

the mystery of the ghost of the iron horse

the duck creek mysteries
book eight

Don Jones

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foreword

Welcome to the *eighth* book in *The Duck Creek Mysteries*!

This one really took some thinking, because—given Loose Wheels’ status as our local ATV and snowmobile dealer extraordinaire—I wanted this story to have a “mechanical” vibe. But at first glance, that seems at odds with the back-to-nature history of this series. But, the more I thought about it, the more it started to “click” in my head. After all, four-wheelin’ and snowmobilin’ (when we have a robust enough winter) is a huge pastime here on Cedar Mountain. I’ve been on innumerable trail rides with my friends and family, and getting to experience the Dixie National Forest with nothing between you and nature but a pair of goggles... is pretty amazing. Those mechanical things are as much a part of the way of life here as watching the deer and the antelope play! And that’s when the story finally settled in for me.

As always, I have to remind you that I’ve taken great liberties with the geography of the area in order to make the story work, and I’ve invented people, places, and businesses that don’t exist, because the story needed them.

I hope you enjoy this latest installment in the series!

Don Jones

May 2026

Duck Creek Village, UT

chapter one

THE SWITCHBACKS below Duck Creek Village had a specific rhythm that Jillian Haverford had memorized without trying to, the way you memorized the layout of a house you'd lived in long enough to navigate in the dark. Second curve after the canyon floor: the shoulder dropped away on the right and you could see three hundred miles of Utah if you looked, or you could hit the guardrail if you didn't. Fourth curve: the ponderosas crowded in and the temperature dropped two degrees in about ten yards, like walking through a door. Sixth curve, seventh, and then the long straight reach before the final pitch — and somewhere in there, if the window was down and the wind was right, the first smell of cedar.

She had the window down.

June had been late getting warm this year, according to the mountain's Facebook group, which Jillian followed the way she followed weather forecasts: with interest, mild skepticism, and the understanding that actual conditions would tell you more than anyone's advance report. The valley she'd left this morning was already at ninety-two degrees, the air above the I-15 shimmering like something impatient to be somewhere else. Up here, at eight thousand feet and climbing, the light had a different quality entirely — flatter, cleaner, the kind of light that made shadows interesting rather than oppressive. Her shoulders, which had been somewhere around her ears since approximately the last

week of April, had been dropping by incremental degrees for the past forty miles.

She was a high school history teacher. She taught at a large public school in St. George, which meant she spent nine months a year in a state of cheerful, managed intensity — lesson plans, parent communications, the particular art of making fourteen-year-olds care about things that happened before smartphones. She was good at it. She liked it, genuinely, which set her apart from some of her colleagues in a way she tried not to think about too often. But liking something and being sustained by it were different propositions, and by the last week of May, Jillian Haverford was reliably running on fumes.

Then June happened, and she drove up the mountain, and somewhere around the fourth switchback she became someone slightly different. Not someone better, exactly, just someone with more space around her. More herself, with the managed version standing slightly to one side.

The village came into view as she crested the ridge, and she felt the specific pleasure of seeing a familiar thing and finding it mostly unchanged. Movie Ranch Road wound through Duck Creek Village in its familiar loose S-curve, and the mix of structures along its length was as particular and unapologetic as ever: log-sided cabins that ranged from genuinely old to aggressively new, a scatter of commercial buildings that had the comfortable, weathered look of places that didn't need to impress anyone, the occasional ATV sitting in a driveway with the particular posture of a machine that was resting between jobs. The village had never looked finished, exactly, which Jillian had always considered one of its chief virtues. It looked, instead, like a place that was in the middle of something.

She catalogued the changes as she drove down the road, the way she catalogued the changes in her classroom between Augusts: methodically, without judgment, just noting what was new. A rental cabin on the north side of the road that hadn't existed last summer — timber-framed, tasteful, at least. Fresh gravel on the shoulder near the trailhead parking, which suggested the drainage problem from three summers ago had finally been addressed. Hot Mama's Pizza had a new awning, red-and-white canvas where the old green one had been, the color

cheerful in the morning light. And something on the door of the Cedar Mountain Country Store that looked like a new sign, which she'd investigate later.

She passed the lava bed pullout, half a mile north of the village center, without planning to think about it, and thought about it anyway.

It was the light, probably — the particular angle of early-summer morning sun on black basalt, which did something to the color of the rock that she'd never quite been able to describe and that the photographs on her phone never quite captured. The lava beds north of the village stretched for several square miles, part of the broader Cedar Mountain volcanic field, and they had a quality that even the mountain's other extraordinary landscapes didn't have: a stillness that felt earned rather than merely empty. Her grandmother had written about it. There was a chapter in the pamphlet — the old spiral-bound one, her grandmother's collection of Cedar Mountain oral histories, self-published in 1986 and distributed out of a summer cabin to anyone who asked — that dealt with the lava beds and what they'd meant to the people who'd lived near them, in various centuries, in various ways. Jillian had read it first at age twelve and it had given her the particular pleasant chill of realizing that a landscape you loved was also a landscape that other people had loved, across enough time that the love itself had become a kind of record.

She should re-read the pamphlet this summer. She always meant to and rarely did, because the pamphlet lived on the cabin's shelf next to the field guides and the worn road atlas, and once she was at the cabin she was usually too occupied with being at the cabin to read about it. But she'd been thinking about the Phantom Stagecoach chapter since February, when a colleague at school had mentioned something about lava tube acoustics in the context of a geology unit, and the memory had surfaced unexpectedly, the way memories from childhood did, with the particular vividness of something that had made a mark before you knew it was making one.

The pullout passed. She kept driving. She had tires to air up.

Loose Wheels occupied a stretch of Movie Ranch Road where the pavement acquired a more purposeful character, as if it understood it was approaching something. The shop sat back from the road at the end of a gravel apron wide enough to accommodate a serious volume of ATVs, trailers, and the various vehicles that accompanied them: a pair of fuel pumps out front, red and slightly faded, their canopy held up by steel columns that had been painted the same institutional green approximately twice in the past twenty years; a small building that served as both office and convenience store, its window crowded with a handwritten specials board and a collection of stickers accumulated over many seasons; and behind all of this, the three-bay service building, its overhead doors open to the June morning, the darkness inside interrupted by the flat white glare of fluorescent work lights and the warmer orange of a trouble lamp hung on a creeper stand.

Jillian pulled up to the fuel pump and cut the engine. She had been stopping here for — she did the math — sixteen summers. The pump handle still had the same screech it had developed somewhere around year four, a sound that she had at various points described to various people as a crow, a rusty gate, and, memorably, a question. It asked its question as she lifted it now. She answered by inserting the nozzle and pressing the handle, and the machine accepted this and began its work.

From somewhere inside the service bay came a sound that she recognized before she processed it — a low, rhythmic, half-vocal sound, not quite talking and not quite the sound someone made when they were concentrating very hard, but somewhere between the two. It was the sound of a mechanic in conversation with an engine. She had heard it from Garrett for most of those sixteen summers, and she had come, over time, to understand it as a kind of diagnostic tool in itself: the cadence changed with the nature of the problem, and if you knew what you were listening for, you could tell whether the conversation was going well.

This morning's conversation sounded complicated.

She topped up her tires — the altitude did something to tire pressure that always required attention — and then pushed through the shop's glass door, which had a bell above it that had been producing a sound approximately two-thirds of a bell's sound for at least a decade,

the other third having departed somewhere in the past and not been replaced.

The shop's interior was small and arranged with the pragmatic logic of a space that had been organized by people who knew what they needed and had stopped caring about anything else. The counter ran along the left wall, holding a register, a credit card reader that was newer than everything around it, and a coffee machine that was not newer than anything around it and appeared to be producing, this morning, something that smelled more like the memory of coffee than coffee itself. Jillian poured herself a cup and considered it charitably.

To the right of the counter: shelves of ATV and UTV supplies — oil, filters, belts, the particular array of small parts that kept machines running at altitude. Behind the counter, a doorway led back to the service bay, and through it drifted the ongoing conversation between Garrett and whatever he was working on, plus the radio, which was doing something complicated with classic rock and the occasional weather report.

Across from the doorway, on the left wall behind the counter: the cork board.

It was large, larger than it strictly needed to be, and it had the layered quality of all good community cork boards — things pinned over things, older layers occasionally visible at the edges where the newer ones had shifted. She scanned it with the habit of someone who had been reading it for sixteen summers and had a feel for its seasonal rhythms. Trail conditions report, stapled in the upper left: three trails marked "marginal" after the wet spring, one marked "closed until further notice" with the hand-drawn frustrated face that had become the Cedar Mountain Service District's unofficial symbol for genuine inconvenience. A notice about the District's summer meeting schedule. A missing dog notice that showed a golden retriever named Biscuit, the notice weathered enough that Jillian hoped sincerely that Biscuit had been found and the notice simply not removed. Three flyers for events that had already happened — a vendor fair, a trail cleanup day, a community potluck — retained on the board by the passive consensus that taking them down was somebody else's job.

And new, in the bottom right quadrant, pinned with a single red

tack: a notice written in block capitals on an index card, precise and enthusiastic in the way of someone who had thought carefully about how to present themselves on an index card. DENNY OAKES — AVAILABLE FOR SHOP HELP, WEEKENDS AND SOME WEEK-DAYS. EXPERIENCED WITH ATVs, UTVs, AND SMALL ENGINES. CALL OR TEXT. A phone number. And below the phone number, a small drawing of a wrench, quite accomplished, the details rendered with the attention of someone who found wrenches worth rendering accurately.

She was still looking at this when she heard the sound under the side-by-side change register, and then the creak of a creeper sliding on the concrete floor, and then Garrett's boots arriving at the bay doorway.

He was a compact man in his mid-sixties, which was not how you'd describe him on first look — the first look suggested older and harder, seasoned in a way that had nothing to do with age and everything to do with accumulated hours in service bays, under vehicles, in the specific posture of a person who had been bending over engines since before most of the mountain's summer visitors were born. His face held the topography of a man who spent his days squinting at things that were trying to hide from him, and his hands, which he was currently wiping on a rag that had long ago given up any pretense of absorbing anything, were the hands of someone who had shaken hands with a lot of metal over a lot of decades. He wore a gray work shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbow, and on the breast pocket: a small oval patch, slightly faded. The name GARRETT in the machine-stitched font of a long-standing arrangement between him and whoever ordered the patches.

He looked at her. The look was brief, efficient, and complete — the same assessment he gave to machines that were brought in for diagnosis, which Jillian had always taken as a form of respect, because it meant he wasn't going to waste either of their time.

"Haverford," he said. It contained everything a longer sentence might have contained.

"Morning," she said. "Truck's topped up. Figured I'd get the tires while I was here."

He nodded, the nod of a man who had anticipated this and found it reasonable, and came around the counter to pull her key fob and note

the tire request on the pad by the register. His handwriting was small and very precise, which she had noticed years ago and found consistent with everything else about him.

"How was the winter?" she asked.

"Winter," he said, which she understood to mean: present, notable, ongoing in its effects, no further commentary offered.

She turned, more from habit than from any particular intention, to look at the shelf of found objects on the wall beside the doorway — the collection that had been accumulating as long as she'd been coming here, each item left by someone who had found it on a trail or in a field and brought it to the shop because Garrett was the kind of person who would know what to do with found things, or at least keep them in good conscience. A surveyor's pin, the orange paint worn to a memory. A rusted spur, the rowel still intact and still turning on its pin. A section of chain with a swivel that she had never been able to identify the application of. A child's compass, its needle still live, pointing the same direction it had always pointed.

And above the register, where it had been for as long as she could remember seeing it and somehow longer: the wrench.

She had noticed it before. Everyone noticed it — it occupied a peg at eye level, its size and obvious age drawing the eye in a room full of functional objects, and the quality of its mounting (a wooden peg, set in the wall at the precise angle needed to keep the tool horizontal, clearly placed by someone who had thought about it) suggested that it had been put there deliberately, that it was not simply stored but displayed. She had noticed it before, registered it, and moved on, the way you moved on from things that were always there.

Today, for no reason she could explain except perhaps the particular quality of the morning light through the shop window and the thought of her grandmother's pamphlet still half-present in her mind from the pullout, she stopped moving on.

It was large — significantly larger than a working wrench would typically be, the kind of size that suggested ceremonial purpose or a very specific industrial application. It was clearly hand-forged rather than cast, the surfaces irregular in the way of things made by a hand that knew what it was doing but was making rather than replicating, the

finish dark with age and something that might have been gilt plating, once, now reduced to a suggestion of gold in the places the light caught it directly. The box end was oversize, disproportionate in a way that might have been intentional. It hung on its peg with the composed, slightly weighty dignity of an object that had been somewhere for a long time and expected to remain.

"Garrett," she said. "The wrench."

He looked up from the pad.

"Where did it come from?"

He was quiet for a moment, which with Garrett was not the silence of someone gathering thoughts but the silence of someone deciding how many of their thoughts to share. He put down the pen. He looked at the wrench with the expression of a man regarding something he had a working relationship with but not a fully explained one.

"Came in a box," he said. "Tools someone donated, maybe eight, ten years ago. Maybe longer. Nobody left a name. It was in the bottom."

"It's handmade," she said.

"Yep."

"The mounting peg — someone put that there on purpose."

"Before my time," he said. "Peg was already there when I started. Just hung it there because that's what you do with a thing that fits a peg."

She looked at it for another moment. The light from the window caught the box end and held it briefly, the old metal giving back more warmth than you'd expect from something that cold.

"Does it work?" she asked. "As a wrench?"

Something crossed Garrett's face — not quite a smile, but a movement in the direction of one, which from Garrett was significant. "Tried it once," he said. "Felt right." He picked up the pen again. "Everything in here has a story. That one just hasn't told me its yet."

He went back to the pad. She went back to her coffee. Outside, on Movie Ranch Road, an ATV started up and pulled onto the gravel apron with the loose, unhurried sound of a machine in no particular hurry, and the morning continued.

She was still at the counter, halfway through the coffee and reading the trail conditions on the board with the professional attention of someone planning the week's hikes, when the door opened and the bell produced its two-thirds sound and a man she hadn't seen before came in.

He was in his mid-forties, she guessed — broad across the shoulders in the way of someone who had been physically active for long enough that it had simply become his shape, wearing a work vest with a number of pockets that exceeded any obvious current need, and moving through the space with the ease of someone who was comfortable in it without owning it. His truck was visible through the window: a newer pickup, well-kept, with a tasteful graphic wrap in dark green and charcoal that suggested either professional affiliation or a strong aesthetic opinion, or both. He scanned the shop in the efficient, friendly way of someone who was checking that everything was where he'd left it, and when his eyes reached Jillian at the counter he smiled with the unguarded warmth of a person who was genuinely pleased to encounter another person.

"Morning," he said, with the natural ease of a man for whom speaking first in any room cost him nothing. "Don't think we've met. Denny Oakes." He extended his hand.

She shook it. "Jillian Haverford. I'm in for the summer."

"Haverford — up on Deer Haven Loop?" He said it without the performance of someone demonstrating a memory, just the matter-of-fact way of someone who paid attention to who was where on the mountain. She must have shown mild surprise, because he added: "Somebody mentioned the Haverford place before the season started. Your family's been coming up a long time."

"Three generations," she said.

"That's the good kind of local," he said, meaning it.

He turned to the counter, nodded at Garrett's direction in the bay — a respectful nod, the nod of someone who knew better than to interrupt a man under a vehicle — and went to the coffee machine with the proprietary ease of a person who had made coffee here before. He poured himself a cup and leaned against the counter without leaning on it, which was a subtle distinction but a real one.

"You coming in for service?" he asked.

"Tires," she said. "And I wanted to take a look at the wrench." She nodded toward the wall.

He glanced at it with an expression that was familiar and approving, like looking at a friend. "Isn't that something," he said. "Been here as long as anyone can remember, apparently. I've been trying to find out more about it but nobody seems to know where it came from." He said this with the interest of someone who genuinely wanted to know, not someone who was claiming expertise. "You know anything about old tools?"

"A little," she said. "More about old stories."

"Well," Denny said, "at this altitude, those are often the same thing."

From the bay, Garrett's ongoing conversation with the side-by-side shifted register slightly, suggesting a development in the diagnosis. Denny set down his cup and picked up a socket set from the counter — one with a tag on it, clearly a return — and headed toward the doorway to the bay. "Better get out of his way," he said, tilting his head toward the sound. "He hates it when anybody's standing around while he's thinking." He said this with affection rather than complaint, the way you described someone whose habits you'd learned because they were worth learning.

"Good meeting you," Jillian said.

"You too." He went through the doorway, and she could hear him settle into the second bay with the particular sound of someone who knew exactly where he was putting his tools.

She finished her coffee. She looked at the wrench one more time.

Garrett emerged from the bay briefly, handed her the truck key, and said "All set" in the tone of a man who had concluded one thing and was about to begin another. She thanked him, left the cup on the counter, and went out into the June morning.

The road out to Deer Haven Loop took her back past the lava beds, the north turnoff she knew but didn't take, the particular way the basalt caught the midmorning light now that the sun had moved higher and

more directly overhead. She drove without the radio — she rarely used it this close to the village, where the frequency of things worth noticing was high enough that she liked to keep her attention free.

The cabin on Deer Haven Loop was exactly what she expected, which was a satisfaction she had learned not to take for granted. It had been in her family since her grandmother's time — bought for almost nothing in the 1970s when buying a cabin on Cedar Mountain cost almost nothing, kept through the decades with the irregular but genuine attention of people who used it and cared about it without treating it as an investment. Two bedrooms, a kitchen with the particular layout of someone who had decided where the refrigerator was going and then designed everything around that decision, a main room with a wood stove and the kind of built-in bookshelves that could only have been installed by someone who intended to be there a long time. The walls held the specific smell of a cabin that was used every summer and heated occasionally through the winter: wood, dust, the mineral ghost of old fireplaces, and something underneath all of that which she had never been able to identify and had eventually decided was simply the smell of accumulated summers.

She unloaded the truck in the same order she always did — food and essentials first, then books and gear, then the things she always brought and rarely used but couldn't imagine leaving behind. She put the kettle on. She stood at the west-facing window for a moment and looked at the ponderosas and the quality of the light through them, which was the specific quality of light through ponderosas at nine thousand feet in early June, a combination she was convinced existed nowhere else on earth.

On the shelf beside the atlas and the field guides: the pamphlet. Spiral-bound, its cover slightly bowed from years of storage and occasional humidity, the title typed in the font of a 1980s electric typewriter: *Cedar Mountain: Stories the Maps Don't Tell*. Her grandmother's name on the cover, and below it the year, and below that the words *Second Printing*, which had always made Jillian smile because the first printing had been twenty copies run off at a Kinko's in Cedar City and the second had been thirty, produced under the exact same circumstances two years later after the first ran out.

She picked it up but didn't open it. She turned it in her hands for a moment, feeling the familiar slight roughness of the cover's cardstock.

The drive back past the pullout had snagged something. The lava beds in the particular angle of that particular light. The pamphlet had a chapter — the longest chapter, the one her grandmother had clearly returned to more than once, the margins of Jillian's copy dark with her grandmother's penciled additions — about the Iron Horse. About the road that used to run through this part of the mountain, the stages that ran it, and the one that didn't come back.

She should read it again this summer. She would.

She put the pamphlet back on the shelf, next to the atlas, in the spot that had held it every summer since she'd started being old enough to decide what went where.

The kettle came to a boil. Outside, in the ponderosas, something moved — a raven, probably, given the sound, though she didn't see it — and then the trees were still again, and the mountain was doing what the mountain did, which was simply being itself, with the patience of something that had been doing it for a very long time and expected to continue.

See you in June, she had written at the end of last summer's journal, the way she always did.

Here she was.

chapter two

THE LAVA BEDS south of the village were, by any objective measure, not a good place to take a rented ATV on a Tuesday afternoon in June. The terrain was uneven in the specific way of volcanic basalt — not rough exactly, but honest, the kind of surface that registered every decision you made about speed and line and reminded you of it immediately if you made a poor one. The trail that looped through the southern field ran for about six miles before rejoining the gravel service road, and it passed through a landscape that Carl Matsuda had come to think of as the mountain's most candid face: no aspens, no panoramic views, no particular effort to be scenic. Just the rock, the sky, and the sound of the engine working.

He had ridden the loop four consecutive afternoons, which he recognized was becoming a habit, and which he had not yet decided whether to address. There were worse habits. The loop took about ninety minutes at a reasonable pace, and he had been riding it at a very reasonable pace — partly because the terrain demanded it and partly because he had been paying attention.

This was the thing he kept coming back to, on the loop and off it: he had been paying attention.

The notes app on his phone had a document he'd started three weeks ago under the title "mechanical empathy," which was a placeholder name for a concept he hadn't yet fully articulated even to

himself. He was a UX designer by profession, which meant he spent a significant portion of his working life thinking about the relationship between human beings and the machines they operated — how people communicated with interfaces, how interfaces communicated back, where those conversations broke down and why. It was a field that rewarded systematic thinking, and Carl was a systematic thinker, but the best moment in any design project was always the moment before the system — the moment when you were simply watching a person interact with a thing and letting the data arrive without imposing a framework on it yet.

He had been having a lot of those moments on Cedar Mountain.

Not just on the loop. At Loose Wheels, watching the mechanic there — a compact, iron-haired man named Garrett who moved through the service bay with the unhurried efficiency of someone who had been doing this for a very long time and had made his peace with every aspect of it — Carl had noticed something that he didn't have precise language for. Garrett listened to machines the way a good doctor listened to patients: not just processing the reported symptoms but attending to the gap between what was reported and what was meant. He would put a hand on an engine casing before he connected a diagnostic reader. He would tilt his head at an idle and hear something in it that Carl couldn't hear. He seemed, in some fundamental sense, to be having a conversation with the machine rather than performing a procedure on it.

Carl had been turning this over for three weeks, and the loop had become the place where he turned it best. The rental ATV was not a sophisticated machine — it was a mid-range recreational unit from a local outfit that rented by the week, and Carl had been renting by the week for two summers running, at a rate that he had recently begun to suspect was not actually saving him money compared to buying one, a calculation he had started and abandoned three times because the variable costs were genuinely complex and also because he had come to feel a certain loyalty to the specific rental, which was a feeling he acknowledged was irrational and did not intend to act on. He knew its particular noises. He knew the slight pull to the left on a downhill grade and

the particular sound the belt made in a tight turn. He had, in short, learned to listen to it.

Which was why, at approximately forty-two minutes into the Tuesday loop, when the machine changed, he noticed immediately.

It was not a dramatic change. There was no warning light, no cough, no hesitation in the controls. It was a quality shift — a subtle difference in the way the engine was delivering power, as if the relationship between the throttle and the response had acquired a slight lag that hadn't been there before. He opened the throttle on a flat section and felt it: the machine did what he asked, but a beat late, and without the particular quality of willingness that he associated with the ATV operating normally. He eased back, listened. The engine sounded the same. He tried the throttle again. Same result.

He reached for his phone and opened the voice recorder.

Tuesday, 2:47 p.m. ATV anomaly, south lava loop, approximately four miles out. Engine responsive but — not quite. Lag in throttle response, maybe a quarter second, consistent across throttle positions. No warning lights, no audible change in engine note. Feels like — okay, this is going to sound ridiculous — it feels like the machine is thinking about something else. Like it's doing the work but its attention is divided. That's not a mechanical description. I know that's not a mechanical description. I'm noting it anyway because I don't have a better one. Symptom appeared gradually, maybe twenty minutes ago, I didn't register it as anomalous until it became consistent. Returning to base.

He rode back slowly, still attending. The machine held the symptom — consistent, mild, not worsening — for another twenty minutes, and then, somewhere in the last mile before the turnoff to the cabin, it resolved. Not gradually: just gone, the throttle response snapping back to its normal character as if whatever had been dividing its attention had finished with it and released it. He parked in the small

gravel area beside the cabin steps and sat on the machine for a moment after he cut the engine, one hand on the handlebar, thinking.

Then he opened the notes app and started a new document.

The town of Duck Creek Village had a hardware and supply store, a pizza restaurant, a country store, a coffee shop, a gift shop, a pub, and Loose Wheels Service Inc., which occupied a position in the village's practical life that was somewhere between infrastructure and institution. Carl had been to the shop twice before this visit — once in his first summer to ask about trail conditions, once at the start of this summer to inquire about the rental ATV's service history — and both times he had stayed longer than the errand required, which told him something.

He arrived at eight-thirty on Wednesday morning with the rental ATV on the small trailer he'd borrowed from the rental outfit and a description of the previous afternoon's symptoms that he had refined over dinner and a second cup of coffee into something he felt was reasonably precise.

The bay doors were already open. The radio was playing something that involved a steel guitar and strong feelings about a truck. From the far bay came the particular sound of a man and a machine in a conversation that was not going well for at least one of them — a low, intermittent sound that Carl had come to recognize as Garrett's diagnostic register, the equivalent of a doctor saying *bmm* while looking at a chart. The *bmm* that meant the chart was not giving him what he needed.

Carl unloaded the ATV onto the apron, parked the trailer, and went inside.

The shop's interior occupied a different part of his attention every time he visited. This morning it was the cork board. He had looked at it before without really reading it, the way you looked at community cork boards in small towns — registering the category (community communications, event notices, small-business cards) without processing the content. Today, waiting for Garrett to emerge from the far bay, he actually read it.

It was more interesting than most cork boards. The organization

was geological — things accumulated in layers, newer material overlapping older, with the occasional eruption of something that needed prominent placement pushing older items to the margins. He found the trail conditions report (three routes marginal, one closed, a hand-drawn frowning face next to the closure notice that suggested institutional exasperation rather than personal feeling). He found a notice about the Cedar Mountain Service District's summer meeting schedule, which appeared to meet monthly and to have an agenda that ran to six items even in the summary version. He found a missing dog notice for a golden retriever named Biscuit that had been on the board long enough that he hoped earnestly represented a resolution rather than an ongoing situation.

And in the lower right corner, recently pinned: an index card in careful block capitals. DENNY OAKES — AVAILABLE FOR SHOP HELP. EXPERIENCED WITH ATVs, UTVs, AND SMALL ENGINES. The card had a phone number and, below the phone number, a drawing of a wrench that was rendered with more accuracy than index-card notices typically achieved.

Carl was still reading the card when Garrett appeared from the far bay doorway.

He was wiping his hands on a rag that had reached a philosophical relationship with cleanliness — it no longer expected to improve matters but participated anyway out of professional habit. He looked at Carl, looked at the ATV visible through the window on the apron, and arrived at a conclusion without apparent intermediate steps.

"Rental," he said. It was not quite a question.

"Right," Carl said. "Third summer on the same one, which I've been told is unusual. I was going to ask you about that, actually — whether it makes more financial sense to buy at some point."

Garrett's expression registered this as a reasonable question that he would address when the current unreasonable situation had been dealt with. He nodded at the ATV. "What's it doing?"

Carl had rehearsed this. He gave the description in the order he'd organized it the night before: onset (approximately forty minutes into a ninety-minute ride), character (throttle lag, consistent, without warning lights or audible engine change), duration (approximately

twenty minutes, then spontaneous resolution), and frequency (first occurrence that he'd noticed, but he acknowledged he might have missed earlier episodes if they'd been milder). He used the phrase "loss of intention" and immediately added: "I know that's not a mechanical term."

Garrett looked at him for a moment. "No," he agreed. Then: "But I know what you mean."

He went out to the ATV. Carl followed, and watched.

What happened next was the thing that Carl had been thinking about for three weeks and had not yet been able to adequately describe in the notes document. Garrett reached the machine and did not immediately connect anything to it. He put his right hand flat on the engine casing, just above the cylinder head, for about five seconds. He moved the hand to the fuel system housing. He pressed, released, pressed. He leaned down and looked at the underside of the machine from an angle that didn't appear to reveal anything visible, but which he held for long enough that Carl concluded he was listening rather than looking. Then, and only then, did he go back to the shop and return with the diagnostic reader, which he connected to the OBD port and read with the same focused attention he'd applied to everything else.

The reader showed nothing. Garrett read the screen, then read it again, then unplugged the reader with the expression of a man who had expected this result and found it confirming rather than reassuring.

"Clean," he said.

"That's what I was afraid of," Carl said.

Garrett looked at him with something that was not quite surprise — more like a recalibration of an estimate. "Why afraid?"

"Because if there's a code, you know where to start. If there's no code—"

"You start somewhere else," Garrett said. He looked at the machine. He looked at it the way, Carl was beginning to understand, he looked at everything that was asking him a question he didn't yet have an answer for: with patience, and without the performance of confidence. "Leave it. I'll look it over."

"Is there anything—"

"Leave it," Garrett said, not unkindly. "Come back this afternoon."

Carl went inside to wait.

The found-object shelf was on the wall beside the inner doorway, and he had noticed it before but not examined it. He examined it now. A surveyor's pin, its orange paint so weathered it had become a suggestion. A spur, iron, the rowel intact. A length of chain with a brass swivel whose application he couldn't identify. A child's compass. A section of rubber gasket material that someone had clearly found and brought in on the grounds that it came from something and should be returned to something, even if the specific something was unknown.

The shelf had the character of a repository. Not a collection — a collection implied curation, a collector with an aesthetic — but a repository, the place where things ended up when they needed to be somewhere. The shop was the kind of place that earned that function: if you found something on a trail and didn't know what it was or where it belonged, you brought it to the person who would know, or who would keep it faithfully until the knowing arrived.

He was thinking about this — about the difference between a collection and a repository, and what it meant for a place to earn the second function — when he looked up and saw the wrench.

It was above the register, on a wooden peg set at the angle needed to keep it horizontal, and it was the kind of object that rewarded attention in proportion to how much attention you gave it. Oversize — significantly larger than any working wrench he'd seen, the kind of size that suggested either a very specific industrial application or a deliberate departure from function toward something else. Hand-forged, clearly: the surfaces had the irregular quality of things made by a hand rather than a mold, the metal worked rather than poured. The finish was dark with age and something that had been, at some point, gold — or the ambition of gold — now reduced to a warmth in the places where light found it directly.

Carl photographed it with his phone. He was not sure why, except that his instinct when he encountered something he didn't have a category for was to keep a copy of it until the category arrived.

He opened the notes document and typed:

Golden wrench above register. Hand-forged, pre-industrial manufacture probably, though I'm guessing. Displayed on a dedicated wooden peg — someone put that peg there deliberately, at eye level. This is not a stored tool. This is an exhibited object. Why does a working service shop exhibit one tool? The other shelf items are a repository — found things, kept things — but this is different. This has a peg. Someone decided.

He was reading this back when the door opened and Denny Oakes came in.

Carl had seen Denny once before — a brief introduction on the apron earlier in the week when Denny had been heading out and Carl had been heading in, the kind of exchange that covered names and nothing else. Today Denny was carrying a socket set in a canvas pouch, clearly a return, and he moved through the shop with the easy competence of someone who knew exactly where things lived and how the space operated. He put the socket set on the counter, noted Garrett's absence with a glance toward the bay, and turned to Carl with a smile that had no performance in it — just the natural expression of a person who was genuinely pleased to encounter another person on an ordinary Wednesday morning.

"Carl, right? Denny." He leaned against the counter. "You leave something with Garrett?"

"Rental ATV. It was doing something strange yesterday."

Denny's expression moved to the particular sympathy of someone who had experience with machines doing strange things. "The lava loop?"

"South one, yeah."

"That loop does something to machines sometimes. Something about the dust composition, I think, though I've never been able to confirm it." He said this with the easy authority of someone sharing a working theory rather than a conclusion. "Garrett'll sort it. He always does." He said this with the particular confidence of someone who had watched Garrett sort things and had found it reliable. He looked around the shop with the comfortable survey of a person checking that

everything was in order, and his gaze landed on the shelf, then the wrench above the register. "You looking at the wrench?"

"Photographed it," Carl admitted.

Denny smiled. "I did the same thing my first week. Nobody knows where it came from. Been there longer than most of the equipment." He shrugged with genuine equanimity — it was a mystery, and he found it an acceptable mystery. "There's a lot of stuff in this place that has more history than anyone can account for."

He nodded toward the found-object shelf. "That spur showed up three years ago in a bag someone left on the apron. No note. Garrett just put it on the shelf." He gestured along the wall at the chain and the compass and the gasket section. "It's like a lost and found that nobody ever picks up from. I think he keeps it because— I don't know. Because some things deserve a place."

Carl looked at the shelf. Then at the wrench.

"That's a good way to put it," he said.

Denny dropped off the socket set and went through to the bay — Garrett had emerged briefly, noted the return, and gone back — and the shop settled into its working quiet. Carl sat on the bench beside the counter and read trail reports on his phone and listened to the sound of Garrett's ongoing conversation with something in the far bay, which had the character, this morning, of a conversation in which one party was being patient and the other was not being cooperative.

When Garrett came back with the ATV key, it was eleven-fifteen.

He put the key on the counter. Carl waited.

"Nothing on the reader," Garrett said. "Fuel system's clean, injectors clear, no mechanical faults I can find." He paused. "But."

Carl stayed quiet.

"Third machine this month with this symptom," Garrett said. He said it the way he said most things: flatly, without editorial weight, presenting the fact and leaving the interpretation as Carl's work. "Different machines, different riders, same complaint." He looked at Carl with the measuring look he applied to things that were asking questions he hadn't answered yet. "I'm keeping track."

"I'd like to see what you're tracking," Carl said. "If that's all right."

Garrett considered this for a moment — not long, just enough to

establish that the decision was his to make. Then: "Come back when it's not busy."

Carl picked up the key. He had one more question, and he asked it the way you asked questions that you suspected would either be answered honestly or not at all: directly, without framing. "The way you worked on it before the reader — the listening. How did you know what to listen for?"

Garrett looked at him. The measuring look, the same as before. Then: "Reader tells you what the machine says. Listening tells you what it means."

He went back to the bay. Carl stood at the counter for another moment, then went outside.

The cabin on Deer Haven Loop was a newer build — three winters old, according to the woman who ran the rental, who had described it as "modern mountain" in a way that had prepared Carl for something aggressively appointed and turned out to mean simply that the kitchen worked and the insulation was adequate. It had a desk facing the west window that got afternoon light until about four, at which point the ponderosas absorbed it, and this was where he worked in the mornings: the company's interface projects open on one monitor, his notes documents open on the other, the pour-over setup on the kitchen counter doing what it could with altitude-compromised water temperature.

He had told his manager, when he'd first arranged the summer remote work, that he was going to a place with minimal distractions. This had been accurate as a description of Duck Creek Village's nightlife and entirely inaccurate as a description of the mountain itself, which provided a continuous supply of the specific kind of distraction that masqueraded as productive thinking. He had gotten more ideas in two summers on Cedar Mountain than in the previous four years combined, and most of them were not directly related to interface design.

He made coffee. He opened the notes document.

The "ATV anomaly" document was currently four hundred words,

split between voice-memo transcriptions and typed observations. He read through it. Third machine this month, Garrett had said. Different machines, different riders. Carl added this, with a timestamp:

11:47 a.m. Follow-up with Garrett at Loose Wheels. Diagnostic: clean — no codes, no mechanical fault found. But: Garrett says this is the third machine in a month with the same symptom profile. Different machines, different riders. He's "keeping track" — separate from whatever computer system the shop uses, I think. He said I could come back and look at what he has. I'll do that.

More important note: asked him about the pre-reader listening. His answer: "Reader tells you what the machine says. Listening tells you what it means." That's — I want to sit with that for a while before I do anything with it.

He sat with it. The afternoon light came through the window and moved across the desk in its slow arc. He opened the work project on the left monitor and looked at the interface he'd been developing: a dashboard for a logistics management system, clean and functional, the kind of thing he was good at and that had been paying his rent for eight years. The interface communicated with its users through precisely designed feedback loops — inputs, responses, error states. It told users what the system said.

He looked at the right monitor. *Listening tells you what it means.*

He closed the work project. He opened a new document titled "mechanical empathy — notes, Cedar Mountain" and began to type, and then stopped, and then began again, and wrote for forty minutes without looking up, which was not a thing that happened to him very often, and which he took as a sign that the concept had been waiting for him to have the right words rather than the other way around.

At five-fifteen he ran out of words and closed the document and put on his shoes and walked to the general store for coffee, which he was out of again. He was going through it faster this summer than last, which he suspected was related to the notes document.

The store was quiet at this hour — the midday tourist traffic gone, the evening activity not yet started, the specific stillness of a small mountain village in the late afternoon when the light was going gold and everything that needed doing had been mostly done. He got his coffee from the shelf and was reading the label — he was particular about the grind — when he heard two people in the parking lot through the propped-open door.

"—the same thing again, Doug says. Just sort of loses the plot on the way home."

"Yeah? What does Rolane say?"

"Said she couldn't find anything on the reader. But she thinks it might be a fuel thing. He's going to take it over to the other guy — Garrett — see if he gets a different read."

"Third machine I've heard about this month."

"Fourth, I think. Maybe fourth."

Carl paid for the coffee and went back to the cabin. He opened the notes document. He added a line at the bottom of the last entry:

5:38 p.m. Overheard parking lot conversation — two locals discussing another ATV with the same symptom profile. "Loses the plot on the way home." Third or fourth incident, per their count. Both Rolane and Garrett noted no diagnostic fault. One of them mentioned it might be a fuel issue. Garrett also has a machine that came to him after Rolane couldn't find anything. This is a pattern, not individual incidents. *Not isolated.*

He stared at the last line for a while. Then he removed the question mark he had put after it the night before.

chapter **three**

THE MEADOW behind Loose Wheels was not, technically, part of Loose Wheels. It belonged to the Forest Service, or possibly to the Cedar Mountain Service District, depending on which map you consulted and how much you trusted the accuracy of boundaries drawn in 1987. In practice it belonged to whoever was using it, and on the morning of the first ATV safety course session, it belonged to Wanda Fehr.

