled northeast. The journey in the story is not described in terms of distance or time; it's described in terms of what was passed. The landmarks are physical but also relational: the place where the creek divides, the ridge where the wind always comes from the same direction, the meadow where a particular plant grows that you can eat, the rock formation that looks like something depending on where you stand when you look at it.

These are navigational descriptions. They are also, if you know the terrain, precisely locatable descriptions.

The fire-holders' camp — the place where Coyote and his party arrived as guests, ate, played games, spent the night — is described as

being at a high point from which you could see in every direction. A place of command. The kind of place that, in this country, is either a natural summit or a structure built where a summit wasn't available.

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Tomas looked at the table.

Leo looked at the topo map. At the plateau edge. At the one man-made feature marked on it.

"The lookout tower," he said.

"The lookout tower is built where the Paiute would have recognized a commanding position," Tomas said. "The Forest Service didn't choose that spot at random either — they chose it because it has the best sight-lines on the mountain. The same logic, separated by centuries." He paused. "The deception scene — Coyote arriving as a guest, showing the fire-drills to prove they had their own fire, spending the night before the theft — that scene happens at the high place. At the place of command."

"The council fire," Cody said quietly.

"Yes. The fire-holders' camp would have had a council fire. A fire made for gathering, for hosting guests, for the deliberation of important things." Tomas looked at Cody. "The site your crew found at the base of the lookout tower."

"Multiple cedar bark bundles," Cody said. He'd opened his notebook to those pages, the Eagle Point and lookout tower documentation side by side. "Arranged around the perimeter of the ring. Not inside it, around it. When Brennan told me the previous response had found only a fire ring and ash, I noted that someone had come back and added the bundles after the initial fire."

"A council fire has attendants," Tomas said. "In the story, Coyote and his party are the guests, but the fire-holders have their own people present. The bundles at the perimeter of the ring may represent that — the assembled council." He was quiet for a moment. "Someone knows enough about the ceremonial form to re-create it. Not just the story. The form."

Leo felt the thing he sometimes felt when a situation opened unexpectedly in front of him — not alarm, nothing as simple as that, but a kind of heightened awareness, the sense of a depth he hadn't previously gauged. He picked up his phone and looked at @Jackrabbit's comment again. The place where you first understand how far you have to go.

"They knew we'd been to the overlook before we went to Eagle Point," he said. "They left that comment after we posted the overlook photos. By the time they left it, they would have known — if they're watching the posts — that we hadn't been to the lookout tower yet." He set the phone down. "They were telling us we were at the beginning of understanding how far we had to go."

"Yes," Tomas said.

"Not the journey," Leo said. "The understanding."

"Those are often the same thing."

Cody had his pen moving now, the shorthand quick and purposeful. He looked up. "What comes after the council fire? After the theft?"

Tomas turned his mug in his hands.

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After the theft, after Coyote runs from the fire-holders' camp with his hair blazing, the relay begins.

This is the part of the story that moves fastest in the telling and would have covered the most ground in reality. Each member of the party was positioned along the route before the theft — they'd planned it during the daylight hours of their visit, while playing games and eating and being guests. Each one had a leg. Eagle first, then Woodpecker, then Chickenhawk, then Blue Jay, then Roadrunner — and at each handoff, the fire passed from one set of hands to the next and the pursuers fell a little further behind, because the relay was faster than any single runner could have been.

The relay moves northeast to southwest. It's coming home. Coming back toward the people who needed it.

The handoff points are described, in the versions of the story that carry the most geographic specificity, as: a high meadow with a view of

two drainages; a rocky crossing where the wind changes direction; a stand of trees that are the tallest on the slope; and a flat-topped formation above the valley where the last clear view of the summit is possible before the descent.

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Tomas stopped. He picked up his tea. He looked at Cody's topo map.

"Show me where your fifth and sixth fire sites would be," he said. "If the pattern holds."

Cody took the grease pencil. He extended the arc of the existing three marks, following the geographic logic of the route description Tomas had given — the drainages, the ridge crossing, the slope descent. His hand moved slowly, with the deliberate care of someone who understood that what he was doing was more than annotation.

Four more marks. Then a fifth, at the cedar notation in the northeast drainage.

Tomas looked at the map for a long time.

"The high meadow with the view of two drainages," he said finally. "That's here." He pointed to the saddle between the two ridges, the terrain Cody had marked as the fifth site. "I know that meadow. I've been there. The view is exactly as described."

"And the cedar grove," Cody said. His finger rested on the final mark.

"The cedar grove at the drainage," Tomas said, "is where the story ends. Where Jackrabbit saves the last ember from the rain." He looked at both of them. "If someone is walking this story — if every site is a beat in the narrative — then they haven't finished yet. The last site hasn't been made. They're still on the way."

"The rain," Leo said. He was thinking about WeatherKid\_15. Ten days. "We have maybe ten days before significant rain hits the northeast face."

Tomas looked at him steadily. "Then whoever is walking this story may be trying to finish it before the rain arrives." A pause. "Because the ending of the story requires rain. Jackrabbit saves the ember from the rain. If you're going to re-create that —"

"You need the rain to be real," Leo said.

The room was very still.

"You think they know the forecast," Cody said. Not quite a question.

"I think," Leo said carefully, "that anyone who knows this story well enough to walk it beat by beat across a mountain landscape also knows this mountain well enough to read the weather."

Tomas said nothing. He picked up the photocopy of the route map and folded it with care, returning it to his pocket. Then he looked at both of them with the expression Leo had first seen when Tomas had told them to put their phones away — the expression of a man deciding what the moment required.

"What I'm about to tell you," Tomas said, "is mine to tell, because I've thought about it carefully and I believe it's more useful to you than it is private to me. But I'd ask that it not leave this room."

Leo and Cody both nodded.

"I know this story not just from scholarship. My grandmother's family had Paiute ancestry — mixed, several generations back, not something she was able to fully trace but something she carried." He said it simply, without performance. "She told me a version of this story when I was a child. Different in some details from the academic versions I've read since. More specific in others." He looked at the map. "The cedar grove she described — the shelter where the last ember was saved — she said it was a real place. She'd been there. She said some things there were older than any person could know, and that you could feel it."

Leo looked at Cody. Cody looked at Leo.

"The cedar grove at the drainage," Leo said.

"I believe so. Yes." Tomas stood, picking up the mugs. "I haven't been there myself. She described the approach but not in terms I've been able to map precisely." He looked at Cody's topo. "Your grease mark, though. I think you're close."

He took the mugs to the sink. The conversation had ended in the way Tomas's conversations ended — not abruptly, but with a natural completeness, as if he'd given exactly what the moment called for and was confident the rest would develop without being pushed.

He rinsed the mugs, set them in the rack, and went back to his shift.

Leo and Cody sat with the two maps spread on the table between them — Cody's topo, Tomas's photocopy face-up where he'd left it — and the arc of grease marks connecting the known to the unknown, and the cedar notation at the end of the line.

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The boot print confirmation came that afternoon, and it came sideways, the way the best confirmations do — not from a confrontation or a deliberate test, but from the ordinary friction of the day producing the piece of information that had been waiting to surface.

Kowalski had scheduled the first two cache field checks for that afternoon: the sites on the east slope, the more accessible ones. Leo and Cody went along, less because they expected to find anything definitive and more because Kowalski's field checks had the quality of events you attended if you wanted to understand the shape of the situation. He didn't explain his reasoning. He moved through the terrain and checked the caches and documented the results, and if you were paying attention you learned things from watching how he did it.

The first site was intact. Kowalski photographed, recorded, locked, and moved on without comment.

The second site was in a shallow drainage on the east slope, accessible by a fire road that ended at a locked gate. From the gate it was a twenty-minute walk through mixed scrub and pine. The cache box was in a concealed position — not hidden, exactly, but positioned in a way that was unobvious to anyone who didn't know where to look, a deliberate design choice for security. Kowalski knew where to look. He went directly to it.

The box was locked. Kowalski checked the combination, confirmed the seal, opened it.

He stood for a moment looking at the contents.

Leo and Cody, a few feet back, couldn't see what he was seeing from that angle, but they could see Kowalski, and Kowalski's stillness was communicative in the way that stillness in a precise person always is.

"Kowalski." Cody's voice, quiet and direct.

"Water treatment kit is short." Kowalski said it without turning. "Tablets and the backup filter. And the second emergency blanket." He closed the box, checked the hasp, and turned around. His expression was exactly what it always was — controlled, organized, operating — but there was something behind it that Leo read as the contained version of something larger. "This box was checked in July. I checked it myself. Everything was present and accounted for."

"So it was accessed between July and now," Cody said.

"Between the fourteenth of July and today." He'd already produced his inventory log. He made a notation with the precisely controlled handwriting of a man who wrote in ink. "Two sites confirmed compromised. Four remaining."

Leo was looking at the ground around the cache site, the small clearing where the box was positioned. The soil here was more sheltered than the lookout tower alcove, less wind, less foot traffic. The ground had the slightly packed, slightly dusty quality of earth that preserved impressions.

There were boot prints.

Not a confusion of them — not the overlapping mess of a site that had been visited many times by many people. Two sets, both heading to and from the cache, in a clear approach and retreat path along the line of least resistance through the scrub. The prints were not fresh — they'd been there long enough for the edges to have softened slightly — but they were clear enough.

Leo crouched. The sole pattern was the one Cody had described: herringbone centre channel, lateral lug pattern, the distinctive architecture of a technical fast-packing shoe.

"Cody," he said.

Cody came and crouched beside him. He looked at the prints for a long moment, moving around to see them from different angles, not touching the ground.

Then he took out his phone and found the photographs he'd taken at the lookout tower alcove.

He held the phone at the same angle as the prints, comparing.

He was quiet for what felt like a full minute.

"Same sole," he said. "Same manufacturer and line, same size — I'd

estimate a men's ten or ten-and-a-half." He stood up. "This isn't a partial match. This is a match."

Leo stood beside him and looked at the prints in the pale afternoon light. He thought about the green Tacoma in the visitor lot with the clean, organized gear on the roof rack. He thought about the east slope and the plateau edge, mentioned together, casually. He thought about Dex's word: resourceful.

He thought about the cache at the lookout tower, the decommissioned box on the shelf, positioned where it had no business being.

He thought about Kowalski standing over an open cache box with his inventory log in his hand, making a notation in ink.

He did not say Dex's name out loud. Cody didn't either. Kowalski was ten feet away, closing up the second cache, and the conversation that needed to happen about what they'd just confirmed was not the conversation for this moment and this audience.

"Kowalski," Leo said. "How many people know where the active cache sites are?"

Kowalski looked at him. "The crew. The county emergency management coordinator. The Forest Service district ranger." A pause. "And anyone who found one by accident, or by being in the right area at the right time and knowing what to look for."

"The cache boxes are marked," Leo said. "CMSD stencil on the lid."

"Yes."

"So if someone found one, they'd know what it was."

"They'd know it was a service district cache," Kowalski said. "Whether they'd understand what that meant is a different question." He looked at Leo steadily. He was, Leo understood, a man who had already been thinking about this. Who had been thinking about it since Brennan's report, possibly since before that. He was asking Leo, without asking, what Leo knew.

"We may have something useful in the next day or two," Leo said. "Would you rather I brought it to the captain or to you?"

"Both," Kowalski said. "At the same time." He shouldered his pack. "Let's get the other two sites done first."

He started down the track.

Leo looked at the boot prints one more time. He took a photograph. Then he followed.

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That evening, back at his own cabin, Leo sat at the kitchen table with his laptop open and the @Jackrabbit comment thread visible on one half of the screen and his photographs open on the other. He'd eaten — something quick, pasta with whatever was in the cupboard — and now the cabin was quiet and the mountain outside the window was doing its evening thing, the ridgeline going dark blue against a sky that still held some light.

He looked at the comment thread. @Jackrabbit had left two more comments since the morning — both on earlier posts in the Following the Ember series, both working backward through the archive.

The first was on the Cascade Falls post, the one with the photograph of the trail on the way up:

@Jackrabbit The clearing where the ash first fell. In the story this is the moment before the journey begins — when the people understood something was missing but hadn't yet decided to go looking for it. The hardest moment is always before the first step.

The second was on Leo's very first post in the series — the ambient shot of Cedar Mountain from the valley road, taken before he'd known what the series would become:

@Jackrabbit You were already looking in the right direction.

Leo sat with these for a long time.

He had the thought, not for the first time, that @Jackrabbit was not simply a knowledgeable observer. They were a participant. Not in the fire sites — he had no evidence for that, and the instinct to conflate two things just because they both seemed unusual was one he'd learned to distrust. But they were participating in something. The comments

weren't information drops, they weren't showing off. They were responses. To what Leo was finding and what he was posting and, maybe, to what he was becoming willing to understand.

You were already looking in the right direction.

He typed a reply to the first comment: The hardest moment is always before the first step. I've been thinking about that. What makes someone take it anyway?

He posted it and set his laptop on the table and went to the window. The mountain was fully dark now, the stars beginning — the September sky at this elevation was something that people from lower and lighter places were not prepared for. He'd been on this mountain for years and he still wasn't fully prepared for it.

He thought about two things in the same landscape. He thought about a trail with an ending that required rain. He thought about a boot print in pale, sheltered soil, confirmed by the most methodical person he'd met on this mountain.

He went back to the laptop. @Jackrabbit had replied, in the four minutes he'd been at the window:

@Jackrabbit The same thing that makes anyone take any first step. They find that not going has become harder than going.

Leo read it twice.

He thought about Kowalski making a notation in ink, and Brennan saying the word medical with the evenness of a professional keeping something contained, and Redd's eyes on him the first morning with the deliberate quality of a decision being made.

He thought about his own first step, three years ago, toward a mountain he'd heard about from someone at a roadside diner in Nevada who'd said you have to go to Duck Creek, there's something about that place that sticks to you, and Leo had detoured three hundred miles to see what that meant and had, as promised, never quite left.

Not going had become harder than going.

He closed the laptop. He'd sleep on the boot print confirmation and bring it to the captain and Kowalski tomorrow, as he'd said he would.

Outside, somewhere on the dark mountain, the story was still moving. Beat by beat, site by site, the relay carrying its ember through the night toward an ending that required rain and a sheltered place and someone willing to protect what couldn't be allowed to go out.

Leo went to bed.

He left the porch light on, because the mountain was dark and there was enough in motion tonight that a light seemed right.



## chapter eight

THE CEDAR MOUNTAIN SERVICE DISTRICT held its annual fire-safety training on a Saturday in mid-September, which was, as Brennan explained it, the last practical window before the season tipped from fire risk to snow risk and the community's attention shifted accordingly. It was an event the station took seriously — not in a grim way, but in the way that people who understood actual consequences took things seriously, which was with care and competence and the occasional dry joke at exactly the right moment.

Leo had been to community events on this mountain before. He knew their rhythms: the slow arrival, the coffee that appeared from somewhere, the way people sorted themselves by familiarity while pretending to be sorting themselves by interest. He arrived twenty minutes early to set up his camera position and found Kowalski already outside arranging the equipment display with the focused attention of a man who had a specific vision for how it should look and was going to achieve it.

"Can I help?" Leo asked.

Kowalski looked at the display, then at Leo, assessing what category of help was being offered. "The folding tables are in the near bay. Four of them. The legs stick."

Leo got the tables. The legs did stick. He got them open anyway and

set them up where Kowalski pointed and received in return a nod that he'd come to understand was Kowalski's version of a standing ovation.

By nine o'clock the station yard had filled with the comfortable density of a well-attended community event: thirty or so people, range of ages, the mix of full-time residents and seasonal cabin owners and day-visitors that Duck Creek Village produced on any given weekend in good weather. Someone had brought a folding chair and arranged it with the precision of a person who knew where the sun would be in an hour. A pair of trail runners in technical gear were examining the equipment display with professional interest. Three children were conducting an independent investigation of the fire truck's exterior while their parents pretended not to notice.

The station's flag moved in the light morning wind. The mountain above was doing what it did in mid-September — presenting its best version of itself, the aspens at full gold, the sky the specific deep blue that happened at elevation when the summer haze was gone and the air had been rinsed clean by the season change. It was, Leo thought, a very good morning to be talking about how to keep it all from burning.

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Sophie arrived at nine-fifteen, which was three minutes before the training was scheduled to start, which was Sophie's version of early.

She came on foot from the village road, which meant she'd walked from the Country Store — it was maybe a mile and a half, an easy walk, but Leo noted she was in her work clothes still, which meant she'd come on her break and had a specific time she needed to be back. She had a coffee from somewhere — the Country Store had a small machine behind the counter, nothing fancy, functional — and she scanned the assembled crowd with the quiet efficiency of someone taking attendance.

Leo caught her eye from across the yard. She raised her coffee cup a quarter inch in greeting.

He crossed to her. "You didn't tell me you were coming."

"You didn't tell me the station was doing a public training," she said.

"I read about it on the community board. The one at the store." She looked at the equipment display. "How are you getting on?"

"Really well, I think. We have two significant things developing."

"I know about the fire sites. Brennan mentioned it at the hardware counter." She sipped her coffee. "And the cache thing?"

"How do you know about the cache thing?"

"Kowalski mentioned it to me when he came in for a replacement padlock hasp." She looked at Leo with the expression she used when the answer to a question was obvious and she was being generous about it. "I work at the hardware store, Leo. Everyone comes in eventually. They all talk. I have excellent recall."

"Of course you do."

"Tell me about the cache thing. Properly."

Leo gave her the full account in four minutes, which was genuinely fast for the amount of information involved. Sophie listened without interrupting, which was one of her gifts — she could hold a complete summary in her head while you gave it without needing to process out loud, which meant when she spoke it was always a response to the whole thing rather than the last sentence.

"So you have boot prints at two locations and a route description that's consistent with the known cache sites," she said. "Anything else?"

"He mentioned, when we talked at the station, that he tops up his supplies from —" Leo paused, choosing the word, " — a spot he'd found in the backcountry. He called it resourceful."

"He told you," Sophie said.

"He didn't know he was telling me."

"That's still him telling you." She looked across the yard at the equipment display, then at the people assembling in rows of folding chairs as the training prepared to start. "Is he here?"

"Not yet. But he mentioned he does these trainings when he can."

"Good." She adjusted her coffee cup and looked at the training setup with the air of a woman settling in. "I'd like to see him."

"Why?"

"Because you like him," she said. "Which means you might be giving him more benefit of the doubt than the situation warrants. I don't like him yet, so I won't."

Leo opened his mouth and closed it.

"Don't take it personally," Sophie said. "Go film something. I'll watch the audience."

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The training was run by Redd and Brennan, with Tomas handling the medical preparedness section and Kowalski managing the equipment display and the question-and-answer on cache and supply logistics, which Leo had not anticipated and which turned out to be the most immediately useful part of the morning for everyone involved except possibly Kowalski himself, who answered eleven consecutive questions about defensible space and evacuation planning with the patience of a man who had answered the same eleven questions many times before and understood that they mattered anyway.

Redd opened the session standing in the yard in front of the assembled chairs with his hands in his pockets and no notes, which Leo had suspected would be how he did it.

"This mountain has had significant fire," Redd said, without preamble. "It will have significant fire again. That's not a prediction, it's an ecology. Fire is part of how this landscape works. Our job —" a small pause, "— is to make sure that when fire does what fire does, it doesn't also do what it doesn't need to do. Which means your house. Your car. Your family."

He let that sit for a moment. The yard was quiet.

"Everything we're going to talk about this morning is oriented toward one question: what can you do, in your specific situation, to make the job of the crew easier on the day when everything is moving fast and there isn't time to think about it? The answer is: a lot. More than most people think."

He proceeded to cover defensible space, evacuation planning, communication protocols, and the station's notification system with the same quality he brought to everything — specific, efficient, no wasted words, and underneath it the unmistakable quality of a person who cared about the outcome rather than the performance of caring about it. Leo filmed it. He was going to post very little of it, but he

wanted it documented because this was what the station was, at its core, and that deserved to exist somewhere.

Brennan took over for the fire history section, which was where his own particular gift came through — he taught the way people teach when they love the subject, with the layered enthusiasm of someone who could go considerably deeper than the time allowed and was exercising discipline in not doing so. He talked about the burn scar on the ridge, the 2017 fire that Leo had heard mentioned several times without context, the way you could read fire history in the vegetation transition from the road. He pointed at the mountain above the station as he talked, and the people in the chairs turned in their seats to look where he pointed, and Leo watched several of them see something they'd driven past for years with new eyes.

Dex arrived during Brennan's section. He came through the station entrance quietly, chose a seat at the end of a row, and settled in with the attentive posture of someone who was here to learn, not to be seen. He had a small notebook. He took notes.

Leo noticed this and kept filming.

Across the yard, Sophie had positioned herself at the edge of the seating area with the peripheral view she'd clearly wanted. Leo could see her without looking directly at her, which meant he could see when her attention fixed on something specific. It fixed on Dex within about thirty seconds of Dex sitting down.

She watched him for a while. Then she looked at Leo. Then she looked back at Dex.

Leo waited.

At the break — Kowalski's equipment display, coffee from an urn that someone from the village had brought and which was considerably better than the station pot, a folding table of baked goods whose provenance Leo did not investigate because the result was good regardless — Sophie materialized at Leo's elbow.

"He's not here for fire safety," she said, without greeting.

"He might be. He seems genuinely engaged with —"

"Leo." She picked up a cookie, looked at it, set it back down in favor of a different one. "His questions during the Q-and-A portion just now. Did you hear them?"

"I was filming. I wasn't —"

"He asked three questions. He asked how frequently the cache sites are restocked. He asked what the standard contents of a plateau-designation cache are. And he asked —" she paused, and Leo had the feeling she was being precise about this because precision mattered, " — he asked whether there was a difference in supply configuration between the active cache network and any retired sites."

Leo stood very still.

"That last one," she said. "He asked about retired sites."

"I heard you."

"He's not asking about fire safety. He's doing inventory. He wants to know what's where and whether it's active or not." Sophie finished her cookie. "He knows about the lookout tower cache. Or he suspects someone knows about it, and he's trying to find out how much."

Leo looked across the yard at Dex, who was talking to the trail runners from the equipment display with the easy engagement of a man in his element.

"You got all of that from three questions at a community training session."

"I got all of that from listening to the questions instead of watching the person ask them," Sophie said. "Which is harder when you like the person."

Leo was quiet for a moment. "You've been here forty minutes."

"I told you. I have excellent recall and I don't like him yet."

She refilled her coffee and went to find Tomas, who she'd apparently decided she wanted to talk to, and left Leo standing at the folding table with the particular feeling of someone who has just had an obvious thing explained to them by a person being very kind about it.

He went to find Cody.

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Cody had spent the training on the equipment display's far end, in conversation with Kowalski about the remaining cache field checks, and had apparently registered the same thing Sophie had registered about Dex's questions through a different mechanism — he had, as Cody

often did, been listening to everything simultaneously without appearing to attend to any of it specifically, and had made notes.

"He asked about retired sites," Leo said.

"I wrote it down," Cody confirmed. He showed Leo his notebook: four lines of shorthand, the last underlined twice. Leo couldn't read Cody's shorthand but he could read the underline.

"Sophie said he's trying to find out how much we know."

"Sophie's probably right."

"She usually is."

"She's always right," Cody said, with the directness he used for facts. "What she is occasionally is early. This time she's not early."

They stood for a moment watching Dex across the yard. He had finished with the trail runners and was now in conversation with Kowalski, who had the expression of a man answering questions he was simultaneously evaluating. Kowalski answered everything Dex asked — there was no reason not to, the information was public — but Leo noticed that Kowalski's answers were a degree more precise than they needed to be, the extra precision of a person who was also listening to the questions.

"Kowalski knows," Leo said.

"Kowalski has always known," Cody said. "He's been waiting for us to have enough to say something official."

"How many days do we need?"

"One, maybe two. The remaining cache checks. And I'd like one more look at the sole pattern — something current, not a photograph. If I can see his boots in person and confirm the match, then we have physical evidence at two sites, a route overlap, and an admission that he uses cache infrastructure for supply." He looked at Leo. "That's enough."

Leo nodded slowly. He watched Dex shake hands with Kowalski and move on toward the exit, pausing to exchange a word with Brennan, then with Redd, each interaction easy and collegial and professional. He moved through the station's community the way someone moves through a community they've earned a place in, and Leo felt the particular discomfort of holding two true things simultaneously: that Dex had been genuinely good company and genuinely good value up

here, and that he'd also been doing something that had put the crew in a position they shouldn't have been put in.

Both of those things were going to remain true after the conversation. That was just the shape of it.

"After the cache checks," Leo said.

"After the cache checks," Cody agreed.

