

the mystery of the golden talon

the duck creek mysteries
book seven

Don Jones

the duck creek mysteries

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foreword

When I completed the sixth book in this series, *The Mystery of the Stone People*, I was pretty sure that was it. But I stopped into The Lofty Nest, Duck Creek Village's eclectic and homey gifts-and-home-decor shop, to see if the owner would be interested in stocking copies of *Cedar Mountain Campfire Stories*. (She was!) It had been a long time since I'd been into the shop, and I instantly remembered why I liked it so much. There's a *lot* of merchandise, but nothing feels cluttered—it's so artfully arranged, it smells so nice, and you really do feel like you might stumble across some unique, magical item if you just browse long enough. And I started wondering where The Lofty Nest fit into the universe of the *Duck Creek Mysteries*... and over a cup of coffee next door at Ground + Toasted, it came to me... and you're holding the result.

As always, while I've borrowed the names of real people in Duck Creek Village, what you're reading here are just characters that I've invented. I've taken some liberties with the local geography in the name of the story, and even had to invent some places and organizations (like the Historical Society) to fill in the narrative. But you can, and definitely should, stop into The Lofty Nest on your next journey up the mountain... and see what calls to you.

Enjoy!

Don Jones

Duck Creek Village, UT
May 2026

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one

the ledge at cascade falls

CODY WESTBROOK ADJUSTED the bridge of his glasses with the edge of a mittened hand, squinting through their perpetually smudged lenses at the sunlit sprawl of Dixie National Forest below. The viewing platform at Cascade Falls was, by all metrics—logistical, ecological, and aesthetic—a perfect observation post. Only, the red volcanic gravel under the faux-log bench kept shifting, so every time Cody swung his legs for comfort, it emitted a sound not unlike the crunch of burnt toast underfoot. The bench was already pocked with claw marks and initials, and the back rail vibrated whenever a semi barreled by on the highway far below.

The morning air was cold enough to sting his nostrils, but he'd read somewhere that mountain air oxygenated the brain, so he inhaled deeply and tried to ignore the subtle scent of fertilizer wafting from the parking pull-off. The falls themselves weren't visible from this vantage—just their white noise roar, rising up the limestone canyon and blending with the high, fluted whisper of the aspens that hemmed the trail. Still, it was quiet enough for a city-raised ornithologist to imagine he was in the middle of nowhere.

Cody braced his elbows against his knees, steadied the binoculars, and found the falcon scrape on the far cliff. It was exactly where he'd GPS-marked it two weeks ago, an overhanging ledge about 120 vertical feet up, perched above a haphazard slope of talus. The nesting bowl was

little more than a scrape in the rock, surrounded by a raggedy picket of pigeon bones and wind-blasted feathers. He counted, as always, three white ovals, one with a spatter of yolk already drying into the guano. No sign of the parent birds this early—though one of them had been circling with a vengeance at dusk last night, as if daring the sunset to approach.

He set the binocs down, flipping open his weatherproof field journal. His hand, bundled in an over-engineered glove, made a slow and patient cursive:

May 9. Overcast, temp 37F. Wind: 4 knots NE. Eggs intact, scrape active, minimal disturbance. Observed: Steller's jay, raven, two Clark's nutcrackers (hypersocial, loud, as usual). Unofficial trail at base of cliff appears freshly disturbed—investigate further.

He closed the book and sucked at the top of his pen. It tasted faintly of last night's disinfectant wipe. Above, the sky was a flat, eggshell blue, and if he looked long enough at the horizon, he could almost feel the curvature of the Earth and his own irrelevance. He liked that.

A shadow flickered across the ledge. He jerked the binoculars back up—nothing. Cody frowned, set the binocs back down, and scanned the entire vertical sweep of rock. His technique was meticulous: left-to-right, down, right-to-left, down. Like a dot matrix printer for the human eyeball.

Midway through the third scan, something snagged the corner of his sight—a glint, just above the nest, half-lost in the rust-colored patina of the rock face. He focused in. There, about a meter left of the scrape, a neat trio of metallic anchors had been driven into the cliff. Not camouflaged, not subtle—bright silver, gleaming with the self-confidence of brand new hardware. The middle one was rigged with a quickdraw, and the bottom carabiner hung open like a tiny, accusing mouth.

Cody drew a sharp breath, holding it, as if his silence could undo

what he'd just seen. Unauthorized climbing. On a protected face. He snapped photos through his phone's adapter, took three for redundancy, then four more in case he'd been shaking. He fished a notecard from his cargo pocket and scribbled:

Anchors (3), w/ quickdraw, above scrape. Obvious recent placement. See regulations section 2.3.1.1 re: wildlife closure and disturbance. Contact FS rangers? Note timing vis-a-vis nesting period.

His hands were steady, but he felt his pulse ticking higher. He made a quick visual survey of the approach path—was there a shortcut from the trail below, a goat path for the reckless or entitled? Maybe a local with a grudge against protected species? He could almost hear his grad advisor's voice, warm with condescension: "Some people can't resist a challenge, Westbrook. Not every problem is a data set."

Cody snorted, which fogged up his glasses again. He fished a lens cloth out of his vest, methodically polishing while his mind churned through risk matrices and mitigation strategies. This was precisely the kind of field data he'd been hoping to not collect, the unplanned-for variable in his study design. In his notes, he underlined disturbance twice, then boxed it for good measure.

He took a last look at the cliff face. The anchors were as clear and damning as a police lineup. The eggs in the scrape were still, for now. He thumbed through his journal, reviewing previous days' notes, as if the act could will the site back to a state of pristine, undisturbed nature.

Instead, he found himself watching the horizon again, this time with the uneasy sense that he was being watched back—not by a bird, but by the mountain itself, waiting to see what the young scientist would do next.

Leo hitched the pruning saw a little higher onto his shoulder, not quite needing to, but liking the way it looked. The tool's teeth were still flecked with sap from yesterday's round of volunteer trail work—a solid session, all things considered, even if only four people had showed. Today's round was just maintenance, and Leo wasn't about to dress it up as a hero's journey: clear the windfall, cut back some scrub oak, maybe snap a few photos for the Duck Creek Vibe account if the morning light cooperated. Easy stuff, the kind you could do half-asleep if your sleep hadn't been ruined by a certain friend's karaoke after-party.

He set an easy pace up the Cascade Falls Trail, ducking under the warped aspen branches like he'd done it a hundred times, because he had. Each step compressed the loose red gravel under his shoes, and the slope of the path gave a gentle pull in his calves—a sensation as familiar as his own voice. Leo had cycled this stretch, run it, hiked it in storm and sun. If you lined up every footstep he'd left here, you could probably trace his growing up out of them.

He crested the last short rise and saw the new guy—binoculars, expensive-looking gear, city posture—seated alone on the far end of the viewing platform. Leo recognized him from the store, which was technically his other job, but they'd never had an actual conversation. Only nods and that weird “Do I know you?” semi-smile city people used when they weren't sure if you were a threat or a Yelp review.

Leo made a clicking sound with his tongue, then waved the saw in a lazy salute. “Hey there. If you're waiting for a show, I'm told the falls are rated PG before noon.”

The guy—Cody, that was it, the bird scientist—looked up with the startled, blink-rapid reflex of someone ripped out of a spreadsheet and plunked into real life. He seemed to consider a retort, then settled for a tight-lipped nod.

“Just clearing a hazard up the trail,” Leo called, gesturing with the blade. “Storm last night did a number on the trees. You see any downed stuff your way?”

“No, just some debris on the lower switchbacks,” Cody replied, his voice higher than expected. “Nothing that would impede, uh, ordinary trail use.”

Leo snorted, more at the phrase than the person. “Cool, cool.

Holler if you need anything.” He passed the platform and followed the path’s gentle curve until it kinked at a young ponderosa, recently bisected by a lightning strike. A branch as thick as his thigh angled across the trail, stripped clean of bark on the underside and beading with sticky resin at the splintered end.

He pressed his hand against the break, flexed it. The wood was fresh and cool, and his thumb came away with a smear of amber sap. He breathed in, savoring the sharp, lemony sting of it. One clean cut and the path would be clear; he could probably do it one-handed, but that was showing off.

He settled into the work, setting the blade with short, measured strokes, then lengthening them as the groove widened. The branch didn’t fight him; it just accepted the saw’s teeth and made that soft, satisfying purr only dry wood could. Leo could see why his uncle called it “good therapy.” He started humming, the tune matching his pace, and let his mind wander to the three different DM threads waiting for him back at the store.

Halfway through, he paused to catch his breath and noticed, amid the debris at the base of the trunk, a weird glimmer. Not dewdrops—those didn’t survive this late in the morning. He set the saw down, knelt, and brushed aside a litter of needles and half-dried cones. There, buried just enough to be annoying, was a camera filter: circular, thick-rimmed, with the kind of quality heft only someone with too much money or too much Instagram bought.

Leo wiped it against his flannel sleeve and held it up to the sun. The filter turned the bright sky into a surreal blue, richer than the naked eye could handle. He whistled. This wasn’t your average kit lens toy. He squinted through it, panned the treeline, then flipped it over and read the label: B+W 82mm Kaesemann, German-made. A hundred bucks, easy, maybe two. He felt a ripple of appreciation for whoever had dropped it—probably an earnest hiker-photographer, but just as likely one of the summer renters whose idea of wilderness came with room service.

He glanced back toward the viewing platform, where Cody was scribbling into a notebook with the intense, head-down focus of someone trying to invent a new alphabet. Leo grinned, then called out:

“Hey, you lose a filter out here? Or know anybody who did? Found a beauty.”

Cody looked up, surprised again, and shaded his eyes. “A what?”

Leo walked back, holding the filter between thumb and finger like a poker chip. “Camera filter. Pretty high-end.”

Cody shook his head, then reconsidered. “I saw some people photographing the falls yesterday. Elderly couple. Nikon gear, lots of zip-off clothing.”

Leo laughed. “That narrows it down. Bet half the county wears zip-offs between April and October.” He flipped the filter into the air and caught it. “I’ll drop it at the Lofty Nest, just in case. Or, who knows, maybe it’s a clue for one of those British mysteries.”

Cody blinked, then gave a polite, micro-sized smile. “I suppose stranger things have happened.”

“Not around here,” Leo said, returning to his task. “Here, it’s all normal, all the time.” He flexed his shoulders, relishing the crackle of cartilage, and went back to work with a touch more enthusiasm.

Cody nodded, but his mind was already churning. The most likely explanation was a photographer losing the filter while setting up a shot—probably in violation of the posted closure signs, judging from the location. “It might be linked to the anchors,” he said, voice slightly breathless. “Photographers sometimes climb to get better angles. It’s not allowed, but—”

“Let me guess,” Leo cut in, “rules are more like guidelines when there’s a shot at going viral.” He grinned, but there was a keen edge to it. “Betcha next week there’s an ‘incredible drone footage of the falls’ post, and half the comments are yelling at each other about bird safety.”

Cody wasn’t sure if this was an olive branch or a barb, but he took it at face value. “Actually, disturbance of raptor nests during active breeding is a federal offense,” he said. “Section 3503 of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. The mere presence of people can reduce the breeding success rate by up to 32 percent, depending on species and—”

“Whoa, whoa,” Leo laughed, holding up both hands, saw still in his right. “No arguments here. I like the birds, too. But these cliffs aren’t exactly secret. People have been bushwhacking up from the old logging road for years.”

“That access point isn’t maintained or sanctioned,” Cody said, more firmly than he meant. “The restoration crew has spent two seasons blocking it. If visitors ignore the signage, the whole closure zone is compromised.”

Leo shrugged, unbothered. “You ever tried to block a Utah grandpa with a camera? They’ll scale barbed wire if it means getting a shot of a squirrel with a weirdly-shaped tail.”

Cody wanted to object, but a memory surfaced—his own grandfather, who once talked his way into a closed botany garden in Germany by claiming to be a Nobel Prize judge. The contradiction of familial pride and professional duty made him stammer for a beat. “That’s... not entirely inaccurate,” he conceded. “But still. There are good reasons for the rules.”

Leo watched him, the earlier grin settling into something quieter. He tossed the filter lightly, then pocketed it. “I’m not trying to start trouble, man. I just like to know what’s going on in my backyard. Even if it’s only technically my backyard for four months of the year.”

Cody heard, and noted, the edge of something like homesickness. He shifted the topic, less from strategy than reflex. “You seem familiar with the area,” he said. “You work on this trail?”

Leo nodded. “That’s my summer gig, yeah. Cedar Mountain Country Store. Also run the Vibe account, do trail updates and dumb memes so tourists don’t wander into bear dens. My boss calls me the ‘Ambassador of Goodwill.’” He snorted at his own joke. “Anyway. You’re the bird guy?”

“Yes. Cody Westbrook. Doctoral candidate. Cornell,” he added, because it sometimes opened doors.

“Leo,” the other said, shaking Cody’s hand with a callused but not painful grip. “No doctorate, but I did win the 5th Grade Science Fair. Something about potato batteries.”

Cody smiled, surprising himself. “Those are a classic.”

Their brief détente was interrupted by another sharp cry, closer and much more frantic. Both men’s heads snapped upward in unison, eyes drawn to the pale blue sky above the cliffs. The peregrine falcon was back, its shape unmistakable even without optics—a blade of wings cutting circles over the ledge, dipping lower and faster with each pass.

Cody fumbled for his binoculars, got them up just in time to see the bird swoop down toward the scrape, then veer away at the last moment. He tracked its path, heart pounding. The raptor was flying an erratic, agitated circuit—no hunting, no gliding, just a repeated, urgent patrol.

“Something’s spooked her,” Cody muttered, voice low.

Leo shaded his eyes, following the flightpath. “Maybe a hawk?”

“No. There’s nothing else airborne. It’s a defensive pattern, not territorial.” Cody adjusted the focus, trying to read the bird’s posture. “She’s not landing on the nest. That’s... not good.”

Leo looked at him, concern evident now. “What’s it mean?”

“If she doesn’t return to incubate in the next hour, the eggs can chill. Risk of abandonment spikes if the disturbance repeats.” Cody’s technical language collapsed into pure, anxious honesty. “This isn’t normal.”

A silence fell over the platform. Even the wind seemed to die down, leaving only the faint, distant hum of the falls and the insistent, cycling cry of the falcon above.

Leo leaned in a little, dropping the casual bravado. “You think someone’s up there right now?”

Cody considered, ran through the possible variables, then nodded. “If the approach was disturbed this morning, it’s likely. Can we get down there?”

Leo frowned. “Not safely. We need to come up from another direction.” He looked up at the sky. “It’s getting a little late. We can come back tomorrow?”

Cody considered. “There’ll be evidence if someone’s been there.” He nodded. “Yeah. Let’s do that.”

“Okay. Let’s head back, then. We can hit Lofty Nest, see if Erica’s noticed anyone strange in the village.”

two

the lofty nest selection

THE LOFTY NEST sat just a bit higher than its neighbors on Movie Ranch Road, a squat, two-story log cabin that looked like it had survived a century of blizzards just to keep an eye on the ever-changing village. Leo led the way up the seven steel steps, the treads still crusted with last week's snow. The porch was wider than most—two rocking chairs faced east, and between them a trio of clay pots jostled for sunlight: bluebell, stonecrop, and a determined little pine sapling sprouting from an old hiking boot. The hand-carved sign over the door showed a bird's nest stuffed not just with eggs, but also a compass, a pencil, and what looked suspiciously like a tiny monocle.

Inside, the warmth was immediate—both the radiant, invisible kind from wall heaters, and the friendlier sort that came from years of woodsmoke, beeswax, and something like fresh-milled pencil shavings. Cody breathed it in, nose wrinkling as he tried to parse every note. The floor creaked under Leo's boots and barely murmured under Cody's. Amber light from a dozen mismatched sconces filtered through colored glass mobiles, casting ripples of gold and green across the walls and floor. The effect was more sunrise than artificial, and made the rows of antiques and oddities seem to glow from within.

Erica stood behind the main counter, sleeves rolled past the elbows of her pale blue cardigan, glasses perched at a precise and improbable angle. Her hair was tied up with a bit of orange ribbon, and her eyes—

quick, brown, and just short of teasing—registered them the moment the door bell chimed.

“Well, if it isn’t Duck Creek’s most famous social media star,” she said, her smile blooming. “And Dr. Westbrook, in person, as foretold.”

Leo grinned. “You only say that because no one else in town has your WiFi password.” He brandished the black camera filter, flipping it through his fingers. “We’re on a quest.”

Erica made a show of leaning over the counter to peer at the object. “Let me guess, tourist lost it, and you’d rather return it than let it become another artifact in my junk museum?”

“Depends. If it’s cursed, I’ll keep it,” Leo said. “Otherwise, yeah—Cascade Falls Trail, near the switchback. Cody thinks it might be linked to some unauthorized climbing up there. You hear anything from the usual suspects?”

Cody hung back, half an aisle away, cataloging the contents of the shop. He spotted three shelves of books (field guides, westerns, and a surprising amount of poetry), a battered flag from the 1984 Olympics, and a case full of faded baseballs. He wasn’t used to shops that didn’t have a dedicated birding section, but he found himself curious anyway.

Erica pulled a ledger from beneath the counter, its cover stickered over with a tangle of national park emblems and what appeared to be a Lisa Frank unicorn, circa 1992. She licked her finger, started flipping through the pages.

“Let’s see... lost keys, two cell phones, a dog harness—wait, did you ever return the purple Kong to that family from Phoenix?”

Leo pretended not to hear. “Nobody here knows what a Kong is for. It’s more valuable as an educational tool.”

Cody’s attention drifted to a framed photo behind the counter: a young Erica, half-buried in snow, brandishing a snow shovel like a sword. He squinted at the caption—“Blizzard Queen, Jan ’17”—and tried to imagine what would constitute a major blizzard around here.

Erica didn’t look up from the ledger. “We had a couple from Santa Rosa in on Monday. The guy’s camera bag lost a lens cap somewhere near the falls, but that’s it. Last week, there was a group from Provo—” She turned the book, so the boys could see the neat lines of script. “But they were all using drones. Not the lens type.”

"Then it's a mystery," said Leo, but his tone was less dramatic than satisfied. "If anyone checks in, let us know?"

"I'll call your people," Erica said. "But honestly, if it was dropped by someone on the cliffs, odds are they're still in the area. Nature photographers are, by definition, obsessive." She glanced at Cody, who nodded—he'd met more than a few at conferences.

Leo leaned forward, voice dropping. "Hey, what about weird stuff? Anyone come through acting squirrely?"

"Every week," Erica said, "but only because you haven't raised the bar in a while."

Leo accepted the burn. "We'll keep poking around. Just wanted to cover the bases."

Erica slid the ledger back under the counter, then gave Cody a side-long look. "You look like a man on a quest. Anything you want to add?"

Cody blinked. "I... no, just dropping off the filter, actually. I'm not in the habit of misplacing things."

Erica arched a brow. "Good. The mountain eats enough as it is." She tapped the counter, then pivoted away to adjust something on the back shelf. "If you get bored, Dr. Westbrook, the star maps in the next aisle are worth a look. Some date back to the 1920s. Your kind of thing."

"Thank you," Cody said, surprised to feel a blush prickling his ears. He had the irrational sense that the shop had his number already, and wondered what else it might call out in him.

Leo, sensing a distraction, patted him on the shoulder. "She's not wrong. There's a whole wing in the back for dead scientists. Come on, you'll love it."

Cody followed, the scent of cedar and wax growing sharper as they moved past the register and into the main body of the store. The filter, forgotten in Leo's palm, caught a band of blue light and gleamed for a moment before being pocketed away. The search would wait—at least until the next clue revealed itself, or until the shop, in its own way, decided what should happen next.

Cody drifted deeper into The Lofty Nest, the hum of conversation at the counter fading behind a lattice of bookcases and relic-laden shelves. The shop's interior grew stranger and richer with every aisle. The walls, logs chinked with a pale mossy mortar, glowed in the filtered

morning light. The air here was cooler, and the scent of burning pine sap mingled with the faintest sweetness—like powdered sugar dusting a campfire.

Each step brought new discoveries: a rack of military compasses, half with cracked faces; a huddle of old field microscopes, their lenses clouded with the ghosts of past observations; a clutch of geology hammers, their handles smooth as river stones. Time felt thick in this place, the kind of shop where you could wander for an hour and emerge, blinking, to find the sun in a new position.

He paused before a battered upright piano, its keys showing more brown than ivory, and reached out to tap a single note. The sound—muted, hesitant—seemed to hang for a moment before fading into the persistent ticking that filled the shop. Cody realized it was not one clock, but a whole orchestra of timepieces: some large, some minuscule, all beating in and out of sync.

He liked it here. The clutter, the slight chill, the sense that nothing had ever been truly discarded, only misplaced until found by the right person.

A particular display case drew him in—a narrow, waist-high glass box tucked between an ancient rolltop desk and a pile of odd, heavy metal lanterns. Inside the case, on a plinth of faded purple velvet, rested a brass telescope. It wasn't new, or even close to new; the barrel was dented in two places, the eyepiece lacquer worn to a dull gold by use. But what truly caught him were the etched patterns spiraling along its length: a looping band of constellations, tiny points and lines dancing in the glassy morning light.

He crouched, forearms braced on knees, face inches from the case. The glass itself was slightly warped, enough to cast subtle halos around the stars. Cody tilted his head, following the etched constellations, then stilled as he recognized Orion—then Cassiopeia, then something less familiar, a winding, serpent-like figure he'd only seen in obscure charts.

A shadow fell across the case, and Erica, hands folded over her ledger, knelt beside him. "That one's special," she said, voice softer here. "John Wesley Powell carried it from the Green to the Grand, or so the legend goes. They say he mapped half the west with one hand and held that scope in the other."

Cody blinked. "*The* Powell? The explorer?"

She nodded. "And the scientist. He saw the world as it was, not as he wanted it to be. My grandfather always said that was the hardest part, the not wanting."

Cody let his breath out slowly, eyes never leaving the artifact. "Is it... real?"

Erica smiled, a small curl at the corner of her mouth. "Most things in this place are real in some sense. But yes—paper trail, provenance, all that. You want a closer look?"

Before he could answer, Leo materialized behind them, hands in the back pockets of his jeans, posture loose as a ragdoll. "Careful, Cody. The last person to touch that got lost for a month and came back only able to speak in riddles."

Cody straightened, flustered. "That's not—" He cut himself off, seeing Leo's grin.

Erica, ignoring the joke, produced a ring of brass keys from her cardigan and selected a tiny, antique-looking one. "It's fine. Objects like this like to be handled. Just mind the velvet—it stains."

She unlocked the case, lifted the box out with practiced care, and set it on the piano bench. "There," she said, motioning to Cody. "It's all yours for a minute."

He hesitated, then reached out. The moment his fingers brushed the brass, a prickly, static buzz ran up his hand. It was not unpleasant, just unexpected—like the first touch of fur after a dryer cycle. The telescope was heavier than he expected, its chill warming instantly to his grip.

He brought it to his eye, twisting the knurled focus wheel. The interior glass was flawless, the view crisp and strangely luminous. He aimed it across the shop, picking out the ragged outline of the fireplace, then the sweep of Erica's hair, then the golden numbers on the far wall's grandest clock.

"It works," he said, startled. "Perfectly."

Erica watched him with a mixture of pride and something more. "He took care of his things. The west was a cruel place, but not for him. Not really."

Cody lowered the telescope, running a thumb along the etched

stars. Where his skin pressed the metal, the lines shimmered—he blinked, but they did it again, just a flicker. Maybe a trick of the light.

“Is that normal?” he asked, squinting at Erica.

She shrugged. “Some say objects remember who held them. That one likes attention, but only from the genuinely curious.” She glanced sideways at Leo. “Never did a thing for me.”

Leo, perhaps to test it, plucked the telescope from Cody’s hands. He cradled it, then aimed it with one eye shut, pirate-style. “Wow,” he deadpanned. “I see a whole shelf of unsold Christmas ornaments.” He passed it back, the weight shifting cleanly between them.

Cody felt the charge return as soon as he touched it, and he held it a moment longer than necessary. “I... could I borrow this? For research, maybe. I won’t damage it. I’ll sign a waiver, even.”

Erica waved off the notion. “No need. Just bring it back in the same state, and try not to drop it into the canyon.” She packed the telescope back into its velvet-lined box, but handed it to Cody rather than returning it to the case.

He accepted it, dazed. “Thank you.”

“Use it wisely,” she said, standing. “Powell had a knack for getting to the bottom of things. Maybe you will too.”

Leo gave Cody a look as they headed back toward the counter. “You gonna name your firstborn after her, or after the telescope?”

Cody ignored him, still running fingers along the case. He couldn’t shake the sense that the object had been waiting for him, and the sensation left him both pleased and unsettled.

In the front room, the fire in the river rock hearth was burning steadily, radiating both heat and a hypnotic orange glow. The soft ticking of the shop’s clock collection filled the silences. For a moment, the only sound was the shifting of logs as Leo prodded them with a poker.

Erica stood by the counter, watching them with her calm, knowing smile. “If anything else calls out to you, let me know. We specialize in lost things.”

Cody nodded, then tucked the telescope under one arm and joined Leo at the door. As they stepped out into the cold, he felt the warmth from the hearth and the object linger in his bones. He looked back

once, catching Erica's wave, and then they were outside, boots echoing on the steel steps.

Above them, the sky was a clean, insistent blue. The constellations were invisible in daylight, but Cody felt, just for a heartbeat, as if he could see them anyway—threaded through the air, just waiting to be mapped.

Leo stretched his arms behind his head, body savoring the cold as he and Cody stood just past The Lofty Nest's porch, a patch of stubborn ice crunching under their boots. The telescope hung awkwardly from Cody's gloved grip, the battered brass case looking both precious and totally out of place.

They started down the steel steps, Leo skipping the last two in a hop, Cody following with the deliberate caution of someone used to black ice and sprained ankles. The wind picked up, carrying the mineral tang of snowmelt and the distant, ozone-crisp hint of oncoming weather.

Leo couldn't help himself. "So," he drawled, "now that you've been personally selected by the spirit of John Wesley Powell, when do the visions start? Or does it just download a map into your brain, Matrix-style?"

Cody glared, but it was the mild, helpless sort of glare reserved for a friend who made sport of your earnestness. "It's a historic artifact," he said, voice a little too defensive. "And I did get static shock. That's explainable. The shop has terrible humidity regulation."

"Sure, sure," Leo said, bumping Cody with his elbow. "Next thing you know, you'll be hanging crystal pendants in your window and leaving offerings for the moon."

Cody almost smiled. "There's zero evidence for lunar influence on raptor behavior."

Leo considered. "But you're not ruling it out completely?"

Cody sighed, shifting the telescope from hand to hand. "There's just something about it. Not mystical. But I can't... articulate it. Like maybe it belonged here, or I do."

“That’s called being sentimental,” Leo said, but with a sort of gentle approval. “Or you’re finally going native.”

They reached the edge of the lot, and Leo made to cross the road, then stopped short. A black SUV idled in the lot across from the Duck Creek Village sign, windows tinted but not enough to hide the array of hardware racked across the dash and passenger seat. A camera—long lens, pro-grade—was mounted to a bracket that extended halfway across the center console. The license plate was out-of-state, but the decal on the rear window was unmistakably local: Zion Adventure Collective.

Leo whistled, low. “Well, well. That’s a serious rig.”

Cody followed his gaze, eyes narrowing. “Who brings that kind of kit to a snowmelt ghost town?”

Leo grinned. “People who really, really want to get the shot. Or people with too much money. Or maybe—” He dropped his voice, mock dramatic. “Maybe they’re the ones who set the anchors. Documenting their illegal ascent before the Forest Service can slap a fine on them.”

Cody’s mind snapped into investigative mode. “Could be. Or they’re tracking the birds, same as me, but with... unconventional methods.” He fingered the telescope absentmindedly, then added, “Or maybe it’s both.”

Across the road, the SUV’s engine ticked over. The driver—a man in a parka and mirrored sunglasses—glanced their way, then busied himself with something on the dash. Leo made a show of tipping an invisible hat. “Subtle,” he muttered, but the edge in his voice said he didn’t like it.

The sky above was veined with streaks of cirrus, a high blue that Cody had already, in his private notes, classified as a likely predictor of storm in the next thirty-six hours. He checked the time—still plenty of daylight, but the angle of the sun threw the shadows long and cold.

“You wanna check them out?” Leo asked, all mock casual. “I’ll go over and say hi. Play dumb.”

Cody hesitated. “No, not yet. We’ll wait. See what pattern emerges.” He looked at the telescope, and then at the SUV, mind whirring through the possibilities.

“Suit yourself,” Leo said, tucking his hands into his flannel shirt. “I’m just saying, between weird artifacts and mysterious camera guys, you’d think we’d have more action around here. It’s like living in the opening act of an X-Files episode, but with less government and more banter.”

“Can’t be worse than academia,” Cody said, surprising himself with the easy sarcasm.

Leo cracked up. “That’s the spirit! Let’s go grab coffee. Maybe the caffeine will help you commune with your new antique friend.”

Cody nodded, one last look at the SUV, then followed Leo up the incline toward the store. Behind them, the telescope’s etched stars caught a glint of sun, sending a sliver of light over Cody’s shoulder—a flash so brief he doubted he’d even seen it.

Inside the shop, Erica watched them from behind the counter, her smile unchanged. She made no mention of the telescope, or the SUV, or even the mysteries that seemed to be accumulating in neat little piles at their feet. Instead, she just gave a small, secret wave, like someone wishing luck to a pair of travelers who didn’t yet realize they were on a journey.

Leo noticed, of course. He nudged Cody and nodded toward the counter. “See? She knows. This place eats weirdos for breakfast.”

But Cody, for the first time, felt like maybe he belonged among them.

He looked at the battered scope in his hands, and at the sky beyond the window, and he wondered—not for the first time—if some mysteries were meant to be solved, or if the solving was just an excuse to keep asking better questions.

Either way, they had a direction. And that, Cody thought, was all a scientist (or a local, or maybe just a human) could really hope for.

three

the magnified sight

SPECTRA POINT WASN'T the tallest place Cody Westbrook had ever stood, but at exactly 10,285 feet, it felt like the top of the hemisphere. The hike from the parking lot was barely a mile, but the last hundred yards were uphill enough that he could taste the iron in his own breath by the time he and Leo reached the overlook. A head-high rail of rusted steel ran along the edge, cold and solid, and beyond it, the ground sheared away in a drop that turned legs wobbly if you stared at it too long. At their backs: white-bristled spruce, hunched and wind-polished into shapes that looked designed by Dr. Seuss. Out front: the entire western horizon, washed in a light so clean it made you believe in the literal existence of infinity.