Carl knew this before he spoke to her. He knew it from the evidence: the cones laid out in a pattern that he had initially read, from the shop's back gate, as arbitrary, and which revealed itself on closer approach to be a meticulous reconstruction of the decision points on the East Ridge junction — not an abstraction of a trail but a specific trail, mapped in orange plastic on flat grass. He knew it from the two stakes and a measuring tape she had apparently finished using before he arrived, which were now coiled and put away with the neatness of a person who put things away as a matter of principle rather than tidiness. He knew it from the directional sign he had placed yesterday afternoon, the one pointing toward the GPS wayfinding station he'd set up at the meadow's north end.

It had been moved. Slightly — maybe twenty degrees of rotation — but deliberately. He stared at it. He looked at the course layout Wanda had established. He looked at the sign's new direction. After a moment

he understood: in the context of her cone layout, the new direction was more accurate. The sign now pointed to where a rider leaving the junction simulation would logically be looking for the next waypoint, rather than where Carl had pointed it, which was where the station physically was.

He decided not to mention this.

Wanda came across the meadow at the pace of someone who had completed one task and was moving to the next one. She was in her mid-sixties, compact and direct in her movements, wearing a work vest over a long-sleeve shirt in the practical color palette of a person who had stopped thinking about clothes sometime in the 1990s and found the resulting freedom considerable. Her hair was cut short and silver, and she moved through the dewy grass with the posture of someone who had spent thirty years standing beside highways in all weather and had come to regard outdoor discomfort as a baseline condition rather than a problem. She stopped at a conversational distance — not close, not far, the distance of a professional assessing a professional.

"Carl Matsuda," Carl said, and extended his hand.

"Wanda Fehr." Her handshake was the handshake of someone who had done it ten thousand times and had long since stopped putting anything into it beyond basic competence. "You're the GPS."

"That's me," he said. "I was going to set up the—"

"I saw your setup." She looked at the north end of the meadow where his equipment waited on its folding table. "The module and the table are fine where they are. The sign I moved."

"I noticed," Carl said. "It's better where you put it."

She looked at him with a brief, evaluating attention. "Yes," she said, which closed that topic. "Your module — what does it do, specifically?"

He gave her the version he had been refining over the past week, having learned from experience that the version he led with in the first summer — which foregrounded the data-capture capability — was the wrong version for a live course setting. He led instead with the rider-facing function: the module showed a simplified map of the trail system with flagged decision points at junctions, prompted riders to confirm their intended direction before proceeding, and built a spatial awareness of the route through active engagement rather than passive GPS follow-

ing. The underlying data collection was secondary. Wanda listened with the focused, neutral attention of someone taking a deposition.

When he finished, she was quiet for a moment.

"I've been running this course for eleven years," she said. "I've never used a GPS unit."

"I know," Carl said. "I'm not suggesting the course needs it to function. I think it addresses a specific gap — junction decision-making under pressure — that traditional course methods don't fully cover. I'd like the chance to demonstrate it."

"I'll keep that in mind," she said, and turned back toward the course. There was no dismissal in her tone. There was also no particular warmth. There was the flat professionalism of someone who had heard the pitch and filed it in a category labeled *possible* rather than *no*, which was more than Carl had expected and less than he'd hoped for. He took it as the starting position it was.

The course participants arrived in two waves. The first wave was the people who arrived early: a couple in their forties — the Henleys, they introduced themselves, from St. George — who pulled in on their own ATVs with their helmets already on, which Wanda noted with the specific quality of attention she gave to things that told her something useful. They were confident. She would find out this morning how much of that confidence was earned. The second wave arrived in rentals and borrowed rigs, six people across three vehicles, including a woman named Loretta who asked where she should park and then parked somewhere completely different from where Carl indicated, which he considered a possible data point about decision-making under low-stakes conditions.

And Connor.

Connor arrived last, in the passenger seat of a late-model Subaru that pulled into the lot with the careful pace of a parent who is not going to leave until they have confirmed that the right person is in charge. His mother — identifiable by the expression of someone conducting a safety audit while pretending not to — sat in the driver's

seat and watched him cross the meadow gate with the focused attention of a person seeing a child they have worried about off on something. Connor was sixteen, tall in the way of someone who had grown quickly and hadn't fully taken ownership of the height yet, and he walked across the meadow with his hands in his pockets and his face arranged in the expression of someone who was going to be completely fine with whatever was about to happen and did not require anyone to make any particular effort on his behalf. He found a spot at the back of the group. He looked at the rental ATV assigned to him and very carefully did not look like he was assessing it, which meant he was assessing it.

Carl had been watching ATV riders for two summers and had a reasonably calibrated sense for who had actually ridden before. Connor had ridden before. He just didn't want to make a thing of it.

Leo arrived during the pre-course equipment check.

He came through the back gate of the Loose Wheels lot with his camera already running, which was not a surprise, and with the particular momentum of someone who had identified their opening shot and was pursuing it with the focused intention of a hunting animal. He had been talking about this documentary — the Loose Wheels documentary, which GR had apparently agreed to somewhere in the past two weeks under circumstances that Carl gathered had not been fully thought through by at least one of the parties — with the concentrated enthusiasm of a person who had been given access to something worth filming and was determined to do it justice. He had described it to Carl the previous day over coffee at Ground + Toasted: twelve minutes, maybe fifteen, the story of a working shop and its relationship to a community that depended on it, the mechanical heart of Cedar Mountain. He had said this with complete sincerity, which Carl had found, unexpectedly, moving.

The opening shot, Leo had explained, was going to be Wanda in the meadow with the mountains behind her.

He aimed the camera at the meadow. Wanda was in the middle of her opening briefing. She was explaining the course structure — four sessions over two weeks, morning practical and afternoon theory on alternating days — in the flat, informative register she used for all factual communication. She did not look at Leo. She did not pause. She

simply added, approximately two sentences after the camera appeared in her peripheral vision, a clause to her policy statement.

"No filming during course sessions," she said, in precisely the same tone she had used to describe the helmet chin strap requirement. "Cameras create distraction. Distraction creates accidents. I've seen both." She moved on to the emergency stop procedure without any transitional language, the policy delivered and complete.

Every participant in the course glanced at Leo for exactly one beat. Then they looked forward again, with the focused attention of people who had decided, simultaneously and without coordination, that they did not want to be associated with whatever was about to happen.

Leo lowered the camera.

He held it at his side. He did not put it in his bag. This was a distinction that Wanda, Carl suspected, had anticipated and was not interested in pursuing. She had moved the problem from the course to the periphery, which was where it needed to be, and the specific peripheral location was not her concern. Leo, recognizing the geometry of this, moved to the shop's back doorway — outside the course perimeter, technically, on the shop's property — and resumed filming from there with the philosophical equanimity of a person who had been outmaneuvered and found the experience instructive.

GR was at the shop's back window.

He watched for approximately twenty seconds. His expression, in those twenty seconds, had the quality of a man who has just witnessed the correct outcome of something he was not certain would have the correct outcome. Then he went back to work.

Leo, from the doorway, filmed the course. His opening shot was not, in the end, Wanda in the meadow with the mountains behind her. It was Wanda in the meadow with the mountains behind her and thirty yards of separation between the camera and its subject, which meant the shot had a different quality than he'd intended — longer, cooler, the distance between the observer and the observed built into the frame. He looked at the playback on the screen. He thought about it. He decided it was, actually, better.

The morning session ran until eleven-thirty. Wanda's teaching method, Carl had begun to understand by midmorning, was not primarily about instruction. It was about observation followed by targeted intervention — she watched each rider for two full circuits before saying anything, building what was clearly a diagnostic profile of each person's specific errors, and then addressing those errors with the precision of someone who knew exactly which four words would do the work of forty. She did not raise her voice. She did not generalize. When she told Loretta that her left-hand cornering was creating a weight distribution problem, she described the specific distribution, the specific corner, and the specific correction, and Loretta took the next corner differently, and it was better.

Connor made it to the third circuit before the showing-off became visible.

It was not aggressive showing-off — that was the thing. It was the quiet, almost involuntary showing-off of someone who was good at something and found it difficult not to be good at it in a way that other people could see. He had natural throttle sense and clean body position and a corner-reading instinct that was probably the product of two or three years of unsupervised riding somewhere he wasn't supposed to be. None of this was the problem. The problem was the line he took into the simulated junction sequence — a line that was technically correct and demonstrably faster than any other participant's line and which required, at one point, a weight shift over the outside wheel that was the kind of thing you could only do if you knew exactly what you were doing.

He clipped a cone.

It was a matter of perhaps two inches of misjudgment, the kind that came from calculating correctly and executing at about ninety-five percent, which at speed was exactly as much margin as the cone required. The ATV rocked, recovered, and continued. Connor did not react. His face was composed with the careful neutrality of someone hoping that if they didn't acknowledge the error, it might not have fully happened.

Wanda said: "Connor."

He brought the ATV to a stop and looked at her.

"Your line into the junction was good," she said. "Your weight shift was good. Your margin was not good. At that line and that speed, your margin was two inches. On a real trail, at that junction, two inches is a drop of four feet." She paused. "Run it again. Same line, same speed, different margin."

Connor ran it again. He ran it with margin. He clipped nothing. He did not look any less capable than he had before, which was the point that Wanda was making without stating it: competence and showing off were not the same thing, and competence had the longer useful life.

Carl, watching from the course perimeter, made a note.

10:22 a.m. Wanda's correction of Connor (the teenager — good rider, too aware of it). She didn't tell him to slow down or be careful. She told him what his margin was and what it meant in real conditions. She quantified the risk in terms he couldn't argue with. He couldn't argue with it because it was true and because she'd already watched him closely enough to know exactly what had happened and why. This is what diagnostic attention looks like in a human system. She watched him first. Then she spoke.

The Kanab couple pulled into the Loose Wheels lot at ten forty-five, which Carl registered from the course perimeter because the sound of a machine running below its normal engagement level was, after two weeks of thinking about this, something he could now identify at forty yards. He did not leave the course. But he watched, over the course fence, as Garrett came out of the bay and looked at the ATV and did the same thing he had done with Carl's machine: hand on the engine casing, patient and still, a conversation being held in a language Carl was only beginning to learn to hear.

He excused himself from the course during the lunch break.

The couple — Jim and Paulette, the paperwork said, Cedar City address, renting up through Saturday — were in the customer chairs with the particular patience of people who had accepted that they were going to

be here for a while. Paulette was reading something on her phone. Jim was watching Garrett work through the open bay doorway with the interested attention of a man who found mechanical competence worth watching.

"Same thing," Garrett said, without looking up, when Carl came through the shop door. "No codes."

Carl waited.

"Third this month," Garrett said. He said it in the same tone he'd used in Chapter 2 — flat, factual, the delivery of information rather than the expression of concern, though the distinction was narrowing. He went to the counter. He opened the ledger. Carl watched him write: the date, the machine, the service date, the symptom note, the diagnostic result. Small and precise. Garrett's handwriting looked like it had been produced by a person who had decided at some point that penmanship was a form of respect for the information being recorded and had maintained that position ever since.

He put the ledger back.

Carl said: "Is that separate from the computer system?"

Garrett looked at him. The measuring look, the same as before — assessing whether the question deserved an answer, and what kind of answer. Then: "Computer tracks what I bill. This tracks what I see."

He went back to the bay.

Carl took his lunch outside and sat on the bench and opened the notes document.

12:08 p.m. Third machine. Kanab couple, east trails, same symptom, serviced here two days ago. Diagnostic clean. Garrett's ledger — I watched him write in it. He records: date, machine, service date, symptom, result. Separate from billing system. He said "computer tracks what I bill, this tracks what I see." This is a parallel data system he maintains because the digital record doesn't capture what the digital system can't measure.

He's been tracking this since before I noticed it. He's ahead of me.

Also: Jim and Paulette mentioned on their way out that they'd heard at the trailhead that someone else's machine did the same thing earlier this week. "Going around," Paulette said. She said it like the flu. Garrett didn't respond. He was already under the next machine.

Rolane came through the bay door while Carl was still on the bench, carrying a belt housing and the focused expression of someone in the middle of a job that was going worse than expected. She glanced at Carl with the brief, neutral acknowledgment of one professional recognizing another in a shared workspace. "You the GPS guy?" she asked.

"That's me," Carl said.

"Wanda give you a hard time?"

"She moved my directional sign."

Rolane considered this. "That's pretty mild, actually," she said, and went back inside.

The afternoon session was the practical riding evaluation, and by three o'clock Wanda had a complete picture of every participant's error profile. Carl had watched her build it in real time, the same way he watched Garrett build a diagnostic read — through accumulated observation rather than through any single test. She didn't have a clipboard during the riding segments. She didn't write anything down while she was watching. At the debrief she spoke for nine minutes without notes and described each rider's specific errors with the accuracy of someone reading from a transcript.

After the debrief, when the participants had collected their gear and Connor's mother had completed her safety audit from the fence and departed apparently satisfied, Carl approached her.

"Two riders this morning nearly missed the same junction," he said. "The one in the northeast corner of the layout, coming off the downhill

entry. They read it the way they expected the trail to be rather than the way it was."

Wanda looked at him. She knew which junction, and which riders, and what had happened. He was not telling her anything she didn't know.

"That's the specific gap the GPS module addresses," he said. "Not the riding — the reading. It builds the habit of confirming what's ahead rather than assuming it."

She was quiet. The meadow had gone still in the way of spaces after the activity has left them, the flattened grass and displaced cones giving the afternoon light something to work with. A raven somewhere in the ponderosas above the shop was conducting a one-sided argument with something. Wanda stood with the patient stillness of a person who was thinking rather than deciding.

"Can your device tell a rider what to do when the battery dies at nine thousand feet?" she asked.

It was the question he hadn't prepared for, which meant it was the right question. He thought about it honestly. "Not in the current build," he said. "But I can fix that."

She looked at him with the same brief evaluating attention she'd used that morning. "Let me know when it's fixed," she said. She picked up her clipboard and walked toward the shop. She did not look back, because looking back was not part of the process.

Carl stood in the meadow. He watched her go. He opened the notes document.

3:24 p.m. Wanda's battery question. She's right — the current build has no analog fallback. If the device fails in the field, the rider has nothing from it. The gap is real. I'm going to fix it before the next session.

Longer note: she watches riders the way Garrett watches machines. Not looking at the surface behavior — listening for what the behavior means. She knew which two riders were going to miss the junction before they nearly missed it, I'm fairly sure, and she watched them do it anyway because she needed to see exactly how, not just whether. That's not just good teaching. That's diagnostic. She's running the same process Garrett runs, on a different system.

I want to write more about this but I don't know where it goes yet. Saving it.

He closed the document. He went back through the gate to help stack the cones, because they needed stacking and he was there, and because Wanda had already started and it seemed wrong to watch.

Leo, camera down, helped too.

"Good first day?" Carl asked him.

"I got some great footage from the doorway," Leo said. He picked up a cone, examined it, set it on the stack. "That shot of Wanda with the mountains behind her is actually better from forty yards than it would have been from twenty."

"Did you plan that?"

Leo considered. "I'm going to say yes," he said.

Carl stacked a cone. The raven in the ponderosas had concluded its argument and departed. The mountains behind the meadow were doing what mountains did in the late afternoon — absorbing the light and giving it back changed, the red in the rock coming forward as the angle flattened. Somewhere in the shop, Garrett was still working, the sound of it carrying clearly across the still air: a steady, patient conversation with whatever the afternoon had brought him.

chapter **four**

PERFECT — and thank you for the store name correction. I'll use "Cedar Mountain Country Store" consistently from here forward. Mitch running the day-to-day while Doug and Sam own it is a nice detail — it means there's a staff presence without the owners needing to be in every scene.

The Cedar Mountain Country Store occupied the south end of Movie Ranch Road in a building that had been a feed supply depot, a trading post, a garage, and, briefly in the 1950s, a dentist's office, before arriving at its current vocation and deciding to stay. The exterior gave no particular indication of what was inside — weathered vertical plank-ing, a hand-painted sign that had been repainted over its own ghost several times, a porch with two chairs that were always occupied in summer by people who had come in for something specific and stayed much longer than they intended. Inside, the store was everything the building's exterior declined to promise: warm and deep and smelling of coffee and pine and something faintly, pleasantly sweet from the candy aisle, the ceiling hung with years of accumulated inventory that had drifted upward the way things did in spaces that were used by people who loved them. Mitch ran the place with the calm efficiency of someone who had long since made his peace with the gap between what the store was supposed to be and what it actually was, which was less a

retail establishment than a community in miniature, with all the patience and digression that implied.

Jillian arrived at seven-forty on a Thursday morning, which was early enough that the village was still doing its quiet version of itself — the ATV traffic not yet started, the trails not yet populated, the light still coming in at the low flat angle of a morning that hadn't fully committed to the day yet. She had been on the mountain six days. The St. George school year had receded to a comfortable distance, a thing that was real but not present, and the summer version of herself was settling in around her edges the way it always did: a degree of tension releasing here, a degree of attention opening there, the particular calibration of a person who has arrived somewhere that fits.

She had passed the new rental cabin's lit windows on the way down Deer Haven Loop — somebody up early or never quite asleep, the valley rhythms following them up the mountain until the mountain corrected them — and the Hot Mama's parking lot empty, and the Forest Service truck sitting outside the trailhead with the particular posture of a vehicle that had been there since before sunrise. Trail maintenance crew, probably, working on the section above the east lava beds that had been on the District's backlog since the spring snowmelt revealed what the winter had done to the drainage. She made a note to check the conditions board at Loose Wheels before she took the ATV out tomorrow.

The store's door had a bell that worked properly, which she had always found quietly satisfying in comparison to Loose Wheels' partial bell, and the bell announced her into the smell of the coffee machine and the low ceiling and the stereo doing something with a Johnny Cash song that she half-recognized. Mitch was restocking the breakfast shelf in the back — she could hear the particular sound of cans being placed with deliberate care — and at the counter, Maya Runningwater was sitting on the tall stool behind the register with a mug in both hands and the expression of someone who had been up for a while and had made her peace with it.

"You're early," Maya said, as if they were mid-conversation, which they were.

"You're earlier," Jillian said, and went to the coffee machine.

They talked the way they always talked in the first days of the summer: covering ground, taking stock, filling in the winter's gap with the specific currency of a friendship that renewed itself annually and never seemed to lose much in the interval. Maya's winter had been full — a contracted hydrology survey for the state water board, which had taken her to three different river systems in southern Utah and produced data she described with the restrained enthusiasm of a person who had found exactly what she was looking for and was still deciding what to do with it. She had also, she mentioned without apparent emphasis, started leading tourist hikes on the weekends. Waterway-focused — the springs and seeps and the particular hydrology of a mountain that collected water in ways that weren't obvious from the surface. She had done two so far this season and both had sold out.

"There's more interest than I expected," she said. "People want to understand why the lake does what it does. Or they want to look at a pretty pond and have someone tell them it's significant, which is fine too."

"Both are real reasons to show up," Jillian said.

"I've started to think so."

The morning traffic in the store was the unhurried kind — a couple of locals stopping in for coffee on their way somewhere, a woman from one of the rental cabins who had run out of something and needed to replace it and seemed to find the errand less of an inconvenience than an opportunity to look at everything else the store offered while she was there. The stereo moved from Johnny Cash to something by John Denver that Jillian couldn't name but that felt right for the hour. Mitch emerged from the back, nodded at Jillian, exchanged a few words with Maya about a delivery expected that afternoon, and went back to his restocking with the unhurried competence of a man who kept a lot of things moving without appearing to rush any of them.

It was Maya who brought up the lava beds. She did it the way she did most things: as a fact she had been sitting with long enough to decide it was worth sharing, delivered in the tone of a person who had a working theory and was offering it for review rather than for validation.

"You hear about the sounds?" she said.

Jillian looked up from her coffee. "What sounds?"

"North lava beds. Last weekend — a couple from Las Vegas, they were camped at the main access pullout. They came in Saturday morning asking about it." Maya wrapped both hands around her mug and looked at the window, where the morning light was starting to do something useful with the mountain's upper rim. "Metallic. Rhythmic. Not constant — it started in the evening, when the temperature dropped, and went on for a few minutes and then stopped. Came from underground, or at least from deep in the rock. They described it as—" she paused, choosing the word — "mechanical."

Jillian was quiet.

"I told them it was probably the CCC pipes," Maya said. "The old water project infrastructure — there's iron pipe running through the eastern lava bed margin from a 1930s spring capping project, and when the temperature differential gets significant, it can move in the fittings. It makes sounds sometimes." She said this with the pragmatic confidence of someone who had been explaining the mountain's stranger behaviors to tourists for long enough to have a rotation of accurate and plausible answers. "That's probably what it was."

"Probably," Jillian said.

Maya looked at her. "They didn't look convinced," she admitted. "And honestly—" she turned her mug in her hands, "—I wasn't entirely either. It was the way they described it. Rhythmic. Intervals. Not the sound of something shifting. The sound of something running."

"How long ago did you first hear about this?" Jillian asked.

"This was the first direct report. But I've been hearing things — not about sounds, just about something being off up there. People saying the north beds feel different this year. Which doesn't mean anything, necessarily. People say that every few years." She looked at Jillian with the measured attention she gave to things she thought might be important. "Why? You know something about it?"

Jillian opened her mouth to answer, and from the hardware aisle, without preamble or transition, a voice said: "That's the Iron Horse."

Hector Peña had been in the hardware aisle since before Jillian arrived. This was not unusual. Hector came to the Cedar Mountain Country Store every weekday morning at some point between seven and ten and stayed until something more interesting presented itself, which was sometimes never. He was seventy-eight years old and built with the specific density of a man who had spent six decades at high elevation doing physical work, and he had the face of someone who had spent the same period outdoors in all weather and had never particularly objected to any of it. He had grown up in the Iron County area and had been on Cedar Mountain, in one capacity or another — ranching, then fence contracting, then the kind of general semi-retirement that involved doing whatever needed doing for whoever asked — for most of his life. He had been coming to this store since before Mitch's parents owned it.

He emerged from the hardware aisle with a box of wire staples in one hand and the expression of a man who had heard what he needed to hear and was prepared to contribute. He set the staples on the counter and looked at Maya, then at Jillian.

"Hector," Jillian said.

He nodded at her — the nod of a man who knew who she was and considered this sufficient acknowledgment of the fact. "Haverford girl," he said. It was what he had called her since she was twelve years old, and the upgrade to Haverford woman had apparently never seemed necessary to him, which she had long since decided to find endearing.

"You know the legend?" she asked.

"Know it," he said. "My father told me. His mother told him. She was fifteen in 1886." He said this with the flat specificity of someone presenting a genealogical fact, not a dramatic device. "She remembered the winter. Remembered the stage not coming." He looked at Maya. "Iron Horse is what they called the Concord coaches. Iron wheel rims, rang against the lava rock when they came through." He picked up his staples. "If people are hearing iron wheels in the north beds, that's the Ghost of the Iron Horse. That's what it always is."

He said this without performance. He went to the register, paid Mitch for the staples, and returned to the hardware aisle, apparently satisfied that his contribution had been made and the rest was their business.

Maya watched him go. Then she looked at Jillian. "He said that like it was a bus schedule," she said.

"That's how he says everything," Jillian said. "Tell me the whole legend."

Maya told it.

She had told it before — Jillian could hear the places where the telling had been worn smooth by repetition, the phrases that had found their best form and stayed there. The winter of 1886 had been the worst in Cedar Mountain's recorded history: a storm system in late November that arrived without the usual advance signals and dropped three feet of snow on the plateau in thirty-six hours, followed by temperatures that didn't recover until February. The Kanarra-to-Cedar City stage route crossed the plateau in those days — coaches running twice weekly, carrying mail and passengers and, on certain runs, payroll shipments for the iron mining operations at the mountain's base. Elias Cord had been driving a relief run on the twenty-second of November. His coach was a Concord — bright red, the color standard for that line — and it was carrying a strongbox of payroll gold along with two passengers whose names the record had not preserved. The storm came down over the plateau while he was crossing the open stretch above the lava beds. Neither Cord, nor his passengers, nor the coach were seen again.

The company mounted a search in March, when the snow retreated enough to make it possible. They found nothing. The official record listed Cord and the passengers as lost to the storm. The payroll gold became part of the mountain's permanent mythology: lost, buried, waiting in some fold of the lava beds or at the bottom of some unmarked shaft for someone patient enough and lucky enough to find it. Over the following decades the legend had accumulated details and variations the way all legends did — the red of the coach becoming brighter in each retelling, the gold becoming larger, the storm becoming more apocalyptic — until what remained was the clean, essential image: a red stagecoach, iron wheels singing against black rock, swallowed whole by a white sky.

And the sounds. In winter, mostly — on the coldest nights, when the temperature differential between the plateau surface and the lava tubes was at its greatest, people who camped near the north lava beds

reported hearing something metallic and rhythmic rising from the rock. The old-timers called it the Iron Horse making its rounds. The explanation had varied by generation: the ghost of Cord himself, driving his endless route; the natural settlement of the rock as the cold contracted it; gas moving through underground chambers. The sounds kept being reported. The explanations kept being offered and found insufficient.

"Nobody's ever confirmed anything," Maya said. "Nobody's gone out there and located a specific source. It's intermittent enough that by the time anyone investigates, it's stopped." She looked at her mug. "Hector's the only person I know who just accepts it as a fact and doesn't feel the need to explain it."

"My grandmother wrote about it," Jillian said.

Maya looked up. "The pamphlet?"

"The pamphlet." Jillian turned her coffee cup in her hands, feeling the weight of the conversation settling into something specific. "I've been meaning to re-read that chapter. I think I need to do that tonight."

The cabin had the mid-morning quality it got when the sun had cleared the ponderosas and was coming through the west window at a useful angle, filling the main room with the kind of light that made everything look slightly more significant than it needed to be. Jillian made tea — the afternoon version of her coffee habit, a distinction she maintained through the summer as a way of marking the hours — and took the pamphlet from the shelf.

She sat at the table by the window and opened it properly for the first time this summer.

Her grandmother had published *Cedar Mountain: Stories the Maps Don't Tell* in 1986, at a copy shop in Cedar City that had done a run of twenty copies with the patience and slight condescension of a business that considered spiral-bound self-publishing a curiosity rather than a service. A second printing of thirty had followed two years later, produced under identical circumstances after the first ran out. Jillian owned the only copy she knew of with marginalia — her grandmother had kept one working copy, annotating it as new information came to

her, adding penciled notes in the margins and corrections in the footnotes, until the margins were nearly as dense as the text. When her grandmother died, the annotated copy came to Jillian, and it had lived on this shelf in this cabin every summer since, because there was nowhere else it belonged.

The pamphlet was forty-three pages, organized into eleven chapters. The chapter dividers were hand-drawn — small, precise illustrations that her grandmother had done herself, each one a different local plant or landmark rendered in pen. The Phantom Stagecoach chapter was the longest, at nine pages, and it was the chapter with the most marginalia: her grandmother had returned to it, clearly, multiple times over multiple years, adding notes in different pencil weights that suggested different seasons and different states of mind.

Jillian read it carefully, more carefully than she had in a long time, looking for the things Carl's question had made relevant. The route details were there: a description of the stage road that had crossed the Cedar Mountain plateau in the 1880s, mostly following the ridge above the lava beds before descending toward the mining district. Her grandmother had drawn the route from a combination of sources — a county surveyor's report from 1882, a diary entry from a Cedar City resident who had ridden the line in 1884, and the company records that had survived in the iron company's archived documents at the county courthouse. The route was marked on the sketch map that was folded into the chapter as a separate page, drawn in her grandmother's careful hand on a piece of drafting paper that had gone slightly golden with age.

Jillian unfolded the map on the table.

It showed the plateau in rough topographic terms — the ridges and valleys represented by shaded lines that were accurate enough to be recognizable if you knew the terrain, which Jillian did. The stage route was marked in red ink, tracing the ridge above the lava beds and then curving north before descending to the valley floor. It passed directly above the main lava tube system — close enough that riders on the route would have been able to look down into the tube entrance area, and close enough that anyone caught in a storm on that section of the road would have been within a quarter mile of the tubes if they had known to look for shelter.

In pencil, in her grandmother's hand, at a point on the route just above the tube system: *sounds reported here, winter months. Cord's route?*

Jillian looked at this for a while.

She put the map on the table and opened the topo app on her phone. She found the lava tube system — the main access was clearly marked as a recreational point of interest — and overlaid it mentally with the route her grandmother had drawn. The sketch map's route and the phone's terrain matched well enough to be the same geography, despite the difference in precision. Cord's route had passed above the main lava tube entrance. Within a quarter mile, maybe less.

She looked at the footnote on page seven of the chapter, the one her grandmother had marked with two asterisks to indicate she considered it important: *See: Kane County Independent, March 1887. Account of spring survey party, southern route. Ref. in county archives. Significant — see notes.*

The "see notes" led to a marginal annotation in pencil: *Recovery? Ask at archives.* Nothing further. Whatever her grandmother had intended to pursue at the Kane County archives, she had either pursued it and not recorded the result, or had not yet gotten to it when the pamphlet was finished. Jillian filed the footnote and moved on.

She read the rest of the chapter standing up, the pamphlet in one hand, the mug in the other, in the way she read things when they were interesting enough to keep her on her feet. The legend's emotional center, she had always thought, was not the gold — it was Cord himself. The pamphlet described him as a third-generation southern Utah native, a man whose family had been in the territory since before statehood, who had driven the Cedar Mountain route for four seasons before the blizzard. Her grandmother had found his name in the company records and in a single reference in a Cedar City newspaper from 1887, which described him as "a reliable and experienced operator, well known on the mountain." That was the entirety of the historical record for a man who had vanished in a storm on a route he knew better than anyone.

Her grandmother had written, in the last paragraph of the chapter: *Perhaps the kindest thing we can do for a mountain is to leave some of its questions unanswered. The stories we tell about the places we love are not*

lesser than the facts. They are the facts of a different kind — the facts of belonging, and of mystery, and of the long conversation between the living and the ground they stand on.

Jillian read this paragraph three times, which was how many times she always read it.

The evening came in the way cedar mountain evenings did in late June: gradually at first, then all at once, the light flattening and warming and the temperature dropping in the ten-minute window between six and six-ten with the specificity of a process that had been running on schedule for longer than the cabin had existed. Jillian sat on the small porch with the pamphlet closed on her knee and the journal open beside it, listening to the ponderosas do what ponderosas did in an evening wind, which was a sound she had been falling asleep to for twenty-odd summers and which still, every year, struck her as one of the better sounds available.

She was not agitated. This was, she recognized, one of the things the mountain did for her: it replaced urgency with attention. Things that had seemed pressing in the valley — deadlines, the particular ambient anxiety of a school year, the low-level noise of a life being actively managed — receded not because they became less real but because the mountain offered a different scale against which to measure them, and at that scale, most urgency revealed itself as preference.

What she felt about the lava beds and the sounds and Hector Peña's identification and the sketch map with its penciled annotation was not urgency. It was interest — the clean, steady kind, the kind that didn't need to resolve itself by nightfall. The mountain had been keeping this particular question for a hundred and forty years, and it had not suffered for the delay. She could be patient.

She opened the journal to a fresh page and wrote:

The mountain keeps giving the same story to different people in different centuries. Hector's grandmother heard

the sounds in 1886. Campers are hearing them now. Grandmother wrote "sounds reported here" on a map she drew forty years ago, on a route she traced from records a hundred years old. The story travels forward. Worth finding out why.

She looked at what she'd written. Then, below it, more slowly:

The pamphlet has a footnote: Kane County Independent, March 1887. Recovery? She wrote "significant." I want to know what she found, or what she didn't find.

She closed the journal. The ponderosas continued their conversation with the wind, which was the kind of conversation that didn't require resolution, only continuation. Somewhere up the loop, a screen door opened and closed — one of the other cabins, a neighbor she didn't know yet, beginning or ending something she couldn't see.

The pamphlet went back on the shelf in the morning, next to the atlas and the field guides, in the spot that had held it since Jillian had been old enough to decide where things went. For tonight it sat on the arm of the porch chair, where she could see it if she looked, which she did occasionally, the way you looked at a thing that had more in it than it had given up yet.

chapter **five**

THE MORNING JILLIAN finally got around to examining the Golden Wrench properly was also, as it turned out, the morning someone else was already at Loose Wheels ahead of her with a different question, and the two questions turned out to share more of an answer than either of them had any reason to expect.

She had been thinking about the wrench since Chapter 1 — or more precisely, she had been thinking about it since the evening two nights ago when she'd sat with the pamphlet open to the chapter on pioneer-era tool culture and found, in a footnote she'd read a dozen times without it registering, a reference to the Cedar City smithy's practice of producing custom presentation hardware for its primary clients. The smithy's primary clients had included, the footnote noted, several of the southern Utah stage operations. The note had not mentioned a wrench. It had not needed to. The wrench above Garrett's register had been sitting in the back of her mind since the first day of the summer, and the footnote had lit something underneath it without quite explaining what.

She told herself she was also due for a tire rotation. This was true.

The Loose Wheels lot had three vehicles in it when she pulled in: GR's truck, a Forest Service pickup that was probably there for parts, and a cabin-rental type — newer, a bit too clean for serious trail work, with a padded equipment case visible through the back window. She

had seen it before, she thought. Movie Ranch Road, or Deer Haven Loop. One of the newer rentals.

She went inside.

The man at the counter had a phone in his hand and the quality of attention of someone who was reading rather than browsing — a focused stillness, one thumb occasionally moving to scroll, the rest of him organized around the screen. He was in his early thirties, she thought, with the particular physical ease of someone who spent time outdoors but wasn't defined by it the way the working locals were. He glanced up when she came in, offered the reflexive acknowledging nod of someone sharing a waiting room, and went back to his screen.

The notes document was open. She could see the timestamp header from the doorway — not the content, just the format, the way she could recognize a field journal from twenty feet away without reading it.

Garrett appeared briefly in the bay doorway. He looked at Jillian, looked at the man at the counter, looked at the general situation of two people waiting for his attention while he was in the middle of something that required his attention more urgently.

"Tire rotation?" he said to Jillian.

"And I wanted to look at the wrench," she said.

He looked at the wrench. He looked at her. He seemed, briefly, to consider whether this required comment, and decided against it. "Leave the truck," he said. "Twenty minutes." He went back to the bay.

She poured herself a coffee and looked at the wrench.

From behind her, the man at the counter said: "The one above the register?"

She turned. He had put his phone away and was looking at her with the focused curiosity of someone who had heard something that connected to something else.

"That's the one," she said.

"I photographed it when I was in earlier this week," he said. He said it simply, without performing the coincidence of it. "I've been trying to

figure out what it is." He extended his hand. "Carl Matsuda. I'm renting the Phelps cabin on Deer Haven Loop."

"Jillian Haverford. Same road, third cabin up from the cattle gate." She shook his hand. "What have you figured out about it?"

"That it's hand-forged, which puts it pre-industrial or at minimum pre-factory. That somebody put that peg in specifically to display it. That nobody here seems to know its provenance." He paused. "What have you figured out?"

She looked at the wrench. "That it probably came from a smithy in Cedar City that supplied the southern Utah stage lines in the 1880s. I found a reference in an old pamphlet. I came in today to see if the proportions match what the pamphlet describes." She paused. "Which I realize I should have brought a photograph of."

From the bay: Leo's voice, asking Garrett something. Garrett's response, brief and discouraging. The sound of a camera being pointed in a direction it had apparently been asked not to be pointed, followed by a diplomatic retreat.

Carl looked toward the bay. "He's making a documentary," he said.

"I gathered," Jillian said.

They both waited while Leo made his adjustments, and then the shop settled back into its working quiet.

"A pamphlet," Carl said, returning to the subject with the focused attention of someone who had filed something and was now retrieving it. "Local history?"

"My grandmother wrote it. Cedar Mountain oral histories. Self-published in 1986." She looked at the wrench again. "There's a section on pioneer-era tool culture that references the Cedar City iron works smithy. It produced custom hardware for the stage lines. Presentation tools — the kind you'd give to a client or a supplier as a mark of the relationship." She paused. "The proportions of what she describes match that." She nodded at the wrench. "But I'd need the photograph to be sure."

Carl had his phone out. He turned it toward her: a close-up photograph of the wrench, multiple angles, the shots of someone who had photographed it with the specific intention of comparing it to something later. "Is this useful?"

She looked at the photographs. Then at the wrench. Then back at the photographs. "Where did you get the light source for this one?"

"Shop light from the bay. I asked Garrett to hold it at an angle." He paused. "He didn't ask why, which I thought was interesting."

"That's Garrett," she said. She handed the phone back. "I'll need to check it against the pamphlet. But yes. That's useful."

Outside, on Movie Ranch Road, an ATV went past with the particular sound of a machine being taken for an unhurried morning ride rather than pushed. Jillian looked at the window, then at her truck visible through it, then at the bench outside the shop's front door.

"Garrett said twenty minutes," she said. "You want to sit outside? It's warm enough."

Carl looked at the bench, then at his notes document, then at her. "Sure," he said.

The bench outside Loose Wheels' front door was the kind of outdoor furniture that had arrived for a specific purpose and stayed because removing it would have required a decision that nobody had gotten around to making. It was weathered to a silver-gray that matched the front fascia of the building, and it held two people side by side with the slight lean toward each other that long benches acquired over years of use, gravity and wood grain conspiring. Jillian had sat on it before, waiting for service or waiting for someone, and she had always found it a good place to think.

She had, she realized, also brought the sketch map.

It had been in her bag since the day after she'd read the pamphlet — she'd folded it back into its crease and tucked it in the outside pocket with the vague intention of looking at it in the field, or of comparing it to the topo app at some point, or simply because it felt wrong to leave it at the cabin while she was on the mountain. She took it out now and unfolded it on her knee.

Carl glanced at it. Then he looked more carefully. "Is that hand-drawn?"

"My grandmother drew it from source documents. 1882 county

survey, an 1884 diary, company records." She smoothed the fold. "It shows the stage route across the Cedar Mountain plateau. The route Elias Cord was driving in 1886."

Carl was quiet for a moment. "The Phantom Stagecoach," he said.

She looked at him. "You know the legend?"

"I've been riding the south lava loop for two weeks," he said. "I asked at the general store about the terrain on the north side. Someone mentioned the sounds." He paused. "And the story."