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The weather kid arrived with his mother at eleven, which was toward the end of the formal training and the beginning of the informal questions-and-lingering portion that these events always produced. Leo saw him from across the yard and recognized him immediately from the Discord activity if not from any prior meeting: a fifteen-year-old in a jacket that was slightly too formal for a Saturday morning community event, carrying a folder, scanning the crowd for faces he recognized from their online avatars.

His name, Leo had learned from the Discord, was Marcus. Marcus Tillotsen. His mother was a primary school teacher in the village; his father worked shifts at the Cedar City hospital and was home on weekends. The weather station in the backyard had been a birthday present when Marcus was eleven, chosen by Marcus himself from a research document he'd prepared and presented at the dinner table, which Leo had learned from GertrudeW in the Discord with the specificity of a community that knew its own.

Marcus found Leo first.

He walked across the yard with the particular gait of a fifteen-year-old trying to be composed about something he was not composed about, and made it about two-thirds of the way before he said: "You're Leo. You're actually — I mean, from the Discord. And the Following the Ember posts."

"That's me," Leo said.

"I'm Marcus. WeatherKid\_15. I updated the forecast this morning — did you see it?"

"I saw it. Walk me through the revision."

This was exactly the right thing to say. Marcus opened his folder.

He had a printed forecast model — not a screenshot, an annotated printout with handwritten notations in the margins, the kind of document you made when you were taking something seriously with physical materials because you didn't quite trust the screen yet. He explained the pressure system's revised trajectory with the focused, slightly rapid delivery of someone who had rehearsed the explanation and was now running it in real conditions.

The system had shifted north, he said. The rain was coming faster than his initial projection, the northeast face of the mountain was squarely in the path, and his revised estimate was six days rather than ten. Possibly five. He'd checked his barometric sensor twice this morning and the drop was ahead of schedule.

Leo listened to all of it carefully, and not just because it was relevant to the cedar grove timeline — though it was, and urgently so. He listened because Marcus was explaining meteorology with the earned confidence of someone who'd been paying close attention to a specific system for four years, and that quality was worth attending to regardless of the subject.

"Your numbers have been right all season," Leo said. "Brennan mentioned it."

Marcus managed to receive this information calmly for approximately one full second.

"He said that?"

"He said you're usually right. That was his exact word: usually. From Brennan, I've come to understand that's essentially extraordinary."

Marcus looked at the folder in his hands and then at some point in the middle distance that he was not actually looking at. He was the specific kind of fifteen that hadn't yet learned how to process large compliments with anything other than visible internal recalibration.

"It's just data," he said. "I mean, the sensor is good. And the model I use accounts for the orographic effect on the plateau, which the standard NWS model doesn't fully capture for terrain this specific, so —"

"Marcus," Leo said.

"Yeah."

"It's okay to be pleased with yourself. You've been consistently right about a complicated thing."

Marcus looked at him. Then he looked at the folder again. Then he said, with a care that was itself a form of dignity: "Thank you. I think I am, a little."

His mother arrived at his elbow — a woman with the warm, slightly amused expression of a parent watching a child navigate a moment they've prepared for — and introduced herself to Leo. They shook hands. She said Marcus had talked about the Discord contribution since July.

"He's been an excellent field correspondent," Leo said, which was true.

Marcus, who had regained his composure, said: "I also have a theory about the pressure gradient on the northeast face that I think explains why the fire sites you've been documenting are where they are. In terms of terrain exposure. If you have a minute —"

"I have a minute," Leo said.

He had several minutes. He had, in fact, found that the most interesting conversations on this mountain came when you stopped managing your time and let the conversation tell you how long it needed.

Marcus opened the folder to a different page.

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Kowalski found Leo at the folding table at twenty past eleven, during the winding-down of the event, when most people had collected their questions and their baked goods and their mental notes and were beginning to drift back toward their vehicles and cabins and weekends.

"The pressure gradient theory is interesting," Leo said, before Kowalski could speak. "The kid thinks the northeast face exposure creates a natural draw that would concentrate air movement in the drainages and make certain clearings —"

"Leo."

"Right. Sorry."

Kowalski looked at him with the level expression he used when

there was something to say that he'd been waiting to say. "The remaining cache checks. I want to do them Monday. The two of you, me and Brennan, full day."

"We'll be there."

"The route will take us through the terrain near the lookout tower area." He was looking at something across the yard — not Dex, who'd left, but the middle distance, the mountain above the station. "There may be additional physical evidence worth documenting."

"We think so too."

Kowalski's eyes moved to him. "You have something."

"Boot prints at the second cache site. Consistent with prints at the lookout tower. Distinctive sole — technical fast-pack shoe, not common up here. Cody wants a live comparison before he says anything definitive."

A pause, shorter than most Kowalski pauses. "Salewa."

Leo looked at him. "You know."

"I've been watching Dex Hartley's footwear since the third week of July," Kowalski said, without a trace of satisfaction in it. "I noticed the sole pattern at the station entrance. I recognized the brand." He looked at the mountain. "I didn't have enough to say anything. I needed the cache evidence to be complete before it was worth bringing to the captain."

"Why didn't you say something to us?"

"Because you were finding it yourself, and your path to it was different from mine." He turned to look at Leo directly. "If I'd handed it to you, you'd have been confirming my conclusion. This way, you reached it independently. That's a better position to be in."

Leo absorbed this. He thought about Kowalski's eleven-minute listen after the lookout tower report. He thought about Kowalski's notation in ink at the cache site, the precise handwriting of a man who had been building a record. He thought about Kowalski posting the coyote photograph at nine-forty-seven PM without telling anyone.

"You have a file," Leo said.

"I have a file."

"How long?"

"Since July fifteenth. The first cache discrepancy I attributed to my

own counting error. The second one, I opened a file." He said it without drama, the matter-of-fact quality of a person describing standard procedure, which for Kowalski it was. "Monday. Bring what you have."

"We'll have the sole comparison by then."

"Good."

He picked up two folding tables, one under each arm, and carried them back to the near bay without apparent effort. Leo watched him go and thought about what it meant to have a mind like that — systematic, patient, uninterested in the performance of knowing things, just the actual knowing.

He found Cody near the training chairs, talking to Marcus and his mother, Marcus mid-sentence about orographic effects and Cody listening with full attention and asking the kind of precise follow-up questions that made Marcus talk faster. Sophie was nearby, in conversation with Tomas that had apparently been going on for some time, the two of them standing with their coffees in the easy posture of people who'd found a wavelength quickly and were making the most of the remaining time.

Leo stood in the station yard in the mid-morning September sun and looked at all of this — the dispersing community event, the mountain above, the flag moving in the light wind, the equipment Kowalski was methodically restoring to its proper places — and felt a thing he occasionally felt and didn't have a precise name for: the sense that a situation had arrived at exactly the shape it was supposed to be, and that all the pieces were in their right positions, and that what came next was going to require everyone.

The coyote was on its turnout.

It was watching the yard clear with the patient, composed attention of an animal that had been here for the whole thing and found it consistent with its expectations.

Leo lifted his camera and filmed thirty seconds of the station yard: people, mountain, flag, coyote. He knew he'd post the coyote and keep the rest for himself.

He was getting better at knowing which was which.

Sophie found him before she left.

"I have to get back," she said. "Sunday shipment prep starts at noon."

"How was Tomas?"

"Remarkable." She said it with the brevity she used for things she actually meant. "He knows more about plant pharmacology than anyone I've met who isn't in a university. And he's modest about it in a way that isn't false modesty — he genuinely doesn't think what he knows is unusual." She paused. "I like him."

"High praise."

"Accurate praise." She settled her bag on her shoulder. "The kid — Marcus — he's got a real gift. Make sure he knows that from someone who isn't his mother. He's the age where it matters where it comes from."

"I already told him."

"Good." She looked at him for a moment with the expression she occasionally produced that contained more warmth than her default register suggested she had available. "You're doing something important here. Both of you." She looked at Cody across the yard. "The fire trail thing — the legend. Don't rush it."

"I'm trying not to."

"You're also trying to get to the cedar grove before the rain."

"That too."

"Those two things are in tension," she said. "You know that."

"I know."

"Good." She turned to go. Took three steps, then turned back. "The rain, when it comes — don't be on the mountain in it. You'll want to be. Don't."

"How do you know I'll want to be?"

She looked at him with the expression that meant the answer was obvious.

"Right," he said. "See you at the store."

She left. Leo watched her walk back down the village road in the September sun, getting smaller, turning the far corner, gone.

He thought about what she'd said: those two things are in tension.

She was right. She was always right, occasionally early, and this time she was neither early nor late. She was exactly on time, which was Sophie's actual gift — not recall, not precision, though she had both. Arriving at the right moment and saying the necessary thing and trusting you to do something with it.

He went to find Marcus, who was still talking to Cody about pressure gradients, and told him again that his work was genuinely useful, and watched the information land for the second time with less recalibration and more simple pleasure, which was exactly the right direction of travel.

The mountain held its good weather for one more afternoon.

Six days, Marcus had said. Maybe five.

Leo started counting.

## chapter **nine**

THE VIRGIN RIVER RIM TRAIL runs along the southern edge of the Markagunt Plateau for the better part of twenty miles, and if you wanted to design a trail specifically to remind a person why they lived on this mountain, you would design something very close to it. The plateau drops away to the south in a series of escarpments that reveal, in stages, the full depth of the canyon country below — the Kolob Terrace, the Hurricane Cliffs, and beyond them the pale smear of the lowland desert that makes the elevation you're standing at feel like a different category of place entirely. On a September morning, with the aspens in their turn and the air carrying the first real suggestion of what was coming, it was the kind of trail that made the two hours of driving required to reach it feel like a bargain.

Leo had not planned to be on it today.

He'd started the morning intending to spend it at his cabin, reviewing his photographs from the Eagle Point and lookout tower visits, writing some notes he'd been putting off, and fielding the ongoing Discord commentary on the weather system Marcus had flagged — which had, overnight, acquired the quality of a community event, GertrudeW having reported that Biscuit had spent the previous evening sitting on the windowsill facing northeast and refusing to be moved, which the Discord had received with a seriousness that Leo found both absurd and entirely appropriate.

But the morning had come in clear and cold and sharp-edged, the kind of September morning that made staying inside feel like a moral failure, and by eight o'clock he'd put his notebook in his pack and driven south along the plateau toward the Strawberry Point turnoff, where the Rim Trail access put you directly onto the escarpment edge with no preamble.

He'd been walking for an hour and a half when he heard boots on the trail behind him.

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Dex was moving at a pace that suggested he'd started earlier and farther east — the unhurried, ground-covering stride of someone who'd already warmed into the walk and was now just traveling. He had a light pack, the kind configured for a day rather than an overnight, and he was carrying his jacket rather than wearing it, which meant he'd been moving long enough to not need it.

He saw Leo at about the same moment Leo turned to look, and his face did the thing it always did — the quick, genuine pleasure of an unexpected encounter with someone he liked.

"Of all the rim trails on all the plateaus," Dex said.

"In all of southern Utah," Leo agreed.

They fell into step together with the easy naturalness of people who'd established a rhythm in prior conversations and found it transferred to walking without adjustment. The trail here ran close to the escarpment edge, the drop to the south visible through a fringe of Gambel oak that had gone a burnt red-orange, the canyon country below spread out in the morning light like a map of itself.

"You come out here often?" Leo asked.

"When I need to think," Dex said. "The Rim Trail is good for thinking. Long enough that your mind has room to move, varied enough that you don't go automatic." He looked out at the view. "I also bring groups through here on the longer courses. Day four, usually — by then they've got their legs under them and they can actually look at where they are instead of just trying to keep up."

"Where do you take them on day four?"

"Depends on the group. Strong groups, we do the full traverse from the Strawberry Point access to the Navajo Lake connector — you pick up the Navajo Lake Loop at the north end and come back around through the basin. About fourteen miles with the connector. It's a good day." He said it with the specific, unshowy satisfaction of a person describing something they'd done many times and still meant. "Weaker groups, we do an out-and-back from Strawberry Point to the Harris Springs Rim overlook and back. Five miles, but the Harris Springs view is worth the whole day on its own."

"I haven't done Harris Springs," Leo said.

"Add it to the list. Late afternoon is the best time — the light comes in from the west and hits the canyon walls at an angle that makes the whole thing look like it's lit from inside."

They walked for a while without talking. The trail curved west along the escarpment and the view opened further, the canyon country rolling south to a horizon that was theoretically the edge of something but looked from here like the beginning of everything. A raven worked the thermals below the cliff edge, riding the updraft with the boneless ease of an animal that had resolved the question of effort and decided against it.

Leo filmed thirty seconds of it. Then he put his phone away and just looked.

"You grew up in this kind of country?" he asked.

"Colorado," Dex said. "Western slope. Canyon country there too, different character — drier, redder, less of the high plateau feeling. I came to Utah for a course I was taking, one of the early NOLS wilderness programs, and something about the Markagunt just —" he paused, looking for the word, and in the pause Leo heard the same thing he sometimes heard in his own pauses when he tried to describe why he'd stayed on Cedar Mountain: the difficulty of making language do something that landscape did without effort. "It kept me," Dex said finally. "That's the best I can do."

"That's the honest answer."

"The honest answer and the complete one are usually the same thing up here," Dex said. "The mountain has a way of making complicated explanations feel unnecessary."

Leo thought about the cedar grove at the end of Cody's grease-pencil line. He thought about @Jackrabbit's comment: you were already looking in the right direction. He thought about Tomas saying: sometimes what a place looks like on the way in tells you as much as the place itself.

The mountain kept doing that — kept producing the right sentence at the right moment, through whichever mouth happened to be available.

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They stopped at the Strawberry Point overlook, which was where the escarpment gathered itself into its most dramatic statement: a promontory extending south from the plateau rim, the land dropping away on three sides to the canyon country below, the view a full hundred and eighty degrees of southern Utah geology laid out with the patient indifference of deep time. A pair of hikers Leo didn't know were at the overlook railing, taking photographs. Dex and Leo found a flat shelf of rock twenty yards back and sat on it.

Dex had a water bottle and an apple, which he produced from his pack with the organized ease of someone for whom trail food was not an afterthought. He offered Leo half the apple. Leo accepted.

"Tell me about the courses," Leo said. "The philosophy of them, not the itinerary."

Dex looked at the view while he thought about this, which Leo had come to understand was how Dex thought about things that mattered to him — he looked at something large and let the question find its own shape.

"Most of the people I take out," Dex said, "have spent their entire adult lives in environments that are completely mediated. Everything that keeps them alive is managed by someone else — their food supply, their water, their shelter, their warmth. They've outsourced all of it so completely that they've lost the felt sense of what it costs. Not the money cost. The actual cost — the effort and knowledge and attention that has to go into maintaining a human life in a physical world."

"And that bothers them," Leo said.

"It unsettles them. There's a difference." Dex turned the water bottle in his hands. "Bothered implies they want it fixed. Unsettled is more honest — they've noticed something about their situation that they can't quite look away from. They come to me because they want to close the gap, even a little. Learn some of what was outsourced. Feel like less of a passenger."

"Does it work?"

"For some of them. The ones who arrive ready to be changed by the experience rather than just to have it." A small pause. "Those are actually the majority. People self-select for this kind of course — you don't sign up for five days in the backcountry if you're not genuinely willing to be uncomfortable."

Leo ate his half of the apple and looked at the canyon country and thought about what Dex was describing. He thought about Leo himself, three years ago, detouring off the highway toward a mountain he'd only heard about from a stranger. He thought about the specific, slightly inexplicable feeling of arriving somewhere and understanding within an hour that leaving was going to be harder than staying.

"What do you teach them about fire?" he asked.

Dex smiled. Not at Leo — at the question, or at something the question reminded him of. "Everything," he said. "Fire is the center of it, honestly. Not because fire is the most practically important survival skill, though it is — but because fire is the thing that makes everything else feel real. You can talk about shelter construction all day and it stays abstract. The moment someone gets their first fire started from friction in a damp field at dusk —" he paused, and something in his voice had shifted, had gone to the place where people go when they're talking about something they genuinely love, " — everything changes. They understand, physically, in their hands and their chest, that they are capable of something that kept their species alive for a hundred thousand years. That feeling doesn't go away."

"No," Leo said. "I imagine it doesn't."

He was thinking about cedar bark. He was thinking about Coyote leaning over the fire and the bark in his hair catching, and the long relay across the landscape, and what it meant that someone was re-walking that relay right now on this mountain. He thought about what it would

mean to Dex — who understood fire as a felt connection to something ancient and necessary — to know the story that was being told in the cedar bark fire rings on Cedar Mountain's plateau.

He decided, not for the first time, that he liked Dex. And he held the other thing alongside it — the boot prints, the depleted caches, Sophie's three-question analysis — and found that the two things did not cancel each other out. They were just both true.

"You ever read much about Indigenous fire practices?" Leo asked. Carefully. Conversationally.

"Some," Dex said. "The prescribed fire literature gets into it — the Paiute use of fire for land management on the plateau is documented pretty well. There's a reason this landscape looks the way it does. It's not entirely natural — it's been tended." He looked at the terrain below the escarpment. "People managed this land with fire for thousands of years before anyone else arrived and decided fire was only a problem. The ecology up here reflects that history whether or not anyone acknowledges it."

"You teach that to your groups?"

"I try. It lands differently for different people." He stood, brushing rock dust from his trail pants. "Some of them find it interesting history. Some of them find it genuinely moving. A few of them — the right ones — start to understand that they're not the first people to have figured out how to live in this landscape. That there's a body of knowledge here that's older than any course I could design, and that the correct attitude toward it is humility."

He said this without any performance in it. It was just what he thought.

Leo looked at the view for a long moment.

"Come on," Dex said. "I'll show you the Harris Springs Rim. The morning light's still good."

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The spur to the Harris Springs Rim overlook branched off the main Rim Trail about a mile west of Strawberry Point, an unmarked use-path that Dex took without hesitation. It ran along a subsidiary escarpment

— lower than the main rim, but angled differently, so the view it offered was of the canyon system from a more intimate distance, the walls of the drainage close enough that you could see the individual color bands in the rock face, the pale cream of the Navajo sandstone, the darker Kayenta above it, the Moenave at the base where the canyon floor was.

"How do you know about this spot?" Leo asked.

"Course day two," Dex said. "Water sourcing. There's a seep at the base of the escarpment here — reliable through September in most years, dry by October. I bring groups to it to practice treatment and sourcing before we're in a situation where it matters." He looked at the rock face below. "Also the view."

"Also the view," Leo agreed.

They stood for a while at the overlook. No railing here, no official designation — just the edge of the rock and the drop beyond it and the canyon catching the light at the angle Dex had promised, the walls lit from the west in a way that made them look almost warm.

"I should get back," Leo said eventually.

"What are you working on today? After this."

"Cache field checks with the station crew. Monday is the full survey." He said it without loading it, the way you mention plans you have.

Something moved in Dex's expression, briefly — too fast and too small to name. He recovered it without drama and said: "The station keeping you busy."

"It's a good group of people," Leo said. "I think I underestimated what a fire station actually is when I first drove up. What it represents, out here. The crew that keeps this mountain — " he gestured at it, the whole improbable beautiful thing, " — the crew that keeps all of this going for everyone who lives or visits here. It's not a small thing."

"No," Dex said. Something in his voice had a quality Leo couldn't fully read — agreement, he thought, genuine agreement, but underneath it a note that might have been something else. Something that sat at the edge of a feeling Dex was keeping organized. "It's not a small thing at all."

They walked back to the main trail together. At the junction, they split — Dex continuing west toward the Everett Hollow descent, Leo

turning east back toward the Strawberry Point trailhead and his truck. They said their goodbyes with the easy warmth of people who'd had a genuinely good morning together, and Leo watched Dex's green jacket disappear around the curve of the trail before he turned and started back.

He walked for a while without filming, which was increasingly his habit in situations he wanted to keep clear in his own head before he decided what to do with them.

He thought about the note in Dex's voice at the end — the not-small-thing quality of it. He turned it over as he walked, the way you turn something over when you're not sure what it is yet but you know it's worth the turning.

It was not guilt, he decided. Or not only guilt. It was the sound of a person who already knew, somewhere not fully examined, that something they'd been doing had a weight they hadn't given it. The awareness arriving before the reckoning. The thing Tomas had described as the moment before the first step: when not going has become harder than going.

The trail curved east. The canyon country fell away to the south. The aspens on the slope above were going gold faster now, the September light doing its accelerating work.

Leo pulled out his phone and looked at the Discord. Marcus had posted an updated barometric chart at six this morning with a note that the pressure drop was continuing ahead of schedule. The comment thread had forty-three replies, including GertrudeW reporting that Biscuit had now moved from the northeast-facing windowsill to the top of the refrigerator, which she considered an escalation.

Leo typed a quick reply — Thanks Marcus, consistent with what the crew is seeing — and pocketed his phone.

Five days, maybe four.

He walked faster.

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He told Cody that evening, at Cody's cabin, over the pasta Cody made when he was working through something — the same three-ingredient

combination every time, reliable and unpretentious, the culinary equivalent of a Cody field note.

"The note in his voice," Cody said.

"I can't characterize it better than that. It wasn't guilt exactly. More like — awareness. Of a gap between what he's been doing and what he'd think of himself as doing."

Cody ate. He was thinking in the way he thought when data was resolving into a conclusion — not quite there yet, but approaching.

"He talked about the station," Leo said. "About what it represents. Not in a way that sounded like deflection — it sounded like he meant it. He does mean it, I think. The crew, the mountain, the community they protect. He genuinely values all of it."

"Which makes what he's been doing worse," Cody said. "Not better."

"I know."

"But it makes the conversation easier," Cody added. "If he already understands the value of what was taken — even if he hasn't connected it to his actions yet — then the conversation is about completing a circuit, not building one from scratch."

Leo looked at him across the table. "That is either the most optimistic framing I've heard this week or the most accurate one."

"I think it's both," Cody said.

Leo twirled pasta and thought about a man standing at a canyon overlook saying it's not a small thing with a note in his voice that was the sound of understanding arriving somewhere it wasn't fully welcome yet. He thought about the teaching philosophy — the outsourced life, the lost felt sense of cost, the clients who came to close a gap. He thought about the irony of that, which was not small, and decided it wasn't his irony to point out. That was between Dex and whatever he'd been doing on the mountain, and when the time came it would surface on its own.

"The cache checks are Monday," Leo said.

"I know."

"After that we have enough."

"After that we have enough," Cody confirmed. He looked at his bowl. "The fifth site. We still need to find it. The saddle between the

two ridges — the high meadow with the view of two drainages. Before the rain."

"Four days, Marcus says. Maybe less."

"Then we go tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," Leo agreed.

Outside, the Cedar Mountain night was doing what it did in mid-September — dropping fast, stars appearing with the aggressive clarity that came when the last of the summer haze was gone and the air had been scrubbed clean by the cold. Through Cody's kitchen window, the ridgeline was a dark shape against a sky that was not quite black, the last of the color draining out of it while they sat there.

Leo looked at it and thought: somewhere out there, the story is still moving. The relay is still running. And whoever is carrying it knows, the way you know things on this mountain when you've been paying attention, that the rain is coming.

He washed his bowl without being asked, which was his way of saying thank you for the pasta and the thinking-space and the company of someone who knew when to say something and when to just eat.

Cody, who understood this, said: "Seven o'clock."

"Seven o'clock," Leo said, and went home to sleep.

## chapter ten

MONDAY CAME IN grey and purposeful, the sky the flat, high overcast that precedes weather systems on the plateau — not threatening yet, just informational. The light it produced was even and shadowless, the kind that showed terrain exactly as it was without the editorial commentary of direct sun. Kowalski, Leo suspected, would have approved of it as a working condition.

They met at the station at seven-thirty: Kowalski with his pack already organized, his printed inventory sheets in a waterproof sleeve, his expression the settled focus of a man executing a plan he'd been holding in his head for weeks. Brennan with his own pack and the gate keys on their ring, the keys that accessed the service roads and the locked sections of the cache network. Leo and Cody with their documentation gear — Cody's camera and notebook, Leo's phone and the quiet intention to film nothing today unless something specifically warranted it.

Redd came out of the station as they were loading the truck. He looked at the four of them, looked at the sky, looked at Kowalski.

"Full survey," Kowalski said.

"Call me when you've got the last site." Redd looked at Leo and Cody. "Both of you." It was not a question but it was not an order either. It was the kind of statement that contained, if you were listening, something that functioned as trust.

"Yes," Leo said.

Redd went back inside. They loaded the truck and drove north.