It was, as Leo said more than once, a hell of a spot.

Cody unslung the padded satchel from his shoulder and set it on a patch of red-dust gravel. He pressed the clasp and, with deliberate care, lifted the telescope from its velvet cocoon. Even in the bright sun, the brass caught fire—every etched line, every pit and scratch was suddenly vivid, like an old coin waking up after a century's nap. He ran his thumb along the barrel, feeling the weird, pleasant static the object gave off whenever he held it.

Leo, less ceremonial, set his own binoculars on the stone ledge and dug around in his pocket for a protein bar. "You want me to do a

sweep?” he asked, mouth already half full of peanut butter and some other flavor Cody couldn’t place.

“I have a target,” Cody said. He fit the telescope to its battered tripod, which he’d lugged all the way from Duck Creek for this very moment. “About one mile due south, see that line of rock just above the first promontory? There’s been repeated falcon activity there, at least according to the last three eBird reports.”

Leo shielded his eyes and squinted. “You mean that fin that looks like a dragon’s spine? Just above the ice patches?”

“That’s it,” Cody said. He dialed the focus wheel until the telescope’s interior snapped from blur to crystalline sharpness. The usual dancing heat haze of afternoon was less here—higher altitude, less ground for sunlight to boil. Through the lens, the rock was almost close enough to touch: every band of ancient orange and pink, every lichen scab, every accidental crosshatch left by wind or frost.

He adjusted the azimuth a degree, then steadied himself and peered in. At first, he saw only what he expected—stone, then, with a slow sweep, the ragged lip of a possible nest site. He scanned for the quick, low flicker that would betray a bird in flight. But instead, just beyond the nest bowl, a shape resolved itself—a void in the rock where there shouldn’t have been any, almost rectangular, covered in netting and camouflaged by slabs of shed bark.

He frowned, recalibrating the focus.

Behind the netting, something moved. Not an animal, not quite. It was a shape, unmistakably human, but barely more than a shimmer against the backdrop of orange rock. It sat perfectly still, but even so, a faint nimbus of red and gold quivered around it. He blinked hard. The shimmer remained.

Cody pulled back, shook his head, and looked with his bare eyes. Nothing there. He checked the telescope again, more carefully this time. The human-shaped shimmer was still there, and now that he stared, the “blind” it occupied looked engineered—angular, purposeful, like the ones he’d seen in wildlife documentaries but more sophisticated. The aura around the figure was restless, growing brighter as he concentrated. It reminded him, irrationally, of the time he’d left the

night-vision function running on a camera and a field mouse had glowed like a coal on the LCD.

He felt his hands tremble a little, not from the cold. A sticky, dry feeling formed in the back of his throat.

"Leo," he said, not looking up, "does your binoc have an infrared filter?"

Leo wiped his mouth and grinned. "This thing? Cheapest model they had at the outdoor shop. I'm not even sure it's all glass. Why?"

"There's something in that first blind," Cody said. "I think someone's out there. Not a birder."

Leo picked up his binoculars and aimed. "Where?"

"Just below the crest, between the two pinyons. You have to look for the break in the lichen pattern. It's deliberate." Cody switched to his field notes, scribbling a quick diagram and marking the coordinates as best he could.

Leo whistled, impressed. "You've got eyes like a hawk, dude. I see... something. Maybe. Could just be a weird shadow, though."

"It's not a shadow," Cody said, sharper than he meant. "Look again, but imagine you're hiding from people, not birds."

Leo obliged, but after a minute he set the binoculars down. "Still nothing. If someone's in there, they're deep. Unless you've got X-ray vision, I don't see how you—"

Cody interrupted, "It's the telescope. It's showing... more than it should."

Leo cocked an eyebrow, smile fading. "You mean, like, it's broken?"

"No." Cody hesitated, struggling for a way to put it in scientific terms. "It's like there's an afterimage. An aura. Some kind of... thermal bloom." He wasn't even sure what he meant, but the words felt truer than not.

Leo sidled over to look. "Let me try?"

Cody handed the telescope over, watching closely as Leo lined up with the eyepiece. He watched Leo's face for any hint of the static buzz or the weird, prickly alertness Cody had felt.

Leo hunched over, squinted, then pulled back. "That's wild," he said. "Everything's so close-up. But I don't see any people, just a bunch of red rock and some bark."

Cody took the telescope back. The metal was noticeably warmer now, even in the breeze, as if it had charged up from use. He inhaled through his nose, trying to ground himself. He checked the view again.

This time, two more silhouettes showed up—both on different outcrops, each with the same nervous, flickering corona. He made a slow, deliberate scan across the whole amphitheater, mapping out all the possible blind locations. Five. Maybe more, if he counted the fainter ones at the far perimeter.

He turned to Leo, swallowing his pride. “There are more of them. Whoever they are, they’re watching the nests. All of them.”

Leo’s skepticism was gone, replaced by something more serious. “You’re not making this up?”

Cody shook his head. “I’d bet the next five years of grant money on it.”

They both stood there for a while, silent except for the high, ringing wind and the sound of Leo’s thumb nervously thumping against the steel rail.

Cody looked again through the telescope, then out at the amphitheater with his naked eye, then back through the scope. The human shimmers stayed put, never blinking, never shifting position even as the sun moved behind them. He wrote every detail down, forcing his handwriting into neat, precise lines.

Finally, Leo broke the silence. “Dude, what is it?”

Cody let out a breath, slow and careful. “There’s someone in those blinds. Or something. The telescope—” he gestured to the brass instrument, the sun making its constellations shimmer— “it’s showing me what’s hidden. Like it knows what to look for.”

Leo whistled again, but this time it was low, a sound with no humor left in it.

“Should we call someone?” Leo asked, voice dropping as if the walls might have ears.

Cody didn’t answer immediately. Instead, he placed the telescope back in its case, his hands still tingling from the residual charge. He looked up, scanning the ridgelines with his own two eyes.

Above them, the blue sky arced on forever, but Cody could feel, as

tangibly as the wind against his cheek, that something was about to break loose.

He closed the case and turned to Leo, who was waiting with the unshakable patience of someone who had seen weird before and expected to see more of it.

"We're not done yet," Cody said. "But whatever's up here—it's not just birds anymore."

They headed back down the ridge, boots crunching the ancient dust, both of them knowing that the next time they looked, there might be even more to see.

The trail from Spectra Point curved back along the rim, a narrow band of dust and cinder that made every step feel like you were tracing the margin of an ancient map. Leo walked just ahead, his strides loose and unfazed, but Cody moved with the fidgety focus of someone still chewing through a problem. At the first overlook that offered a bit of privacy—a bare knuckle of rock lined with toppled logs and a wind-bent picnic table—they stopped and caught their breath.

Cody set the telescope on the tabletop, the wood so weathered it felt like driftwood under his gloves. He was trying to remember every detail from the last half hour: the blinding clarity, the flicker of red-gold light, the way the silhouette's outline seemed to pulse with nervous energy. It was more than an optical illusion, he was sure. But he could hear his old advisor's voice in his head, pedantic and relentless: "The mind is built for seeing patterns, Mr. Westbrook, even where none exist."

Leo unzipped a water bottle, took a swig, and regarded Cody with a gentle, expectant patience. "You want to run it by me again?" he said, tone easy but eyes sharp.

Cody nodded, then gestured to the telescope. "I want you to try something. Look at that spot on the ridge—right where the shadow cuts across the fin. Find the blind, if you can."

Leo raised the telescope, supporting it with both hands. The tripod wasn't necessary for casual viewing, but Cody let him use it, wanting to replicate the setup as exactly as possible. Leo's nose scrunched in concentration as he scanned the cliff face.

"It's clear as day," he muttered. "I see the nest—looks like a scrape, yeah? There's a patch of feathers, some kind of moss. But nothing else."

“Really focus,” Cody said. “Don’t just look for a person. Look for anything that doesn’t belong.”

Leo went silent, breathing a slow, measured breath through his nose. He swept the telescope, then paused. “Maybe a weird shadow,” he said, “but nothing alive. Are you sure—?”

Cody took the telescope back and pressed his hands to the barrel. It was hot. Not scalding, but the kind of warmth that told you a battery had been running too long. He didn’t mention it to Leo—he didn’t want to bias the experiment.

He brought the lens to his eye and found the blind in a heartbeat. The shimmer was there, stronger than before. It almost looked like a figure was pacing now, the edges of the aura jagged, agitated. With a chill, Cody noticed there were two heat blooms now, the second one crouched lower, almost fetal.

He swept the telescope along the amphitheater’s rim, checking each outcrop and shadow. The pattern repeated: wherever there was a possible nest, there was a corresponding blind, each one hosting its own ghostly watcher. Some of the auras were faint, others dazzlingly bright. At the farthest reach, near a split boulder that jutted into the canyon like a broken tooth, he saw something that made him pull back and blink.

A network of long, thin rods was rigged between the rocks, each capped with something that sparkled blue in the sun. Wires snaked from the rods to a box, half-buried in scree. If he strained, he could see the box pulsing, its heat signature weirdly visible through the telescope.

He swapped in the higher-magnification eyepiece, almost fumbling it in his haste. The image jumped in closer—he could see the rods were antennas, and the blue caps looked like high-end motion sensors. The box was a cellular transmitter. A remote trigger.

“Are you seeing this?” Cody asked, forgetting himself and trying to show the image through the lens. But when Leo looked, his brow only furrowed.

“I see rocks and sticks, man. Not even a bird. You sure you’re not hallucinating from the altitude?”

Cody couldn’t even muster a smile. “This isn’t normal. I can see the heat signatures—like in a wildlife camera, but live. And there are more.

Every nest I check, there's someone watching it. Sometimes with equipment."

Leo looked at him, uncertain now. "Are you sure it's not just sunburn you're seeing? Or a mirage?"

Cody took a breath. "No. Listen, some of these setups—they're sophisticated. The sensors, the netting, the transmitter boxes. These aren't amateurs. And it's all pointed at the falcon nests."

Leo's expression changed, skepticism giving way to something darker. "You think it's a professional operation? Like—" He hesitated, looking for a word. "Poachers?"

Cody nodded, feeling the word slot in perfectly. "Or collectors. There's a black market for raptor eggs. But it's early in the season for a full snatch. This is surveillance, first. They're scouting the nests."

He snapped the telescope shut, hands lingering on the still-warm brass. The constellation etchings caught the low sun, glinting like tiny, angry stars.

"Okay," Leo said, "let's think. You see the heat signatures, but only through the telescope?"

"Yes," Cody said. "You saw nothing."

"Means they're either using some kind of tech that screws with visibility, or—" Leo trailed off, then grinned, "or you've finally gone mountain mad."

Cody considered. "If I had, it would be the best-timed delusion of my life."

They shared a quick, nervous laugh, the kind that comes when you're not sure which of you is supposed to be reassuring the other.

Leo rolled the problem between his palms. "We could try the Forest Service, but good luck getting anyone out here on a Friday. If it's an organized group, they'll have their people in and out before a ranger even gets a memo."

"We need proof," Cody said. "Photos, coordinates, dates. If I can catch one of them on infrared, or better, get a shot of the setup in daylight—" He stopped, the plan forming in his head.

"Then we have something," Leo finished for him.

They spent the next hour building a map, Cody marking the precise locations of every blind, every odd equipment cluster, and every heat

shimmer he could find. Leo annotated the field notes with trail shortcuts, old logging roads, and likely approach routes. They cross-referenced everything with a scanned topographical map Leo pulled up on his phone, arguing over the best observation points and how to approach the area without being seen.

All the while, Cody kept glancing at the telescope, as if the object itself might offer up another clue. He couldn't shake the feeling that it wanted him to see, that it was filtering out all the noise and giving him only what mattered. That was not how optics worked. But it was exactly how a field biologist's brain did, and the line between the two felt alarmingly thin at ten thousand feet.

As the sun dropped behind the furthest canyon wall, they packed up. The cold returned, sharp and insistent. Leo pulled on his hat and started down the trail.

Cody paused at the overlook, telescope slung across his chest, and took one last look at the amphitheater. The shimmers were still there, and he could see them even with his eyes closed—afterimages that burned in his vision long after the lens was put away.

He jogged to catch up with Leo, who was already whistling a tune that echoed off the stone and made the descent feel less lonely.

"We'll come back tomorrow," Cody said, "with better gear. Maybe a thermal camera, if I can borrow one from the university."

Leo nodded. "And maybe we bring a friend or two. Someone who can keep an eye out for human weirdos, while you focus on the feathered ones."

Cody grinned. "Deal."

They made the rest of the hike in companionable silence, boots finding rhythm even as their thoughts ran off in every direction. By the time they reached the car, the sky had purpled into early twilight, and the stars were just starting to prick through the last haze of sunlight.

Cody looked at the telescope one more time before stowing it away. He could almost feel it buzzing in its case, eager for another look, another secret. He didn't know what made it work, and he wasn't sure he wanted to. For now, it was enough to know that someone—or something—was watching, and that he wasn't seeing ghosts.

He was seeing the truth. Or something close enough to it.

The drive back from Cedar Breaks was all switchbacks and hush, the kind of stillness that followed a really good scare or a really good discovery—Cody couldn't tell which this had been. Leo's playlist, set to shuffle, played exactly one song on the descent: a moody, woodsy instrumental that was more silence than sound. Neither of them broke it. The sky, approaching dusk, glowed with that impossible Utah blue, streaked here and there with long, luminous feathers of cirrus.

Cody rolled down his window, wanting the cold air to wake him up, to shake out the edges of his nerves. Leo kept both hands on the wheel, eyes tracing the hairpin turns as if reading sheet music. The telescope rested across Cody's lap, snug in its satchel, but he could feel the brass barrel through two layers of jacket and the entire seat cushion. It thrummed, faintly. He pressed a palm to it, steadying himself, and found he wasn't imagining the pulse.

They parked at a turnout near the rim, just above Duck Creek. The overlook here was more modest—just a half-moon of packed dirt, the log barrier chipped and scrawled with the initials of whoever had loved, or hated, or just briefly visited the place. Far below, in a cut between stands of black spruce, the rooflines of Movie Ranch Road glinted with late sunlight.

Leo got out first, stretching like a cat, then popping the hatch and rooting around in the back for trail snacks. Cody followed, adjusting his glasses and taking in the view. The air up here tasted of sap and snowmelt, undercut by the faint, electrified tang that always came after a thunderstorm.

They spread their notes and field gear out on the hood of the Subaru, which was already warm from the day's drive. Leo produced a bag of neon-orange cheese crackers, tossing one into his mouth and then, thoughtfully, one more onto the ground for the ecosystem. Cody sketched a quick map of the amphitheater and the corresponding nest sites, cross-referencing with the GPS grid on his phone.

He felt the need to talk, to process, but the words came out slow and fragmentary.

"It's not possible," he said, almost to himself. "Optics can't do that.

Even with heat mirage, you'd need a differential of... a hundred degrees, at least."

Leo didn't look up. "Maybe it's the altitude. Weirder things have happened at ten thousand feet."

Cody shrugged, then nodded. "Altitude hallucinations are usually auditory. Not visual. And not... reproducible. Every time I looked, it was exactly the same."

"You think it's the telescope," Leo said, not a question but a stake in the ground.

Cody pressed the case, feeling the soft vibration of it. "I think it's the only thing that's changed. And—" he hesitated, then shook his head. "And I think it wants me to see it."

Leo leaned against the car, elbows planted on the roof. "My grandma would say that's a sign. Or a curse, depending."

Cody almost laughed, but the sound caught. He flipped through his field notes, each page a neat grid of data points and sketches of the strange, shimmering auras. He felt the old urge to graph it, to quantify the weirdness, as if putting a number to it would make it obey the laws of normal experience.

He was about to say something more when it happened: a sudden, all-encompassing darkening, as if a massive bird had passed directly in front of the sun. For a second, the world was in shadow—a perfect, silent solar eclipse. Both Cody and Leo looked up instinctively, hands shading their eyes.

The sky was empty. Not a plane, not a hawk, not even a cloud thick enough to cast a shadow.

The darkness lasted only an instant, but the chill lingered. It ran through Cody's bones, sharp and exhilarating. He heard the hush break as Leo let out a low whistle, then turned to him, eyes wide and unguarded.

"Did you see that?" Leo asked.

Cody nodded. "It was right over us. Like... like a total block."

"Not a bird," Leo said. "Not even a condor would cover that much sky."

Cody said nothing. He re-ran the moment in his head, searching for the error, the trick of light, the rational explanation. There was none.

He looked at Leo, and for the first time saw genuine concern where there used to be only humor.

Leo paced a slow, restless circle, then stopped in front of Cody. "Okay. So, let's say this is real. The telescope's showing you things that aren't there for the rest of us. The sky is pulling off stunts nobody can explain. And there are people—actual people—hiding out near every raptor nest in the canyon."

Cody nodded again, each fact a stone dropped in a pond.

"What do we do?" Leo asked, softer this time.

Cody felt the pull of the question, the need to be the scientist, the guide. "We get proof," he said. "We document everything. We check the sites. If there's a pattern, we'll find it. And—" He glanced at the telescope, then back at Leo. "We figure out what this thing is trying to show us."

Leo let out a breath. "I'll bring the headlamp. And maybe a GoPro. If you're seeing weird stuff, we might as well try to record it."

Cody managed a smile. "I thought you didn't believe in ghosts."

"I don't," Leo said. "But I believe in you. And I believe in being prepared."

They cleaned up their field gear, sweeping cracker crumbs off the hood, and stowed everything with practiced efficiency. The sky, newly blue again, was already hinting at stars. The sun set behind a ridge so far away it looked like the edge of a flat world.

Cody paused before getting in the car. He took the telescope out, just for a second, and held it up to the light. The etched constellations shimmered—not just the patterns, but the space between them, a flickering that seemed almost alive. He felt the hair on his arms rise, but not from fear.

He looked through the lens, scanning the horizon. For a moment, the world looked normal—ridge, trees, the silvered glint of the road. Then, as the last bit of sun cut under the clouds, he saw a single, glowing thread stretching across the sky, connecting two distant peaks.

He blinked, and it was gone.

He tucked the telescope away, feeling a strange, electric anticipation. Whatever was happening with the falcon nests, whatever was casting shadows that logic couldn't explain—it was only just beginning. He and

Leo were in it now, and the mountain, in its way, had given them the keys.

He climbed into the passenger seat, buckled in, and turned to Leo. "I don't know what this thing is showing me," he said, resting a hand on the telescope, "but whatever's happening with those falcon nests—someone's taking a very professional interest."

Leo grinned, nerves smoothing out with the familiar return of his bravado. "Good. Means we're not the only ones who care."

They drove down the mountain in the deepening dark, two unlikely allies with a brass telescope and a shared suspicion that the world was not quite what it seemed. The road twisted and dove, headlights flaring on each turn, and above them the first stars came out, burning clean and bright and utterly unafraid of the night.

Far overhead, something passed between the stars, just for a heartbeat, casting a shadow that no one else would ever see.

But Cody and Leo knew. And that would have to be enough—at least until tomorrow.

four

the mystery of the missing song

THE NEXT MORNING, as if the prior day's weirdness needed tempering by carbohydrates and caffeine, Leo led Cody into Ground + Toasted Bakery at precisely 7:02 AM. The place was all honeyed light and kiln-fired tile, with a line of baristas shuffling between an old Italian espresso machine and the pastry cases. The air carried a perpetual undertone of cinnamon, set off by sharp, backhanded notes of fresh espresso and something floral from the soap in the bathroom.

Inside, every surface was a comfort. Walls paneled in reclaimed pine, tables polished so often they shimmered like pond water in the sun. A rotating cast of local art hung behind the register: this week, a series of woodblock prints of mountain sheep, each wearing a different hat. The seats nearest the window were already claimed by two fixtures of the Duck Creek morning scene, who on any given weekday could be found holding court: Higgins and Crabtree, the ornithological odd couple.

This morning, as if for effect, the pair had assembled their entire mobile command post on a four-top by the fireplace. A pair of battered headphones, a directional microphone shaped like a small satellite dish, and a laptop bristling with USB adapters and extension cords. To a passing glance, it was either an FBI sting or a podcast launch. The subjects themselves looked the part: Higgins in his perpetual sage-green vest, every pocket packed with a different birding pin, and Mrs. Crabtree in a cardigan knitted with an argyle pattern of warblers in improb-

able hues. Her hair was drawn up in a no-nonsense bun, secured with what looked suspiciously like a mechanical pencil.

At the moment, the two were locked in a gentle but escalating dispute over who had first logged the Gyr Falcon at Navajo Lake.

"I distinctly recall the sun hadn't breached the east ridge when I sighted the dorsal banding," Higgins insisted, tapping a printout from eBird like it was a subpoena. "Six forty-two, not a minute later."

Mrs. Crabtree, not to be outmaneuvered, produced her own evidence: a narrow, weathered leather journal, whose interior margins were thick with years of hand-penned observation. She slid a fingernail under the correct page and pivoted it toward her rival. "My entry is timed at six thirty-nine. Weather: 'wind calm, light fog, birdsong absent except for single raspy call, possible Gyr Falcon juvenile or vagrant merlin in pre-dawn light.' I won't challenge your eyesight, Higgins, but I will challenge your watch."

"Wristwatch error," Higgins huffed. "You're running fast."

"I synchronize every week with the NIST atomic clock," Crabtree replied, never raising her voice but radiating the quiet power of someone who had taught junior high science for forty years.

Leo steered Cody to the counter, raising a hand to Brandi, the owner, who was already prepping their usual order. "Double cinnamon roll and the house blend, hot," he said, then, with a conspiratorial glance, "and maybe two of the peanut butter ones for... research."

Brandi, whose biceps bulged against the sleeves of her neon-pink T-shirt, winked. "And for your friend?"

Cody startled as if only just realizing he was expected to answer. "Uh—just black coffee. And a cinnamon roll, please. If it's not a trouble."

"No trouble at all," Brandi said, voice like gravel wrapped in velvet. "Sit tight. It's almost out of the oven."

Randy, the youngest of the baristas, manned the espresso station with the terrified intensity of a high-wire act. Today his hair was bleached to a near white, with an undercurrent of green that Leo appreciated. The kid nodded to Cody as he started pulling a shot, hands barely trembling at all.

Cody tucked himself onto a bench at a two-top, using the battered

telescope case as a shield. He tried not to stare at Higgins and Crabtree, but the pull was magnetic. He caught snippets of the argument, both sides volleying timestamps and species IDs, and found himself silently critiquing their data hygiene. He wanted to ask what reference books they trusted for raptor juveniles, but social protocol said to let the old-timers finish their volley before intruding.

Higgins, undeterred, began fiddling with the directional mic, aiming it first at Crabtree, then at his own chin, as if hoping to record a moment of clarity. Instead, all he picked up was the industrial grinder kicking in behind the counter.

“Listen!” Higgins barked, jabbing at the display on the digital recorder. “That’s the same frequency I heard from the canyon. See the spike?”

Crabtree peered over her glasses, unamused. “That is a conical burr grinder. If you mistake espresso for avian call, perhaps your eardrums are not as spry as your ego.”

Leo stifled a laugh as he set his phone to record the exchange, “for posterity, and maybe a meme.” Cody watched, a strange fondness growing as he realized this was less a debate and more a ritual—a daily sparring match that ran on rules as fixed as the tide.

Randy delivered their drinks, setting them down with only minor spillage. “Sorry, sorry,” he said, mopping up a ring of coffee with a practiced swipe of the wrist. He eyed the telescope, curiosity prickling. “That for stargazing, or are you spying on the wildlife with the pros?”

Cody hesitated, then slid into technical mode. “It’s—uh—actually, it’s a nineteenth-century refractor, etched with constellations. I’m running a field study on peregrine falcon nesting, so it’s both a tool and, I guess, an artifact.”

Randy brightened. “Cool! You see the osprey nest out at Navajo Lake? They’re back early.”

Cody’s relief was palpable. “I logged three yesterday. One was banded, which is odd for this region. I think the local rangers are keeping tabs for a regional survey.”

“I’ll tell my mom. She loves that stuff,” Randy said, then drifted back to the espresso machine, face already fading into the next order.

Leo took a slow, savoring bite of his cinnamon roll, then prodded

Cody's shoulder with a napkin-wrapped finger. "Welcome to the ongoing thesis defense we call breakfast."

Cody smiled, a real one, then cast another glance at the corner table. Higgins and Crabtree had moved from heated debate into icy *détente*, both typing into their respective devices with the fervor of high-level chess.

"I'm going to say hi," Cody said. "You coming?"

Leo made a gesture that said, 'I'll follow once the pastry situation is stabilized.'

Cody approached the pair, holding his coffee like a peace offering. "Excuse me, but did I overhear a Gyrfalcon sighting? May I ask which field marks you used for the ID?"

Crabtree's eyes sharpened, her demeanor thawing instantly at the presence of a new expert. "Certainly. Heavily streaked underparts, visible mustache mark, and a definite size advantage over the local prairie falcons. Juvenile, based on brownish tone."

Higgins cut in. "But you see, that's precisely my point—juveniles can resemble merlins in poor light, and unless you have a definitive size comparison—"

"I measured against a perched raven, thirty meters away," Crabtree replied.

Cody considered. "That's a good reference. And if you have the call on recording, I'd love to hear it later. I'm Cody Westbrook, by the way. I'm running a Cornell data set on local raptor migration."

Higgins's brow softened a full degree. "The Westbrook paper on urban-nesting accipiters?"

Cody nodded, caught off guard. "That's mine."

Crabtree beamed, producing a thin, laminated article from her bag like a playing card. "I always cite the specialists. Good to see the tradition continues."

Higgins offered a hand, the gesture surprisingly warm. "Higgins. This is Crabtree, of course. You two should collaborate, if you can survive the breakfast crowd."

They made space for Cody, who perched at the edge of the bench, and the conversation shifted instantly from rivalry to analysis. They quizzed him on subspecies, migration timings, and whether recent

climate data correlated with what he'd seen in the field. Crabtree asked about "the instrument" with a conspiratorial tilt of the head.

"It's... an odd one," Cody admitted, running his fingers along the case. "Sometimes I think it picks out more than I do, but that's probably just confirmation bias."

"Or maybe the mountain has a will of its own," Crabtree said, half-joking.

Higgins, never one to cede the floor for long, redirected: "So, have you noticed the sudden uptick in out-of-town observers at the cliffs? Unusual optics, strange gear, people who don't look like hikers or birders?"

Cody felt a prickle of recognition. "Actually, yes. At least three surveillance blinds, and some very sophisticated equipment. I can't tell if they're researchers or something else."

Crabtree exchanged a look with Higgins. "See? I told you it wasn't just my imagination."

Leo, finished with his cinnamon roll, joined the group just as Crabtree was outlining a theory involving the Utah Birding Mafia and their plot to control all high-priority nest sites from Salt Lake to St. George. Leo inserted himself with seamless grace, offering a cheery, "Morning, all! You all conspiring, or just comparing plumage again?"

"We're recruiting," Higgins deadpanned. "You in?"

"Only if there's coffee and the occasional pastry stipend," Leo replied.

Brandi approached with a tray, dropping off a second round of cinnamon rolls "on the house, for intellectual labor." She lingered a moment, watching the table's chemistry.

"Do you need me to put the regulars in the penalty box?" she asked Leo.

He considered. "Not yet. They're at a safe temperature for now."

Brandi snorted and left, satisfied.

The table became a rapid-fire exchange of theories and speculation, with Cody finding his groove—switching between data points and educated guesses, listening, adjusting, feeling his way through the strange dance of small-town science. He realized, with a jolt, that he'd

missed this: the back-and-forth, the rapid problem-solving, even the egos, because here, they actually wanted to be right together.

As the morning sun slid through the east windows, the espresso grinder kicked up again, and Mrs. Crabtree's voice rose above it. "You see, Higgins? It's not just about who saw it first. It's about understanding what you're actually seeing."

Higgins shrugged, sipping coffee with mock defeat. "I suppose even legends must yield to the empirical, on occasion."

"Only on occasion," Crabtree agreed, smiling for real this time.

Leo nudged Cody, quietly pleased. "See? You fit right in."

Cody believed him, for once. He tucked into his cinnamon roll, and let the warmth of it, and the buzz of the place, seep into the awkward spaces he usually carried around. The world outside was cold and complicated, but in here, for a moment, everything was measured out and just a little sweet.

The birders, having reached an armistice only by common cause against the local espresso acoustics, soon redirected their attention to Cody. The moment he'd claimed his cinnamon roll, Crabtree fixed him in her sights, her elbow bracing on the tabletop and her digital recorder set to "interrogate." She started in with the polite brutality of a former school principal.

"Young man, is it true you're running a migration study? That you're credentialed? Not just a passing tourist?"

Cody, caught with a bite mid-chew, nodded, then tried to finish his mouthful with scientific dignity. "Yes, ma'am. Doctoral research, with a focus on migration bottlenecks and breeding success rates. Most of my previous work was with urban-dwelling falcons, but—" He shot a glance at Leo, who made a go-ahead gesture with his coffee mug. "But fieldwork's the next stage."

Crabtree's eyes gleamed behind her glasses. She nudged her battered leather journal toward Cody, the cover scarred and soft as ancient plumage. "Then you'll want to hear this. For three days running, I've sighted a raptor at the old pond. Not peregrine, not merlin. Something else. Lighter, almost golden. Not in any regional guidebook."

Higgins made a pained sound, halfway between a sigh and a snort.

“Margaret, every time you see a bird with an odd shade, you want to rewrite the checklist.”

Crabtree ignored him, voice rising with the certainty of gospel. “If I log a color, I mean it. Pale gold—almost like the Eurasian morph, but not quite. It perched on the red spruce, then dove straight into the pond. I heard the wing beats, but no call. I’ve never known a silent raptor.”

“Maybe it’s just a trick of the sunrise,” Higgins said. “Low angle light refracts and—”

“—and you still wear sunglasses at dawn, Walter. Your rods and cones are obsolete.”

Cody, embarrassed for them both, nodded solemnly. “It’s possible there’s a light-morph juvenile, or a hybrid. You said there was no call?”

Crabtree smiled. “Silent as a ghost.”