"What did you think of it?"

He considered this with the seriousness of someone who was not going to give a careless answer. "I think something is making those sounds," he said. "And I think the legend has been describing it for a hundred and forty years in the only language available to the people who heard it." He looked at the map. "Can I ask about your ATV? Did it fail on the south loop?"

The non-sequitur was so clean that it took her a half-second to track it. "I don't have one," she said. "I ride the trails on foot mostly. Why?"

Carl opened the notes document on his phone. He turned it toward her. "Mine failed on the south loop two weeks ago. The same symptoms have appeared in two other machines this week — Garrett has a third case in the bay right now. Same profile: gradual power loss, no diagnostic codes, spontaneous recovery. All of them serviced at this shop within a specific window." He paused. "I've been mapping it."

She read the document. She was a history teacher, which meant she was trained to read primary sources with attention to what they included and what they conspicuously didn't. What Carl's document included: precise observation, careful timestamping, provisional conclusions clearly marked as provisional. What it didn't include: any of the social texture of the mountain, the community context that would tell you whether a pattern of shop-related machine failures was anomalous or whether this happened every summer and nobody thought to document it.

"I heard two people in the parking lot at the general store," she said. "About a week ago. One of them said a neighbor's ATV had been doing something strange. The other one said they'd had the same thing after

bringing it here." She paused. "They made it sound like it wasn't new this season."

Carl looked at her. He opened the notes document and typed. She watched him add the date and a summary of what she'd said, and she had the feeling — accurate, she suspected — that he had been doing this, accurately and completely, every day since the first incident.

"That pushes the pattern back further than I had it," he said.

"How far back does your earliest data point go?"

"Three weeks."

"Mine would put it at five, at least." She watched him update the document. "What do you think is causing it?"

"Three possibilities." He didn't need to look at the document to list them. "Contaminated fuel supply from a common source. A faulty batch of a specific lubricant or additive used in the service process. Or —" he paused, "—something being deliberately introduced into the machines." He said the third option with the careful flatness of someone who was not yet willing to give it more weight than the first two. "I don't have enough data to prefer one over the others."

"Do you know who's had access to the service bay?"

He looked at her. "Garrett, and a volunteer named Denny Oakes who helps on weekend afternoons." He paused. "And probably others I haven't accounted for yet."

She filed this. "Garrett's keeping a ledger," she said.

"I know. I've been trying to get a look at it." He glanced through the shop window at the counter. "I think he'll show me, eventually. He's — I think he's running the same pattern analysis I am, in his own system."

"He is," she said. "That's how Garrett works. He tracks what the computer doesn't."

They sat with this for a moment. The morning traffic on Movie Ranch Road had picked up — a couple of ATVs heading toward the trailhead, a delivery truck making its rounds, the specific sound of a mountain town doing its summer business. The light was full now, the early-morning flatness replaced by something warmer and more direct.

She looked at the sketch map on her knee.

"Can I see your topo?" she said.

He opened the app and handed her the phone. She held the phone

beside the map. The sketch map's coordinate system was not precise — her grandmother had been drawing from textual descriptions, not from GPS data — but the topographic relationships were accurate enough. Ridge lines, valley floors, the particular shape of the plateau's western edge. She found the lava tube system on the topo app — marked as a recreational point of interest, with a trailhead symbol at the main access point — and moved her finger to the corresponding location on the sketch map.

The stage route her grandmother had drawn passed directly above it.

She looked at the alignment for a moment. Then she handed both documents to Carl, the map and the phone, and watched him see what she had seen.

He was quiet for longer than she expected. He held both at the same angle, the phone's screen and the paper map, moving his eyes between them with the focused attention of someone who was checking and rechecking rather than jumping to a conclusion.

"Your grandmother drew this from 1880s source documents," he said.

"From an 1882 survey and an 1884 diary entry." She paused. "And she marked the sounds. Look at the penciled note above the tube system."

He found it. *Sounds reported here, winter months. Cord's route?* He read it twice.

"She knew," he said.

"She suspected. She wrote 'Cord's route?' with a question mark." Jillian looked at the map. "She always said the mountain kept giving the same story to different people. I think she thought the sounds and the legend were connected, but she never got out to the tube system to find out why."

Carl turned the phone so she could see the topo again. He had zoomed in on the lava tube area, and he was tracing something with his finger — the topographic contour lines around the main tube entrance, the way the terrain funneled toward a specific point.

"If there's a resonant source in that tube system," he said, "the geometry of the approach would channel and amplify it. The sounds people

are hearing at the pullout would be coming from significantly deeper in the rock." He looked at her. "I have audio equipment. A directional microphone, a recorder. I've been meaning to get out there with them."

"I know the approach," she said. "The main tube entrance is about two miles in from the access pullout. I've been there once, years ago, with a trail maintenance crew."

He looked at her. "Would you be willing to go back?"

She looked at the sketch map — at the penciled annotation in her grandmother's hand, the question mark at the end of a question that had been waiting forty years for someone to take equipment to it.

"Day after tomorrow," she said. "I want to re-read a section of the pamphlet first."

He opened the notes document and wrote this down — date, location, objective, note about the pamphlet. She watched him do it without comment, and recognized in the gesture the specific quality of someone for whom writing it down was not a formality but the thing that made it real. She did the same thing, differently.

Garrett came to the shop door with a rag in his hand and the expression of a man who had solved one problem and was ready to begin the next one. He looked at the bench — the two of them, the sketch map, Carl's phone, the general evidence of something being figured out — and made his assessment.

"Come inside," he said. "It's warmer. There's more coffee."

He went back in. They gathered their things and followed.

Leo was in the inner doorway of the bay, camera hanging at his side with the studied casualness of a person who has been waiting for an interesting shot and has been waiting long enough to get comfortable about it. When he saw Jillian and Carl come in together from the bench, with the maps, with the quality of attention people have when they've just found something worth continuing, he raised the camera. He was careful about it — not intrusive, just present. He got a shot of the maps being put on the counter, the phone beside the pamphlet page, the two of them looking at the same thing.

He posted a clip to the Loose Wheels account that afternoon. Caption: *Two kinds of maps. Same mountain. Stay tuned.* He added a location tag and a hashtag he'd been saving for the right moment. GR saw it two days later, shown it by Rolane, and said nothing. His expression suggested he had filed the caption under categories he did not intend to elaborate on.

Inside, at the counter, Carl put the topo beside the sketch map and they looked at both of them together, and Jillian got a second coffee, and outside the day continued doing what late-June days did on Cedar Mountain — expanding into the available space, unhurried, making itself comfortable, the way the best days did.

"The ledger," Carl said, after a moment.

"Tomorrow," Jillian said. "Ask him tomorrow, not today. He's in the middle of something."

Carl looked toward the bay. Garrett's ongoing conversation with whatever he was working on had shifted register — something had been found and was not being cooperative about it. "How do you know when to ask him things?"

"When the conversation in the bay sounds like he's winning," she said.

Carl listened. Then he looked at her. "Does he ever lose?"

She thought about this. "He always figures it out," she said. "But sometimes it takes a while."

chapter **six**

GROUND + TOASTED occupied the ground floor of a building that had previously been a storage annex for the Cedar Mountain Country Store, a fact that the coffeehouse's interior still carried in its bones — the ceiling was low, the walls were log, and one corner had a freight door that had been converted to a window with the pragmatic efficiency of people who had a freight door and needed a window and saw no reason not to combine the two problems. The result was a space that managed to be both small and somehow unhurried, the way certain rooms were, the chairs arranged with the unconscious generosity of a place that expected people to stay longer than they planned.

Carl had discovered it in his first summer by following the smell, which was specific and deliberate and suggested that whoever was making the coffee had opinions about it. He'd been right: the woman who ran the morning shift — mid-forties, precise about filters and temperature, tolerant of questions but only if they were good ones — had trained somewhere that took these things seriously, and she had brought the training to eight thousand feet on Cedar Mountain and applied it without apology. Carl considered this one of the mountain's better decisions.

He arrived at seven forty-five, which was early enough to get the table by the freight-door-window, and he had the pattern document open on his tablet by the time Jillian came through the door at eight.

She was carrying the pamphlet — he hadn't expected that — and she had the look of someone who had been thinking on the drive over, which he recognized because it was the same look he had most mornings.

"You re-read the section?" he said.

"And made notes." She sat down, pulled a slim notebook from her bag — paper, not a phone, ruled pages with handwriting that moved across the line with the practiced efficiency of someone who wrote a lot by hand. She set the pamphlet and the notebook side by side and looked at his tablet. "What do you have?"

He turned the tablet toward her. The pattern document had grown overnight: he'd added the anecdote from the general store parking lot that she'd provided in Chapter 5, pushed the timeline back, and added a column he hadn't had before — a column for who had been at the shop during each service window. The column was mostly blank. But not entirely.

"Garrett's name is in every window," he said. "Which makes sense — he runs the service bay. There's one other name that appears in three of the four. Denny Oakes." He paused. "He doesn't appear in the fourth because the machine's service date was a Tuesday and he only comes in on weekends and some weekdays." He paused again. "But he stopped by the shop on that Tuesday afternoon. I'm not sure what he was doing there."

Jillian looked at the column. She looked at it for a long time without saying anything, which he had already learned was how she processed things that she didn't like the shape of. "You got the service dates from the ledger?"

"Garrett showed it to me yesterday afternoon." He had gone back to the shop after the session on the bench, when the bay conversation had shifted to a tone that suggested the problem had been resolved and GR was available. He'd asked about the ledger directly. Garrett had put it on the counter without preamble, which Carl was beginning to understand was how Garrett expressed both trust and urgency — the combination of the two presented as a single undemonstrative gesture. "I cross-referenced the dates with my original notes. The service window for the affected machines runs from the third week of May to last week."

Jillian picked up her notebook and looked at her own notes. "That's six weeks."

"Six weeks and change."

"And Denny started volunteering—"

"Early May," Carl said. "The notice went up on the cork board May seventh. Garrett says he'd been around a few times before that."

Jillian was quiet. She looked at the freight-door-window, where the morning light was doing something pleasant with the spruce trees on the far side of the road. Then she looked back at the document. "What are the other possible causes?"

"I've been working through them." He'd spent most of the previous evening at this, the notes document expanding into a secondary document he'd titled "elimination." "The fuel supply is a shared regional distributor. If there were a contamination issue there, we'd be seeing it in every shop on the mountain, not just Loose Wheels. I contacted two other service businesses in the area — one in Long Valley, one in Panguitch — with some cover about doing a survey on ATV maintenance patterns." He said this with the mildly apologetic tone of someone who had bent a truth for practical reasons and was being honest about it. "Neither of them has seen anything comparable this season."

"So the fuel supply is probably clear."

"Probably. Which leaves two remaining possibilities: a faulty or contaminated product being used in the service process itself — a lubricant, a fuel additive, something applied during routine maintenance — or something being introduced to specific machines deliberately." He looked at the column with Denny's name in it. "The second possibility requires access and intent and a reason. The first just requires bad luck."

"We don't have enough to prefer one over the other," she said.

"No." He picked up his coffee. "We need to know what's in the service bay when these jobs are done. What products Garrett uses. What's on the shelf versus what someone brings in."

Jillian turned the notebook toward him. She had made a list — not of products, but of people. It was shorter than he expected: Garrett, Rolane, Denny, and four names he didn't recognize. "These are the people who've been in and around the shop during the season," she said.

"The four I don't know — you probably don't either. Two are locals who occasionally trade labor for parts, one is a regular customer who basically lives in the parking lot, and one is a Forest Service contractor who stops in for equipment work a few times a season." She paused. "I got this from Maya. She knows who's who."

Carl looked at the list. He added the four names to his column, with footnotes. The document now had more blanks than entries, which was appropriate — they were still in the stage where the shape of what they didn't know was more useful than a false precision about what they did. He had learned this in interface design: the map of unknown states was often more informative than the map of known ones.

"We should go to the shop," he said.

"We should go to the shop," she agreed. "And we should let Garrett lead. He knows what he has and what he doesn't. If we come in with a list of questions, he'll answer the questions. If we come in and let him show us what he's been tracking, we'll learn what he thinks matters."

Carl looked at her. "You've worked with him before?"

"Not formally. But I've watched how he is with problems." She picked up the pamphlet and her notebook and put both in her bag. "He doesn't solve things by talking about them. He solves things by showing you what he sees. So let him show you."

Loose Wheels in the late morning had a different quality than Loose Wheels in the early morning. By ten o'clock the day's first wave of service jobs was underway, the bay sounds layered and specific — two machines running in different registers, the radio doing something with classic rock, the occasional sharp percussion of a torque wrench being applied to something that had been waiting for it. The lot had four vehicles in it besides their own. The cork board had acquired two new notices since Jillian had last read it — a trail update for the east ridge and a flyer for a community potluck whose organizer had a gift for optimistic font sizes.

Garrett was behind the main bench when they came in, doing something with a fuel pump assembly that was laid out on a clean shop

cloth in its component parts. He looked up when the door opened. He looked at Carl. He looked at Jillian. He looked back at the fuel pump.

"Both of you," he said, which was an observation rather than a question.

"Both of us," Carl confirmed. "If you have time."

Garrett considered the fuel pump. He considered the bay behind him, where the two service jobs were in various stages of progress. He picked up a component, examined it, set it down. "Rolane's got the bay," he said. "Give me ten minutes."

They got coffee and waited. Leo was not in the shop, which felt like an absence that had its own particular quality of relief. The cork board yielded its information at the pace Jillian gave it. Through the bay doorway, Rolane's work had the efficient, unhurried rhythm of someone who had been doing this long enough to have opinions about which order things were done in and was acting on them.

Garrett came out in eight minutes, which told Carl something. He had the ledger with him — he put it on the counter without being asked, which told Carl something else. He looked at Jillian and Carl with the measuring look he used when he was deciding how much of what he knew to share, and then he apparently decided that the full amount was the right amount.

"Tell me what you have," he said to Carl.

Carl laid it out: the pattern document on the tablet, the timeline, the service window, the symptom profile, the fuel supply investigation and its result. He kept it organized and brief — Garrett was not a person who needed information repeated or context explained, and padding the presentation would have wasted something that felt, in Garrett's presence, like a non-renewable resource.

Garrett listened without interrupting. When Carl finished, Garrett opened the ledger to a tabbed page near the middle. "I have six," he said.

Carl looked up. "Six?"

"You have five. I have six." He turned the ledger so Carl could read the relevant entries. "The sixth came in two weeks before yours. The owner didn't associate it with the shop — said it was an old machine that sometimes had trouble, figured it was age-related. He's been riding it all spring." He put his finger on the entry. "But the symptom

description matches. And he'd been in for service ten days before it started."

Carl updated the pattern document. The timeline extended back further. Six machines, a range of seven weeks, all serviced here, same symptom profile. He looked at Garrett. "Does the symptom appear in any machines that weren't serviced here?"

"Not that I've been told about," Garrett said. "I've been asking. Quietly." He said this in the tone of a man who had been conducting his own investigation in parallel, with his own methods, for longer than either of them had been aware. "I asked around at the trailhead when the trail volunteers were in last week. Nobody riding machines they hadn't brought to me."

Jillian said, from the end of the counter where she had been listening: "What's on the shelf for the fuel system services?"

Garrett listed them — the standard products, the specific brands, the quantities he went through in a typical season. He produced a binder from under the counter that held his supplier invoices, organized by category and date, and he went through the fuel system section with the patient thoroughness of someone who had already done this himself and was covering the ground again for the benefit of people who needed to see it.

Nothing anomalous in the supply chain. Same brands, same suppliers, same protocols as the previous four seasons.

"Which means it's either a bad batch of something I don't have records of," Garrett said, "or it's something that came in through a different channel." He closed the binder. He did not look at Denny's name on Carl's pattern document. He did not need to. "I keep the bay organized a specific way," he said. "Products on the shelf are mine. Products someone brings in should be checked in and logged. That's policy." He paused. "Most regulars know it. Not all of them follow it."

Carl made a note. Jillian made no notes — she was making her mental map, which was what she did when the information was the kind that needed to be held in relation to everything else she knew about the community rather than recorded in isolation.

"Can we look at the shelf?" Carl asked.

Garrett came around the counter and led them into the bay.

The service bay at Loose Wheels was more organized than it appeared from the outside. The apparent chaos of the working area — the hoists and jacks, the tools at various stages of use, the machines in various stages of disassembly — was organized around a logic that was legible once you knew what you were looking for. Products were on a metal shelving unit against the east wall, labeled in Garrett's small precise hand: fuel additives by application, lubricants by viscosity and type, cleaning agents in their own section at the bottom. Everything had a place. Everything that was on the shelf had been purchased through Garrett's supplier accounts.

Carl photographed the shelf. He looked at each product — the brands, the product names, the lot numbers. Jillian looked at the access points: where you could move around the bay without being in the main work area, where you could reach the shelf without going past the hoists, where you could introduce something to a machine that was up on the stand without Garrett necessarily seeing it from his position at the main bench. She did this without being obvious about it, with the practiced eye of someone who had spent enough time in this shop over enough summers to understand its geography.

She found three positions from which you could reach the fuel system access on a machine that was on the central hoist without being visible from the bench. All three were in the area of the second bay — the one that volunteer helpers typically used when they were working on their own machines or doing basic prep work on scheduled service jobs.

She didn't say anything about this to Carl or to Garrett. She wrote the layout in her notebook in the form of a rough sketch, with the three positions marked, and she put the notebook in her bag and came back to the shelf area where Carl was finishing his photographs.

Garrett was watching Rolane work on the far machine with the specific quality of attention of a senior person watching a junior person do something that they are doing correctly and that still requires watching, because that is how it works.

"When you're done," he said, to Carl, without turning around, "come look at something."

He led them to the far end of the shelf, where the fuel additives were stored. He pointed to a gap on the second shelf — a space about four inches wide between two containers, a space the right size for a specific type of small container. "Used to have a supplemental fuel conditioner there," he said. "I stopped carrying it two seasons ago. Product changed its formula. New version had some issues." He paused. "The space is still there because I haven't put anything else in that slot." He looked at Carl. "I notice when things are in places they shouldn't be. I also notice when things are in places where they shouldn't fit." Another pause. "Last five weekends, that slot has had something in it that I didn't put there. Gone by Monday."

Carl looked at the slot. He looked at Garrett. "Did you see it well enough to identify it?"

"Small container. Aftermarket product. Handwritten label. Couldn't read the label from where I was." Garrett turned away from the shelf. "That's all I have."

Carl typed a note. Jillian was very still.

They came out of the shop into the midmorning light to find Denny Oakes in the parking lot.

He had a cooler in the back of his truck — the tailgate was down — and he was distributing cold sodas into a tote bag with the organized efficiency of someone who had planned this errand and was executing it on schedule. He looked up when they came out, and his face did what Denny's face always did when he saw people he knew: it moved immediately into warmth, the specific warmth of someone for whom other people were a straightforwardly good thing.

"Jillian," he said. "Carl. You both here at the same time — that's great." He held up the tote. "Sodas for the safety course crew. Thought they'd want something cold after the morning session." He looked at the shop. "Garrett in? I wanted to drop something for him too."

"He's in the bay," Carl said.

"I'll leave it at the counter." Denny went inside, and through the window they could see him doing exactly what he said — setting a soda on the counter, waving in the direction of the bay, coming back out. He rejoined them in the parking lot with the easy manner of someone who had completed a task and had nothing in particular to hurry away to.

He asked Carl about the GPS module — had he had a chance to address Wanda's battery question? Carl said he was working on it, and Denny nodded with the genuine interest of someone who found the problem worth solving rather than someone who was filling conversational space.

He asked Jillian about the Haverford cabin — had the water pressure been all right this season? There had been some issues on Deer Haven Loop last winter, something to do with the service road culvert. She said the pressure had been fine. He said good, because it had been on his mental list to check on.

"You keep a mental list of people's cabin conditions?" she said, with the tone of someone asking a real question rather than making a point.

"I keep lists of a lot of things," Denny said, without any self-consciousness about it. "It's just how I'm organized. Easier to help if you know what's going on."

He said goodbye with the warmth he brought to all his exits — specific, personal, directed at each of them rather than at the air between them — and drove away.

They stood in the lot for a moment.

"He's in every window," Carl said. He said it quietly, with the specific flatness of someone reporting a data point rather than making an accusation.

Jillian watched the truck disappear around the curve onto Movie Ranch Road. "He could be," she said. "He's always around. That's what makes it hard to track." She paused. "It could also be coincidence. He's genuinely helpful and he's been coming here all season. The probability of him appearing in a service window is just — high. Independent of whether he's done anything."

"I know," Carl said. "That's what makes it hard to think about."

She looked at the shop. The cork board was visible through the window, the Denny Oakes notice still in its corner with its precise block capitals and its well-drawn wrench. She thought about what Garrett had said about the gap on the shelf — the slot the right size for a small container, something appearing in it on weekends, gone by Monday.

She thought about Denny's mental list of people's cabin conditions.

She thought about the particular way someone who loved being useful could, without any bad intention, cross a line between helping and doing something that wasn't his to do — and how a person like that might not even be able to see the line from where he was standing.

"We need more data," she said.

"Yes," Carl said.

"Specifically, we need to know what was in that slot." She paused. "And whether Denny Oakes has any reason to be putting things in service bays that don't go through Garrett's supply chain."

Carl was already opening the notes document. He typed for a moment, then looked up. "I want to ask about him — not to anyone here, not yet. But there are ways to find out what someone is into without asking directly."

Jillian looked at him.

"Online," he said. "He's a person on the mountain in the summer. People who are enthusiastic about things — products, hobbies, community service — they tend to leave traces."

She considered this. "That feels like something that should be done carefully."

"It will be," he said. "The same way you'd look at primary sources before you decided what they meant."

She thought about this, and found it accurate, and said so by not objecting to it.

They walked to their vehicles. The day was fully established now, the morning's flat light replaced by something more direct and purposeful, the mountain doing what it did when the sun got high enough to commit. In the bay, through the open doors, Rolane's work continued at its steady pace. Garrett had returned to the fuel pump assembly, its components laid out on the cloth in their proper order, waiting to be reconstituted into something functional.

The investigation was in motion. Neither of them had said so, because the saying of it would have been redundant. Some things that were underway didn't need to be announced.

chapter **seven**

THE ACCESS PULLOUT was a wide gravel clearing on the north side of Movie Ranch Road where the pavement ended its argument with the terrain and conceded to a Forest Service two-track that wound into the lava field for about half a mile before giving up entirely. Jillian had parked here before — trail crew day, years ago, when the District was evaluating the tube entrance for recreational access signage — and the clearing looked exactly as she remembered it: gravel, a post with a brown Forest Service sign listing trail distance and difficulty rating, and at the field's edge, where the gravel gave way to basalt, a line of low wooden stakes with orange flagging that had been there long enough that the flagging had faded to something closer to pink.

Carl was already there when she arrived, his truck pulled to the far side of the clearing, the tailgate down. He had things arranged on the tailgate with the organized efficiency of someone who had packed with a specific sequence in mind: the padded case for the directional microphone, the portable recorder in its own pouch, a temperature and humidity logger that he introduced, without apparent irony, as borrowed from a man named Atmospheric Gary, who lived in one of the cabins above the main trailhead and maintained three weather stations on the mountain as a retirement hobby. There was also a headlamp, two water bottles, and a printed topographic sheet of the lava field that he had annotated with a green marker, the tube entrance

circled and the approach route traced in a line that was slightly more direct than the flagged trail.

Jillian looked at the annotated map. "Where did you get the green line from?"

"Satellite imagery. I cross-referenced with your grandmother's sketch and adjusted for the topography." He paused. "It cuts about twelve minutes off the flagged route."

She looked at the flagged route and then at the green line. The green line went through a section of the field that she recognized as uneven but passable — she'd walked it with the trail crew. "It's fine," she said. "But there's a hollow section about a hundred yards in where the basalt sounds different underfoot. Go carefully there."

He made a note on the printed map. She approved of this.

She had brought the pamphlet's sketch map, her own headlamp, a journal, and the specific quality of readiness that came from having prepared by re-reading rather than by acquiring equipment. She also had, in the breast pocket of her jacket, the page she had photocopied from the pamphlet — the full text of the Phantom Stagecoach chapter, including the sketch map and the footnotes. She had annotated it herself, in her own hand, adding what she knew from Maya's telling and from Hector Peña's one-sentence identification. The margin of the copy was dense with her writing, in the way of someone who thought on paper.

"Ready?" Carl said.

"Ready," she said.

The lava field announced itself before you reached it, the way the mountain's more serious landscapes always did — not dramatically, but through a shift in the quality of the light and the sound and the air that was cumulative rather than sudden. The gravel of the two-track gave way to smaller rock and then to the first exposure of basalt, which was black in the way of something that had been very hot for a very long time and had been cooling since. The surface of the field was not smooth — it had the texture of something that had frozen mid-motion,

which was accurate, the lava having done exactly that somewhere between eight hundred and a thousand years ago according to the geological survey her grandmother had cited in the pamphlet. There were pressure ridges and collapse zones and stretches of ropy pahoehoe and stretches of rough, fractured a'a, and the whole field had the quality of a landscape that was in no hurry to make itself comfortable for anyone who visited it.

Jillian liked it for this reason. It was not a landscape that was trying to please you. It simply was what it was, on its own terms, and if you were patient with it, it was patient with you.

She set the pace, which was not fast, and Carl did not push it. He was carrying the equipment bag and recording ambient sound as they walked — the recorder running, the directional mic aimed forward, building the baseline acoustic profile of the field that he'd explained he wanted before they reached the tube. He walked with his attention split between the terrain and the recorder, which was a state she recognized as the audio equivalent of what she did with her journal: capturing the approach as well as the destination, on the grounds that both were data.

"Your grandmother described the field in the pamphlet?" he asked.

"Briefly. She was more interested in the human history than the geology. But she noted that the basalt amplified some sounds and absorbed others, and that the behavior was unpredictable enough to have generated several legends independently of the stagecoach one." Jillian stepped over a pressure ridge, her boot finding the stable edge by habit. "She wrote about a family in the 1930s who camped near the southern tube entrance and reported hearing music on the second night. Banjo music, specifically."

Carl walked for a moment without responding. Then: "Temperature differential again, probably. Different resonant frequency from a different pipe or fitting."

"That's what I assumed," Jillian said. "But there wasn't a CCC water project near the south field. The 1930s infrastructure runs through the east margin." She paused. "I've never figured out the banjo."

Carl was quiet again. Then he added something to the notes on his phone with one thumb, still walking, without breaking stride. She found this mildly impressive.

The hollow section she'd warned him about was where she remembered it — a stretch of about thirty yards where the basalt beneath the surface was unsupported, the lava having flowed over a pre-existing depression and cooled into a bridge rather than a solid floor. The sound underfoot changed when you reached it, from the solid crunch of rock on rock to something slightly more resonant, a fraction more hollow. Jillian slowed and moved to the field's edge, where the rock was thicker.

"Here," she said, and stopped.

Carl stopped. He listened. He pressed one foot down, experimentally. The sound was subtle but real — a faint difference in the way the strike transmitted through the rock. He nodded. They moved single file along the edge until the sound returned to solid.

The approach to the tube entrance took forty minutes at their pace. The entrance was not dramatic — a dark horizontal gap in the basalt, roughly the height of a doorway and wider than it looked from the approach, where the rock face had fractured and a section had tilted inward, leaving an opening into the tube's first chamber. The Forest Service had installed a low gate with a sign about the site's status as a non-developed recreational access point, which was official language for: we know you're going to come here and we'd prefer you stayed in the first chamber. A secondary sign listed the tube's basic statistics: approximately three hundred meters in accessible length before it narrowed below human entry, formed by lava flow approximately nine centuries ago, stable structure with no evidence of recent seismic activity.

Carl read the signs. He photographed the entrance from two angles. He checked the temperature logger: sixty-one degrees at the surface. He held it at the level of the entrance gap: fifty-three degrees, the tube's cooler air flowing outward in a draft that was steady and just perceptible.

"Eight-degree differential at the entrance," he said. "That's a meaningful pressure gradient."

"The draft pulls toward the tube in summer and pushes out of it in winter," Jillian said. "The temperature relationship reverses. It's part of why the sounds are intermittent — you need the right direction of airflow, which depends on the season and the time of day." She paused.

"My grandmother noted that the sounds were always reported in the evening, in colder months. Consistent with the tube exhaling into a colder exterior."

Carl looked at her. "She did the analysis."

"She was a geographer before she was a historian," Jillian said. "She just wrote for an audience that preferred stories to data."

They went through the gate and into the first chamber.

The first chamber was large enough to stand in and wide enough that the walls were not immediately close. The light from the entrance reached about fifteen feet inward, sufficient to see the chamber's basic geography without headlamps: the ceiling low and smooth where the lava had cooled against the surface above it, the floor rough and uneven, the walls showing the characteristic swirl patterns of moving magma frozen mid-flow. The chamber smelled of rock and cold and something faintly mineral that Jillian had always associated with the deep interior of the mountain — not unpleasant, just the smell of a place that was very old and very still and not particularly concerned with the people who occasionally came to visit.

Carl set up immediately. He had done this before in some form — the efficiency of the setup was practiced, not improvised. The directional microphone on its small stand, aimed toward the interior of the tube. The recorder connected and running. The temperature logger on a ledge at mid-wall height. He worked quickly and without narrating what he was doing, which she found comfortable.

Jillian went to the eastern margin of the chamber, where the tube's wall met the floor, and looked at what was there. The tube's outer edge was partially buried by debris — fallen rock, accumulated dust, the occasional organic matter that had blown in through the entrance over the years. Along the base of the east wall, at the point where the chamber began to narrow toward the tube's interior, she could see, half-buried in the debris, a length of iron pipe.

She crouched.

The pipe was old — the iron surface corroded to a deep reddish

brown, the kind of oxidation that took decades of intermittent moisture. It was approximately four inches in diameter, the standard size for the CCC water infrastructure her grandmother had referenced. The section she could see was perhaps three feet long, disappearing into the debris at both ends, suggesting that the full run was substantially longer. At the visible near end, where the pipe section met what appeared to be a fitting — a coupling of some kind — there was a gap.

Not a break. A gap: the pipe end and the fitting were no longer fully engaged, separated by approximately two inches, the thread on the pipe end still visible. The separation was the kind that came from decades of thermal cycling — expansion and contraction through hundreds of winters, the metal moving incrementally until the joint that had once been tight was now open.

"Carl," she said.

He came to where she was crouching. He looked at the pipe. He looked at the gap. He looked at the temperature logger, which he retrieved from the ledge and held near the gap: forty-nine degrees. Four degrees cooler than at the chamber entrance. The gradient was building as the surface temperature dropped with the approaching evening.

He set the recorder close to the gap. He set the directional microphone to face it. He checked the gain levels. He straightened up and looked at Jillian.

"Now we wait," he said.

They waited for twenty-two minutes, which Jillian knew because she was writing in her journal, and she dated each entry with the time, and the entry that began with *waiting* was at five forty-seven and the entry that ended it was at six oh nine.

The chamber was not uncomfortable. The cold was steady and consistent rather than biting, the kind of cold that required a jacket but not misery. Jillian wrote. Carl checked his equipment periodically with the attention of someone who had learned to monitor without interfering. They did not talk. The silence of the tube had its own quality — not absolute, because there were faint sounds from outside, the wind

and the occasional distant sound of a vehicle on Movie Ranch Road, attenuated to near-nothing by the distance and the rock — but close enough to absolute that the silence had texture. You could hear yourself think in it.

The sounds began at six oh eight.

Not suddenly, and not loudly. They built: a faint resonance first, at the edge of perception, the kind of sound you noticed by the way it changed the quality of the air rather than by any discrete hearing of it. Then, as the gap in the pipe reached whatever temperature relationship it needed, the resonance became a sound: metallic, specific, rhythmic in the way that something mechanical was rhythmic — not the steady pulse of a machine but the irregular-but-patterned rhythm of something driven by a variable force, the wind changing, the airflow shifting, the gap opening and closing its acoustic behavior as the pressure differential fluctuated.

It sounded like iron wheels on stone. That was the fact of it, stated plainly: the sound produced by a two-inch gap in an iron pipe, amplified by three hundred meters of lava tube acting as a resonating chamber, carried to the entrance and changed in character by the geometry of the rock, sounded like the rhythmic striking of iron wheel rims on a hard surface. Not exactly. Not precisely. But enough that Jillian, who had been told this story her entire life, understood immediately and completely why every person who had ever heard it from a distance, at dusk, in the cold, had said *Iron Horse* and meant it.

Carl was crouched over the recorder. His hand was near the equipment but not touching it. He was listening with his whole body, the specific stillness of someone receiving information.

The sounds went on for four minutes and seventeen seconds. Then the differential shifted — a gust of wind from the north changed the pressure relationship at the tube entrance — and the gap fell silent. The tube returned to its version of quiet.

Carl played back the recording. The sound from the small speaker in the recorder was tinny and reduced, the way all recordings were — lacking the quality of presence that the real thing had, the way it occupied the air of the chamber. But it was recognizable. Distinctly, specifically recognizable.

Jillian listened to the playback with her journal open on her knee, the pen in her hand, not writing. The sound came from the recorder in the small space of the first chamber, and she listened to it the way she had listened to the real thing: completely, without analysis, just receiving.

When it stopped, she said: "That's what they heard."

Not a question. A confirmation: that the sounds the campers reported, that Hector Peña's mother had heard in 1886, that her grandmother had marked on a map with the notation *sounds reported here, winter months* — that those sounds were this. This pipe. This gap. This tube.

Carl looked at the recorder. Then at the pipe. Then at her.

"Not just a broken pipe," he said. He said it with the focused attention of someone thinking out loud rather than making a speech. "The lava tube is the resonating chamber. The pipe is the vibrating element. The temperature differential is the energy source — it creates the pressure gradient that drives the airflow through the gap, which produces the vibration, which the tube amplifies and shapes." He paused. "It's a system. The mountain assembled it over nine hundred years and then the CCC installed the critical component in 1934." He looked at the tube's interior, the three hundred meters of darkness that they had not gone into and were not going into. "The mountain built its own Iron Horse."

Jillian sat with this.

She sat with it the way she sat with things that were important — fully, without rushing to the next thought, giving it the space to be what it was before deciding what it meant. The sound in her memory, still present. The sound on the recording, still audible in her mind. The gap in the pipe, two inches of thermal cycling over eighty years, producing a thing that had been both true and false for a hundred and forty years. True in its physics, false in its attribution. True in its effect, false in its cause. A ghost that was real. A mystery that was explained. A legend that was neither confirmed nor denied.

She wrote in her journal:

The Iron Horse is a two-inch gap in a CCC water

pipe in the east margin of the north tube. The tube is the resonator. The temperature is the engine. The legend is what nine centuries of rock has to say about eighty years of iron. All three are correct.

She looked at what she'd written.

Then, below it:

The question is what we do with this.

She did not say this out loud. She put the journal in her pocket and stood, and Carl was already packing the equipment with the same efficiency he had set it up with, and they went out through the gate and back into the early evening of the lava field.

The walk back was longer than the walk in, because the light was different. The sun was fully behind the ridge and the field had taken on the particular quality of basalt at dusk — the black rock absorbing the last of the ambient light and holding it for a moment before releasing it into the cooling air. The temperature was dropping at the surface, which meant the tube behind them was doing its thing again, or would be shortly, the differential reversing and the gap settling back into its evening frequency. She did not look back. She did not need to.

Carl walked beside her rather than behind her, which was possible now that the return route was more familiar. He had the recorder in his hand, the headphones around his neck, still listening to something in the playback on low volume. After a while he took the headphones off and coiled them.

"Tell me the rest of the legend," he said. "The version in the pamphlet, not the campfire one."

She told it: the full Cord story, with the details the campfire version smoothed away. The third-generation local. The four seasons on the

route. The company records that described him as reliable and experienced. The 1887 newspaper reference that mentioned the recovery of the payroll gold, which she had found in the Kane County Independent footnote — though she didn't yet know what the recovery reference fully meant, because she had not yet found the actual article, only her grandmother's annotation about it. Elias Cord and his two passengers, names not preserved in any record she had found, lost in a storm on a road he knew better than anyone. The official story that had never been fully told because the people who would have completed it were not there to tell it.

Carl listened the way he had listened to the pipe: completely, without interrupting, processing rather than waiting for his turn.

When she finished, the hollow section was approaching — she could hear the change in the footfall ahead of her, the familiar shift in resonance. She moved to the edge. He followed without being told.

"The CCC installed the pipe in 1934," he said, when they were past it and back on solid ground. "Forty-eight years after Cord vanished. The sounds started — or started being reported — sometime around then, presumably. Your grandmother's notation: *sounds reported here, winter months*. Did she date that annotation?"

"No. The pamphlet was written in 1986. She could have been writing about reports from any point in the preceding fifty years."

"So the legend existed before the sounds began," he said.

"The legend of the stagecoach existed. Cord's story existed. The specific legend of the Iron Horse sounds — the ghost of iron wheels — that might be more recent. It might be the CCC pipe that created the specific sensory detail of the legend." She paused. "The mountain took a story about iron wheels and gave people a reason to keep believing it."

Carl was quiet for a moment. Then: "That's either the most accidental or the most intentional thing I've ever heard of."

"That's what the mountain does," Jillian said. "It's very patient."

The gravel of the two-track was under their feet again, and the clearing was visible ahead, their two trucks in the fading light. The temperature had dropped enough that their breath was faintly visible. From somewhere in the field behind them, if the differential was right, the pipe was producing its sounds for the evening — or not,

depending on the wind. She did not know which. She did not go back to check.

At their trucks, Carl uploaded the recording from the portable recorder to his laptop — he did this immediately, in the cab, before they left the clearing, which she recognized as the behavior of someone for whom losing data was a category of disaster he had trained himself not to risk. She waited, leaning against her truck, looking at the field in the last light.