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The cache network, as Kowalski explained it on the drive, was organized in three tiers. The first tier was the primary response zone — sites accessible within twenty minutes from the station by road, configured for the most likely call types: structural fire assist, vehicle accident, medical. These were the well-stocked, frequently checked caches whose contents were the most critical and whose inventory was the tightest. The second tier was the extended response zone — the plateau and the east slope, farther out, accessed by service road, configured for wildland fire support. And the third tier, which no longer officially existed, was the legacy network — sites that had been decommissioned when the district's response planning was updated two seasons ago, the boxes supposed to have been retrieved and returned to the station.

"How many third-tier sites were there?" Cody asked.

"Seven," Kowalski said. "Six were recovered. One was not."

"The lookout tower," Leo said.

"The lookout tower." Kowalski looked at the road. "The access was complicated that season — early snow on the plateau road, the crew was stretched on an extended response, the retrieval got deferred. By the time it was practicable, it had been deferred long enough that it fell off the active task list." A pause, the quality of a pause in which a precise person was being precise about accountability. "That's on me. It should have been on a formal task list from the beginning. It wasn't."

"You couldn't have known someone would find it," Brennan said.

"No. But I should have retrieved it regardless." He said it without self-flagellation, just the clean acknowledgment of a process failure by a person who ran processes well and took their failures seriously. "Today we close the gap."

The truck turned onto the plateau service road and the mountain opened up around them — the flat-topped country, the big sky, the escarpments to the south that Leo now associated with the Virgin River

Rim and Dex's voice saying the mountain kept you. The aspens along the road shoulders were past peak, the gold going to the papery, translucent quality that came just before the leaves let go. A week, maybe less.

The rain was coming.

Leo watched the sky and counted days.

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They worked through the first three sites before noon.

Site four was intact — contents verified, lock tested, Kowalski's notation made in ink. Site five was the site near the Duck Creek Trail connector, a second-tier cache positioned for the trail corridor, and it was also intact. Site six was the one that had been accessed: a plateau-edge cache, configured for wildland fire support, positioned in a rock alcove a quarter-mile off the service road. They found it the way they'd found the earlier compromised site — the lock combination correct, the seal apparently undisturbed, everything looking right until Kowalski opened it and stood looking at the interior with the focused, contained expression of a man reading a situation.

The inventory was short. Not catastrophically — nothing had been stripped. But the fire shelter, one of two that had been in the cache, was missing. A length of high-tensile cord, gone. A multi-tool. And the water treatment kit, again: the same category of item that had been taken from the previous site.

"Consistent," Cody said, looking at Kowalski's inventory sheet.

"Consistent," Kowalski confirmed. "Same profile as the other compromised sites. The items taken are the items a person running a field course would find most useful. Water treatment, cord, multi-tool." He paused. "The fire shelter is new. That's the most significant single item missing across all sites."

"What does a fire shelter cost?" Leo asked.

"Six hundred dollars for the current-generation model. This one was current-generation." He photographed the interior, the empty bracket where the shelter had been mounted. "It's also not something you use casually. A fire shelter is a last-resort survival item — you deploy

it when you're about to be overrun by fire and there's nowhere to go. Taking it for a field course —" he stopped. "I don't think he knew what it was. Or he knew what it was called but not what it was for."

"He told me on the trail that his clients learn the cost of things," Leo said. "The felt sense of what it takes to maintain a human life." He said it without irony, because it wasn't the moment for irony. "I believe he meant it."

"I know," Kowalski said. He closed the cache, checked the hasp. "That makes it a different kind of problem than if he didn't."

They stood for a moment in the rock alcove, the overcast sky visible above the escarpment, the wind carrying the first real edge of the approaching system. Leo thought about the Rim Trail yesterday, the morning light, the apple. He thought about the note in Dex's voice at the end: not a small thing.

"One more site," Brennan said.

"One more site," Kowalski agreed.

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The final site on the survey was the lookout tower cache.

They drove the service road to the plateau gate, used the key, drove through, and hiked the half-mile to the tower in a silence that was not uncomfortable but was weighted — the silence of four people who were approaching the end of something and knew it. The overcast had thickened since morning, the sky now the particular flat grey of a system that had made its decision and was executing it. Not rain yet. Soon.

The tower stood against the grey sky with its usual quality of patient official readiness. The ground-level storage alcove door was as they'd found it on the first visit: closed, the hasp undamaged, the lock hanging open. Kowalski looked at the lock for a moment, then pulled the door open.

The cache box was still there. Still on the lower shelf, olive green, CMSD stencil on the lid.

Kowalski crouched in front of it. He worked the combination — he'd looked up the box's original assignment in the station records and found its factory combination, which had never been changed, which

was its own notation in the file he was building. The lock opened. He lifted the lid.

Leo and Cody had positioned themselves to see over Kowalski's shoulder without crowding him. Brennan stood in the alcove doorway, the grey sky behind him.

The box was not empty. But it was not complete either. Kowalski read the contents against his inventory sheet for the box's original configuration — what should have been there when it was decommissioned, everything that had been in it when it was last officially checked two seasons ago.

Missing: one water treatment kit. One emergency medical kit — the full kit, not just supplies. One hand radio, the station-frequency model. Two emergency blankets. One fire starter kit.

Present: one emergency blanket, still sealed. One signaling mirror. One printed emergency protocol card, laminated. A coil of paracord.

"He's been using it as a staging cache," Cody said quietly. "Not stripping it. Using it. Taking what he needs for a given course and — " he paused, " — possibly returning some of it."

"The paracord is not in the original inventory," Kowalski said, without looking up. "It was added. Same with the signaling mirror." He photographed everything. "He's been topping it up with his own supplies when he takes things out. He thinks he's maintaining it."

The word medical kit sat in Leo's chest in the way that heavy words sit when they're fully understood. A full emergency medical kit. Not a first aid kit — a medical kit, the kind configured for wilderness trauma response. The kind a crew might need on a technical rescue call in the northeast drainage, where response times were longer than Redd liked and getting longer as the terrain got more complex.

"Has anyone needed it?" Leo asked. "This season. A call where this box's contents would have been the nearest supply."

Kowalski was quiet for a moment. "There was a trail rescue in August. Hiker down on the northeast face, suspected ankle fracture, secondary concerns about shock. We responded from the station with our onboard kit." He paused. "The call resolved with what we had. The onboard kit was sufficient."

"But if it hadn't been," Brennan said from the doorway. "If the onboard had been depleted or the hiker's condition had been worse —"

"This cache is the nearest secondary supply for that section of the northeast face," Kowalski said. He closed the box, reset the lock — engaging it this time, properly — and stood. "It would have been insufficient."

Nobody said anything for a moment.

The wind moved through the tower's steel framework above them, producing the low, harmonic sound that metal structures make when the air finds their frequencies. The grey sky pressed down.

Leo thought about what Cody had said the night before: completing a circuit rather than building one. He thought about Dex's face when Leo had mentioned the cache checks — that brief, too-fast movement in his expression, recovered without drama. He thought about a man who taught people the felt sense of cost, who had been taking things whose cost he had not yet felt.

The circuit was going to complete itself. The only question was how.

"We have enough," Leo said.

"We have enough," Kowalski confirmed. He shouldered his pack. "I'll prepare the documentation summary tonight. Tomorrow morning, the captain."

"We'll be there," Leo said.

They walked back to the truck through the thickening grey. Brennan locked the plateau gate behind them. The aspens along the service road had gone almost entirely to bare branches overnight, the last of the gold on the ground now, pale and translucent in the flat light.

The season was ending.

Everything was moving toward its conclusion at once.

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That evening the Discord achieved what Leo could only describe as a state of collective meteorological excitement that bordered on the ceremonial.

Marcus had posted his final pre-event forecast at four o'clock with

the precision of a scientist filing a formal report: revised arrival window, thirty-six to forty-eight hours. Northeast face primary impact zone. Rainfall totals, projected by elevation band. Duration: two days minimum, possibly extending to three on the upper plateau. He had included a hand-annotated map of the expected precipitation pattern, photographed from his notebook, the contour lines drawn in blue ink with the careful habit of someone who thought better on paper than on screen.

The Discord had received this with the enthusiasm of a community that had been watching a weather event develop for two weeks and was now, finally, at the moment of vindication or refutation.

GertrudeW had reported that Biscuit had descended from the top of the refrigerator, circled the kitchen twice, and was now sitting directly in front of the heating vent, which she interpreted as a definitive forecast confirmation. Three other members had agreed. One had dissented on methodological grounds and been good-naturedly overruled.

The former geography teacher who posted obsessive wind analyses had produced a three-part breakdown of the orographic forcing over the Markagunt plateau that was, Leo thought, probably more accurate than anything the public forecast models were offering, and had ended it with the characteristically understated conclusion: substantial precipitation likely.

Leo read all of it twice, made a note of the timing — thirty-six hours meant Wednesday morning at the earliest, Wednesday afternoon if Marcus's revised window was right — and texted Cody: Cedar grove tomorrow. First light.

Cody's reply came back in under a minute: Already packed.

Leo smiled at his phone. Of course Cody was already packed. Cody had probably been packed since Tomas had pointed at the cedar notation on the topo map and said I believe so, yes.

He looked at the @Jackrabbit thread, which had been quiet for two days. He typed a message, considered it, revised it, considered it again, and posted: The rain is coming. Thirty-six hours. We're going to the grove tomorrow.

He wasn't sure why he posted it. Some instinct about transparency,

about acknowledging to whoever was watching that he understood what was at stake and wasn't approaching it carelessly. An instinct about the difference between following something and hunting it.

He watched the thread.

After eleven minutes, @Jackrabbit replied:

@Jackrabbit The ember is already there. It has been for a while. Go carefully.

Leo read it three times.

The ember is already there.

He set his phone down on the table and sat with that for a long moment. The cabin was quiet around him, the mountain outside doing its nighttime things, the wind beginning to carry the first distant suggestion of what was coming — not rain yet, just the advance quality of air that had decided something.

The ember was already there. Whoever had been walking this story had finished it — had reached the grove, had made the last site, had saved the last coal. And they'd done it before the rain, which meant they'd read the same forecast Marcus had read, or read the sky directly, and they'd moved.

And now Leo and Cody were going to go there. Not to find the person. Not to document, or expose, or conclude. Just to be there. To stand in the place where the story ended and understand it from the inside, the way you understand things when you're willing to go all the way to where they happened.

He replied to @Jackrabbit: Thank you. We'll go carefully.

He went to bed.

The wind picked up through the night, working through the pines outside the cabin with a new intentionality, the sound of a system that had stopped being theoretical and started being real. Leo lay in the dark and listened to it and thought about a jackrabbit running through rain with an ember tucked beneath its tail, and the cold wet world pressing in from every direction, and the one small warmth that would not go out.

In the morning they would go to the grove.

He was, he realized, a little afraid — not of anything specific, not of

any danger the mountain held. Afraid in the way you're afraid before something you've been moving toward for a long time finally arrives. The fear of the threshold. The moment before the first step, when not going has become harder than going.

He recognized it. He'd been here before.

He went to sleep.



## chapter eleven

THE ARGUMENT STARTED the way their arguments usually started, which was not as an argument at all but as a conversation that had been building underneath other conversations for long enough that it eventually became unavoidable.

They were at Leo's cabin the evening before the planned grove visit, the remains of dinner on the table, Cody's pack already by the door, both of them with coffee going cold at their elbows. The wind had been picking up since afternoon, working through the pines with increasing purpose. The thirty-six-hour window was narrowing. Tomorrow was the day.

It started, as these things do, with something small.

Leo had been scrolling through his Following the Ember archive, thinking about the sequence of posts, the story they told taken together — the arc from the first ambient mountain shot to the overlook to Eagle Point to the cedar canopy photograph he'd previewed in his mind as the final post, the one that said everything without saying anything. He was half-thinking out loud, the way he did when he trusted his company enough to process in the open.

"The grove photograph," he said. "I want it to be just the canopy. No fire ring, no ash, nothing that says 'here is the specific location.' Just the trees. Just the light."

Cody was quiet for a moment, in a way that Leo had learned to distinguish from his usual contemplative silence. This was the other kind. The kind that preceded something he'd been weighing.

"You're still planning to post from the grove," Cody said.

"One photograph. The canopy. Nothing identifying."

"But you'll know where you took it. And anyone who has been following the series carefully will know we've reached the end of the trail."

"Yes."

Cody looked at his coffee. "I'm not sure we should go at all."

Leo looked at him.

"I've been thinking about it since Tomas told us about his grandmother," Cody said. "About what this trail is. Not what it looks like from the outside — not a puzzle, not a geographic curiosity — but what it actually is. Someone has been performing an act of devotion to this story on this landscape. A private act. Something they've been doing, from what Tomas described, probably for a very long time in some form." He paused. "The current series is more elaborate than previous iterations, Redd said. Something has changed, something has prompted this particular telling. We don't know what. And we're about to walk into the conclusion of it, uninvited, with cameras."

"One camera," Leo said. "And I already said —"

"One camera, one phone, and two sets of eyes that have been documenting this trail for three weeks." Cody's voice was not sharp. It was the voice he used when he was being careful, which was more unsettling than sharpness. "Leo. We have been treating this as a mystery to be followed. Something pointed at us, designed to be pursued. But what if it wasn't? What if the fire sites are in accessible places not because the person wants to be found, but because accessible places are where the story's geography requires them to be?"

Leo didn't answer immediately. He sat with the question and found it had weight.

"@Jackrabbit," he said after a moment.

"@Jackrabbit comments on your posts. That's interaction. It's not an invitation to arrive at the conclusion of a sacred practice."

"They said 'go carefully.' Not 'don't go.'"

"That's an interpretation," Cody said. "A generous one."

"It might also be accurate."

"It might." Cody turned his mug in his hands. "Here's what I keep coming back to. We are two outsiders — well-intentioned, respectful, genuinely interested, all of that is true. But outsiders. We didn't earn the story. We found it by following a geographic pattern that Tomas was able to decode because of his family connection to it. We have been, for three weeks, following something that was not laid out for us."

Leo was quiet for a moment. The wind pressed against the cabin windows, testing.

"What would you have us do?" he asked. Not defensively — genuinely.

"Stop at the trailhead," Cody said. "Or go to the grove and stand at the edge and leave." He paused. "Not photograph. Not document. Not post."

"Not even the canopy."

"Not even the canopy."

Leo looked at his phone, face-down on the table. He thought about the canopy photograph he'd been composing in his head since Tomas had described the grove — the cedar light, the creek sound, the thing his grandmother had said: you could feel it. He thought about the Following the Ember archive, the story it told, the audience that had been walking alongside him and Cody for three weeks now, and whether that audience had a claim on the ending.

He thought about what Tomas had actually said. Not 'you may find the person.' Not 'you will understand the story when you arrive.' He'd said: I think you need to decide, before you go any further, what you're going to do if you're right.

Tomas had known, Leo realized. He'd known they were going to have this conversation. He'd planted the question weeks ago so that when it arrived it would arrive in a space they'd prepared for it.

"The problem," Leo said slowly, "is that I don't think the answer is as clear as you're making it."

Cody looked at him.

"Here's the thing," Leo said. "I've been doing this — the Following the Ember content — with a specific intention from the start. Not to expose. Not to sensationalize. To bear witness. To say: there is something here that matters, and I'm going to pay attention to it, and I'm going to do that in public because the mountain and its stories deserve a public that pays attention." He paused. "I think that's a legitimate thing to do. I think bearing witness has value. I think —" he stopped, reorganized, tried again. "I think the alternative to someone like me showing up and paying careful attention is not that no one shows up. It's that someone else shows up and pays careless attention. And I would rather it be me."

Cody was quiet for a while. Leo let him be quiet, because this was a Cody-thinking silence rather than a Cody-waiting-to-respond silence, and interrupting them produced different results.

"That's not wrong," Cody said finally.

"But."

"But it's the argument that every person who has ever inserted themselves into something that wasn't theirs to insert themselves into has made. With complete sincerity." He said it gently. Not as an accusation — as a fact he was bringing to the table the way he brought all facts, because they were relevant. "I'm not saying your intention is bad. I'm saying the road to the grove being paved with good intentions is the precise problem."

"So we don't go."

"I didn't say that either."

Leo looked at him. "Cody. You have to land somewhere."

"I know." He set his mug down. "I think we go. I think we don't photograph. I think we stand at the edge of the clearing and we look and we leave. And I think —" he paused, and something in his face was doing something that Leo didn't often see there, something effortful and honest, " — I think we make the decision about what we've been doing, and whether it's been right, not before we go or after we arrive, but in the actual moment. When we're standing there and we can see what it is and what we're doing in relation to it."

"That's frightening," Leo said.

"Yes," Cody said. "That's how I know it's the right answer."

They sat with it for a while. The wind pushed at the windows. The coffee went cold.

"Okay," Leo said.

"Okay," Cody said.

Neither of them said anything else about it that evening. They talked about the cache checks and the morning logistics and what time to leave — first light, which at this time of year on this mountain meant six-fifteen, six-twenty at the outside. They talked about whether the trail into the drainage was likely to be wet from the advance moisture and whether their boots were adequate for it. Practical things. The kind of talk that comes after a genuine conversation, when both people have said what needed saying and are now content to be in the same room without it.

Leo washed up. Cody took his pack and went home to sleep.

Leo stood at the kitchen window for a while after he heard Cody's car on the road, looking at the dark ridge and the darker sky above it and the first suggestion of cloud cover moving in from the northwest, the stars going out in sequence as the system advanced.

He thought: I don't know if I'm right. And I'm going anyway.

He thought that was probably the honest version of most of the things he'd done that had turned out to matter.

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He'd been planning to go straight to bed. He didn't.

He found himself, around nine-thirty, driving to the station. Not for any specific reason he could have named — no errand, no appointment. Just the pull of the place, the way it had become in three weeks something that felt like a fixed point. He'd felt this before about places and locations, this specific kind of gravitational quality that certain buildings acquired once they became associated with things that mattered. The station had it.

The exterior lights were on, as they always were. A single vehicle in the lot — Redd's truck, which Leo had come to associate with late hours, the captain's apparent conviction that the mountain didn't keep a schedule and neither should he.

Leo sat in his own truck for a moment, feeling the slight social awkwardness of having driven somewhere without a clear reason. Then he got out and knocked on the side door, the one that led to the common room rather than the equipment bay.

Redd opened it. He looked at Leo with the assessing quality that was his baseline, then stepped back and let him in without asking why he was there.

The common room was quiet, one lamp on, the whiteboard covered in its scheduling notations, the corkboard doing its usual dense work. The coffee maker was off — even Redd apparently had a limit — but there was a thermos on the table that smelled like something better than the station pot, and Redd poured a cup without being asked and set it in front of Leo's usual chair.

Leo sat. Redd sat across from him.

They looked at each other in the companionable way of two people who'd established enough mutual regard to not require preamble.

"Tomorrow," Redd said.

"Tomorrow. First light." Leo wrapped his hands around the cup. "Cody and I had a disagreement tonight."

"About whether to go."

"About whether we should go at all. About what we're doing when we follow something that wasn't put there for us." He paused. "We resolved it, more or less."

"How?"

"We're going to go and make the decision when we're there. In the moment. When we can see it."

Redd looked at his thermos. "That's a harder way to do it than deciding in advance."

"Cody said that's how you know it's right."

"Cody's not wrong." Redd was quiet for a moment. The station settled around them, the way old buildings settle in the night hours, the sounds of structure rather than activity. Outside, the wind was finding the gaps in things and noting them.

Then Redd said: "I've been to the grove."

Leo looked at him.

"Twice. Once about twelve years ago, on a solo patrol — I was doing

a fire risk assessment of the northeast drainage and I went further than the route required because the terrain pulled me in that direction. And once four years ago, same thing essentially. I don't have a better explanation than that." He said it the way he said everything, the flat delivery that meant he was being as accurate as he could be. "The second time, I found what you might expect to find from what Tomas has told you."

"A fire site."

"A site. Cedar bark, stone arrangement, the creek nearby. Not the elaborate construction you've been finding this season — smaller, simpler. A single fire ring, long cold. But placed with care."

"What did you do?"

"I stood at the edge of the clearing for about ten minutes," Redd said. "Then I left. I didn't touch anything. I didn't report it — it was on public land, no damage, nothing to report formally." A pause. "I didn't tell anyone."

"Why are you telling me?"

Redd looked at the window, the dark outside it, the mountain invisible but present beyond the glass. "Because you're going there tomorrow and I want you to know what it felt like," he said. "So you're not surprised by it."

"What did it feel like?"

He thought about it. Redd was not a person who used words carelessly, and the thinking-before-he-spoke quality was not hesitation — it was accuracy, the search for the right description.

"Like I had interrupted something," he said finally. "Not something in progress — nothing was happening, the fire was cold. But something ongoing. Something that didn't require me to be there to continue but was continuing regardless, whether I was there or not, whether I knew about it or not." He paused. "Like the mountain had been having a conversation with itself for a very long time, and I had wandered into a room in the middle of it."

Leo sat with that.

"I left it alone," Redd said. "Both times. And when the reports started coming in this season, when Kowalski opened his file and Brennan started asking questions and you and Cody showed up with your map and your camera — I made a decision to let it develop at its

own pace." He looked at Leo directly. "Because I believed, and I still believe, that the mountain was going to provide what was needed at the right time. Which in this case turned out to be the two of you."

"That's a lot of faith to put in a content creator and a bird scientist," Leo said.

A very small thing happened in Redd's expression. It was the closest Leo had seen him come to a smile that wasn't purely suppressed. "You solved the Stone People thing," Redd said. "And the Golden Talon business. And whatever happened at the Iron Horse last winter, which Brennan told me about in detail." The almost-smile again. "The mountain makes its choices. I've learned to respect them."

Leo looked at the corkboard. At Kowalski's coyote photograph, which had migrated from the Facebook page to physical print in the past week, pinned in the upper right corner with the caption — Station resident. Not on the payroll — still attached. At the flyer beneath it with the hand-drawn coyote and the caption Too Late. At the safety poster that had survived multiple administrations.

"This mountain has been telling that story for a long time," Leo said. It was something Redd had said weeks ago and he was giving it back, not as a question, as a statement he now understood the full weight of.

"Yes," Redd said. "Maybe it just needed someone to listen again."

He picked up his thermos and poured the last of it into his own cup. A gesture of completion, or of continuation — Leo wasn't sure which, and thought it might be both.

"Go carefully tomorrow," Redd said. "The approach to the drainage can be slippery when the moisture is up, and the moisture is going to be up. Wear your good boots."

"Tomas already briefed us," Leo said.

"I know. I'm telling you again." He stood, with the unhurried ease of a man who was done for the evening in all the ways that counted. "Go carefully. See what's there. And trust what you find."

Leo drove home through the dark with the wind pressing against the truck and the clouds thickening overhead and the mountain invisible on all sides but present, always present, the way things are present that don't require your acknowledgment to be real.

He went to bed at ten-thirty.

He set his alarm for five-fifty.

He did not expect to sleep well and was surprised, when the alarm went off, to find that he had.

The mountain, apparently, had decided he was ready.



## chapter twelve

THE MORNING AFTER Kowalski completed his documentation summary, he presented it to Redd at the station's seven o'clock briefing with the same manner he brought to all formal reports — organized, precise, unsensational, the facts arranged in the sequence that made them most legible to someone hearing them for the first time. Leo and Cody were there at Redd's invitation, which they'd received via Brennan the previous evening in the form of a text that said: 7am. Captain wants you both. Wear your good boots.

The briefing was short, because Kowalski's summaries were always short — he had the gift of compression, of knowing which details were structural and which were decoration, and he never included the decoration. Five cache sites confirmed compromised. Items missing across the network: water treatment supplies at three sites, emergency medical supplies at two, a fire shelter, a hand radio configured to the station's frequency, standard field equipment at all five. Estimated replacement cost: just over three thousand dollars. And the lookout tower cache — decommissioned, not retrieved, accessed an unknown number of times over an unknown period — which represented both the largest single gap in the network and the longest-running exposure.

Redd listened without interrupting. He had a specific quality when receiving formal information — a particular stillness, the attention of a person who was not just processing content but assessing implication,

who was already three moves ahead in terms of what the information required of him. When Kowalski finished, Redd looked at his thermos for a moment.

"The hand radio," he said.

"Yes."

"It's still out there."

"I believe so. The frequency logs show three anomalous transmissions — short, probably accidental keypresses from someone unfamiliar with the unit. The timestamps correspond to dates when Dex Hartley's courses were in the field."

The name was in the room now, formally, for the first time. Redd looked at Kowalski. Kowalski looked at Redd. Leo had the sense of two people who had arrived at the same destination by different routes and were now confirming the address.

"How long have you had the name?" Redd asked.

"Since July fifteenth. A working hypothesis since then, a well-supported one as of Monday." Kowalski paused. "I wanted physical evidence at multiple sites before I brought it forward. Leo and Cody provided independent confirmation of the sole pattern, which I consider sufficient."