Leo leaned in, grinning. “That pond’s got its own local legend. Every year, someone swears they see an albino hawk or a gold eagle. Never the same bird twice. By July, they’ve all evaporated.”

“Then you explain the photos,” Crabtree said, opening her tablet with a showman’s flourish. She scrolled to a burst of blurry, dawn-lit shots: a bird, impossibly pale, streaking past the lens. “Ignore the time-stamp, the camera’s old,” she said. “But look at the primaries.”

Cody squinted. In the photo, the raptor was a white smear, but there was enough outline to make out the long, pointed wings and a blunt, predatory head. He studied the pixels as if they might reorganize into a revelation. “You’re right. That’s... not normal. Could be leucistic.”

“Or,” Higgins said, “could be an escaped falconer’s bird. They’re always getting loose out of Vegas or Moab.”

“Had that thought,” Crabtree said. “But I checked the state logs. No reports. And if it were a trained bird, it would have anklets or a band.”

Leo cut in, “You can always borrow my drone, get a closer look next time.”

“Drones are cheating,” Higgins said, but his tone had softened.

Randy the barista, stealthily eavesdropping while cleaning a neighboring table, piped up, “If you want a local who can spot anything, you

need Mrs. Fung from the campground. She says she's got an eagle that eats breakfast with her every morning."

"Now, there's a trustworthy observer," Higgins said, half-mocking, half-fond. "She once swore a coyote stole her tent. With her in it."

Cody, feeling brave, asked, "Do you ever coordinate? Like, an official census?"

Crabtree's face lit. "Yes! We do the annual count, but lately the real activity is at night. Unusual calls, sometimes electronic. Walter doesn't believe it, but—"

"There are no electronic birds," Higgins interjected.

"You haven't been to the pond after midnight," Crabtree shot back, "or you'd know. There's a new sound—rising, then blipping off. Not a natural cadence."

Leo perked up. "That's the night fishermen. Half the teens in town use bug zappers to scare up the bass."

Crabtree looked wounded, but after a beat, she accepted it. "Still," she said, "I'd like to confirm. Maybe a group observation, with proper gear and no interference."

Higgins, caught, tried to reassert control: "If there's a real anomaly, I'll be the first to say so. But until then, I'm staking my rep on an atmospheric trick."

Brandi appeared with fresh coffee, setting the mugs with the grace of a Vegas dealer. She nodded toward the table's chaos. "You folks ever settle anything?"

Leo grinned. "Why would they? The arguing is half the fun."

Brandi, pleased, topped off Leo's mug and gave him a cinnamon roll "to-go" with a flick of her wrist. "If you get them to agree on anything, come back and let me know. I'll name a drink after you."

She left, and the table's dynamic shifted: the argument no longer about being right, but about who would be vindicated first. Cody found himself smiling at the performance, even as he tried to keep up with the swirl of anecdotes and counter-theories.

Crabtree offered Cody a business card, handwritten in fountain pen, with her home phone and "all hours welcome" underlined twice. "If you hear or see anything strange, let me know."

"I will," Cody said. "And if I can get a clear shot of your mystery bird, I'll send it to you first."

She looked delighted, as if already seeing her notebook updated with a new first.

Higgins, pretending not to be impressed, gave Cody a little salute. "Good luck, Westbrook. You're going to need it with this bunch."

Leo and Cody eventually stood, their pastries long finished and the coffee at that perfect temperature where it neither scalds nor cools. As they navigated the tight aisle between tables, Leo lowered his voice.

"On Saturdays, these two hold a bird-calling contest in the parking lot. It used to be just for fun, but last year Higgins got a blue jay to land on his shoulder and Crabtree still hasn't let it go."

Cody, struggling not to laugh, nodded. "Is that why she called him a show-off?"

"Only in public," Leo said.

At the door, they overheard Crabtree's voice, pitched low but unmistakable:

"If he's as good as he seems, we can use him for the Duck Creek stakeout. I've got two night-vision goggles and a tent big enough for four."

"And if not," Higgins replied, "he'll at least bring good pastries."

The two men stepped into the morning cold, the warmth of the bakery trailing after them in little cinnamon-scented puffs.

Cody said, "Do you think we'll get recruited?"

Leo shrugged, the sun already brightening his hair. "Around here? It's not a question of if. It's when."

The walk back to the car was brisk, the sidewalks already dusted with the first rumors of snow. The world outside was wide and sharp, but inside the bakery, the feuds and fancies of the local birders lingered, ready for another round.

Cody pocketed the business card and followed Leo up the street, feeling more a part of the village than he ever expected. He was, after all, officially on the list.

five

the legend of the thunderbird

THE WALK back to The Lofty Nest took less than ten minutes, but the cold morning seemed determined to etch itself into every bit of exposed skin. Leo made it a point to detour through the old movie set lot, just for the fun of hearing Cody ask if the wooden gallows and tin jail had ever been in an actual film. (“Six, technically,” Leo said, “but only three with horses. The rest are in the low-budget zombie western category.”) Cody, uncomplaining, followed at a brisk pace, his gloved hand never leaving the battered telescope’s case.

At this hour, the main stretch of Movie Ranch Road was nearly silent. The only movement came from a red-tailed fox at the edge of the lot, nose in a food wrapper, and a raven posted atop the power pole, trading commentaries with the wind. The Lofty Nest looked just as they’d left it—log cabin, warm porch, the faintest curl of smoke from the chimney. Leo knocked anyway, then opened the door, the motion setting off the faint music of the hanging chimes and the sharp, cinnamon-heavy warmth of the interior.

Erica was already behind the counter, her cardigan swapped for a heavier wool wrap, the orange ribbon now trailing down the side of her braid. She saw them and smiled as if they were right on time.

“You’re early,” she said, tucking a pencil behind her ear. “I haven’t even finished updating the log.”

“It’s an emergency,” Leo said, mock-serious. “Cody saw something

that isn't on a map. Or, technically, saw more than he was supposed to. The usual threshold for calling in an expert."

Cody gave a hesitant smile. "We'd like to ask some questions about the telescope. And, maybe, other things you've heard about the area."

Erica's gaze flicked from Leo to Cody to the telescope's case, and the smile widened by a micron. "I thought you might. Let's go to the back."

She led them through the main shop floor—its morning shadows intact, the clocks ticking in loose chorus, the colored glass hangings sending pale rainbows across the bookshelves. Leo, resisting the urge to run a hand over every new object he saw, noticed the arrangement had changed since yesterday: a pair of wooden skis replaced the antique snowshoes by the hearth, and the river rock fireplace held a fresh stack of kindling, the smallest embers glowing.

Instead of heading up the visible stairs to the loft, Erica turned down a short hallway between the bookcases, then paused at what looked like a solid wall. With two fingers, she lifted a curtain of beaded glass and slipped through, the beads parting with a sound like a handful of coins being shaken. Leo ducked after her, and Cody—momentarily stymied—followed once he'd mapped the trick.

Inside was a different world.

The air was warmer, a little heavier, as if the logs here had spent their lives absorbing secrets. The lighting was amber, more from a cluster of mismatched desk lamps than from the single small window set high in the west wall. A ring of bookshelves, raw and uneven, lined the perimeter, their contents less curated and more hoarded: field guides, dog-eared yearbooks, old ledgers, at least a dozen spiral-bound notebooks with labels in three different handwritings.

But the real centerpiece was the back wall. A cork board, nearly floor to ceiling, was tiled with maps of every age and scale—some photocopied and inked with circles and arrows, others lovingly hand-annotated, their borders browned and curling. A contour map of Dixie National Forest dominated the middle, but next to it Leo spotted a surveyor's sketch of Duck Creek from 1910, several pages from an old mining claim, and a napkin with a cartoonish outline of Navajo Lake, "water babies" penciled in the shallows.

Below the cork board was a battered table, more workbench than

dining set. Atop it: three woven baskets (one full of acorns, one with small stone disks, the last cradling a painted wooden bird), a collection of arrowheads, a jar of ancient nails, and a hand lens that looked one step removed from a pirate's monocle. There were also two coffee mugs, both stained, and an ashtray with a single, perfectly extinguished stick of cedar incense.

The sensory world here was almost dizzying. The air tasted of smoke and old paper; somewhere, a faint electric whine suggested a clock on the verge of rewinding; and under all of it, a gentle, persistent birdsong played, though Leo saw no speakers and the window was definitely closed.

Erica motioned Leo to a sturdy wooden stool, then indicated an armchair for Cody. The armchair was low and deep, upholstered in green vinyl, its arms cracked and shiny with old age. Cody, unsure whether to set the telescope down or cradle it, chose to hold it, his thumb rubbing the constellations like a worry stone.

Erica took the third chair—a weathered leather relic with the stuffing coming out in two places—then drew a pack of matches from her pocket. She picked out a new stick of cedar from a woven tray, lit it, and set it in the shallow dish at the center of the table. It smoldered gently, giving off a perfume sharp enough to sting but not unpleasant.

She spoke first, tone changed from the store's playful banter. "So. You want to know about the telescope. Or what it's showing you."

Cody, gripping the scope's case, nodded. "I saw... something. It's hard to describe. Like an aura, or heat bloom, but only through the lens. And it was people—hiding near the falcon nests. Not visible otherwise."

Erica listened, eyes fixed not on Cody but on the instrument itself. "Powell's Refractor," she said, half to herself. "You're not the first person to see what's hidden with it. But you might be the first to notice it's more than a collector's item."

Leo shifted, then leaned in. "Have you tried it? Does it work on everyone?"

Erica shook her head. "For me, it's just a beautiful piece of brass. It prefers the company of the curious." She nodded to Cody. "Or those with a stake in the mountain."

Cody colored slightly. "I don't believe in—well, I don't have a theory for this. But it's real. I checked. Multiple times."

"That's all that matters," Erica said. "Not what you call it, but what you see with it."

A silence settled in the room, filled only by the ticking of some unseen clock and the smoke tracing a line to the ceiling.

Leo, wanting to shift the mood, asked, "What about the maps? I mean, are those all from around here?"

"Most," Erica said. "Some from old expedition logs, some I drew myself. That one—" she pointed to the napkin—"came from a Paiute elder, in exchange for a pair of reading glasses and a ride to Cedar City."

Cody took it all in. "Do you think these... auras, the people watching the nests... do you think it's related to the local legends?"

Erica considered. "Every place has its stories. Here, the Thunderbird is the big one. You can see it in the rock art at Cedar Breaks, or in the petroglyphs north of town. Sometimes it's a warning, sometimes a protector." She tilted her head. "What did the aura look like, exactly?"

Cody described it: the flickering corona, the restless, nervous energy, the way each one seemed to orbit a blind or nest like a captive sun. He added, "It felt... more like intent than heat. Like a marker, or a warning."

Erica nodded, unsurprised. "Thunderbird is said to travel in arcs of fire, lightning, or just a shimmer in the sky. When it shows up, things change."

Leo jumped in. "There was a weird eclipse yesterday, too. For a second, the whole canyon went dark. No birds, no sound. Just—blackout."

Erica's eyes narrowed. "Was anyone else with you?"

"No," Leo said. "Just the two of us, and the car. And the telescope."

"Interesting," Erica said, drawing out the word. "Sometimes you need the right tools to see what's actually happening."

She reached across the table, not to grab the telescope but to brush her hand just above it. "Powell's people were surveyors, but they also had a deep sense of the unknown. Some of the stories say he went looking for Thunderbird himself, after a vision at the Grand Canyon."

She smiled, a little sad. "He never found it, but he mapped the whole basin instead."

Cody absorbed this, then asked, "What do you think it wants? Or, rather, what do you think it's trying to show?"

Erica shrugged, the movement delicate. "Maybe it's not what the mountain wants. Maybe it's what it fears. Something's disturbing the balance. You see it in the nests, in the way the wind moves. You feel it in the air, even if you're not trained for it."

She let the silence build, then concluded, "If the telescope is showing you something, I'd listen."

Leo, for once, didn't joke. "What about the other side? The people in the blinds. Are they... like us?"

Erica didn't answer right away. "Some people come here for the view. Some for the birds. Others come for things they shouldn't have." She reached under the table and withdrew a weathered envelope, passing it to Cody. "Found this on the porch last week. No return address. Inside is a list of coordinates, all falcon nest sites. With a note: 'For your collection. More coming soon.'"

Cody opened the envelope. The list was typed, each line paired with a date and a time window. His skin prickled as he realized the last few matched his own field notes, almost to the hour.

"Who would do this?" he asked, voice small.

Erica looked at him, and for a moment she seemed older, sadder than before. "You'd be surprised how much people will pay for a live egg, or a rare specimen. Not everyone's interested in preserving."

Leo, jaw set, said, "So we have a poacher, or a collector. And something else is warning us about them."

Erica nodded. "Maybe even giving you a chance to stop it. If you want."

The room seemed to grow warmer, the smoke heavier. The bird-song rose, distant but insistent.

Cody glanced at Leo, who nodded. "We're in. Whatever this is."

Erica smiled, relieved. "Good. Then let me show you what the Thunderbird really is."

She stood, motioning them to the cork board. As Cody and Leo followed, the telescope hummed in his hands, the brass growing warm

to the touch. Through the closed window, a shadow swept across the snow, impossibly fast, gone before they could turn to see it.

Somewhere in the shop, a clock struck the hour. The birdsong stilled, waiting.

The three of them faced the wall of maps, ready to chart the next move.

Erica moved with purpose, drawing Leo and Cody to the wall beside the maps. Hanging in pride of place was a square of tanned deer-skin, its surface painted in ochre and faded gold. The image was elemental: a bird, impossibly huge, its wings eclipsing a sun, beak jagged as a thunderhead. In one talon it clutched a spear of lightning, the other grasped what looked like a twisting blue snake. Arcs of cloud and hail danced around its body, and at the bottom of the painting, tiny dark stick-figures pointed up, mouths open in awe or warning.

Erica let the silence stretch until even the ticking clocks seemed to listen. "The Thunderbird," she said, tracing a finger over the wingspan. "Most stories call it that, but the names are all different: panach, sukwan, witumpi. It's not a single bird, not exactly. More like the sky's memory of every bird that ever was, all packed into one."

Leo whistled, low and admiring. "That's some serious branding," he said, but his voice was reverent.

Cody looked at the painting, brow creased. "Is this local? I mean, did Paiute bands report actual sightings, or is it a symbolic thing?"

Erica smiled, not unkindly. "All legends start as sightings. The details change, but the reason doesn't. It shows up when something's at risk. Usually, the land."

She turned to the maps, finding a line of inked circles that snaked along the mountain ridges. "There's a pattern, if you look. Every time the Thunderbird appears—storm, fire, flood—there's a shift in the valley below. Sometimes it's a warning. Sometimes it's a fix." She glanced at Leo. "You grew up here. Ever hear a story like that?"

Leo nodded, the motion small. "Uncle Jim used to say it was the only bird the mountain feared. He said if you saw it, you kept your mouth shut and your eyes to the ground until it passed. The year the cabins up on Aspen Loop got wiped out by that freak windstorm, everyone said it was the Thunderbird, cleaning house."

Erica's eyes sparked. "Exactly. It's not just a bird. It's a force. When the mountain's creatures are in trouble—when the balance is off—it comes to fix things."

Cody shifted, wrestling with the idea. "So, you're saying... what? That this legend is a kind of ecological feedback system?"

Erica grinned. "Call it that if it helps." She gestured at the telescope in Cody's hand. "Some people think that's what Powell was looking for when he mapped this place. Not just rivers and cliffs, but the boundaries of what's safe to do, what's okay to take."

Leo, picking up the thread, said, "So if someone starts taking too much—like, say, eggs from a protected nest—the Thunderbird steps in?"

"Or something does," Erica said. "And it leaves a mark. Sometimes a storm, sometimes just a feeling. Sometimes"—she tapped the telescope, light—"something only a certain kind of person can see."

Cody looked at the painting again, trying to reconcile the grandeur of the myth with the data in his notebook. "I guess I've always seen stories like this as psychological. A way for communities to encode best practices. But if there's a real effect—if people really see or feel things—" He trailed off, unwilling to say more.

"Not everything has to be in the literature," Erica said. "But if you're curious, there's more." She crossed to a wooden cabinet tucked under the cork board, its front painted with a spiral of tiny, swimming shapes. She opened it and brought out a small glass jar, sealed with red wax and filled nearly to the brim with clear water. At first glance, it was ordinary, but as she held it to the light, shadows writhed in the liquid—miniature serpents, or flickers of movement too fast to track.

"These are what the Paiute call Water Babies," Erica said, holding the jar in two hands. "They live in the hidden channels under Navajo Lake. Mischief-makers, but also protectors, if you know how to ask."

Leo leaned in, eyebrows raised. "I thought Water Babies were like, you know, fairytale stuff."

"They're a warning and a promise," Erica said. "If you respect the water, it will keep you safe. If you don't, they might pull you in. Every search and rescue up here has at least one person who swears they saw something in the lake before they fell through."

Cody watched the jar, then the shadows inside, and felt the hair lift on his forearms. "Are they alive?" he asked, voice gone softer.

"In a way," Erica said, rotating the jar so the light caught the moving forms just so. "They're as alive as any story. If you leave them near your bedside, they say you'll dream of your own past, or of secrets hidden in the mountain."

Leo, unable to help himself, said, "I'm guessing they don't do refunds if your dreams are weird."

Erica laughed, the moment lighter. "No, but sometimes people bring them back. The jars, I mean. Empty. They say the Water Babies found their way home."

She set the jar down next to the incense, the light still playing off the restless shadows.

Cody looked at the telescope, then at the painting, then at Erica. "So what do we do with all this? I mean, besides watch the nests and wait for the Thunderbird to drop by?"

Erica grew serious. "You keep doing what you're doing. Document everything. Pay attention, even to the stuff that doesn't make sense. If there's a pattern, you'll see it. And if the mountain has something to say, it will let you know. It always does."

Leo nodded, a slow, thoughtful motion. "So we're part of the story now."

"We always were," Erica said, "but most people pretend not to notice."

The birdsong in the background started up again, a little louder now. The smoke from the cedar stick curled in a slow spiral toward the vent, and the clock in the hallway chimed the half hour.

Erica looked at both of them, then back at the painting. "There's one more thing, if you want to know. But it's not for the faint of heart."

Leo shrugged. "We've come this far."

Cody, though skeptical, nodded. "Tell us."

Erica took a deep breath, then said, "They say the Thunderbird only appears to those who need to see it. But if it marks you—if you're on its list—it will keep showing up until you do what's needed. Sometimes that's easy. Sometimes not." She looked at Cody, then Leo. "Either way, you're in for it now."

A silence followed, not uncomfortable, but full of all the things left unsaid. Cody thought of the flicker on the cliff, the blackout at the rim, the way the telescope buzzed like a live wire every time he picked it up.

He wondered, for the first time, what else might be waiting for them on the mountain. Or what it might want.

He looked at Leo, who offered a half-smile, then at Erica, who seemed both relieved and sad at once. The painting glowed in the amber light, and for a second, the Thunderbird seemed to move—just a fraction, just enough.

The clocks ticked, the incense burned down, and somewhere, far off, a real bird cried out, the sound sharp and solitary.

Erica's gaze slid from the Thunderbird painting to the battered telescope in Cody's hands, her focus sharpening as she leaned in. She didn't ask to hold it. Instead, she reached out, letting her fingertips hover just above the brass barrel, as if it might bite if startled. The constellation etchings threw back the amber light in subtle sparks, and for a moment, nobody spoke.

"It's not just any telescope," she said, voice lowered. "Most people think it's a collector's piece, or that it survived the Powell expedition by pure luck. But the real story—the one they don't put in the museums—is that John Wesley Powell had it made special for this mountain. He called it a Guide's Eye."

Cody blinked, registering the term. "You mean—like, it's meant to... what, guide explorers?"

"Not just explorers," Erica said. "Anyone with a purpose. Anyone trying to see what's hidden." She traced a pattern in the air above the brass, stopping at the focus wheel. "It was built to protect things that couldn't speak for themselves. The animals, the water, the land."

Leo's expression was open, less mocking than before. "That sounds less like science and more like magic."

Erica met his gaze. "Powell started as a scientist, just like you, Cody. But by the time he left, he'd seen enough to know that not everything here can be measured. Sometimes the mountain teaches you how to look. And if you don't listen, you miss everything that matters."

Cody looked at the telescope, then at Erica. "So how does it work? I mean, if I wanted to use it... for protection?"

Erica shrugged, the movement light and final. "It only works if you want the truth. Not the truth you want, but the truth that's there. It won't show you more than you can handle, but sometimes that's still a lot." She gave him a long, careful look. "If you're seeing auras or shimmers, that's not a glitch. It means the mountain picked you for the job."

Leo whistled. "Does it pick more than one person at a time?"

She tilted her head. "Depends. Sometimes the task is too big for just one."

Cody hesitated, then ran his thumb along the barrel. "There's a legend about an artifact like this at Cornell. They said it was a fake, but it looked almost exactly the same. Same pattern, same... feeling. I wrote a paper on it once. Couldn't explain it, so I left it out."

"That's how most stories end up here," Erica said. "Left out, until someone needs them."

She let that settle, then said, "There's something else. Since last week, I've had people asking about the birds. Not the usual types—these are pros. One was a man in his fifties, tall, maybe six-three. Wore a parka that cost more than my car, and a camera harness you could use to land a plane. He wanted details. Nest locations. How many chicks, exactly where, exactly when."

Leo stiffened. "That's the guy from the overlook. Black SUV, Zion decal. You see him, Cody?"

Cody nodded, the memory sharpening. "He was there the day we saw the eclipse. Watching us, maybe even following."

Erica's mouth pressed thin. "He's not the only one. Two others came in this morning, just browsing, but they asked about local legends. Acted like they were writing a travel piece, but—" She shrugged, unconvinced.

Leo leaned forward, elbows on the battered table. "Are they dangerous?"

"I don't know," Erica said. "But they want something. And they know you have the telescope."

The clocks ticked, closer now, as if the room itself was waiting to see what they'd do next.

Cody clutched the telescope tighter. "If this Guide's Eye is meant to

protect... then we have to get to the nests before they do. We have to see whatever the mountain's trying to show us."

Erica smiled, but it was all resolve. "You don't have to do it alone. I've got contacts—Crabtree, Higgins, even the Forest Service, if we keep it discreet. You just need to keep watch, and keep moving. Don't let them catch you standing still."

Leo grinned, nerves fizzing into action. "Not a problem. We can start tonight, if you're up for it, Cody."

He nodded, surprised to hear his own voice steady. "We should check every nest site, log what we see. If the telescope shows me anything weird, I'll document it. Maybe we can get a photo through the lens."

Erica's approval was quiet but clear. "Good. I'll help from here, keep an ear out. And if you need a safe place to stash that telescope, or yourselves, you know where to come."

Cody tucked the scope under his arm, suddenly conscious of its weight and the strange, almost feverish warmth radiating through the case.

Leo stood, stretching his arms. "Back to the grind, then. This time, with a supernatural advantage."

Erica saw them to the beaded curtain, the moment almost formal. "If you hear the Thunderbird, don't be afraid. Just listen."

They stepped out into the main shop, the familiar tick of clocks and the scent of wax and old pine instantly grounding them. Leo led the way, but Cody lingered for a second, glancing back to see Erica at the threshold, her cardigan glowing in the morning light.

They exited into the street, air sharp and clean. The road was empty, but at the far end of the lot, the black SUV was parked, engine running. Cody felt the hair on his neck rise.

"Should we go over?" Leo asked, voice casual but his fists were bunched in his pockets.

"No," Cody said. "Let's wait. We have what we need. Let's see what happens if we act like we're not watching."

They walked, slow at first, then faster, the weight of the telescope a pulsing heat at Cody's side.

He tried to remember the exact words Erica had used—how the

Guide's Eye didn't show what you wanted, but what needed to be seen. He wondered if that would be enough to keep them ahead, to keep the birds and their nests safe.

He wondered, too, what it would show him next.

The wind picked up, swirling grit and the tiniest flake of snow down the gutter. Cody looked up, searching the sky, half-expecting to see a giant golden wing passing over. Instead, the sky was blue, empty, and ready.

The world felt thinner, more fragile, but also more alive. Leo fell in step beside him, and together they walked toward the next trailhead, two points on the map, watched by all the stories the mountain had saved up just for them.

Behind them, the clocks in The Lofty Nest struck the hour. And ahead, somewhere unseen, the truth was waiting.

six

the blue dye trail

THE DRIVE OUT to Duck Creek Pond took only ten minutes, but the afternoon's light transformed the world with every bend in the road. The clouds had burned off, leaving a sky so blue it felt almost mythic, the kind of color you remembered from childhood or invented in dreams. As Leo pulled the Subaru into the dirt lot, he caught the scent of juniper and saw the pond stretched out in a wide, perfect ellipse—ice-free, for once, and sparkling like a dropped bowl of sapphires.

Kids were already there, squealing and tossing bread crusts at a horde of mallards near the east shore. Parents set up collapsible chairs on the bank, the click and snap of aluminum legs joining the distant pings of fishing lures hitting the water. At the dock, a trio of retirees in camo bucket hats traded tall tales and thermoses, their lines set with casual optimism. Somewhere, a boom box leaked out the tail end of a country song, then crackled into static.

Cody stepped out first, blinking at the sun. His field jacket, too warm for the day, made him look like a holdover from an Antarctic expedition, but he left it zipped anyway. He unslung the battered telescope case, fingers curling around it with something between reverence and need.

Leo joined him at the edge of the lot, one boot already coming untied, saw blade strapped to his pack like a conversation starter. He

surveyed the pond, then Cody, then the gathered microcosm of Duck Creek Village.

“So, where do we start? The ducks or the gossip?”

Cody considered, then nodded toward the far end of the dock. “Falcons use this pond as a hunting ground. If there’s anything strange, it’ll be at the waterline.”

Leo followed, boots skidding a little on the packed earth. The walk down was short but steep, and by the time they hit the gravel of the access path, the hum of the village was replaced by the subtle, living white noise of the forest: chittering squirrels, the low burble of spring runoff, the high whine of something with wings.

They reached the dock’s entrance just as one of the retirees—a man with a walrus mustache and a sunburn that probably had a name—reeled in a trout no bigger than his thumb. The other two whistled and hooted, but the man released it with an expert flick, sending the tiny fish back in a silver arc.

Leo grinned. “Trophy catch, huh?”

The man turned, offered a smile cratered with laugh lines. “They’re getting bolder every year. Or maybe I’m getting less picky.”

Cody nodded politely, then scanned the dock, eyes narrowing as he counted the gulls on the far side. “Excuse us,” he said, then hurried to the end of the planks, boots thumping hollow on each step.

Once they were alone at the edge, Cody set the telescope on the railing, clicked the tripod into its mounts, and began the deliberate, practiced sequence of prepping for observation. He unscrewed the eyepiece, checked for lens fog, then turned the focus knob with the tenderness of a safecracker.

Leo watched, arms folded. “You expecting a bird, or an alien landing?”

“Neither,” Cody said, his voice far-off. “But if something’s disturbing the nests, it’ll leave a pattern.”

He swept the lens along the shore, then upward, calibrating. To his left, the reeds shivered with the movement of frogs. To his right, a black-headed gull stabbed the water, then shook itself, droplets scattering like gems. In the center of the pond, the surface looked perfectly ordinary—reflections of trees, the glint of ice receding at the north end. Cody

tracked along the line of the dock, following it as far as the optics would allow.

Then he stopped. He blinked, once, then again. He shifted his stance, leaned in, then jerked back from the lens as if he'd been slapped.

"Whoa," he said, not for show.

Leo straightened, coming over. "What? You see something?"

Cody's face had gone pale, but his eyes were electric. He glanced around to make sure no one was close, then motioned Leo to the telescope.

"Look," he whispered. "Right at the surface. Start from the base of the dock, sweep toward the northwest."

Leo squinted into the eyepiece. At first, he saw only what he expected: the muddled brown of the bank, flecks of green from the algae mats, a soda can marooned near the cattails. But as he panned, he noticed something odd—a glimmer, just above the waterline, like a film of soap on glass, but wrong in color. It was a line of blue, bright and humming, not a pigment but a presence. The line extended from the dock's base, curling across the water in a lazy S, then beelined toward the furthest point of land.

He stepped back, blinking hard. "What the hell—"

"It's not visible to the eye," Cody said, low. "Only through the telescope."

Leo looked again, this time bracing himself. The blue wasn't just a line—it was a trail, maybe half a foot wide, pulsing like a heartbeat. At intervals, the color pooled, forming little globules that hovered over the water before thinning out and continuing.

He pulled back, the hair on his arms standing. "What is that?"

Cody's hands moved, restless. "I thought I was seeing things. But it's consistent. And look—" He dialed the telescope down, aiming it at the marshy strip below them. "It's on the reeds, too. Like someone painted a line, but—"

"But it doesn't show up to the naked eye," Leo finished, looking over the side. The reeds looked as plain as ever, a random scatter of brown and gold.

Cody made a quick note in his pad. "I've read about this," he said, excitement rising. "Some researchers use an optical tracking dye. It's a

liquid, but it's only visible with a specific wavelength filter—like the kind used in high-end optics, or..." He trailed off, staring at the battered brass of the old telescope.

Leo whistled, a single, sharp note. "You're telling me someone's leaving an invisible trail? Like a bread crumb for birds?"

"No," Cody said. "Not for the birds. For whoever's watching them. The dye is biologically inert—doesn't show up in most animal spectra, so the birds, fish, even the bugs don't notice it. But if you have the right gear, you can track a path through the whole ecosystem."

Leo let that settle. "Who uses this stuff?"

Cody didn't answer right away. He thumbed through the notebook, then said, "It's not sold over the counter. I had a professor who used it, but only after jumping through a year's worth of permits. Government, private foundations—maybe a few industrial labs. That's it."

Leo looked at the trail, then the pond, then the village up the hill. "So what's it doing here?"

Cody's eyes were fixed on the far shore. "We need to find out where it leads."

They packed up, careful not to draw attention. Cody left the telescope's case slung across his chest, the instrument itself still humming with the residual heat of use. They skirted the dock, moving along the muddy shore, the blue line now invisible to both of them unless Cody stopped and used the lens.

At the northwest point, the dye line left the water and painted itself across a patch of crushed grass. From there, it was a dotted path into the treeline—blue smears on bark, little halos around twigs, even a faint residue on a plastic survey flag left by the Forest Service. Cody paused every few feet, checking the alignment and the intensity of the color.