The lava beds at dusk had a quality she had never been able to describe adequately and had tried to describe several times in her journal over the years. The black rock in the gray light, the way the surface looked both dead and attentive, the specific quality of stillness that was not the stillness of something absent but the stillness of something waiting. Her grandmother had written about it: *the lava beds are the mountain's memory, written in a language that predates everyone who has ever tried to read it*. She had read this as a child and found it beautiful and slightly frightening, and she still found it both.

Carl came out of the cab with the laptop. "Good quality," he said. "Clean recording, identifiable source, temperature logs correlate with the acoustic data." He paused. "I could write this up completely. Acoustic analysis, geological context, historical correlation. It would be a genuinely interesting paper."

She looked at him.

He met her look. "I'm not going to," he said. "I'm just noting that I could."

She nodded. "I know," she said.

They stood in the clearing for another moment. The light was nearly gone now. On the mountain above the field, the ponderosas were doing what ponderosas did at the end of the day — settling into their own version of quiet, the wind moving through them with the sound that was as close as any inanimate thing came to breathing.

"Who do you think named it the Iron Horse?" Carl asked. "The first person, not the legend. The first person who heard the pipe and reached for a name."

She thought about this. "Someone who knew the Cord story," she said. "Someone who was close enough to 1886 to still feel the loss of it,

and who heard something in the dark that sounded like iron wheels, and understood the mountain was answering them in the only language it had."

Carl was quiet.

"I think it was meant as comfort," she said. "Not a haunting. An answer. The mountain saying: *he's still running his route. He hasn't stopped.*"

She got in her truck. Carl got in his. They drove back down Movie Ranch Road in the dark, separately, each holding the evening the way you held something that needed thinking about before it needed talking about.

chapter eight

THE ATV SAFETY course had been running for three days when the thing happened that Carl had been privately expecting since the first morning, which was that Connor did something genuinely impressive and immediately ruined it.

But that was the afternoon. The morning had its own complications.

Carl arrived at the meadow at seven fifty with his GPS module in its padded case, his tablet, a folding table that he had borrowed from the Cedar Mountain Country Store's back room on the understanding that he would return it before the Friday delivery, and the particular alertness of someone who had spent the previous two evenings making significant changes to software that had previously been working fine. The changes were necessary — Wanda's battery question had identified a real gap, and he had been fixing it — but he was not yet certain the fix was complete, which was a specific kind of technical anxiety that felt different from ordinary anxiety and was in some ways worse, because it combined doubt about your own work with the knowledge that you had to demonstrate the work publicly in approximately two hours.

He had also, somewhere on the drive from the cabin, decided to

bring coffee from Ground + Toasted rather than from his own pour-over setup, because the pour-over required focus and this morning he was using his focus for other things. He had two cups in a carrier. The second cup was not for anyone specific. It was for whoever needed it.

Wanda was already in the meadow.

She was at the south end, checking the condition of the cone layout from the previous session, which had been left out overnight and had been slightly rearranged by what appeared to be a combination of wind and a single determined ground squirrel that had knocked over two of the markers on the east circuit. She was righting these with the unhurried efficiency of someone performing a task that she had performed before and expected to perform again, and she did not look up when Carl came through the gate, because she had already registered his arrival by sound and filed it in the appropriate category.

"Morning," Carl said.

"Morning," Wanda said, setting the last cone. She straightened and looked at the course layout with the same assessing attention she brought to everything, checking that the geometry was correct.

Carl put the carrier on the folding table. "I brought an extra coffee," he said. "If you want it."

She looked at the carrier. She looked at him. The look had the quality of someone assessing a variable they hadn't accounted for. "What is it?"

"Dark roast. No sugar. I didn't know your preference so I went with the assumption."

She came to the table and picked up the cup. She tried it. She said nothing, which he had learned to read as approval. She kept the cup. He considered this a meaningful development in their professional relationship and did not remark on it.

He opened the padded case and began setting up the GPS module.

"You fixed the battery issue," she said. It was not a question.

"I think so. There's a laminated fallback card in a pocket on the mounting bracket. If the device fails, you pull the card. It has diagrams for the three most common junction-decision scenarios in the terrain we're using." He held up the card. It was the size of a playing card, printed on both sides, laminated in the shop at the Cedar Mountain

Country Store by Doug on Tuesday afternoon. The lamination was slightly uneven at one corner, which Carl had decided to accept because asking for a redo would have been the kind of perfectionism that the situation didn't warrant. "It's not comprehensive. But it covers the situations where riders have made bad decisions in the past two sessions."

Wanda took the card. She read both sides with the focused attention she brought to anything that was going to be used in her course. She turned it over again. She put it in the bracket pocket herself, which was either a test or an endorsement or both.

"The diagrams are clear," she said.

"Thank you," Carl said, with the restraint of someone who wanted to say more and recognized that saying more would be the wrong move.

She handed the card back to him. "Show me how the fallback sequence works."

He showed her. She watched. She made one suggestion — the third diagram's arrow was ambiguous at the junction point, could mean either fork. He looked at it. She was right. He wrote the correction in his notebook and told her he'd have a revised version by the next session. She nodded and went back to checking the course layout, taking her coffee with her.

Carl set up the rest of his equipment with the specific pleasure of someone whose work had just been taken seriously by the right person.

The participants arrived in the pattern that had established itself over the first two sessions: the Henleys first, on their own ATVs, helmets on, radiating the particular confidence of people who had been doing this longer than everyone else and felt it was important that this be visible. Three rental riders behind them, including Loretta, who had parked in a different spot than the one Carl had indicated for the third consecutive time and seemed to find this unremarkable. Two more locals who had been signed up by the Merchant Association under the theory that it was better to have everyone certified before August than to deal with the consequences of not doing so.

And Connor, last, from his mother's Subaru.

He was improving. Carl could see it plainly — the body position was cleaner, the throttle control more deliberate, the corners handled with something closer to the margin Wanda had told him he needed. He was a naturally talented rider who was in the process of learning that natural talent without discipline was a liability rather than an asset, which was not a lesson most people accepted quickly and which Connor was accepting faster than average, though not without the specific resistance of someone who found the lesson personally expensive.

This morning he arrived looking like he had been thinking. Carl recognized the look from the mirror.

Wanda ran the morning briefing with the economy of someone who had delivered it before and saw no reason to expand it beyond its useful content. Safety checks, route for the day's practical session, one new element: a timed junction sequence on the east circuit that would require each rider to make a decision about which fork to take at three consecutive junctions without stopping to consult a map or another rider. The purpose, she explained, was to develop the habit of reading terrain in advance, so that decisions were made before the junction rather than at it. She did not say anything about Carl's module, but she positioned the wayfinding station on the correct side of the first junction and she had put his laminated card in the bracket herself, which were two forms of endorsement that required no verbal acknowledgment.

The Henleys exchanged a look that suggested they found this unnecessary. They were good riders. They did not need to be told to read terrain in advance.

They missed the second junction. Both of them. In exactly the same way, which was that they read the approach correctly and then made the decision at the junction rather than before it, and by the time they made it they had slightly too much speed for the right-hand fork, which was the correct fork, and they both took the left. The left fork brought them back to the start of the circuit, which was where they did not want to be.

Wanda watched this happen with the expression of someone whose hypothesis had been confirmed.

She said nothing to the Henleys about it. She waited until the debrief. She noted it then, specifically and without emphasis, as a data point rather than a failing: both experienced riders, reading the approach correctly, decision made at the junction, speed management at the fork. The junction sequence would be repeated in the afternoon session. There was a better way to ride it.

The Henleys nodded with the careful composure of people who were competent enough to hear correction without defensiveness, which was itself a form of competence that Wanda appeared to note. She moved on.

Leo arrived at eight forty-five with his camera already running, which was how he arrived everywhere.

He had, since the first session's camera rule, established a working geography for himself: the shop's back doorway, the fence line on the west side of the meadow, and occasionally the gravel apron between the meadow and the shop lot, which was technically Loose Wheels property rather than the course area and which he felt gave him a reasonable argument for being there. He had not tested this argument with Wanda because he suspected she would find it less compelling than he did, and he preferred operating in the space of things that had not been explicitly prohibited over the space of things that had been explicitly permitted, on the grounds that the first space was larger.

This morning he had a specific shot in mind. He had been thinking about it since the previous session, when he had watched Wanda give Connor the four-sentence correction that had been more precise than any amount of raised voice. He wanted a shot of her face when she was watching a rider — not when she was speaking, not when she was briefing, but in the moment of pure observation, when she was collecting information with the complete and uncured attention of someone whose job was to see clearly. He had been trying to get this shot for three sessions and had not yet gotten it, because every time he got close to the right angle Wanda moved, or the light changed, or Leo himself

shifted and the camera registered the movement and the moment was gone.

This morning the light was cooperating. Wanda was at the north end of the circuit, watching the first riders go through the junction sequence, and the angle from the fence line put the sun behind Leo's left shoulder and the mountains behind Wanda's right. The shot was there.

He raised the camera.

He got forty-two seconds of footage before the battery died.

He stared at the camera. He stared at it with the specific quality of attention of someone who was running a rapid diagnostic of what had gone wrong and arriving at an answer he did not want. He had charged the battery. He was certain he had charged the battery. He had plugged it in last night before dinner and he had checked it this morning before leaving the cabin and it had shown full. The camera was four years old, and the battery was the original battery, and the original battery had been showing full for approximately two years while actually being capable of sustaining approximately forty-two seconds of continuous recording in cold temperatures.

He looked at the meadow. Wanda was still in the exact right position. The light was still cooperating. The shot was there, and he could not take it.

He put the dead camera in his bag. He took out his phone. His phone's camera was not the same as his camera's camera, and he knew this, and he raised it anyway because forty-two seconds was not enough and the shot was there.

He got the shot on his phone. It was not as good as it would have been on the camera. It was, he would discover when he reviewed it later, in the still-sharp air of the shop doorway with the phone screen at arm's length, better than he expected. The phone's smaller sensor had compressed the depth of field in a way that brought Wanda forward against the mountains, her expression exactly what he had been trying to capture — the focused, complete, unhurried attention of someone who was having a private conversation with the information in front of her. He would use this shot. He would tell no one it was from his phone.

Garrett appeared briefly in the shop's back doorway.

He looked at the meadow. He looked at Leo with the dead camera bag and the phone raised. He looked at the meadow again. He went back to work. His expression, in the moment before he turned, had the quality of a man who had anticipated approximately this outcome and found the confirmation satisfying rather than surprising.

The junction sequence ran through the morning session, and by the time the lunch break arrived, every rider in the course had attempted it at least twice and the results had been distributed, as Wanda had apparently expected, in a precise hierarchy: the beginners worst, Loretta puzzlingly good on the second attempt after being puzzlingly bad on the first, the Henleys improving, and Connor best.

Connor was best in the specific way that was both true and a problem. He had read the approach to the first junction correctly, made the decision before the fork, adjusted his speed and line, and taken the correct turn. He had done this at the second junction and the third junction. He had done it at a speed that was measurably faster than any other participant in the session, which was the problem, not because the speed was unsafe — his margins were adequate, Wanda had checked — but because the speed was visible, and Connor knew it was visible, and knowing that it was visible was the specific thing that tended to push his riding from competent to slightly too far.

He did not push it too far in the morning session. He was, Carl noticed, actively not pushing it, in the careful way of someone who had heard a specific thing from a specific person in a previous session and was applying it with the deliberate attention that meant the lesson had actually landed. The not-pushing-it was visible in a way that the showing-off had been, which was itself a form of progress.

Wanda saw this. Carl saw Wanda see it.

During the lunch break, Wanda walked to the north fence and stood with her coffee, looking at the circuit with the expression of someone reviewing data rather than resting. Carl approached, which he did carefully, on the grounds that Wanda during a break had a different

quality than Wanda during the course and the transition required some attention.

She spoke before he could. "Your module worked on the third junction."

"Which riders used it?"

"Three. The two beginners and Loretta." She paused. "The beginners used the card after the device told them to look at the card. Loretta used the card before the device suggested it, which means she read the fallback as the primary instruction, which is not what you intended but produced a better outcome than the device alone."

Carl looked at this from the angle she was offering it. "She read the card as a map rather than as a backup."

"Yes. Which suggests the card is clearer than the device for certain types of learners." She drank her coffee. "You should look at that."

He wrote it down. He was aware that she was giving him something — specific observational data that she had collected on his tool, as a form of professional courtesy, because she had decided that the tool was worth improving. He did not make a large thing of this. He said: "Thank you. I'll look at it before the next session."

She nodded and went back to watching the circuit.

The afternoon session was the practical riding evaluation, which Wanda ran differently from the morning's skills work. The morning was about building and practicing specific behaviors. The afternoon was about seeing what happened when the practicing was set aside and the rider was simply asked to ride — what the underlying habits were, what emerged when the scaffolding came down.

She told the participants this in approximately those terms, which was characteristic: she did not soften explanations by omitting the part that made people uncomfortable.

The Henleys went first, because they were always first and Wanda had decided early in the course that the most efficient use of the Henleys was to put them first and use what they did as a calibration for what she was watching for. They rode well. They were, genuinely, good

riders. The junction work had corrected the specific problem from the morning, and their margins were appropriate and their speed management was sound. Wanda watched them with the same neutral attention she watched everyone, which was itself a form of assessment — she was noting that there was nothing here she needed to intervene in, which freed her attention for the next rider.

Loretta rode with the particular confidence of someone who had figured out the course's underlying logic and was now applying it rather than executing memorized movements. She took the card out of her pocket at the first junction, looked at it, put it away, and took the correct fork. Carl watched this and thought about what Wanda had said at lunch.

The beginners rode with the earnest, full-body attention of people for whom ATVs were still mainly the machines in the experience rather than the medium through which they moved through terrain. They were improving. They would keep improving. This was the arc Wanda seemed to have planned from the first session, which was visible now in the way the course's difficulty had been calibrated to exactly the level of challenge that produced improvement rather than discouragement.

Connor was last.

He waited at the start of the circuit with his hands on the bars and the expression of someone who had made a specific decision and was holding himself to it. He was not going to show off. He was going to ride the way Wanda had told him to ride, with the margins she had specified, at the speed that the terrain warranted rather than the speed that demonstrated capability.

He did this for the first junction and the second junction and three-quarters of the east circuit, and then he was coming into the third junction and the terrain opened up on the approach in a way that was specifically the kind of terrain that rewarded a faster line, and Connor had been seeing this line since the first session and had not taken it, and this time, without any conscious decision that Carl could see, he took it.

It was a good line. It was, objectively, a smart piece of riding — he had read the terrain correctly and executed the faster line with appropriate margin and arrived at the junction earlier and cleaner than any other rider in the session. It was also, clearly, exactly the kind of thing he

had told himself he was not going to do. He knew this immediately, which was visible in the slight stiffness of his posture as he brought the machine back to the staging area.

Wanda let him come to a full stop. She let him take his helmet off. She let him stand there for a moment with the helmet under his arm before she spoke.

"You took the fast line at the third junction," she said.

"Yeah," Connor said.

"Was that the decision you made before the approach, or the decision you made at the approach?"

He was quiet for a moment. Then: "At the approach."

"Right," Wanda said. She looked at the circuit. "The line was correct. Your margin was acceptable. Your decision process was not." She paused. "The difference between a good rider and a safe rider is that the good rider can take the fast line. The safe rider knows when the fast line is a decision and when it's a reflex, and they can tell which one they're doing." She looked at him. "Which one were you doing?"

Connor thought about this with the honesty of someone who was taking the question seriously. "Reflex," he said.

"Yes," Wanda said. "Work on that."

She walked back toward the staging area. Connor put his helmet back on and rode the circuit again, this time at a pace that was clearly deliberate, every decision made before the approach, including the third junction where the fast line was available and he did not take it. Carl watched. The second run was, in the specific way of deliberate riding, more impressive than the first, because it was chosen rather than reflexive, and the difference was visible if you were watching for it.

Carl texted Jillian that evening.

Wanda corrected Connor today for taking the fast line. She asked whether the decision was made before the approach or at the approach. He said at the approach. She said: work on that. Two sentences. The lesson was complete.

Jillian replied after a few minutes:

She's teaching him to know the difference between a good decision and a good outcome. Those aren't the same thing.

Carl stared at this for a moment. Then he opened the notes document.

6:47 p.m. Jillian's text re: Wanda and Connor. "The difference between a good decision and a good outcome." This is the same distinction Garrett makes between what the machine says and what it means. Wanda and Garrett are doing the same diagnostic work on different systems — one on riders, one on engines — and the core insight is identical: the output is not the thing you're reading. You're reading the process that produced the output, and the process is what you're trying to change.

I've been building interfaces for eight years and this is the thing I keep getting wrong. I optimize for the output. The better work is to understand the process.

Saving this. Not sure where it goes yet.

He put the phone down. Through the cabin's west window, the ponderosas were doing their end-of-day thing, the wind in them the specific sound that he had not had a word for before this summer and was starting to think might not need one.

He went back to the shop after dinner, partly because he had left a part order to pick up and partly because the shop at closing time had a quality he had started to value — the day's work concluded, the bay quiet, Garrett doing his end-of-day inventory in the particular silence of a space that knew what it was for.

He found Garrett at the far bay, reclining the last machine on the

hoist for the overnight. He found, unexpectedly, that Garrett was not alone: Rolane was at the supply shelf, returning something to its place, and Leo was at the far end of the service counter, reviewing footage on his laptop with the focused attention of someone going through dailies.

Leo looked up when Carl came in. "Hey. Good timing. Come look at this."

Carl came to look. Leo had the afternoon's footage in a rough timeline on the screen, and he was scrolling through it with the practiced speed of someone who had learned to identify what was worth keeping at a glance. He stopped on a section and played it: Wanda at the north fence during the lunch break, in the shot Leo had gotten on his phone. The compressed depth of field, the mountains behind her, the expression that Carl had watched her wear during observation. It was, Carl realized, looking at it on the screen, a very good piece of footage. It captured something that was difficult to capture: competence at rest, the thing expert attention looked like when it was not performing itself.

"That's her," Carl said.

"Right?" Leo said. He played it again. "I got this on my phone because my camera died after forty seconds. The battery is, apparently, deceased." He said this with the equanimity of someone who had accepted a loss and moved on. "But the phone got this, which I wouldn't have gotten if the camera had kept running, because I would have stopped looking for the shot." He paused. "The dead battery was good luck."

Carl looked at the footage. "That's one way to describe it."

"It's the accurate description," Leo said, without any apparent irony. He closed the laptop. "I ordered a new battery. It's coming Friday."

From the shelf, Rolane said, without looking up from her work: "The sandwich is still the best thing in the documentary."

Leo pointed at her. "Correct. And underrated. People keep telling me the sandwich is the whole film. I'm starting to think they might be right."

Carl picked up his part order from the counter. He looked at the Golden Wrench above the register for a moment — he had been looking at it differently since the evening with Jillian and the sketch map, turning the provenance question over in his mind in the background of

other thoughts. He photographed it again, this time from a lower angle that captured more of the box end's detail. He had an idea about where to look next, an idea that had arrived during the drive from the lava beds and had been sitting patiently since then, waiting for him to have the time to follow it.

Tomorrow, he thought. Tomorrow he would follow it.

He said goodnight to Leo and to Rolane and to Garrett, who responded with the particular sound that meant acknowledged, and went to his truck. Above the shop, the mountain was doing what it always did — simply being itself, on its own schedule, with the patience of something that had been waiting a long time and was comfortable with the waiting.

chapter **nine**

THE PAMPHLET HAD A LOOSE PAGE.

Jillian had not known this. She had handled the pamphlet every summer for more than two decades — taken it from the shelf, read sections of it, set it down on the porch chair arm with a finger marking her place, replaced it on the shelf at summer's end with the same unhurried care she used for everything she loved and didn't want to damage. She had read the Phantom Stagecoach chapter enough times to know certain passages without looking. She had read the footnotes, the marginal annotations, the penciled corrections her grandmother had made to the second printing after finding errors in the first. She had read the dedication page and the acknowledgments and the brief, modest author's note in which her grandmother had described the project as an attempt to write down the things the mountain told her before the mountain changed its mind.

She had never, in any of those summers, looked at the back of the back cover.

She was doing so now because Carl had asked her, the previous evening, whether the pamphlet had any photographs of the Cedar City smithy, and she had said no, she didn't think so, it was mostly text with the occasional hand-drawn illustration. And then she had gotten home and taken the pamphlet down and looked through it properly, with fresh attention, and found nothing in the body of the text. But the back

cover, when she held the pamphlet at an angle to check whether anything had been tucked into the spine, produced a faint resistance that she had never felt before.

She turned the pamphlet over and looked at the back cover's inner face.

Tucked between the last page and the rear cardstock cover, held by the slight compression of the binding, was a photograph.

She stood at the kitchen table in the cabin's morning light and looked at it for a long time before she did anything else.

The photograph was printed on cardstock, the thick photographic paper of an era when photographs were made to be handled rather than displayed. The image was black and white, slightly warm in the way of silver gelatin prints that had aged well rather than badly, and it showed the interior of a working smithy: a forge in the left background, its shape unmistakable, the brick chimney rising out of frame; an anvil in the center, a tool rack along the right wall hung with tongs and sets and hammers in the dense, organized way of a shop where everything had its use and its place. Two figures in the background, both in work clothes, both out of focus enough to be impossible to identify. They were doing something at the forge, something with a long tool that caught the light of the fire.

And in the right foreground, hanging on a wooden peg set in the wall at eye level, a wrench.

The proportions were unmistakable. The oversize box end, the particular style of the handle, the way the metal caught the available light and gave it back with the faint warmth of something that had been gold, once. It hung on its peg the way the wrench above Garrett's register hung on its peg: horizontally, deliberately, at the height of a person who had decided this object deserved to be seen.

The peg was the same style as Garrett's peg. Not similar — the same: a single turned wooden dowel, set in the wall at a slight upward angle to prevent the tool from sliding, the wood stained with the same dark finish as the wall around it.

Jillian sat down at the table.

She looked at the photograph for another minute. Then she turned it over. The back of the cardstock was blank except for a faint pencil inscription in the upper right corner, very small, in handwriting she did not recognize: *Cedar City, 1884*.

She looked at this for a moment. Then she photographed the photograph with her phone, both front and back, and sent both images to Carl with the message: *I found something. Come look at this when you get a chance.*

He called back in four minutes.

"Where," Carl said, without any preamble, which was characteristic of him when he had just seen something that required immediate clarification.

"In the back of the pamphlet," she said. "Between the last page and the rear cover. It's been in there the whole time. I've had this pamphlet for twenty years and I've never looked at the back of the back cover."

A brief silence. She could hear him doing something — the sound of a chair, a laptop opening. "The peg is the same as Garrett's," he said.

"I know."

"The proportions of the wrench—"

"I know. I've been looking at it for the last ten minutes."

Another silence, longer this time, with a different quality. Then: "There's a sign on the wall in the background. Left side, above the forge. It's partially obscured by the figure in the background but there are letters visible." She could hear typing. "Can you send me a higher-resolution version of the front image?"

She looked at her phone. The photograph was small enough that the image quality was limited by the cardstock original rather than the phone camera. "The original is about three by four inches. I can take it somewhere with better equipment."

"I have photo editing software on my laptop. Even at that resolution I might be able to get more out of it." A pause. "Can I come over?"

Carl arrived at the cabin twenty minutes later with his laptop under one arm and the expression of someone who had already formed a hypothesis and was trying not to form it too firmly before he had the evidence to support it. He sat at the kitchen table. Jillian put the photograph in front of him and went to make coffee.

He looked at the photograph. He looked at it the way he looked at things that mattered — completely, without the performance of looking, his attention organized and quiet. Then he picked up the photograph, very carefully, by the edges, and tilted it toward the window light.

"The sign," he said.

"Above the forge," she said, from the kitchen.

"Three letters clear, one partial. C-E-D and then something behind the figure." He set the photograph down and opened the laptop. He had the photo editing software open before the laptop had fully loaded, which suggested he had opened it before leaving the cabin. He imported the image she'd sent — the phone photograph of the photograph — and began adjusting the exposure and contrast with the focused efficiency of someone who had done this kind of work before.

Jillian set two cups on the table and sat across from him.

She watched him work. The adjustments were small and deliberate — not the aggressive processing that produced artifacts, but the careful kind, pulling information that was already in the image rather than inventing it. He worked in silence for about seven minutes. Then he stopped and leaned forward.

"C-E-D-A," he said. "Partial R. Maybe another letter after that." He turned the laptop toward her. The sign, in the enhanced version, was still partially obscured by the figure, but four letters were now readable in the lighter area above the figure's left shoulder. "Cedar," he said. "And there's a second line below it. I can't read the second line."

"Cedar City," Jillian said.

He looked at her.

"It's the only Cedar anything in this part of Utah that would have had a smithy of this size in 1884," she said. "There was a Cedar City iron

works in the territorial period. My grandmother mentioned it in the tool culture section of the pamphlet — not in the Phantom Stagecoach chapter, in an earlier one. She described it as the primary fabrication supplier for the southern Utah operations in the pioneer era." She picked up her coffee. "Including the stage lines."

Carl was quiet. He looked at the laptop screen, then at the photograph, then at his own phone where the image of the Golden Wrench from his previous photography session was still in his camera roll. He pulled it up and held it beside the laptop.

"The box end," he said.

"Yes."

"The mounting angle."

"Yes."

"The peg style."

"I noticed that first," she said.

He put the phone down. He was doing the thing she had learned to recognize as Carl processing something significant: the stillness that was not passive but active, the internal work visible in the quality of his quiet.

"The Cedar City smithy made presentation hardware," she said. "Custom tools for clients and suppliers. My grandmother wrote about it — the practice was common in the pioneer era, a kind of professional gift between businesses. You had a working relationship with someone, you commissioned a piece from the local iron works. Something that would be kept." She looked at the photograph. "The peg was already in Garrett's shop when he started working there. He hung the wrench on it because it fit. The peg was already there because somebody put it there for exactly this purpose."

Carl looked at the photograph again. Then at the wrench in his phone. Then back at the photograph.

"I want to look at the wrench in person," he said. "With better photographs than I have."

"Garrett will let you," she said. "He already let you photograph it once."

"I want to photograph it against a measured reference. And I want to look at the mounting hole in the peg, if I can." He was typing notes

as he spoke. "The peg construction date would be determinable if there's enough wood exposed. There are tool marks in the photograph that might be matchable to specific smithy practices." He paused. "I'm not a metallurgist or a wood historian. But I know people who are, or I can find them."

"Carl," she said.

He looked up.

"What you're describing," she said, "is a research project."

"Yes," he said.

"Before we decide whether that's what we want to do," she said, "let's find out what the smithy was."

He nodded. This was reasonable. He returned to the laptop.

The Cedar City iron works had a digital footprint, as things from the territorial period increasingly did as local historical societies digitized their collections. Carl found the relevant entry in forty minutes of organized searching, starting with the Utah State Historical Society's online catalogue and working outward to the Iron County archives and, finally, to a transcribed version of the 1902 Cedar City business directory — the last edition that would have included the smithy before it closed the following year.

W. Cord & Sons, Iron Works and General Fabrication, Main Street Cedar City. Est. 1878. Smithing, toolmaking, wheel hardware, custom ironwork. Primary supplier to southern Utah stage operations, mining hardware, agricultural equipment. Second-generation operation. Recognized for quality custom presentation work.

He read this twice. He read the business name twice.

"Cord," he said.

Jillian, who had been reading over his shoulder for the last ten minutes, said: "Yes."

"W. Cord." He looked at the screen. "Elias Cord was driving the 1886 route."

"Elias Cord," she said, "was the son of W. Cord. Or the grandson — the directory says second-generation, 1878 establishment. If W. Cord

started the smithy in 1878, Elias would have been—" she paused, working the timeline "—either the son in early adulthood, or the grandson if W. Cord was old enough to have established the business by that date." She thought about it. "The photograph is dated 1884. Two years before the blizzard. The figure holding the wrench—"

"Could be Elias," Carl said.

"Could be W. Cord. Could be both of them in the photograph — there are two figures." She looked at the image on the laptop. "The one holding the wrench is in the foreground, clearer. The one at the forge is background, older-seeming from the posture."

Carl looked at the photograph for a long time. "The wrench Elias Cord's family made," he said slowly. "In the smithy that supplied the stage lines his family's ironwork served. And it ends up in a shop on Cedar Mountain."

"It ends up," Jillian said, "above the register of the shop that services the machines that travel the same terrain the stagecoaches traveled." She paused. "Garrett uses it. He said it felt right in the hand when he tried it."

Carl was very quiet.

"I know," she said.

He went to Loose Wheels at closing time, as he had done the previous evening. He found Garrett finishing the day's inventory, the ledger open on the counter, the bay sounds settling into the particular quiet of a space winding down from its day's work.

Garrett looked up when Carl came in.

"Can I photograph the wrench again?" Carl said. "Up close. With a measuring reference. And — if I can — I'd like to look at the mounting peg."

Garrett set down his pen. He looked at Carl with the measuring look, the one that assessed whether the question deserved an answer and what kind. Then he came around the counter without speaking, took the wrench down from its peg — both hands, the same careful grip he used for fine work — and handed it to Carl.

Carl held it. It was heavier than he expected. The metal was cold from the shop air, and the surface under his fingers had the particular texture of hand-worked iron — not rough, but not the machined smoothness of manufactured tools. The box end, up close, showed the tool marks of its making: the hammer strikes that had shaped the metal around the die, each one deliberate and each one slightly different, the signature of a hand doing precise work. The handle had been shaped with the same attention, the taper fitted to a grip that was specific rather than generic.

He set it on the counter and photographed it from six angles, each time with a ruler held in frame. He photographed the peg: the mounting hole in the wall, the turned dowel, the stain on the wood. He photographed the wall around the peg, the area of the plaster that had been painted around the peg's placement rather than over it, which suggested the peg had been there before the most recent paint job by at least one generation.

Garrett watched him without moving.

When Carl was done, he put the ruler in his pocket. He looked at the wrench on the counter. He looked at Garrett.

"I think this came from a smithy in Cedar City," he said. "A place called Cord & Sons. It was the primary fabrication supplier for the southern Utah stage lines in the 1880s. The family's name was Cord."

Garrett was very still.

"Elias Cord," Carl said, "was the driver of the stagecoach in the 1886 blizzard. The Ghost of the Iron Horse." He paused. "I think this wrench was made by his family. I think it was made in 1884, maybe for the stage operation, maybe as a presentation piece. I think it's been in this building since before the current structure was built, which means it's been on Cedar Mountain for a very long time."

Garrett looked at the wrench on the counter. He looked at it the way he looked at machines that had just told him something he hadn't expected: with full, unhurried attention, reading the information and letting it settle before doing anything with it.

After a long time, he said: "That explains why it feels right in the hand."

Carl looked at him.

"Not everyone's hand," Garrett said. He picked up the wrench. He turned it once — the slow, assessing rotation of someone who has handled something many times and now understands it differently. "I tried it when it came in. Felt like it was made for someone who did this work." He set it back on the peg. "Makes sense, if it was."

He went back behind the counter. He picked up his pen. He looked at Carl.

"You going to do something with this?" he said.

Carl thought about this. He thought about what Jillian had said that morning — *before we decide whether that's what we want to do, let's find out what the smithy was*. They had found out what the smithy was. The next question was exactly what Garrett was asking.

"Not yet," Carl said. "We want to make sure first."

Garrett nodded. He returned to his inventory. Carl put the ruler back in his jacket pocket, said goodnight, and went to his truck.

He drove back to the cabin on Deer Haven Loop in the late evening, the mountain doing its end-of-day thing on both sides of Movie Ranch Road, the ponderosas going dark against a sky that still held the last of the light. He had the photograph on the passenger seat — Jillian had let him take it, carefully sleeved in a piece of the acid-free paper she used for her research documents, which she had produced from a folder in the cabin's desk with the matter-of-fact efficiency of someone for whom archival care was a professional habit. He would return it tomorrow. Tonight he wanted it where he could think about it.

At the cabin, he opened the notes document and typed for a while. Then he opened a new document — the second such document he had created since arriving on the mountain, the first being the "elimination" file from the ATV investigation — and titled it *Cord*. He transferred the relevant entries from his notes into the new document: the photograph, the smithy, the business directory entry, the 1884 date on the cardstock, the box end dimensions from his photographs, the peg construction details. He made a list of things he still needed: a better enhancement of the sign in the photograph, the second line of text; a comparison of the

tool marks on the box end to the smithy's known working practices, which would require finding examples of Cord & Sons' other work; the history of the building that Loose Wheels currently occupied, which predated the current structure and might have records.

Then he opened the *Cedar Mountain* notes document — the renamed main file — and added a single line at the bottom of the current entry:

9:43 p.m. The wrench is a Cord wrench. W. Cord & Sons, Cedar City, 1884. Elias Cord's family made the tool that ended up in the shop on the mountain where Elias Cord's route is still remembered. I don't know what to do with this yet. But I think Garrett does, in his way. He said "makes sense, if it was." He put it back on the peg. He didn't move it. He went back to work. That seems right.

He closed the laptop. Outside the cabin's west window, the ponderosas were dark against the night sky, and the mountain was doing what the mountain always did — being itself, at its own pace, with the patience of something that had been waiting a hundred and forty years and was entirely comfortable with the wait.

On the passenger seat, in its sleeve of acid-free paper, the photograph waited too.

chapter ten

SAL CRENSHAW DROVE the failing ATV directly to Loose Wheels rather than back to her cabin, which was the decision of someone who had been on Cedar Mountain long enough to know that an ATV behaving oddly on a trail was a problem that needed a mechanic, not a parking space. She pulled into the lot at eleven forty-three on a Thursday morning with the machine on a small trailer and an expression that suggested the drive from the east trail junction had given her considerable time to develop an opinion about what was happening and who was responsible for it.

Carl was in the shop when she arrived. He had stopped in to pick up a filter he'd ordered for the rental and had stayed, as he often did, because the shop had a quality in the mid-morning that he found conducive to thinking: the bay sounds at their working rhythm, Garrett in the far bay with a suspension job that was going the way of most suspension jobs, the radio doing something with a country song that had more going on in it than the genre usually advertised. He was at the counter with his notes document open, adding the previous evening's Cord research to the relevant file, when the trailer pulled into the lot.

He watched through the window as the driver — a woman in her fifties, wiry and purposeful, wearing the specific category of outdoor clothing that had been chosen once and maintained indefinitely — got out and assessed the trailer situation with the quick efficiency of

someone who had dealt with trailers before and wasn't going to pretend otherwise. She unloaded the ATV herself, which took her about ninety seconds, and came through the shop door with the focused energy of someone who had a specific thing to communicate and intended to communicate it.

"Garrett in?" she said, to the room in general.

"Bay," Carl said.

She nodded at him in the way of someone acknowledging a useful stranger and went to the bay doorway. "Garrett. I've got a machine that's doing something I don't like."

From the bay, a pause in the suspension work. Then: "Bring it in."

She went back out and wheeled the ATV into the bay's open slot with a competence that Carl, watching from the counter, recognized as the product of years rather than practice sessions. She knew how the machine moved. She knew its geometry. She had been riding ATVs on Cedar Mountain, it appeared, since before ATV riding was a curated experience.

Garrett came out from under the suspension job. He looked at the ATV. He looked at Sal. He did his sequence: hand on the engine casing, hand on the fuel system housing, the brief pause of someone who was listening rather than touching.

"When did it start?" he said.

"About ninety minutes ago. East trail, coming back from the upper junction. Same thing as always — just sort of quits being interested." She paused. "You've seen this before on this machine."

Garrett looked at her. "When?"

"Two summers ago. Mid-July. You ran the diagnostics and found nothing and we decided it was heat-related." She said this with the even tone of someone presenting a case file. "It's not July and it's not that hot."

Garrett went back to the bay and got the diagnostic reader. He ran it. He showed the screen to nobody in particular, because the screen said what Carl expected it to say, which was nothing. No codes. No faults. Clean.

"I'll look at it," Garrett said. He gave her the loaner key from the

board behind the counter with the same unhurried efficiency he brought to everything.

Sal took the key and came into the customer area. She poured herself a coffee with the proprietary ease of someone who had been using this coffee machine for long enough to know its specific temperament, and she sat down in one of the two customer chairs and looked at Carl.

"You're new," she said.

"Second summer," he said. "Cabin on Deer Haven Loop."

"Matsuda," she said, the way Denny had remembered Jillian's name — not performing the recall, just stating it. "I heard about the GPS module for the safety course. Wanda Fehr mentioned it at the Service District meeting."

"What did she say about it?"

Sal considered. "She said it addressed a real gap and the analog fallback was a reasonable solution. From Wanda, that's an endorsement."

Carl stored this. "You live up here year-round?"

"Nine months. I winter in St. George." She looked at her coffee. "Twenty-two years on the mountain, give or take."

The machine was running in the bay — Garrett had put it on the stand and was working through something in the fuel system with the focused attention of a person who had decided to be thorough. From the far bay, the suspended suspension job waited with the patience that suspension jobs generally had.

Sal's opinion, once she had established that Carl was worth talking to, proved to be specific and well-organized. She had lived on Cedar Mountain long enough to have opinions about most things related to it, and she held them the way people held things they'd earned: without apology and without performance. She mentioned that this was the second time this machine had shown the same symptom with no diagnostic cause, and that if it happened a third time she was going to have a more pointed conversation about whether the machine was right for Cedar Mountain conditions or whether she'd been sold something that was better suited to flatter

terrain. She mentioned that her neighbor across the loop had had a similar thing happen to his machine, though his had resolved faster. She mentioned that she'd heard, at Hot Mama's the previous evening, that the Kanab couple who'd been staying in one of the east cabins had had the same issue.

"It's going around," she said, with the tone of someone describing a seasonal cold. "Like whatever it is travels between machines." She paused. "Or between service visits."

Carl looked at her.

She looked back at him with the even, patient attention of someone who was used to being underestimated in direct proportion to how much they actually knew. "I've been bringing ATVs to this shop for twenty-two years," she said. "I know what Garrett's work looks like. This isn't his work." She paused. "I'm not saying it's his fault. I'm saying whatever's causing this came through this shop, which is not the same thing."