Redd looked at Leo. Not accusingly — with the assessing quality that was his baseline, checking where Leo was in relation to all of this.

"He doesn't know what he took," Leo said. "Or he didn't. He may be starting to." He thought about the Rim Trail, the note in Dex's voice, the moment that had looked like awareness arriving at an inconvenient door. "He's not a bad person. He made a serious mistake with serious consequences."

"The August rescue," Redd said.

"Yes."

Redd was quiet for a moment. Through the common room window, the mountain was doing its pre-dawn grey, the overcast heavy now, the system close enough to feel.

"We bring him in," Redd said. "Informally. Coffee at the station. We show him what we have and we give him the opportunity to do the right thing." He looked at Kowalski. "Not the county. Not yet."

Kowalski nodded once. "I'll note in the file that the captain authorized a direct approach before formal referral."

"Do that." Redd stood. "Leo. You're the one who has a relationship with him. Can you get him here?"

"Yes," Leo said. "But after tomorrow. We're going to the grove in the morning."

Redd looked at him with something that was not quite a smile and not quite its absence. "Tomorrow," he said. "The grove first. Then Hartley." He picked up his thermos. "Priorities."

He went back to the equipment bay. Kowalski filed his documentation, returned the summary to its waterproof sleeve, and went to make a fresh pot of coffee — the real kind, from a tin of good grounds he kept in his locker for occasions that warranted it. He set a mug in front of Leo without ceremony.

Leo wrapped his hands around it and thought about tomorrow, and the grove, and a story that was already finished, waiting for them to arrive at its ending.

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The fourth compromised cache was discovered that afternoon, and it changed the tenor of the day in the way that the arrival of one thing too many always does — not by being dramatically worse than what came before, but by closing off the last remaining version of events in which the situation was manageable without action.

Brennan found it on a routine patrol of the northeast face trail corridor — not one of the scheduled survey sites, just a cache he passed on a standard patrol route and checked as a matter of habit, the way he checked everything on patrol, because habit and consistency were what kept small problems from becoming large ones. He called it in from the field. Kowalski took the call. Leo, who was in the common room finishing his coffee, watched Kowalski's face during the call and understood what was happening before Kowalski said anything.

This cache was different from the others in one specific respect: it was a primary-tier site. Not extended response, not legacy — primary. The kind configured for the most likely call types, positioned for the

fastest access, stocked with the items the crew absolutely could not do without in the first minutes of a medical response.

The full emergency medical kit was gone.

Not the backup supplies, not the supplemental items — the kit itself, the primary one, the sealed hard case with the complete trauma response contents that lived in a specific bracket in a specific cache for a specific reason that had been thought through carefully by people who understood the consequences of getting it wrong.

Kowalski made his notation in ink. He did not say anything for a moment after he hung up the call. Then he said, to no one in particular, with the precision of a man making a formal statement for the record: "This is no longer a resourcing inconvenience."

Leo said nothing. There was nothing to say that Kowalski hadn't already said more accurately.

Redd was notified. He came through the common room, listened to Kowalski's account, and said: "Get Hartley in here. Today if possible."

"We have the grove tomorrow," Leo said.

Redd looked at him. There was a moment — brief, genuine — in which Leo could see the captain calculating, weighing the two things against each other. A missing medical kit. A cedar grove at the end of a trail. The mundane and the mythical, pressing simultaneously from opposite sides.

"Tomorrow morning," Redd said. "Grove at first light. Hartley in the afternoon. Can you reach him?"

"I'll text him now."

"Tell him we'd like to talk fire safety for his upcoming courses. Keep it simple."

Leo texted Dex: Hey — crew at the station wants to do a fire safety consult for your fall course season. Captain's idea. Wednesday afternoon work for you? Good coffee, I promise.

Dex's reply came back in six minutes: Works great. See you then. Looking forward to it.

Leo stared at the reply for a moment — the ease of it, the warmth of it, the completely unguarded quality of a man who had no idea what Wednesday afternoon was actually going to be. He thought about Cody's phrase: completing a circuit rather than building one. He

thought about the note in Dex's voice on the Rim Trail: not a small thing.

He put his phone in his pocket and went to find Cody.

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What happened with the coyote that afternoon was not, strictly speaking, Leo's fault.

He would maintain this position consistently in subsequent retellings, and Cody would not dispute it, and even Kowalski — who was arguably the most directly affected party — would, when pressed, concede that the chain of causation involved factors outside Leo's direct control. This did not prevent anyone from finding it very funny, including, eventually, Kowalski himself, though that took approximately forty-eight hours.

It started with the wildlife nonprofit.

They had reshared Leo's original coyote clip two weeks ago and it had found an audience well beyond Duck Creek Village — wildlife enthusiasts, amateur naturalists, people who simply liked watching a composed animal go about its morning routine with the unhurried dignity of a creature that had decided the station was home and was comfortable with that. The clip had now been viewed, between Leo's original post and the nonprofit's reshare, somewhere north of four hundred thousand times. This was not a number Leo had anticipated when he filmed sixty seconds of a coyote sitting in the morning light.

The consequence of four hundred thousand views, it turned out, was that a nature documentary production company based in Salt Lake City had watched the clip, watched it again, watched Leo's subsequent coyote content, and sent him an email expressing interest in the possibility of including the Cedar Mountain station coyote in a short documentary segment about wildlife adapting to human-adjacent environments in the American West.

Leo had forwarded this email to Redd as a matter of courtesy, with a note saying he'd told them nothing and would decline if the station preferred. Redd had forwarded it to Kowalski. Kowalski had read it, sat with it for the better part of two hours, and then — in a move that Leo

would later describe as the most surprising single action he had witnessed in three weeks on Cedar Mountain, which was a high bar — had replied to the production company himself.

Not to decline.

To request more information about the segment's scope, intended audience, and production timeline.

Leo discovered this when the production company's location scout emailed him to say they'd already been in contact with a Mr. Kowalski at the Cedar Mountain Service District and that Mr. Kowalski had been very helpful, and could Leo confirm the coyote was still resident at the station?

Leo went to find Kowalski.

He found him in the equipment bay, running his afternoon inventory with the focused attention he brought to it every day, clipboard in hand, the systematic footsteps, the system. Leo stood in the bay door for a moment watching him.

"Kowalski."

"Mm."

"The documentary company."

A pause in the clipboard work. Not a long one. "They have a legitimate reach," Kowalski said, without turning. "Their previous segments have been viewed by audiences in the millions. A segment on the station coyote, contextualized properly, would generate more public awareness of the district's work than any other communications approach available to us."

"That's — yes, that's true."

"The district's equipment fund is undercapitalized," Kowalski continued, still not turning. "Public awareness translates, measurably, into donation activity. I looked at the nonprofit's data from their previous reshares. The correlation is statistically significant."

Leo stared at the back of Kowalski's head.

"You want the coyote to raise money for the station," Leo said.

"I want the station's work to be appropriately funded," Kowalski said. "The coyote is a vehicle."

Leo considered this for a long moment. "Have you told the coyote?"

Kowalski turned around. His expression was exactly what it always

was — organized, controlled, the surface of a very deep lake. "The coyote," he said, "doesn't need to be told. It already understands the assignment."

He turned back to his inventory.

Leo went back to the common room and sat down and laughed, quietly, for about ninety seconds. Then he composed himself, picked up his phone, and texted Brennan: Did you know Kowalski is negotiating with a documentary production company about the coyote?

Brennan's reply: Yes. He consulted me last week. I told him I thought it was a good idea.

Leo: You both knew.

Brennan: We also told Tomas. He looked up the production company's previous work and said their approach to wildlife content was ethically sound.

Leo: And Redd?

Brennan: Redd said, and I'm quoting directly here, "If the animal wants the attention, who are we to argue."

Leo put his phone down on the table and looked at the corkboard — the coyote photograph, Station resident. Not on the payroll — and thought about a fire station crew that had, collectively and without telling him, decided to leverage a wild animal's social media presence into a funding mechanism for their equipment budget. He thought about all the conversations that had happened in this building that he hadn't been party to, all the quiet competence operating below the surface of what he could see.

He thought: I have been underestimating this crew from the beginning.

He thought: I should probably stop doing that.

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The Discord that evening was extraordinary even by its own standards, and its own standards were already high.

It had started, as the best Discord events started, with a piece of information dropped casually into the general channel that immediately

bifurcated the conversation into two simultaneous threads, each generating content faster than anyone could read it.

The information was this: Marcus had posted his final pre-rain forecast update at four-fifteen, and the numbers had shifted significantly. The system had accelerated again. The new arrival window was not thirty-six hours. It was eighteen to twenty-four. Rain on Cedar Mountain, specifically on the northeast face, beginning sometime between midnight and six in the morning.

The first thread was meteorological: the former geography teacher producing a real-time update of his orographic forcing analysis, three other members cross-referencing with their own instruments, a furious and genuinely technical debate about whether the dewpoint data from the Cedar City ASOS station was applicable to the plateau or systematically biased by the elevation difference. Marcus participating in this debate with the focused intensity of a competitor who had done his homework and knew it.

The second thread was about Biscuit.

GertrudeW had posted, at four-seventeen, a photograph. The photograph showed her kitchen. In the kitchen, on the counter, Biscuit the cat had knocked over a ceramic fruit bowl, scattered its contents across the counter, and arranged herself in the now-empty bowl with the self-possessed satisfaction of an animal that had completed a project. The fruit — three apples, two oranges, a bunch of green grapes — was on the floor.

GertrudeW's caption: She has never done this before. I believe this is a significant escalation. The bowl is very large. She filled it completely.

The thread that followed this photograph was, Leo thought, one of the better things he'd encountered on the internet in recent memory. Seventeen members had replied within ten minutes. The replies ranged from genuine concern for the fruit to elaborate meteorological interpretations of Biscuit's bowl occupation — the bowl as a depression system, the fruit as high-pressure blocking, Biscuit herself as the low-pressure center moving in. Someone had made a diagram. It was not entirely facetious. It was also, improbably, not entirely wrong — the bowl-as-low-pressure interpretation corresponded reasonably well to the actual forecast track.

Leo posted a response: Biscuit's methodology continues to outperform the NAM model. I'm logging this as a formal data point.

GertrudeW replied: I will let her know. She will be gratified but will not show it.

Marcus replied: For the record, my revised eighteen-to-twenty-four hour window was based on the 500mb analysis and the updated ensemble mean, not on feline behavior. But I acknowledge the Biscuit correlation is statistically interesting.

Someone replied to Marcus: You're not even a little curious?

Marcus, after a pause of about four minutes that Leo chose to read as a fifteen-year-old scientist wrestling genuinely with a methodological question: I'm going to say that I am professionally agnostic about the mechanism while remaining open to the data.

The Discord erupted. GertrudeW sent a photograph of Biscuit, still in the bowl, looking at the camera with the expression of an animal that was professionally agnostic about nothing.

Leo showed the thread to Cody, who was at the station for the evening, sitting with his pack already by the door because he'd apparently decided to just leave it there permanently at this point.

Cody read through the Biscuit thread carefully, with the same attention he gave to field data, and then said: "The bowl-as-low-pressure-center interpretation is actually not unreasonable. Cats preferentially seek enclosed spaces ahead of barometric drops. It's a documented behavior."

"Please don't tell Marcus," Leo said. "He will never be professionally agnostic about anything again."

"That might not be a loss," Cody said. But he was almost smiling.

Outside, the first suggestion of rain arrived not as rain but as a change in the quality of the air — a heaviness, a settling, the atmosphere making its preparations. The pines around the station moved in a new way, responding to something that wasn't wind exactly but was wind's precursor. The exterior lights made halos in the new moisture.

Leo looked at the sky through the common room window.

"Eighteen hours," he said.

"Maybe less," Cody said. "We should sleep."

"I know."

Neither of them moved for a while. The Discord continued its conversation — the meteorological thread and the Biscuit thread having merged now into a single magnificent hybrid, the former geography teacher having produced a revised analysis that incorporated, without apparent irony, both the 500mb ensemble and the bowl occupation data, with a note that the combined model showed strong agreement with the station's own barometric readings.

Marcus had replied to this with a single word: Remarkable.

GertrudeW had replied: I have been saying this for three years.

Kowalski, who had apparently joined the Discord at some point in the past week without telling anyone, posted his first message in the channel at nine forty-three PM. It contained the station's official barometric reading from the yard sensor, the time stamp, and a notation of the pressure change over the previous six hours. Nothing else. No commentary, no context.

The Discord treated this as a significant event. Seven people replied with variations of welcome and gratitude. The former geography teacher immediately incorporated the reading into his model and posted a revised forecast that he described, with understated precision, as the most accurate projection of the evening.

Kowalski did not reply to any of the responses.

But at nine fifty-one he posted the barometric reading again, updated, with a second timestamp.

Leo looked at Cody. Cody looked at Leo.

"He's going to post the readings all night," Leo said.

"Yes," Cody said. "He is."

They looked at the screen for a moment longer. Then Cody picked up his pack. "Grove at six-fifteen."

"Grove at six-fifteen," Leo said.

Cody left. Leo locked up and drove home through the beginning of the rain — not rain yet, not quite, but its absolute imminence, the air so saturated with intention that the windshield needed wipers before the first drop had actually fallen.

At home he checked the Discord one more time. Kowalski had posted four more barometric readings, each with a timestamp, each

showing the pressure dropping with the steady, remorseless consistency of a system that had decided.

Gertrude W: Biscuit is still in the bowl.

Leo put his phone on the charger, set his alarm for five-forty, and thought about tomorrow the way you think about things that are going to be significant before you know exactly why.

The rain began sometime after midnight.

He heard it arrive in his sleep — the sound of the mountain receiving something it had been waiting for, the pines accepting the weight of water with the patient accommodation of things that had done this many times before. Not a storm. Not an event. Just the rain, doing what rain does on Cedar Mountain in the third week of September, which was to remind everything that summer had been conditional and the terms were now due.

He slept through it without difficulty.

In the morning, everything would be wet and the grove would be waiting and the last ember of a very old story would be there in the cedar and the dark earth, having survived exactly what it was always going to survive.

He had decided to trust that. It felt, finally, like the right decision.



## chapter **thirteen**

THE RAIN HAD STOPPED SOMETIME before dawn, leaving behind the particular silence that follows rain at elevation — a silence that was not the absence of sound but its transformation, the mountain's ordinary acoustic texture changed by the water that had settled into every surface and every hollow. The pines dripped. The gravel in the station yard held small, precise depressions where the drops had landed. The air smelled like what it was: the same mountain it had always been, cleaned.

Leo arrived at the station at six o'clock. Cody was already there, which was not a surprise — Cody's relationship with early mornings was simpler than other people's, unencumbered by the negotiation between the alarm and the will that most people experienced. He had his pack and his notebook and his topo map in its waterproof sleeve and the expression of a man who had been up for an hour and had used the time well.

Tomas was there too, which Leo had not expected.

He was in his civilian clothes — not his station gear — with a daypack leaning against the common room table and a mug of his own tea in his hands. He looked at Leo when Leo came in and said: "I'm not coming to the grove. I want to be clear about that."

"Okay," Leo said.

"But I wanted to be here when you left." He looked at his mug. "And I wanted to give you something."

He reached into his pack and produced a folded piece of paper — not the photocopy of the route map, something handwritten, a single page. He handed it to Leo without explanation. Leo unfolded it.

It was a description. Written in Tomas's small, careful hand, in the style of directions given by someone who knew a place well enough to describe it without consulting anything — by landmark, by feel, by the sequence of things you encountered on the way. The approach to the drainage. The point where the pines changed to cedars. The sound of the creek before you could see it. The clearing, and what it looked like at different times of day. The stone arrangement. The spring-fed seep nearby.

Not a map. A memory.

"My grandmother's description," Tomas said. "As close as I can render it. I've been writing it down since she passed — I had most of it, but talking to you these past weeks made me remember the parts I'd let go soft." He paused. "I want you to find it on your own terms. But I didn't want you to miss it because of a wrong turn in the drainage."

Leo looked at the page for a moment. Then he folded it carefully and put it in the breast pocket of his jacket, the closest pocket, the one he used for things he didn't want to lose.

"Thank you," he said.

Tomas nodded once, the nod of a man who had done what he came to do. "Go carefully. The drainage will be slippery after the rain. And the creek will be up — don't try to cross it. The grove is on the near side."

"We know," Cody said.

"I know you know. I'm telling you again." He picked up his mug and looked at both of them with the careful, warm attention that was his particular quality — the EMT's gaze, the one that assessed and found, rather than assessed and judged. "Whatever you find there — it's already yours, in the sense that it's everyone's who approaches it with care. I want you to remember that."

He went out to his car without fanfare. They heard it start, heard it

pull out of the lot, heard the sound of it diminish toward the village road and then disappear.

The station was quiet. The coffee maker, on its automatic morning cycle, filled the room with its reliable smell.

"Ready?" Cody said.

"Yes," Leo said.

They drove north into the wet mountain morning.

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The service road to the northeast drainage was navigable but changed by the rain — the packed dirt surface had softened in places, holding the tracks of whatever had moved through overnight, and the culverts at the low crossings were running with clear, fast water that hadn't been there yesterday. Cody drove, because Cody drove the way he did most physical things: methodically, with full attention, no wasted movement. Leo sat with Tomas's page in his jacket pocket and the topo map open on his knee and watched the terrain change around them as they climbed.

The Markagunt plateau in the early morning after rain was a specific and very particular thing. The light was flat but luminous, the overcast acting as a diffuser that made every surface — rock face, pine needle, wet grass blade — glow with an evenness that direct sun never produced. The aspens that had been in full gold two weeks ago were mostly bare now, their white trunks standing in the flat light like a notation in a score, something that marked time rather than making it. The mountain was past its autumnal display and into the quiet that follows it, the settling into winter's approach with the patience of a thing that had done this before and would do it again.

Leo did not film the drive. He had brought his phone and his camera and he had, at some point in the morning's preparations, decided that both would stay in his pack unless something changed. This was not a resolution made with difficulty — it arrived as a simple fact, the way some decisions do when you've been thinking toward them long enough. He was going to the grove the way you go to places that matter: without the apparatus of documentation, without the

mediation of a lens. With just his eyes and his attention and whatever capacity he had for the kind of looking that leaves marks.

Cody glanced at him once during the drive, at his empty hands, and said nothing. But something in his expression settled.

They parked where the road ended at a locked gate — the drainage below accessible only on foot from here — and got out into the wet morning air. The gate was Forest Service, a simple bar-and-chain arrangement across a rutted two-track that descended into the drainage. Beyond it, the track disappeared into the trees.

Leo checked his watch. Six forty-three.

He consulted Tomas's page, holding it carefully against the moisture in the air. The approach began at the gate and followed the two-track for about a quarter mile, until the track bent left toward a seasonal meadow. Before the bend, a game trail broke right into the trees, heading directly for the drainage. You took the game trail. The game trail was faint but consistent — something used it regularly, deer or elk or both, the mountain's own system of paths that predated any human route-finding.

"Game trail," Leo said. "Right, before the track bends."

"I see it," Cody said.

They went in.

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The first quarter mile was familiar terrain — the mixed forest of the plateau's lower slopes, lodgepole pine and white fir, the ground cover a wet carpet of needles and duff that absorbed their footsteps and gave back nothing. Cody moved with his usual methodical ease, reading the ground before each step, the naturalist's habit of treating terrain as information. Leo followed, close enough to benefit from Cody's route-finding, far enough to have his own relationship with what he was seeing.

The transition happened the way Tomas's description had said it would happen, and the way it happened was not subtle. One moment they were in lodgepole pine. Then the ground changed — wetter, the soil darker, the drainage's influence becoming palpable. Then a smell

arrived that Leo recognized from the fire sites but had not encountered in its source form: cedar. Not smoke, not ash, but the living tree, the oils in the bark releasing into the wet morning air with an intensity that the rain had amplified rather than diminished.

And then the cedars themselves.

They were not what Leo had imagined, which was that they would look like the cedars he'd seen elsewhere — ornamental, tidy, the sculpted shapes of park plantings. These were old. The trunks were thick and shaggy, the bark fibrous and reddish-brown, layered and striated in the way of things that had been accumulating for a very long time. The canopy they formed was different from the pine forest behind them — lower, denser, the light filtered through it in a way that changed the quality of the air beneath, producing something green-tinged and still and cool. The ground under the cedars was clean, the duff thicker, the understory sparse. A room effect. The sense of having passed through a threshold.

Leo stopped.

Cody stopped beside him.

Neither of them said anything for a moment. The creek was audible now — not far, the sound of water moving over rock, small but clear in the cedar-hushed air. The trees around them moved in the faint breath of air that worked through the drainage, and the movement made a sound that was nothing like wind in pines. Softer. More considered. As if the trees were making a deliberate sound rather than simply responding to atmospheric conditions.

Leo thought: I understand now what Redd meant.

He did not say this out loud.

"The creek is to the right," Cody said quietly. "From the sound."

"Tomas said don't cross it. Grove is on the near side."

"Then we go left."

They went left, following the cedar line, moving slowly now — not from caution about the terrain, which was manageable, but from the instinct that this place called for a different pace. The pace of approaching something rather than arriving at it. The pace that left room for whatever you were approaching to remain itself rather than becoming, by your arrival, something else.

The clearing opened without announcement.

One moment there were trees. Then there was sky — not much of it, a grey oval of overcast framed by the cedar canopy on three sides and the creek bank on the fourth, the drainage's near side forming a natural wall of willow and sedge grass wet from the rain. A clearing of perhaps thirty feet across, the ground covered in the fine, saturated duff of cedar fall, the surface springy and dark and smelling of everything the tree carried in its wood and bark and oil.

The creek beyond the willows moved with its small, clear sound. The cedars stood at the clearing's edge with the quality of things that had been standing there for longer than the question of why was interesting.

And in the center of the clearing, the ceremony circle.

Leo had been to four fire sites. He had documented each one with the care and attention that Cody had modeled and that he had made his own. He had looked at each one and understood it, in the terms available to him — geographic, narrative, material. He had understood, in a way that accumulated with each site, that what he was looking at was deliberate and significant and connected to something much older than the individual act of making it.

None of that preparation was quite sufficient for this.

The circle was larger than the others — not dramatically, but perceptibly, the ring of stones extending to perhaps four feet across, the stones themselves larger and flatter, chosen with a care that was evident in their uniformity of color and surface. The ash inside was the ash of a fire that had been allowed to burn completely and then cool completely, pale grey and thorough, undisturbed by wind or rain because the clearing's cedar canopy and willow bank had sheltered it. At the center of the ash, arranged on a flat hearthstone that formed the circle's center point, was the cedar bark bundle.

Intact. Unburned.

Not the remnant of combustion — the thing itself, prepared and placed, the bark wound tight in the way that preserved an ember, the way that allowed a coal to survive being carried. The last ember of the

relay, saved from the rain, tucked beneath the tail of something patient and determined. Waiting.

Leo stood at the edge of the clearing and looked at it.

Around the circle's perimeter, the eight bark bundles he'd come to expect at the more elaborate sites — but here they were placed differently. Not at intervals around the ring, marking council or assembly. They were arranged in a spiral, working outward from the ring toward the clearing's edge, getting smaller as they went, the last one barely larger than a closed fist, positioned at the very boundary between the clearing floor and the cedar canopy's drip line. As if the story was still moving. As if the relay was ongoing, working its way outward from the center, the ember still being passed.

The cairns were at the clearing's four edges — not compass points, something else. The six directions Cody had found in the other sites' orientations: the sky acknowledged above, the earth below, the four lateral directions arranged according to a logic that was not the logic of a compass but of something older, a way of situating oneself in relation to the world that didn't require a needle and a pole to find north.

At the northern edge, where the cedar canopy was thickest, a single feather had been pressed flat beneath a smooth stone. Not decorative. Deliberate. The kind of placement that said: someone was here, and they wanted to mark it, and they chose this.

And in the soft earth at the clearing's far edge, near the creek bank, pressed into the duff with the clarity of a seal in wax: a single jackrabbit track. Fresh enough. The soft impression of small, fast feet that had passed through the wet earth and left their mark and moved on into whatever the next thing was.

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Cody documented the site.

Leo had expected this and had no objection to it — Cody's documentation was not extraction, it was attention made systematic, and it was as respectful in its way as any other form of witness. He moved through his spiral, camera working, notebook open, the shorthand accumulating. He was very quiet. He moved with a care that Leo had

not seen even at the other sites, a particular delicacy of footfall, as if he understood that the ground here was not just ground.

Leo stood at the clearing's edge the whole time.

He did not step into it. He had arrived at the edge and found that the edge was where he needed to be. Not from timidity — he was not afraid of the clearing, nothing in it suggested threat or danger or the wrong kind of solemnity. But there was a quality to the space that his position at its margin felt correct in relation to. Like Redd had said: a room in the middle of a conversation. You could stand in the doorway. You didn't need to sit down.