At the edge of the woods, he stopped. "It's fresh," he said. "If it were more than a day old, the pattern would diffuse. This was applied maybe this morning, maybe last night."

"Does it go up?" Leo asked, meaning into the canopy.

Cody checked. "No. It stays ground level, then arcs around—wait." He gripped the tripod tighter. "There's a break, then another line picks up, parallel to the first but spaced out. Like... like a corridor."

Leo's face was serious now, the joker replaced by a local who knew when something was off. "That's a game trail. Or a human one."

They moved faster, the wind stirring a thin layer of dust off the path. The further they went, the more deliberate the blue trail became—like someone was marking waypoints. At one, there was even a faint smell, not chemical but oddly sweet, like a cut apple left in the sun.

Cody's phone pinged. He checked it, then handed it to Leo. "The eBird app just got a ping from this grid. Someone reported an unusual raptor sighting here, less than an hour ago."

Leo looked at the map, then the woods. "Let's not keep them waiting."

They moved on, Cody's feet clumsy with adrenaline. Every few yards, he stopped to check the telescope, making sure the line was still true. Leo kept his head on a swivel, watching for movement above and ahead.

After a quarter mile, they broke through to a clearing—an old campsite, ringed with the blackened scars of years of campfires. In the middle was a single, perfect print in the mud, half-boot, half something else, but clean and deep. Beside it, the blue trail pooled, forming a tight spiral before shooting off toward the bluff above the pond.

Cody knelt, taking a photo of the print and the blue swirl. He looked up, and for the first time, his voice was shaky. "That's deliberate. Someone wanted to leave a mark."

Leo joined him, then pointed at the spiral. "Is that a signal? Like a code?"

Cody considered. "Or a meeting point. Some birders use spirals as a marker when tracking flock movement. But this—" He looked at the boot print again. "This is too neat."

They stood, eyes scanning the edges of the clearing. The wind picked up, then dropped, leaving behind a silence that felt tense, expectant.

Leo said, "We follow the trail."

Cody nodded, telescope clutched in both hands.

They walked, side by side, as the sun dropped behind the pines, and the truth—whatever shape it took—waited for them just up the next rise.

The trail resumed beyond the spiral, painting the forest floor with invisible ink only Cody could see. He moved slower now, pausing every ten paces to check the alignment, sometimes kneeling to sight along the lens just inches above the duff and pine needles. Leo handled the pathfinding, skirting deadfall and low branches, pointing out the old deer scrapes and the subtle indentations left by snowshoes in wetter months.

As they entered the stand of aspens, the shift in light was immediate—spring-bright, the ground carpeted with last year's coins of gold, each leaf crisp and edged with memory. The blue trail ran true, threading between the youngest trunks, then shooting up a fallen log like a hiker on a dare. At each junction, the pattern repeated: not just a line, but a series of arrowheads, some neat, some rough, always pointing onward.

Cody muttered, "This is intentional. Not just marking, but wayfinding."

Leo knelt beside him, examining the latest arrow. It was drawn with more care than the rest, the tail flared out and the head beveled like a craftsman's chisel. "Reminds me of how they marked cross-country courses at my old college," Leo said, thumb tracing the shape in the air. "But with flour, not... whatever this is."

Cody ran his sleeve over the bark; nothing transferred, not even a smudge. "It's suspended in solution," he said, mostly for himself. "It dries instantly, no residue. But in the right light—" He offered the lens to Leo.

Leo looked, still not seeing the blue, but saw enough to trust Cody's certainty. "It's a high-end marker. Not for random hikers."

They pressed on, the woods growing denser and the soundscape shifting. Where before the pond had been a chorus of frogs and kids and the faint boom of music, here the only voices were their footsteps and the high, glassy shiver of wind in the aspens. Even the birds had gone quiet, as if they too were watching.

Cody checked the line, found it thicker now, running parallel to a game trail, sometimes branching in double helix before merging again. The pace quickened. Leo led, picking the route with a runner's intuition, sometimes vaulting a downed trunk, sometimes sliding over it to keep the noise low.

“Whoever made this,” Leo whispered, “knew someone would follow.”

Cody kept his focus tight. “Or wants us to.”

The next marker was a splash on the side of a granite boulder, the blue dye forming a perfect hemisphere at chest height. Cody paused, inspecting the edge. “It’s not just paint,” he said, excitement peeking through his nerves. “It’s mixed with a binder. The outer layer hardens, but the inside stays liquid—”

“So it glows stronger the fresher it is?” Leo guessed.

“Yes.”

“Then we’re close.”

The trail led up, winding toward a natural rise. The climb wasn’t steep, but the loose scree made every step a calculated risk. Leo went first, boots silent, and at the summit he crouched, beckoning Cody with a finger to keep low. Together, they eased to the edge of the bluff and peered down.

Below was a small clearing, maybe thirty feet across. At the far end, set back in shadow, was a makeshift blind: camo netting, brush stacked just so, the outline broken by deadwood and scraps of brown tarp. A trickle of smoke rose from a can stove. Two figures sat by it, both bundled in high-end outdoor gear—one hunched, the other tall and angular, face lost in the shadow of a ball cap.

The blue trail led directly to the blind, pooling in a tight circle around it.

Cody’s breath caught. He slipped the telescope from its case and focused in, steadying his hands against the rock. Through the lens, everything sharpened: the texture of the tarp, the clean cut of the camo netting, the logos—tiny but unmistakable—stitched into the gear. He swept the view, pausing on the taller figure. The man was drinking from a steel thermos, but his other hand rested on a binocular harness, the kind used by professionals who watched for days at a time.

Cody adjusted the focus again, then stilled. Next to the blind, half buried in shade, was a hard case—matte black, with a set of stickers on its side. He zoomed in, tracing the edges until he made out the largest decal: a stylized “V” entwined with a hawk’s talon. He nudged Leo and whispered, “Does that look familiar?”

Leo craned his neck, squinted, then hissed. "That's the same logo as the SUV. The one from the lot."

Cody nodded, mind spinning. "They're tracking the nests. Not just observing. They're marking them."

As if on cue, the hunched figure stood, stretched, and walked to the edge of the clearing. From a cargo pocket, the person produced a small bottle—metal, with a nozzle at the end. They uncapped it, shook it once, then sprayed a dot of the solution onto a dead branch, right at eye level. The blue marker flared in the telescope, almost dazzling. The figure stepped back, admired the work, then returned to the stove.

"They're using the same stuff here," Cody whispered. "We can map every stop they make."

Leo frowned. "But why go through all this trouble? If it's about the birds, just set a camera and wait. Unless—" He trailed off, eyes narrowing. "Unless they want to grab something fast, and not lose the site."

"Or leave a trail for someone else," Cody said, dread building.

Below, the tall man checked his watch, then barked a quiet command. The hunched figure doused the stove, packed up the bottle and thermos, and started breaking down the blind. In less than two minutes, both had vanished down a side trail, leaving only the faintest scar of blue and the embers from the can stove.

Cody and Leo stayed put, waiting, the sounds of the forest slowly returning. When they were sure it was safe, they slid down into the clearing, Cody moving straight for the branch with the fresh mark.

He inspected it, then pulled out a nitrile glove and swabbed the blue with a strip of tape. It left no stain, no residue, but when he looked through the lens, the tape glowed neon.

"It's the same formulation as at the pond," he said. "But this is undiluted. They want this visible for weeks, at least."

Leo checked the ground, scanning for prints or other clues. "We could follow them. Or see what's in the case."

Cody thought for a second, then nodded. "Let's check the case."

They found it, tucked behind a log, half camouflaged by loose pine needles. Leo glanced around, then popped the latch. Inside were dozens of small vials, each labeled with dates and numbers. Alongside, a camera

—the kind used for wildlife documentation—rested in a foam cradle. The memory card slot was empty.

Cody stared at the vials. “They’re collecting samples. Maybe eggs. Maybe something else.”

Leo’s voice was grim. “We need to get this to Erica. She’ll know what to do with it.”

Cody took a final, sweeping look through the telescope, tracing the blue line as it left the clearing and wound up the next ridge. “They’re not done,” he said. “And neither are we.”

They packed up, making sure to leave no trace, then doubled back along the blue-laced path. The markers, once hidden, now seemed to pulse with urgency, each one a reminder that the forest was being mapped, step by step, by people who saw it only as a resource to be claimed.

As they retraced their way toward the village, the sun set fully, turning the sky from mythic blue to a bruised violet. Behind them, the aspen leaves trembled in the dark, the world just a little less wild than it had been.

Ahead, the next move waited, as clear as a trail in fresh snow.

The blue markers grew bolder the further they went. Every sapling along the old access road bore a dot or swipe, each one fresh and strong in the telescope’s view. They followed the line with a shared sense of urgency—no longer just tracking for curiosity’s sake, but for the certainty that something was unfolding, right now, and they were running out of time to change it.

A half mile in, the trail left the woods and crossed a shallow draw. The ground was sandy here, stripped of snow by wind and spring thaw. Ahead, scattered among the pines, were the angular roofs and raw-wood decks of Navajo Lake Estates. Leo recognized the neighborhood from summer runs—a web of luxury cabins, half of them empty except for holiday weekends or family reunions. The sense of privacy here was engineered, every house built to face away from the others, with high fences and enough perimeter brush to keep out both wind and human eyes.

The blue trail cut straight for one of the biggest cabins at the end of the spur road. Leo stopped them twenty yards back, hunkered behind a

clump of saplings and did a slow, deliberate recon. The cabin was two stories of engineered logs, wraparound decks, a fire pit built into the front lawn. Most noticeable was the black SUV idling in the circular drive, its windows so deeply tinted you could shave in the reflection.

They knelt in the lee of the trees, watching.

It took only a minute for the first figures to emerge. The tall man wore a parka even in the sun, his head shaved, skin tanned enough to belong to any region on earth. He carried himself like a man who didn't expect to be challenged: brisk, upright, hands free at his sides. Flanking him were two younger assistants, each dressed in technical gear and ball-caps, their faces made anonymous by mirrored sunglasses.

They began unloading from the SUV, working in silence: heavy hard cases, tripods, what looked at first like pelican crates for audio gear but which, under the telescope, Cody quickly saw were vented and sealed for live cargo. Each was custom-stenciled with a barcode and a slot for a digital readout. As they transferred the last of the cases to the porch, one of the assistants popped the latch on a crate, checked the inside, and relocked it with a twist Cody could practically feel from fifty feet away.

Cody ducked lower, heart pounding. "Those are animal transporters. They use those for exotics, sometimes reptiles, sometimes birds. They're climate controlled."

Leo watched the scene, jaw clenched. "They're not even pretending to hide it."

"They don't need to," Cody said. "Look—nobody else is around. This whole block is empty."

The tall man barked a short command—European, maybe Slavic in shape—and the two assistants disappeared inside the house. He lingered by the SUV, then leaned against the hood, thumbs working a phone with the intensity of someone waiting for a code or a call.

Leo nudged Cody. "See the decal?"

Cody focused the lens: on the passenger door was the same hawk-and-V logo they'd spotted earlier, but below it, in block font, read:

VANE VISUALS: Capturing Nature's Rarest Moments

He exhaled, a mix of recognition and dread. "He's the owner. Julian Vane. His YouTube channel has half a million subs. He does big-game

wildlife footage—Africa, Patagonia, the Arctic—there are rumors he poached a mountain lion for a Netflix gig, but nothing stuck.”

Leo grunted. “Guess he’s decided to start on birds.”

They watched as Vane opened the hatch and unloaded a final, slender case. It was matte black, long enough for a rifle, but with tripods built into the frame. He checked his watch, then scanned the tree line—eyes sharp and unhurried, as if he knew the exact location of every living thing within a mile.

Leo felt his gut twist, but he kept his voice steady. “If we want proof, this is it. But we need to see what’s in those crates.”

Cody nodded, still peering through the telescope. “Or catch him in the act. He’ll wait for nightfall or early dawn. Raptors are less wary at first light.”

They hunkered deeper, using the cover of a fallen pine to get closer. At thirty feet, they could hear the rumble of the SUV engine, the faint click of Vane’s phone keys. The air carried the cold-burn of pine sap and the sharp, weirdly chemical tang of the tracking dye, though only Cody seemed to notice.

A window on the second floor of the cabin cracked open. One of the assistants—this one with a shock of white-blond hair—set up a high-end camera on the balcony, aiming it not at the pond, but at the forest beyond. He swept the area, pausing every few degrees to snap off a sequence of shots, then adjusted a sensor on the railing. The setup was military grade, more than any birding project would need.

Leo watched, then whispered, “Those sensors—they’re motion-activated. He’s got the place locked down like a bank.”

Cody nodded. “And the blue dye is their roadmap. They’ll follow it out, find the nest, grab what they want, and bring it back here before anyone even wakes up.”

They heard a noise—a soft, animal whine. Both tensed, but it was only a dog, a pointer mix, bounding from the back of the SUV. The dog wore a vest, fitted with a GPS module and what looked like a GoPro. It circled the clearing, nose to the ground, then froze, tracking something at the edge of the woods.

The hair on Cody’s neck stood up. “If that thing’s trained for eggs or live chicks—”

"It'll lead them right to the nests," Leo finished.

For a moment, neither spoke. The operation's scale was clear. This wasn't just a couple of thrill-seekers or a social media stunt. It was a coordinated, professional grab—an outfit with the money, the tech, and the arrogance to do it in broad daylight.

Leo's face went hard. "If we get caught, they'll run us off or worse."

"We won't get caught," Cody said, voice thin with conviction. "We just have to outpace them. Or get the evidence to someone who'll care."

They watched as the pointer darted up the drive, stopped at the base of a dead spruce, and dug at the ground. The tall man followed, patient, then rewarded the dog with a treat and clipped its lead to his belt. Together, they walked a slow perimeter, the man stopping at every blue-marked branch, sometimes scraping at the lichen, sometimes just observing.

"Look at the way he checks the line," Cody whispered. "He's not just following, he's confirming the markers."

Leo pulled out his phone, snapped a few quick photos, then stuffed it back in his pocket. "You think he's got a schedule? Like, will they hit the next site tonight?"

Cody nodded. "They'll want to move before the public wakes up. Best window is dusk or just after sunrise. He'll scout, then send the assistants to retrieve."

Leo weighed the options. "We can't take them head-on. But if we mess with the markers—reroute the trail—they might lose their place. Or buy us enough time to warn someone."

"Forest Service won't get here in time," Cody said. "But Erica can. She'll know who to call."

A movement at the side of the house drew their attention: one assistant emerged, this time carrying a bundle of fine-mesh netting and a climbing harness, the kind used by arborists or technical climbers. He stowed the gear next to the crates and went back in, the door closing with a soft, pneumatic thud.

Leo grinned, a rare flash of mischief. "I know that brand. It's from my store. The only place around here to get it. Want to bet he paid cash and asked no questions?"

Cody shook his head, then went rigid. Through the scope, he saw

Vane pause at the edge of the woods, scanning the horizon with something like calculation. He turned, locking eyes—almost—on the place where Cody and Leo hid. For a second, Cody thought the man would come straight for them. But then he turned, patted the dog, and headed back up the drive, satisfied.

“They know what they’re doing,” Cody said, breath returning.

“We’re not the only ones watching,” Leo replied.

They slipped away, careful to leave no trace. Once out of earshot, Leo whispered, “So, what’s the plan?”

Cody checked the sky, saw the sun dropping fast. “We intercept at the next nest. They’ll use the dog, the nets, the whole kit. We document everything, then call Erica. With luck, we can pin them before they get out of the valley.”

Leo nodded, a quick, decisive motion. “And if we get caught?”

Cody didn’t hesitate. “Run.”

They took the old service trail, cutting wide around the cabin’s sightlines, and made their way toward the ridgeline above the pond. Every now and then, Cody checked the telescope, confirming the blue trail as it wound through the woods—still fresh, still leading forward, but now with a new urgency.

At the crest, they paused, catching their breath. The air was crisp and sharp, laced with the promise of snow, though the ground said it was weeks off yet. Below them, the pond lay in shadow, the banks empty, but every now and then a ripple disturbed the surface—a fish, a bird, or maybe just the memory of the day’s commotion.

Leo checked his phone, then frowned. “Lost service. We’re on our own until we get back to the highway.”

Cody smiled, despite everything. “It’s okay. The mountain wants us to finish what we started.”

Leo shook his head, bemused, then led the way down. “You know, I never figured I’d be on the side of the birds. But if the other side is those guys—” He let the rest hang.

Cody nodded, unslinging the telescope. “We’ll need to move fast. If they’re as good as they look, they’ll hit the nest at first light.”

They set off, the blue trail lighting their way in the deepening dusk.

Each marker was brighter now, as if the mountain itself was rooting for them, or at least giving them a fighting chance.

At the base of the slope, Leo stopped, held out a hand. “You smell that?”

Cody sniffed—pine, cold air, a faint ozone tang. Then he caught it: a whiff of something sharp and acrid, almost antiseptic.

“Chloroform,” Cody said, startled.

Leo’s lips thinned. “They’re going to knock the birds out before transport. That’s how they keep them quiet.”

Cody clenched his hands, anger pushing past the fear. “Not if we get there first.”

They closed in on the nest site, moving quietly now, using every trick they’d learned from a year in the woods. The wind shifted, carrying the distant sound of laughter from the cabin, a stark contrast to the intent, predatory silence of the poaching crew.

At the last marker—a triple arrow, bold and almost beautiful—they saw it: a scrape in the cliff, lined with new grass, three perfect eggs at the center, and, perched above, a female peregrine, watching the horizon.

Cody smiled, awed. “She’s still here.”

Leo pulled out his phone, snapping photos, then set up a quick perimeter. “We have to watch through the night. If they move on this, we need to be ready.”

Cody nodded, then, on impulse, looked through the telescope one last time. The world telescoped into focus: the nest, the bird, the eggs, the blue marker, and, far up the ridge, the glint of a lens—someone else, watching from above.

He lowered the scope, looked at Leo, and for the first time felt like they stood a chance.

Tonight, they’d hold the line.

Tomorrow, they’d bring the story home.

And maybe, if they did it right, the mountain would still have its birds for another year.

seven

the true value encounter

DUCK CREEK'S main drag never saw so much foot traffic as it did on Memorial Day weekend. The Cedar Mountain True Value Country Store was packed wall-to-wall, a living cross-section of the American outback in miniature: weathered locals in faded Carhartts arguing about the best replacement headlamp, collegiate guides in matching windbreakers making disaster jokes while loading carts with ramen bricks and cans of off-brand energy drink, tourist couples giggling over bear bells and plastic flasks, two giggling Girl Scouts in aviator sunglasses filling an entire plastic tote with single-serve peanut butter packets. Over it all, the speakers above aisle five crooned out a '70s classic, volume set just shy of overpowering, and the store's own little ecosystem buzzed in harmonious dissonance.

Cody Westbrook stopped just past the entry mat, blinking at the overload. He'd only ever shopped in the curated calm of campus supply stores, where every item was arranged with algorithmic precision and nothing was out of place. Here, the order was an emergent property of chaos: snow shovels next to summer garden hoses, bear spray adjacent to racks of sunglasses, coolers stacked like blocks beneath an entire wall of fishing lures. He breathed in—plastic and wood smoke, with a high note of pine-scented sanitizer and the deeper, almost syrupy undertone of new rope.

"Go on," Leo said, giving Cody's backpack a nudge. "You'll never

see a more diverse population in your life. Welcome to the soul of civilization.”

Cody stepped forward, following Leo’s path past the registers (all three open, all three manned by red-aproned teens with high school calculus still on their breath) toward the map display at the far end of the store. Leo peeled off briefly, dropping a box of granola bars into their basket, then returned at Cody’s elbow.

The map rack was a rickety, rotating beast: seven levels of papered possibility, each slot loaded with dog-eared topo charts and well-creased forest service maps. Leo spun it with a flourish, then stopped on the shelf labeled “Navajo Lake Basin and Adjacent Trails.” He fished out three copies and handed one to Cody, whose hands already tingled in anticipation.

Cody took a step closer, running a thumb along the edge of the map. “This set is almost two years old,” he said. “Should be recent enough, right?”

“Only thing new up there is the ice cream stand and a couple of seasonal yurts,” Leo said. “Trails are eternal. Check it for marker updates?”

Cody nodded, flipping open his birding journal to the page where he’d drawn a grid overlay. The rest of the world faded as he lost himself in the contours: lines tight as a heartbeat, every ridge and draw telling a story in a language he understood down to the last decimal of elevation.

“Here,” he said, pointing. “This point is the optimal viewing platform. Full line of sight to at least three possible nest sites, and the slope faces north—less thermal distortion.”

Leo leaned in, his own copy of the map folded at a suspiciously expert angle. “But if you want to get within fifty meters, you’ll need to take the Cutthroat loop around the back. It’s a mess after snowmelt—two miles of bad mud, and three places where the beavers have built new dams since last year.”

Cody looked up, brow furrowed. “Wouldn’t that slow them down?”

“Depends if ‘them’ means you, or Vane’s poachers, or the local bear population,” Leo said, grinning. “My money’s on the bear. But if it’s the poachers, they’ll come from above, not below.”

Cody marked a red dot on the map with a precision he'd learned from years of fieldwork, but his mind was already racing ahead. "If we have to get there first, we'll need to cut at least half a mile off the approach. Could we bushwhack from here—" he traced a fingertip across an unmarked saddle—"and cross straight to the ridgeline?"

Leo whistled. "That's pure elevation. You up for a two-thousand-foot scramble?"

"Only if the alternative is losing the nest to those guys," Cody said. The words came out more intense than he meant, and he cleared his throat to cover.

"Noted," Leo said, more quietly. He pointed to the far wall, where the camping aisle was stacked high with off-brand protein powder and mesh laundry bags. "Grab a set of microspikes, just in case. Last year, that whole slope was a skating rink until July."

The map review devolved into a low-voiced planning session, their heads almost touching as they debated approach routes and backup plans. Neither noticed the way the locals kept a respectful two-step distance, or the fact that at least one customer took a phone photo of the two of them—Duck Creek's social media sphere moved fast, and the arrival of "the bird guy" from Cornell was already a topic of interest.

An aisle over, metal tent stakes clinked in their cardboard tray as a bearded man with a Utah State Parks t-shirt debated with his partner over the merits of different mallets. "Fiberglass is lighter, but you don't get the satisfying 'thunk'," the man said.

His partner, a woman with a braid as thick as a rope, shrugged. "You want satisfying, get the cast-iron one. Or just pretend and hit it with a rock."

A burst of laughter, a little loud for indoors, rolled across the store.

From behind the front counter, Mitch the manager surveyed his domain. He wore the store's blue vest with more gravitas than most men wore a suit. When he saw Leo, he raised a hand, his voice carrying through the tumult. "You keeping this guy out of trouble, Leo?"

Leo returned a mock salute. "He's strictly a research risk, Mitch. No bear spray required yet."

Mitch's smile never broke. "If you want the latest on trail condi-

tions, ask Dave at the rental desk. He's been up there every day this week, said the west spur's already bone dry. He'll get you sorted."

"Thanks, man," Leo said, steering Cody toward the far counter.

Cody noticed the subtle choreography of the place as they moved through it: locals drifted in knots, never blocking an aisle for more than a minute; tourists formed single-file lines, always looking for the path of least resistance; the staff slid past each other with microsecond precision, swapping boxes, answering questions, and reloading shelves without so much as a near miss. It was, in its way, a miracle of adaptive behavior.

At the rental desk, Dave (barely old enough to need shaving) was reciting the snowpack report to a knot of Boy Scouts. He saw Leo, broke off mid-sentence, and flashed a proud smile. "Hey man! The snow's all gone from Duck Lake, but the Cutthroat's still muddy. You want the long or the short spikes?"

"Give me the long," Leo said. "And a pound of the pine-scented hand sani, if you've got it."

Dave ducked behind the counter and returned with the items, along with a battered packet of trail mix. "On the house," he said, handing the bag to Cody. "You're the new scientist, right? Saw your picture on the birding group."

Cody blushed, instantly aware of the attention. "Uh, yes. That's me. Thanks."

Dave looked almost awed. "Hope you find what you're looking for. The falcons are the best thing about this town."

He rang up the spikes and hand sanitizer, then gave a quick nod, the kind that said he'd brag about the interaction for a week.

Back in the main aisle, Leo sniffed the sanitizer before tossing it in the basket. "They go through two gallons a month here," he said. "The last batch tasted like gin and regret."

Cody did a quick calculation in his head. "That's more than the CDC recommends for the entire village."

Leo grinned, dropping a box of metal tent stakes into the cart. "You never know what you're going to touch out there. Be prepared."

They made a slow pass down the outdoor gear aisle, pausing to inspect an array of portable water filters (Leo: "Take the pump one, the

straw is a rookie move”) and then a shelf of sleeping bag liners. Cody ran his hand over the synthetic fabric, marveling at the way even cheap gear felt exotic in the context of the village.

“So,” Cody said, voice a little lower, “what’s the best way to stay out of sight if the poachers are looking for us?”

Leo considered. “Don’t dress like a scientist. Borrow a flannel from me, grow a mustache. Mostly, move early and don’t park at the trail-head. Locals use the old service roads—poachers always show up in rental SUVs and leave tire marks a mile wide.”

Cody nodded, absorbing the lesson.

At the checkout, the line was three deep, with a burly dad at the front staging a full camping revolution: tent, stove, bear can, two crates of instant oatmeal, and a bright orange “emergency rescue blanket” the size of a twin mattress. The counter display was a study in counterprogramming: beef jerky, foam can coolers, and a last-minute impulse buy of neon bug bracelets.

Leo distracted himself by reading the notice board posted by the exit. “Looking for live traps for chipmunks,” read one hand-scrawled ad. Another, in precise black marker, offered “Off-Season Snowmobile Tune-Ups—No Questions Asked.” A third, torn and faded, had the words “LOST CAT” at the top, followed by a blurry photo and a tear-off phone number.

The dad in front of them finished his transaction, kids clutching their bug bracelets like Olympic medals, and the line moved forward.

As Cody set their haul on the counter, the bell above the door gave a double ring. The store’s chatter didn’t stop, but it... shifted, like a field of grass sensing a change in the wind. People paused, glanced, then returned to their business. The only ones who didn’t look away were Cody and Leo, who saw a man step through the entry with the confidence of someone who knew they’d be remembered.

He didn’t look like he belonged to a small town, or to any ecosystem short of a boutique travel agency. Corbin Vaught’s entrance had the kind of ripple effect reserved for celebrity guests or minor emergencies: the knot of teens at the sunglasses display fell silent, the group of off-duty firefighters by the deli case tracked him with side-eye, and

even the Girl Scouts measured his passage with the hypervigilance of small prey animals.

Leo, always sensitive to social energy, felt the room tip on its axis before he actually saw Corbin's face. Cody, in the midst of comparing elevation profiles on two topo maps, sensed it only as a lull—a microclimate of quiet, as though the store had drawn a collective breath.

Corbin walked with a springy economy, all momentum and angles, his body honed by a life of motion and his gear as shiny and intentional as his smile. The jacket was an arcane triple-layer that had never seen a discount, the hiking pants cut slim and topped by a logo that suggested both eco-consciousness and predatory instinct. Over it all, a custom camera harness fit him like a holster, with three cameras ranging from high-speed action to a gimbaled beast that looked like it could identify your soul from fifty yards. The lenses hung at perfect chest height, capped and ready, the smallest of them bearing the silver eagle decal of Vane Visuals.

He bypassed the browsing, made a polite circuit around the tent stake section, and headed straight for Cody and Leo with the focus of a missile.

"Gentlemen," Corbin said, voice crisp, New England but muted for public consumption. "Sorry to interrupt your mapping session, but I recognized you from the Bio One feature, Dr. Westbrook. Or—" he checked himself, with just the right amount of humility—"Doctor in training?"

Cody didn't answer right away. Leo gave the man points for both accuracy and subtle aggression. "Just Cody," he said, keeping his own posture loose. "You're with Vane?"

Corbin's handshake was a surgical grip, efficient and cool. "I'm Corbin Vaught. Field producer, cinematographer, amateur ornithologist." He flashed a laminated card from his harness, then tucked it back as if the gesture were both an introduction and a warning. "We're working on a documentary for The Nature Channel—Utah's Aerial Predators. They say you're the man to talk to about this year's falcon surge."

Cody nodded, cautious. "I'm running a field study on peregrine nesting, yes."

Corbin's eyes flicked to Leo, then to the notepad in Cody's hand. "You mapping the nest sites or just looking for new terrain?"

Cody shrugged. "Little of both. It's a tight season—lots of returners."

Corbin grinned. "Returners? Good to know." His gaze returned to Leo. "You're local, right? Leo from Duck Creek Vibe? My crew's been following your Instagram for a year."

Leo snorted. "It's mostly bear memes and slow-motion wrecks, but glad to know I've got a pro audience."

Corbin laughed, genuinely amused. "We all start somewhere. Listen, we're trying to get some B-roll of raptor behavior, but most of the prime overlooks are tourist-choked. I'd heard a rumor—" his voice dropped, inviting conspiracy—"that some of the best nest action happens on the back side of Navajo Lake. Supposedly, there are hidden cliff faces with generations-old sites. Any truth to that?"

He made it sound like a secret, but Leo could tell he already knew the answer.

Cody's tone cooled. "If you're hoping to get footage from the north rim, you'll need a permit and a spotter. It's restricted during peak season."

Corbin's smile stayed wide, but his eyes hardened a half degree. "We're fully permitted. Got the sign-offs last week. Still, nothing beats local knowledge. We'd love to collaborate, or at least buy you a beer in exchange for your favorite trailhead."

Leo crossed his arms, the basket of supplies swinging at his hip. "Can't help with the beer. Maybe with the trail, but it's a mud slog right now."

Corbin nodded as if this were the final clue to some puzzle. "The Cutthroat loop, then. That's what I thought. My crew will love the challenge."

He shifted, checking the time on a watch that was either a fitness tracker or an altimeter, then leaned in to Cody. "One other thing—I'm not supposed to mention this, but the client is obsessed with the idea of rare morphs. You know, the 'Golden Peregrine' or whatever the old-timers call it. We've picked up stories all up and down the Intermoun-

tain, but nobody's ever documented one on camera. Do you think it's real?"

Cody's answer was dry. "No evidence for a color morph here. Most reports are light-phase juveniles, or leucistic individuals. Not a distinct taxon."