From the bay, the sound of Garrett's work shifted slightly — a pause, a resumption at a different point. He had heard this. He was filing it.

"Did you hear anything," Carl said, keeping his voice even, "about what might have come through? A product, an additive? Anything new in the supply chain?"

Sal looked at him for a moment. She was assessing something — not his motives, he thought, but his usefulness. Whether he was someone worth giving information to.

"I ran into Denny Oakes at the country store last week," she said. "He was talking about a fuel additive product he'd been testing. Said it was something new, something for small engine performance at altitude. He was enthusiastic about it."

Carl kept his face completely neutral.

"I didn't think much of it at the time," Sal said. "Denny's always enthusiastic about something. But it's been in the back of my mind." She looked at the bay doorway, where Garrett's work sounds continued at their patient rhythm. "Is there a connection?"

"I don't know yet," Carl said. "What was the name of the product?"

She shook her head. "He didn't say. Or I didn't register it if he did."

She picked up her coffee. "He was more excited about the concept than the specifics."

Carl opened the notes document and typed one line. He didn't show it to her. He would tell Jillian about this conversation, and they would decide together what to do with it, and when.

Garrett emerged from the bay at twelve-fifteen with the diagnostic results, which were the same as before: nothing. He stood at the counter with the particular stillness of a man who had looked at something thoroughly and come away with more questions than he'd arrived with, and he looked at Sal with the directness he reserved for situations where the professional pleasantries of inconclusive results was going to be inadequate.

"Fuel system's clean," he said. "No mechanical fault I can find. Same symptom as your machine two summers ago and six other machines I've seen this season."

Sal set down her coffee. "Six."

"Six that I know about," Garrett said. "Could be more that didn't come to me." He said this with the flatness of a man stating a fact that he found unpleasant but accurate. "I'm keeping track. I'll keep looking at yours. Leave it overnight."

Sal was quiet for a moment. She had the quality of stillness that people had when they were recalculating something — not upset, but revising. "Is this going to affect my summer?"

"Not if I can help it," Garrett said. It was the most he would promise, and both of them knew it was the appropriate amount.

She nodded. She picked up the loaner key and her jacket. At the door, she stopped.

"Whatever it is," she said, turning back, "it didn't come from your supply chain. I've watched you stock that shelf." She looked at him. "It came in through a different door."

Garrett held her look. "I know," he said.

She went out.

Garrett stood at the counter for a moment after the door closed. He looked at the loaner key board, at the gap where Sal's key had been. He looked at the bay, where her machine was on the stand. He looked at Carl, who was still at the counter with the notes document open and the expression of someone who had just heard several things that needed to fit together.

Garrett went under the counter and got the ledger. He opened it to the current page. He wrote in it for about forty seconds — the date, the machine, the service history, the symptom, the diagnostic result, the owner's comment about Denny Oakes and the fuel additive product. His handwriting was small and precise and he did not abbreviate. When he finished, he read back what he had written, made one correction, and closed the ledger.

Then he took out his phone — an older model that he used with the two-finger efficiency of someone who had learned to text out of necessity rather than preference — and sent Carl a message.

Carl's phone buzzed. He looked at it.

12:19 p.m. Text from Garrett: "Denny mentioned a fuel product. To a customer. Who now has the problem." That's it. That's the whole message. No punctuation on the second sentence. I've read it four times.

He put the phone face-down on the counter. He thought about the conversation at the parking lot outside the country store, after their last visit to the shop — Jillian saying *he's always around, it could be coincidence*, and Carl saying *that's what makes it hard to see*. He thought about Denny at the shop with his sodas, asking about the GPS module, asking about the cabin's winter condition. He thought about Denny's index card on the cork board with its precise block capitals and its accurately rendered drawing of a wrench.

He texted Jillian.

Garrett texted me. Sal Crenshaw — the woman who just brought in the fifth machine — ran into Denny last week. He was promoting a fuel additive product. She didn't get the name. Garrett knows.

He waited. Her reply came back in about three minutes, which was fast for Jillian.

Where are you?

Shop.

Stay there. I'm coming.

She arrived twenty minutes later, which was how long it took to drive from the Haverford cabin on Deer Haven Loop to Movie Ranch Road when you were not in a hurry but were also not dawdling. She came through the door and looked at Carl and then at Garrett, who was back in the bay with the suspension job, and she sat down in one of the customer chairs and said: "Tell me what happened."

Carl told her. He gave it in order — Sal's arrival, the diagnostic result, the conversation in the customer area, Garrett's ledger entry, the text. He gave it with the organized precision of someone who had been running notes on this investigation long enough that the facts arrived in their proper sequence without effort.

Jillian listened with her full attention, the way she always listened. She did not write anything down. She was making her mental map.

When Carl finished, she was quiet for a moment. She looked at the bay doorway. She looked at the cork board. She found the Denny Oakes notice in the lower right corner — the precise block capitals, the phone number, the small accurate drawing of a wrench — and she looked at it for a moment with the expression of someone seeing a familiar thing from a new angle.

"Garrett texted you directly," she said.

"He's never done that before," Carl said.

"No." She looked at the wrench above the register — automatically, the way her eyes went to it when she was thinking. "He's telling us he's ready. Not to act — to be helped." She paused. "He's been carrying this alone for a while."

Carl thought about this. About the ledger that Garrett had been keeping since before either of them arrived, the parallel data system running in longhand under the counter. About the gap on the shelf where a small container appeared on weekends and disappeared by Monday. About Sal saying *it came in through a different door* and Garrett saying *I know*.

"We need to find out what the product is," Carl said.

"Yes." Jillian looked at the bay. Garrett's work sounds continued, steady and patient. "And we need to do it without asking Denny directly. Not yet."

"I have an idea about that," Carl said. "If he's promoting a product, there'll be evidence of it online. Distributor pages, social posts, community groups. People who sell these things through direct networks — they tend to leave a lot of traces."

Jillian nodded. She had the expression of someone who found this approach distasteful in a specific, bounded way — the reaching into someone's digital life without their knowledge — and who had already decided it was necessary. "Be careful with it," she said.

"I will," he said. "Same as you'd treat a primary source. You don't decide what it means before you've read it."

She acknowledged this. She looked at the cork board again, at the Denny notice, at the precise little drawing of the wrench that was both accurate and somehow sweet, the way all of Denny's gestures toward the community were both accurate and somehow sweet.

"He really does love this shop," she said. Not defending him. Just stating a fact that made the situation more complicated rather than less.

"I know," Carl said.

The bay sounds continued. Outside, Movie Ranch Road was doing its midday thing — the easy traffic of a summer mountain town at its most comfortable hour, the light direct and warm, the kind of afternoon that had no urgency in it at all.

Denny's truck pulled into the lot.

He was carrying a small cooler this time, which he brought through the door with the easy efficiency of someone running a familiar errand. He set it on the counter and looked at Carl and Jillian with the uncomplicated warmth that was simply how he arrived in rooms.

"Carl, Jillian." He opened the cooler and produced two cold sodas, set them on the counter. "I heard the safety course went well yesterday. Wanda said something to the Merchant Association about the GPS module."

"She did?" Carl said.

"Said it was addressing a real need." Denny said this with the genuine enthusiasm of someone who liked hearing that good work was being recognized. He produced a third soda for himself and leaned against the counter. "She's not easy to impress. You should feel good about that."

"I do," Carl said.

Denny looked at Jillian. "How's the cabin holding up? I've been meaning to check in with some of the Deer Haven people about the water pressure situation — there was a culvert issue over winter."

"Pressure's been fine," she said. "But I appreciate you keeping track of it."

"I keep lists," he said, with the unself-conscious ease of someone who had long since accepted this about himself. "It's just how I'm organized. Easier to help people if you know what's going on."

He took his soda into the bay to work on his own machine, and the shop settled back into its working quiet. Through the bay doorway, they could hear him greet Garrett, ask about the suspension job, offer to hand tools if Garrett needed an extra pair. Garrett said nothing that Carl could hear, which he was beginning to understand might itself be a kind of answer.

Carl and Jillian looked at each other. They did not say anything. They had the easy economy of people who had been working together long enough to communicate without speaking, in the specific way of

two people who had the same information and had independently arrived at the same place.

Carl opened his laptop. Jillian picked up her coffee. The investigation was in its next phase, and neither of them had said so, and it didn't need to be said.

1:47 p.m. Denny in the shop. Same as always — warm, specific, helpful, completely natural. He knows about the GPS module from Wanda's comment at the Merchant Association meeting. He's keeping track of the Deer Haven Loop water pressure because of a culvert issue from last winter. He asked Garrett if he needed an extra pair of hands on the suspension job.

I'm going to start looking for the product tonight. Whatever he's been adding to these machines, he's been telling people about it. That means it's findable.

He said "easier to help people if you know what's going on." I don't think he knows that sentence has two meanings right now.

He closed the notes document. He opened a browser. He typed, in the search bar, *Denny Oakes Duck Creek Village Utah*, and waited.

chapter eleven

THE MORNING CARL borrowed Atmospheric Gary's equipment was the morning he understood that Gary was not, as he had initially assumed, an eccentric with too much time and an internet connection, but a serious amateur meteorologist with a better-organized data collection system than some of the professional setups Carl had worked with in his previous life at a company that thought it was doing something important with weather APIs. Gary's three weather stations were calibrated and maintained on a schedule that he kept in a laminated binder. His temperature and humidity loggers were the professional grade, not the consumer grade. When Carl arrived at Gary's cabin above the main trailhead to borrow the logging unit, Gary spent eight minutes explaining its calibration history and handed over a laminated quick-reference card for the interface. Carl thanked him. Gary said: "Return it clean and don't let it get wet." Carl said he wouldn't. Gary said: "The probe, not the display unit. The display unit is waterproof. The probe is not." Carl updated his understanding of the equipment and thanked Gary again.

He drove back down to the access pullout feeling better equipped than he had in Chapter 7, which had been, in retrospect, more reconnaissance than investigation.

Jillian was already at the pullout when he arrived, which was not a surprise. She had the pamphlet's sketch map and the photocopied

chapter page in her bag and a different headlamp than last time — a brighter one, which she had borrowed from the trail maintenance locker at the Cedar Mountain Country Store on the grounds that if they were going into the tube again, they might as well be able to see. She also had, in the front pocket of her jacket, a measuring tape, which she had thought to bring and Carl had not, and which he acknowledged as the more practical preparation.

"Atmospheric Gary says the probe isn't waterproof," Carl said, by way of greeting.

"Is it going to get wet?" she asked.

"I don't plan for it to."

"Then we're fine." She looked at his equipment on the tailgate. The directional condenser microphone was in its padded bag — the same one from Chapter 7. The recorder was upgraded, a different model with a cleaner preamp. The temperature logger was Gary's unit, the professional grade, with the probe clearly labeled in Gary's handwriting: *NOT WATERPROOF*. "What's the plan?"

He had the plan in a document on his phone. He turned the phone toward her. She read it with the focused speed of someone who processed dense information quickly.

"You want to measure the gap," she said.

"Precisely, in millimeters. And photograph it in a way that establishes the dimensional relationship to the pipe body. If I have accurate dimensions I can model the acoustic behavior — calculate what frequency the gap should produce given the temperature differential, and compare that to what we recorded." He put the phone away. "If they match, I have a complete account of the mechanism."

"And if they don't?"

"Then I'm wrong about something and I need to figure out what." He picked up the equipment bag. "Ready?"

"Ready," she said, and they went in.

The lava field was doing what the lava field always did in the morning: absorbing the light rather than reflecting it, the black basalt taking the

early sun and holding it with the focused attention of something that had been doing this for nine centuries and had made its peace with the practice. The temperature at the surface was fifty-eight degrees — Carl noted this from Gary's logger as soon as they stepped off the gravel of the two-track — and the air had the particular quality of high-elevation mornings in late July, when the season had committed to summer but the altitude maintained its own position on the question.

Jillian led at the same pace as before, the same route, the hollow section navigated with the same care. She had been here twice now and the approach had settled into her body the way familiar terrain did — not memorized, exactly, but known, the way you knew a room in the dark. She spoke less than she had in Chapter 7. The first visit had been partially about orientation; this one was about work, and the work called for a different kind of attention.

Carl walked behind her, equipment bag over one shoulder, recorder in his hand and running. He was building the ambient profile again, not because he needed it — he had it from the previous visit — but because the temperature data recorded alongside the audio would let him demonstrate the correlation later. If he wanted to demonstrate it later. Which he did, or which he had been doing, or which he might continue doing until a decision was made about whether demonstration was the right word for what he intended.

He had been thinking about this since the drive up the mountain that morning: the question of what the complete account was for. In his work, a complete account was always for something — a design recommendation, a user research report, a presentation to a product team. The account existed in service of a decision. Out here, with the lava beds on both sides and the tube ahead and the temperature logger in his hand, the purpose of the complete account was less clear, and he had spent a portion of the drive examining his own motivation with the specific discomfort of a person who was accustomed to purpose and had temporarily misplaced it.

The tube entrance appeared at the same place, looking the same, the gate and the Forest Service signs unchanged. The temperature differential at the entrance was seven degrees this morning, slightly less than the eight degrees he'd recorded in the evening during the previous visit,

which was consistent with the morning thermal equilibrium before the day's heating cycle had fully established the differential. He noted this.

They went in.

The first chamber was the same chamber, which was a statement that required less qualification than it might seem to: caves and tubes did not change between visits, and the particular permanence of volcanic rock gave the space a quality of constancy that was, Carl thought, one of the more honest things about it. The ceiling was where it had been. The floor was where it had been. The smell of rock and cold and the faint mineral quality of deep interior space was exactly the same.

The pipe was where they had left it.

Carl crouched at the east margin where the pipe section ran along the base of the chamber wall, and he looked at it properly this time, with the measuring tape and Gary's logger and the upgraded camera on his phone. He measured the gap first: nineteen millimeters at the widest point, fourteen at the narrowest, the separation irregular in the way of metal that had moved in small increments over many decades rather than in a single failure event. He photographed it with a ruler in frame — both the gap itself and the full run of pipe, which extended approximately two meters in each direction before disappearing under the debris that had accumulated against the wall.

Jillian crouched beside him.

"She wrote about the infrastructure," Jillian said. She had the photocopied chapter page out, folded to the relevant section. "The CCC survey from 1934. There's a note here — I've read it before but it didn't mean anything to me until Chapter 7." She read aloud: *'A spring capping project in the eastern lava bed margin, iron pipe of approximately four inches diameter, installed to direct the natural outflow from a perennial spring toward a livestock watering point east of the formation. Survey notes indicate approximately 200 feet of pipe in two runs, with a service access point at the main tube entrance.'* She looked at the pipe. "Service access point at the main tube entrance. They knew the pipe ran into the tube."

"Which means," Carl said, "that anyone who read the 1934 survey would have known about the pipe." He photographed the section of pipe that was most exposed, the fitting and the gap in sharp focus. "Your grandmother had access to the county survey records. She cited them."

"She cited them in 1986." Jillian looked at the page. "She wrote 'sounds reported here' in her sketch map notation. If she connected the sounds to the pipe, she didn't write it down. Or she wasn't certain."

"Or she was certain and decided not to write it down," Carl said.

Jillian looked at him. He had said this without emphasis, as an observation rather than a conclusion, but the observation had a quality that settled in the space between them with some weight.

"That's possible," she said. "She was very careful about what she put in the pamphlet. She distinguished, in her note to me, between 'what the mountain says' and 'what the mountain means.' She never conflated them." She looked at the pipe. "If she understood the mechanism and chose to describe the phenomenon rather than the cause, that was a decision."

Carl wrote this in the notes document. He was aware, writing it, that he was documenting a decision made by a person who was not present and could not explain her reasoning, and that he was treating the decision as data rather than as a subject of judgment, which felt like the appropriate approach and also like an incomplete one. He put the phone away and got the recorder and the directional microphone set up near the gap.

"We wait for the differential to establish," he said.

"I know," Jillian said. She sat on the chamber floor, back against the wall, and opened her journal.

The differential established over the course of thirty-four minutes, which Carl documented in six-minute intervals with Gary's logger. The external temperature had climbed to sixty-three degrees as the morning progressed and the sun reached the field's surface — five degrees of increase, enough to widen the gap between the tube's stable interior and the warming exterior to approximately nine degrees, which was close to

the Chapter 7 figure and sufficient, based on his modeling, to drive the airflow through the gap.

The sounds began at nine degrees of differential.

Not suddenly — the onset was the same gradual emergence as in Chapter 7, the resonance building from the threshold of perception into something specific and audible. The gap in the pipe was producing a vibration that the tube's geometry amplified and shaped: a metallic, rhythmic sound with the irregular but patterned quality of something driven by a variable force, the airflow fluctuating with the morning wind, the frequency shifting in the small range between fourteen and nineteen millimeters of gap width.

Carl watched the recorder's level display. The signal was clean — cleaner than the previous recording, the upgraded preamp giving him a signal-to-noise ratio that would allow genuine acoustic analysis rather than just documentation. He watched the levels and did not touch anything, because the recording was exactly what it needed to be and interference was the last thing it required.

Jillian had closed her journal. She was sitting with her back against the wall and her knees drawn up, and she was listening with the complete, unhurried attention that she brought to things that she had already decided mattered. She was not analyzing. She was receiving. Carl had learned, over the course of the summer, that this was not a passive state — it required a specific kind of effort, the effort of staying present rather than processing — and that Jillian was better at it than anyone he had spent time with.

The sounds ran for five minutes and forty-two seconds. Then the differential shifted — the morning wind changed direction and the airflow through the entrance altered — and the gap fell silent.

Carl replayed the recording. He held the recorder between them and they listened together to the compressed, tinny reproduction of what they had just heard live, and the difference between the two — the presence of the live sound, the flatness of the recorded version — was itself a data point that he noted but did not add to any document.

"It's always reduced," he said.

"I know," Jillian said. "That's true of everything that gets recorded." She paused. "My grandmother wrote about that too. She said the differ-

ence between a story told and a story written was the same as the difference between a fire and a photograph of one."

Carl looked at the recorder. "Is that in the pamphlet?"

"No. She told me that when I was about fourteen. I was going through a phase where I was writing everything down." She paused. "She said: 'Write it down, yes. But write it down so that the person who reads it can feel the fire, not so that they don't have to.'"

He thought about this. He thought about the notes document, which was now very large, and about the Cord document, and about the recording currently saved to the recorder's internal memory, and about the acoustic model he was building on his laptop that would eventually — if he chose to complete it — constitute a complete account of the mechanism.

"I can model the acoustic behavior," he said. "I have everything I need. The gap dimensions, the pipe geometry, the temperature differential, the recordings." He paused. "I could publish a note. Not a full paper — a short technical note in an appropriate journal. Local history, acoustic phenomena. It would be accurate and complete and practically nobody would read it."

Jillian looked at him.

"I know," he said. "I'm working through it."

"Take your time," she said. "The mountain has been keeping this for a hundred and forty years. It can wait for you to think."

Carl looked at the pipe. At the gap, currently silent, the metal cold, the fitting that had been slowly separating from its coupling since 1934 or perhaps earlier, the iron moving in increments too small to measure in any single year but cumulative enough, over eight decades of winter and summer, to open a space that the wind found and the lava tube amplified and the mountain turned into a legend.

He was a designer. His work was the design of communication between human beings and the systems they operated. He had spent eight years building interfaces that made invisible processes visible, that translated machine behavior into human language. He was sitting in a lava tube looking at a machine the mountain had assembled from a CCC pipe and nine hundred years of volcanic rock and the specific temperature behavior of a high-elevation plateau, and he understood it

completely, and the understanding felt — this was not a professional observation but it was an accurate one — like something that needed to be held carefully rather than published.

He packed up the recorder and the microphone. He photographed the pipe one more time, in the chamber's cold air, and put the phone away.

"Jillian," he said.

She looked up from her journal.

"Can you read me the last paragraph of the Phantom Stagecoach chapter?"

She was quiet for a moment. Then she opened the photocopied page and found the paragraph. She read it — her grandmother's voice in her voice, in the cold of the first chamber of the north lava tube, with the iron pipe and its nineteen-millimeter gap a few feet away:

Perhaps the kindest thing we can do for a mountain is to leave some of its questions unanswered. The stories we tell about the places we love are not lesser than the facts. They are the facts of a different kind — the facts of belonging, and of mystery, and of the long conversation between the living and the ground they stand on.

The tube was quiet. Outside, the morning was doing what mornings did — advancing, warming, committing to the day. Carl sat with the paragraph for a moment.

"She wrote this before she knew about the pipe," he said.

"I think so," Jillian said. "Or before she was certain. The 1934 survey annotation might mean she suspected. But she wrote the conclusion before she had the evidence."

"She arrived at the right answer before she had the proof."

"That happens," Jillian said. "The mountain tells you things before you know why they're true."

Carl looked at the gap in the pipe one more time. Fourteen to nineteen millimeters. Eight decades of thermal cycling. The Iron Horse, measured and understood and quietly extraordinary.

"I'm going to need to think about this for a few days," he said.

"Good," she said. "That's the right amount of time."

They gathered their things and went back through the gate and into the morning field.

The walk out was quieter than the walk in, which was the appropriate direction for that particular change. The lava field in the mid-morning was different from the lava field at dusk — warmer and more ordinary, the dramatic quality of the volcanic landscape replaced by something more straightforward, the rock simply rock, the sky simply sky, the distance between here and the parking area simply a walk.

Jillian moved through it with the same ease she always moved through terrain she knew, and Carl moved beside her with the same slightly-behind-the-terrain attention of someone who was physically present and mentally somewhere else, which was accurate. He was going through the acoustic model in his head — not building it toward publication, just reviewing its components. Gap dimensions. Pipe geometry. Temperature differential. Tube length and cross-section. The characteristic frequencies of the resonating system at different differential values. The correlation between the observed sounds and the modeled predictions.

It was complete. That was the thing. The account was complete in a way that he had not built a complete account since the previous product cycle, and the completeness had its own quality — a sense of closed doors, of questions that had found their answers and were ready to be filed.

"Garrett is going to need to know what we found," he said, apropos of nothing that had been said in the past ten minutes.

Jillian looked at him. "About the pipe?"

"About the ATV machines. About Denny." He paused. "I found the product last night. Online. I have most of what I need."

She was quiet for a moment. "Tell me tonight. Come to the cabin for dinner and tell me what you found, and we'll decide together what to do with it."

"Tonight," he said. "Yes."

They walked on. The two-track returned underfoot, and the gravel of the parking area came into view, and their trucks waited in the late-morning light with the patient reliability of things that had been left

somewhere and were simply there when you came back, which was all you could reasonably ask of them.

Carl transferred the morning's recordings from the recorder to his laptop before leaving the pullout, as he always did. He checked the temperature logs — nine degrees of differential at the onset, exactly as modeled. He uploaded both to the Cord document, where they sat alongside the photographs and the gap measurements and the acoustic model.

He looked at the document for a moment. Then he renamed it.

He thought for a few seconds about what to call it. He had named documents before with the pragmatic efficiency of someone who needed to find them later: *ATV anomaly. Elimination. Cord.* These were working titles, functional. What this document was, now that it was complete, was something different. It was a record of a thing the mountain had been doing for eighty years in the memory of a thing that had happened a hundred and forty years ago, and a record of the two people who had found it and understood it and were deciding what to do with the understanding.

He named the document *Iron Horse*.

He closed the laptop and drove back down Movie Ranch Road toward the cabin on Deer Haven Loop, and on the way he passed the pullout, and he slowed, not quite stopping, and looked at the lava field in the late morning light, and what he saw was simply the field — black rock, blue sky, the ordinary extraordinary landscape that the mountain wore on its surface while doing its slower work underneath.

He drove on.

10:47 a.m. Complete acoustic account of the north tube resonance system. Gap dimensions confirmed: 14-19mm at separation point, CCC iron pipe c.1934, east margin of first accessible chamber. Differential at onset: 9 degrees Celsius. Recordings clean. Model confirms observed frequency range.

Renamed the document. I'll figure out what to do with it. But not today.

Tonight: dinner at the Haverford cabin. I found the product. We need to decide how to move on Denny.

Both things at once. The mountain and the machines. They've been running in parallel all summer. I think they've been teaching the same lesson.

chapter twelve

LEO HAD A THEORY ABOUT B-ROLL, which was that most documentarians collected it wrong.

The wrong way was to know what you were looking for before you looked. If you knew what you were looking for, you filmed what you expected, and what you expected was always smaller than what was actually there. The right way was to arrive with the camera running and let the place tell you what it had, which required a specific kind of patience that most people described as passive but that Leo had come to understand as its own form of active work. You were not doing nothing. You were doing the opposite of imposing. You were creating the conditions under which interesting things could reveal themselves, and then you were paying close enough attention to catch them when they did.

This was the theory. It had served him well in other locations. On Cedar Mountain, it had produced, in three weeks of documentary work, approximately fourteen hours of footage, two usable sequences, one genuinely great shot of Wanda Fehr that he had gotten on his phone after his camera battery died, and a forty-two-second segment of Garrett eating a sandwich that Leo had watched back seven times in the past week and was increasingly certain was the best thing he had ever filmed.

He arrived at Loose Wheels on a Wednesday morning with the camera on, the bay doors open, and the theory firmly in place.

The bay in the mid-morning had its own particular atmosphere, which Leo had been trying to capture for three weeks and had not yet fully captured, and which he was beginning to suspect might be the kind of thing that required patience rather than technique. It was not the equipment or the light — both were manageable. It was the quality of the work itself: the specific, unhurried attention that the space brought to things. Machines came in, Garrett and Rolane looked at them, the machines were understood and addressed and sent back out. The process had a rhythm that was not dramatic and was not trying to be dramatic, and documenting the non-dramatic was, Leo had learned, considerably harder than documenting the dramatic, because the dramatic told you when to press record and the non-dramatic did not.

He set up in the corner of the secondary bay — the bay Garrett used for prep work and where volunteer helpers typically worked on their own machines — with the camera aimed toward the service floor at a low angle that caught the light from the open bay doors in a way he found interesting. He had blocked this shot three separate times and not executed it, always because something else had presented itself or because Garrett had asked him to move. Today the secondary bay was empty and the angle was unobstructed and the light was doing the thing he had been waiting for it to do.

He pressed record.

The first twenty minutes were the ambient footage he needed — the sounds of the shop layered into each other, the radio doing something with a song that had a steel guitar and complicated feelings about a specific woman in a specific truck, the ceiling fans turning at their summer speed, the distant sound of Garrett's work in the far bay punctuated by his characteristic working sounds. Leo moved the camera slowly around the secondary bay, letting the shot breathe, not forcing anything. He filmed the shelf of supplies on the east wall — Garrett's careful labeling, the products in their proper places, the gap where the supplemental conditioner used to be. He filmed the tool hooks, each hook with its correct tool except one empty hook near the far end, which he found compositionally interesting and which he later could

not explain his interest in. He filmed the open bay door and the lot beyond it and the corner of Movie Ranch Road visible at the lot's edge, where the summer traffic moved at its easy pace.

Rolane appeared in the bay doorway at nine forty, carrying a belt housing with the focused expression of someone whose work was going according to expectations and who found expectations a reasonable guide to work. She looked at Leo, looked at the camera, looked at the shot he was setting up, and made the specific assessment that she applied to most things Leo did, which was: probably fine, will not require my involvement. She went back to the far bay. Leo appreciated her for this.

At ten fifteen, Denny Oakes arrived.

He came through the shop's side entrance — the entrance that connected the convenience area to the service bay — and he moved through the secondary bay with the easy familiarity of someone who had been using this space for a full season. He was wearing his work vest over a long-sleeve shirt and he had the specific quality of a man who had things to do and was going to do them in the order that made sense, beginning with checking in on his ATV, which was in the secondary bay on its own stand, awaiting a belt replacement that Denny was handling himself rather than paying shop rates for, which was a reasonable decision and one that Garrett had accommodated without comment.

He greeted Leo with the warmth he brought to all greetings. Leo lifted a hand from behind the camera. Denny went to his ATV.

Leo kept filming.

This was the b-roll theory in action: Denny working on his machine was good footage. The body language of someone who was competent at something physical was always good footage — there was a quality of attention in skilled physical work that the camera could capture in a way that no amount of interviewing replicated. Denny had this quality. He moved with the unconscious fluency of someone who had been working with his hands long enough that the tools had become extensions of intention rather than instruments of execution. Leo watched this through the viewfinder and thought about how to describe it in the narration he was writing in his head, which was always how he worked.

At ten thirty-two, Denny went to his truck.

Leo followed with the camera, tracking through the secondary bay's open door to the lot, staying back far enough to not be intrusive, keeping the angle low. This was the b-roll instinct: Denny going to the truck for a part, or a tool, or something from the cooler he kept in the bed. It was ambient reality. It was the kind of footage that made a documentary feel true rather than staged, the thousand small transitions between the moments of significance.

Denny went to the driver's side door. He opened it. He reached behind the seat.

He came back with a bag — a canvas tote, slightly worn, the kind of bag that contained things that lived in the truck rather than things that were brought on specific trips. He brought the bag into the secondary bay and set it on the bench. He reached into the bag and produced a small container.

The container was perhaps four inches tall, cylindrical, with a label that was handwritten rather than printed. Leo could see the label in the camera's frame — the handwriting was legible on the screen's preview, but he was watching the shot composition rather than reading the content, which was why he saw the container without immediately registering what the container was.

Denny measured a specific amount — careful, precise, the amount of a person who was following a protocol — into the ATV's fuel system access. He replaced the cap. He put the container back in the bag. He put the bag back behind the truck's seat. He came back to the secondary bay and continued with the belt replacement.

The whole sequence took four minutes.

Leo moved the camera back to the bay interior, where the morning light was doing something he wanted to capture before it shifted. He filmed for another twenty minutes and then took a break for coffee, and the b-roll session continued, and the container sat behind the seat of Denny's truck, and Leo's camera held the four-minute sequence in its memory without comment.

Garrett's lunch break happened at the same time every day, which was twelve-fifteen, which was when the morning's service jobs had reached their logical stopping points and the afternoon's had not yet begun. He came out of the far bay, opened the small cooler he kept under the counter, and sat on the stool at the secondary bay's bench.

The sandwich was a specific sandwich that Leo had not been able to identify with certainty — it appeared to involve turkey, something that might have been avocado, and a kind of bread that was denser than standard sandwich bread in a way that suggested it had been made rather than purchased. Garrett ate it with the unhurried focus of someone who was doing one thing and doing it completely, which was the same quality he brought to mechanical work and to diagnosis and to the end-of-day inventory and to most other things he was observed doing, but which in the context of a sandwich had a quality that Leo found, watching through the viewfinder, unexpectedly moving.

He was not performing anything. He was simply eating a sandwich, at twelve-fifteen, in the secondary bay of his shop, looking out the open bay door at the mountain in the middle distance. His expression was not content, exactly, or peaceful, exactly — it was more specific than either of those words. It was the expression of a person who had arrived at their own terms with the world and found the terms acceptable. Not triumphant. Not resigned. Simply settled.

Leo filmed twelve minutes of this.

He did not zoom in. He did not adjust the angle. He did not do anything that would have interrupted the shot or signaled to Garrett that the shot was happening, which he did not think Garrett was unaware of but which he was reasonably confident Garrett had decided not to object to, on the grounds that if you were going to let someone make a documentary in your shop, you had to accept that the documentary would sometimes look at the shop's ordinary operations.

Garrett finished the sandwich. He folded the wax paper it had come in with the same care he applied to everything — the fold clean, the corners aligned — and put it in the cooler. He closed the cooler. He sat for another minute looking at the mountain through the bay door. Then he went back to the far bay.

Leo reviewed the last twelve minutes on the preview screen.

He watched it twice.

That, he thought, is the film.

Carl arrived at the shop at one-fifteen, during the tail end of the second-day safety course session, which ran in the meadow behind the shop and which Carl had left briefly to pick up the parts order he had on hold at the counter. He was in a particular mood — the focused, slightly distracted quality of someone who had been doing close analytical work and had not yet fully surfaced from it. He and Jillian had had dinner at the Haverford cabin the previous evening and he had told her what he had found online about Denny's MaxFlo Pro distributorship, and they had agreed on the next steps, and he had come back to the cabin and spent two hours refining his understanding of the Phase 1 product's mechanism and cross-referencing it with the ATV symptom profiles, and the cross-reference was complete and the match was precise and he now knew, with the specific certainty of someone who had run the numbers from multiple directions and arrived at the same place each time, exactly what had been happening to these machines.

He picked up the parts order and was about to leave when Rolane said, from the bay doorway: "The safety course thing going okay?"

"Better than okay," Carl said. "The fallback card is working."

"Wanda told me," Rolane said. She said this in the tone of someone who found this significant enough to mention but not significant enough to elaborate on. She went back to the bay.

Carl put the parts order under his arm and was about to go back to the meadow when his phone buzzed. He looked at it, and saw a message from Leo:

hey are you still at the shop

Just leaving

stay there two minutes. I want to show you something from this morning's footage

Wanda's mid-session check was happening in the meadow — the riders on a water-crossing simulation that Carl had set up with a shallow dip in the terrain and some sand — and it was going well enough that she had not signaled for him, which he had learned to read as the best possible report. He texted Jillian: *going to be a few minutes late getting back to the meadow. Leo has something from the footage.*

Leo arrived from the far end of the lot with his camera bag over one shoulder and his laptop under his arm and the expression of someone who was managing a feeling he had not fully identified yet. He set the laptop on the counter, opened it, and navigated to a file.

"I was filming b-roll this morning," he said. "In the secondary bay."

"I know," Carl said. "I saw you in there earlier."

"I got something." Leo opened the file. He scrolled to the ten-thirty section and let it run.

Carl watched the sequence. He watched Denny go to the truck. He watched him retrieve the bag from behind the seat. He watched him measure the specific amount into the fuel system access. He watched him put the container back in the bag. He watched the bag go back behind the seat.

He looked at the preview screen's timestamp. He looked at the secondary bay visible in the footage. He looked at the container in the shot, the handwritten label, the careful measured dose.

"Can you zoom in on the label?" he said.

Leo had anticipated this. He had the enhanced still already pulled up — he had done this himself, that morning, using the editing software on his laptop. The label was clearer than in the video but not perfectly legible at the recording's native resolution. He had taken it as far as the software would take it without generating artifacts.

Carl looked at it. He could see the handwritten text in the upper portion of the label. He could read approximately half of it.

MaxFlo Pro — Phase —

The rest was partially obscured by Denny's hand in the frame.

"Phase something," Leo said.

"Phase one," Carl said. He said it with the flat certainty of someone

who already knew what the rest of the label said, because he had spent the previous evening reading the MaxFlo Pro product documentation and knew the Phase 1/Phase 2 system in sufficient detail that the partial label was not a partial answer but a complete one. He looked at Leo. "Do you have the original file? The full resolution?"

"I film in 4K," Leo said. "The file is on the camera card." He produced it.

Carl had his laptop in the truck. He went and got it. He imported the file. He opened it in the editing software Leo had walked him through two weeks ago for a different reason. He navigated to the container sequence. He opened the still frame tool and captured the frame in which the label was most visible — Denny's hand positioned slightly differently, the label's full face angled toward the camera. He zoomed.

MaxFlo Pro — Phase 1

And below it, in smaller handwriting: *D. Oakes, Cedar Mtn.*

Carl sat with this for a moment. Then he opened the notes document.

1:34 p.m. Leo's footage: Denny retrieved the MaxFlo Pro Phase 1 container from behind his truck seat and measured a dose into his ATV's fuel system, 10:32 this morning, secondary bay. Container label confirmed in 4K still frame: "MaxFlo Pro — Phase 1, D. Oakes, Cedar Mtn." This is not his ATV. This is a customer ATV that had a scheduled belt replacement. He was in the bay for the service.

He stopped typing. He reread the last two sentences. He deleted *This is not his ATV* and read the remaining note again.

He typed it back in.

"What is it?" Leo said. He had been watching Carl with the contained attention of someone who was trying to read a situation without interrupting it.

"A fuel additive," Carl said. "A specific product. Multi-level marketing. The Phase 1 formula conditions the fuel system but leaves a resin

deposit if it isn't followed within forty-eight hours by the Phase 2 product." He paused. "The Phase 2 product is sold by the same distributor."

Leo was quiet for a moment. Then: "Denny's been dosing the machines."

"He's been adding Phase 1 to machines he has access to," Carl said carefully. "The effect is gradual power loss with no diagnostic code. Which is exactly the symptom profile in the six machines Garrett has been tracking."

Leo looked at the laptop screen, at the still frame with the label and the container and Denny's hand. He looked at it for a long time with the specific quality of someone who understood that the footage he had captured by accident was not actually an accident — not in the sense of having been intended, but in the sense that attention paid to the right things tended to produce results that were relevant, and the b-roll theory was, in its own way, a statement about the relationship between attention and evidence.

"What happens now?" he said.

"I need to talk to Jillian," Carl said. "And then we need to talk to Garrett." He saved the file to his laptop, ejected the camera card, and handed it back to Leo. "Can you keep this between us for now?"

"Yes," Leo said, without any hesitation that Carl could see. He closed the laptop. He put the camera card away. He looked at Carl. "Is he in serious trouble?"

Carl thought about Denny's distributor page. The bio with the photo and the work vest. The post from eight months ago about helping every small engine on Cedar Mountain run better. The complete, undefended sincerity of someone who had found a product he believed in and had not yet found the part of his own reasoning where the belief had crossed a line.

"He's in the kind of trouble that comes from making several bad decisions in a row while thinking you were doing the right thing," Carl said. "Which is a specific kind of trouble."

Leo considered this. "The worst kind," he said.

"Sometimes," Carl said. He closed his own laptop and put it under his arm. "Sometimes it's also the most fixable kind."

He went back to the meadow, where the water-crossing simulation

had produced, in his absence, the specific result that the data had predicted and that Wanda had apparently been waiting for with the patient attention of someone who knew exactly what was coming.