He looked at the cedar bark bundle on the hearthstone.

He thought about a jackrabbit running through rain with the last coal of a stolen fire tucked beneath its tail, the wet world pressing in from every side, and the one small warmth that would not go out because it could not go out, because everything depended on it, because the people needed it and need is its own form of protection.

He thought about Tomas at the station, in his civilian clothes, handing over a page of his grandmother's memory.

He thought about Redd, twelve years ago and four years ago, standing at this edge — or close to this edge — and leaving.

He thought about @Jackrabbit, watching his posts from somewhere on this mountain, answering with the patience of someone who had been keeping something alive for a long time and was gratified, perhaps, to have it noticed carefully rather than carelessly.

He thought: the ember is already there. It has been for a while.

He thought: yes. It has.

Cody finished his documentation. He came back to the edge and stood beside Leo and they both looked at the clearing together, the grey light coming through the overcast and the cedar canopy, the creek audible beyond the willows, the ceremony circle with its intact bark bundle and its spiral of attendant bundles moving outward toward where they stood.

"It's finished," Cody said. "The trail is complete."

"Yes."

"Someone was here within the last two days. The feather is dry — sheltered by the stone, but still. The jackrabbit track held its edge."

"Before the rain," Leo said. "They finished it before the rain."

"Yes." Cody looked at the bark bundle on the hearthstone. "They saved the ember. Exactly as the story required."

The creek made its sound. The cedars moved.

"What do we do?" Leo said. Not about the clearing, not about the documentation — about the larger question, the one they'd argued about the night before last and resolved into a method rather than a conclusion. He was asking for the conclusion now, from inside the moment, the way Cody had said they should.

Cody was quiet for a long time. Long enough that the quality of the quiet changed, became less the silence before speech and more the silence that is itself an answer.

"We leave it," he said finally. "We leave it exactly as it is. We don't direct anyone here. We don't mark the location. We don't make this a destination."

"The photographs," Leo said.

"Mine stay in my field documentation. Not published, not shared. The same way I'd treat any sensitive ecological site." He paused. "Yours — that's your decision."

Leo looked at the clearing. He thought about the canopy photograph he'd been composing in his head for two weeks — just the trees, just the light, nothing that said here specifically, nothing that pointed. He thought about the caption he'd been working toward, the one that said everything without saying anything.

"One photograph," he said. "The canopy. No clearing, no circle, no creek. Just the cedars and the light."

"From where you're standing now?"

"From where I'm standing now."

He took out his phone. He turned, keeping the clearing at his back, and looked up into the cedar canopy — the shaggy underside of it, the light coming through the wet needles in the flat diffuse way of the overcast morning, the branches layered and complex, the bark close above him in its reddish-brown fibrous detail. He took one photograph. He put his phone away.

"Okay," he said.

"Okay," Cody said.

They stood for a moment longer. The clearing was behind them. The creek was ahead. The cedars were all around, doing what cedars do, which is be old and be present and release their particular smell into the air as a form of testimony.

Then they heard boots on the trail.

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Redd came through the cedars the way he came through everything: with the unhurried ease of someone who belonged in difficult terrain, his pace steady, his gear appropriate, his expression when he saw them the expression of someone confirming something he'd expected to find.

He stopped at the edge of the clearing. He looked at the circle, at the bark bundle on the hearthstone, at the spiral of attendant bundles, at the cairns at the six positions. He looked for a long time. His face did something during that looking that Leo could not fully name — it was the face of a person encountering something they had been holding space for in their mind for a long time, and finding that the real thing was both exactly what they'd imagined and more than they'd imagined, the way important things usually are.

"The captain said he wasn't going to be here," Cody said, very mildly.

"The captain changed his mind," Redd said. He looked at the site for another moment, then stepped back, one deliberate step, to position himself at the clearing's edge rather than inside it. He looked at Leo. "You didn't go in."

"No."

"Good." He looked at the bark bundle. "It's been a while since it looked like this."

"You've seen it with the full ceremony circle before?"

"Not here. Not like this." He was quiet for a moment. "But I've seen the care of it. The intention." He looked at the feather under the stone. "Whoever has been doing this — this season, the previous seasons — they've been doing it for a long time and they know exactly what they're doing."

"Yes," Leo said.

"And we're not going to find out who," Redd said. It was not a question.

Leo looked at him. "No. We're not."

Something settled in Redd's expression — a resolution, or more accurately a confirmation of one. He looked at the clearing one more time, the full sweep of it, the ceremony and the care and the story it carried, the old story that had been walked across this mountain by someone who understood it from the inside and had needed, this season, to walk it all the way to its end.

"This mountain has been telling that story for a long time," Redd said.

Leo recognized the words. He gave them back: "Maybe it just needed someone to listen again."

Redd looked at him with something that was, this time, unmistakably a smile, brief and real and gone.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go back."

They left the clearing as they'd found it: the bark bundle on the hearthstone, intact and waiting. The spiral of bundles working outward, still moving. The feather under its stone. The jackrabbit track in the wet earth, preserving the record of something fast and determined that had passed through and moved on.

The creek spoke as they went. The cedars held their smell around them. The trail through the drainage was slippery in exactly the places Tomas had predicted, and they navigated it carefully, the three of them, single file through the wet forest, with the patience of people who knew that getting back safely was as much a part of the story as getting there.

Leo walked last. He kept Tomas's page in his breast pocket, over his heart, for no reason he would have been able to articulate and every reason that didn't require articulation.

The mountain held its counsel behind him.

The ember waited in the cedar.

The story, having been told all the way to its end, rested.



## chapter **fourteen**

THE DRIVE BACK from the drainage was quiet in the way that follows significant things — not the silence of people who have nothing to say but the silence of people who have said the necessary things and are now letting them settle into whatever shape they're going to take.

Redd drove. Cody had the topo map open on his knee, force of habit, though he wasn't looking at it. Leo sat behind Redd and watched the wet mountain move past the window and thought about the cedar bark bundle on the hearthstone and the way the spiral of bundles had moved outward from the center like something still in motion, still passing the ember forward, the relay not ended but ongoing — not because the story wasn't complete, but because the story, being what it was, did not end. It continued. It had been continuing since before anyone now alive was born and would continue after. They had simply been present at one moment of it, one telling, one relay leg of an incomprehensibly long journey.

He thought about how that felt, and found that it felt right. Not diminishing — not the feeling of being small in relation to something large. The feeling of being a part of something that extended in both directions beyond your own span, which was different from smallness. It was more like belonging. The feeling of a thing that was larger than you that had, briefly, included you.

He thought he probably wouldn't be able to explain this to anyone who hadn't been standing at the edge of that clearing.

He thought Redd would understand it without explanation.

He thought Tomas already knew.

---

They stopped at the station long enough for Redd to change back into his gear and for Kowalski to make coffee and for the four of them — Redd, Kowalski, Leo, Cody — to sit at the common room table for a few minutes in a configuration that felt, without anyone naming it, like the end of a chapter.

Brennan came in from the equipment bay and leaned in the doorway, reading the room with the quick attention he brought to everything, and said nothing, which was the right thing.

Tomas's shift started at eight. He arrived while they were still at the table, set down his bag, looked at Leo, and asked: "The approach, near the bend — did you take the game trail right, or go around?"

"Right," Leo said. "It was clear."

Tomas nodded. "Good." He hung up his jacket. "I'm glad you went."

"So am I," Leo said.

Tomas looked at him once more with the assessing, warm gaze — checking not for damage but for condition, the EMT's habit of seeing how people actually were rather than how they presented — and apparently found what he was looking for, because he went to put his tea on without further inquiry.

Kowalski refilled Leo's cup without being asked. This had, Leo realized, become a habit over the past three weeks, the coffee appearing at his elbow as a form of acknowledgment that did not require speech. He found it one of the most genuinely touching things that had happened to him on this mountain, which was not the observation he'd have predicted making three weeks ago when Kowalski had first looked at him with the expression of a man assessing unfamiliar weather.

"Tomorrow," Leo said. "Dex. Afternoon."

"Two o'clock," Kowalski said. "I've blocked the common room."

"Good coffee," Redd said. Not to anyone specifically. It was simply a parameter he was setting, a condition of the meeting. The good coffee, from Kowalski's tin, rather than the station pot.

"Obviously," Kowalski said.

Brennan, still in the doorway, said: "Should I be there?"

Redd considered. "Yes," he said. "All of us. It happened to all of us."

Nobody argued with this.

---

Leo posted the photograph that evening.

He'd taken one picture in the grove — just the one, from the clearing's edge, turning his back on the ceremony and looking up into the cedar canopy with the grey morning light filtering through the wet needles, the bark close and detailed above him, the branches layered in their old complexity. He looked at it for a long time before he posted it, the way he looked at photographs that he thought might be doing something real rather than just something good.

It was doing something real.

The light in it was the light of that specific morning in that specific place — the post-rain diffusion, the flat luminosity that the overcast produced, the way it made every surface glow without casting shadow. The cedar bark in close detail, reddish-brown and fibrous, the texture of accumulated years. Above it the canopy opening in layers, the deep green of it, the sky behind it the pale grey of a system that had delivered its rain and was now resting.

He wrote the caption slowly, across several drafts, and kept the final one, which was four words:

Some stories belong here.

Not to the mountain. Not to the people who lived on it, or the people who visited it, or the people who had walked a very old story across it in cedar bark and deliberate fire. Just: here. In this place. Present and continuing.

He posted it at seven-fifteen in the evening and put his phone face-down on the table and did not look at it for two hours.

When he picked it up, the post had four hundred comments and was still going.

Most of them he read only in summary — the ordinary response to a photograph that landed, the appreciation and the sharing and the people telling him it reminded them of a place they loved. He read those with gratitude and moved through them quickly, because they were the secondary thing.

The primary thing was at the top of the comment thread, left within three minutes of the post going up, from an account he recognized:

@Jackrabbit Yes. Thank you for understanding that.

Leo read it once.

He did not reply. Some things didn't need a reply. Some exchanges were complete in themselves, the way certain conversations are complete when the right thing has been said and the right thing has been heard and adding to it would only diminish it.

He put his phone down again.

He sat in his cabin in the evening with the mountain outside the window doing its quiet September work — the stars coming out through a break in the departing overcast, the pines settling, the temperature dropping with the clean decisiveness of a season that had made up its mind — and felt, without drama or fanfare, that something had been completed.

Not solved. Not concluded in the way of mysteries that have suspects and evidence and resolutions. Completed, in the way of stories that have a shape and that shape has been honored, all the way to the end, by everyone who was part of the telling.

He thought about the relay. About the ember passing from hand to hand across the country, each runner carrying it a portion of the way before passing it forward, the fire-holders' pursuit falling further behind because the relay was faster than any single runner. About Jackrabbit at the end of it, in the rain, with the last coal.

He thought: we were part of the relay. He and Cody and Tomas and Redd and Brennan and Kowalski and Tomas's grandmother and

whoever @Jackrabbit was and everyone who had kept the story alive in this landscape for longer than any of them could know. A different kind of relay. The ember passed forward in a different medium — not cedar bark, not a runner's hands, but attention. Careful, respectful, continuing attention.

That was all any story needed, in the end.

Someone to carry it carefully to the next person who needed it.

He went to bed early, for once.

The mountain kept its counsel, the way it always had, patient and enormous and not requiring anything from him tonight except to rest and be ready for tomorrow.

Tomorrow there was a different kind of completing to do.

Tomorrow there was Dex.

---

In the morning, before anything else, before coffee or the Discord or the daily check of the Following the Ember thread, Leo did one thing.

He went to his camera roll and found the photographs from the fire sites — all of them, from the Cascade Falls trailhead to the Duck Lake overlook to Eagle Point to the lookout tower clearing to the saddle site and the cedar grove — and he created an album. He titled it, in the album's private label field where only he would ever see it: The Relay.

He did not post any of them. He did not delete any of them. He kept them the way you keep things that mattered — not for anyone else, not for any purpose beyond the keeping itself. A private record of what had been found and how it had been treated and what had been understood along the way.

He put his phone down.

He made coffee.

He thought about Dex, and about the conversation that was coming, and about the difference between a circuit completed and a circuit broken, and why the first was almost always better than the second when it was available.

It was available here. He was reasonably confident of that.

He drank his coffee in the morning quiet of his cabin and let the

mountain be what it was — large, patient, full of stories he hadn't found yet and wouldn't, because that was what mountains were for: to hold more than any one person could carry, to return something different each time you came back to them, to outlast every question you brought to them and offer, instead of answers, the more useful gift of better questions.

He finished his coffee.

He drove to the station.

The coyote was in its spot.

Leo looked at it through the windshield for a moment before getting out. The coyote looked back with its characteristic unhurried attention, ears forward, expression composed, entirely at home.

"Morning," Leo said.

The coyote's ears moved, tracking something on the plateau above the station. Then it looked back at Leo, held his gaze for a moment, and looked away.

Leo went inside.

The day had things to do, and he was ready for them.

## chapter **fifteen**

THE RAIN DID what Marcus had said it would do, which was arrive with purpose and then decline to leave.

The first day was steady and grey and complete — the kind of rain that wasn't dramatic but was absolute, the mountain entirely invisible above the treeline, the service roads running with water, the station's gutters working hard. Redd put the crew on modified standby: no non-essential travel, all vehicles fueled and staged, the radio on continuous monitor. It was not a weather emergency. It was weather that required attention, which was different, and the crew paid the appropriate kind of attention — focused but unhurried, the practiced readiness of people who spent every season preparing for exactly this.

Leo had driven to the station at seven-thirty with the intention of going home by noon. He was still there at six in the evening, and not because anything was keeping him.

The station in the rain was a different place than the station in the sun. The exterior had contracted — the yard empty, the equipment bays closed against the weather, the flagpole's flag taken in for the duration. But the interior had expanded, or felt like it had, the way enclosed spaces sometimes feel larger when the outside world has reduced itself to a grey curtain of water. The common room, which on clear days was a place people passed through, had become a place people stayed. The coffee maker ran almost continuously. Someone had produced, from

somewhere, a tin of shortbread that diminished steadily through the morning and was replaced, around two o'clock, by a plate of sandwiches that Brennan had made in the station kitchen without announcing he was doing it.

"You cook," Leo said, when Brennan set the plate down.

"My wife's recipe," Brennan said. "She makes them for road trips. The principle transfers."

"What's the principle?"

"Good bread, real mustard, don't overthink the filling." He sat down across from Leo. "She says the secret to everything in the kitchen is knowing when to stop adding things."

Leo ate a sandwich and decided Brennan's wife was right about this and probably about most things, based on the available evidence.

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The radio calls came in through the first day at intervals that kept the crew present without keeping them busy — a report of a tree down on the road to Navajo Lake, handled by the county road crew; a welfare check on a cabin owner whose neighbors hadn't seen him since before the rain started, resolved when he answered his door annoyed to have been interrupted from a book; a minor vehicle slide on the lower plateau road, no injuries, handled by the county sheriff's deputy who happened to be nearby.

Each call produced a brief, efficient response from whoever was on the radio — Brennan mostly, or Kowalski when Brennan was occupied — and then a return to the station's interior life, the particular rhythm of a crew in standby mode that Leo had not previously understood was its own form of work. The maintenance of readiness. The sustaining of the conditions under which response was possible. It was not exciting, and it was not supposed to be exciting, and the people doing it understood that its value was measured not in the calls that came in but in the quality of the response when they did.

Cody had set up at one end of the common room table with his laptop and his field notes, spending the rain day writing up his snag survey documentation in the organized, methodical way that Cody

wrote everything. He surfaced periodically to eat a sandwich or accept coffee, made occasional observations about the rain's effect on the soil moisture data he'd been collecting, and otherwise operated in the productive self-contained way that made him excellent company in enclosed spaces — present without requiring attention, available without demanding it.

Tomas was on shift. He spent the morning reviewing his ethnobotany materials at the table's far end, the course manual open, the pencil notations accumulating in the margins. Around eleven, he and Cody fell into a conversation about the relationship between traditional plant knowledge and current ecological restoration practice that lasted forty minutes and that Leo tracked from across the table with the quiet pleasure of someone listening to two people who knew a great deal about adjacent things find the place where those things connected.

At one point Tomas said, without looking up from his manual: "The cedar grove at the drainage — the seep there feeds a microhabitat that supports at least three plant species uncommon at this elevation. I've been meaning to document it properly for two years."

Cody looked up. "I saw the seep. The sedge community around it is unusual — the moisture regime is different from the surrounding forest."

"The cedars maintain it," Tomas said. "They moderate the temperature and humidity in the drainage in ways that protect the seep from the summer dry cycle. Remove the cedars and the seep probably fails within a decade."

"So the grove is —"

"Ecologically self-maintaining," Tomas said. "And has been, probably, for several hundred years." He looked at Cody. "It's not just old. It's functional. It does something."

Cody was quiet for a moment. "I'd like to come back in spring," he said. "With proper documentation equipment."

"I know where it is now," Tomas said, with a mild precision that made Leo smile into his coffee.

"So do I," Cody said.

They went back to their respective work. The rain continued. The station held its warmth against the weather with the solid competence

of a building that had been built for exactly this purpose and took it seriously.

---

Leo spent the first afternoon at the window.

Not brooding — he was constitutionally unsuited to brooding, which required a quality of inward fixation that his attention kept escaping from. He was thinking, which was different, and the window was useful for thinking because it gave his eyes something to do while his mind worked on something else. The something else was Dex.

He had been turning the conversation over since the Rim Trail. Since the cache survey. Since the lookout tower and the open lock and the decommissioned box on the shelf that someone had been treating as a resource because they didn't understand it was a lifeline. Since Kowalski's formal statement: this is no longer a resourcing inconvenience.

He had been, he realized, rehearsing. Not the words — you couldn't script a conversation like this, and trying to would make it worse. But the stance. The internal position from which he would walk into the room tomorrow and sit across from a man he genuinely liked and say something that would change the shape of what they were to each other.

He thought about what he knew of Dex, which was more than he'd known of most people after three weeks. The Western Slope origins, the NOLS training, the years of building courses that did something real for people — that closed the gap between knowing things and feeling things, that returned to people a felt sense of their own competence in the physical world. He thought about the fire philosophy, the hundred-thousand-year inheritance of the people who'd first figured out how to stay warm. He thought about Dex on the Rim Trail saying the mountain kept you, and the honesty of it.

He thought about a fire shelter sitting in a wilderness instructor's gear without its owner fully understanding what it was for.

"You're rehearsing," Cody said, from across the table, without looking up.

"I know."

"It won't help."

"I know that too."

Cody was quiet for a moment. Then: "What are you worried about?"

Leo considered being deflective about this and decided against it. "I'm worried he'll be defensive. That the version of himself he shows up with tomorrow will be the protected version, the one that's already constructed a justification, and that we'll spend the whole conversation fighting that instead of getting to the actual thing."

"And if he is?"

"Then we show him the evidence and let Kowalski's documentation do the work and it becomes a different kind of conversation." He paused. "Less interesting. Less useful. It might resolve the same way, but it won't — it won't feel like the thing we talked about. Completing a circuit."

"Completing a circuit requires both ends," Cody said. "We can only bring one."

"I know."

"He might bring the other. You said yourself there was something in his voice on the Rim Trail."

"I did."

"You said it looked like awareness arriving somewhere inconvenient." Cody turned a page in his notebook. "Awareness that has arrived, even inconveniently, tends to stay. He's had two days now to sit with whatever was starting to surface then."

Leo thought about Dex in his house or his camp or wherever he'd been for the past two rainy days, with the weather that made thinking inward unavoidable, and the awareness that had been beginning to arrive somewhere in the middle of a conversation on a trail, and two days of nowhere to go.

"The rain is useful," Leo said slowly.

"The rain," Cody said, "is excellent. For multiple reasons."

Leo looked at him. Cody was writing something in his notebook and wearing the expression of a man who had been thinking about this for longer than the conversation suggested and had reached a conclusion he was keeping to a modest presentation.

"You think he's going to come in ready," Leo said.

"I think he's going to come in having spent two days in the rain by himself thinking about what kind of person he wants to be," Cody said. "Which is, in my experience, a useful condition for a difficult conversation."

Leo sat with this. Outside, the rain moved through the pines in a sustained, grey curtain. The station roof made its small sounds — the gutters, the runoff, the steady percussion of water on metal that became, after a while, not intrusive but ambient, part of the station's interior weather rather than a comment on what was happening outside.

"Have I told you lately that you're a very good person to think alongside?" Leo said.

"You haven't told me ever," Cody said.

"Well." Leo picked up his coffee. "You are."

Cody wrote something else in his notebook. His expression did not change but something around its edges did, slightly, in the way of a person receiving something they were glad to have received and were being composed about.

"Get some sleep tonight," he said. "You think better when you've slept."

"That's true of everyone."

"It's particularly true of you."

Leo could not argue with this.

---

The second day of rain was different from the first — lighter, more variable, the system moving through rather than parked, the sky producing brief intervals of higher ceiling between heavier bands that came through at two-hour intervals and then relented. Marcus had posted at six AM with the characteristic precision of a person who had been awake since five watching his instruments: system weakening, clearing expected by late afternoon, confidence level high. Gertrude W had reported that Biscuit had descended from the refrigerator top, reclaimed her preferred chair by the south window, and was grooming

with an air of satisfied completion. The Discord had received this as confirmation.

The station's second-day energy was different too — the compressed, purposeful stillness of the first day had loosened, the crew moving more freely between bays, the conversation more ranging. Brennan spent the morning going through his historical files, the accumulation of local research he kept in a series of labeled folders that occupied an entire shelf above his locker, and produced at lunch a pamphlet he'd found — a Forest Service historical document from the 1940s, part of a survey of the district's pre-settlement land use — that contained, in a footnote on page eleven, a brief reference to a cedar drainage on the northeast face of the plateau as a known seasonal encampment site, used by the Southern Paiute during the fall nut harvest.

He set it on the table in front of Tomas without comment.

Tomas read the footnote. He read it again. He set the pamphlet down carefully and looked at the table for a moment, with the expression Leo had come to associate with Tomas encountering something that confirmed what he'd believed without proof.

"Seasonal encampment," Tomas said quietly. "Fall nut harvest." He looked at Brennan. "That drainage would have been a stopping point. A place of rest and renewal between summer and winter range." He paused. "A place worth returning to."

"A place worth marking," Brennan said.

"Yes."

They looked at each other with the quiet satisfaction of two people who had just added a piece to something large and were thinking about where it fit.

Leo reached across and looked at the pamphlet. The footnote was eight lines long, a dry archival notation in the style of midcentury academic documentation — factual, unembellished, the name of the drainage, the seasonal pattern, the source material cited parenthetically. He thought about how many people had read this pamphlet in eighty years and how many of them had read footnote eleven on page eleven and understood what it meant.

He thought: probably Tomas. Probably Brennan. Maybe one or two others.

He thought: the mountain hides things in plain sight. It always has. He put the pamphlet down.

"Brennan," he said. "Have you ever thought about writing any of this up? The local history — the connections between the landscape history and the living community. There's a book here."

Brennan looked at him with the expression of a man who had thought about exactly this for quite some time and had not said so.

"I have a folder," he said.

Leo smiled. Of course he had a folder. Everyone at this station had a folder. Kowalski had files. Tomas had course manuals. Redd had his thermos and his knowledge and twenty years of paying attention. And Brennan had a folder, which was the beginning of a book whether he'd admitted that to himself yet or not.

"Show me sometime," Leo said.

Brennan considered this. "Maybe," he said. Which, from Brennan, Leo had learned, was a yes that was still deciding on its timing.

---

The Discord on the second afternoon achieved something that Leo would later describe to Sophie as its highest form.

It started, as the best things did, with Kowalski.

He had been posting barometric readings every thirty minutes since joining the channel — not commenting, not engaging with responses, just posting the reading and the timestamp and the pressure change delta with the steady reliability of a piece of scientific equipment that had been assigned a task and was executing it. The Discord had organized itself around these readings with impressive speed: Marcus had built them into his forecast model, the former geography teacher had incorporated them into his wind analysis, and two other members had begun timing their own observations to align with Kowalski's posts in order to build a comparative dataset.

None of this had involved Kowalski's participation beyond the readings themselves.

On the second afternoon, during a lull between rain bands, the former geography teacher — whose name was revealed, when someone

finally asked, to be Gerald — posted a summary analysis of the storm event that was, in Leo's non-expert opinion, genuinely good: clear, specific, well-sourced, connecting the station's instrument data to the regional picture in a way that was accessible without being simplified. He credited Kowalski's readings explicitly, by station name, and noted that the data quality had materially improved the accuracy of his analysis.