Corbin listened, polite but with a static tension underneath. "If you saw something that wasn't normal, would you know?"

Leo broke in. "He's literally written papers about it."

Corbin laughed, a little louder this time. "That's why I like science—always a footnote, always a caveat. Well, if you do see anything, we'd be grateful to know. I'll leave you my number."

He drew a business card from his harness and set it on the counter with a small, deliberate tap. "We're up on the lake through Tuesday, then heading south. If you change your mind about collaboration, or want a look at the gear, just text me. We have some revolutionary techniques for non-invasive documentation."

Cody picked up the card but didn't pocket it.

Corbin gave another thin smile, then moved off, not quite dismissed but already thinking two moves ahead. He stopped at the hand sanitizer station, gave his palms a brisk rub, and lingered by the rental desk as if waiting for the staff to finish a call.

Leo leaned close. "That guy could sell sunscreen in a blizzard."

"He's more interested in what we're doing than what they're filming," Cody said, voice tight.

"You get the bit about 'rare morphs'?" Leo whispered. "They're not here to make nature documentaries. They're here to grab something they think is unique."

Cody nodded, eyes on the map but not seeing it. "We need to move up the timetable."

"Tonight?" Leo asked.

"Soon as possible," Cody replied. "If we can get up the north rim before midnight, we might catch them setting up."

The sound of a register drawer slamming shut snapped both of them back to the present. Corbin, having completed his purchase of an absurdly expensive headlamp and a three-pack of metal water bottles,

thanked the staff with practiced warmth and made a show of slipping his new gear into a backpack already bristling with gadgets.

As Corbin exited, Leo caught sight of two figures waiting outside the store—both dressed in identical windbreakers, both scanning the parking lot with a canine vigilance. Corbin rejoined them, said something brief, and the group disappeared toward the row of idling SUVs.

Inside, the store's energy snapped back to baseline. The Girl Scouts resumed their sugar-rush giggling, the off-duty firefighters argued about the best jerky flavor, and a pair of toddlers resumed their low-stakes war over a display of plastic shovels.

Cody and Leo finished their checkout in silence. Dave at the counter gave Leo a look: "Those guys seemed... intense."

Leo shrugged. "They're city people. Gets cold up here, makes them hungry."

Dave snickered, then nodded toward the door. "You want to know something weird? They asked about the bug-out roads—like how to get off the mountain without hitting the main drag. Not a normal tourist question."

Cody and Leo exchanged a glance.

"Thanks, man," Leo said. "See you next time."

Cody needed air. He slipped away from the main aisle, past a row of plastic-wrapped pool toys and onto the relative privacy of the paint section, which smelled of latex and that faintly chemical hope all home repairs carried with them. He set his basket down, pretended to browse a rack of varnishes, and unclipped the battered telescope from his pack.

He cradled it in one hand, turning the focus knob with the gentleness of a musician tuning a rare instrument. Just a peek, he thought—just enough to feel like he had an advantage, or at least a warning. Corbin Vaught was dangerous, and not in the charming, television-host way. His presence in the store had unsettled something old and animal inside Cody, and it wasn't just professional jealousy.

He pointed the refractor through the glass front of the store. The lens caught the world, clarifying every detail into razor-sharp presence: the color of the light outside, the reflection of the counter, the swirl of customers in and out of the automatic doors. He swung the view until he found Corbin,

who was standing by the checkout, pretending to examine a display of energy bars. Through the refractor, Corbin's shape was outlined in a pulsing red light, an aura that throbbed in time with Cody's own heartbeat.

Cody blinked, adjusted the focus, but the effect remained: a thick, bright boundary of heat around the silhouette, stronger and more aggressive than anything he'd seen before. He moved the lens, catching other customers—nothing. Just Corbin.

The telescope grew warm in his hands, the brass heating as if the light itself was conducting electricity through the metal. The sensation made Cody's palms sweat, but he didn't let go.

He tracked Corbin as he moved, every motion tracing a streak of red. When Corbin shifted to peer up at the security camera, the aura flared, then snapped back to its prior intensity. It was less a color and more an alarm.

Cody exhaled, pulse steadying. He closed the telescope with a gentle twist, then wiped his hands on his pants. When he returned to the main aisle, Leo was waiting, basket at his feet.

Leo's eyes darted to the telescope, then to Cody's face. "You look like you just saw a ghost."

"I saw something," Cody whispered. "It's not normal."

Leo's face sobered. "You trust it?"

Cody nodded, once. "We need to be careful."

As if on cue, Corbin appeared at the head of the aisle. "There you are!" he said, voice bright, almost too bright. "I was just telling the staff here about your research. Really impressive stuff." He let the compliment hang, then segued seamlessly. "Listen, we're calibrating our night-vision rig out at the trailhead in twenty. If you're interested in seeing it—just for fun—I'd be happy to give you a demo."

Leo grinned, but his posture said no. "Appreciate it, man, but we've got a thing with some friends. If we get done early, maybe we'll swing by."

Corbin's smile tightened, a micro-expression that did not go unnoticed. "Of course. Well, offer's open. Could be the last clear night for a week, if the forecast holds."

He tipped an imaginary hat, then walked to the checkout. His shadow lingered a little too long on the linoleum.

Corbin Vaught didn't wait in line like the rest of the world. He floated to the register, bypassed a frazzled mom with two shrieking toddlers, and set his haul down with a practiced clatter. Dave, a college sophomore working his last semester before transferring to USU, sized up the items with a growing, if respectful, awe.

On the counter: a titanium mini-crampon kit ("for vertical ice, not snow," the box boasted); a trio of micro-cord spools; two bottles of magnesium fire starter; a sheath-knife with a high-viz orange hilt; a six-pack of chemical hand warmers; and, last but not least, a pair of "RaptorGrip" leather gloves, the packaging featuring a peregrine falcon in attack pose, the tagline reading, "Tame the Wild."

Dave scanned each item, his eyes flicking from the gear to Corbin and back. "Big plans?" he asked, trying to keep his voice light.

Corbin smiled, all canines. "Filming a special out at the break. Sunrise shoot tomorrow, but if the forecast holds, we'll be getting some night shots too." He picked up the gloves, flexing the leather. "Would you say these run true to size?"

Dave considered. "I'd go down a half, especially if you want grip. But, uh, you might not need the hand warmers. Supposed to be seventy-five at the lake."

Corbin shrugged, unbothered. "Old habit. Camera batteries die fast if your hands go numb. And I run cold." He handed over a credit card—shiny, dark, probably heavier than Dave's whole wallet.

As Dave bagged the gear, Corbin shifted gears, slipping into the tone of someone who wanted to be both friend and confidant. "You get a lot of climbers out here?"

Dave perked up. "Mostly in fall, when the cliffs are dry. Winter's for snowmobiles and ice fishing. Why?"

Corbin's face was the picture of casual curiosity. "Heard a rumor there's a route up the north side of Navajo Lake—supposed to be a shortcut to the ledge. You know it?"

Dave paused, eyebrows up. "Not really a trail, more like a goat path. Steep, loose. Last year, some guys tried to make it to the overlook and ended up calling Search and Rescue."

Corbin grinned wider. "They make it out?"

“Helicopter got them,” Dave said, pride and caution mixing. “They had all the wrong gear. But, uh, don’t take that as a challenge.”

Corbin collected his bag, pausing to slip the RaptorGrip gloves from the package. He flexed them on, admiring the way the leather caught the store light. “Wouldn’t dream of it.” He tossed a wink and moved off, the old-fashioned bell over the door punctuating his exit.

Dave looked after him, then at the register, then at Leo and Cody, who’d been standing off to the side, watching the whole transaction with something like dread.

Leo picked up their own order—a tangle of microspikes, instant coffee, and the pound of hand sanitizer—and offered Dave a look. “You ever see someone shop like that?”

Dave laughed. “He’s got the budget for it. But he was asking about the wildlife, too. Said he was doing a feature on rare birds. Wanted to know where the rangers kept the keys to the gate on the overlook road. Told him that’s above my pay grade.”

Leo grinned, “Good answer.” He paid cash, thanked Dave, and nudged Cody toward the exit.

Outside, the sun had shifted, painting the lot in long, shadowed stripes. The air felt thinner than before, stretched tight by tension. Cody scanned the lot, tracking the movement of Corbin’s crew as they loaded the black SUV.

Corbin was directing two assistants—one with a goatee, the other with a fisherman’s tan. They were organizing the haul with military precision, stowing the micro-cord, checking the crampons, and (most conspicuous of all) lifting a collapsible mesh cage from the trunk. The cage was zipped into a nylon sleeve, but the outline was unmistakable. Leo exhaled slow, running a hand through his hair.

“You see that?” Cody said.

“I do,” Leo replied.

They watched as Corbin gave a final once-over, tightening straps on the cage and tossing the fire starter into the passenger side console. He stopped to review a digital checklist on his phone, then glanced back at the store window—just for a second, just long enough to catch Cody and Leo’s reflection in the glass. His smile, visible even from a distance, looked almost genuine.

Inside, Mitch the manager was restocking the impulse display, but he saw Leo through the window and stepped out for a word. “Hey, Vibe,” he called, keeping his voice low. “That guy you talked to—he’s been in every day this week. Yesterday he asked about off-limits access to the cliffs. Said he was doing a scientific survey, but wouldn’t show any permits. Seemed mighty interested in those protected nesting sites.”

Leo nodded, poker-faced. “He’s not alone. We’ll keep an eye.”

Mitch relaxed, hands on his hips. “Tell your friend the birds are safe. We don’t give out maps to those spots, even if you grease our palms.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Leo said, but he gave a knowing smile.

Cody was already scanning the SUVs, memorizing the plates, the gear, the faces. Every detail. He felt the brass telescope under his jacket, as if it wanted to be used.

When Corbin’s team finally rolled out, it was with a low, synchronized growl—two vehicles, perfectly spaced, heading toward the trailhead. They didn’t hurry, but they didn’t waste time either.

Leo watched them go, then nudged Cody. “Next move?”

“Map the fastest route to the north rim,” Cody said, voice clipped. “If we leave now, we can get ahead of them.”

“You want to bushwhack?” Leo asked, eyebrow raised.

Cody nodded. “If they’re using technical gear, they’ll go for the direct line. We can take the old service trail—no one else knows it’s still passable.”

Leo grinned. “Now you’re talking.”

They piled into Leo’s hatchback, tossing the hand sanitizer and spikes onto the back seat, and pulled out onto the main drag with less urgency than they felt.

The first stop was a roadside turnout, the old duck pond shimmering in the slanting light. Leo pulled over, cut the engine, and turned to Cody. “You sure about this?”

“We don’t have a choice,” Cody said. “If they get to that nest, it’s over.”

They gathered their gear in silence. Cody double-checked the telescope, feeling its weight, the odd warmth that seemed to pulse from within. Leo shouldered the pack, checked the phone for reception, and

then, without any more words, they set off toward the edge of town and the beginning of the trail.

Behind them, the world of shelves and price tags and impulse buys faded, replaced by the hush of the woods and the call of something high and bright in the sky. Ahead, the dirt road curved into shadow, and every step brought them closer to the heart of the mountain, and the thing that waited to see which story would be written next.

The stakes had never felt higher. The village had its gossip and its heroes, but only tonight would show if the birds would have their keepers.

As they moved, neither Cody nor Leo looked back. The only way was forward, and every detail mattered.

eight

the shadow on the ridge

AT THIS HOUR, the Virgin River Rim Trail was all shadow and hush, every step up the switchbacks painting Cody's boots with a little more red dusk and a little more of the day's exhaustion. Leo led the way, unbothered by the elevation, his stride loose and sure even as the world narrowed to a band of sandstone and sky. Behind them, Duck Creek Village was already blurring into silhouette, the last of the sunlight pouring down the far valley and lighting up the tops of the ponderosas like stage props.

Cody tried to focus on the familiar things—the scuff of his boots, the pull of his pack against his shoulders, the steady, if slightly thin, rhythm of his breathing. But his mind kept jumping, playing back the day's discoveries on a loop: the blue tracking dye only visible through the telescope, the precise way the lines intersected at every point of human interference, the odd chill that had dogged them since they'd found the first mark at the pond.

They were near the top of the rise before Leo finally slowed, scanning ahead with a hand raised against the glare. He stopped at a slab of rimrock, not quite flat but plenty for two, and dumped his pack with a little flourish. "Best seat in the house," he said, and swept an arm at the view.

Cody had to admit, it was a spectacular perch. The world fell away in every direction: to the west, the sun was just touching the horizon, a

glowing coin that melted the distant cliffs into orange and indigo. The whole bowl of the valley lay open beneath them, scattered with stands of aspen and pockets of scrub, each tree casting a shadow twice as long as itself. Off to the north, the faint glint of Navajo Lake was visible, and on a clear night, Leo claimed, you could track the lights from the rental cabins all the way out to Duck Creek.

Cody unslung the battered telescope and set it on the bare rock, feeling the faint tremor in his hands. He checked the horizon, then the small cluster of buildings that marked Corbin's team's staging ground. Already, headlights blinked on along the access road, little needles of white threading through the gloom.

Leo plopped down and pulled out a battered can of cold brew, cracking it with a sound that, on this rock, echoed like a gunshot. "You think they'll make their move tonight?" he asked.

Cody shook his head. "They're not amateurs. They'll wait until after full dark. Less foot traffic, less chance of being spotted by some overeager Boy Scout or—" he paused, "—by us."

Leo grinned. "They have no idea we've got home field advantage." He shifted, pulling his own binoculars and a gnarled bag of sunflower seeds from his pack. "You want the best look, set up here." He kicked a flat spot free of gravel, then, after a pause, shrugged off his jacket and bunched it as a makeshift pillow. "Wind'll pick up soon. That telescope's going to need a windbreak."

Cody grunted his thanks, more focused on calibrating the tripod. The old refractor was temperamental, but tonight it seemed to settle in with a minimum of fuss, as if it, too, was waiting for something. He dialed in the focus, making sure the optics were true, then sighted in on Corbin's rental cabin—a flash of blue siding and an overbuilt deck, halfway between faux-chalet and full prepper bunker.

Below, the day finished burning itself out. The wind faded to nothing, and in its place came a silence so deep it pressed at the ears. Even Leo noticed, falling quiet as he worked through the seeds.

Cody checked his watch. "Five minutes until true sunset," he said, almost to himself.

Leo nodded, stretching his legs out and staring straight up. "You ever get the feeling the mountain's holding its breath?" he asked.

Cody hesitated. "Not until recently," he said, then forced himself to add: "Not until you dragged me into your local legend rabbit hole."

Leo snickered. "Just wait until the water babies show up. They don't do subtle."

The sun slid the last inch behind the far ridge, and the world went instantly cold. Shadows pooled up from every hollow, painting the woods below with the kind of darkness you didn't often see outside of a city blackout. Cody felt it first as a chill, then as a pressure, like something was about to break.

He peered through the telescope, checking each of the three marked nest sites in sequence. Nothing moved: no poachers, no birds, not even a stray rabbit. He panned to the rental cabin, expecting to see Corbin pacing or prepping, but the house was dark, blinds pulled tight. The only light came from a parked SUV, its hazard lights blinking a lazy, indifferent yellow.

Cody frowned, then looked up, scanning the sky. The first stars were out, just the barest pricks of light against the blue-black. He traced the line of the ridge, then looked west, expecting the usual play of clouds. Instead, he saw it: a shadow, vast and perfect, cutting across the upper third of the sky. It wasn't a bird, not even a glider—it was too big, and it moved with an uncanny smoothness, as if it was painted on the sky itself. The shape passed directly overhead, blocking the afterglow for a full three seconds. Then it was gone.

Cody blinked, hand frozen on the telescope's focus wheel.

Leo felt it too. He shot to his feet, sunflower seeds tumbling everywhere, and scanned the horizon. "Did you—"

"I saw it," Cody said. "It was... it was enormous."

They both looked up. Nothing. Not even the ghost of a contrail.

Leo ran a hand through his hair, genuinely shaken. "That's not possible. There's no way—"

Cody, regaining some of his composure, said, "Maybe a cloud. Or a flock, in formation. Or—" He stopped, knowing it was a lie even as he tried to make it true.

Leo sat back down, more carefully this time. "My grandpa told me a story once," he said, voice quiet, almost apologetic. "When he was a kid, the old folks said the Golden Talon would show up when something

was out of balance. Like, if too many sheep grazed the plateau, or someone tried to poison the coyotes. They said it only comes when someone's taking what isn't theirs to take."

Cody nodded, not because he believed, but because it sounded right.

"Grandpa saw it once," Leo continued. "Said it was like the whole sky turned inside out, just for a second. He never joked about it, not even when he was drunk."

Cody kept his eyes on the telescope, but his mind was elsewhere. "It's not scientific," he said, softer than he intended. "But whatever it was... I don't think it wanted us."

"No," Leo agreed. "But I think it wants something from the people down there."

They sat in silence for a while, the only sound the dry click of a grasshopper somewhere out of sight. The air felt charged, as if the mountain was waiting to see what they'd do next.

Cody pulled out his field journal, hands steadier than his nerves, and began to write. He logged the time, the location, the observed phenomena. He tried to phrase it in the language of science—shadow anomaly, unidentifiable source, duration measured in seconds—but the words felt hollow.

Leo watched him for a bit, then said, "You think we're in over our heads?"

Cody shrugged. "Probably. But it's not like we can leave."

Leo grinned, the expression a little forced, and lobbed a sunflower seed into the dark. "Then let's make sure we're the last ones standing."

The wind picked up, just a little, and Cody felt the telescope shift under his hands. He rechecked the nest sites, then the cabin. Still no movement. The mountain was holding its breath again.

He closed his journal, the page already curling at the edge from the cold, and looked at Leo. "We should keep watch," he said. "If they're going to make a move, it'll be soon."

Leo nodded, then stretched, his silhouette sharp against the last orange band of the sky. "You ever get tired of being right?"

Cody smiled, the tension breaking. "It's a burden."

They settled in for the night, the rimrock under them holding just

enough warmth to last another hour. Above, the stars multiplied, crisp and cold and impossibly close. Somewhere to the east, a coyote howled, and the sound bounced off the cliffs and came back new.

Cody checked the sky one more time, hoping to see the shadow again, but the sky was empty. He wondered if they would ever know what it meant.

But Leo seemed to, at least a little.

As the last color bled out of the west, Leo leaned back and said, "If we see it again, I want to be ready."

Cody didn't ask what "ready" meant.

He just kept watching.

By the time true night arrived, the rimrock was locked in cold, the kind that bit right through the seams of Leo's flannel and made even the most stubborn adrenaline fade into a low, jittery hum. Above them, the stars multiplied until the whole sky was a web of frost, and the rising moon—big and yellow as a barn lantern—threw shadows sharp enough to trip you if you weren't careful where you set your boots.

They stayed on the outcropping, backs wedged against the sun-warmed stone, trading sips from a shared thermos of black coffee that tasted like burnt toast and hope. Cody had set up his camera, the red indicator light a steady, almost heart-like pulse in the dark. He'd also jury-rigged a little notepad lamp using a piece of glow stick and a hair tie, so he could jot observations without blowing their night vision.

Leo didn't bother with a light. He watched the valley with his bare eyes, using the moonlight to pick out every detail: the way the shadows stacked up at the base of the pines, the thin line of frost crawling down the gullies, the distant, flicker-flash of the rental cabin's porch lamp.

He nudged Cody. "You ever notice how sound changes up here after sunset?"

Cody, eyes on the camera screen, shrugged. "Less thermal convection. The air's denser, so it carries farther. At least that's the theory."

Leo nodded. "That, or the mountain's finally listening." He

grinned to himself, but Cody just grunted, focused on getting a clean shot of the cabin below.

It was almost midnight when the first real movement caught their attention. A set of lights—three, maybe four—wound through the woods, not in a straight line but in a careful, almost military sweep. Leo recognized the pattern instantly. “They’re searching for something. Not just hiking.”

Cody lifted the telescope, bracing his elbow on his knee for stability. Through the brass, the world sharpened: the lead light was Corbin, moving with the same lean-forward intensity he’d had in the store. Behind him, two assistants, each with a pack and a headlamp set to red. The crew moved quiet, no wasted steps, always with one person scanning the trail behind.

Leo muttered, “They’re better at this than I thought.”

Cody didn’t answer. He was tracing their movement, tracking the way they coordinated without ever needing to speak. Then he spotted it: the taller assistant, carrying a duffel bag full of gear, stopped at the base of a dead tree and pulled out a bundle of netting—tangle nets, the kind you used for live capture. The man unspooled it with a flick, checked the lines, then stuffed it back into the bag with a precision that said this wasn’t his first time.

Cody’s throat went dry. “They’re prepping for a grab,” he whispered. “They’ll go after the nest just before dawn. Less chance of the parents being spooked, and the raptors won’t see the nets in time.”

Leo craned to look, but he trusted Cody’s assessment. “Which nest?”

“North face,” Cody replied, not hesitating. “It’s the most accessible from their cabin, and the nestlings are only a week old. They’ll go for volume—eggs and chicks, maybe both.”

A long moment passed, the air thick with dread.

Leo stood, brushing the grit from his pants. “Then we go now.”

Cody looked up. “We’ll lose them if we move too soon. We need to get ahead and set a watch at the north rim.”

Leo shook his head. “If we wait, we might miss the window. Trust me—if these guys are pros, they’ll change tactics on the fly.”

Cody bit his lip, then nodded. He packed away the camera,

wrapped the telescope in its satchel, and pulled his gloves from the pocket of his jacket. Leo already had his pack on, moving with the brisk, unshowy focus of a man who'd hiked these trails since he was old enough to outrun a family argument.

They left the comfort of the rimrock and plunged into the woods, careful to stick to the dry edges of the trail where their boots made less noise. The moon lit their way, but in the shadows the dark was absolute, and more than once Leo had to reach back and steady Cody by the sleeve to keep him from tumbling off a root or into a gully.

After half a mile, they dropped off the main trail and took the old deer path, barely more than a game trail. Here, the world closed in: the pines stitched together overhead, and every step sounded loud as a gunshot. Leo slowed, checked his GPS once, then turned it off to avoid the glow. "Stay close," he whispered. "If you get turned around, just yell."

Cody nodded, his breath frosting in the air.

They made good time, and in less than twenty minutes, they reached the saddle above the north face. From here, the whole bowl of the valley was visible, the rental cabin a pinprick of gold below. Leo crouched, waited for Cody to catch up, then pointed. "That's the drop. The nest is a hundred yards below, just off that rock outcrop."

Cody checked his watch. "Forty-five minutes until they make their move."

Leo grinned, wolfish in the moonlight. "Plenty of time."

They hunkered in, using the curve of the hill as a shield from the wind. Leo set his bag as a backstop, then pulled out a handful of energy chews and passed them to Cody. "You'll need the sugar," he said.

Cody smiled, a thin, tense line, and popped two at once. He watched the lights below, each movement telegraphed by the discipline of Corbin's crew. They didn't bunch up or dawdle; every step was calculated, every stop for water or gear done in near-silence.

Then, as predicted, the team paused at the trail's end. One assistant slipped off to the right, circling wide to flank the nest site. The other unpacked the netting and began to set the lines along a fallen log. Corbin himself did a slow circuit of the area, scanning for threats—predators, human or otherwise.

Cody risked a glance through the telescope. In the brass, the auras burned bright: Corbin's was a violent red, his intent palpable even from two hundred yards away. The assistants pulsed in twin halos of blue and green, a spectrum Cody had never seen on another living thing. And, at the center of it all, the nest shimmered—a gold so pure it seemed to push back at the darkness.

He whispered, "The mountain wants them to fail. I think it's using us to make sure."

Leo didn't respond, but his eyes said he agreed.

They watched, silent as stone, as the crew finished their setup. Then, right on cue, the shadow appeared again—this time as a black arc that cut the moonlight in two, passing so low over the ridge that the tops of the pines bent in its wake.

Neither of them dared to move.

Corbin's crew froze, too. Through the telescope, Cody saw them drop flat to the ground, netting and all. The shadow hung overhead for a full minute, then vanished as if it had never been.

When the men rose, they moved with a new urgency, but their discipline had cracked. They checked their gear twice, then three times, and when Corbin barked an order, the second assistant fumbled the net and dropped it in the dirt. He cursed, the sound audible even at this distance.

Leo leaned in, whispering, "We can spook them. If we're lucky, they'll pack up and run."

Cody's mouth was dry. "What if they don't?"

Leo shrugged, a gesture equal parts bravado and resignation. "Then we buy time for the raptors. That's the job."

They waited, every second stretching until the cold numbed their hands and faces. At last, Corbin's team made their move, crawling toward the ledge where the nest was hidden. Leo nudged Cody. "Go," he said. "We'll intercept from above."

They moved, fast and low, sticking to the shadowed side of the hill. Leo took point, weaving through deadfall with the ease of a local. Cody followed, keeping one hand on the telescope, which had started to buzz against his palm, the etched constellations glowing faintly in the moonlight.

At the last bend, Leo paused. He motioned for Cody to get down, then pointed: below, the crew had set up a ladder against the rock face. The lead assistant was halfway up, net in one hand, headlamp off to avoid detection. Corbin held the base steady, eyes locked on the nest.

Leo whispered, "Now."

Cody took a deep breath, then shouted, "Stop! Put the net down."

The effect was immediate. The assistant on the ladder froze, clinging to the rung. Corbin spun, searching for the source of the voice. For a moment, nobody moved.

Then Leo stepped into the open, arms raised, voice carrying in the clear air. "You're trespassing on a protected wildlife area. Step away from the cliff and keep your hands where I can see them."

The crew hesitated, then did as told. Corbin kept his eyes on Leo, calculating.

Cody joined him, the telescope slung across his shoulder like a badge.

"Who are you?" Corbin demanded.

Leo grinned. "Local enforcement. We know all the tricks. You're done here."

Corbin stared, then smiled, all teeth. "Not even close," he said. But he signaled to his men to stand down.

Leo and Cody advanced, slow and deliberate. As they closed the distance, Cody noticed the crew looked more rattled than angry. Whatever the shadow was, it had shaken them to the core.

Corbin tried one more bluff. "You know there's no law against watching birds."

Leo shot back, "There is if you're collecting them. Or interfering with a federally protected species."

The man's lips thinned. "You can't stop us all," he said.

Cody looked at him, then at the nest, then back. "We can try."

For a while, it was a standoff—neither side willing to give ground. But the cold was relentless, and the tension finally broke when the lead assistant, teeth chattering, said, "Let's go, man. This isn't worth it."

Corbin glared, then nodded. "We'll be back," he promised, then retreated, his crew close behind.

Leo and Cody waited until the last of the lights vanished down the trail. Only then did they climb to the nest, checking for damage.

The eggs were untouched. The parent raptor watched them from a branch above, unblinking and fierce.

Cody let out a breath. "We did it," he said.

Leo smiled, this time with real warmth. "No, man. You did it. The mountain just helped."

They sat in the silence, hands numb, hearts pounding, and watched the dawn creep up on the far side of the valley. The shadow did not return, but its presence lingered—a reminder that sometimes, you had to believe in things you couldn't see, or even explain.

When the first bird call broke the quiet, Cody looked at Leo. "What now?"

Leo shrugged. "We wait for the next move. It's never over."

Cody nodded, settling back to watch the sky change color. The telescope, still humming, rested across his lap like a promise.

Above them, the stars faded, but the memory of the shadow stayed.

And somewhere, far below, Corbin Vaught was already plotting his next approach.

But for now, the falcons were safe.

For now, the mountain had its keepers.

nine

the higgins- crabtree debacle

IT **WAS** the kind of spring morning that made Aunt Sue's Chalet look like a movie set—a log-and-stone slice of Americana tucked just off the Duck Creek highway, picnic tables parked in a square around the fire pit, the aroma of fresh biscuits and burnt coffee locked in perpetual combat with the sharper tang of pine. Today the tables hosted the usual tourists (city families trading their allergies for altitude sickness), a clutch of leather-skinned locals already knee-deep in fishing stories, and, at the far edge nearest the woods, a sprawling outpost of science: a pair of battle-hardened retirees who had converted their outdoor table into what could only be described as a bird-watching command center.

If you wandered too close, you'd have to duck beneath a lattice of fishing rods, parabolic microphones, and at least three different digital recorders, each wired to a portable speaker. A clipboard bristled with red and blue notations. Field guides formed a wall at the edge, their pages open like flags of rival countries. Between the high-tech gear and the low-tech camp thermos sat Mrs. Crabtree, white-haired but not a wisp of her had ever gone unnoticed, and Mr. Higgins, whose hat—festooned with every conceivable Audubon pin and patch—tilted toward Crabtree like a sunflower stubbornly seeking the only available light.

Their argument had entered its second hour, but the matter at hand had not changed: which of them had seen the rare Gyrfalcon at Navajo

Lake first. Higgins brandished his battered analog wristwatch like a sheriff's badge. "6:42 AM, precisely," he barked, chin high, as though the time itself was enough to tip the world on its axis.

Crabtree's lips drew into a straight line, the kind that had made decades of students quake at her stare. "Nonsense," she said, flicking a finger at her notebook, where the page was boxed and underlined. "I logged it at 6:39. Pre-dawn, clear as a bell, confirmed by the lack of wind at the rim and the presence of ice crystals on the adjacent branch. You, as always, arrived late and then constructed a narrative."

Higgins snorted, flipping open his own log with a grand gesture. "You forgot the lag between field sighting and written record. I use a voice memo, instantaneous to the event. My log is the event. You're still stuck in the dark ages, Margaret."

They glared, the tension thick enough to disturb even the wild-haired toddler at the next table over, who briefly stopped attempting to catch a hornet with a plastic spoon.

But the real showpiece on the table was the bird-calling flute: a rough, wooden tube, adorned with faded paint and chipped feathers at the end. Crabtree claimed to have found it at a garage sale in Kanab, "next to an 8-track labeled 'Mating Songs of the Great Plains'." The story never lost its punch, even for Higgins, who always acted as if he was hearing it for the first time.

Now Crabtree held the flute aloft, squinting at the grain as though she could divine the proper call by taste alone. She set her mouth to the end, drew a sharp breath, and unleashed a note that could have cracked glass. It warbled up, then down, and then trembled in a way that made every crow on the edge of the woods take flight at once.

All conversation on the patio stopped. Even the syrupy whine of the coffee grinder inside seemed to pause, as if the machine itself feared drawing attention.