The afternoon session ran until three. Carl watched Connor navigate the water crossing three times — the first cautiously, the second correctly, the third at the correct speed with the correct line and the correct approach to the decision, which Wanda noted without praise or criticism, the notation of a correct result being simply the absence of correction. The Henleys had found their rhythm. Loretta remained perplexingly good at some things and perplexingly inconsistent at others, which Wanda appeared to find more interesting than either pure competence or consistent error. The beginners were improving at the pace that appropriate challenge produced: steadily, visibly, with the particular satisfaction that came from understanding something that had been opaque the day before.

Wanda's mid-session check happened at the water crossing, as Carl had expected. She watched two riders through the dip and came to stand beside him.

"The fallback card is being used correctly now," she said.

"I saw," he said.

"The second diagram is still ambiguous." She looked at the course. "The left fork indication at the junction variant. Three riders have misread it."

"I'll fix it before the next session," he said.

She nodded. She watched the third rider through the water crossing, assessed the line, said nothing. Then: "You were inside the shop for a while."

"Leo had footage he wanted me to see."

"Is that the documentary footage?"

"Some of it," Carl said.

Wanda was quiet for a moment. Then: "Leo films with more care than he lets on."

"I know," Carl said.

She went back to the course. Carl watched the next rider and thought about what he was going to say to Jillian and what they were going to say to Garrett and what Garrett was going to say to Denny, and none of the thinking was anxious exactly — it was the organized, sequential thinking of someone who had identified the next steps and was preparing to take them — but it was also not comfortable, because the steps were going to require something of everyone involved that was going to be harder than the investigation had been.

Leo reviewed the full day's footage that evening at his cabin. He went through it in order, as he always did: the ambient footage from the morning bay session, the sandwich sequence, the Denny container sequence, the afternoon shots he'd taken from the fence line during the water crossing. He worked slowly and with the focused attention of someone who was no longer just archiving but evaluating — this was the stage of documentary work he liked best, the stage where the raw material started to tell you what it was.

The sandwich sequence ran twelve minutes on his timeline. He watched it twice more. Then he watched a third time with the volume up, which he had not done before, and heard in the ambient audio something he had not registered while filming: the particular quality of the silence around Garrett as he ate, which was not the silence of absence but the silence of a place that was comfortable with itself. The ceiling fans. The distant radio. The sound of Movie Ranch Road through the open bay door, barely present. And underneath all of it, so faint that it was almost below the threshold of the microphone's sensitivity, the sound of something in the far bay settling — metal on metal, the small percussion of a shop at rest.

He had not planned to film any of this. He had been filming b-roll, by the b-roll theory, and the b-roll theory had produced a twelve-minute sequence of a man eating a sandwich in a service bay in the mountains of Utah, and the sequence was the best thing in the documentary, and Leo had no clear explanation for why that was true. It simply was.

He exported a rough cut of the documentary to his editing timeline,

laid the sandwich sequence at the center of it, and looked at the timeline for a while. Then he opened a new project file and titled it *Loose Wheels: A Documentary* and started building toward something.

At eleven forty-five, his phone buzzed.

Carl:

I looked at the footage again. The container label is complete and confirmed. I'm calling Jillian in the morning. We'll let you know what happens.

ok. You going to be okay?

Yeah. Are you?

Leo looked at the timeline, at the twelve minutes of sandwich footage at its center, at the four-minute container sequence filed separately in a folder he had labeled simply *Evidence*, which was a word he had used in the documentary context before but not in this particular weight of context, not with this particular import.

Yeah. Go do what you need to do.

He put the phone down. He went back to the timeline. The mountain outside his cabin window was doing what it always did at this hour, which was nothing visible and everything necessary, and somewhere in the secondary bay of Loose Wheels, which was dark and locked and smelled of oil and cold air, the gap on the east wall shelf was empty, because Denny had taken the container home, and the investigation was in its final phase, and the documentary was taking shape, and the sandwich was, in Leo's professional opinion, simply perfect.

chapter **thirteen**

THE LOFTY NEST sat on Movie Ranch Road at the point where the road's commercial character gave way to something less deliberate — the shops thinning, the lots widening, the ponderosas beginning their encroachment on the built environment in the patient way of things that expected to win eventually and were not in any hurry about it. The shop itself was a log structure with a covered porch and a sign that was readable without being aggressive about it, and inside it was the kind of space that rewarded time spent in it more generously than time spent looking at it from the outside would suggest.

Carl and Jillian arrived separately and met at the porch at nine-thirty, which was the arrangement they had made by text the previous evening, after the conversation about Leo's footage and the MaxFlo Pro product had run its course and they had agreed that the morning needed to go to the Cord thread before they turned their full attention to Denny. Both threads were moving. Both needed to be followed to their conclusions. This was the morning for one of them.

"Did you call ahead?" Carl asked.

"I never call ahead," Jillian said. "Erica is always there."

This proved accurate.

The shop's interior was warm after the morning outside and had the layered smell of old paper and wood and something faintly resinous that Carl associated with the shop specifically and had never encountered anywhere else. Erica was behind the main counter when they came in, doing something with a receipt book that involved a level of organizational attention that the receipt book's physical condition did not obviously reward. She looked up when the chimes went, assessed the two of them in the single efficient glance of someone who had been reading people in this shop for many years, and set the receipt book down.

"Jillian," she said. Then: "And the GPS module." She said this to Carl with the calm accuracy of a woman who had been told things by a community that told her things.

"Carl Matsuda," he said. "We've met briefly."

"You photographed the Golden Wrench in July and have been in twice since then," she said. "I know who you are." She said this without any particular performance of impressiveness, just as a correction to the record. She came around the counter. "What are you looking for?"

"Historical photographs," Jillian said. "Cedar Mountain area, 1880s if possible. Specifically anything connected to the Cedar City iron works or the stage lines that operated through here in the territorial period."

Erica looked at her for a moment. Then she said: "Come back here," and walked toward the back of the shop without waiting to see whether they would follow, because she had already assessed that they would.

The archive corner was not visible from the main shop floor. It was accessible through a narrow passage between two sections of shelving that, if you were not looking for the passage, read as the end of one shelf and the beginning of another. Erica navigated it with the ease of someone for whom the shop's geography was as natural as the layout of a familiar house, and on the other side was a space with lower ceilings and better light — a work lamp on an adjustable arm, a table that was clearly used for actual examination of materials, and along the far wall, a set of flat file drawers in a metal cabinet that had the vintage institu-

tional quality of something salvaged from a school or a government office.

"The area photographs are in the lower drawers," Erica said. "Organized by decade and subject, loosely. The 1880s are in the third drawer from the bottom. I have a folder labeled 'Cedar Mountain Commercial, 1880–1910' that might be what you're looking for." She looked at Carl. "The photographs you're hoping are in there — are they connected to the wrench?"

Carl looked at her. "How did you—"

"You photographed the wrench in July," she said. "You've been in twice since then, both times spending time at the counter near the register. The wrench is the thing that's changed for you in this shop." She said this with the equanimity of someone who found pattern recognition a natural part of her work. "And Jillian's grandmother's pamphlet has a section on pioneer-era tool culture that references the Cedar City smithy." She looked at Jillian. "I have a copy of the second printing. I've read it."

Jillian was quiet for a moment. Then: "Of course you have."

Erica opened the third flat file drawer.

The folder labeled *Cedar Mountain Commercial, 1880–1910* was thinner than Carl had hoped and thicker than he had feared, which was the right size for a folder that might or might not contain the specific thing you were looking for. Erica laid it on the examination table and opened it without ceremony, the photographs inside protected by glassine sleeves that had been added at some point by someone who understood archival care. She spread them across the table surface and stood back.

There were eleven photographs. Six were exterior views — buildings, road sections, the early commercial strip of what would become Movie Ranch Road. Three were group portraits of the kind that establishments commissioned in the 1880s and 1890s to document themselves, the subjects arranged with the formal stillness of people who understood that the photograph was a record and conducted themselves accordingly. One was a landscape view of the plateau in winter, the snow deep enough to change the mountain's proportions.

And two were interiors.

Carl recognized the first one immediately. He recognized it from the photograph that Jillian had found in the pamphlet — the one that had been tucked behind the rear cover for twenty-odd summers — but from a wider angle, a different vantage point. The forge was in the right background. The anvil was in the center. The tool rack ran along the right wall with its tongs and sets. And in the right foreground, the peg, and on the peg, the wrench.

"There," Jillian said, quietly.

Carl was already moving to the second interior photograph.

The second photograph was a closer composition, taken from nearer the forge, and it had what the first did not: people. Two figures, one in the middle distance and one in the foreground, both in the working clothes of the period — heavy canvas, leather apron, the specific posture of men who spent their days in physical work. The figure in the middle distance was at the forge, facing partially away from the camera, his age readable from his posture if not from his face: a man past middle age, with the particular set of shoulders of someone who had been doing this work for long enough that it had shaped him. The figure in the foreground was facing more toward the camera — not at the camera, the formal portrait convention, but toward it in the natural way of someone who had heard or sensed the photographer setting up and had turned without quite stopping what he was doing. He was younger. He was holding something: a long-handled tool, possibly a set, in his right hand. His left hand was near the wrench's peg but not touching it — reaching for it, or having just released it, the ambiguity of a caught moment.

And below the photograph, in faded ink on a label affixed to the bottom of the mount:

W. Cord & son, Cedar smithy, 1883.

Carl read it. He looked at Jillian. She had read it at the same moment he had, because her eyes were on his rather than on the photograph when he looked up.

"Cord," he said.

"Yes," she said.

The room was quiet. Erica was at the edge of the table, not quite

looking at the photograph, not quite looking away from it. She had the quality of someone who had been waiting for a specific moment and recognized it when it arrived.

"W. Cord & son," Carl said. "The same Cord."

"Elias Cord was the son," Jillian said. "Or the grandson — the 1902 business directory said second generation, established 1878. If W. Cord started the business in 1878 and this photograph is 1883, the figure in the foreground could be Elias at approximately—" she worked the age range, "—eighteen to twenty-five, depending on when he was born." She looked at the photograph. "The figure by the forge is older. This is the father. W. Cord."

Carl looked at the younger figure, the one reaching toward the peg, the one who may have made the wrench or who was simply in proximity to it on the day the photograph was taken, three years before the blizzard and the route and the vanishing. He looked at the wrench on the peg behind the figure, the same wrench that was now hanging above Garrett's register sixteen miles up the road, having traveled a route that nobody had documented or followed across a hundred and forty years.

He looked at Erica.

"Did you know?" he said.

She considered the question with the honesty it deserved. "I knew the folder was here. I knew the label said Cord." She paused. "I didn't know you were going to connect the wrench at Loose Wheels to this photograph." She looked at the photograph. "Though I find I'm not surprised."

"The wrench came from this smithy," Carl said.

"Almost certainly," she said. "The proportions match what I know of the shop's work. The peg style is consistent with how they mounted presentation pieces." She looked at Jillian. "Your grandmother's pamphlet describes the smithy's practice of making custom presentation hardware for their primary clients."

"The stage lines," Jillian said.

"The stage lines," Erica confirmed.

The 1887 Southern Utah Courier article was not in the flat file drawer. It was in a different location entirely — a vertical file of photocopied newspaper clippings that Erica maintained in a separate section of the archive corner, organized chronologically, and which she went to without hesitation after Carl asked whether she had anything connected to the 1886 blizzard or the Cord route's aftermath.

She returned with a single sheet — a photocopy of a photocopy, the resolution slightly degraded but the text fully legible — and laid it on the table beside the photographs.

It was a brief item, half a column, from the *Southern Utah Courier* of March 14, 1887. The headline: *STAGE COMPANY SETTLES RHOADES ROUTE CLAIM*. The relevant paragraph was the second:

Carl read it. He read it the way he read documents that contained unexpected information: completely, without rushing to the conclusion, letting the text produce what it produced.

The paragraph stated that the payroll gold from the November 1886 Kanarra-to-Cedar City run — the run on which Elias Cord had vanished — had been recovered by the mining concern through a separate private transaction in February 1887, and that the matter of its transport and the company's insurance claim relating to its loss were considered closed. The item noted that the fates of the driver and two passengers remained unknown and that the search conducted in March had produced no evidence of the coach or its occupants.

Carl looked at the paragraph for a long moment. Then he looked at Jillian.

She had read it at the same pace he had. She was looking at the photocopy with the expression of someone who had just had a thing she half-knew confirmed in a way that made the confirmation feel different from the knowing.

"The gold was recovered," Carl said.

"In February," Jillian said. "Three months after the blizzard. Three months after the company reported it lost." She looked at the article. "The item says 'private transaction.' Which means the company knew where it was, or reached an agreement with someone who did, and chose not to publicize the recovery." She paused. "The legend of the lost

gold — the treasure in the lava beds — was based on an assumption that was never true."

"Or never entirely true," Carl said. "The gold may have been genuinely lost at first. The blizzard, the coach, the route. But it was found. It was recovered. The company closed the claim and didn't correct the story."

"Why would they?" Jillian said. "The story was already loose. Correcting it would have required acknowledging the private transaction, which presumably involved an amount that was less than the gold's full value. It was easier to let the legend run."

She looked at the photographs. At W. Cord and son, 1883. At the younger figure reaching toward the peg.

"Elias was never found," she said. "His passengers were never found. The coach was never found." She said this with the careful flatness of someone stating facts that deserved their full weight. "The gold was recovered and the company closed the file and the mountain kept the rest."

Erica had been quiet through this. She was leaning against the edge of the shelving with her arms folded and the expression of someone who had been in this room for many conversations about things the mountain had kept, and who found the current conversation consistent with that experience.

"Your grandmother's footnote," she said to Jillian. "The Kane County Independent, 1887. Recovery — see notes."

"She found the recovery reference," Jillian said. "She knew. Or suspected." She looked at the annotation she had been carrying in her memory since Chapter 4: *Recovery? Ask at archives*. "She wrote 'significant' and then 'see notes' and then apparently never finished the note." She paused. "Or she finished the note somewhere I haven't found it."

"She may have decided it was the wrong kind of significant," Erica said. "Some things are significant in a way that adds to the story and some things are significant in a way that ends it. She was a careful writer. She would have known the difference."

The room was quiet. The work lamp on its adjustable arm was doing the quiet work of illumination, and outside the shop the Moun-

tain was going about its business, and Carl was looking at a photograph of a man who had made a tool that was now on a peg in a service bay sixteen miles away, and the tool had been made in 1883 or thereabouts, and the man in the photograph had driven his last route three years later into a storm, and the gold he was carrying had been quietly recovered and the company had closed the file, and what remained was the route and the legend and the wrench and the sounds from the lava tube that had been speaking in the mountain's own imprecise language for eighty years about iron wheels on black rock.

He looked at Jillian. She was looking at the photograph — at the younger figure, the one reaching toward the peg.

"He made it," Carl said. Or his father made it and he handled it. Or both. The photograph didn't resolve it and probably couldn't.

"His family made it," Jillian said. "That's enough to know."

Erica returned the photographs to their glassine sleeves and the folder to its drawer with the care of someone for whom the physical integrity of things was a form of respect rather than a procedure. She let them make photocopies of the two interior photographs on the small copier in the archive corner — good quality, 600 dpi, the details preserved. Carl photographed both originals with his phone as well, from the same careful angles he had used for the wrench.

They thanked her.

"Don't," she said, and she meant it in the specific way of someone who found gratitude for doing the obvious slightly beside the point. She paused, holding the folder. "What will you do with it?"

Carl looked at Jillian. Jillian looked at Carl. They did not confer visibly. They had, he recognized, already been conferring for several weeks in the slow accumulation of the way they worked together, and the answer to Erica's question was already known to both of them even if neither had stated it explicitly.

"Tell Garrett," Carl said. "The wrench is his. The history is in it. He should know what it is."

Erica nodded. "And the rest?"

"The rest," Jillian said, "is the mountain's."

Erica looked at her for a moment with the evaluating attention she had applied to both of them when they arrived. Then she did what she almost never did, which was show something on her face that was not the careful neutrality of a person who had decided long ago that her own opinions about things were best kept private: a brief, specific expression of satisfaction, the kind a person had when they recognized a correct answer.

She said nothing further. She walked them back through the passage between the shelves to the main shop floor, where the clocks were doing their various work and the morning light was coming through the front windows at the angle that made the hanging glass pieces cast their small colored rectangles across the floor. She went back to the counter. Carl and Jillian went to the door.

At the door, Carl stopped.

The Powell telescope was on its shelf, where it always was, in the corner near the window. He had looked at it before without thinking much about it. He looked at it now and thought about Cody Westbrook from Book 7, who had used the telescope and found what he needed to find, and about what Erica had said about objects belonging where they belonged and the story staying in the object. He thought about the wrench above Garrett's register and the peg that had been in the wall before the current structure was built.

He did not say anything about any of this. He went out.

They walked to their vehicles in the thin late-morning shade of the ponderosas that had established themselves along the road's east shoulder. The photocopies were in Carl's jacket pocket, folded once along the portrait orientation so the images faced inward.

Jillian was quiet for the first part of the walk, which was the way she handled things that needed to be carried for a moment before they were spoken. He had learned to recognize this and to wait for it.

"The legend has been telling the wrong story," she said.

"About the gold," he said.

"About the gold," she agreed. "The legend says the gold is lost in the lava beds. The gold isn't in the lava beds. The gold was recovered in February 1887 and the company closed the file and the story kept running." She looked at the mountain above the tree line. "But the legend was never really about the gold. The campfire version is about the gold, because treasure is the language campfire stories use. My grandmother's version was already about Elias — about a man who knew the mountain better than anyone and went into it and didn't come back." She paused. "The gold being recovered doesn't change the story that matters. It just removes the part that was wrong."

"The stagecoach legend," Carl said, "is about loss. Not about treasure."

"Yes. And the loss is real. The gold isn't lost. Elias is lost." She looked at the ponderosas. "His family's wrench has been on Cedar Mountain the whole time. That's the part of the story that the legend has been trying to tell, in the language it had available."

Carl thought about the iron pipe in the lava tube, resonating in the evening temperature differential, producing the sound that the mountain had been sending up through nine hundred years of volcanic rock and eighty years of CCC iron pipe in a language that required translation. *Iron wheels on stone*. The machine the mountain built to keep a story moving.

"The legend is accurate," he said. "It's just describing the wrong thing. The sounds are real. The Iron Horse is real. The sense that something is still running the route — that's real." He paused. "The treasure map version is wrong. Everything else is right."

Jillian stopped walking. She stood on the road shoulder for a moment, looking at nothing in particular, which was the look of someone who was seeing something internal rather than external.

"She knew," she said. "My grandmother. She had the footnote. She found the recovery reference. She wrote 'significant' and left it." She looked at Carl. "She left the paragraph in the pamphlet anyway. The one about leaving questions unanswered. She left it even though she

suspected the gold wasn't lost." She paused. "She decided the true story was worth keeping even if one part of it was wrong."

"Because the true story isn't about the gold," Carl said.

"No," Jillian said. "It never was."

They walked on. Her truck was at the far end of the lot and his was nearer. At his truck, he stopped.

"Tonight," he said. "Garrett."

"Tonight," she agreed. "We have everything we need."

She walked to her truck. He watched her go for a moment, then looked at the Lofty Nest's porch, where the sign was doing its quiet work of identifying the building without advertising its contents, which was appropriate. Some things revealed themselves to the people who came looking and maintained their privacy from everyone else, and this was not a flaw in their design but a feature.

He got in his truck. He drove toward the cabin on Deer Haven Loop.

On the passenger seat, folded once, the photocopies. W. Cord & son, Cedar smithy, 1883. The younger figure reaching toward the peg. The wrench already there, waiting for him to reach it, or having just been placed by him, or both.

11:34 a.m. Two interior photographs of the Cord & Sons smithy, confirmed in Erica's archive. Caption on the second: "W. Cord & son, Cedar smithy, 1883." The younger figure is Elias, or consistent with Elias's age at that date. He is reaching toward the peg where the wrench hangs.

The 1887 Southern Utah Courier article confirms the gold was recovered "via separate private transaction, February 1887." The gold was never lost in the lava beds. The legend's treasure map layer is false. The rest of the legend — the loss, the route, the sounds — is true.

Jillian said: "The legend is accurate. It's just describing the wrong thing." This is a better statement of the situation than anything I would have written.

Tonight we go to Garrett. Tomorrow we go to Denny.

He looked at this last line for a moment. Then he added:

In that order.

chapter fourteen

CARL HAD MADE a promise to himself, somewhere around the third year of his career, that he would not spend his professional energy on products that didn't deserve it. This was a principle that had served him reasonably well and had cost him two contracts, one of which he still thought about sometimes in the way of a thing that was the right call but had consequences. The principle was essentially this: the world had enough of things that were designed to look better than they worked, and adding more of them to the available supply was a form of harm that he was not willing to participate in, even at hourly rates that would have made his graduate school self sit down.

He thought about this principle while reading the MaxFlo Pro website at eight forty-five on a Thursday morning, because the MaxFlo Pro website was designed to look better than the product worked, and the design was ambitious enough that Carl found himself reading it with the focused professional attention of someone studying a category of failure.

The website was, on first view, confident. It had a color scheme that implied industrial authority — dark blue, silver, flashes of orange — and a navigation structure that suggested a comprehensive organization without, on closer examination, delivering one. The product page for the Phase 1 formula was titled *PerformancePrime: Foundation Series* and opened with a testimonial from someone identified only as *D.O.*,

Cedar Mountain, UT, which Carl read three times before accepting that it was almost certainly who he thought it was.

The testimonial said: *"I run ATVs at high altitude year-round and I've never felt more confident in my machines' performance since starting the MaxFlo Pro regimen. Phase 1 is the foundation. Give it time to work."*

Carl looked at this for a moment. He opened the notes document.

8:47 a.m. MaxFlo Pro website. The Phase 1 testimonial on the product page is attributed "D.O., Cedar Mountain, UT." He wrote his own testimonial. He believed in it enough to put his initials on it. This is— I'm setting aside what this is for a moment and reading the technical documentation.

He found the technical documentation in a section titled *For Professionals* which was buried three clicks deep in the navigation and which he suspected was not frequently read by the site's intended audience, on the grounds that the intended audience was probably not looking for technical documentation when they were evaluating whether to purchase a fuel additive from a multi-level-marketing network. The section was dense and somewhat drier in tone than the rest of the website, as if a different person had written it — someone who had been given a product specification and asked to translate it into consumer language and had done so with limited enthusiasm.

He read through it twice. He made notes. He opened a separate browser tab and looked up the chemistry of resin formation in small-engine fuel systems at altitude, which took him to a peer-reviewed paper from a small-engine mechanics journal that was available through an open-access repository and which was written with the flat, precise language of people who found the subject interesting for its own sake and had not adjusted their prose for any other audience.

The peer-reviewed paper confirmed what the MaxFlo Pro documentation described, in considerably more specific terms.

The Phase 1 formula — *PerformancePrime Foundation Series* — contained a compound that the paper's authors would have called a hydrocarbon surfactant and that the MaxFlo Pro documentation called a *fuel system conditioning agent*. The compound coated the surfaces of

fuel system components — injectors, fuel lines, filter housings — in a thin film that was designed to prepare those surfaces for the Phase 2 product's active ingredients. Applied alone, the film was stable for approximately four hours, after which it began to break down into a microscopic resin deposit that progressively restricted fuel flow. The restriction was gradual, consistent, and produced no fault code because the fault was not mechanical — no sensor was being triggered, no threshold was being crossed. The engine was simply receiving less fuel than it was requesting, and the shortfall was small enough in the early stages to feel like reduced responsiveness rather than failure.

Four to six hours after application, the symptom profile was consistent with every case in Garrett's ledger.

Carl read this section of the paper three times. Not because he needed to re-read it for comprehension — he had understood it on the first pass — but because he was checking his own work, which was a habit he had developed in his professional life and applied everywhere else. You did not report a finding without having checked it from multiple directions. You did not go to someone with an accusation — even an implicit one, even a gentle one, even one you were going to deliver in the quietest possible way — without having verified the technical basis from at least two independent sources.

He found a second source in a small-engine mechanics forum that was not, technically, a peer-reviewed publication, but which contained a thread titled *Phase 1 additive degradation — injector issues* that had been posted by a mechanic in Moab and which described, in the practical language of someone who had seen the symptom profile on three different machines over the course of a single season, exactly what Garrett's ledger described and what Carl's own pattern document described and what Sal Crenshaw had described sitting in the customer chair at Loose Wheels with her coffee going cold.

The mechanic in Moab had concluded the thread with: *tracked it back to an MLM product called MaxFlo. Phase 2 is supposed to clear the deposit but the timing window is tight. If you don't get Phase 2 in within 48hrs you're looking at a flush. Interesting business model.*

Carl looked at *interesting business model* for a moment. He appreciated the Moab mechanic's restraint.

He opened the MaxFlo Pro Phase 2 product page, which was titled *PerformancePrime: Performance Series*, and read it. The Phase 2 formula was described as a *high-performance fuel system activator* that worked in combination with the Phase 1 conditioning to deliver *measurable performance improvements in small engines operating at altitude, under load, or in variable temperature conditions*. The testimonials on the Phase 2 page were, in aggregate, enthusiastic: reduced fuel consumption, improved throttle response, enhanced reliability. Carl read the Phase 2 formula's technical documentation, which was also in the *For Professionals* section. The Phase 2 formula contained a solvent compound that dissolved the resin deposit left by Phase 1, restoring the fuel system surfaces to their pre-treatment condition. If applied within the window, the combined effect of Phase 1 and Phase 2 was, technically, net neutral — the fuel system ended up approximately where it started, possibly marginally cleaner if the solvent did its secondary work effectively.

He looked at this for a while.

The scheme was not, in the technical sense, fraudulent. Phase 1 and Phase 2 did what the documentation said they did, in the sequence the documentation described, within the timing window the documentation specified. The product worked as designed. The design was — he was choosing his word carefully — *structurally dependent on a problem that the product itself created*. You applied Phase 1. Phase 1 created a problem. You applied Phase 2 within the window. Phase 2 solved the problem. You attributed the improvement to Phase 2 rather than recognizing that the improvement was simply the resolution of a condition that Phase 1 had introduced.

If you did not apply Phase 2 within the window, the problem remained. The machines Denny had dosed had not received Phase 2.

9:34 a.m. Mechanism confirmed from two independent sources: peer-reviewed paper (Journal of Small Engine Mechanics, 2019) and mechanic forum thread, Moab, UT. Phase 1 creates a resin deposit that restricts fuel flow over 4-6 hours. Phase 2 dissolves the deposit if applied within the 48-hour window. Without Phase 2, the symptom profile is: gradual power loss, no fault codes, spontaneous partial resolution after fuel system flush or extended rest.

This matches all six machines in Garrett's ledger exactly.

The product works as designed. The design is— I'm going to call it a dependency structure. Phase 1 creates the dependency. Phase 2 resolves it. The testimonials are technically accurate. The performance improvement attributed to Phase 2 is real. The performance improvement is the resolution of a condition that Phase 1 introduced.

This is the business model.

He closed the technical documentation tabs and went back to the MaxFlo Pro home page, which was still open in the first tab, still confident in its dark blue and silver and orange. He looked at the distributor network section, which showed a map of active distributors with small pin markers, and he found the Cedar Mountain marker, and he clicked on it, and it took him to Denny's distributor page.

He had looked at this page before, the first time he had searched for Denny online, but he looked at it again now with the additional context of everything he had spent the morning reading. The photo: Denny in his work vest, grinning, standing in front of his truck in what appeared to be the Loose Wheels lot, which meant the photograph had been taken on a Saturday or a weekday afternoon when he was there helping out. The bio: three paragraphs, earnest and specific, the writing of a person who had been given a template and had filled it with actual

conviction rather than with the generic enthusiasm that template-filling usually produced.

Carl read the three paragraphs.

The first paragraph described Denny's background — twenty-two years on Cedar Mountain, a background in small-engine maintenance, a passion for the ATV community and the recreational culture of the region. The second paragraph described his discovery of MaxFlo Pro — he had found the product through a friend of a friend, he said, and had been initially skeptical, but the results on his own machines had convinced him. He used the phrase *game-changer* once, which was once more than Carl would have used it, but the phrase was surrounded by enough specific detail — altitude performance, throttle response, cold-weather starts — that it read as genuine experience rather than scripted enthusiasm.

The third paragraph was about his vision.

Cedar Mountain has some of the best ATV terrain in the Intermountain West, and the people who ride it deserve machines that are performing at their best. High altitude is hard on small engines — lower oxygen density, temperature extremes, demanding trails. Most people accept that their machines will underperform at elevation, but they don't have to. I want to help every rider on this mountain get more from their machine and more from the mountain. That's why I joined the MaxFlo Pro community. That's why I'm here.

Carl read this paragraph four times.

The fourth time, he was not reading it as a product pitch or as a business development statement or as the documentation of a particular category of commercial enthusiasm. He was reading it as a statement of intent from a person who had meant every word of it and had found, in the MaxFlo Pro network, a vehicle for the intent that happened also to be the thing that had caused the problem he was now trying to solve.

He closed the laptop.

He sat at the kitchen table in the cabin on Deer Haven Loop for a while, with the pour-over coffee going cold at his elbow and the west window doing its late-morning thing with the ponderosas. He was not

troubled in the way of someone who had made a difficult discovery. He was troubled in the way of someone who had made a straightforward discovery about a person they had come to understand, and the straightforwardness of it was the part that required the sitting.

Denny had not been trying to harm anyone. That was the beginning and the end of the motivational analysis, and Carl had arrived at it on the first evening's research and had not found any evidence to revise it in the days since. Denny had found a product he believed in. He had joined its distribution network with the specific vision of helping his community. He had begun, at some point, to add Phase 1 to machines he had access to — machines belonging to people who had brought them to the shop he loved, whose performance he genuinely wanted to improve — with the intention of following up with Phase 2 and generating the testimonials that the product's business model required.

He had not followed up with Phase 2. Carl did not know why. The most plausible explanation was also the most human one: the timing window was tight, the window required access to the same machines again within forty-eight hours, and the logistics of that access had either not worked out or Denny had not thought through the logistics carefully enough before he began. He had created the problem. He had not executed the solution. The machines had suffered the symptom profile, and the symptom profile had spread through Garrett's ledger, and the investigation had run for three weeks, and here they were.

He opened the notes document one more time.

10:12 a.m. Complete picture assembled.

Denny Oakes joined the MaxFlo Pro distributor network with the genuine intention of helping ATV riders on Cedar Mountain. He began adding Phase 1 to machines he had access to through his volunteer work at Loose Wheels, with the intention of following with Phase 2 and generating documented performance improvements. He did not execute the Phase 2 follow-up — unclear whether logistics failed or the plan was not complete when he started. Six machines received Phase 1 without Phase 2 and have been showing the symptom profile since.

He was not trying to hurt anyone. He was not trying to hurt the shop. He was trying to be useful in a way that required doing something that was not his to do to other people's machines without their knowledge or consent.

He thought he was helping.

There is a specific kind of person who causes harm through the application of unsupervised goodwill to other people's property. Cedar Mountain gets a lot of those, as Jillian would say. Denny is one of them.

The mechanism is confirmed. The intent is clear. The next step is Garrett.

He called Jillian.

She answered on the second ring, which meant she was at the cabin rather than on a trail.

He gave it to her in sequence, the way he gave everything: the website, the technical documentation, the peer-reviewed paper, the Moab mechanic forum thread, the Phase 1/Phase 2 dependency structure, the testimonial with D.O.'s initials, the third paragraph of the distributor bio. He did not editorialize as he went. He gave her the

account and let her process it as she did, which was silently and completely, with occasional sounds that meant she was tracking rather than asking him to continue.

When he finished, she was quiet for a moment.

"He wrote his own testimonial," she said.

"In the present tense," Carl said. "He's still — as of whatever date that page was last updated — actively running Phase 1 applications."

Another silence. He could hear, faintly, the ponderosas at the Haverford cabin doing their mid-morning thing with the wind, which was the same thing they did at every hour and which he had come to associate with the specific quality of a thoughtful pause.

"The Phase 2 timing window," she said. "Forty-eight hours."

"Yes."

"He's been in the shop every weekend all season. He's had access to the machines he dosed. He could have administered Phase 2." She paused. "Why didn't he?"

Carl had been thinking about this. "I think he started before he had the full protocol worked out. He applied Phase 1 — probably to his own machine first, to test it — and then extended the application to other machines because he believed in the product and wanted to generate evidence for the testimonials he planned to document. But Phase 2 requires a specific follow-up visit to each machine within a narrow window, and I don't think he had a system for tracking which machines he'd treated and when."

"He has a mental list," Jillian said.

"He told us that," Carl said. "Of people's cabin conditions, their water pressure, their—" He stopped. "He has a mental list of everything on the mountain. But the Phase 1 applications needed a written list with timestamps, and I don't think he made one, and without it the forty-eight-hour window is very difficult to hit consistently."

Jillian was quiet again. He waited.

"He didn't know he was doing it wrong," she said. "In his mind, he was doing the setup work. Phase 2 was coming. The improvement was coming. He just—" She paused. "He just got the sequencing wrong and didn't have the system to catch it."

"Yes," Carl said.

"That's a very specific kind of mistake," she said.

"Yes," he said again.

"It's also," she said, with the careful evenness of someone stating something that needed to be stated, "not a mistake that excuses what happened to six people's machines without their knowledge."

"No," Carl said. "It isn't."

"Garrett tonight," she said.

"Garrett tonight," he confirmed. "I'll text him."

"Good." A pause. "Carl."

"Yes."

"The third paragraph," she said. "The one about wanting to help every rider on the mountain."

"I've read it four times," he said.

"I know," she said. "That's the hardest part."

She was right about this, as she was right about most things when she took her time about it, and he sat with it for a while after she hung up: the hardest part was not the mechanism or the intent or the specific catalogue of bad decisions that had led from a genuine desire to help into the pattern document on his laptop and the six entries in Garrett's ledger. The hardest part was the third paragraph, which was real, which had been written by a real person who meant every word, and which described something that was true about Denny Oakes regardless of what else was also true about him.

He texted Garrett:

We have what we need. Can we come by after closing tonight?

Garrett's reply came back in three minutes:

Seven.

Carl put the phone down. He opened his laptop. He looked at the MaxFlo Pro website one more time, at the distributor map with its pin markers, at the Cedar Mountain pin that linked to Denny's page and his photo and his bio and his third paragraph.

Then he closed the laptop and went for a walk, because the cabin had been a place for thinking and the thinking was done and what he needed now was the mountain in its ordinary form, the version it wore on Tuesday mornings in late July when nobody was asking anything of it.

chapter **fifteen**

THE FINAL SESSION of the ATV safety course ran on a Friday morning, which meant the meadow behind Loose Wheels had the particular quality of a thing completing itself — the worn track in the grass, the cone layout that had been refined over two weeks into something close to precise, the participants moving through the circuit with the accumulated competence of people who had arrived as one version of themselves and were leaving as a slightly improved version.

Wanda had designed it this way. Carl had not understood this until approximately the fourth session, when he had noticed that each session's difficulty calibration was not random but sequential — each challenge slightly larger than the previous one, each new element introduced at the moment when the previous one had been sufficiently absorbed. This was not instruction in the conventional sense. It was architecture. Wanda had built something, over two weeks, in the behavior of twelve riders, and the final session was the last piece of the structure being put in place.

He was thinking about this — about architecture and behavior and the difference between teaching and building — while watching Connor run the full circuit for what would be the last time in the official course context. Connor was, at this point, a different rider than he had been on the first morning. Not dramatically different in skill — his natural ability had always been there — but different in kind: the deci-

sions were made before the approach now, consistently, the margin maintained without apparent effort, the fast line available and not taken at the junctions where not taking it was the correct choice. He had not become a less capable rider. He had become a rider whose capability was under his own management rather than running slightly ahead of him.

Wanda watched him through the final junction.

She said nothing. This was, Carl had learned, the highest available rating.

The debrief ran for eleven minutes. Wanda covered every participant with the same specific economy she had applied since the first session — not global assessments but particular ones, each person given the three things they had improved and the one thing to carry forward. The Henleys received acknowledgment that their junction decision-making was now consistently prior rather than reactive, which landed with the visible relief of people who had spent two weeks hoping this would be the conclusion. Loretta received a specific note about her fallback card usage that Carl filed as data for the next version of the module. The beginners received the kind of debrief that was essentially a summary of everything they had learned, which was considerable, delivered in Wanda's characteristic register without any inflation.

Connor received: "Your margins are correct. Your decisions are made before the approach. You're a safe rider." A pause. "Work on not needing me to tell you that."

He nodded. He put his helmet under his arm. He looked like someone who had been given something that was going to take a while to fully understand he had received.

Carl stood at the meadow's edge and watched the participants collect their things and filter out through the back gate, and he thought about Wanda's architecture, and about Garrett's diagnostic method, and about the CCC pipe in the lava tube, and about Denny's distributor page, and about the relationship between systems and the people who built them and the people who moved through them. The mountain had spent nine hundred years building a resonator and eighty years

finding the pipe to put in it. Wanda had spent eleven years refining a course structure that could make a sixteen-year-old understand the difference between a decision and a reflex in two weeks. Garrett had spent seventeen years developing a diagnostic sensibility that could hear what a machine meant rather than what it said.

Denny had spent eight months believing in a product that created the problem it was supposed to solve.

The architecture mattered. The intent was necessary but not sufficient. You needed both, and you needed them pointed in the same direction.

He picked up a cone that had been displaced by the morning's circuit work and set it on the stack. Leo, who had been filming from the fence line for the final session, came through the gate and picked up another cone without being asked.

"Good last session," Leo said.

"Yes," Carl said.

"Connor's going to be fine."

"Yes," Carl said again.

Leo stacked the cone. "Tonight?"

"Tonight," Carl said.

The video recording happened because Wanda asked, which was the only reason Carl could imagine it happening, because asking Carl Matsuda for help with technology was not the kind of thing Wanda Fehr would ordinarily do, and she did it with the direct simplicity of someone who had decided to do something and was not going to add any performance to the deciding.