The Discord appreciated this in the way the Discord appreciated things, which was immediately and enthusiastically and with a number of side conversations opening simultaneously.

Kowalski posted his next barometric reading.

Then, below it, for the first time since joining the channel, he posted a second message. It was three sentences:

Kowalski\_CMSD Gerald. Your analysis is sound. The methodology is correct.

The Discord went briefly silent in the way that group chats go silent when something unexpected has happened and everyone is deciding how to respond to it.

Gerald replied, after about ninety seconds:

Gerald\_WeatherWatch Thank you. That means a great deal coming from the station.

Kowalski did not reply to this. He posted his next barometric reading four minutes later, on schedule, and resumed his established pattern.

But something had shifted in the channel's texture — a warmth, a sense of a connection formally acknowledged, the way a nod between two people who have been working in parallel without meeting can change the atmosphere of a shared space. The Discord for the rest of the afternoon was warmer than it had been, the conversations more generous, the arguments about forecasting methodology conducted with a slightly greater good humor.

Leo showed the exchange to Cody.

Cody read it. "Kowalski endorsed Gerald's methodology," he said.

"In public."

"That's significant."

"It is." Leo put his phone down. "I keep thinking I've found the limit of this crew and then finding that there isn't one."

Cody considered this. "I don't think it's limitlessness," he said. "I think it's that each of them has a specific thing they're genuinely excellent at, and when you line all the specific things up they cover more ground than you'd expect from four people."

"That's a very Cody way to describe it."

"It's accurate," Cody said.

"It is accurate," Leo agreed. "It's also not the whole story."

Cody looked at him.

"The whole story," Leo said, "is that they also like each other. And they like this place. And they show up every day for both of those reasons, and that —" he paused, searching, "— that is not a small thing either."

He'd borrowed the phrase from Dex, who'd borrowed it from whatever part of himself knew things before the rest of him caught up.

Cody was quiet for a moment. Then: "Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," Leo confirmed.

The rain came through in its last heavy band around four o'clock, the gutters surging briefly, the windows opaque with water. Then it eased. Then it stopped. The sky lightened by degrees, the grey thinning to a pale, luminous overcast that carried within it the suggestion of blue, the system having delivered what it came to deliver and now moving on.

By five o'clock the yard was wet and still and the mountain was coming back into view above the treeline — first the lower slopes, then the middle distance, then finally the ridge, dark with wet timber, the aspens on it stripped entirely bare now, their white trunks standing in the clearing sky like something that had been waiting patiently for the water to pass.

Kowalski posted a final barometric reading, with a notation: Pressure rising. System clearing. And then one more line, which was the most words Leo had seen him put together in the channel outside of formal communications:

Kowalski\_CMSD Good work, everyone. The data this season has been excellent.

The Discord erupted, the way it always erupted, but with something in it that was more than the usual enthusiasm — something that was closer to pride, the specific pride of people who had been doing something quietly and carefully for a long time and had just been told, by someone whose opinion of these things they respected, that it had mattered.

GertrudeW posted a photograph of Biscuit, fully extended on her south-facing chair, basking in the first narrow bar of late-afternoon sun that had made it through the breaking overcast.

The caption: She says you're welcome.

Leo laughed, genuinely, and sent the photo to Sophie with no caption.

Sophie replied in forty seconds: Tell Kowalski I approve of his community management style.

Leo: He doesn't have a community management style. He has standards and the community arranged itself around them.

Sophie: That's the best community management style there is.

Leo looked at his phone for a moment, then out the window at the clearing mountain, the wet yard, the flagpole where Kowalski had quietly rehung the flag sometime in the past hour.

"I'm going home," Leo said. "I'm going to eat something real and sleep properly and be here at two o'clock tomorrow with everything I have."

"Good," Cody said. He was already packing up his laptop.

"You'll be here before me," Leo said.

"Almost certainly," Cody agreed, without any apology in it.

They drove out separately into the post-rain evening, the wet road reflecting the last light, the mountain enormous on all sides and newly washed and very quiet. Leo drove with the window cracked and smelled the cedar-and-rain smell that the mountain produced after weather, which was a smell that had no equivalent anywhere he'd been before this mountain, and which he had come to think of as the smell of the

place itself expressing something — relief, perhaps, or simply the chemical fact of water meeting oils that had been waiting for it.

He drove home.

He ate.

He slept without difficulty, which the mountain seemed to have decided he deserved.

In the morning there would be Dex, and the conversation, and whatever completing a circuit actually felt like from the inside.

He was ready for it.

He was, he realized — for the first time since this whole thing had begun — actually ready.

## chapter **sixteen**

DEX ARRIVED AT five minutes past two, which was close enough to punctual that it didn't register as late, and which meant he'd probably sat in his truck for a few minutes first — the thing people do when they're composed about something they're not entirely composed about.

Leo noticed this. He did not mention it.

The common room had been arranged with the casual precision that Kowalski brought to everything he organized: five chairs around the table rather than the usual three or four, the good coffee in the pot rather than the station's standard issue, a plate of the shortbread tin's replacement — something Brennan had produced that morning from a recipe his wife had texted him, apparently on short notice, apparently without Brennan having explained the occasion. It looked like a convivial meeting. It was supposed to look like a convivial meeting.

Redd was already seated when Dex came in, which Leo had thought about and decided was exactly right — the captain present but not standing, not performatively official, just there. Kowalski was at the counter with his coffee, which put him in Dex's peripheral vision rather than directly across the table, a position he'd chosen himself and which Leo suspected was calculated. Brennan was at the table's near end with a mug. Leo had positioned himself closest to the door — not blocking it, just proximate, the friendly face you saw first.

"Dex." Leo extended a hand. "Thanks for coming in. The roads okay after all the rain?"

"Fine by this morning." Dex shook hands — the same calibrated grip, warm and brief. He looked around the room at the assembled crew with the easy, professional scan of a man who was used to reading rooms. "This is a full house for a fire safety consult."

"We thought it was worth having everyone together," Redd said. "Coffee's better than usual. Sit down."

Dex sat. He accepted coffee from Kowalski, who brought it to the table without being asked and set it down and returned to his position at the counter. He took a biscuit from the plate and ate it with the easy appetite of someone not currently anxious, which Leo logged as either genuine ease or very good composure. Possibly both.

"How'd the courses go this season?" Leo asked. "Before the rain shut things down."

"Good. Really good, actually — the fall groups are usually my strongest. People who sign up for backcountry work in September are self-selected for commitment." He wrapped his hands around the coffee mug. The good coffee registered in his expression — a brief, appreciative pause. "Five-day intensive last week was a particularly strong group. Three of them have already asked about a winter skills follow-up."

"Where do you run the fall intensives?" Brennan asked. Conversationally. His notebook was not visible.

"East slope primarily. The plateau edge later in the session when the group is ready for the exposure." Dex looked at Brennan with the open interest he showed everyone. "You know the terrain up there well?"

"Pretty well," Brennan said. "I've been doing some historical research on land use in that corridor. Pre-settlement, mostly."

"Anything interesting?"

"A lot, actually." Brennan's tone was perfectly pitched — engaged, unhurried. "The northeast face in particular has a rich use history. Seasonal encampment sites, trade routes, the cedar drainage —" he paused, just slightly, " — a lot of activity that doesn't show up in the standard histories."

Dex nodded, the nod of a man who found this genuinely interesting and was filing it away. "The prescribed burn literature touches on

some of that — the Paiute fire management practices in the corridor. I use it in the courses."

"You mentioned that on the Rim Trail," Leo said. Easy. Just recalling a conversation. "That you teach the Indigenous land management history."

"It's important context," Dex said. "You can't teach fire ecology on Cedar Mountain without it. The landscape is partly a product of that history whether people acknowledge it or not."

"Absolutely," Tomas said, from the table's far end, where he'd been quiet until now, his mug in both hands. He said it simply, with the weight of a person for whom it was not a pedagogical position but a personal one. Dex looked at him and something in his expression registered the quality of what Tomas had said — that it came from somewhere real rather than somewhere academic.

"You know the area well?" Dex asked him.

"Some of my family history is connected to it," Tomas said. No more than that. It was enough.

Dex nodded slowly, with the genuine respect of a man who understood he'd just been given something. "Then you know what I mean about the context."

"I do," Tomas said.

The room was warm. The coffee was good. Outside, the post-rain light was doing what it always did in the afternoon after the system cleared — the particular clarity that came when the air had been washed and everything it illuminated looked precise and new. The mountain was visible above the treeline, the bare aspen stands on the upper slopes white and clean against the blue that had finally returned to the sky.

It was, Leo thought, an exceptionally comfortable trap.

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Redd moved it forward with the same economy he brought to everything.

"Dex," he said. "Part of what we wanted to talk about today was your course routing. Specifically the supply question — how you support your groups in the field over a multi-day program."

"Sure." Dex set his mug down. "Happy to go through it. What's the concern — weight load? Communication gear?"

"Supply sourcing," Redd said.

A beat. Shorter than most pauses, but there.

"I travel pretty light on consumables," Dex said. "I've refined the kit over seven years. Water treatment I handle on-site — the east slope has reliable sources through September if you know where to look."

"And backup?" Kowalski said, from the counter, without moving. His voice had its usual quality — level, precise, entirely without accusation.

"I carry redundancy for the critical items. Water treatment, fire starting, first aid." He looked at Kowalski. "Are you seeing a gap in my protocols? I'm always open to review."

"We may be," Kowalski said. He came to the table then, not hurrying, and sat down. He had his inventory sleeve with him, the waterproof one. He set it on the table but didn't open it yet. "I want to ask you something directly, and I'd like you to answer it directly, because I think that's the most useful approach for everyone in this room."

Dex looked at him. Something had shifted in his posture — not defensiveness, exactly, but a new attentiveness. The recalibration of a smart person who has realized the conversation has moved into a different register.

"Of course," Dex said.

"Have you accessed any Cedar Mountain Service District cache boxes during your courses this season?"

The question landed in the room with the clean, factual weight of Kowalski's best work. No accusation. No drama. Just the question, asked directly, given the space it needed.

Dex looked at Kowalski. He looked at the inventory sleeve. He looked, briefly, at Leo — and Leo held his gaze with the expression he'd been composing for two days, which was the expression of someone who was not his enemy.

"The emergency stations," Dex said, after a moment. "Yes."

"Tell me about that," Kowalski said.

Dex took a breath. Not a rattled breath — a considered one, the breath of a man deciding how to give an accurate account of something

he had not previously had to account for. "Early in the season I found one of them on the east slope. I knew what they were — I'd seen the CMSD markings. I understood them as community emergency resources. Not the station's property specifically — public infrastructure, like a trail register or a bear box." He paused. "I started using them for top-ups. Water treatment primarily. Some cord. Occasionally first aid supplies if I was running low and the next resupply point was far out."

"Did you return items?" Brennan asked.

"Sometimes. I tried to leave the boxes better than I found them. I added some cord once, and a signaling mirror." He looked at the table. "I thought I was maintaining the system."

"How many times?" Kowalski asked.

"This season? Six, seven times across five or six different boxes." He said it without flinching, which Leo respected even in the difficulty of the moment. "I kept loose track of what I took. I tried to be judicious."

"The lookout tower," Redd said.

Dex looked at him. "Yes. I found that one in June. It wasn't on any map I had — it looked disused, the lock was open. I thought it was a decommissioned unit."

"It was decommissioned," Kowalski said. "It was also not retrieved when it should have been. Which is a process failure on our end." He opened the inventory sleeve and laid the summary on the table — not all of it, just the first page, the overview. "But the contents were still configured for active service. I'd like to go through what's missing."

Dex looked at the page. He read it with the focused attention of a man who understood numbers and took them seriously. His face moved through several things: recognition, understanding, and beneath that, the arrival of something larger and less comfortable.

"The fire shelter," he said.

"Yes," Kowalski said.

"I —" Dex stopped. He looked at the entry on the page. "I took a fire shelter from the lookout tower cache in July. I'd never worked with one before. I wanted to understand how it deployed. I used it for a training demonstration with a group." He looked at Redd. "I knew the general purpose — wildfire survival. I didn't —" He stopped again.

"You didn't know what specifically it was for," Redd said. His voice was even, without edge. "Or what it meant for it not to be where it was supposed to be."

"No," Dex said. "I didn't." He was very still. Not the composed stillness of a man holding a defense together, but the different stillness of a man whose defense had just become unnecessary because what was behind it was worse than he'd thought and he'd decided to stop pretending otherwise. "Tell me."

Redd told him about the August rescue. The hiker on the northeast face. The onboard kit sufficient, the call resolved, the outcome good. And then the single sentence that carried the full weight of what might have been: "But this cache is the nearest secondary supply for that section of the trail. If the call had been worse, or if our onboard had been anything other than fully stocked, we would have needed what was in that box."

Dex listened to this without moving.

When Redd finished, there was a silence that was not uncomfortable but was complete — the silence of a room in which something has been fully understood, and everyone present knows it has been understood, and there is nothing to add.

"I thought I was being resourceful," Dex said. His voice was level, but there was something underneath it that Leo recognized from the Rim Trail: the sound of awareness that had arrived somewhere it wasn't entirely welcome. "I have spent seven years teaching people to be resourceful in the backcountry. To find what they need and use it and maintain it and return it in better condition than they found it." He looked at the inventory page. "I applied a framework to a system that the framework wasn't designed for. And I didn't question it because it was working. Because nothing went wrong."

"Nothing went wrong," Brennan said quietly, "that you knew about."

Dex looked at him. "That's exactly right."

The afternoon light came through the common room window and lay across the table in a long, pale bar, catching the rim of coffee cups and the edge of Kowalski's inventory page and the repair patch on Dex's trail pants, the one on the right knee that had come from a real tear in

real terrain. Leo looked at it for a moment and thought about seven years of building something genuine, something that helped people, built on a framework that had one structural error in it, one place where the logic was sound but the application was wrong.

He thought: this is a person who knows how to take a correction. The question is what they do with it.

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"What do I need to do?" Dex asked.

It was the same question he'd asked in Leo's imagination during two days of rehearsal, and it landed exactly as Leo had hoped it would — not defensive, not bargaining, just the clean pragmatism of a man who had arrived at understanding and was now ready for the next step.

Kowalski slid the full inventory sheet across the table. "A complete accounting of what was taken, across all sites, to the best of your recollection. And replacement of everything on this list — by item, correctly specified. I can give you the specifications."

Dex looked at the full list. He read through it carefully, without rushing, the way he did everything. "Some of this I'll need to order. The fire shelter and the medical kit in particular — I want to get the right generation, not a substitute."

"The current generation is listed," Kowalski said. "The model numbers are in the footnotes."

"I'll have it within two weeks."

"Two weeks is acceptable," Kowalski said.

"The radio," Dex said. He was looking at the entry near the bottom of the list. "I have it. It's in my gear. I didn't know it was frequency-coded to the station — I thought it was a standard emergency unit." He looked at Redd. "I can bring it tomorrow."

"Today, if you have it with you," Redd said.

"It's in the truck."

"After we're done here."

Dex nodded. He looked at the list again, then set it down. He looked at Redd directly, with the quality of a man who was about to say something he'd been carrying and had decided to put on the table.

"I'd like to make a contribution to the equipment fund. Beyond the replacement cost." He held Redd's gaze. "I've been running profitable courses on this mountain, with access to this mountain's terrain and this crew's knowledge and goodwill, for seven years. I've been a poor citizen of the community that maintains all of that. I'd like to correct for it — not just the gear, but the pattern."

Redd looked at him for a long moment. Leo had seen this look before — the single, quiet assessment, the decision being made.

"There's a donation portal through the district," Redd said. "Kowalski will give you the information."

"Thank you."

"There's also," Redd said, with the particular measured quality he used for things that mattered, "the question of your course curriculum."

Dex looked at him.

"You teach people about the backcountry infrastructure they depend on. The water sources, the terrain, the fire ecology." Redd paused. "Do you teach them about the emergency response infrastructure?"

Dex was quiet for a moment. "I don't. Not specifically. I teach them to be self-sufficient — to not depend on rescue."

"Self-sufficiency is good," Redd said. "But no one on Cedar Mountain is self-sufficient. We're all part of the same system. The caches are part of that system. The crew is part of that system." He looked at Dex steadily. "Teaching people to respect the wilderness means teaching them to respect the infrastructure that makes wilderness access survivable for the people who come after them."

Dex looked at the table for a moment. Then he looked up with the expression Leo had last seen on the Rim Trail, the one that was the sound of awareness completing its arrival. "You're right," he said. "That should be in the curriculum. It's an obvious gap and I don't know why it wasn't there already."

"I do," Leo said.

Everyone looked at him.

"Because it requires you to teach people that they're not the central character of the backcountry story. That they're a participant in a system that exists independently of them and will continue to exist after

they leave. That the mountain has —" he paused, searching for the right word, " — obligations to other people, and so do they." He looked at Dex. "That's a harder thing to teach than fire starting. But you could do it."

Dex looked at him for a long moment. "Yes," he said. "I could."

"I know," Leo said.

The afternoon light had moved across the table while they'd been talking, the way afternoon light does, and now lay at a different angle — lower, warmer, the quality of it changed by the hour. The coffee cups were mostly empty. The shortbread was gone. The inventory sheet lay on the table between them, its entries documented and its gaps about to be closed.

Redd stood. The movement had the quality of a formal conclusion — not an ending exactly, but a completion, the thing that had needed doing having been done.

"Thank you for coming in," he said to Dex, in the tone he used when he meant something precisely as simply as he'd said it. "And for handling this the way you have."

Dex stood. He shook Redd's hand, then Kowalski's, then Brennan's, then Tomas's. When he reached Leo, he held the handshake for a moment.

"The Rim Trail," he said. "You knew then, didn't you. Or close to it."

"Close to it," Leo said. "I didn't want to."

"I know." A pause. "Thank you for doing it this way. Rather than the other way."

"There was only ever this way," Leo said. "For something like this, with someone like you."

Dex looked at him for a moment with the expression of a man who had just been given something he hadn't expected and was deciding what to do with it. Then he nodded, once, and went out to his truck to get the radio.

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The radio was a CMSD unit, frequency-coded, exactly as Kowalski had documented. Dex brought it in from the truck in a dry bag with a carabiner on the handle, the way he stored all his gear — organized, protected, maintained. He handed it to Kowalski with both hands, the way you hand back something you've been holding that wasn't yours.

Kowalski accepted it. He checked the unit with three quick, practiced movements — battery, frequency setting, antenna — and set it on the counter. "It's in good condition," he said.

"I keep my gear in good condition," Dex said.

"I know," Kowalski said. And the way he said it — two words, in the tone he used for facts — contained something that was, from Kowalski, as close to the acknowledgment of a person's quality as he was likely to produce. Dex heard it. Leo saw him hear it.

Dex stayed for another twenty minutes. Not formally — the meeting was over — but in the way that people stay when the difficult part of something has passed and what remains is the ordinary human business of being in a room together and finding it easier than you expected. He asked Brennan about the historical research and Brennan told him about the Forest Service pamphlet, and Dex leaned forward over the table with genuine interest and asked three specific questions that revealed he understood exactly what the footnote on page eleven meant. He asked Tomas about the cedar grove's ecology in the terms of someone who had been thinking about the traditional fire management history, and Tomas answered in the terms of someone who was assessing whether this was an exchange worth having and decided that it was.

The coyote appeared at the common room window while this was happening.

It was the first time Dex had seen it — or seen it properly, from close enough to understand the situation. He looked at it, then at Leo, then at the corkboard where Kowalski's photograph was pinned.

"Station resident," Dex read. "Not on the payroll."

"He's in negotiations," Leo said.

Kowalski, at the counter, said: "He's not in negotiations. He has a documentary deal pending."

Dex looked at Kowalski. Kowalski looked back with his standard expression.

"He's going to be in a nature documentary," Leo clarified. "Kowalski negotiated it."

Dex looked at the coyote, which was looking at the station door with its characteristic composed attention, ears forward, entirely unbothered by the documentary implications of its situation.

"Of course he did," Dex said.

It was, Leo thought, the right response. It was the response of a man who had spent two hours being confronted with who he'd been and was now, with no drama and no performance, starting to figure out who he was going to be instead. The coyote helped. The coyote always helped.

Dex left at four o'clock, with Kowalski's procurement specifications in his jacket pocket and the donation portal information on his phone and a standing invitation from Brennan to come talk about the local history whenever he wanted.

Leo walked him out.

They stood in the station yard in the post-rain afternoon, the mountain above them clean and enormous, the aspens on the upper slopes white against the returned blue sky, the air carrying the cedar-and-rain smell that Leo had come to think of as this mountain's particular expression of itself.

"Your courses," Leo said. "The new curriculum element. When you build it out — if you want someone to look at it before you run it, I know people."

Dex looked at him. "Kowalski?"

"Kowalski would be exact. Tomas would be comprehensive. Brennan would give you the historical context that makes it mean something," Leo paused. "Redd would tell you if it was true."

Dex was quiet for a moment. "That's a pretty good editorial board for a course revision."

"It's a pretty good crew," Leo said.

"Yes," Dex said. "It is."

He got in the green Tacoma. The engine turned over with its clean, well-maintained sound. He pulled out of the lot and onto the village road, the tires finding the wet gravel, and drove away into the afternoon.

Leo stood in the yard and watched him go.

The coyote had materialized at the turnout at some point, because that was what the coyote did. It sat in the afternoon sun with the composed, patient attention of an animal that had been present for the whole thing and had found it consistent with its understanding of how the world worked.

Leo looked at it.

"Well," he said.

The coyote looked at the road where Dex had gone. Then it looked back at the station door.

Then it stood, and stretched, and walked around the corner of the building and was gone.

Leo went back inside.

The circuit was complete.

## chapter **seventeen**

THE REPLACEMENTS ARRIVED over the following ten days in a series of deliveries that Kowalski tracked with the satisfaction of a man watching a ledger come into balance.

Dex had been methodical about it. He'd ordered everything from Kowalski's specification list — the right generation fire shelter, the correctly configured medical kit, the water treatment units by brand and model, the cord by rating and length. He'd cross-referenced the footnotes. When something he ordered didn't match the spec exactly, he contacted the supplier and got the right item rather than substituting. He'd emailed Kowalski brief updates as each order shipped, which Kowalski had acknowledged with single-sentence replies that contained, in the aggregate, more warmth than their surface suggested.

The fire shelter arrived on a Tuesday in a flat box with the manufacturer's handling instructions on the outside. Kowalski opened it at the station's kitchen counter, verified the contents, and mounted it in the lookout tower cache's bracket specification — or rather, in the station's primary cache, since the lookout tower unit had been formally retired and the contents redistributed into the active network where they could be maintained and accessed properly. He did this without ceremony or announcement.

Brennan watched him do it. "You're not going to say anything?"

"What would I say?"

"I don't know. Something."

Kowalski looked at the mounted shelter, confirmed the bracket engagement, and closed the cache lid. "It's where it's supposed to be," he said. "That's all that needs saying."

Brennan considered this. "That's very you."

"Most things are," Kowalski said, and went back to his inventory.

The medical kit arrived on Thursday. Kowalski verified it against the spec, logged it, distributed its contents across two caches in the primary response zone according to the redistribution plan he'd already drawn up. He updated his inventory records. He filed the closing documentation on the cache discrepancy report — the one he'd been building since July fifteenth — with a notation that read: All items accounted for or replaced. Network restored to full configuration. No further action required.

He printed a copy of the closing notation and pinned it to the breakroom corkboard.

Below the coyote photograph.

Below the hand-drawn coyote cartoon with the caption Too Late.

Below the safety poster that had survived multiple administrations.

Nobody commented on the placement. It was, in the way of things at this station, simply the right place for it.

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The donation notification arrived on a Friday afternoon, through the district's online portal, and Kowalski received it at the station computer with the focused attention he gave all incoming notifications. He read it. He read it again. He printed it.

Then he walked to the equipment bay where Brennan was running the end-of-week vehicle check, held up the printout without saying anything, and waited.

Brennan read it. He looked at Kowalski. "That's —"

"Yes," Kowalski said.

"That's more than the replacement cost."

"Significantly."

"What's it earmarked for?"

"Training and equipment. The donor specified a preference for personal protective equipment for wildland response." Kowalski looked at the printout. "Which is the category that's been most underfunded in our equipment budget for three years."

Brennan was quiet for a moment, in the way he was quiet when he was thinking about something from multiple angles simultaneously. "He did his homework," he said.

"He did," Kowalski agreed. He did not add anything to this. He didn't need to. The fact of the research — Dex taking the time to learn what the station actually needed, rather than simply writing a round-number check and calling it sufficient — was the thing that mattered, and Kowalski's acknowledgment of it needed no elaboration.