Higgins, undeterred, rolled his shoulders. "You're too nasal," he said, "it's a falcon, not a blue jay." He reached for the flute with the desperate certainty of a man grabbing the last piece of pie at a church potluck. They nearly fumbled it between them, but Higgins' hands were practiced, and he gave the flute a quick, theatrical wipe on his pant leg before putting it to his lips.

His call was lower, more guttural—a sustained whirl that built to a crescendo, then stopped dead. The result was less “majestic raptor” and more “kazoo in an echo chamber.” But, as with so many things, volume counted for something, and his blast set the entire patio’s coffee cups rattling.

From the open kitchen window, one of the waitresses (hair in two long, dark braids, eyes bright as obsidian chips) hollered, “Save it for the birds, Higgins! Some of us have eardrums.”

This drew scattered applause from the regulars. Even Crabtree, never one to let a rival score a point uncontested, allowed herself the barest smile.

For the next ten minutes, the patio operated under a kind of truce, as the two birders took turns blowing the flute and logging every real or imagined call that floated back from the woods. At intervals, they’d shush each other with all the subtlety of a traffic cop, then lean forward as though expecting a personal response from the Gyrfalcon itself.

Across the table, the array of gadgets blinked and burbled. Higgins had set the frequency analyzer to “auto-scan,” and every time it picked up a certain threshold, it belched a metallic squawk that Crabtree claimed “interfered with the purity of the auditory landscape.”

“It’s not my fault you insist on using last-century technology,” Higgins would retort, fingers flying over the touchpad. “If you upgraded, you’d know the birds respond better to the new high-frequency playback.”

“They respond best to patience,” Crabtree replied, never missing a beat. “Something you might acquire, if you last long enough.”

Meanwhile, other patrons tried to enjoy their breakfast. The group of city hikers—two couples in coordinated Patagonia—seemed fascinated, at least at first. The more the birders argued, the more the city-folk watched, heads turning in sync at every escalation. At the next table, a local grandpa with a face like sandpaper poured himself another black coffee, never looking up from his crossword. Only the toddlers seemed immune, trading bites of pancake for the chance to sneak past the grownups and gawk at the birders’ equipment.

The next round with the flute brought a new development. This time, the warble was followed, after a beat, by a faint echo from the

woods. Not the piercing shriek of a raptor, but a lower, burbling sound, almost a laugh. Higgins froze, flute mid-air.

“Did you hear that?” he whispered.

Crabtree nodded, her eyes alight. “Call and response. We have an audience.”

They leaned in, listening hard.

A moment later, it came again—definitely closer. A soft, drawn-out whoop, followed by a staccato chuffing that was... oddly mammalian.

The city hikers tensed, unsure if they were being pranked.

But the grandpa, without looking up, said, “That’s just Bandit. He knows you two are easy marks.”

Crabtree looked affronted. “Bandit?”

The waitress from the kitchen window wiped her hands on her apron as she passed. “Local legend. Yellow-bellied marmot. Smartest thing on this side of the plateau. He’ll take your lunch if you let your guard down, but usually he just mocks tourists.” She winked at the city hikers. “If you want a picture, wait until he gets bored. He’ll pose for a donut.”

This did not amuse Crabtree, who sniffed and returned to her journal.

Higgins, however, saw an opportunity. He lifted his phone, switched to video, and aimed it at the woods. “Let’s document the interspecies communication,” he said, ignoring the way the grandpa was already shaking his head.

He blew another call on the flute, this time softer, with a wavering lilt at the end. The whoop from the trees came immediately, then again, and again, each closer than the last. The city hikers whispered, excitement building.

And then, as if summoned by pure performance, Bandit appeared: a plump, honey-colored marmot, waddling onto the patio with a confidence usually reserved for returning heroes. He paused at the edge, sniffed the air, then locked eyes with Crabtree, who had just set down her container of fresh berries.

There followed a standoff—a tableau of human and rodent, each silently daring the other to make the first move.

It was Crabtree who flinched. She reached for her berries, and in the

blink of an eye, Bandit was under the table and back out, dragging a rogue bagel in his wake.

The city hikers erupted in applause. The waitress laughed so hard she had to set down her tray. Higgins, for his part, never stopped recording.

Only Crabtree looked crestfallen. "I've never been bested by a rodent," she said, but there was a note of admiration in her voice.

"You're not the first," the grandpa said, turning a page on his crossword. "Won't be the last."

As Bandit retreated with his spoils, Higgins turned to Crabtree, triumph in his eyes. "We have a new research subject," he declared.

She glared, then broke into a reluctant grin. "Next week, I'm bringing the squirrel baffles."

"Next week," Higgins agreed, already plotting.

On the patio, the sun edged higher. The coffee refilled, the pancakes vanished, and the village settled back into its normal pattern of friendly rivalry and small, perfect victories. Somewhere in the woods, the real Gyrfalcon—if it existed—watched with detached interest, knowing the best stories were never the ones you expected.

The morning's chaos faded, but the memory of it lingered like the aftertaste of strong coffee—sharp, a little bitter, but somehow exactly right.

If Bandit had a middle name, it would have been Trouble. The marmot (*Marmota flaviventris*, if you wanted to get technical) had a way of appearing exactly when and where he was least expected—preferably where carbohydrates were involved. He'd made a career out of raiding the picnic tables at Aunt Sue's Chalet, but today, fueled by the siren song of the bird-calling flute and the air's clean promise of spring, he was on another level.

Bandit's opening gambit was pure art. He skulked from the brush at the patio's edge, weaving through the ankles of an oblivious tourist family. The youngest child, absorbed in his tablet, never noticed as Bandit circled a trash can, climbed it in two bounds, and launched

himself onto the lattice that shielded the bird-watching table from the main dining area. For a moment, he crouched, all haunch and whisker, sizing up the prey.

Crabtree, deep in a debate over the correct genus for a flycatcher, had not noticed her salad's exposure. Higgins had moved on to testing the parabolic microphone, tilting it this way and that, each movement accompanied by a flurry of notes on his phone.

Bandit went for the cran-walnut salad first, as any marmot with taste would. He gripped the edge of the plastic bowl, yanked it halfway off the table, and plunged his head in, cheeks ballooning to comic effect.

Crabtree let out a shriek that registered on both Higgins's frequency analyzer and every customer on the patio. "Shoo! Get away from my lunch, you little lout!" she yelled, flapping her hands at Bandit, who didn't so much as flinch.

Instead, Bandit fixed her with a blank, rodent stare, mouth full of greens, and doubled down, scooping another pawful of salad into his face.

Higgins, rather than helping, was enraptured. "This is remarkable!" he whispered, toggling the camera to continuous shooting mode. "We're witnessing a true cross-kingdom foraging event. I've only ever read about this in National Geographic."

Crabtree batted at Bandit with a rolled-up napkin, which he deftly avoided by dropping to the bench, circling beneath, and reappearing at the opposite side of the table. He emerged, fur bristling, a piece of grape tomato speared on his incisor. The city hikers caught this detail and one of them snorted so loud she had to cover her face with her napkin.

Bandit's next target was the zip-lock bag of carrot sticks, which he dislodged with a paw flick that would have made a sushi chef jealous. He gnawed open the top, upended it, and scattered carrot coins everywhere. The toddler from the next table shrieked in delight, abandoned his pancake, and dove under the table for Bandit, only to be redirected by his dad, who was doubled over with silent laughter.

Crabtree, realizing defense was futile, climbed onto her bench for height advantage. "Take the fruit, you glutton! At least leave the protein!" But Bandit, true to his calling, ignored the fruit and went for the sealed pack of turkey. This time, his teeth found the weak point in

the wrapper, and he wriggled away with the prize, scuttling beneath the tablecloth like a shark in shallow water.

Higgins, emboldened by the action, lowered himself to table-level, peering through the lattice for a clean shot. “I need more light!” he muttered, hands steady even as Bandit’s tail flicked inches from his nose.

Patrons abandoned all pretense of decorum. The city hikers were now standing, filming with their phones, narrating in a stilted David Attenborough cadence. “And here, we observe the apex rodent in his natural habitat, dominating the table through sheer audacity.”

From the kitchen window, the waitress leaned out, phone raised, already betting with the busboy on which course Bandit would take next. The grandpa with the crossword didn’t look up, but he cracked a smile wide enough to show every one of his gold teeth.

Higgins, spotting his moment, dropped to his knees and shimmied under the bench, angling for the perfect angle. “There!” he exulted, as Bandit paused in a shaft of sunlight, cheeks full, whiskers poised, eyes bright with victory.

Crabtree, momentarily distracted by Higgins’s maneuver, didn’t see Bandit double back for dessert—her sealed container of lemon bars, which she had hidden beneath a stack of napkins. Bandit’s sense of smell was legendary. He uprooted the napkins, nosed open the container, and in a feat of marmot engineering, managed to lever the entire slab of lemon bar out in one piece.

Now, the entire patio was in open applause. The city hikers cheered, the local grandpa gave a slow, reverent clap, and the toddler crawled beneath a row of benches in hot pursuit. Bandit, emboldened, hopped onto the table itself and sat, regal, clutching his prize.

Crabtree finally abandoned all dignity and climbed onto her chair. “I give up! You win, you fat bandit!” Her voice carried over the patio, drawing every eye. Bandit, as if in acknowledgment, took a slow, deliberate bite, locking eyes with Crabtree as powdered sugar dusted his snout.

Higgins, on his back, snapped a close-up, then cackled. “Outstanding! I’ve never seen such determination outside of a badger documentary.”

Bandit, sated and a little smug, surveyed the crowd. He sniffed, then gave a small, high-pitched bark—his trademark victory cry—before scuttling off the table and vanishing beneath the deck.

The aftermath was spectacular. Crabtree's salad was decimated, the carrot bag empty, the lemon bars gone. Higgins, covered in pine needles and with grass stains on his elbows, stood up and offered Crabtree a hand down from her chair. "You know," he said, "in all my years of birding, I have never had a mammal steal the show like that."

Crabtree, winded but smiling, shook her head. "Let's never speak of this again."

The city hikers disagreed, already uploading video to every conceivable social media site. The waitress took a bow, then came around to clear the debris. "On the house," she said, tucking a replacement lemon bar in front of Crabtree, who accepted it with mock suspicion.

The grandpa finally looked up from his crossword. "That marmot's gonna run this town someday," he declared.

Even the toddler, crawling out from under the bench, gave Bandit's exit a round of applause.

As the patio returned to normal, Crabtree straightened her vest, squared her shoulders, and reset her bird journal. "At least he didn't touch the field guides," she said.

Higgins grinned. "Next time, we bring the squirrel baffles."

Crabtree agreed, already plotting.

Inside, the staff retold the story a dozen times before the hour was out. By noon, Bandit's feat was legend, the city hikers had gone viral, and every kid in the village wanted to see the marmot that bested the birders.

Above it all, the sun shone bright. Bandit, full and content, dozed in a patch of dappled light, dreaming of next week's menu.

And in the world of Duck Creek Village, where the line between wildlife and civilization was only ever one picnic table thick, that was exactly as it should be.

By dinner, the buzz of Bandit's conquest had woven itself into the fabric of Duck Creek. Cody and Leo arrived at Aunt Sue's Chalet to find the patio still alive with the kind of low-level chaos that only came from a community united by spectacle. The air was cool but dry, and the sunset slanted gold across the tables, catching on Coke bottles, plates of chicken-fried steak, and the bright stripes of ketchup on paper-wrapped burgers.

The front hostess stand was half-guarded by one of the waitresses, hair pulled up in a pink scrunchie and smile already halfway to a smirk. She greeted Leo with a practiced, "You want the regular, or are you finally ready to try a salad?" before even glancing at Cody.

"Salad's for people who want to live forever," Leo deadpanned. "We're here to enjoy life."

"Could have fooled me, Mr. Granola Bars for Lunch," she shot back. Then, noticing Cody's uncertain hover, she offered her hand. "You must be the scientist. Heard about you from the bakery crowd. Welcome to the show."

Cody shook, his grip careful, eyes darting over the patio's organized chaos. "Is it always like this?" he asked.

She rolled her eyes. "Only when our two favorite bird-watchers are in season. Speaking of, if you want the full Duck Creek experience, I recommend the seat with the best view of the action." She nodded toward the edge, where Crabtree and Higgins were in the midst of animated debrief, salad bowl in triage and a replacement lemon bar already half-gone.

Cody and Leo took the table nearest, the picnic bench still warm from the afternoon sun. A ketchup stain and a forgotten straw wrapper marked the previous occupants' retreat, but Leo swept these aside with a practiced hand and stretched his legs.

As they settled, the waitress reappeared, menus in hand. "Anything to drink?" she asked.

"Coffee for me, Coke for my friend," Leo said.

"Coke, please," Cody confirmed, scanning the menu with the reverence he usually reserved for field guides.

She was gone and back with drinks before either of them had finished reading the first page.

Cody lowered his voice, "Is it safe to eat outside? Should we expect... company?"

Leo's eyes twinkled. "I see you've been briefed on Bandit."

"I witnessed an entire table's worth of food get repurposed," Cody replied. "It was... impressive."

"Bandit's a fixture," Leo explained. "He's probably the most photographed mammal on this half of the plateau. Last summer, someone put up a plaque: 'Bandit's Buffet—Dedicated to our local food redistribution specialist.'"

"Do the owners mind?"

"They claim he's good for business. More people come out here to see him than to hike," Leo said. "Besides, he prefers organic. Never seen him touch a hot dog."

Cody smiled, then leaned in. "Speaking of regulars—does it look like Higgins and Crabtree are plotting something? They've been whispering and checking that phone like they're coordinating a heist."

Leo didn't even turn to look. "They're planning the next bird stake-out. Or maybe revenge on Bandit. Last time he stole Crabtree's sandwich, she threatened to bring a live trap."

Their conversation was interrupted by the waitress's return. "Ready to order?"

Leo pointed at the menu, not even glancing. "Chicken-fried. Double mash, no slaw."

Cody hesitated, then said, "I'll have the soup, please. And the side of bread?"

She nodded, jotted a few notes, then said, "You might want to keep the bread basket close. Bandit's gotten braver since the lemon bar incident." Then she was off, laughing at her own warning.

Cody, feeling more at ease, let himself people-watch. The city hikers from earlier were inside now, reviewing their Bandit footage on a phone and laughing every few seconds. The grandpa had retired to the far end of the porch, where he nursed a beer and took small, satisfied bites from a slab of peach pie. At the birders' table, Crabtree and Higgins had stopped arguing and now seemed to be collaborating over a laptop, the screen's glow flickering off both faces.

But it wasn't the birders that drew Cody's attention next—it was

the corner table, the one shaded by a fake potted pine and a battered patio umbrella. There, alone, sat Corbin Vaught.

He looked different without the camera crew or the retail bravado. The slick jacket was gone, replaced by a dark fleece that made him blend into the shadows. His table was bare except for a glass of water and a single, spiral-bound notebook. A topo map, so detailed Cody recognized the grid from half a patio away, was spread open, held down at the corners by two rocks.

What startled Cody was not the map but Corbin's focus: his finger traced the cliff faces, then paused, then traced again. Every so often, he'd pick up a small, black voice recorder, whisper into it, and set it down, his gaze never leaving the page.

Leo noticed the direction of Cody's stare. "Don't worry," he whispered. "He's been here all evening. Second time around, too. Staff said he showed up early, asked for the same table."

"Has he talked to anyone?"

"Only to order. He tipped big, though. The girls think he's a lost movie star or something."

Cody watched Corbin for a while longer. The man never once looked up. Even when the toddler from before wandered too close, Corbin just reached over, gently guided the kid away, and resumed his tracing.

The food arrived—plates hot, portions generous. Leo dug in immediately, but Cody kept glancing at Corbin.

Finally, curiosity won out. "He's mapping the nest sites," Cody said quietly.

Leo followed Cody's gaze. "You sure?"

"He's got the old USGS topo and the new Forest Service overlay. You can see the marker dots—see, right at the base of the east rim? That's the spot where we saw the first blue dye."

Leo set down his fork, brow furrowed. "You think he's going for another try tonight?"

"He's not a field guy," Cody said. "He's the planner. The next move will come from one of his crew."

"Should we warn Crabtree and Higgins?" Leo asked, a rare note of worry in his voice.

Cody considered. “Maybe. But we’ll need proof if we want them to believe it.”

“Or,” Leo said, leaning back, “we just beat him to the punch.”

They finished their meal, paying in cash (as was the custom for anything you wanted to keep quiet in Duck Creek), and sat for a few extra minutes, letting the hum of the restaurant fill the air between them.

At the birders’ table, Higgins laughed so hard at something on the laptop that he nearly spilled coffee everywhere. Crabtree rolled her eyes, but even she looked amused. Bandit, sated from his earlier exploits, was nowhere in sight, but the legend of his victory lingered in the stories being told at every table.

Only Corbin seemed immune. He closed his notebook, folded the map with surgical precision, and left a tip that was, to Cody’s mind, almost suspiciously generous. Then he stood, gave a brief nod toward the kitchen, and vanished into the parking lot.

Cody and Leo watched him go. Then, in silent agreement, they stood and followed—keeping a careful, two-minute gap.

Outside, the evening had gone blue. The air smelled of woodsmoke and the faint mineral tinge of mountain runoff. Corbin’s SUV idled at the curb, the back hatch already loaded with gear.

Cody and Leo hung back, pretending to study a tourist brochure at the rack near the front door. They waited until Corbin had driven off toward the old service road—then Leo nudged Cody. “Let’s go. If we catch him in the act, even Higgins will have to believe us.”

Cody grinned, adrenaline already kicking in. “You ever get tired of being right?”

Leo flashed a crooked smile. “I live for it.”

They left the warm light of the Chalet behind and strode into the crisp night, the memory of chicken-fried and peach pie fueling them. The world beyond the patio was quiet, the kind of quiet that hinted at secrets waiting just past the edge of the woods.

And as the stars came out, and the cold settled in, Cody and Leo moved with purpose—ready for whatever the mountain would throw at them next.

ten

subterranean clues

THE SERVICE ROAD ended in a spit of crushed cinders and snow-melt mud, flanked on one side by wind-stunted spruce and on the other by the dark, rippling mouth of the cave. Even in the car, with the heater running, Cody felt the temperature shift—an invisible wall between the thin, moonlit cold of the forest and the deeper, old-cold that bled out of Mammoth Cave like a warning.

He shouldered his pack and checked the telescope case a third time before stepping out. Leo was already at the edge of the lot, headlamp on, haloing his breath with a chemical blue. “You see the sign?” Leo asked, pointing with his chin.

The Forest Service placard had two warnings: DANGER - LOOSE ROCK and PROTECTED HABITAT: NO CAMPING. Someone had scrawled a third, in Sharpie, below the official print: enter and be changed.

Cody shivered, not from the cold.

The approach to the entrance was a chute of basalt fragments and icy slush, the slope steeper than it looked on the map. Leo took the lead, boots finding purchase on what little traction existed. Cody followed, the world narrowed to the crunch of cinders and the high, tinny whine of wind funneled by stone.

At the mouth of the cave, everything changed. The wind cut off, replaced by a silence so absolute Cody imagined he could hear the heat

draining from his own skin. The darkness was total—a black so dense it pressed on the eyes. Only the beam of Leo's headlamp, and the faint spill from Cody's own, gave dimension to the chaos of the entry chamber.

"Best to go low," Leo said, crouching as he moved in. "Ceiling drops fast."

Cody followed, ducking as the stone pressed down. The entry passage was rough, craggy, the marks of volcanic birth still crisp in every angle and seam. Their boots scraped and thudded; with each step, water beaded on the ceiling and dropped, sharp and cold, onto the backs of their necks.

The first hundred feet went fast, then the tube opened up—vaulted overhead, wide enough for three to walk abreast. Here, the floor was glassy with old flows, the walls lined with curtains of stone that shimmered in the headlamps. In the glow, a thin mist drifted, blurring the boundary between floor and emptiness.

Leo paused, sweeping his light in a slow arc. "Blue diamonds," he said, pointing at the reflective trail markers bolted into the wall. "Forest Service put them in five years ago, after some yahoos got lost for a week."

"How far does the trail go?" Cody asked.

"Depends who you ask," Leo said. "The official line is a mile. Locals say you can follow the old lava tubes for eight, maybe more. If you know where to look."

Cody unslung the telescope, feeling the case vibrate faintly, the way it did when something was close.

He glanced at Leo, who nodded. "You want to try it?"

Cody knelt, bracing the tripod on a flat patch of basalt. He popped the latches, unfolded the battered brass, and set his eye to the lens. Instantly, the darkness became an aquarium of color: not only the hard beam of Leo's headlamp, but an undercurrent of blue, soft and fluid, tracing the air just above the floor. The dye, or whatever it was, had pooled here—bolder and brighter than outside. It ran in bands along the main tunnel, then split at the first fork, one branch threading deep into the black, the other looping up toward a craggy chimney near the ceiling.

He turned the focus, and the blue resolved into layers, each representing a passage of time. The oldest, a faint stain, ran straight and shallow. The freshest, neon and pulsing, hugged the stone and vanished into the deep fork.

Cody pulled back, heart hammering. "It's here," he whispered. "It's a lot stronger. Like it's alive."

Leo knelt beside him. "Show me."

Cody offered the lens. Leo peered in, then grinned—a slow, wide, delighted thing. "That's insane," he said. "It's like the cave has veins."

They moved forward, following the blue as it wormed through the stone. The air grew colder, damper, the walls wet enough to run a finger through the trickle. At every junction, the blue trail was a guide: sometimes pooling at a dead end, more often sluicing deeper, into the oldest, least stable parts of the cave.

Cody felt his hands numb on the scope, but he kept moving. In the lens, the blue shimmered brighter the further they went, as if the cave itself wanted them to hurry. He barely noticed the water dripping from the ceiling, or the scrape of his boots, or even the gnats that swarmed in the lamplight. The only thing that mattered was the line, and where it led.

Leo, for his part, seemed in his element. He called out trail features—"duck here," "watch the ledge," "next chamber's a drop"—each time saving Cody from a bruised skull or a mud bath. Even so, they made quick progress, the cave swallowing their voices and their light.

At a sharp turn, the tunnel narrowed, forcing them single-file. Here, the blue line ran up the wall, then vanished into a gap barely wider than a basketball. Leo squeezed through first, grunting with the effort, then reached back to pull Cody and the scope after.

Inside, the world changed again. The air was warmer, almost humid, and the walls were glossy with condensation. Their lights bounced off the black stone, doubling and tripling the shadows. At the edge of the glow, something fluttered—bats, dozens of them, wings shimmering as they clung to the ceiling.

Leo pointed, whispering. "Spotted bats. They don't usually roost here. Must be the season."

Cody nodded, more interested in the way the blue dye pooled in

this chamber. It had gathered at the far wall, where it formed a perfect oval—no, a doorway. Through the lens, the blue was so intense it hurt to look at.

He stepped forward, only to stop short as his boot sank into mud. The ground here was soft, churned by something bigger than bats. Leo saw it too, knelt to inspect the prints.

“Fresh,” he said. “Human. Maybe two sets, one heavier than the other.” He sniffed, then looked up at Cody. “They went in. But not out.”

Cody shined his headlamp into the blue-lit doorway. The tunnel beyond was lower, tighter, and the air that spilled from it was cold enough to make his teeth ache. He hesitated, then looked at Leo.

“You sure about this?” Cody asked.

Leo grinned, but it was nervous now. “Not even a little,” he said. “But the blue wants us to see what’s at the end.”

They ducked and crawled into the new passage, the scope packed to protect it from bumps. The tunnel zigged and zagged, every turn amplifying the sense of being watched. Sometimes the air would shift, carrying the echo of their own breath back at them, distorted and doubled. Other times, a rill of water would gurgle underfoot, vanishing into cracks too small for fingers.

After what felt like an hour—maybe it was only twenty minutes—they came to a halt. The passage dead-ended at a wall of stone, but in the center was a perfect circle, cut into the basalt, ringed with a halo of blue that throbbed with every heartbeat.

Cody set up the telescope, hands shaking. He focused on the circle.

Inside, through the glass, the blue swirled, coiling around a shadow at the center. It was not a rock, or a trick of light. It was something real: an object, maybe a box, maybe a case. And next to it, a handprint, burned in negative, outlined by the blue. The handprint was bigger than Cody’s, bigger than Leo’s—almost double.

He pulled away, breath gone.

Leo saw the look, then reached for the circle. His fingers hovered, then pressed the edge. The stone moved, not a lot, but enough.

“It’s a plug,” Leo said. “There’s something behind it.”

Cody nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

Together, they braced their hands and pushed. The plug shifted, then rocked free, revealing a hollow behind. The smell was damp, ancient. Leo reached in first, hand brushing the object.

He pulled it out: a case, battered and old, banded in leather, and on the top, a logo—Vane Visuals, the same as on Corbin's SUV.

Cody's skin prickled. He took the case, set it down, and unlatched it. Inside, swaddled in foam and plastic, was a tangle of metal and glass: a custom camera rig, built for low light, with a nest of sensors and what looked like a sample kit—vials, forceps, even syringes.

He looked at Leo, who just whistled.

"They're not filming," Leo said. "They're harvesting."

Cody nodded, the truth sinking in.

He looked back into the hollow. Beside the case was a second object: a notebook, bound in waterproof cloth. He opened it, fingers numb.

The writing was rushed but precise. Notes on capture times, locations, numbers. Entries about "phenotype anomalies," "success rates," "collection protocol." And at the end, a single line: final sample tomorrow night. Cascade Falls.

Cody closed the book, packed it into his jacket.

Leo was quiet, but his eyes were furious. "They're taking the birds. For real."

Cody nodded. "And they're not alone."

They packed up, retreating from the hollow. The blue line was dimmer now, as if the cave was sated. The bats overhead fluttered, then stilled.

As they squeezed back through the gap, Cody paused. In the telescope, he caught a glimpse—just a flicker—of something gold, trailing the blue. Not a dye, not a stain, but a shimmer, alive and watching.

He shuddered, then pushed on.

Back in the wide chamber, Leo stopped him. "You okay?"

Cody nodded, shaky. "We have to warn the others."

Leo looked at the ceiling, the bats, the stone. Then he smiled, thin but real.

"Let's go," he said.

They made their way out, the blue line fading with every step. By

the time they reached the entrance, the stars were pale against the east, and the sky was just starting to remember the day.

Cody looked back once, into the mouth of the cave.

He thought, for a second, he saw a shadow move. But maybe it was just the mountain, closing its eyes.

He turned, and together, they walked into the chill morning, their boots leaving fresh prints on the cinders behind.

The air was different now. Above ground, the world was still a cold hush, but inside Mammoth Cave the walls were close and full of stories, every inch of stone remembering every hand, boot, and breath that had passed.

They retraced their steps, Leo in front, Cody scanning every surface with the Guide's Eye. Even without the telescope, he could see signs: a scuff in the sediment, a fresh splatter of chalky mud, the faintest slip of lint or feather snagged in a crack. But through the old brass lens, the past screamed in color and clarity.

At a junction just past the big bat chamber, Cody paused, sweeping the scope along the curve of the wall. Instead of the usual play of minerals, he saw handprints—dozens, some overlapping, others distinct. They glowed a bright, icy blue in the lens, fingerprints blazing, the streaks of oil and sweat somehow rendered into visible energy.

"Here," Cody said, holding up the scope for Leo.

Leo bent close, eyebrows lifting as he peered through. "That's... creepy," he said. "Like the cave's keeping receipts."

Cody knelt, eyes tracing the pattern. "They're all right-handed. Each print is spaced like they were carrying something heavy on the left." He reached for the rock, then stopped short, finger hovering in the cold air. "See the way the thumb is always higher than the rest? They were careful not to drop whatever it was."

"Cases," Leo guessed. "Those black ones—like the one in the plug."

"More than one trip," Cody said. He kept moving the scope. Every few feet, a new constellation of handprints appeared, always moving forward, never back.

Leo followed, boot treads muffled on the damp grit. "They stashed the heavy stuff down here, then doubled back for more. That's a lot of work, even for a pro crew."

At the next turn, the blue trail split—a branch veering into what looked like a collapse. Leo tried the passage, but it was tight, and even his lean frame could barely wedge through. "Dead end," he called, voice echoing. "But there's airflow. If you want to keep the birds alive, you'd want that."

Cody followed, squeezing into the darkness. On the other side, the chamber was small but tall—an air pocket that must have formed when the lava cooled fast. Leo's light caught on a scatter of white foam, the kind used to pack electronics, and next to it, two empty crates.

Cody's heart lurched. He moved closer, sweeping the scope.

The crates were stamped VANE VISUALS, each fitted with a control panel and a port for a power cell. Inside, the padding was slick with condensation. There were air filters, mesh grates for ventilation, and a lining of soft, sterilized cloth.

"They're custom," Cody said. "Probably cost more than my entire grant."

Leo poked at the insulation, then reached for a tag bolted to the inside. "They run their own serial numbers," he said. "If you know anyone with access to a supplier, you could trace these."

Cody snapped photos, documenting every angle. "There's residue," he said, pointing to a smear of yellow on the foam. "Yolk, maybe. Or droppings."

Leo's jaw tightened. "They already made a pickup. Left the empty ones as trash."

He turned, studying the floor. "Check this," he said, kneeling to brush away a thin crust of silt. Underneath, the print was perfect: Vibram sole, size 12, with a distinct gouge in the heel.

Leo grinned, but it was all teeth. "That's Corbin's tread. He was bragging about those boots at the store—Italian, triple-stitched, not even on the market yet."

Cody knelt, lining his gloved palm up next to the print. "He must have come down here himself," he said. "This isn't a subcontractor job."

Leo straightened. “Which means he wanted to be sure. Or maybe—
“

He stopped, listening.

A drip echoed, rhythmic, like a distant metronome.

For a second, neither spoke.

Then Leo said, “You see anything else?”

Cody scanned the walls again, this time looking for smaller prints. There, just above the crates, a child’s hand—no, not a child, but a very small, slender adult—had pressed into the wet stone, leaving behind a blue memory. The touch was different, not careful but hurried, maybe even scared.

“They brought someone else,” Cody whispered. “She didn’t want to be here.”

Leo nodded. “Could be one of the assistants. Or a captive.”

They checked the rest of the chamber, finding only a few more scraps: a length of climbing tape, a zip tie, a sliver of aluminum foil. But to Cody, the biggest evidence was the absence—the way the blue lines always pointed outward, never back. Whatever was taken from here, it was never meant to return.