She found him after the debrief, when most of the participants had gone and Leo had retired to the shop's back doorway to review the morning's footage. The meadow was quiet. Wanda was putting the last of the equipment into the course storage bin that lived against the shop's back fence, and she did this with the same efficiency she did everything, and when the bin was closed and locked she straightened and looked at Carl.

"I want to record a video on my phone," she said. "For my grandchildren. I've been meaning to do it and I haven't been able to make the phone do what I want." A pause. "I thought you might be able to help."

"I can help," Carl said.

She produced her phone from her vest pocket. It was an older model, well-maintained, the screen clean and uncracked and protected by a case that was exactly as practical as all of Wanda's other choices. She held it out.

Carl looked at the phone. He looked at Wanda. He said: "What do you want to say to them?"

She considered this. "I want to tell them about the mountain," she said. "I want them to see what I see when I'm up here. They're in Salt Lake City. They've been to Cedar Mountain twice, both times in winter. I want them to see it in summer."

"Do you want to record it here? In the meadow?"

She looked at the meadow, which had the particular quality of a space that had been used well and was now at rest. "Yes," she said. "Here is fine."

Carl spent a few minutes explaining the phone's camera interface, which was, in its current operating system version, arranged with the specific counterintuitive logic of a software update designed by people who believed that improving something required changing it. He showed her the record button, the front-facing camera option, the orientation indicator, the stop button. He showed her twice, clearly, because clarity was more useful than speed.

She held the phone. She looked at the meadow through the screen.

She pressed record.

The first recording captured, with complete fidelity, forty-one seconds of Wanda Fehr's left ear. The ear was in sharp focus. The meadow was visible in the background, correctly framed. The ear was not.

She watched the playback. Her expression was neutral.

"Try again," Carl said, without inflection.

She tried again. The second recording captured the sky above the meadow, two seconds of a passing cloud, and then twelve seconds of Wanda's feet as she lowered the phone while still recording. Her feet

were in work boots, laced precisely, and they were walking. The playback ended.

She watched this without comment.

"The phone," Carl said carefully, "has a tendency to interpret any downward movement as a signal to—"

"Try again," Wanda said.

The third recording began with a clear shot of the meadow's grass at close range, then panned up to reveal the storage bin, then the fence, then a section of sky. Wanda's thumb was partially visible at the left edge of the frame throughout. The recording ran for twenty-two seconds.

She watched it. She handed the phone back to Carl.

"Show me," she said.

He held the phone at the correct angle, demonstrated the grip — thumb away from the lens, elbow in, the specific positioning that the phone's designers had apparently assumed all users would intuit — and handed it back. She replicated the grip with the focused precision of someone who was learning a physical skill and taking it seriously.

"Now," he said.

She pressed record.

The fourth recording was, from a technical standpoint, correct. The phone was held steady. The lens was unobstructed. The meadow was in frame, the mountains visible above the tree line at the far edge, the afternoon light doing what afternoon light did at this elevation in late July. Wanda spoke: she spoke for approximately ninety seconds, looking at the screen, telling her grandchildren — their names were Owen and Clara, Carl gathered — about the meadow and what happened in it and what the mountain looked like in the morning from the course's north end and what it sounded like when the safety course was running and why she thought they should come see it in summer and not just in winter. She spoke without notes and without hesitation and with the specific warmth of someone who had saved a particular voice for a particular audience and was now using it.

She pressed stop.

She watched the playback.

She watched it twice.

Then she watched it a third time, and on the third viewing she tilted

the phone slightly so that Carl could see the screen too, without explicitly inviting him to watch, which he understood as an invitation. He watched it with her. Wanda in the meadow with the mountains behind her, speaking to Owen and Clara about the course and the mountain in the voice she had saved for them.

When the playback ended, she put the phone in her vest pocket.

"Thank you," she said. She said it once, and she meant it completely, and she did not add anything to it or follow it with anything else.

"You're welcome," Carl said.

She went to the gate and through it, into the shop lot, where her truck was parked in the center of its space with the same precision she applied to everything, and she drove away.

Carl stood in the meadow for a moment. It took him forty-five minutes, he noted, which was the right amount of time for the kind of help that mattered.

Leo appeared from the shop doorway. "Did she get it?"

"Fourth try," Carl said.

Leo considered this. "That's pretty good, actually."

"I thought so too," Carl said.

GR's text arrived at four-fifteen

Come by at seven. Both of you.

Carl forwarded it to Jillian. She replied:

I'll bring the pamphlet.

He read this for a moment, not entirely sure why she would bring the pamphlet to a conversation about Denny Oakes and MaxFlo Pro, and then he thought about how Jillian operated — the preparation that was not tactical but atmospheric, the way she brought the right objects to the right conversations because she had an instinct for what a space needed — and he thought that she would know whether to produce the

pamphlet once she was there, and that if she thought it might be useful she was probably right.

He spent the intervening hours finishing the acoustic model — not because the model required finishing tonight, but because the work settled him, the specific calm of organizing information into a form that was complete and precise and ready for whatever came next. He documented the gap measurements, the differential data, the frequency recordings, the CCC survey reference. He built the model to the point where a reader who knew nothing about lava tube acoustics would be able to understand exactly what had been producing the Iron Horse sounds and exactly how. He made it as clear as he could. He saved it. He sat with it for a while.

Then he closed the laptop and drove to Loose Wheels.

The shop at seven in the evening had a quality that Carl had come to associate with the mountain's better hours: the day's work done, the bay quiet, the specific clarity of a space that knew what it was for and was resting from it. The overhead fluorescents were on in the shop area but the bay lights were off, and the register was closed, and the coffee machine had been cleaned and stood in the attitude of a thing at rest. The cork board was doing its quiet work of community documentation. The Golden Wrench was above the register.

Garrett was at the counter with the ledger open when they arrived. He had been writing in it — the most recent entry still fresh, the pen beside it. He looked up when they came in, assessed them the way he assessed everything, and came around the counter.

He did not offer coffee. He did not engage in any of the small rituals that preceded difficult conversations in most social contexts. He stood in front of them and looked at them both and said: "I've known for three days."

Carl looked at him.

"I figured it out three days ago," Garrett said. "I've been deciding what I want to do about it." He paused. "I need to know what you have."

Carl put the pattern document on the counter. He put it there without preamble: six machines, seven weeks, the service window, the cross-reference with Garrett's ledger, the footage summary from Leo, the MaxFlo Pro Phase 1 mechanism documented from two independent sources, the Phase 2 timing window that had not been executed, the complete account of the symptom profile and its cause.

Garrett read it. He read it with the same focused attention he gave to diagnostic data — completely, without skimming, processing rather than confirming. He did not read it the way a person read something they wanted to agree with. He read it the way he read ledger entries: looking for what was accurate and filing it accordingly.

When he finished, he set the document on the counter.

"That's what I have," he said. "That's what I figured out." He looked at Carl. "You have more of the detail. The mechanism." He looked at Jillian. "You understand the person."

"I think so," Jillian said.

Garrett nodded. He was quiet for a moment. He looked at the bay behind him — at the second bay, where Denny worked on his own machine on weekend afternoons, where Leo had filmed the four-minute sequence that was currently saved in a folder on Leo's laptop labeled *Evidence*. He looked at the counter, at the ledger, at the pattern document.

Then he looked at the Golden Wrench.

He crossed to the register in the unhurried way of someone who had made up his mind and was executing a decision rather than arriving at one. He reached up and took the wrench down from its peg. He held it for a moment — the same two-handed hold he had used when he handed it to Carl for the photography session, the hold of someone who understood they were handling something that warranted care.

He turned it once. The old metal caught the shop light at its familiar angle, the dark surface giving back the warmth it always gave back.

He looked at Carl and Jillian.

"This wrench has been in this shop since before I worked here," he said. "Every machine that's come through these doors, it's watched." He paused. The pause had the quality of a weight-bearing element rather

than a hesitation. "I'd like to think it's watching for how we handle things. Not just for how we fix them."

He hung the wrench back on its peg.

He went back to the counter. He picked up the pattern document and looked at it one more time. He set it down. He picked up the pen from beside the ledger.

"I'll call him in the morning," he said. "Ask him to come by Tuesday. I need the weekend to think about how I want to say it." He paused. "I want you both here."

"We'll be here," Carl said.

Garrett made a note in the ledger — Carl could not see what it said from where he was standing, but he watched Garrett's hand write one line, precise and small, and watched him close the ledger and put it back under the counter. The gesture was the same as every other time he had closed the ledger: unhurried, specific, the action of someone putting information where it belonged.

He came around the counter and went to the bay doorway. He stopped.

"Denny's not a bad person," he said, without turning around.

"No," Jillian said. "He isn't."

"He's going to have a hard Tuesday," Garrett said.

"Yes," she said.

"That's necessary," he said. He went through to the bay. The sound of him moving through the space — the specific sounds of Garrett at the end of a working day, checking things, closing things, the small satisfactions of a shop put properly to rest — came through the open doorway and settled around them.

Carl looked at Jillian. She was looking at the wrench above the register.

"He picked it up," she said, quietly.

"I know," Carl said.

She looked at the wrench for another moment. Then she looked at him. "He said 'how we handle things.' Not 'how I handle things.' He said we."

Carl thought about this. He thought about Garrett's text — *both of you* — and about the ledger entry he couldn't read, and about the three

days of deciding before the text was sent, and about the choice to have them present not because he needed their evidence but because he had determined that the three of them together were the right instrument for the task.

"He's been working on this since before we arrived," Carl said.

"Yes," she said. "We caught up to him."

She put the pamphlet back in her bag — she had not produced it, which meant she had decided it wasn't needed tonight, which meant her instinct had been to bring it as a possible resource rather than an intended one, and the resource had not been required. She picked up her jacket from the back of the customer chair.

"Tuesday," she said.

"Tuesday," he said.

They went out. The shop door with its partial bell made its familiar two-thirds sound behind them, and Movie Ranch Road was doing its evening thing in the late-summer dark, and above the shop the mountain was settled into the particular quality of silence it had at this hour, when the day's business was concluded and whatever the night had in store had not yet declared itself.

Carl drove back toward the cabin on Deer Haven Loop and thought about what Garrett had said about the wrench watching for how things were handled. He thought about it the way he thought about things that were worth carrying — not analyzing, just holding, letting the weight of it settle to its actual dimensions rather than the dimensions he might assign to it in haste.

The weight was considerable. It was also, he thought, the right weight.

He pulled into the cabin's gravel lot and sat in the truck for a moment before going inside. The ponderosas were doing what they always did, which was simply being themselves at whatever hour they were asked to be. He had, over the course of the summer, developed a specific gratitude for this quality — the reliability of the mountain's ordinary operations, the way it continued its business without requiring anything from the people who happened to be on it except, occasionally, the capacity to pay attention.

He opened the notes document.

8:04 p.m. Garrett's shop, after closing. He's known for three days. He's been deciding. He wants Tuesday. He wants us both there.

He took the wrench down. He said: "This wrench has been in this shop since before I worked here. Every machine that's come through these doors, it's watched. I'd like to think it's watching for how we handle things. Not just for how we fix them."

Then he hung it back and picked up the ledger and made a note and went to the bay.

Jillian said: "He said 'we.' Not 'I.' He said we."

She's right. He decided something in those three days about what kind of thing this was and who it belonged to, and the answer was: the three of us. I don't entirely know what to do with that. I think I'm supposed to just be here for Tuesday and let it be what it is.

That seems right.

He closed the document. He went inside. The cabin had the particular quality of a space that was ready to be occupied, and he occupied it, and the mountain continued its business outside the west window, unhurried and entirely itself.

chapter **sixteen**

GARRETT CALLED Denny on Saturday morning.

Carl was not there for the call and heard about it afterward, from Jillian, who had heard about it from Garrett in the brief exchange they'd had when she stopped at the shop Sunday afternoon to check on the logistics for Tuesday. Garrett had said: "I told him I needed an extra pair of eyes on something. He said he'd be there at nine."

Jillian had relayed this to Carl with the particular economy of two people who had been working together long enough to communicate efficiently. She did not comment on the framing — an extra pair of eyes — and neither did Carl, but they both understood it. Garrett had found the honest version of a necessary misdirection: he did need Denny there, and what Denny was going to look at was, in a sense, the work itself. Just not in the way Denny expected.

Tuesday arrived with the quality of mid-August mornings on Cedar Mountain: clear, cool, the light direct and purposeful, the ponderosas doing their specific morning thing with the air. Carl drove to Loose Wheels from the cabin at eight-thirty, which gave him enough time to be there when Denny arrived without being there so early that the waiting had its own atmosphere. Jillian's truck was already in the lot when he pulled in.

Inside, Garrett had arranged the shop.

The disassembly was on the main work table in the center of the bay

— a machine that had been scheduled for a complete fuel system overhaul, its components laid out on a clean shop cloth in the careful order that Garrett's work always followed: each piece in its proper position relative to the assembled whole, the disassembly readable as a kind of exploded diagram of the machine's interior logic. The machine was not one of the six affected ATVs. It was simply the morning's work, presented as the morning's work, providing the bay with its ordinary purpose.

Carl and Jillian stood at the counter with coffee. Garrett was at the work table, checking the components against his notes with the focused attention of someone doing two things at once — the engine work and the waiting — and managing both with equal competence.

At nine-oh-three, Denny Oakes came through the door.

He was wearing the work vest. Carl noticed this — the same vest, the same array of pockets, the comfortable familiarity of a man arriving at a place he felt at home in. He came through the door and saw Carl and Jillian at the counter and Garrett at the work table and did what he always did when he arrived anywhere: took in the room with the warm, comprehensive attention of someone who was genuinely pleased to be there.

Then something shifted slightly. Not dramatically — it was not the shift of a man who had been caught and knew it. It was the subtler shift of a man who had registered that the composition of the room was specific, and who was filing this registration while he greeted everyone in the way he greeted everyone.

"Morning," he said. "Carl. Jillian." He looked at Garrett. "What are we looking at?"

"Fuel system overhaul," Garrett said. "Come look at this." He indicated a component on the work cloth — the fuel pump assembly, its housing removed, the internal components exposed. Denny came into the bay and crouched beside the table, and his attention went to the component with the genuine interest of someone who knew what he was looking at.

This was the thing that made it hard. Even now, even in this room, Denny looked at a disassembled fuel system with the interest of someone who cared about machines.

Garrett straightened. He looked at Denny.

"I want to talk to you about some things I've been tracking," he said.

Denny looked up.

Garrett went to the counter and got the ledger. He opened it to the tabbed section — six entries, each one dated, each one a machine and a service date and a symptom profile and a diagnostic result — and put it on the work table beside the disassembled component. He looked at Denny and said: "Six machines. Same symptom. All serviced here in a specific window. No diagnostic faults on any of them."

Denny looked at the ledger. He looked at the entries. Carl watched his face, which was doing something complicated and quiet — the face of someone reading a document that has their own story in it, from an angle they had not previously been shown.

"I've been tracking this for two months," Garrett said. He was not accusatory. He was not performing anything. He was presenting information in the way he presented everything, which was precisely and without editorial weight. "I know what caused it. I have the technical documentation." He looked at Carl.

Carl put the printed documentation on the table: the pattern document, the MaxFdf Pro Phase 1/Phase 2 technical summary, the cross-reference with the symptom profiles, the Leo footage description. He laid it out without preamble. He did not look at Denny as he did it.

Denny looked at the documents.

He looked at them for a long time.

"The footage," he said finally. His voice had the quality of someone identifying something rather than asking about it.

"Leo was filming b-roll for the documentary," Carl said. "He filmed the secondary bay on a Wednesday morning. He didn't know what he was filming."

Denny nodded slowly. He was still looking at the documents. His expression had moved through several places and arrived at somewhere quieter and more settled than any of them — not the agitation of someone preparing a defense, but the stillness of someone who had

heard their own actions described with complete accuracy and was letting that description land.

"I was going to follow up with Phase 2," he said. He said it the way you said something you already knew sounded wrong — without hoping it would land any differently, just because it needed to be said. "I had a list. I was going to go back to each of the machines within the window and—" He stopped. He looked at the work table. "I didn't have a proper system for tracking the timing. I thought I did. I thought the mental list would—" He stopped again.

The shop was quiet. The ceiling fans were turning. The radio was off today, which Carl had not noticed until now.

"You didn't," Garrett said.

"No," Denny said.

Garrett looked at him for a moment — the same measuring look he gave to things that were asking questions he was ready to answer. "I know you believed in the product," he said. "I know that." A pause. "But you put things in people's machines without telling them. Without asking. Without their knowledge." He said this without heat — each word its own unit, each one doing its specific work. "That's not helping. That's something else."

Denny looked at Garrett. He looked at him the way you looked at someone you respected enormously and had let down, which was a specific kind of looking that was harder to sustain than anger or denial.

"I know," he said.

The word sat in the shop for a moment.

Jillian had not spoken yet. She had been standing at the counter with her coffee, and she had been listening with the full, unhurried attention she brought to things she needed to understand completely before she said anything about them. Now she set her cup down.

"I want to tell you what happened to the machines," she said.

Denny looked at her.

She went through it. She did not use the language of accusation — she used the language of the mechanism, which was actually more precise and therefore more difficult to hear. The Phase 1 formula and the resin deposit it left when the timing window was missed. The fuel restriction building over four to six hours. The gradual power loss that

felt like the machine losing interest in the work. The five owners — six, if you counted the machine in the far bay that had come in with the same profile two weeks before Carl's — who had brought their ATVs to the shop they trusted and gotten them back with a problem that none of the shop's diagnostic tools could find because the problem was not mechanical and was not native to the machine. It had been introduced.

Denny listened to all of this without interrupting and without looking away.

When she finished, he said: "Sal Crenshaw."

"Yes," Jillian said.

"And the Kanab couple."

"Yes."

"And—" He named the other owners, from his own mental list, the one he had been keeping. He named all six of them. He was right about all six of them.

Nobody said anything for a moment.

"I'll fix it," Denny said. "Every machine. I'll service them myself, personally, on my own time. Full fuel system flush, injector clean, complete service at no charge." He looked at Garrett. "Every one of them."

Garrett looked at him.

"And I'll write to each of them," Denny said. "A letter. Explain what I did and what I've done to correct it." He paused. "In person if they'll see me. By mail if they won't."

"In person," Garrett said. "All of them."

Denny nodded. This was not a negotiation. He was not asking whether the terms were acceptable. He was stating what he was going to do, because it was clearly what needed to be done and because he had arrived at this conclusion himself rather than having it handed to him.

"The product," Garrett said. He said just the two words.

Denny was quiet for a moment. "I'll stop," he said. "The applications. Obviously." A longer pause. "And I'll — I'll think about the network. The distributor arrangement." He said this last part with the quality of someone setting down something they had been carrying for a long time, with the specific mixture of relief and grief that accompanied the setting down of something you had believed in.

Garrett nodded. He did not say anything further about MaxFlo Pro, because he had said what needed to be said and anything additional would have been more than what was needed.

"You're a good worker," Garrett said. He said this in the same register as everything else — flat, specific, true. "You know machines. You take care of things." He looked at Denny directly. "What you did was wrong. It was wrong because you did it to other people's property without their knowledge. Whatever you intended doesn't change that."

"I know," Denny said again. The word was the same word as before but with more weight in it now, more of the full understanding rather than just the acknowledgment.

"The letters will go on the cork board," Garrett said. "Not your name. Not their names. Just what happened and what was done about it." He paused. "The community needs to know something happened and got sorted out. They don't need to know the rest."

Denny looked at the cork board. He looked at it for a moment with the expression of someone who was taking the full measure of a thing — the community board he had been adding his own notices to all summer, the Denny Oakes notice in the lower right corner with its precise block capitals and its well-drawn wrench. He looked at it and nodded.

"Thank you," he said.

He said it to Garrett, and then he looked at Carl, and then at Jillian, and said it again — not the performed gratitude of a person managing an awkward situation, but the specific gratitude of someone who had been given a form of justice that was harder than punishment and more honest than forgiveness. The kind that required something of him rather than just registering something about him.

He went to the bay doorway and stopped.

"I'm sorry," he said. He was looking at the work table, at the disassembled fuel system component on its clean cloth, the machine's interior laid out with the care of something being examined honestly. "For the shop. I know what this place means. I know what you've built here." He looked at Garrett. "I'm sorry I put something into it that didn't belong."

Garrett said nothing. He picked up the fuel pump housing from

the work cloth, turned it in his hands, set it down again. The gesture had the quality of a man returning to his work — not dismissing what had just been said, but acknowledging it in the way he acknowledged things, which was through the continuation of the work.

Denny went out.

The shop door made its two-thirds sound. Carl stood at the counter and listened to Denny's truck start in the lot and pull out onto Movie Ranch Road. The sound of the truck decreased along the road and disappeared, and the shop was quiet in the way it was quiet after something had concluded correctly.

Garrett was at the work table. He looked at the disassembled fuel system for a moment — at the components on the cloth, at the housing, at the pump assembly waiting to be understood and reassembled. Then he picked up the fuel pump and examined it with the focused attention of someone who had returned his full concentration to the work in front of him.

He found it in about forty seconds: a bolt on the pump body, torqued slightly under specification, a fraction of a turn from where it needed to be. Not the cause of anything urgent. Just a bolt that needed attending to.

He crossed to the register. He reached up and took the Golden Wrench from its peg — both hands, the careful hold. He carried it to the work table. He applied it to the bolt: one clean turn, the wrench's old iron finding the specification with the particular authority of a tool that had been made for exactly this kind of work.

He carried the wrench back to the register. He set it on the peg.

"That's all it needed," he said.

Carl looked at Jillian. She was looking at the wrench, her expression the expression she wore when something settled into its right place and she was letting it settle rather than describing it.

The shop was quiet. The ceiling fans turned. Through the open bay door, Movie Ranch Road was going about its business in the August morning, the traffic of a summer mountain town at its comfortable

midweek pace. The cork board held its notices. The found-object shelf held its accumulated things. The Golden Wrench was above the register where it had been for fifteen years and would be for however many years followed, watching the mechanics and the mysteries and the ordinary Tuesday mornings with the patient attention of something that had been made for good work and had arrived, eventually, at the place where the work was.

Garrett went back to the engine. He picked up the fuel pump assembly and began the reassembly with the same focused, unhurried attention he brought to everything, the work taking its proper place in the morning.

Carl drank the last of his coffee. Jillian picked up her jacket from the back of the customer chair. They looked at each other.

"Tuesday," she said, in the tone of something completed.

"Tuesday," he said.

They went out.

chapter **seventeen**

THE MORNING WAS cold in the way of late August mornings on Cedar Mountain, when the season had not quite decided to change but was running its options. The sky was the specific blue of high elevation in the weeks before the aspens turned — saturated, almost aggressive, the kind of blue that required no adjustment and no apology. The ponderosas were doing their morning thing with the light, which was to take it at the angle it came in and give it back changed, the green going warm in a way that had no name and required none.

Carl was at the pullout when Jillian arrived. He had the laptop open on the tailgate, the acoustic model running its final verification sequence, the output comparing the recorded frequencies to the predicted resonance of the gap at three different temperature differentials. The model was complete. He had finished it the previous evening and run it twice to check his own work, as he always did, and both times it had produced the same result, which was: the mechanism was fully characterized, the account was accurate, the Iron Horse was a nineteen-millimeter gap in a CCC iron pipe amplified by nine hundred years of lava tube and driven by the temperature differential between a Cedar Mountain plateau afternoon and a Cedar Mountain plateau evening, and this was true and it was complete and he had everything he needed to publish a note that practically nobody would read but that would be,

technically, the correct accounting of a thing the mountain had been doing since approximately 1934.

He closed the laptop when Jillian's truck pulled in.

She came out with the pamphlet, which he had expected, and her journal, and the photocopied chapter page from the archive session at The Lofty Nest, which he had not expected but which made sense when he thought about it. She was carrying the full record of the grandmother's thinking — the pamphlet as written, the research documents as found — and this was consistent with how she prepared for the conversations that mattered.

She looked at the laptop. "Is it done?"

"It's done," he said. "Complete account. Gap dimensions, pipe geometry, temperature differential, frequency profile, acoustic modeling. Everything."

She looked at the lava field, where the morning light was working on the black basalt in the particular way of late summer, the surface taking the warmth and holding it while the air above it remained cool. The field was beautiful in the specific way of volcanic terrain in clear weather: alien and ancient and entirely indifferent to the people who came to look at it, which was one of the things Carl had come to appreciate about it most.

"Let's go in," she said.

The access pullout was empty at this hour. The Forest Service sign noted the trail distance and the difficulty rating and the recreational access designation, and below it someone had added a small paper notice, rubber-banded to the post, describing the CCC water project infrastructure that ran through the eastern margin — a Forest Service heritage interpretation, recently posted, part of the district's historical signage initiative. Carl stopped and read it. The notice mentioned the 1934 survey, the spring capping project, the approximate route of the iron pipe. It did not mention the gap. It did not mention the sounds.

He photographed the notice.

"Why?" Jillian said.

"Because it's here," he said. "The Forest Service already knows about the pipe. They've already characterized it as heritage infrastructure. This is — this is already on the record." He looked at the notice. "Anything I publish would be additive at best."

"Or redundant," she said.

"Or redundant," he agreed. He put his phone in his pocket. They went in.

The lava field was itself at this hour. That was the phrase Carl had been using, internally, when he tried to describe what made the field different from other landscapes he had spent time in, and he had not been satisfied with it, but he had not found better language. The field was itself: not performing anything, not arranged for anyone's benefit, not concerned with how it was received. It occupied its square miles of basalt with the settled completeness of something that had been here since before the question of reception was relevant and expected to be here after it became irrelevant again. He found this quality — not comfort, exactly, but something adjacent to it — increasingly available to him over the course of the summer, as if the mountain had been teaching him something by example and he had been slow to learn it.

The hollow section underfoot. The thermal vents at the field's margin. The particular quality of the sound in the lava field, where certain frequencies were absorbed and certain others were carried with unexpected clarity, so that a conversation at normal volume felt intimate in a way that the open sky above it should have prevented.

Jillian walked ahead and he walked beside her, and they did not talk on the approach, because the approach did not require talking. The two miles went the way familiar miles went: not quickly, but without resistance.

At the tube entrance, Carl set the laptop on a flat section of basalt near the gate and opened it. He had the acoustic model running in one window and the full documentation in another — the gap measurements, the temperature logs, the frequency profiles, the two independent confirmations of the mechanism. He arranged it so that all of it

was visible at once, the complete account laid out on the screen in the morning light.

He looked at it for a moment.

"Here is what I have," he said.

She came to look.

They looked at it together. The model was, technically, beautiful in the way that complete accounts could be beautiful — everything in its place, every variable characterized, every relationship accurately described. It was the kind of document that could support a note in a local history journal, or a letter to the Dixie National Forest's heritage program, or a post on one of the mountain's community forums, or a paper at a regional acoustic physics meeting. It could support any of these things. It would be accurate in all of them. It would be, in every case, a contribution to the public record.

"I could publish this," Carl said. He said it in the tone he had been using since Chapter 11: the tone of someone naming an option they have already begun to decide against, but naming it honestly because it deserves to be named. "The gap dimensions, the pipe, the temperature differential, the tube resonance. A short note — maybe five hundred words, a figure, the frequency profile. It would go into a database somewhere and mostly not be read and it would be technically correct and complete."

"Yes," Jillian said. "You could."

"I could post the recording to the community forum," he said. "Or send it to the Forest Service. Or put it on the heritage interpretation page for the site." He paused. "Any of those things would be accurate."

"Yes," she said again. She was looking at the laptop screen, at the acoustic model with its clean lines and correctly labeled axes and its perfectly characterized resonance system. She was looking at it the way she looked at things that were true but not complete.

Carl looked at the tube entrance. The gate, the Forest Service signs, the particular darkness of the opening that suggested depth without revealing it. He had been in there twice now. He knew what was in the first chamber and approximately what was in the rest of it, based on the survey documentation and the tube's published characteristics. He

knew the pipe. He knew the gap. He knew the mechanism. He knew all of it.

"Read me the paragraph," he said.

She had the photocopied page open. The last paragraph of the Phantom Stagecoach chapter was at the bottom of the final page, in her grandmother's typed text, with two penciled additions in the margin that Jillian had noted before and which Carl could now read: a small check mark to the left of the first sentence, and below the paragraph, in the grandmother's careful cursive, a single word: *yes*.

She had read the paragraph to herself so many times that it had the quality of something committed to memory — not memorized, exactly, because she still needed the page, but deeply familiar, the phrases resting in her voice at their natural weight. She read it aloud.

The lava field received it. That was the only word for what happened when she read it in that specific space — the paragraph went out from her voice into the cold morning air of the tube entrance and the basalt and the particular silence of the field, and the field received it with the quality of a place that had been waiting for the words for a long time and recognized them.

Perhaps the kindest thing we can do for a mountain is to leave some of its questions unanswered. The stories we tell about the places we love are not lesser than the facts. They are the facts of a different kind — the facts of belonging, and of mystery, and of the long conversation between the living and the ground they stand on.

She lowered the page.

Carl was quiet. The cold morning air was doing what cold morning air did in the lava field at this hour, which was to make the light seem thinner and the silence seem thicker, a specific quality of attention that the landscape provided without effort.

After a while he said: "She wrote that in a self-published pamphlet distributed out of a summer cabin."

Jillian looked at him.

"Thirty copies," he said. "First printing. Twenty."

"She was a very good teacher," Jillian said.

He held this. He held it in the way he was learning to hold things on Cedar Mountain — not processing it toward a conclusion, just letting

its weight be what it was, as the mountain held its own stories, with patience and without the urgency of resolution.

"She wrote it before she had the complete account," he said. "She had the 1934 survey reference. She had the sounds annotation on the sketch map. She may have suspected the mechanism." He looked at the tube entrance. "She wrote the conclusion before she had the evidence."

"She arrived at the right answer through a different route," Jillian said.

"The grandmother's route," he said. "The historical route. The route of the person who has been listening to the mountain long enough to know what it's saying before she can prove it."

"That's the only route that leads to that sentence," she said.

He looked at the laptop. At the acoustic model with its clean lines. At the complete account laid out in the morning light.

"The mountain has been running the Iron Horse for eighty years," he said, "in the memory of something that happened a hundred and forty years ago. Elias Cord's family made the tool. Elias drove the route. The storm took him. The company recovered the gold and closed the file and the legend kept running, and the CCC installed a pipe in 1934, and the pipe began to speak, and the mountain translated it into the only language it had available — the language of iron wheels on black rock — and for eighty years people have been hearing it and telling a story that is wrong about the gold and right about everything else."

He paused.

"That story," he said, "is doing something that my acoustic model is not doing."

"What is it doing?" Jillian said. She knew the answer. She was asking because it needed to be said.

"It's keeping Elias Cord's route alive," he said. "Every person who hears the sounds and says 'Iron Horse' — every person who sits around a fire and tells the story of the red Concord coach and the blizzard of 1886 — they're running the route. They're doing the thing the mountain figured out how to do with a broken pipe and a volcanic resonance chamber. They're driving the coach forward through time." He looked at the tube entrance. "My acoustic note would stop that."

"Not intentionally," she said.

"Not intentionally," he agreed. "But it would. Once the mechanism is on the record — once the Heritage page says 'the Iron Horse sounds are produced by CCC pipe resonance, see attached acoustic analysis' — the story becomes a footnote. The Iron Horse becomes a curiosity. The route stops running." He paused. "I don't want to do that."

She looked at him.

"I don't want to do that," he said again. Simpler this time, without the account.

The field was quiet. The tube entrance was dark and patient. Behind them, on the laptop screen, the acoustic model sat in its complete and accurate form, waiting to be used or not used with the indifference of information that had no stake in its own application.

"Then don't," she said.

He opened the notes document.

The document had grown since the summer began — it was now very long, the accumulated record of everything he had thought and found and understood and was still thinking about, the full account of the summer laid out in the form of timestamps and observations and provisional conclusions and questions. He scrolled through it. He read a few entries at random: the voice memo from the south lava loop in June, the first visit to Loose Wheels, the bench conversation with Jillian, the lava tube dusk sounds, the Cord business directory entry, the confrontation with Denny, the wrench returned to its peg.

He scrolled to the top.

The document was titled, in the title field, *Cedar Mountain — Notes*. He had renamed it in the truck in the pullout after Chapter 11, moving it from *ATV anomaly* to the current name. He looked at the title now.

He deleted — *Notes*.

He looked at the document. It was now titled simply *Cedar Mountain*. That was accurate. That was what it was. It was not a notes document. It was not an investigation file. It was not a research record. It was Cedar Mountain, in the form that he had been able to make of it over

the course of a summer, which was the form of close attention recorded honestly by a person who had been learning to listen.

He saved it.

He closed the laptop.

9:17 a.m. North lava tube access, Cedar Mountain. Acoustic model complete. Recording complete. Documentation complete.

I'm not publishing it.

Jillian read the paragraph aloud, at the tube entrance, with the field behind her. The field received it. That's not language I would have used in June. It's the accurate description.

The grandmother arrived at the right answer before she had the proof. She wrote "yes" in the margin of her own paragraph. She had the 1934 survey reference. She knew. She decided to leave the question in the right form — the form that kept the route running.

I retitled the document. It's Cedar Mountain now. That's what it is.

The Iron Horse is running. I'm going to let it run.

They walked out.

The lava field in the mid-morning had the quality it always had at this hour — more ordinary than at dusk, the dramatic strangeness of the landscape settling into something plainer and more honest, the rock simply rock, the sky simply sky, the ground underfoot the ground underfoot. The path was familiar by now in the way the field was familiar, which was: known enough to move through without effort, strange enough to keep requiring attention.

Jillian walked at her regular pace, which was the pace of someone

who knew where she was and was in no particular hurry. Carl walked beside her, the laptop under his arm, the notes document closed.

"Will you ever read the acoustic model again?" she said.

"Probably," he said. "It's a good model."

"Will you do anything with it?"

He thought about this honestly. "Probably not," he said. "But I'll keep it." He paused. "It's mine. It's accurate. I built it. I'm allowed to have it."

"You are," she said.

They walked.

"The sounds will keep happening," he said. "The pipe will keep resonating. People will keep hearing it in the evenings when the temperature drops, and they'll keep calling it the Iron Horse, and they'll keep telling the story of Elias Cord and the red Concord coach and the blizzard of 1886."

"Yes," she said.

"And the gold isn't in the lava beds," he said. "It never was. The company recovered it in February 1887 and closed the file. The legend has been wrong about the gold for a hundred and forty years."

"Yes," she said.

"And that's fine," he said.

"Yes," she said.

They came out of the field onto the two-track. The gravel of the access pullout was ahead, their trucks visible in the late-morning light with the patient reliability of vehicles that had been left somewhere and were simply there when you came back. The sky above the field was the same aggressive blue it had been when they arrived. The ponderosas at the field's margin were doing what they always did. The mountain was being itself.

At Carl's truck, he put the laptop on the seat and turned.

"She wrote it before she had the proof," he said. One more time, because it was worth saying one more time. "She arrived there through a different route."

"The long route," Jillian said. "The historical route. Thirty years on the mountain, listening."

"I got here in one summer," he said.

"You paid attention," she said. "That's not nothing."

He looked at the field. At the black rock and the blue sky and the distance between where he was standing and the tube entrance, invisible from here. At the ordinary extraordinary landscape that the mountain wore on its surface while doing its slower work underneath.

"See you at the shop?" he said.

"See you at the shop," she said.

They drove back down Movie Ranch Road in the bright August morning, separately, each carrying the decision the way you carried things that were finished — lightly, without anxiety, with the specific quality of resolution that came from having chosen correctly rather than having chosen easily.

chapter **eighteen**

DENNY OAKES WROTE SIX LETTERS. He wrote them by hand, on the same lined notepad he used for his lists, and he wrote them on the Wednesday evening after Tuesday's reckoning and the Thursday morning after that, sitting at the kitchen table in his cabin with the particular focused discomfort of a person who knows exactly what they have to say and finds no way to say it that adequately accounts for what was done. He rewrote the first letter four times before settling on a version that was, he decided, the correct length and the correct tone — not begging, not minimizing, simply honest. He copied the remaining five with minor variations to account for specific circumstances, because Sal Crenshaw's situation was not identical to the Kanab couple's situation, and the Kanab couple's situation was not identical to the machine that had been pre-dated by two weeks and whose owner had assumed it was age-related wear. Each letter got its specific truth, addressed to the specific person the truth belonged to.

He delivered them in person.

Garrett had been explicit about this and Denny had not argued, because argument would have required him to make a case that the letters mattered less than the delivery, and he was not able to make that case. The delivery was the point. The letters were the account; the showing up was the acknowledgment that the account was owed to a person rather than to a record.

The Kanab couple had left the mountain a week ago — their service address was in Kanab, and Denny drove down on a Saturday morning, which was four hours round trip, and knocked on the door, and stood on the porch and explained himself. They were polite. They accepted the letter. The husband said he appreciated him making the drive. The wife said she hoped the machine was all right now. Denny said it was. They shook hands. He drove back.

The local owners were easier in the logistical sense and harder in every other sense, because they knew him, and he had to stand in front of people who had been his neighbors on the mountain and say what he had done in the voice of someone who was not asking to be forgiven immediately but was asking to be heard completely. Most of them heard him. One of them didn't say anything for a long time after he finished, which was harder than anything they could have said.

Sal Crenshaw's porch was the last one.

She opened the door on the second knock, which was fast enough that he suspected she had seen his truck in the lot. She looked at him with the even attention she brought to everything — not hostile, not welcoming, simply present and attentive and waiting to hear what he had come to say.

He said it. He used the same language he had used on the other porches — specific, honest, without minimizing — and he said it to her the way he had said it to the others: looking at her, not at the letter, not at the lot, not at any more comfortable place to put his eyes.

She listened. She listened with the full, unhurried attention of someone who was going to make up her mind after she had heard everything rather than partway through.

When he finished, she was quiet for a moment.

"You really thought it was going to help," she said.

It was not entirely a question. It was the specific statement of a person who had decided something about the situation while he was speaking — not a judgment, just an accounting. She was naming what she had concluded.

"Yes," he said.