He went to find Redd.

Redd read the printout with his characteristic stillness, holding it at reading distance, his thermos on the desk beside him. When he looked up his expression was the one Leo had come to think of as Redd's version of satisfaction — not the broad expression of someone surprised by good news, but the contained quality of someone whose assessment of a situation has proven correct.

"Good," he said.

"The morning briefing?" Kowalski asked.

"Yes." He looked at the printout again. "Print an extra copy."

At the next morning's briefing, Kowalski read the donation amount and its designation aloud, in the same level voice he used for weather advisories and equipment reports. The crew received it with the particular quality of people receiving news that was both good and right — not celebratory exactly, more the quiet, settled satisfaction of a situation that had resolved the way situations should resolve when everyone involved did the correct thing.

Tomas said: "Good."

Brennan said: "Yeah."

Redd said nothing. He picked up his thermos and held it in both hands and looked at the table for a moment with the expression of a man who was, in his private interior, pleased about something and had no particular need to perform this for anyone.

It was the best morning briefing Leo had attended in three weeks of morning briefings, and he had attended all of them.

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Two weeks after the conversation, Dex's wilderness courses included a new segment.

Leo learned about it not from Dex directly but from one of Dex's clients — a woman from Salt Lake City named Paige who had done the five-day intensive and had found Leo's *Following the Ember* posts while researching Cedar Mountain before the course, and who had sent him a message through his content platform that read: I just got back from a Dex Hartley course and on day two he spent forty-five minutes talking about the Cedar Mountain Service District and why emergency infrastructure exists and what it means and I cried a little and I think you had something to do with this, and I just wanted to say thank you.

Leo read this three times.

He showed it to Cody, who read it once and said: "The circuit."

"Yes," Leo said.

He forwarded Paige's message to Redd with a brief note. Redd replied in a single sentence: Please tell her the crew appreciates that. Leo passed this along. Paige replied that she was going to put it on her refrigerator.

Leo chose not to forward this to Redd, on the grounds that some things were better kept to their natural scale. He suspected Redd would agree.

He also chose not to post any of it, for the same reason he hadn't posted the grove and hadn't posted the conversation and hadn't posted any of the things from the past month that had mattered most. Some things were for knowing. He was getting better at knowing which ones.

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The coyote situation reached its culminating moment on an otherwise unremarkable Thursday in late October, and it reached it in the way that situations at this station tended to reach their culminating

moments, which was quietly, in the middle of something else, without any fanfare.

The documentary production company's location scout had visited the station two weeks after Kowalski's initial contact, spending a morning in the yard and the surrounding area with a camera and a clipboard, asking the crew questions about the coyote's patterns and behavior with the professional courtesy of someone who knew that the people in front of them understood the subject better than they did. Kowalski had answered every question with his usual precision. Brennan had provided historical context about coyote presence on the Markagunt plateau that the scout had not anticipated and was visibly pleased to have. Tomas had offered information about the coyote's ecological role in the area that was both accurate and, the scout said, exactly the kind of layered content their audience responded to.

The coyote had been present for roughly half the scout's visit, sitting in its established position on the gravel turnout, and had on two occasions looked directly into the camera in the composed, unhurried way it did everything. The scout had described this, in the follow-up email to Kowalski, as extraordinary footage.

Kowalski had replied: It is consistent with the subject's established behavioral patterns.

The production visit was scheduled for the first week of November. The segment would run approximately eight minutes in a forty-minute documentary about wildlife adapting to human-adjacent environments. The station would be credited. The CMSD equipment fund would receive a licensing fee that Kowalski had negotiated with the composed efficiency of a man who had once negotiated procurement contracts for a county agency and found the skill transferred.

Leo had asked him at some point how he knew how to negotiate with a documentary production company.

"The principles are the same as any procurement negotiation," Kowalski had said. "Know what you have. Know what they need. Know what it's worth. Don't go first."

"And the coyote?" Leo had asked. "How did you know what the coyote was worth?"

Kowalski had looked at him with the expression of a man for whom

this was not a complicated question. "Four hundred thousand views," he said. "Plus the nonprofit reshare data. The value was in the public record."

Leo had thought about this. "You've been tracking the view count."

"Since the third week of September," Kowalski said. "It's relevant data."

Leo had gone home that evening and laughed about it for a while, in the way that some things could only be processed through laughter, and then had told Cody, who had said: "Of course he was," and gone back to his field notes.

The culminating moment itself was this:

On a Thursday in late October, at approximately nine in the morning, the documentary production company's lead producer arrived at the station for a preliminary meeting about the segment's narrative framing. She was professional and prepared and had clearly done her research, and she arrived to find the station operating in its usual Thursday-morning configuration: Redd in the equipment bay, Kowalski running inventory, Brennan updating the scheduling whiteboard, Tomas on shift reading his ethnobotany materials at the common room table.

She looked at all of this and said to Leo, who was the first person she'd met, "Is it always like this?"

"Like what?" Leo said.

She gestured, taking in the room, the corkboard, the organized competence, the specific quality of a place that knew what it was for. "Like a place that means what it does."

Leo thought about this. "Yes," he said. "I think so. I think it always has been."

The coyote appeared at the common room window at nine-seventeen, which Leo had come to think of as its professional arrival time — it had the quality of someone showing up at the start of business rather than wandering in. It sat in its established position and directed its composed attention at the station door.

The producer saw it. She looked at it for a long moment. Then she looked at Kowalski.

"Station resident," she said, reading the corkboard. "Not on the payroll."

"Correct," Kowalski said.

"But he's here every day."

"Every morning," Kowalski said. "He arrives between eight-fifty and nine-twenty and leaves between ten-thirty and eleven. He is consistent."

The producer looked at the coyote again, then back at Kowalski, with the expression of someone who has just understood that they are in the presence of a story better than the one they came to tell.

"Is he —" she started.

"He is not on the payroll," Kowalski said. "He has not signed a release. He is an autonomous wildlife individual exercising his own discretion about this location."

A pause.

"But —" the producer said.

"But," Kowalski said, with the precision of a man who had thought about this and arrived at a position he was comfortable with, "he has established a consistent and voluntary presence here for the duration of the filming period, and I believe his participation can reasonably be inferred from his behavior."

The producer looked at Kowalski for a moment.

"That," she said, "is the most unusual talent management statement I've heard in fifteen years of production."

"I expect so," Kowalski said. He returned to his inventory.

Leo, who had been standing in the doorway during this entire exchange, turned away and walked carefully to the far end of the common room and stood at the window facing the mountain and breathed.

Brennan appeared at his elbow thirty seconds later. "You all right?"

"I'm trying not to laugh in front of the producer," Leo said.

"She's a professional," Brennan said. "She's probably fine."

Leo turned around. The producer was indeed fine — she was smiling at her clipboard with the expression of a woman who had just realized that the story she'd found was considerably better than any story she could have invented, and that this was one of the genuinely good days of her professional life.

The coyote remained at the window for forty-five minutes that morning. It looked at the producer twice, directly and without apparent concern. When it left, it left at ten forty-three, which was slightly later than its usual departure window, as if it understood that today was not the day for cutting the morning short.

Kowalski noted the departure time in the log he'd apparently been keeping.

Leo had not known about this log.

He decided not to ask how long it had existed.

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Sophie heard about the coyote documentary from the hardware counter at the Country Store, which was where she heard about most things, and sent Leo a message that read: The coyote has a documentary deal and the station has better equipment funding. Kowalski did this. Yes?

Leo: Yes.

Sophie: This is the best outcome of any investigation we've been involved in.

Leo: The cases usually end with someone embarrassed or caught or both.

Sophie: The coyote is neither embarrassed nor caught. He's a documentary subject with inferred consent. It's a significant upgrade on the usual resolution.

Leo stared at his phone for a moment.

Leo: Do you want to come to the station gathering? End of season thing. Redd mentioned it.

Sophie: What are you making?

Leo: Nothing. I'm bringing something from Ground + Toasted.

Sophie: I'll bring cornbread.

Leo: Where are you getting cornbread?

Sophie: I make cornbread. You've known me for three years. Why don't you know I make cornbread?

Leo had no answer for this. He put his phone away and went to find Cody, who was at the station table reviewing his survey documentation

with the systematic attention of a man who had been meaning to do this for three weeks and was now doing it properly.

"Sophie's bringing cornbread to the gathering," Leo said.

"Good," Cody said, without looking up. "She makes excellent cornbread."

"You knew," Leo said.

"She made it for the potluck at the Zen Nest in August. You were there."

"I don't retain food information the way I retain other information."

"That's clear." Cody turned a page. "She also makes a very good apple cake, if you wanted to file that away for future reference."

Leo sat down across from him and thought about what it meant to have been living on this mountain for three years and still encountering things he hadn't noticed about the people he knew. He thought about Kowalski's coyote log. He thought about Brennan's folder. He thought about Tomas's grandmother's directions, written down across a lifetime of not losing them.

"There's more to everyone here than I've found," he said.

Cody looked up. "Yes," he said simply. "That's true of most places where people have decided to stay."

He looked at the mountain through the common room window — the October version of it, the bare aspens and the early snow on the upper ridges and the deep, enduring green of the cedars on the north-east face that never changed regardless of season. The mountain doing what it always did, which was be more than any one person could hold in mind at once.

"It's a good mountain," Leo said.

"It's a very good mountain," Cody agreed, and went back to his documentation.



## chapter eighteen

CODY ROLLED UP the topo map on a Tuesday morning in late October, preparing to return it to the station's map cabinet, and stood at the common room table for a moment looking at it before he did.

It was the map he'd been working from since the first week. The grease pencil marks were all there: the six fire sites, each one a small precise circle, connected by the arc of his extended line. The cedar grove notation at the end of it, the drainage, the creek. The route map photocopy's features had been overlaid in his notebook rather than on the topo itself, but he'd internalized their correspondence well enough that he could read both documents simultaneously in his mind without needing them side by side.

He looked at the arc of marks.

He had been looking at them for weeks, individually and collectively, from close and from the distance that you needed to see a pattern rather than its components. He had looked at them in the field and at the station table and in his own cabin and in the half-aware state between sleep and waking when the mind sometimes produced things that the working day hadn't. He had looked at them so many times that he thought he'd exhausted what they had to show him.

He was wrong.

He didn't understand it at first — just a nagging quality, a sense that the shape he was seeing was familiar in a way that didn't correspond to

any geographic referent. He turned the map slightly, the way you sometimes had to with things you'd been looking at too long in the same orientation. The arc of marks shifted against the topo's fixed lines.

He went still.

He looked at the shape of the arc without looking at the marks individually — looking at what they described together, the curve and the direction and the way it tapered from the plateau toward the drainage, broadening at the upper end and narrowing to the cedar grove at the lower. He looked at it the way you look at optical illusions when you've been told to look for the second image, the one hidden in the pattern of the first.

He found it.

The arc of six marks, plotted on the topo, described a shape. Not a line. Not a random curve. A specific shape, the one that tapered at the base and spread at the crown and had been the operative symbol of this whole investigation since the first morning at the station when Brennan had said the word cedar bark and something had started that hadn't stopped since.

The six fire sites, connected and extended, traced the shape of a flame.

Cody stood at the table for a long time with the map in his hands.

He thought about whether this was real — whether he was seeing a pattern because he wanted to see one, the confirmation bias of a man who had spent six weeks immersed in the symbolism of fire and was now finding it in geographic data. He was a scientist. He took this concern seriously. He looked at the marks again with the deliberate skepticism he brought to his own conclusions.

The shape held.

Not perfectly — the fire sites had been placed according to the legend's geography, not according to any intention to produce a visual form. But the landscape itself, the drainage, the plateau edge, the slope's curvature — all of it had conspired with the story's geographic logic to produce, in the aggregate, something that looked unmistakably like what it was about.

He thought: whoever chose the locations chose them for the story's reasons. The landscape provided the shape.

He thought: the mountain was always going to look like this, if the right story was told on it.

He rolled the map up carefully, tighter than he needed to, and held it for a moment before tucking it under his arm.

He found Leo in the station yard, drinking his morning coffee in the October sun, which was lower and harder than the September sun and cast everything at an angle that made familiar things look slightly different from how they'd looked for the past six weeks.

"I found something in the map," Cody said.

Leo looked at him. He knew Cody's faces. This was the face of a man holding something significant with both hands and being careful about the carrying.

"Tell me."

Cody told him. He described the shape, the arc, the tapering, the way the landscape had collaborated with the story's geography to produce it. He was precise and he was careful and he did not overstate it. Leo listened without interrupting, which was not always his natural mode but which the quality of what Cody was describing seemed to require.

When Cody finished, Leo was quiet for a long moment.

"You're not going to post that," Leo said. It was not a question.

"No," Cody said.

"Good." Leo looked at the mountain above the station, the October version of it, the bare ridgeline and the early snow and the green of the cedar drainage visible as a darker smudge on the northeast face. "Some things are just for knowing."

"Yes," Cody said.

They stood in the yard for a while with their coffees and the map under Cody's arm and the mountain above them doing what it always did, which was hold more than could be said about it in any medium available to the people who lived at its edges.

Leo thought: the mountain drew the story on itself. In the same way it had been drawing things on itself since before anyone was here to read them — the fire scars, the drainage patterns, the way the cedars gathered at specific elevations for reasons that were chemical and meteo-

rological and had nothing to do with intention but produced, in aggregate, something that looked like it.

He thought: everything on this mountain is a story the mountain is telling about itself, and most of it we don't have the vocabulary for yet.

He thought: that is not a problem. That is the whole point.

He finished his coffee.

Cody returned the map to the cabinet. He did it carefully, rolling it into the tube the way you put back something that belonged where it was.

He did not mention the flame shape to anyone else.

Neither did Leo.

It was, they had both decided without discussing it, exactly the kind of thing the mountain kept.

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The certificate ceremony was Redd's idea, and it was the right idea, and the fact that it was not standard CMSD protocol made it better rather than worse.

He'd mentioned it to Kowalski first — the way he mentioned things he'd decided, not the way he mentioned things he was considering — and Kowalski had produced, within forty-eight hours, a certificate. Not a printed template, not a PDF from a government website. A proper document, designed from scratch, with the CMSD seal and the station's address and Marcus Tillotsen's name in a font size that communicated the event's significance without overstating it. The text read: In recognition of exceptional contributions to Cedar Mountain fire weather monitoring and community safety during the 2024 fire season. Signed by Redd, dated, and bearing Kowalski's initials in the corner in the small, precise hand he used for all official documentation.

"You designed this yourself," Leo said, when he saw it.

"The district doesn't have a template for junior weather analyst recognition," Kowalski said. "So I made one."

"Obviously."

"The font is appropriate. I checked three options."

"I'm sure you did."

Kowalski looked at the certificate, then at Leo, with the expression of a man who had put genuine care into something and was not going to pretend otherwise but was also not going to make a speech about it. "He was consistently right," Kowalski said. "All season. His methodology was sound and his data quality was excellent and he shared it without being asked and without expecting anything for it." A pause. "That deserves recognition."

"Yes," Leo said. "It does."

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Marcus arrived with his mother on a Saturday morning, in his best jacket, carrying his forecast folder. He had brought the folder, Leo suspected, because he didn't know whether to leave it at home and had decided that arriving prepared was better than arriving unprepared for whatever the occasion might require.

The common room had been arranged for it — not elaborately, but with the specific intentionality that the station brought to things that mattered. The table cleared, chairs positioned, the good coffee in the pot. Brennan had produced something from the kitchen that turned out to be a spiced apple cake, which Leo noted and filed away for future reference. Tomas was there in his civilian clothes, by choice rather than schedule, which said something. Redd was in his station gear, which also said something, a different thing, the rightness of the captain being officially himself for a thing that was being officially done.

Marcus walked in and took in the room with the assessment of a fifteen-year-old who had been told something low-key was happening and was now recalibrating. His mother put her hand briefly on his shoulder blade — not steering, just contact, the physical shorthand of a parent saying I'm here.

Kowalski brought the certificate from the counter where it had been face-down, and set it on the table.

Marcus looked at it. He read it. He read it again.

He was quiet for a moment that Leo would remember for a long time — not the performed composure of someone managing a public emotion, but the genuine stillness of a person receiving something they

hadn't known they needed until it arrived, and finding that it was more than they'd expected, and needing a moment for the gap between those two things to close.

"Thank you," he said. His voice was steady. He had excellent composure for fifteen.

Redd shook his hand. Not the handshake of a ceremony — the handshake of a professional acknowledging another professional, which was the more serious thing.

"Your readings this season were reliable and consistent," Redd said. "They were used. They mattered." He said it without embellishment, which was how Redd always said things that were true.

Marcus absorbed this. Leo could see him absorbing it — the specific process of a young person receiving direct, unqualified professional acknowledgment from someone whose opinion of these things carried weight. It went in. It would stay in. He was going to carry it the way people carry the things that told them, at the right age, that the thing they were doing was worth doing.

Kowalski said: "The pressure reading on the fourteenth. The anomaly you flagged at four AM. Our instruments confirmed it two hours later. That reading was the basis for an advisory that went out to the district before the system developed." He paused. "That's a direct contribution to community safety. I want you to know that specifically."

Marcus looked at Kowalski. He opened his mouth and closed it.

"Thank you," he said again.

"You're welcome," Kowalski said, which was, for Kowalski, an unusually full response.

They had cake and coffee and Marcus's mother took photographs that Leo suspected would be framed before the week was out. Brennan talked to Marcus about the weather history of the plateau — the long-term patterns, the anomalous seasons, the way the data from Cedar Mountain fit into the broader regional picture — and Marcus asked questions that Brennan answered at full depth, without simplifying, because Marcus didn't need the simplified version. Tomas talked to his mother about the school's science curriculum and what resources

existed for students doing independent research, the conversation of two professionals finding common ground.

Leo filmed three minutes of it — ambient, the room rather than the people, the quality of the morning light through the common room window, the mountain visible above the treeline. He posted none of it. He kept all of it.

Marcus left with the certificate under his arm, still in its folder, held with the care of something that was going to be handled correctly until it was properly framed. He shook hands with the crew at the door — each one, working around the room, with the deliberate thoroughness of someone who understood that the handshake was part of the thing.

When he shook Leo's hand he said: "The Following the Ember posts. They were how I knew the work mattered to someone outside the Discord." He said it with the directness of a person who had been thinking about whether to say it and had decided yes. "So thank you for that."

Leo looked at him for a moment.

"Thank you for the barometric readings at four AM," he said. "And for being professionally agnostic about Biscuit."

Marcus smiled — the full, unguarded smile of a fifteen-year-old who has been met exactly where he is. "I'm less agnostic than I used to be," he said. "The correlation this season was statistically significant."

"I'll tell her," Leo said.

Marcus laughed and went out into the October morning with his mother and his certificate, and Leo watched him go with the feeling he sometimes got when things landed exactly as they were supposed to land — not the feeling of having arranged it well, but the feeling of having been present for it, which was different and better.

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Brennan asked to speak with Leo privately on the afternoon of the same day, after Marcus had gone and the station had returned to its ordinary rhythms and the apple cake had been reduced to a conversation-worthy amount.

They went outside, to the bench on the station's south face where

the afternoon sun came in at the right angle this late in October. Brennan had his coffee. He looked at the mountain for a while before he said anything, which was his habit when what he had to say was something he'd been holding.

"I know who @Jackrabbit is," he said.

Leo looked at him.

"I'm not going to tell you," Brennan said. "I want to be clear about that upfront. It's not mine to share and I was told in a context that doesn't allow for it." He paused. "But I wanted you to know that I know. And that the person knows that the sites were treated with respect. That you and Cody went to the grove and came back and left it alone. That the photographs you didn't take and the posts you didn't post were noticed and appreciated."

Leo sat with this.

"How did they know what we didn't post?" he asked.

"Because they know what the grove looks like," Brennan said simply. "And your posts didn't show it."

"Right," Leo said. "Of course."

The afternoon sun lay across the gravel yard and the flagpole's shadow stretched east, long and precise in the low October angle. A Clark's nutcracker worked the pines at the station's edge with the aggressive purposefulness of a bird doing its winter preparations, cache-burying with the efficiency of something that had done this before and would need what it buried before spring.

"There's something else," Brennan said.

Leo waited.

"What you did — finding the story and then deciding it wasn't yours to finish." He looked at the mountain. "That's harder than finding it. Most people can't do that. They find something and they want to complete the circuit, want the ending, want the full picture. The discipline of stopping at the edge when everything in you wants to go further —" he paused, "— that's a different kind of skill than investigation. Not everyone has it."

Leo thought about the edge of the clearing. The spiral of bundles moving outward, still passing the ember forward. The bark bundle on the hearthstone that he'd looked at and turned away from and not

documented and not mapped and not told anyone the precise location of.

He thought about the album on his phone called *The Relay*, private and complete and not going anywhere.

"Cody helped," he said.

"I know," Brennan said. "Cody's the one who slowed you down enough to see it clearly. But you're the one who had to choose." He looked at Leo directly. "I wanted you to know that the choice was right. From someone who has some standing to say so."

Leo looked at him. At the six years on this mountain visible in his face, the care of a man who paid attention to things and found them important and kept files on what he found. The historian's instinct, which was not the instinct to preserve everything but the instinct to know what deserved preserving and what deserved to remain alive and living rather than documented and fixed.

"Thank you," Leo said. "That means something."

"I know it does," Brennan said. "That's why I said it."

They sat in the October sun for a while longer, with their coffees and the mountain and the nutcracker working the pines, and it was the comfortable silence of two people who had said what needed saying and were content to let it settle.

Leo drove home that afternoon thinking about what deserved preserving and what deserved to stay alive.

He thought about Tomas's grandmother's directions, written down carefully across a lifetime so they wouldn't be lost, kept private so they would retain their meaning.

He thought about Brennan's folder, which was the beginning of a book, which was the beginning of a story that more people ought to know.

He thought about Kowalski's coyote log, and the closing notation filed below the photograph, and the documentary deal that was going to put the station's work in front of an audience that had never considered what a fire station on a mountain like this actually was or did or meant.

He thought about the album on his phone, and the grove, and the

cedar bark bundle on the hearthstone, and the spiral of bundles still moving outward, the ember still being passed.

He thought: some things are for knowing. Some things are for keeping. Some things are for telling. And the hardest skill — the one that determined whether you were trustworthy in relation to the world you moved through — was knowing which was which.

He was still learning it.

He thought he probably always would be, on this mountain, which was generous enough to keep teaching him as long as he was willing to pay attention.

He drove home through the October late afternoon, the mountain enormous and unhurried on all sides, doing what it always did.

Keeping what it kept.

## chapter **nineteen**

THE END-OF-SEASON GATHERING was the kind of event that succeeded because nobody tried to make it succeed. Redd had announced it at a morning briefing with the same register he used for weather advisories — date, time, location, bring something if you want, there'll be food — and the community had done what communities do when a place they value invites them in: they came.

The station yard on a Saturday afternoon in late October was a different thing from the station yard in summer. The light was the low, lateral light of the season — everything lit from the side, shadows long, the mountain's details picked out with a precision that the softer summer light had smoothed over. The aspens were fully bare now, their white trunks standing in the pale light like the bones of something elegant. The sky was the deep October blue of an atmosphere that had been wrung clean of its summer haze and was now as transparent as it got.

Someone had brought a grill. Brennan was at it with the focused attention he brought to things that mattered, working with tongs and a quiet competence that produced, over the course of the afternoon, a quantity of food that was both adequate and excellent. He had a method and he applied it and the result was the result. His wife had come, a warm and direct woman named Carol who shook Leo's hand and said: "You're the one who writes about the mountain," and then,

without waiting for confirmation, said: "There's a lot worth writing about up here," in the tone of someone stating a fact they were glad to have confirmed.

"I'm finding that out," Leo said.

"You've found about half of it," she said pleasantly, and went to get food.

Leo watched her go and thought about the recipe principle — good bread, real mustard, don't overthink the filling — and understood it now as a philosophy that extended considerably beyond sandwiches.

Sophie arrived at twelve-fifteen with cornbread in a cast iron skillet, still warm, wrapped in a dish towel. She surveyed the yard with the quick efficiency she brought to all surveys and made two observations: one about the placement of the folding tables relative to the wind direction, which she kept to herself, and one about the coyote, which was in its turnout position and which she had apparently not previously seen in person.

"Oh," she said.

"Yeah," Leo said.

"He's bigger than I expected."

"He fills the space appropriately."

She looked at the coyote for another moment with the expression she reserved for things that exceeded their description. Then she took the cornbread to the food table and set it down in a position that Leo noticed was both prominent and accessible, the placement of a person who knew what they'd made and felt no need to undersell it.