They backed out into the main passage. Leo led the way, silent, then stopped at a familiar log. “You ever notice how it’s always the same?” he said. “Every time someone does something bad, they think they can hide it. But the world remembers.”

Cody looked at him, really looked, and saw how the cave light hollowed Leo’s eyes but didn’t diminish the fire there. “I used to think memory was just for the living,” Cody said. “But now—“

He glanced at the wall, where the blue handprints still glowed.

“Now I think it’s in the land, too.”

Leo clapped him on the shoulder, then started the climb back up.

At the entrance, morning had fully broken, sunlight catching on the frost-rimed trees. Cody let the brightness soak into his eyes, then pulled out the case and the notebook.

“We take this to Erica,” he said. “And after that—Cascade Falls.”

Leo grinned, a little more himself again. “We catch the bastards in the act.”

They walked back to the car, boots scraping the crusty cinder. Above them, the sky was empty of birds.

But in the shadows, every print and touch and memory waited, perfectly preserved, until someone was ready to see it.

The deeper they pressed into the offshoot tunnel, the more it smelled like something alive: chemical, sharp, and clinging to the skin. The blue handprints on the walls were fewer now, replaced by a different kind of signature—scrapes in the rock, boot-scuffs in the muck, and here and there the glint of something metallic left behind.

Leo went first, testing each step, while Cody watched the ceiling for anything that might move. At the end of a low, winding curve, the passage opened into a chamber bigger than a two-car garage. The walls sweated moisture, and the floor was stained with oil and other fluids, some still tacky to the touch.

A table—just a folding camp model, but braced with duct tape and extra legs—stood in the middle, ringed with crates and soft cases. On its surface, Cody saw a scatter of syringes, some capped, some not. There were vials, each labeled in a tight, almost obsessive handwriting: *F. peregrinus*, 4/28/24, and so on. A leather-bound field notebook, worn and half-soaked, was wedged under a roll of blue nitrile gloves.

Cody went straight for the notebook, thumbed through the pages with gentle, gloved hands. The writing was dense, packed with abbreviations and diagrams of avian skeletons. There were lists of sample numbers, GPS coordinates, times of collection, weather notes. And then, in the last ten pages, a change in tone—a sense of excitement, or maybe panic. Golden morph confirmed. Sample viable. Next extraction crucial.

He flipped to the final entry, which had been pressed so hard the words left a dent in the page: Tomorrow night—Cascade Falls—full team, plus reinforcement. Nets required for rapid retrieval. Birds highly aggressive.

He snapped photos of each page with his phone, hand steady despite his racing pulse.

Leo, meanwhile, prowled the chamber. He picked up a mesh bag and shook it; inside were small bones, each tagged with a colored zip tie.

"They're not just taking eggs," he muttered. "They're harvesting whole nests. Cleaning up after themselves, but not enough."

Cody dropped the notebook into his jacket. "We have to get out before they come back."

Leo nodded, moving fast now. He found a side passage, low and narrow, and gestured for Cody to follow.

They'd barely crawled twenty feet when the echo of voices bounced off the walls, closer than either of them liked. Leo flattened himself against the cold basalt, tugging Cody down beside him. The flashlight beams sliced through the darkness, flickering as the men carrying them argued about a missed turn and the weight of a new case.

Then: Corbin's voice, unmistakable even in a whisper. "If this works, it's the last one. No loose ends. All data gets packed and shipped before sunrise."

The two assistants grumbled, but did as told, their footsteps and the scrape of their boots so clear Cody felt it in his jaw.

Pressed into the shadows, Leo and Cody held their breath. The trio passed, close enough that Cody caught the scent of aftershave and synthetic fiber, and the low mutter of Corbin's pep talk. "Remember, this isn't about the grant money. It's the footage, the proof. No one's seen raptors like these. We make the grab at Cascade, then we disappear."

A pause as one of the assistants bumped his case against the wall. "What if those locals show up again?"

Corbin: "If they do, we use the same plan as at the pond. Distraction, then extraction. If you see the kid with the telescope, let me know immediately. He's not as dumb as he looks."

They moved out of range, the tunnel swallowing their voices. Leo counted off a slow ten, then nodded at Cody to move.

They slipped through the crack and doubled back, staying low until they reached the main channel. Only then did they allow themselves to breathe deep. Cody's pulse hammered in his throat, but his mind spun with a hundred new questions.

He turned to Leo, voice low. "Tomorrow night, Cascade Falls. We know the time, and the target."

Leo wiped a line of sweat from his brow, then grinned, sharp and dangerous. "Now we just need to get there first."

Cody tucked the phone and the notebook into his jacket. "And warn Erica. She'll want to see the proof."

They moved out of the cave as fast as safety allowed, the blue handprints fading behind them. In the predawn chill, the world felt raw and new. Cody shivered, not from the cold, but from the magnitude of what they'd just witnessed.

At the car, Leo looked back once, then clapped Cody on the back. "We're gonna win this one," he said. "The mountain's on our side."

Cody nodded, then pulled the battered telescope from its case. He set it on the hood, aimed it at the first blush of sunrise, and watched as the world sharpened into focus.

Somewhere in the trees, a falcon screamed. It was not a sound of fear, but of warning.

They listened, then turned toward town, knowing they had one more night to save what mattered most.

eleven

the artifact's limit

THE LAVA BEDS east of Navajo Lake were a field of black glass and broken teeth. By noon, the sun cooked every inch of exposed basalt, and the air above the stones shimmered with a wobble that made even the hard angles of rock look like mirages. The only mercy was a thin wind, hot and raw, that swept down off the ridgeline and pushed the scent of scorched earth and pine pitch into the back of your throat.

Cody and Leo moved in slow, deliberate steps across the crust, boots crunching and sliding on loose slag. Every few yards, the ground would drop away into a hidden crevice or hollow, some so deep the bottom disappeared in shadow. It wasn't a proper trail, just a line of cairns and the ghost of a track left by people who didn't mind a little blood on their shins.

Cody's face was already sunburnt despite the 100 SPF Leo had insisted on. Sweat soaked his shirt in uneven bands, and the bandana under his hat was doing a poor job keeping the salt out of his eyes. He stopped at the edge of a jagged rift, took a knee on a slanted slab, and pulled the telescope from its padded holster. The brass was hot to the touch.

"I thought the point was to avoid the lava beds," Leo called from a dozen feet ahead. His voice was cheerful, but he was standing on a suspiciously stable-looking slab, arms crossed, and his own face looked almost as relaxed as it had at the bakery that morning.

"Shortest distance, straight line," Cody said. "You said it yourself—if we cut across, we'll get to the overlook before sunset." He unscrewed the lens cap, held the scope up, and tried to find a path on the far side of the rift. In the hard light, the view should have been clear, but the inside of the lens was black as if someone had shuttered a door.

He turned the focus knob, fidgeted with the diopter, even cupped a hand over the end in case a stray glare was playing tricks. Nothing. He tried again, this time aiming at Leo, hoping to see the shimmer of his heat signature or the ghost-lights that sometimes danced in the periphery. Still nothing.

Cody frowned, wiped his palms on his pants, and tried again. The glass stayed dark, except for a single, thin band of blue at the very bottom—like the lens was holding its breath.

"You okay up there?" Leo called, stepping over a jumble of clinkers with an easy, dancer's balance.

"Yeah," Cody lied. "Scope's acting weird." He snapped it shut, already angry at himself for needing to use it in the first place. He stood, feeling the fatigue in his thighs, and started to edge around the rift. Each step sent a tinkle of loose gravel down into the gap, where it vanished with no sound of hitting bottom.

When he caught up, Leo was perched on a boulder, squinting into the distance. He shaded his eyes with one hand, the other fidgeting with a strip of duct tape he'd wrapped around his hiking pole. "There's a game trail about fifty yards that way," Leo said, nodding upslope. "Might link back to the ridge if we don't mind a scramble."

Cody grunted, annoyed at himself for not seeing it. "Can you mark it? I want to try the scope again."

Leo shrugged, peeled off a strip of neon flagging tape, and knotted it to a dead branch. "For the record," Leo said, voice low but not unkind, "you don't have to use the telescope every ten minutes. Sometimes it's just rock and sun and your own two eyes."

Cody bit back a retort. He knew Leo was right, but the brass scope was the only thing that made him feel even a little in control out here. He popped it open again, braced his elbows on his knees, and tried to center the path in the field of view.

The lens was still black. This time, though, when he stared harder,

he thought he saw a flicker—a pinprick of gold, like a distant headlamp, pulsing once and then gone.

He blinked, checked the glass again. Still nothing.

Cody slammed the scope shut, harder than he meant to, and the click echoed across the rocks.

Leo whistled, impressed. “Easy there, cowboy. Those antiques don’t grow on trees.”

Cody breathed out slow, counted to three, then forced himself to smile. “Just hate being lost,” he said.

Leo nodded. “You’re not lost. You’re just... recalibrating.” He jumped off the boulder and landed lightly, then started up the slope. “C’mon. Let’s beat the worst of the sun.”

They picked their way through the maze, Leo in front, Cody close behind. The world was white-hot at the edges and jet-black in every crack and pocket. Sweat dried on their skin before it could roll down, and the salt left a map of their effort on their shirts.

At a bottleneck between two basalt outcrops, Cody tried the scope again. Same result—nothing but blackness. But as he lowered it, he caught a glimpse of Leo moving ahead, and for a second, the sun cut around his outline like a halo.

Cody stared after him, then packed the scope away for good.

At the next rise, Leo turned and offered his hand. Cody took it, and Leo hoisted him up with a strength that didn’t show in his frame. For a moment, they stood at the top, looking out at the next patch of lava and, beyond that, a sweep of forest that fell away to blue and silver lake.

“You ever get tired of being right?” Cody asked, breathless but grinning.

Leo grinned back, eyes crinkling at the corners. “You ever get tired of learning the hard way?”

They started down the far side, pace matched, not in a hurry but not wasting time. The lava beds stretched behind them, empty and hot, and the air between the two of them felt a little lighter, like the first crack in a windshield before the whole thing lets go.

As they walked, Cody didn’t touch the scope again, but he didn’t need it. Leo never got more than a few yards ahead, and every time

Cody faltered, Leo was there with a hand or a shortcut or a bad joke that made the next step easier.

By the time they reached the forest fringe, the sun was still high, but the worst of the lava was behind them.

Cody dusted his palms, looked back at the black expanse, and felt a sting of pride. "We made good time," he said.

Leo checked his watch, then nodded. "Told you. Sometimes you just have to trust the person in front."

Cody smiled, this time for real, and followed him into the shade.

They walked for a while under the cover of the trees, the black crust giving way to a skin of red dirt and dry pine needles. The air was cooler here, the ground patchy with shadow, and the only sound was the crunch of their boots and the distant call of a flicker somewhere up the hill.

Cody didn't say much. He just kept his eyes on the uneven trail, replaying every failed attempt at the telescope. He knew Leo had noticed. It was impossible not to notice—the way Cody kept slipping the battered scope out of its pouch, fiddling with it, pretending to adjust the focus or clear a smudge, only to close it again with a sigh and try to hide the movement in the swing of his arms.

After the third or fourth time, Cody stopped outright. He found a flat rock under a stunted juniper, sat down hard, and just stared at the brass, feeling every ounce of its weight. He turned the lens toward a patch of sunlight—nothing but blackness. He aimed at the sky, the trees, even at his own scuffed boots. Nothing. It was like the thing was mocking him.

Leo doubled back and stood over him, hands loose at his sides, waiting.

Cody spoke without looking up. "I don't get it. It worked before. It worked better than anything I've ever used."

"Maybe it's tired," Leo said, voice gentle. "You ever think of that?"

Cody almost laughed, but it came out as a breath. "It's not tired. It's

just—” He stopped, then ran a thumb over the scratched body. “It only works when I’m not being a jackass.”

Leo blinked, then sat down beside him. “What do you mean?”

Cody considered how to put it, how to explain the feeling. “When I was in the cave, it was about finding the way out. Helping us. Helping the birds. Now, it’s just...” He looked up, met Leo’s eyes for the first time. “Now I’m trying to use it to show off. To prove I’m smarter, or braver, or something. And it knows.”

Leo nodded. He plucked a piece of bark from the rock, rolled it between his fingers. “That’s how the mountain works,” he said, after a bit. “You can’t take anything from it by force. You have to ask.”

Cody snorted. “I don’t know if it’s the mountain or just the laws of optics, but either way, I’m an idiot.”

“You’re not,” Leo said, and it didn’t sound like a platitude. “You just don’t like not knowing. I’m the same, only I’ve learned to fake it.”

Cody managed a smile, then turned the scope over in his hands. The metal felt different now—still heavy, but less like a burden. He set it down on the rock, stared out at the sunlight dripping through the branches, and let his shoulders relax.

After a minute, he said, “I think I get it now. It’s not about the answer. It’s about seeing what needs to be seen.”

Leo grinned. “You’re learning.”

They sat in companionable silence for a while, the tension gone. When Cody stood, Leo offered his hand, and Cody took it, feeling the strength and warmth there. Together, they set off down the trail, no longer worried about the time or the path or who was in the lead.

For the rest of the day, Cody didn’t touch the scope again. He didn’t need to.

Leo’s idea of a shortcut was more a memory than a map. From the moment they left the edge of the forest, he walked with a different kind of confidence, as though every blackened hump and hollow in the lava field was a friend he hadn’t seen in a while. He’d stop, tap a toe against a

loose chunk of basalt, and mutter, “Still here,” or “Knew you wouldn’t move,” and then hop over it with a dancer’s grace.

Cody trailed close behind, doing his best to match Leo’s steps. It wasn’t just showmanship; there really were paths through the chaos, invisible unless you’d spent years letting the landscape sink into your bones. At one gap, Leo pointed out a fallen log that had charred to a cinder but was still stable. “Makes a bridge if you keep your center low,” he said. Cody, not trusting the surface, went anyway, and was surprised when it held.

They crossed a patch where the crust looked solid but crumbled into powder at the first touch. Leo paused and told him, “It’s an old lava tube. They collapse sometimes, but if you look for the air holes, you can walk the ribs.” He showed Cody the subtle hollows that meant weakness and the ridges that meant strength. They moved faster after that, even as the sun edged lower and every shadow seemed to double in size.

As they walked, Leo talked. He told stories about his grandpa—the man who’d taught him every trick on the mountain. “The old guy could find north by sniffing the wind,” Leo said. “He’d make me stand on top of a rock, close my eyes, and spin until I couldn’t stand straight. Then he’d ask me which way was home. Got it wrong every time, until I didn’t.”

Cody listened, sometimes asking questions, sometimes just taking in the rhythm of Leo’s voice. It was nothing like the lectures back at the university, where facts were lined up like dominoes, waiting for a finger to knock them down. This was knowledge with edges—stories about getting lost and spending the night in a rain-soaked hollow, or the time Leo had to guide a party of tourists out of a thunderstorm by following the echoes off the cliffs.

“What about you?” Leo asked at one point, vaulting a waist-high boulder. “Ever get stuck somewhere with nothing but your own brain to save you?”

Cody thought about it. “Closest I ever came was a week in the stacks at the school library. The cleaning staff lost track of me. I survived on vending machine snacks and guilt.”

Leo laughed so hard he had to stop and catch his breath. “See, you get it. Survival is survival. Sometimes you need calories, sometimes you

need a way out.” He pointed to the next ridge, where the black crust gave way to a sweep of pale stone. “That’s our next landmark. If we can make it before the light goes, we’re golden.”

The final stretch was the hardest—up a narrow spine of basalt, with loose shards on either side and nothing but air below. Leo led the way, moving with quick, precise steps, and every so often he’d turn and offer a hand or point out a safer hold. Cody wasn’t as sure-footed, but he learned fast. When he stumbled, Leo caught his wrist and steadied him without a word.

At the crest, they found a natural amphitheater—a scoop in the rock, wide open to the west. The wind picked up, carrying the scent of lake water and sage, and in the distance, the sun painted the rim of Navajo Lake in sharp, impossible blue.

Leo stood at the edge and looked out, eyes distant. “My grandpa used to say, ‘If you want to know a place, you have to bleed in it.’ I always thought he meant it literally, and I guess sometimes he did. But now I think he just meant you have to give it something of yourself before it gives back.”

Cody didn’t know what to say, so he just nodded.

Leo glanced back at him, then grinned. “Book learning has its place,” he said. “But some things you can only learn by living them.”

Cody smiled, and this time there was no trace of the old tension. “So what now?” he asked.

Leo scanned the horizon, then pointed to a stand of trees down the slope. “Corbin’s crew will be watching the main road, not this side. If we cut down through the trees, we can get to the overlook and see what they’re up to without being seen ourselves.”

Cody checked his GPS—dead, battery fried by the sun. He shrugged, trusting Leo’s sense of direction.

They started down, slower now, the world going soft at the edges as dusk settled in. The air cooled fast, and every breath tasted clean and sharp. They moved without talking, each step a negotiation with gravity and stone, until they reached the first of the pines.

At the edge of the trees, Cody looked back at the lava beds, now a single bruise-colored scar across the mountain. He realized he’d never have crossed them alone, not in a hundred tries. He said so.

Leo just smiled and clapped him on the back. "That's the trick. You don't have to do everything alone."

They ducked into the trees, the world going green and gold around them, and for the first time in days, Cody felt like they were actually getting somewhere.

The last half-mile was all uphill, but the view was worth it. From the crest, Navajo Lake curved away in a perfect half-moon, the water so blue it looked faked, like a postcard turned up to full saturation. The far shore was a smear of black, the lava beds running down into the shallows, and above it all, the sky went from washed-out yellow to a deepening indigo as evening crept in.

Leo set his pack down and stretched, then flopped on his back in the grass, breathing hard. Cody stayed upright, knees bent, eyes locked on the spread below. He pulled out his binoculars and scanned the shoreline, letting his field sense take over.

"See anything?" Leo asked, shielding his eyes.

Cody nodded, adjusting the dial. "Corbin's team. They're not even hiding. Two of them, maybe three, working the flats by the old pumice cut." He tracked the movement, watching as the men staked out lengths of fishing line and set up tripods at even intervals. One carried a bundle of what looked like hardware store netting; the other, a boxy black case and a portable cooler.

"They're setting up for a catch," Cody muttered. "But it's not birds they're after—not just birds."

Leo sat up, curiosity lighting his face. "What else, then?"

Cody focused in, letting the glass do the work. Corbin himself paced the shore, back and forth, checking each site with the same hyper-focus he'd shown at the hardware store. His gestures were sharp, almost military. Every so often, he'd pause to confer with the assistants, then move on. It was all meticulous, controlled.

Then Cody saw the first cage. It was low to the ground, camouflaged in canvas and brush, but the live bait inside was obvious—a plump, speckled pigeon, banded at the ankle. Next to the cage, a tangle of high-test netting sat coiled and ready.

"They're not targeting adults," Cody said, voice tight. "They want something bigger. Maybe fledglings. Maybe the whole nest."

Leo asked for the binoculars. Cody handed them over, and Leo pressed them to his eyes, breath catching. "Damn," he said. "That's some serious gear. I've trapped for banding before, but nothing like that."

He scanned left, then right, then back. "Those tripods—they're not cameras. They're some kind of sensor rig."

"Motion sensors," Cody guessed. "Trigger nets. And look at that—" He pointed, and Leo followed the line of sight. At the far end of the shore, Corbin was unpacking a camera that looked like it belonged on a space probe. A huge lens, filters stacked at the end like poker chips, cables running to a screen he'd set up under a tarp.

Leo whistled low. "Why the overkill? If he's just after bird footage, a GoPro would do."

Cody shrugged, but his mind was moving fast. "Maybe he wants to capture something the regular cameras can't. Different spectrum, maybe UV. Or—" He stopped, thinking of the lens, and the way it had gone black in the lava beds.

"What if he's after the myth?" Cody said. "The old stories. The one your grandpa told you about."

Leo went quiet. He adjusted the binoculars, then handed them back, his face serious. "Could be. But if he is, he's not just collecting evidence. He's hunting it."

They watched in silence as Corbin's crew finished their setup. The sun slid lower, the water going from blue to slate, and the only sound was the wind, pushing up the slope and flapping the tarps below.

Cody pulled out his journal, jotting quick notes and sketches—trap placement, timings, the way Corbin always kept his eyes moving, scanning the horizon as though expecting a rival.

"I don't like this," Cody said, after a while. "We're close, but if we get caught, they'll shut it all down. And if they get the bird first—" He didn't finish.

Leo nodded. "We need to get down there. Maybe set up a distraction, or get eyes on the actual trap before they trip it."

Cody weighed the options, then zipped the journal shut. "Let's go around the lake. Hug the tree line. We can get within a hundred yards without being seen, if we move after dark."

Leo agreed. He checked his pack, tightened the straps, and looked over at Cody with something like pride. "You sure you're up for it?" he asked, just to tease.

Cody grinned, genuine. "If you're leading, I'll follow."

They slipped down the far side of the ridge, moving quiet as ghosts, every footstep measured. The world below faded into blue shadow, but they kept their eyes on the lights—Corbin's camp, the occasional glint from a lens or a reflective band on a cage.

When they reached the cover of the first stand of willows, they stopped. Leo pointed. "There," he whispered. "We'll wait until they bed down. Then we move in."

Cody nodded, pulse ticking in his ears.

They crouched side by side, hidden in the brush, watching the shore. Time slowed, the cold seeping in, but neither of them minded. They were ready.

As the last light faded and the stars came out, Cody thought of all the ways this could go wrong, and all the ways it could go right. For once, he was content not to know.

Next to him, Leo pulled his own binoculars, checked the sites again, and whispered, "This is the fun part."

Cody smiled in the dark. "Yeah. It is."

And together, they watched and waited, the lake a mirror and the night full of promise.

twelve

the golden talon sightings

BY THE TIME Cody and Leo rolled into the parking lot at Strawberry Point, the media circus had already pitched its tents. Satellite trucks lined the dusty turnout, their dish antennas angled like robotic sunflowers at the sky. The clatter of camera shutters and the thwack of folding chairs provided a rhythm section for the morning, while the overlook itself—usually a hush-and-awe affair—bubbled with the energy of a county fair.

If you ignored the birders' telescopes and the news crews with their puffy mics, it could have been mistaken for a pop-up craft market. Vendors had staked out every patch of level ground, hawking "Official Golden Talon" t-shirts in canary yellow and midnight black, the logo a vaguely bird-shaped streak with a halo of sparkles. Someone with a laminator had cranked out "I Saw The Golden Talon" badges by the dozen, and a few enterprising souls offered little bags of kettle corn branded "Feathered Crunch." The air smelled of caramel, sweat, and, just faintly, sage.

Cody scanned the scrum from the passenger seat, hand hovering near the battered brass telescope. "Do we really have to do this?"

Leo looked over the tops of his sunglasses and grinned. "If you want to understand the soul of the mountain, you've got to see what the mountain attracts. Besides—" he jerked his chin at the far edge of the

lot, where a parade of pastel-colored windbreakers herded toward the overlook—"it's the best show in town."

Cody set his jaw and opened the door. The moment his shoes hit the ground, the world assaulted him: the slap of cold wind, the up-close drone of excited chatter, and a dozen conversations whirring in a tangled mess of English, German, and at least three flavors of Utah drawl.

The overlook, a finger of rock jutting high above the valley, had been transformed into a festival grandstand. Lawn chairs and foam pads marked early-bird territory; camera tripods sprouted like weeds in every direction. Kids in felted bird hats zipped between groups, trading rumors and collecting sightings as though each new embellishment would conjure the Golden Talon itself. Dogs, mostly of the short-legged variety, bristled with bandanas and regarded the scene with tolerant bemusement.

At the very tip of the rock, occupying the two best sightlines, sat Mr. Higgins and Mrs. Crabtree, each with their own portable command center. Higgins had claimed the southern edge, his chair anchored with sandbags and a military-grade tripod groaning under the weight of a spotting scope that could probably resolve license plates in Nevada. Crabtree, undaunted, had set up directly opposite, her own tripod-mounted binoculars rimmed with a custom sunshade fashioned from a blue plastic picnic plate. Between them was a thirty-foot demilitarized zone of flat stone, populated by a revolving gallery of admirers, skeptics, and gossips.

Cody and Leo cut a path along the periphery, using the vendors' tables as partial cover. Leo snagged a sample of the kettle corn ("Quality control," he insisted) and started popping pieces into his mouth with practiced, one-handed ease.

As they passed, a pair of college-aged hikers debated the legitimacy of the previous day's "mass sighting."

"Bro, it was huge," said one, arms outstretched as if to embrace the entire escarpment. "Wingspan was, like, wider than my car. And that shimmer—did you see the shimmer?"

His friend nodded, voice skeptical but admiring. "You said it was golden. Like, real gold, or just 'it caught the sun' gold?"

“Gold,” the first said, slow and reverent. “Like a sunrise, but all at once, and it banked straight up the ridge, right over the guy with the weird hat.”

Leo gave Cody a nudge. “That would be you, next time you wear that bucket thing.”

Cody ignored the jab and instead scanned for familiar faces. He spotted the local news crew from Cedar City—KUTV, if he remembered the logo right—setting up shop on a slab of rock. The anchor, in a down vest and full makeup, rehearsed her lines by pacing a tight spiral, her producer trailing and holding a ring light like an Olympic torch. Even the local Forest Service had joined the fray, represented by a pair of rangers keeping a wary eye on the cliff edge and the growing pile of trash bags near the outhouses.

They reached the main event just in time for Higgins and Crabtree’s latest flare-up. Higgins was, as always, the first to escalate.

“Margaret, you can’t possibly get a clear shot from that angle. The sun’s behind you; you’ll get nothing but glare. My setup is aligned for minimum refraction and maximum field depth.”

Crabtree didn’t look up from her notepad. “You might have a five-thousand-dollar scope, but you’ve got the people skills of a bullfrog in rut. The birds hate loud voices, Richard. I can’t hear the wind over your bragging.”

Higgins, determined, set his jaw. “I’ve logged more than three hundred verified raptor sightings from this perch. I know what I’m about.”

Crabtree capped her pen and finally gave him a look. “Three hundred, and still zero friends.” The nearest knot of bystanders snickered, and a kid in a penguin hoodie gave Crabtree a high-five.

Leo leaned in, whispering to Cody. “She’s been workshoping that comeback since last summer. You should have seen the ice storm. Nearly lost a lens cap, but the shade she threw could have blocked out the sun.”

Cody, a little distracted by the spectacle, watched as Mrs. Crabtree expertly redirected the crowd: “Let’s give the birds some space, people. They don’t come if you crowd the ledge.” She flashed a look at Leo, then at Cody, and the expression was unmistakable—solidarity, but also a warning.

They shuffled in, found a gap at the edge, and settled in. Leo took the bench, Cody knelt on the rock, and both started the ritual of setting up optics. Leo's was a battered pair of Nikon binoculars with a duct-taped right eyecup. Cody unpacked the telescope with deliberate care, the brass gleaming in the slanting morning light.

A few feet away, a teenager in a Golden Talon t-shirt (already stained with ketchup) pointed at Cody's gear and stage-whispered, "Bet he's a pro. Maybe he's with the government."

Leo grinned and turned to the kid. "He's with NASA," he said. "They sent him to check if the Golden Talon is really a drone."

The kid's eyes widened. "No way!"

Cody shot Leo a look, but the damage was done: within a minute, three more children had orbited closer, whispering and occasionally darting glances at the telescope as if it might blink.

He tried to focus on the task. The cliff face directly below Strawberry Point was classic peregrine territory—sheer drop, scattered ledges, a few wind-blasted trees clawing at the vertical. But on a morning like this, with a hundred eyes scanning the horizon, the odds of seeing anything that wasn't already famous were slim. Still, Cody methodically swept the visible ridge lines, cataloging the smaller raptors (a sharp-shinned, two kestrels, a turkey vulture banking low) and logging every potential movement.

The real drama was above the observation deck.

A pair of red-tailed hawks performed lazy circles overhead, occasionally mobbed by smaller birds or, once, a lone raven that seemed to enjoy the harassment. Twice, a glimmer of gold flickered on the distant tree-line—always gone before Cody could lock on, but enough to send the crowd into a fresh chorus of gasps.

Each time, the crowd surged forward as one, arms up, phones at the ready. Cody ducked under the movement and kept his attention on the slopes, watching for anything out of place.

"You see anything?" Leo murmured, not bothering to hide the amusement in his voice.

"Nothing that justifies a t-shirt," Cody replied. "And if the Golden Talon is real, it's not going to fly into a wall of selfies."

Leo popped another piece of kettle corn. "Maybe it likes attention."

The next surge of excitement came from the news anchor, who pointed skyward and screamed, "There! Top of the ridge!" The crowd turned as one. Dozens of camera flashes erupted, turning the overlook into a disco. Cody tracked the direction with his scope, steadied his breathing, and caught the source: a hawk, yes, but not gold—not even unusual, except that it happened to angle its wings just right to catch the sunrise, igniting a flare of color that fooled the crowd for three seconds flat.

He lowered the scope, his expression growing tight. "They're never going to see the real thing if they keep jumping at shadows."

Leo watched the crowd's energy—how each burst of hope led to a low groan, and how nobody seemed to mind the cycle. "Doesn't matter," he said, almost kindly. "What they want is the story. The myth. You and me, we want the data. Everybody else is here to be part of a thing."

Cody's eyes swept the ridge again. This time, his focus lingered not on the sky, but on the gaps between clusters of people—especially behind the tents, the food vendors, the edges of the parking lot. He frowned.

"See something?" Leo asked.

"Not yet," Cody said. But he kept watching.

At the far end of the overlook, Mrs. Crabtree had wrangled a fresh audience—this one composed of three grandmas, a pre-teen in a cowboy hat, and a man whose mustache could have qualified as a protected species.

Crabtree handed out pocket field guides and explained the difference between a hawk and a falcon, using a pair of finger puppets for illustration. The crowd, rapt, soaked in every word. Higgins, meanwhile, had doubled down on his technological advantage, snapping photos with a camera the size of a lunchbox and logging each "sighting" into a battered laptop perched on his knee.

The tension between the two camps was palpable, but it never boiled over. It was more like a chess game, each move calculated for maximum effect on the gallery of spectators.

Cody adjusted his scope, this time ignoring the sky and instead targeting the dense clumps of evergreens on the opposite rim. He

tracked a flash of movement—then another, lower down. It was quick, subtle, and gone before he could refocus. But he knew the difference between a bird in flight and a human moving with caution.