She looked at him. Then: "I appreciate you coming in person." She said this with the same evenness she said everything — not warmly, not coldly, just directly, the way a person spoke when they had decided to be honest about what they were feeling, which was: not fully all right yet, but not closed. The mountain's version of: sufficient, for now, for this.

She did not invite him in. She did not close the door on him. She stood in the doorway with the letter in her hand and the expression of someone who had received what was owed and would think about what came next in her own time.

He thanked her for listening. She nodded. He went back to his truck.

The drive home was the particular kind of quiet that came after something that had needed doing was done — not peaceful, exactly, not resolved, but lighter than it had been before. He had done the work. The work was its own thing, separate from what anyone thought of it, and he had done it.

He put the notepad away. He made coffee. He sat at the kitchen table for a while and did not make any lists.

GR's note went up on the cork board on the Thursday afternoon after the letters had gone out.

It was a half-sheet of paper, written in his small precise hand, pinned with a single tack to the center of the board — which required the relocation of a trail conditions update and a flyer for an event that had already happened, both of which he moved to the margins with the deliberate efficiency he applied to all organizational tasks. He read it back once after pinning it, made a small correction with a pencil from the counter, and returned to the bay.

The note said: *What you put in a machine matters. Treat it right.*

No date. No names. No context offered.

The first person to read it properly was a summer regular named Art who stopped in for a filter and spent approximately ninety seconds in front of the cork board with the expression of someone encountering

a statement that was either obvious or profound and could not immediately determine which. He went to the bay doorway.

"Garrett," he said.

"Yep," Garrett said, from under a machine.

"The note."

"Yep."

Art looked at it again. "What happened?"

"Something that got sorted out," Garrett said. The sound of a wrench. "That's what the note means."

Art nodded. He bought his filter and left.

By the following Monday, three more people had asked Garrett about the note. He told each of them: something that got sorted out. Each of them nodded. Each of them understood something slightly different by the statement. All of their understandings were correct enough.

The note stayed on the cork board through the rest of the season. Jillian read it on the Friday after it went up, standing at the counter with her coffee, and did not ask Garrett about it, because she did not need to. She read it the way she read things that had done their work correctly — with the recognition of a right answer arrived at through the right process — and went back to the trail conditions update, which had been re-pinned at the margin and indicated that the east ridge had been cleared and was open for the season's last few weeks.

Leo's documentary screening happened on a Thursday evening, which was the evening Leo determined he had a cut that he was willing to show another human being. He had been working toward this cut since the b-roll session in Chapter 12, and the process had been what editing always was: the slow revelation of what the footage was actually about, which was not always what you had thought it was about when you were filming it.

He had thirteen minutes and forty-two seconds. He had cut twelve minutes of that from the secondary bay footage — the ambient session,

the Denny container sequence removed to a separate folder, the sandwich at the center. The remaining material covered the shop's exterior, the cork board, the found-object shelf, the Golden Wrench, a brief section of the safety course meadow seen from the shop's back gate, and a three-minute sequence of Rolane working on a machine with the focused competence of someone who found the work itself the interesting part. He had added no music. He had added no narration. He had let the shop speak in its own voice.

He set up the laptop on the secondary bay's bench — the bench that was now, in his mind, associated with the footage rather than with any particular use — and called GR in from the far bay.

GR came through the doorway with the specific quality he had at the end of a working day: contained, attentive, the work concluded and the space his own. He looked at the laptop. He looked at Leo.

"Twelve minutes?" he said.

"Thirteen forty-two," Leo said.

GR pulled the stool from the bay corner and sat on it. He looked at the screen with the same focused attention he gave to engine diagnostics — complete, without skimming, processing rather than confirming.

He watched for thirteen minutes and forty-two seconds without speaking.

Leo watched GR watch the documentary. This was not what he had planned to do during the screening — he had planned to watch GR's face for specific moments, noting the reactions — but after approximately ninety seconds he stopped planning and simply watched, because GR watching the documentary had its own quality that was worth attending to. The way his attention moved. The way his face did not move in the expected places and moved, once, in a place Leo had not expected.

The expected places were the shop sequences — the exterior, the cork board, the wrench. GR watched these with neutral attention, the register of a man seeing an accurate account of something he knew well and finding it adequate.

The unexpected place was the sandwich.

The sandwich had three minutes and eleven seconds in the cut, and

Leo had not trimmed it, because every time he tried to trim it he found the trim point moved further into the sequence rather than earlier, the footage resisting compression the way certain things resisted compression: not because they contained drama but because they contained something quieter and harder to define, the quality of a person fully present in their own life at a specific moment, which the camera had been given the gift of recording with complete fidelity. GR eating a sandwich. GR looking out the bay door at the mountain in the middle distance. GR folding the wax paper and putting it in the cooler and sitting for another minute and then returning to work.

At the two-minute mark of the sandwich sequence, GR's face did something that Leo filed as the screening's most important moment: it went still in a different way than it had been still before. Not the stillness of neutral attention but the stillness of recognition — the specific quality of someone encountering an accurate representation of themselves and not knowing quite what to do with the accuracy.

He said nothing.

The documentary ended.

GR was quiet for a moment. Then: "That sandwich bit is good."

Leo had been prepared for several possible responses. This was the one he had hoped for without fully believing he would receive it. He filed it under: complete artistic validation.

"Thank you," he said.

GR looked at the screen, which had returned to the editing interface. He looked at the timeline, the clips arranged in their sequence. He pointed at the sandwich sequence. "That's the whole thing," he said.

"I know," Leo said.

"Why?"

Leo thought about how to answer this honestly. "Because it's what the shop is," he said. "The shop is a place where things get attended to. By people who care about them. And that's what the sandwich is — you attending to your lunch the same way you attend to everything else here. With the same quality of care." He paused. "I didn't plan to film it. I was filming b-roll. But when I watched it back I understood what the documentary was about."

GR looked at the screen for another moment. Then he got off the stool and went back to the far bay, because there was still one more thing he wanted to finish before he locked up.

Leo sat at the bench with the laptop for a while, watching the timeline. He uploaded the documentary to the shop's account at eight-fourteen that evening with the title *Loose Wheels: A Short Documentary* and a one-sentence description: *A Cedar Mountain service shop, in summer.* He tagged the shop's location. He added no other context.

By Sunday evening it had three hundred and twelve views.

By the following Wednesday it had four hundred and seven.

The Cedar Mountain community Facebook group had a thread about it. The thread had fourteen comments. Twelve of the fourteen comments were about the sandwich. Two of them used the phrase "that's the whole film." One of them, from a user whose profile picture was a golden retriever, said simply: "the sandwich is art."

Leo pinned this comment.

Rolane, shown the comment thread on Thursday morning, read through it with the focused attention of someone evaluating evidence and said: "Yep."

Leo considered this a secondary complete artistic validation.

The week after the documentary went up, Jillian stopped by the shop on a Thursday afternoon and found Carl already there.

This was not entirely a surprise — Carl had been at the shop with some regularity through the summer, and the investigation's conclusion had not reduced his visits but changed their character, from the purposeful visits of someone with a specific agenda to the comfortable visits of someone who found the place worth spending time in. He was at the counter with GR, which was also not surprising, and they appeared to be in the middle of a conversation that had the quality of two people who had started somewhere specific and had followed the thread wherever it led.

She got a coffee and joined them.

The conversation, she gathered, was about the Cedar City smithy.

GR had been doing his own research. He had not announced this to anyone — it was not the kind of thing he would announce — but he had been looking into it in the time he had available, which was the same time he had available for everything: the focused, unhurried attention he applied to problems that required solving and the patient waiting he applied to problems that required time. He had found, in the 1902 Cedar City business directory — a digitized version that the Iron County archives had put online — a reference to W. Cord & Sons that was slightly fuller than the entry Carl had found in September. The fuller entry included: *Established 1878 by William Cord, formerly of the Kanarra iron works. Second generation: Elias Cord, smith and operator. Closed following the death of the founder, 1903.*

GR read this to them from his phone, which he held with the two-finger efficiency of a man who used a phone as a necessary tool rather than a preferred one.

Carl was quiet.

"Elias took over after his father died," Jillian said.

"1903," GR said. "Seventeen years after the blizzard. He survived the route."

Jillian looked at this. She looked at the implication of it — that Elias Cord, who had been listed as lost in the 1886 storm, had appeared again in the 1903 directory as the second-generation operator of his father's smithy, running the business for seventeen years between the blizzard and its closing.

"He came back," Carl said.

"He came back," GR confirmed.

They sat with this for a moment.

"So the legend got that wrong too," Carl said.

"The legend got the gold wrong and Elias wrong," Jillian said. "He survived the route. He made it through the blizzard somehow. He went home. He ran the smithy until it closed." She paused. "And nobody updated the story."

"Nobody knew," GR said. "The company closed the claim. The official record said lost. The story was already running." He put his phone away. "The mountain kept the story. Elias went home."

Jillian looked at the wrench above the register. At the peg his father had made the wrench for, or that Elias had made himself, or that had been made for the stage lines his family served. At the dark metal and the warmth the light found in it.

"The wrench got here before the story did," she said.

GR looked at her.

"The wrench has been on Cedar Mountain since before the legend fully formed," she said. "It was here when people started hearing the sounds and calling them the Iron Horse. It's been above the register while the story ran." She paused. "The mountain kept both."

GR said nothing. He picked up the ledger from the counter and made a note in it — a single line, which Carl and Jillian both understood was the Cord entry, added to the record that GR maintained in parallel to everything else because it was the record of what he had seen and what he had come to know, separate from what any other system was able to track.

He closed the ledger. He replaced it under the counter.

"I'm not going to do anything with it," he said. He said this the way he said all definitive things: flatly, specifically, without any need for agreement or response. "I just wanted to know."

"Yes," Jillian said.

"The wrench stays where it is," he said.

"Yes," Carl said.

GR went back to the bay. The sound of his work resumed — the patient, specific sounds of a mechanic attending to a machine with the full quality of his attention, the conversation with the engine underway and proceeding in its characteristic manner. The ceiling fans turned. The cork board held its notices, including the half-sheet in GR's small precise hand. The Golden Wrench was above the register.

Carl and Jillian stood at the counter for a moment in the comfortable quiet of two people who had finished a piece of work and were in no hurry to leave the space where it had been done.

"Elias came back," Carl said.

"He came back," she said.

"The legend lost him," he said. "The mountain kept him."

She looked at the wrench. She looked at it with the expression she

wore when something completed itself — not triumphant, not satisfied in the demonstrative sense, but settled, the way the mountain was settled, with the long patience of something that had been holding a thing for the right person to find it.

"Yes," she said. "That's what the mountain does."

chapter **nineteen**

THE SEASON WAS ENDING in the way Cedar Mountain seasons ended — not with a particular event but with a quality shift, the light going from summer's direct commitment to something more amber and provisional, the aspens beginning their internal accounting of what the year had cost them, the temperature in the early mornings carrying a specific authority that July and most of August had not had. The tourist traffic had thinned. The trailhead parking lot, which in mid-July had required arriving before eight to find a space, now had room at nine-thirty. Hot Mama's had gone to reduced weekday hours. The community cork board at Loose Wheels had its autumn face: fewer event flyers, more practical notices, the Cedar Mountain Service District's winter patrol rotation schedule posted in the upper left corner where the summer's trail conditions updates had lived.

The mountain was doing its late-season accounting, which it did every year and which never looked exactly the same twice, and the people who came every summer were doing theirs.

Jillian was on her second-to-last week. She had been on Cedar Mountain for nine weeks, which was longer than her usual eight and which she had arranged by pushing the St. George apartment's first-of-school-year tasks to the first week of September rather than the last week of August. She had not done this for any particular reason she could name — it had felt like the right length when she booked the cabin in

April, and she had not revised the feeling. She was glad of the extra week now. It gave the summer's work a chance to settle before she had to pack it away.

She was at the Cedar Mountain Country Store on a Tuesday morning when Chloe arrived.

The porch had its late-summer configuration: two of the three rocking chairs occupied, the third at a slight angle that suggested recent use and departure. Maya was in the left chair with coffee and the expression of someone who had been up since dawn for the waterway survey and had reached the comfortable plateau of exhaustion that was its own kind of alertness. Jillian was in the right chair. The mountain was doing its mid-morning thing above the tree line, the clouds building in the way they built in late August — not the dramatic afternoon thunderheads of July, but something slower and more considered, as if the sky was taking its time about whatever it was going to do.

Chloe came up the porch steps with the ease of someone who had been arriving at this porch for several seasons and knew it the way she knew the Zen Nest porch and the porch at her own cabin and the dozen other Cedar Mountain porches that constituted her summer geography. She got coffee from Mitch through the screen door and took the third chair, which she adjusted back to its regular position with the casual efficiency of someone restoring a thing to its right place.

"Last week?" Maya said, to Chloe.

"Thursday," Chloe said. "I've got a commission in Salt Lake that needs actual studio time. I've been putting it off for six weeks." She sipped her coffee. "How's the survey?"

"Complete," Maya said. "The eastern seeps are coming back. Flow rate is up twelve percent from last August." She said this with the particular satisfaction of a number that had confirmed a hypothesis while also being better than expected. "I'm writing the report in installments so I can finish it here instead of in an office."

"The mountain deserves to be where the work gets done," Chloe said.

"That's what I told the state water board," Maya said. "They were less moved by the sentiment than the data."

Jillian had been listening with the comfortable attention of someone who was present rather than waiting for her turn. She looked at the mountain above the tree line, where the aspens on the upper ridge had a few leaves that had made their early decision — not turned, exactly, but committed to turning, the yellow beginning in the edge rather than the center.

"Did you hear the Loose Wheels thing got sorted out?" Maya said. She said it in the tone she used for things she had filed as community information rather than gossip — a distinction she maintained with some precision.

"Yes," Jillian said.

"Was it interesting?" Maya said.

Jillian looked at her coffee. "Some of it," she said.

Maya, who had known Jillian for long enough to read the full range of her ellipses, nodded and moved on. This was one of the things Jillian valued most about Maya — the complete absence of the push that most people applied to partial answers, the confidence that if there was more to say it would be said when it was ready to be said, and that if it wasn't said it didn't require extraction.

Chloe was looking at her phone. She had the documentary pulled up — she had watched it twice since Leo posted it, she had mentioned this to no one but had mentioned the sandwich to several people. "The sandwich section is legitimately good art," she said, to no one in particular.

Maya looked at her.

"Leo's documentary," Chloe said. "The Loose Wheels one. The section where Garrett eats a sandwich."

"I thought it was a documentary about the shop," Maya said.

"It is," Chloe said. "The sandwich is the shop." She put the phone away. "It's a twelve-minute film about a man eating a sandwich in his own space, and it's the best thing Leo has made." A pause. "I told him that. He said the Facebook comment called it art first."

"Which Facebook comment?" Maya said.

"The one from the golden retriever account," Chloe said.

Maya considered this. "I'm choosing not to investigate that further," she said.

Jillian smiled. The porch held them for another half hour — the conversation moving through Chloe's commission, Maya's survey data, the specific quality of light on Cedar Mountain in late August, which all three of them had observed independently and which they spent some time comparing notes on. The ponderosas did their mid-morning thing. Mitch came out briefly to put a new notice on the screen door — something about the fall road maintenance schedule — and went back in without interrupting.

Eventually the morning's business called them in different directions. Maya had data to process. Chloe had a sketch she'd started that morning and wanted to finish before the light changed. They said what needed to be said and went where they needed to go, with the ease of people who would see each other again before the season ended and did not need to treat each departure as a conclusion.

Jillian sat on the porch for a few more minutes after they left, finishing her coffee in the particular quiet of a porch after company has departed and before the next person arrives. The mountain was doing what it always did. The aspens on the upper ridge were doing their accounting. The season was ending in its own time, at its own pace, which was the only pace it had ever operated on.

Carl had been to The Lofty Nest three times since the Cord research session, which was twice more than he had been in all of his previous time on Cedar Mountain combined. He went partly because he had business there — additional questions about the archive, a book on CCC infrastructure that Erica had said she had a copy of somewhere — and partly for the reason people returned to specific places on Cedar Mountain, which was that the place repaid the returning.

He went on a Wednesday afternoon, which was a good time at The Lofty Nest: the tourist traffic had subsided, the light through the front windows was at its most useful, and Erica had a quality on mid-week afternoons of someone who had been doing things all

morning and was now available for the things that didn't fit into categories.

She looked up when he came in. She had the orange ribbon in her braid. The clocks were doing their work.

He told her the full account. He had not done this before — their previous exchanges had been specific and bounded, focused on the photographs or the archive or a particular question — and this was different. He sat at the counter and told her about the wrench and the photograph and the Cedar City smithy and the 1887 newspaper article and the acoustic model and the gap in the CCC pipe and the decision at the lava tube, and then he told her what GR had found: Elias Cord in the 1902 directory, the smithy operating until 1903, the son who had survived the blizzard and come home and run his father's business for seventeen years and never appeared in the legend.

Erica listened with the full, unhurried attention she brought to everything. She did not interrupt. When he finished, she was quiet for a moment.

"You're not going to take it anywhere," she said. It was not a question.

"No," he said.

She nodded, the nod of someone whose expectation has been confirmed. "Objects like that belong where they belong," she said. "The story gets to stay in the object." She looked at the register, at the Golden Wrench that was not here but that she knew as well as the things that were here, because she was the kind of person who knew the significant objects on Cedar Mountain and their locations and their histories, as a professional matter. "Garrett uses it," she said.

"Once," Carl said. "That I saw."

"That's the right frequency for a thing like that," she said.

She was quiet for another moment. Then she said: "Elias came back."

"Elias came back," Carl said.

"The legend lost him," she said. "The mountain kept him." She looked at the shelves behind the counter, at the accumulated objects on their places — the telescope in its corner, the compass on its shelf, the dozen other items that had arrived at The Lofty Nest because this was

where things arrived when they were looking for the right place to be. "That's what the mountain does," she said. "It keeps what needs keeping."

Carl looked at the Powell telescope in its corner. The battered case, the brass barrel visible at one end, the particular quality of an object that had been doing its work quietly for a very long time without requiring any acknowledgment for the doing of it. He had looked at this telescope every time he had been in the shop and had known the story from Leo, from the Book 7 context, from Erica's previous references to Powell's expedition. He did not say anything about it now.

"Thank you," he said, for the archive, for the photographs, for the 1887 article.

"Don't," she said, and she meant it in the way she always meant it — not false modesty, just the accurate accounting of someone who had done what was obviously required and did not consider it the kind of thing that required thanks. She turned back to whatever she had been doing before he arrived. He went to the door.

At the door, he stopped. He looked at the shop — at the clocks and the light and the accumulated objects and the particular warmth that the space maintained regardless of what the weather was doing outside.

"I'll be back next summer," he said.

She did not look up. "I know," she said.

He went out.

His last significant conversation with Garrett happened on a Thursday afternoon, late in the day, when the shop was doing its end-of-day accounting and Carl had come in for no particular reason except that the shop was worth being in and the season was ending and there were fewer of these afternoons left than there had been.

Garrett was under a machine in the far bay. Carl was at the counter with the last of the day's coffee, which had the quality of coffee that has been sitting for a while and knows it but has declined to apologize. He read the cork board. He looked at the note in Garrett's small precise hand — *What you put in a machine matters. Treat it right.* — which

was still there, had been there for two weeks, would likely be there through the season's end and possibly beyond it. He looked at the wrench. He looked at the found-object shelf. He looked at the particular quality of the light through the open bay door, which was late-August afternoon light on Cedar Mountain and was one of the better qualities of light available anywhere.

From the far bay, the sounds of Garrett's work had the particular register of a job that was going well — not easily, but correctly, the conversation between the mechanic and the machine in its productive phase, the diagnostic process having arrived at its conclusions and the corrective process underway.

Carl said, after a while: "Did you know when you agreed to the documentary?"

A pause. The sound of a socket wrench. "Know what?"

"That it would turn out all right," Carl said. "The summer. All of it."

A longer pause. The sound of something being set down carefully.

"The mountain usually does," Garrett said. "You just have to let it work."

The sound of the socket wrench resumed. Carl sat with this. He had been sitting with things all summer, letting them be what they were rather than what he wanted them to be or what he expected them to be, and it had been, by any accounting he was capable of running, the most productive thing he had done. Not the pattern document or the acoustic model or the Cord research or the GPS module, though all of those had been worthwhile in their specific ways. The sitting with things. The letting it work.

He finished the coffee. He set the cup on the counter. He picked up his parts order from the pile next to the register — he had left it there two days ago and not picked it up because the pickup had become a pretext rather than a purpose — and put it under his arm.

"Garrett," he said.

"Yep," from the far bay.

"Good season," Carl said.

A pause. Then: "Yep."

He went out.

He drove the long way back to the cabin on Deer Haven Loop, which was not significantly longer than the direct way but went north on Movie Ranch Road before turning east rather than turning immediately, and which passed, about a mile out of the village, the access pullout for the north lava beds.

He slowed as he approached it. He had been doing this involuntarily since the second visit to the tube — slowing at the pullout, the habit of attention that the place had established in him over the summer. Most times he kept going, because there was nothing to do there in the afternoon and the ATV on the two-track would have attracted attention. Today he stopped.

He rolled down the window.

The afternoon air came in: cedar and basalt and something that had no name and was specific to Cedar Mountain at this hour in this season, a combination of temperature and altitude and the particular organic chemistry of late-summer ponderosas that he had been meaning to try to describe and had repeatedly failed to describe and had eventually decided did not require description. He knew it. That was sufficient.

He listened.

The lava field was doing its afternoon thing. The temperature at the surface was warm — he could feel it in the air coming through the window — and the differential between the surface and the tube's interior was small, probably insufficient to drive the airflow through the gap at the resonance threshold. He knew this from the model. The model said: sounds occur at a minimum differential of approximately seven degrees Celsius, onset at approximately six. The current surface temperature was probably sixty-two, sixty-three degrees. The tube's interior was in the low fifties. The differential was at the threshold, maybe slightly below.

He listened anyway.

His phone was on the passenger seat. The recorder was in the equipment bag in the back of the truck. The acoustic model was on the laptop under the seat. He did not reach for any of them.

He listened.

Nothing. The afternoon was warm, the temperature differential flat, the gap in the CCC pipe silent in the way of mechanisms that require specific conditions and had not been given them. The lava field was itself — black rock, thin grass at the margin, the sky going from its afternoon blue toward something more amber at the horizon. The field did not perform. It was not concerned with being observed.

He sat for a minute. Two minutes. The window was down. The afternoon did what it did.

Then he rolled the window up and drove on.

He drove past the aspens at the upper edge of the village, which had their early-deciding leaves — a few yellow among the green, the mountain's internal accounting running slightly ahead of schedule this year, or perhaps exactly on schedule, and what he had considered slightly ahead was simply the mountain's own timetable operating without reference to anyone's expectation.

He turned onto Deer Haven Loop and parked in the cabin's gravel lot and sat in the truck for a moment before going inside. The ponderosas were doing their evening thing. The quality of the air at this hour was the quality he associated most specifically with Cedar Mountain — not the morning quality, which was sharp and clarifying, and not the midday quality, which was direct and honest, but the early-evening quality, which was something else. Something that suggested the day had been completed correctly and the night was going to be what it was going to be and both of these things were acceptable.

He opened the notes document.

6:12 p.m. Last significant conversations of the season. Erica: "Objects like that belong where they belong. The story gets to stay in the object." Garrett: "The mountain usually does. You just have to let it work."

Stopped at the pullout on the way home. Temperature too warm. No sounds. I didn't get out the recorder. I just listened.

The mountain was just the mountain. That's the right thing for the mountain to be.

Driving back Thursday. I'll be back next summer.

He looked at this last line for a moment. He had not decided this formally — the decision had arrived while he was writing the note, in the way decisions sometimes arrived when you wrote toward them rather than about them, and it was already true by the time he read it back.

He closed the document. He went inside. The cabin on Deer Haven Loop was doing its thing, which was being itself — the specific smell of a summer rental that had been used well and was glad of it, the particular quality of the last light through the west window that he had been watching all summer and had not gotten over. He put water on for tea. He looked out at the ponderosas. He thought about nothing in particular, which was something he had gotten better at over the summer and which he suspected was related to everything else he had gotten better at.

The mountain was keeping what it kept. He was leaving what he was leaving. Both of these were the right things to do.

chapter **twenty**

JILLIAN'S last day on Cedar Mountain always arrived before she was ready for it and never surprised her by arriving, which was the specific temporal condition of things that were both expected and unwelcome. She had known since mid-August that the last day would come on this Thursday. She had not spent any of the intervening weeks pretending otherwise. She had simply been on the mountain, in the time available, with the quality of attention the mountain rewarded, and now the time was ending and she was packing what needed packing and leaving what needed to be there for next June.

The cabin had the specific quality it always had on the last day: slightly more itself than usual, as if aware of impending vacancy and expressing its character with extra emphasis. The smell of wood and accumulated summers. The west window doing its thing with the morning light. The shelf with the atlas and the field guides and the pamphlet and the compass that Erica had given her two days ago, which Jillian had placed on the shelf immediately because that was clearly where it belonged and she had looked at it on the shelf several times in the two days since and found it correct each time.

She packed the things that came back to St. George. She left the things that lived here. The pamphlet stayed, as it always stayed, because this was where it had been for twenty-three summers and where it would be for whatever summers followed. The compass stayed next to

it, on the grounds that Erica had pulled it from the archive photographs folder and given it to her in the specific way Erica gave things — with the confidence of someone who was not giving a gift but returning a thing to its right owner — and that the cabin's shelf was clearly the right place.

She made coffee. She stood at the west window and looked at the ponderosas for what she already knew was the last time this summer, but which felt like it always felt — not final, just the most recent. She drank the coffee. She rinsed the cup and left it on the rack because the cabin deserved to be clean when it sat empty.

She drove to the Cedar Mountain Country Store.

Mitch was doing inventory when she came in, which meant the store had its particular morning quality of organized purpose rather than customer service, and Jillian liked the store in this mode because it was the store being itself rather than the store being a public-facing thing. She got coffee — the last cup of country store coffee of the summer, which tasted as it always tasted, which was exactly right — and found Maya at the back counter doing something with a set of water quality reports.

They talked for thirty minutes, which was the right amount of time for a goodbye that was a see-you-and-we-both-know-it rather than a farewell. Maya's survey data was written, filed, sent to the state water board, and substantially better received than she had expected, which she described with the specific restraint of someone who had hoped for a good result and was not going to perform surprise at receiving one. She was staying through October — the fall seep survey was better than the summer one, she explained, because the reduced surface flow made the subterranean contributions more visible. Jillian told her to send the report. Maya said she would. Both of them knew she would.

The conversation moved the way late-summer conversations on Cedar Mountain moved — covering the season without accounting for it, the summary implicit in the ease of the exchange rather than in any explicit statement. They did not talk about the Loose Wheels investigation because they had already not talked about it in the way that constituted talking about it. They did not talk about Elias Cord because

Jillian was not sure she was ready to say it out loud yet to anyone except her journal, which already had the entry and was holding it correctly.

They said goodbye in the doorway, with the comfort of people who would see each other next summer and did not need to treat the parting as a conclusion.

Jillian drove to The Lofty Nest.

Erica was behind the counter when she came in, doing something with a receipt book that seemed to be resisting cooperation. She looked up and set the receipt book aside with the ease of someone who found the timing convenient rather than inconvenient.

"Today," Erica said.

"Today," Jillian confirmed.

She had come to return the key to the archive flat files — Erica had given her a temporary key in August after the Cord research session, to allow for follow-up visits, and Jillian had made three subsequent visits that had each produced something worth finding, though nothing as significant as the Cord photographs and the 1887 article. She put the key on the counter.

Erica looked at it. She picked it up and put it in the register drawer without the transaction of the giving-back — no acknowledgment that a key had been lent, no ceremony of its return. It had been borrowed and it was back, which was how things worked in the shop, the ongoing circulation of objects to the people who needed them and back to the places that held them.

"The compass," Erica said.

"Is on the shelf in the cabin," Jillian said. "Where it belongs."

Erica nodded. She had the expression she wore when an expectation had been confirmed — not satisfaction exactly, more the absence of surprise that was itself a form of contentment. She turned back to the receipt book.

Jillian looked at the shop. She had been looking at this shop for many summers and it had changed the way all good shops changed — slowly, through accumulation, each season depositing something new without displacing what was already there. The clocks doing their work. The colored glass pieces sending their small rectangles of light across the floor. The Powell telescope in its corner, the brass barrel visible at the

near end, the constellations on its surface catching the morning light at their specific angle.

She looked at it for a moment.

"Erica," she said.

Erica looked up.

"Does the mountain always—" She paused, looking for the right framing. "Does it always work out?"

Erica considered this with the seriousness it deserved, which was the seriousness she brought to all genuine questions. She did not answer immediately. She looked at the receipt book, which she appeared to have given up on for the present. She looked at the shop.

"It works out to what it is," she said. "Not always to what people want. But what it is is usually worth the finding." She paused. "This summer worked out to what it is."

Jillian thought about this. About the wrench on the peg and the gap in the pipe and Elias Cord running his father's smithy until 1903 and the note on the cork board and Denny on Sal's porch and Leo's documentary and GR eating a sandwich. About the grandmother's paragraph read aloud in a lava tube with the field behind them. About Carl retitling his document and driving past the pullout without recording.

"Yes," she said. "It did."

She said goodbye. Erica said: "Next summer." Not a question, not a wish — a statement, offered in the register of things that were simply known.

Jillian went out.

She found Carl at Ground + Toasted, which was the only place she would have expected to find him at nine-thirty on a Thursday morning. He had his laptop open and the pour-over setup at his elbow and the expression of someone who was working at the productive edge of something rather than the blocked edge, which she had learned to distinguish over the course of the summer. He looked up when she came in and did the thing he did — the quick, complete assessment followed by the relaxation of the attention back to neutral — and closed the laptop.

"Today," he said.

"Today," she said. She got coffee and sat across from him.

He had, she already knew, decided to stay through October. He had mentioned this to her three days ago and again yesterday and she had not needed him to mention it either time but had not said so because the mentions were not informational — they were the articulation of a decision that had surprised him and that he was still getting used to. People who came to Cedar Mountain for two weeks and stayed for four months tended to be surprised by their own staying, especially the first time.

"The project?" she said.

He glanced at the laptop. "I'm turning the notes document into something," he said. "Not a paper. Not a report. Something else." He paused. "I'll know what it is when it's finished."

She nodded. She suspected she knew what it was. It was the kind of thing that took a summer to accumulate and a winter to understand and a second summer to complete, and he would come back in June with it in a different shape than it was now, and the mountain would have opinions about it, and those opinions would be correct.

"The GPS module?" she said.

"Wanda's going to run the fall course with it," he said. "She texted me the revised circuit diagram. She moved one of the junction simulations to the east meadow because the drainage is better in September." He paused with the specific quality of someone choosing to say the next thing rather than leave it unsaid. "She said to tell you the first thing she filmed on her phone was a video for Owen and Clara, and that they watched it six times."

Jillian looked at her coffee. "Good," she said.

"Yes," he said.

They sat for a while in the comfortable quiet that had accumulated over the summer — the quiet of two people who had done a piece of work together and were in no particular hurry about what came next. Ground + Toasted was doing its mid-morning thing: the espresso machine, the low conversation at the window table, the light through the freight-door-window doing the specific thing it did at this hour that Carl had been photographing intermittently all summer without ever capturing it fully to his satisfaction.

"The mountain keeps the people it likes," Jillian said.

He looked at her. "Is that a thing?"

"Little of both," she said.

He smiled. It was the smile of someone who had been given a sentence that was going to stay with them, which was the kind of sentence Cedar Mountain produced in people who paid attention to it and which he had, over the course of the summer, gotten considerably better at receiving.

"Next summer," she said.

"Next summer," he said. "I'll be here."

She believed him. She picked up her coffee and finished it and put on her jacket and said goodbye to Brandi at the counter, who said "see you next year" with the certainty of someone who had been saying it to summer regulars for a long time and knew the difference between the people who came back and the people who didn't. Carl was the kind who came back. He had been from the beginning, even when he didn't know it yet.

She went out into the late-morning air of Cedar Mountain in early September, which had a quality that was its own thing — not summer, not fall, but the specific transitional atmosphere of a mountain deciding. The aspens on the upper ridge had gone further in their accounting. The ponderosas were doing their thing with the light that they always did.

She got in her truck and drove.

Movie Ranch Road in the early afternoon ran southwest, away from the village and toward the switchbacks that would take her back down to the valley. She had driven this road hundreds of times in both directions and knew its specific features the way she knew the features of all places she had traveled long enough — not by description but by anticipation, each landmark arriving when expected and registering as confirmation rather than discovery.

She passed Loose Wheels.

The bay doors were open. Through them, in the brief interval of

passing, she could see GR at the main bench, doing something with focused attention, the radio on, the shop doing what it always did. The Golden Wrench was above the register — she couldn't see it from the road at this speed, but she knew it was there, on its peg, in its place, doing its patient watching of the mechanics and the mysteries and the ordinary Tuesday mornings.

She drove on.

The village thinned. The road narrowed to its undivided stretch, the gravel shoulders beginning, the ponderosas pressing closer. The afternoon was warm — warmer than it had been for a week, a last summer insistence before September fully committed to its own character.

She passed the turnoff to Deer Haven Loop without slowing. The aspens at the junction were turned twenty, twenty-five percent — more than the upper ridge, the lower elevation catching the season's turn earlier. She looked at them through the window with the specific attention she gave to things she was leaving. They were beautiful in the specific way of things that were in the process of becoming what they were going to be, the yellow arriving in the green rather than replacing it, both colors present and both correct.

The lava bed pullout appeared ahead on the right.

She was not planning to stop. She had stopped here in Chapter 1, on arrival, and had not stopped; she had slowed in Chapter 19, on a warm afternoon, and had heard nothing. She was going home. The switchbacks were ten minutes ahead. St. George was four hours beyond that.

She slowed anyway.

She pulled into the gravel clearing and cut the engine.

The afternoon was warm but the temperature at the rock's surface was dropping as the sun moved west — she could feel it in the air coming through the window she had rolled down without quite deciding to. The lava field was itself: black basalt, thin late-season grass at the margin, the sky above it the particular blue of early September that was slightly different from August's blue in ways that were real but not easily described. The two-track ran into the field and stopped where it always stopped, the trail continuing on foot to the tube entrance two miles in.

She listened.

The field was quiet in the way it was quiet when the differential was insufficient — not dead quiet, but the specific quiet of a mechanism not yet engaged, the right conditions approaching but not arrived. The temperature was at the threshold. The surface was cooling. The differential was building at the margin, the tube's interior cold and stable, the evening coming toward the field from the east.

She listened.

And then — faint, at the edge of perception, rising with the quality of something that had been there all along and was only now audible — the sounds.

Not loud. Not dramatic. The specific metallic rhythm she had heard at dusk in Chapter 7 and at dawn in Chapter 11, the Iron Horse running its route in the language the mountain had assembled for it: a broken pipe and nine hundred years of volcanic rock and the temperature differential between a late-summer afternoon and the deep interior of the earth. Rhythmic, irregular, coming from below and to the east, rising and falling with the wind's small adjustments to the pressure at the tube entrance.

Elias Cord's father had made the tool that was now above Garrett's register. Elias had driven the route for four seasons before the blizzard and had come home and run his father's smithy for seventeen more years, and the mountain had kept both of them — the man in the directory and the wrench on the peg and the sounds from the lava tube that had been speaking his name in its own language since before Jillian's grandmother was born.

She listened for a full minute.

The sounds continued: patient, unhurried, exactly what they were and nothing more than what they were and everything they had ever meant.

She smiled.

She rolled up the window.

She drove.

The journal entry was written that night, at the kitchen table in her St. George apartment, which smelled like the apartment rather than the cabin and which was its own kind of right. She had unpacked the things that came home and put them where they belonged and made tea and sat at the table with the journal open and the pen in her hand.

She wrote:

Elias Cord's father made the wrench. Elias drove his last route into a blizzard and came home and ran the smithy for seventeen years and then closed it, and his father's wrench ended up in a shop on a mountain where it still hangs above a register next to a coffee machine, watching mechanics and mysteries and ordinary Tuesday mornings. The mountain kept him when the legend lost him. The mountain kept the wrench when no one was keeping track. I don't know what that means, entirely. I think it means the mountain is patient in a way that outlasts the stories people tell about it, and that the things worth keeping get kept whether anyone decides to keep them or not.

She looked at this.

Then, below it:

Carl says the mountain built its own Iron Horse. I think that's right. I think the Iron Horse has been running the same route for a hundred and forty years, and it always arrives exactly where it was going.

This summer worked out to what it is. Erica said that. She's usually right.

The pamphlet is on the shelf. The compass is next to

*it. The sounds from the lava tube are doing what they
always do when the temperature is right.*

That's enough. That's more than enough.

See you in June.

She closed the journal.

She put it on the shelf where it lived between summers.

She looked out the window at the St. George night, which was warm and flat and entirely itself — not the mountain, not Cedar Mountain, not the specific dark of a ponderosa forest at nine thousand feet, but the honest dark of the valley, which had its own qualities and its own patience and its own things worth keeping.

She thought about the sounds from the pullout. The way they had arrived at the threshold of the differential, exactly when the conditions were right, indifferent to whether anyone was there to hear them.

The mountain running its route.

The Iron Horse doing what the Iron Horse had always done.

She turned off the kitchen light and went to bed, and the journal was on its shelf, and the summer was in the journal, and the mountain was four hours north on the I-15 doing its slow patient work, keeping what needed keeping, letting the stories run.

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A richly imagined literary fantasy in the Victorian style, pondering the question, "what becomes of people who engage on a great, world-changing quest... only to abandon it before its conclusion?" Dr. Alastair Finch must not only answer the question, but also take up some of those quests, if he's to unlock the Gateways and release our world's true source of courage and inspiration: Dragons.

Imperium Galactica

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Power Wave • Superior Wave • Supreme Wave

These are also available in the Kindle store, and in paperback format, on Amazon.

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.