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The gathering filled through the early afternoon with the comfortable density of a community that knew itself. Leo recognized faces from three weeks of station life — the trail runners from the safety training, the cabin owner whose welfare check had resolved happily, two of the Discord members he'd met in person for the first time and recognized immediately from their posting styles. GertrudeW was there with her husband, a quiet man who let her do the talking and appeared entirely at peace with this arrangement. She

introduced herself to Leo with the directness of someone who had been wanting to and had now found the occasion, and told him that Biscuit had resumed her normal behavioral patterns now that the rain had passed and was currently sleeping on the south-facing chair in the front room.

"Please tell her the community appreciates her service," Leo said.

"I will," GertrudeW said. "She'll pretend she doesn't care. She cares."

Gerald — the former geography teacher, the author of the obsessive wind analyses — turned out to be a compact, precise man in his sixties who had been teaching secondary school geography for thirty years and had retired to Duck Creek Village specifically because the mountain's weather systems were, in his assessment, the most interesting in the state and he wanted to watch them closely. He shook Leo's hand and then immediately asked a question about the orographic effect on the north-east drainage that was so specific that Leo had to get Cody, who answered it with the focused engagement of someone who had also been thinking about this and was glad to find another person who had.

They talked for twenty minutes, Gerald and Cody, at the corner of the food table, with the intensity of two people discovering a shared technical interest in a social setting that hadn't promised this and was providing it anyway. Leo watched from a few feet away and felt the particular pleasure of someone who had made an introduction — the indirect one, through the Discord, across the season — that had turned out to matter.

Marcus arrived with his family at one o'clock. He was not in his best jacket this time, which Leo read as a sign of comfort — he was here as a regular community member rather than as a guest of honor, and he dressed accordingly. He got food, found Leo, reported that his barometric sensor had been reading a new pressure pattern developing to the northwest that he was monitoring, and then went to find Kowalski, who was at the equipment display talking to a group of cabin owners about defensible space and who interrupted himself mid-sentence to shake Marcus's hand.

The cabin owners watched this handshake with the curious attention of people witnessing a social dynamic they hadn't expected.

"Who's the kid?" one of them asked Leo, afterward.

"The district's weather analyst," Leo said. "Best barometric data on the mountain."

The cabin owner looked at Marcus, who was now in earnest conversation with Kowalski about pressure gradient modeling, and then back at Leo, with the expression of someone updating their understanding of a situation.

"How old is he?"

"Fifteen."

"Huh," said the cabin owner, and went to get more food.

Dex arrived at one-thirty, quietly, parking in the far end of the lot rather than the visitor space. He got a plate and found a position at the yard's edge that was present without being central, the position of a man who understood he was here at a degree of welcome that he'd had to re-earn and was being appropriately thoughtful about it. He talked to Brennan for a while about the historical research — the Forest Service pamphlet, the footnote on page eleven — with the genuine interest he'd shown in the station the first day Leo had met him, which was the same interest, the same quality of attention, that had made him likeable then and made him likeable now. The situation had changed. The person hadn't.

Leo watched this from across the yard and felt the thing he'd been expecting to feel and finding it was simpler than he'd anticipated: relief. Not that it was over, not that it had resolved — but that the resolution had left intact what was worth keeping. Dex's presence at a community gathering, eating Brennan's food and talking about local history with the man who knew it best, was not a diminished version of something that had existed before. It was the correct version, the one with the structural error corrected and the framework intact.

He went over.

"Good food," Dex said.

"Brennan's method," Leo said. "His wife's principle."

"What's the principle?"

"Good ingredients, don't overthink it."

Dex looked at his plate. "Sound philosophy."

"Most of the best ones are."

They ate together for a few minutes in the easy silence of people

who had been through something and come out the other side of it with their regard for each other intact. Then Dex said: "I'm running a course next month. First one with the new curriculum element."

"How's it sitting in the flow?"

"Naturally, actually. More naturally than I expected." He looked at the station building. "It turns out that talking about emergency infrastructure in the context of a wilderness course isn't a departure from the self-reliance philosophy. It's the completion of it. You can't be genuinely self-reliant if you don't understand the systems your self-reliance depends on."

"That's Redd's point," Leo said.

"I know." Dex was quiet for a moment. "I should have seen it myself. I would have, eventually. He just got me there faster."

Leo thought about Tomas saying: the hardest moment is always before the first step. He thought about Dex on the Rim Trail, the note in his voice, the awareness arriving somewhere inconvenient. He thought about two days of rain and a man alone with a question about what kind of person he wanted to be.

"You got there," Leo said. "That's the part that matters."

Dex looked at him with the expression of a man receiving a grace he wasn't sure he'd earned and deciding, after a moment, to accept it.

"Yeah," he said. "I suppose it is."

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Redd made his toast at two o'clock, which was the right time — the food was done, the gathering was at its most settled, the afternoon light had found its optimal angle.

He didn't call for attention. He simply stepped to the center of the yard with his thermos and waited, and the gathering organized itself around him the way gatherings do when the person in the center commands attention without asking for it. Conversations paused. People turned. The coyote, which had been present at the turnout for the better part of an hour, remained still.

"I want to say a few things," Redd said, in the voice that carried without being raised — the voice of a man who knew his range and

used it accurately. "The station has had a good season. Not an easy one — the fire risk this year was significant and the crew responded to it well, and I'm grateful for that every day. That's first."

He looked around the yard, at the crew and the community assembled.

"Second: this community does something that I don't think gets said plainly enough, which is that it shows up. For the training. For the preparedness. For paying attention to what the mountain is doing and what it needs. That makes our job possible, and I want you to know we know that."

He paused for a moment. Leo watched the yard — the faces, the listening, the quality of attention that a gathering produces when it's been told something true.

"Third," Redd said. "This season the station received an unexpected contribution from a member of the community who learned something the hard way and responded to it with integrity. That equipment fund contribution is going directly to personal protective equipment for wildland response — gear that keeps the crew safe when conditions are worst. I won't name the contributor, because that's their business. But the crew knows who it is, and we're grateful."

Dex, at the yard's edge, was looking at the ground with the expression of a man who had expected something like this and had prepared for it by becoming very interested in the gravel. Leo did not look at him. Nobody did. It was a community gathering and this was community business and the grace in Redd's handling of it was in what he didn't say as much as what he did.

"Last thing," Redd said. He lifted his thermos. "To the mountain. Which keeps teaching us things we needed to know, if we're paying attention."

The yard raised its cups and glasses and mugs. A brief, genuine sound, the community toast, and then the ordinary sounds of an afternoon gathering reasserting themselves — conversation, the grill's last work, a child running across the gravel, the coyote's ears moving.

Sophie appeared at Leo's elbow.

"Good toast," she said.

"He means what he says," Leo said. "At exactly the weight he says it."

"I know. I've been watching him all afternoon." She took a piece of cornbread from her plate and ate it with the satisfaction of a person eating their own cooking. "He's the reason this station is what it is."

"The crew is what the station is," Leo said.

"The crew is what it is because of him," Sophie said. "That's not a contradiction. It's how good leadership works." She ate the rest of the cornbread. "Tell him I said so at some point. Not today — today is too soon. But eventually."

"He'll say it's the mountain," Leo said.

"He'll be right," Sophie said. "And so will I."

She went to find Tomas, with whom she'd been having a running conversation all afternoon about ethnobotany and traditional medicine and the specific pharmacological properties of several plants that grew on Cedar Mountain, the conversation of two people who had found a deep common interest on first meeting and were not done with it.

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The gathering thinned through the late afternoon in the natural way of outdoor events when the temperature drops and the light goes golden and people begin to feel the comfortable gravitational pull of home. The grill cooled. The food table reduced itself to remnants. The folding chairs were stacked by Kowalski with the systematic efficiency he brought to all logistical conclusions, and the yard returned to itself.

Leo and Cody ended up at the yard's eastern edge as the last guests were leaving, standing with the last of the good coffee in mugs that had gone slightly cold, looking out toward the treeline in the direction of the northeast drainage. You couldn't see the cedar grove from here. The terrain was too complex, the distance too great, the grove tucked into its sheltered fold in the mountain's fabric where it had been for a long time and would be for a long time after.

But you could see the direction.

"You ever think about who we didn't find?" Cody asked.

Leo thought about @Jackrabbit. About Brennan's private knowledge, offered and retained. About the account that existed to leave comments and had done its work and gone quiet in the weeks since the

grove. About whoever had stood in that clearing in the days before the rain, completing a relay that had been running since before anyone now alive could remember, saving the ember that the story required be saved.

"Yeah," he said.

"You okay with that?"

Leo considered the question properly, the way it deserved. He thought about the edge of the clearing, and the decision made there, and the weeks since in which the decision had continued to feel correct — not easy, not without its residual pull of curiosity, but correct in the way of things that are right rather than just satisfying.

"More okay than I thought I'd be," he said. "You?"

"Strangely, yes." Cody looked toward the treeline. "I think what happened is that the question changed shape. At the beginning I wanted to know who, because I thought that was the answer the question was pointing at. But the more we followed it, the more it became clear that who wasn't the point. The point was the story. The point was whether it was being kept well."

"And is it?"

"Yes," Cody said, with the precision he used for conclusions he'd arrived at through proper methodology and was confident in. "Whatever @Jackrabbit is, and whoever has been walking that trail for however long — the story is being kept well. It's alive. It's being told in the right way, in the right place, with the right care." He paused. "Our job was to confirm that and step back. Which we did."

"Confirming and stepping back," Leo said. "Not the most dramatic ending."

"No," Cody agreed. "It's the right one."

Leo looked at the treeline, at the direction of the grove, at the mountain above it going from gold to the deeper colors of the afternoon's last hour. The bare aspen stands. The dark cedar line on the northeast face, the grove somewhere in the fold of it, the ember on the hearthstone still waiting in the cedar and the earth.

"What do you think comes next?" he asked.

Cody considered this with the same seriousness he gave to every question that deserved it.

"Another story," he said. "The mountain never runs out."

Leo laughed — the real kind, the kind that comes when something lands exactly right, at the exact moment you needed it to, from exactly the right person. The kind that felt like something being released rather than something being performed.

"No," he said. "It doesn't."

The coyote was at the turnout. It had been there, intermittently, for most of the afternoon, and it was there now in the late light — the reddish-grey coat going warmer in the October sun's final angle, the ears up, the composed attention directed at the station door as it always was.

It had been at this station all season. Through the training, through the cache survey, through the rain, through the conversation with Dex, through the certificate ceremony, through this afternoon. It had been present for all of it, in the way of things that are present without being part of the narrative, that exist alongside the story rather than in it.

Leo lifted his camera and filmed thirty seconds. The coyote in the October light, the station building behind it, the mountain above it, the flag moving in the late afternoon wind that came down off the ridgeline at this hour.

He knew before he'd finished filming that this was the last coyote post of the season. Not the last ever — the documentary was still coming, and the coyote showed no sign of changing its habits — but the last of this season, this story, this particular six weeks of paying attention to what the mountain had to show.

He looked at the clip. Thirty seconds of an animal in the light, composed and unhurried, doing what it had been doing every morning since September without explanation or apology.

He wrote the caption slowly, considering.

He kept it.

It read: Coyote keeps showing up. Still means something.

He posted it.

He put his phone in his pocket.

He stood in the station yard in the late October afternoon with his cold coffee and his good company and the mountain enormous and patient above him, and felt — for the duration of a moment that was not long but was complete — that everything was in exactly the right place.

Then the wind came off the ridge and he pulled his jacket closed, and Cody said he was going home to eat something, and the yard was empty except for Kowalski, who was doing a final check of the gate latch with the focused attention of a man who would check the gate latch until it was correct and then leave, which was what Kowalski did.

Leo watched him.

"Good season," Leo said.

Kowalski tested the latch. It held. He turned. "Yes," he said.

He went inside.

The coyote was gone from its turnout, the gravel empty in the long October light.

Leo drove home.

## chapter **twenty**

LEO'S FINAL POST about the season went up on a Sunday morning in early November, eleven weeks after Sophie had dropped him and Cody at the station with her advice about not filming anything that bled.

He'd been writing it for a week — not drafting it formally, not sitting down with a document open, but composing it in the way he composed things that mattered, which was in the spaces between other things: on drives, on walks, at the kitchen window with his first coffee, in the last minutes before sleep. The sentences came in fragments and he held them until they connected, the way you wait for an image to resolve in low light, knowing that pushing it would lose it.

When he sat down to write it on Saturday evening, most of it was already there.

He wrote about Cedar Mountain in November — the specific quality of the place when the summer visitors were gone and the community had pulled in around itself for the season and the mountain could be heard more clearly, the way you hear a room's acoustics when the furniture is moved out. He wrote about the Cedar Mountain Service District and what it was, actually, rather than what people assumed it was — not the dramatic version, not the crisis-response version, but the daily version, the version of showing up every morning

and doing the work of maintaining readiness, the version that made all the other versions possible.

He wrote about fire. Not the emergency kind, not the ecological kind, though he touched on both. He wrote about fire as a thing that had been passed between human hands for longer than any of the other things humans had learned to do, the first technology, the one that everything else had followed from, and how there was a story on this mountain about that passing — a story that was older than the mountain's current name, older than any map that had been made of it, that had been carried in the memory of the people who'd lived here the longest and was still being carried, still being told, in ways that most people moving across the plateau would never know about and didn't need to.

He wrote about what it meant to find a story you hadn't been looking for and to have to decide what your relationship to it was. He wrote about the difference between witness and intrusion, between attention and appropriation, between the camera and the eye and the moments when the right thing was to put the camera away and just be present with what was there. He wrote about his own limitations in this, which were real, and about the people who had helped him see them — Cody, Tomas, Redd, Brennan — each of them a different kind of knowing brought to bear on the same mountain.

He wrote about the crew. At length. Not their names — he checked with Redd before posting, described what he wanted to say, and received in return the one-sentence reply that constituted Redd's form of enthusiastic endorsement: That's accurate. He wrote about what four people who were excellent at specific things and who genuinely liked the place they worked could accomplish when those things were needed in combination, and how rare that was and how worth noting.

He wrote about the coyote.

He had to write about the coyote. The coyote was not a metaphor — he was explicit about this, because the internet would make it one without his help and he wanted to get ahead of it. The coyote was a wild animal who had decided a fire station was a good place to be and had been proven right in this assessment by approximately four months of evidence. That the coyote's species featured in a story that was also, this

season, being told on the mountain he lived on was a coincidence that the mountain had arranged, the way the mountain arranged all its coincidences, which was by being old enough and complex enough that coincidences were simply patterns you hadn't understood yet.

He wrote, at the end, about what he thought the mountain wanted from the people who lived on it or visited it or drove through it on their way to somewhere else. He was aware this was a presumptuous thing to write — the mountain didn't want anything, it was a geological formation — but he wrote it anyway, because he'd been on this mountain long enough to know that some things were true even when they weren't literally true, and this was one of them. What the mountain wanted was: attention. The right kind — patient, respectful, willing to be wrong about what it was looking at, willing to sit at the edge of things without needing to finish them. The kind of attention that left what it found intact and better for having been seen.

He wrote: this mountain has stories in it that are older than any of us and will outlast all of us. The best thing we can do is listen well and pass them forward carefully. That is the only kind of stewardship that matters on a place like this.

He read it back once.

He posted it with a single photograph: the cedar canopy, taken from the clearing's edge, the grey morning light through the wet needles, the bark in close detail above him. The photograph he'd taken with his back to the ceremony and his eyes in the trees.

The caption — the whole post, really — was long for his usual format. Not long for what it needed to be.

He put his phone down and went to make breakfast.

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The post moved the way the best things moved — steadily rather than suddenly, accumulating an audience across the day rather than spiking and fading. By noon it had been shared by the Southern Paiute tribal council's cultural preservation page with a comment that stopped Leo in the middle of eating lunch.

The comment read: This is what respectful engagement looks like.

Thank you for understanding that the stories belong to the land, and for saying so clearly. We see you.

Leo read it three times.

He set his phone down on the table and sat with it for a while, the way you sit with things that are larger than your immediate capacity to process them. He thought about Tomas at the station in his civilian clothes, handing over his grandmother's memory. He thought about @Jackrabbit watching the thread. He thought about the groove worn into the stone at Eagle Point — the smooth depression made by a thumb or a smooth stone over a very long time, the physical record of return after return after return.

He thought: we did something right. Not perfectly — there were things he'd have done differently, posts he'd been slower to compose, moments where the camera had come out a half-second sooner than the situation called for. But in the aggregate, across the season, the thing had been done with the care it required, and the people it mattered to most had seen that.

He forwarded the comment to Tomas.

Tomas replied in four minutes: Yes. This is right. Thank you for all of it.

Leo forwarded it to Redd.

Redd replied in eleven minutes — longer than usual, which meant he'd read the post properly rather than just skimming: I'll print this. It goes on the board.

Leo smiled at his phone.

He forwarded it to Cody.

Cody replied immediately: I saw it. I've been sitting with it for an hour. It's the right response to the right work.

He forwarded it to Brennan.

Brennan replied: The mountain picked the right people this season.

He thought about forwarding it to Kowalski and then didn't — not because Kowalski wouldn't value it, but because Kowalski would find it himself, through whatever systems Kowalski maintained for tracking things that mattered to the station's mission. He would log it. He would act on it in whatever way seemed appropriate. He would not

mention that he'd seen it unless there was a specific operational reason to do so.

Sure enough, two hours later, the station's Facebook page — Kowalski's page, the one with Station resident. Not on the payroll — posted a share of the tribal council's comment with a one-sentence caption: The Cedar Mountain Service District is honored to serve this land and its stories.

It was the most words Kowalski had put on the station's Facebook page in a single post all season.

It had four hundred shares by evening.

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Sophie came to the station on a Tuesday, her day off, walking the mile and a half from the Country Store in the November cold with the unhurried stride of a person who was not bothered by cold or distance and found the walk useful for thinking.

She had read everything. She told Leo this at the door, before she'd come fully inside, standing on the station's threshold in her coat and scarf with the composed expression she wore when she'd formed a complete opinion about something and was deciding how to deliver it.

"I read the post," she said. "And the treatment, and Cody's field notes — he shared them with me last week. And the Following the Ember archive from the beginning."

"All of it," Leo said.

"All of it." She came inside, unwrapped her scarf. "I wanted to understand the whole thing before I said anything about it."

"And?"

Sophie looked at him. Then she looked at Cody, who had appeared from the common room with his coffee and his notebook, and who met her gaze with the specific expression of a person who was not anxious about what she was going to say but was paying attention.

She looked at both of them.

"You both did well," she said.

She said it the way she said everything: flatly, with complete convic-

tion, in the tone of a person for whom the statement was a fact rather than an opinion and who saw no reason to elaborate on facts. Four words, delivered at the weight they carried rather than the weight they could have been inflated to.

They landed.

Leo opened his mouth.

"Don't," Sophie said. "Just take it."

He took it.

Cody said: "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Sophie said. "Is there coffee?"

There was. Kowalski had made the good kind again, which had become the station's default since Dex's ongoing contribution had quietly funded the upgrade in the supply budget. Sophie accepted a mug and sat at the common room table and opened her own notebook — because Sophie, it turned out, had also kept notes, across the whole season, in the small leather notebook she carried in her coat pocket for things worth writing down.

"I have questions," she said.

"Of course you do," Leo said.

"The scratch marks on the overlook stone. Were they ever identified?"

"No. Tomas has a theory but he's keeping it."

"The six-direction cairn placement in the grove. Cody documented six orientations in his notes. Standard compass is four. The other two are sky and earth in the Paiute cosmological system. How did Cody know to look for that?"

"He didn't," Cody said. "I found it in the photographs in retrospect. When I was reviewing the documentation after the grove visit."

Sophie wrote something. "So the site was made with a cosmological accuracy that wasn't visible until documentation review."

"Yes," Cody said.

"Whoever made it knew what they were doing at a level that went beyond the story's narrative structure," Sophie said. "They were working in the full ceremonial form."

"That's what Tomas concluded," Leo said. "Yes."

She wrote something else. She had the expression of a person assembling a picture that was both clearer and larger than she'd anticipated.

"The flame shape in the map," she said.

Leo went still. Cody went still.

Sophie looked at them. "Cody mentioned it in his field notes. He described examining the topo before returning it." She looked at Cody. "You found the shape and then you and Leo decided not to tell anyone."

"Yes," Cody said.

"Good," she said. "That was right." She closed her notebook. "Some things are for keeping."

"Some things are for knowing," Leo said.

"Same thing, in this case." She drank her coffee. "I won't say anything about it."

"We know," Cody said.

Sophie looked at her notebook one more time, then put it in her pocket.

"One more thing," she said.

"Of course," Leo said.

"Brennan's folder." She looked at Leo with the expression she used for things she considered obvious. "Have you told him he should write the book?"

"I told him there was a book there."

"That's not the same as telling him he should write it." She picked up her mug. "Tell him. He's waiting for someone with standing to say so."

"You could tell him," Leo said.

"I don't have standing," Sophie said. "You do. You've spent six weeks on this mountain paying attention in public, and the people who live here have seen that. They'll take it from you."

Leo thought about what Brennan had said at the bench: that deserves recognition, and having standing to say so. He thought about what Marcus had said at the door: the Following the Ember posts were how he'd known the work mattered to someone outside the Discord.

He thought: Sophie is right. She is always right, occasionally early, and this time she was exactly on time.

"I'll tell him," Leo said.

"Good." She finished her coffee and put the mug in the rack in the way that meant she'd looked for the dishwasher, found there wasn't one, and adapted without comment. She rewrapped her scarf. "The Country Store is getting a delivery this afternoon. I need to be there."

She went to the door. Turned. Looked at both of them one more time, in the way she sometimes looked at things she valued — brief, direct, giving nothing away and communicating everything.

Then she was gone.

The door closed behind her.

Leo and Cody looked at each other.

"You both did well," Leo said.

"Four words," Cody said.

"Four words," Leo confirmed.

"Was that a compliment?"

Leo thought about it. He thought about Sophie's tone, the complete conviction, the fact rather than the opinion. He thought about what it meant coming from her specifically, from the person who had the clearest eye on this mountain of anyone he knew, who said exactly as much as a thing required and not a syllable more.

"Yes," he said. "I think it was."

"You think," Cody said.

"It's Sophie. There are layers."

"There are always layers with Sophie."

"But the top layer was a compliment."

"I agree," Cody said. "I believe the top layer was a compliment."

They stood in the common room with their coffees and the station going about its ordinary business around them — Kowalski in the equipment bay, the radio monitor running its quiet background hiss, the scheduling whiteboard dense with its autumn notations, the corkboard doing its accumulated work — and let the season settle around them the way things settle when they've been completed.

"What's next?" Cody asked.

Leo thought about the mountain outside. The November version of it, bare and clean and deep in its own quiet. The cedar grove somewhere on the northeast face, the ember waiting, the story continuing in

the way the story had always continued — not because anyone was watching, but because the land held it and the people who knew it kept it and the mountain, patient and enormous and not running out of things to say, went on.

"I don't know yet," Leo said. "Something. The mountain will have an idea."

"It usually does," Cody said.

Leo put his phone in his pocket — not for any particular reason, just the ordinary act of a man finishing one thing before the next thing arrived.

The coyote was at the window.

It was looking at them.

Not at the door this time — at them. At Leo and Cody standing in the common room with their coffees, the two of them, in the station that had become over six weeks something that felt like a fixed point, the place where the season had been lived.

The coyote looked at them for a long moment with the composed, unhurried attention it brought to everything. Its ears were forward. Its expression was the expression of an animal that had been present for all of it and had found it, on the whole, consistent with its understanding of how the world worked when people were paying the right kind of attention.

Then it turned away, and looked at the mountain, and was still.

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In the cedar grove on the northeast face, in the sheltered drainage where the spring-fed creek ran clear and the old trees held their warmth against the November air, the bark bundle on the hearthstone rested in its place.

The rain had come and gone. The season had turned. The story had been told all the way to its end and the end had been witnessed and honored and left intact, the way things are left when they are understood to be alive rather than finished.

The ember waited.

It had been waiting for a long time.

It would wait a little longer.

When the next person came — whoever they were, however they arrived, however many seasons from now — the ember would be there.

It always was.

That was what the story said.

That was what the mountain knew.

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## about the author

Don Jones is a multi-award-winning author of fantasy, science-fiction, cozy mysteries, and cozy fantasies. After a career in tech, numerous positions at tech startups, and more than sixty published tech books (the ones they seemed to sell by the pound, back in the day), Don left it all behind and started writing down the stories that had been banging around in his head. The result is more than two-dozen novels—with more every year—that have received rave reviews and numerous industry awards. Today, Don writes primarily from a cabin near Duck Creek Village, UT, diligently overseen by a Goldendoodle named Corentin.