He nudged Leo. “Look, below the service road. South side. Someone’s moving through the trees, away from the crowd.”

Leo squinted, using his naked eye. “Poachers?”

“Maybe,” Cody said. “Or maybe just someone who doesn’t want to be seen.”

Leo considered, then tapped a message into his phone: “Watch the tree line. South overlook.” He sent it to Erica and to the Forest Service rangers.

Crabtree’s voice, sharp as a bell, rang out across the overlook. “Remember, folks, the best sightings come to those who wait. The birds know when you’re watching.”

Cody smiled, despite the nerves, and tried to settle in. The wind had picked up, bringing with it the scent of distant rain. The crowd didn’t care—they were in it for the long haul, as long as the popcorn and excitement held out.

For the next hour, every few minutes brought a new “sighting.” Sometimes it was a bald eagle, once a lost Canada goose, but mostly it was hope, refracted and amplified by a hundred pairs of eyes. Every child left convinced they’d seen the Golden Talon. Every grandma added the event to their scrapbook of small-town miracles.

But Cody and Leo kept their eyes on the gaps, the edges, the places where myth and reality were most likely to collide.

And as the sun climbed higher, turning the overlook into a glare-blasted theater, Cody watched the edges of the scene with growing unease. There were too many people. Too many variables. The very circus meant to celebrate the birds had turned the place into a perfect smokescreen.

At his side, Leo finished the last of the kettle corn and crumpled the bag. “You want to get a t-shirt before they sell out?” he joked.

Cody, not looking away from the cliff, shook his head. “No. But we need to make a move, before the real show starts.”

He pointed with his chin, subtle. “There. South tree line. I think the next act’s about to begin.”

Leo nodded, his own grin gone. "Let's go."

They packed up their optics and slipped through the crowd, leaving the noise and the legends behind. Only Crabtree noticed them go—her eyes sharp, always— and she gave a tiny, secret salute.

The last thing Cody saw as they left the overlook was a child, arms spread wide, running in slow motion across the rock, his shadow cast by the sun like a pair of wings.

He envied the certainty.

Then he followed Leo, and together they vanished into the edges, where the best stories always started.

Leo liked to joke that you could tell everything about a person by the way they used a trail. The poachers, as it turned out, were not the kind to leave tracks, but they were very, very good at using other people's.

They'd barely slipped the gravity of the main overlook when Cody signaled for a halt behind a row of battered Porta-Johns. From here, the commotion faded to a dull roar, and the real landscape reasserted itself: a stand of wind-bent spruce, a tangle of deadfall, and a latticework of old game trails switchbacking down the exposed rock. No one gave it much attention, but Cody kept a running scan of the human traffic—every bird-nerd, every vendor, every camera guy pretending to need a bathroom break. Patterns emerged.

"Look," Cody said, voice low, not bothering to mask his tension. He handed Leo the battered field glasses and pointed, almost but not quite at a trio of men loitering by a "Golden Talon Souvenirs" cart.

To the untrained eye, they could have been regulars. But Cody's scope had caught them earlier: their shoes too clean, their movements just a fraction off from the controlled chaos around them. They waited until a new burst of excitement—another "sighting" called from the overlook—pulled everyone's gaze up, then one man peeled off, ducked behind the kettle corn tent, and reappeared three trees down, setting something at the base of a snag.

"Gear drop," Leo muttered, watching as the man pressed a small black puck into the mulch and covered it with a pat of moss.

"And again," Cody said, as a second man mirrored the move farther down, using a pair of bright orange cones as cover. He carried a hiking staff, but at the tip was a plastic clamshell: the kind you used to stash camera traps, or, if you believed the stories, remote-triggered net guns.

Leo passed the glasses back and nodded, already moving to the next patch of shadow. "They're not even worried. All they need is one good chance and the crowd does the rest."

Cody was watching the first man again, who now strolled the periphery with a phone to his ear. "They want to catch the real Golden Talon and sell it before anyone can even prove it exists."

"And if they can't?" Leo asked, knowing the answer.

"They'll settle for whatever they can get. Raptor, eggs, anything rare enough to move on the black market." Cody's face twisted. "And all these people are the perfect cover."

They slid along the fringe, moving past a pair of old-timers in matching Army surplus jackets. Leo flashed them a "how's it going," and the men grunted approval, not realizing they'd just been clocked and cleared.

The overlook's edge thinned out to a narrow trail, and here the noise and color of the main event faded. The men in question had set up at three points—one near the trailhead, one halfway down, and a third at the old fire ring just before the rock face cut back toward the nesting ledge.

"They're setting a perimeter," Leo said, and Cody nodded grimly.

A burst of voices and a thumping sound—like someone had dropped a cooler full of ice—brought both to a stop. Cody ducked behind a boulder, then peered around to see a camera crew wrestling a tripod into position, the reporter in a blue windbreaker orchestrating her team with the certainty of someone who had only ever seen cliffs on TV.

"Should have brought sunglasses," Leo whispered. "We stand out."

Cody gestured to the trees. "We'll circle around and get a line from above. They want to keep eyes on the nest, but not spook it."

They moved, silent as the hawks themselves, and caught up to the midpoint watcher just as he crouched to set his own camera trap. Cody's Guide's Eye caught every detail: the model, the make, the fact

that this was not a regular motion-activated rig but a custom hack, probably wired for live feed and remote triggering. The man wore gloves, left no prints, and didn't so much as twitch when a child screamed from the overlook. He worked fast and melted back into the crowd without so much as a backward glance.

Leo caught Cody's sleeve. "We need to get one of those units before they check in."

Cody nodded, the plan already building. "We'll wait for the next sighting, then double back. I'll go for the one by the fire ring. You watch the other two."

Before they could move, a new voice cut through the air, buoyant and professional:

"Hi! Sorry, can I get a word with you two?"

They turned to see the news anchor from earlier, windbreaker emblazoned with the KUTV logo, microphone pointed at their chins. Her cameraman, a kid with a skateboard helmet and the beginnings of a mustache, stood ready.

"Do you have a moment for a quick interview?" the anchor beamed, not waiting for an answer.

Leo's improv instincts kicked in before Cody's nerves could take over. "Sure! Always happy to talk birds." He put a friendly arm around Cody's shoulders, steering him so that the nest sites were out of frame.

The anchor didn't miss a beat. "There are rumors a professional birdwatching team is in town—are you the experts everyone's talking about?"

Leo flashed a grin. "Depends who you ask. Cody here is the scientist. I'm the emotional support."

Cody felt his face heat, but the woman's gaze was already locked on him. "Have you seen the Golden Talon yourself?"

He blinked. "No confirmed sighting, but there's plenty of evidence a rare morph is hunting these ridges. If you want the real story, ask the local birders." He pointed with his chin back toward the overlook, where Mrs. Crabtree now held court for a group of selfie-happy tourists.

The anchor nodded, sensing a story. "And do you think it's safe for people to be out here, with so many birds of prey circling?"

Now it was Cody's turn. "Birds don't care about crowds unless someone gets too close to a nest. If everyone stays on the trail and respects the space, it's perfectly safe—for the people and the birds." He put a little steel in his voice. "But it's important not to disturb the local wildlife. That goes for everyone."

The anchor's eyes sparkled, scenting the subtext. "You mean poachers?"

Leo jumped in, smile unwavering. "Oh, I'm sure no one would dare try anything with so many eyes around. Besides, the Forest Service runs regular patrols. If someone did try, they'd have to be really clever."

The anchor, satisfied, signed off with, "Thank you, gentlemen. If you do spot anything out of the ordinary, let us know. We'll be watching!" She moved off, cameraman in tow.

The moment they were gone, Cody exhaled. "That was too close."

Leo squeezed his shoulder. "It bought us three minutes, minimum. Let's go."

The next ten minutes were a scramble of moves. Cody doubled back to the fire ring and, under the cover of a loud birthday singalong from the parking lot, pried the camera trap from its hide with a multi-tool. It was hot to the touch, already transmitting. He disabled the power, then tucked it in his jacket.

Leo, on his end, intercepted the other two devices with more subtlety: a "clumsy" trip and spill by the tent sent one flying into the duff, and a "helpful" child redirected the orange-cone trap to a very annoyed dog owner, who promptly chucked it off the trail.

By the time they regrouped, the men who'd set the traps were scouring the area, but doing so with the studied nonchalance of people who knew they couldn't make a scene.

"They'll try again," Cody said, breathless, as he showed Leo the rig. "But now they're blind on two sides."

Leo's mouth set in a line. "You sure there's not another team?"

"There could be more," Cody admitted. "But Corbin likes to be close to the action."

A fresh blast of commotion from the overlook signaled a new "sighting." The men used it as a chance to regroup, melting into the

surge of bodies at the main event. For a second, the sky really did shimmer—a gold flash against the sun, gone in an instant.

Cody checked his phone. The time ticked down; they were running out of window.

“We need to find the next target,” Leo said. “They can’t get to the cliff from here—too many people. But if they’re serious, they’ll move to the fallback.”

“Where’s that?” Cody asked, already plotting the terrain in his head.

Leo’s smile was thin and sure. “There’s a ledge below the picnic area. Old climbers’ route. If I were a poacher, that’s where I’d wait for nightfall.”

Cody nodded. “We’ll get there first.”

They moved off, leaving the battered camera trap hidden in the hollow of a log, and as they did, a pair of young kids ran past, arms outstretched, shrieking, “Golden Talon! I saw it! It’s real!” Leo watched them go, then caught Cody’s eye.

“Every story has a shadow,” he said, low. “Let’s make sure we’re in the right one.”

Together, they slipped into the trees, two ghosts in a crowd of legends, knowing that the only way to win was to stay invisible until the right moment came.

The informational booth wasn’t much to look at. Two plastic tables braced end-to-end, topped with a motley spread of legend pamphlets, a battered “Ask Me About the Golden Talon” placard, and a shallow tray of hand-carved wooden trinkets shaped like claws and wings. The booth’s back edge was anchored by a Coleman water cooler and a mesh trash bag, and the whole affair was shaded by a tarp strung between the back of a Subaru and a borrowed pop-up tent. Compared to the carnival chaos at the overlook, the air here was meditative: the thin drift of cedar incense barely out-matching the sweetness of kettle corn, and the booth’s attendant conducting business in a voice so soft you had to lean in to catch it.

She was a little older than Leo, with sun-scorched cheeks and black

hair gathered in a braid, the tail flicked with a crow feather. She wore a faded Utah Jazz sweatshirt under a volunteer vest, and her name tag, handwritten and partially obscured by a string of puka beads, read: JESS.

Leo and Cody arrived side by side, both running on the kind of adrenaline that made everything feel ten percent sharper. Leo hung back, surveying the flow of people—families, fanny packs, more news crews—and the way the crowd pinched and swelled around every rumor of a new sighting.

Jess greeted them with a quick, knowing smile. “If you’re looking for the birds, you’re late. They got wise at sunrise.”

Cody half smiled, but didn’t answer. He glanced at the handouts, which bore headlines like “THE LEGEND OF THE GOLDEN TALON” and “PAIUTE FOLKLORE—A GUIDE TO LOCAL RAPTORS.” The latter was illustrated with a colored pencil drawing that reminded him of a Lisa Frank folder, if Lisa Frank had been into predation.

Jess poured two cups from the water cooler and set them on the table, inviting them to take. “You look like you’ve been running a marathon.”

Leo accepted, careful not to spill. “Just ducking the news crews.”

She snorted. “You and everybody else. We’ve had people coming in from Provo and Vegas all morning. Someone started a rumor that it’s a prophecy, and now I’m explaining to every TV station why the world will probably not end this week.”

Cody gave her a look. “Is there anywhere up here that isn’t crawling with people?”

Jess hesitated, then shook her head. “Not unless you count the base of the point, down the cliff. But even the local climbers are chasing the legend today. You need something?”

Cody looked over his shoulder, then leaned in. “We’re here about the nest sites. There’s a team—” he dropped his voice, “—private, not local, using the Golden Talon story as cover for an illegal harvest. They’re setting camera traps and worse. If they get a live bird—” He let the rest hang.

Jess’s eyes sharpened. “How sure are you?”

"We found the traps," Leo said. "Disabled three already. They'll move to their fallback, south ledge, after sundown. But as long as the crowds are up here, the falcons won't hunt, and the poachers can get as close as they want."

Jess rolled her lip in thought, then nodded. "I can get you an ID on their crew. Give me the description, and I'll call the Service." She waited as Leo did just that, listing clothes, faces, even shoe brands. She scribbled it all on the inside cover of a legend flyer.

Cody's mind was running ahead. "It's not enough. Even if the rangers show up, they can't move the crowds. It's not illegal to watch birds, and the more people up top, the easier it is for the poachers to slip in."

Jess met his gaze. "What's your play, then?"

He hesitated, glancing at Leo. "If we could clear the overlook—move everyone to a different site, even for an hour, the falcons would return to the nest. With a parent on the ledge, the poachers would never risk a grab."

Leo grinned, picking up on the idea. "All we need is a distraction."

Jess snorted again. "It would take a miracle. Or a really good story."

Cody looked down at the display, at the printouts and talon-shaped keychains, and then at the plume of smoke from the incense. His eyes widened.

"What if we fake it?" he said. "A bigger event, one the whole crowd can't miss. Something so good they'll abandon their posts."

Jess was already shaking her head, but then she paused. "Like... a Golden Talon Festival? We don't even have a pavilion—wait, the Community Center just down the road is open for the season. Some of the volunteers are already setting up for the Saturday pancake breakfast. If we got the word out, promised a Golden Talon special...?"

Leo was way ahead. "We stage a sighting, right at dusk, and say the experts will present a talk at the festival. We get the news crews to follow, and everyone else will chase the party."

Jess's eyes glimmered. "It's so dumb it could work."

Cody didn't waste another second. "Do you have a printer?"

She jerked a thumb at the trunk of the Subaru. "Color ink, but not a lot of paper."

Leo grabbed the nearest notepad and started sketching a festival logo: a stylized, cartoony raptor, eyes wide, wings up in an expression halfway between hungry and inviting. Jess pulled open the hatch, found the battery pack, and within minutes the tiny printer was churning out flyers—each one slightly off-kilter, but the headline “GOLDEN TALON FESTIVAL—TONIGHT AT 6” was impossible to miss.

Jess handed the first flyer to Cody. He read it, then looked at her. “You just made up an entire event in five minutes.”

She grinned. “Better than watching a hundred strangers scare off every animal in the forest. Besides, if there’s a pancake breakfast, I’m already in.”

Cody found a sharpie and started writing bullet points on the flyers: “LIVE RAPTOR PRESENTATION!” “RAFFLE PRIZES!” “EXPERT TALKS AND SIGHTINGS!” Leo took over, scribbling “ONE NIGHT ONLY” and “FOOD, MUSIC, FAMILY FRIENDLY!” across the bottom. Jess, not to be outdone, dug up a small megaphone and began rehearsing her best carny bark.

Within fifteen minutes, the plan was moving. Jess handed off flyers to every kid in a bird hat, every passing grandma, and every vendor with a folding table. Cody and Leo worked the news crews, feeding them the scoop about an “exclusive community event” and encouraging them to bring their cameras—“for the full story, you have to see the festival.” They played the angle hard, and it worked: even the anchor who’d grilled them earlier was soon waving a flyer and promising her viewers “an inside look at the real Golden Talon phenomenon.”

At first, the crowd at the overlook didn’t budge. But as the rumor spread—festival, presentation, a promise of seeing something never-before-captured—the edges began to fray. Families with restless kids were the first to bail. Then the vendors, eager for a new captive audience. Even the competitive birders, Crabtree and Higgins, hesitated as their audiences drifted off, finally agreeing (after a loud argument) to meet at the Community Pavilion for the “panel discussion.”

It was not a perfect evacuation. A few diehards lingered, eyes glued to the sky, but by 5:30 the overlook was more empty than not. The only ones left were the ones who’d always been there: the wild birds, the

wind, and—at the moment—a pair of shadowy men in clean hiking boots, peering up at the now-deserted ledge.

Leo and Cody watched from a distance as the poachers conferred, their agitation obvious. They paced, scanned the ridgeline, checked their phones. Leo grinned. “If they want to try now, they’ll have to do it in daylight.”

Jess met up with them at the edge of the parking lot, hands smelling of toner and cedar. “It’s working,” she whispered. “You’ll never get everyone, but for tonight, you’ve got a shot.”

Cody nodded, feeling the electric calm that comes right before a storm. “Thanks. You should probably get to the festival. If it goes bad, at least you’ll have an alibi.”

Jess laughed, a low, bright sound. “You guys be careful. The legend only works if someone’s alive to tell it.”

She left them, and Leo looked at Cody, a wild light in his eyes.

“You ever run a con before?” Leo asked, joking but not entirely.

Cody shook his head. “I was always the mark. But this is better.”

As the sun slid lower, the light went gold across the stone, and the wind shifted, bringing with it the hush of birds returning to their perches. Cody set up the brass telescope, trained it on the ledge, and waited. Leo scanned the approaches, watching for any move from the remaining poachers. The festival rumor carried up the hill in bursts of laughter and applause.

Somewhere behind them, a volunteer with a bullhorn declared, “Five minutes to the Golden Talon Panel! Don’t miss the Legend Presentation!” The noise drifted up, and even the clean-shoed men at the cliff seemed to twitch with impatience.

Cody smiled, feeling, for once, the mountain on their side.

The night was coming. The birds were coming home. And as the last of the crowds vanished down the road, all that remained was the promise of one perfect, impossible sighting.

thirteen

the marmot's revenge

THE NEXT MORNING found Cody and Leo at the edge of Duck Creek Village, where the asphalt in front of Loose Wheels shimmered under a punishing sun. The parking lot, normally a holding pen for pickups and snowmobiles, had transformed into a transient headquarters for everyone who wanted to see, be seen, or say they'd "contributed" to the search for the Golden Talon.

Leo gripped the plastic handles of a grocery bag in each hand, both bulging with the basics of stakeout cuisine: jerky, Red Bulls, single-serve cheese wheels, and two varieties of donut holes. Cody toted a lumpy canvas sack slung over his shoulder, the battered brass telescope sticking out like a periscope. He squinted against the brightness, already dreading the moment when the last square inch of shade would be claimed by a staked pop-up tent or the world's most ambitious pickup truck.

"Ten bucks says there's at least one drone up by noon," Leo said, nodding toward the roof of the service station, where a family of tourists had set up a folding table, a cooler, and—already—three plastic lawn flamingos.

Cody shook his head. "Fifteen says the drone belongs to the Forest Service. They'll want an official record, but they won't want to share the airspace."

“Is that... what the—” Leo trailed off, because directly ahead, in the center of the parking lot, a spectacle was unfolding.

Mr. Higgins, resplendent in a safari vest so dense with Audubon pins it could have deflected small arms fire, stood atop the front bumper of his cherry-red SUV. With the grave precision of a man diffusing a bomb—or maybe assembling a trampoline—he mounted the final piece to what could only be described as a backyard SETI array. Aluminum struts angled from the hood like an exoskeleton, and at the center, mounted on a lazy susan of spray-painted plywood, was a parabolic dish lined with gold foil and Christmas tinsel. Cables ran from the dish to a nest of speakers and blinking lights zip-tied to the grille.

A crowd of onlookers, half in birding hats and half in matching “Golden Talon” t-shirts, formed a semi-circle at a polite distance, unsure whether to be inspired or alarmed.

Higgins was in his element. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, voice booming with the aid of a wireless lapel mic clipped to his shirt, “today, we advance the field of ornithological detection. Welcome to the future!” He threw his arms wide; the dish wobbled, then realigned with a faint, heroic twang.

Next to the car stood Mrs. Crabtree, arms folded, mouth set in a line that could have served as a carpenter’s level. She wore practical field gear—earth-tone cargo pants, a UV-blocking shirt, and a hat built for survival rather than style. She did not look up from the tablet in her hand, but her commentary was loud enough to be heard three rows deep.

“That’s not how you calibrate a frequency modulator, Harold!” she called out. “And if you don’t ground the antenna, you’ll fry the whole board.”

Higgins gave her a dismissive wave. “Thank you for your input, Margaret. But I assure you, I’ve followed the latest research. This is a fully integrated, multi-spectrum receiver—custom built to detect raptor-specific flight harmonics and thermal signatures.” He beamed at the crowd, milking every second.

Leo whistled, impressed despite himself. “That’s some next-level gear. Think it does anything?”

“Probably picks up AM radio from Mexico,” Cody said, “but it looks incredible.”

They watched as Higgins dramatically clipped a car battery to the rig, then thumbed a switch on a control panel he’d duct-taped to the windshield. Instantly, the dish began to rotate with a low, whirring noise, the Christmas tinsel shivering in the breeze. The speakers emitted a sequence of chirps and squawks that, to Cody’s ear, sounded more like an old dial-up modem than a falcon.

Higgins narrated every motion. “First, we sweep for electromagnetic anomalies. If you’ll observe, the dish automatically adjusts for wind direction and humidity.” He pointed at a spinning weather vane at the very top, festooned with a laminated silhouette of a bird of prey. “Once the array detects a raptor within range, we engage the frequency analyzers. The whole system is calibrated to the known wingbeat and vocalization spectrum of *Falco peregrinus*.” He tapped a button, and the speakers shifted from static to a low, urgent beep.

Someone in the crowd asked, “Can it really tell the Golden Talon apart from a normal falcon?”

Higgins’ smile widened, clearly loving the question. “Excellent query! Not only does this array detect the standard peregrine, but I’ve programmed it to flag any anomaly—unusual coloration, iridescence, or flight pattern. If the Golden Talon is real, we will be the first to record its presence scientifically. We’re not just making history, folks. We’re making ornithology.”

From the crowd, a smattering of applause, mostly from the “Golden Talon” shirt people.

Mrs. Crabtree, not to be outdone, tilted her chin up and raised her tablet high. “Or,” she called, “you could just use your eyes and a decent pair of binoculars. I logged two confirmed sightings this week, and I didn’t need a disco ball on a stick.”

“Jealousy is unbecoming,” Higgins countered, but the bite had already lost some venom.

Cody and Leo edged closer, setting their bags down near the curb. The morning had taken on a carnival air: tourists with sticky breakfast fingers, locals in well-worn ballcaps, even the attendant from the gas station, who’d propped open the convenience store door to watch. A

toddler with a melted popsicle gawked at the spinning dish, then attempted to imitate the beeping sound, to his own great delight.

Leo bent to Cody, voice low. "I know it's junk science, but... what if it works?"

Cody shrugged. "If it does, Higgins will have a job offer from half the tech companies in the state. If it doesn't, we'll still get to watch it melt down, so either way, it's a win."

They watched as Higgins, clearly preparing for a finale, turned back to the crowd. "And now, the demonstration!" He produced a small, taxidermied raptor from the passenger seat—presumably on loan from the nature center—climbed onto the hood, and held it aloft. "When the receiver detects avian presence, the system will illuminate the alert array."

He lowered the bird in front of the dish. Instantly, the dish locked onto the target, a bank of LED lights flashed red, and the speakers blared a triumphant electronic fanfare. Higgins grinned in triumph, as if he'd just split the atom.

The crowd cheered, and a few people took photos. Mrs. Crabtree muttered, "Showoff," but even she looked impressed.

Cody scanned the parking lot, noting that the rest of the research teams—at least a dozen—had set up their own, less showy stations: notebooks, field scopes, even a laptop or two. Most of them watched Higgins' display out of the corner of their eye, equal parts skepticism and envy. The only person unmoved was the barista from the gas station, who'd retreated to the shadows and watched the proceedings while sipping what looked like her third cup of coffee.

As the demonstration wound down, Leo nudged Cody. "Ready to stock up?"

"Ready as I'll ever be."

They made their way inside, where the air was thirty degrees cooler and smelled like chili dogs and citrus cleaner. The shelves were already stripped of anything that could pass as hiking food, but Leo managed to snag a fresh loaf of sourdough and an industrial-sized sleeve of jerky. At the counter, the clerk—a teenager who looked like he'd just woken from a nap—rang up their supplies, pausing only to glance at the battered telescope.

"You with the science crowd?" he asked, thumbing the buttons with a practiced lethargy.

Cody hesitated, then nodded. "You could say that."

The clerk grinned, showing a row of perfect, orthodontic teeth. "They say the real action is up by Aspen Mirror Lake. But if you want my two cents, it's the bait and switch at Cascade Falls that'll draw the rare birds. Everyone here's watching the sky, but nobody's paying attention to the woods."

Leo raised his eyebrows, impressed. "You a birder?"

The clerk shrugged. "Just like to watch. Birds, people, whatever. You see all kinds if you know where to look."

As they left, Cody made a mental note: sometimes the best field intel came from the guy who stocked the beef jerky.

Back outside, the crowd had thinned, the morning's novelty giving way to the realities of sunburn and patience. Higgins was still holding court, now showing off a laminated binder of "preliminary findings," which, from a distance, looked suspiciously like printouts of Wikipedia articles. Mrs. Crabtree had retreated to the shade of her car, scribbling in a logbook with a focus that made the world around her disappear.

Cody and Leo stood at the edge of the parking lot, reloading their packs, and took in the show. The sun had burned away the last traces of mountain cool, and the world felt poised—ready for the first real move of the day.

Leo sipped a Red Bull, eyes on the whirring dish. "You know, if this all works out, we're going to have to buy that guy a donut. Or a drink."

Cody smiled, feeling—for once—like he had more than a statistical chance of pulling this off. "If we save the birds, I'll buy him a whole dozen."

They set off, following the line of blacktop east, toward where the cliffs and the water and the myth of the Golden Talon waited. Behind them, the last echo of the detection array's victory fanfare floated on the air, absurd and perfect, just like everything else on the mountain.

If you wanted to understand the local ecosystem, you could do a lot worse than watching Bandit the marmot at work.

He emerged from the gap under the driver's seat of Higgins' SUV as if it was his own living room, paws brushing the scuffed floor mat, nose twitching with the focused energy of a gold rush prospector. Bandit was fat with late-spring plenty—his belly was so round it almost dragged on the ground—and his fur shone with a yellow haze where the sun caught it. He moved with the half-speed, half-urgency of a creature who knew he had nothing to fear from humans, especially in a village that treated him more like a local mascot than a pest.

His first stop was the glove compartment, which he pried open with two quick swipes of his claws. The aroma of trail mix hit him like a wall. Within seconds, Bandit was elbow-deep in the bag, scooping raisins and bits of stale pretzel into his mouth with the efficiency of a six-year-old in front of an unsupervised party platter.

The only sign of the raid outside the car was a faint plastic crinkle, which blended in with the rising hum of Higgins' "detection system." No one noticed the marmot's behind bobbing rhythmically in the air as he worked his way through the bag, least of all Mr. Higgins himself, who was in the final throes of his pre-launch speech.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Higgins intoned, holding aloft a laminated chart titled 'Signature Frequencies of Known Raptors' like Moses with the tablets, "what you are about to witness is unprecedented. This device, this Golden Talon Detection System, is the synthesis of years of research and a lifetime of passion. Prepare yourselves for a scientific breakthrough!"

The crowd clapped with the uncertain energy of people who suspected something was about to explode.

Meanwhile, Bandit, his first course complete, burrowed behind the front panel toward the source of a much richer aroma: the low, oily tang of insulation and fresh plastic. The cables for the radar system were bundled under the dash, labeled with color-coded tape in the kind of way that was supposed to make amateur repairs easier, but actually just created a marmot buffet of flavors and textures. Bandit tested each wire, selecting his favorite by firmness. He paused for a moment—maybe

relishing the anticipation—then sunk his teeth into the main red power cable.

The taste of copper sent a jolt through Bandit's whole body. He recoiled, then attacked again, undaunted, working with that special blend of anger and glee reserved for the world's true disruptors. The wire chewed, Bandit scurried back to the glove compartment, yanked the second-best snack bag, and squeezed out the passenger side—leaving a fine trail of fur and static in his wake.

Above, the system whined louder, the whirl of the dish building to a fever pitch. Higgins was narrating every step: "We initiate the sweep... adjust for solar glare... and—this is the critical phase, folks, don't blink—engage the ultra-sensitive directional array!"

He punched the button with the flourish of a game show host. The dish jerked left, then right, then started spinning so fast the tinsel whistled. The speakers emitted a shriek that, for a split second, sounded eerily like a real raptor call—before the pitch deepened, flattened, and then went pure static.

Sparks flew from the base of the dish. The LEDs, meant to pulse a sophisticated sequence, instead flashed a manic SOS. The control panel on the windshield let out a sad puff of blue smoke and died. The dish, instead of locking onto the tree line or the distant ridgeline, shuddered, reversed, and came to a trembling stop—pointing directly at the nearest trash can.

Higgins stood motionless, hand still on the button. For a beat, no one breathed. Then, as if on cue, the detection system gave one final, victorious beep.

The crowd erupted. Not in the polite applause Higgins expected, but in honest-to-god laughter: the kind that starts with the kids and ricochets up the age ladder until even the stoniest-faced grandpa is dabbing tears from his cheeks.

"Look," shouted a little girl in a neon bird shirt. "It's found the garbage!"

Even Mrs. Crabtree, who had been massaging her temples in anticipation of just such a disaster, could not keep from smiling. "The marvels of modern technology," she deadpanned. "Nature never stood a chance."

Higgins, undeterred, raised his voice over the din. “Extraordinary! The system has isolated an anomaly. We have made contact with an unidentified avian entity—possibly a species new to science, possibly a highly adaptive subspecies of urban scavenger!”

The crowd, in perfect unison, spun to see what the system had “found.” At that very moment, Bandit the marmot popped his head from the trash can, cheeks stuffed with trail mix, eyes bright as LED’s in the glare. He chewed, considered the crowd, then raised one paw in what looked remarkably like a wave.

Another round of laughter washed over the parking lot, and the marmot, soaking up the attention, dove back into the trash with renewed purpose.

Leo, doubled over with laughter, looked to Cody. “That’s the most honest science I’ve ever seen.”

Cody grinned, then glanced at Higgins, who was already flipping through his binder, preparing to “document” the sighting. “I almost want him to get tenure,” Cody said.

As the crowd broke into clusters—some to photograph Bandit, others to dissect the incident with the relish of high school quarterbacks on Monday morning—Cody and Leo found themselves alone for a moment, watching the chaos from the curb.

Leo wiped his eyes. “The best part is, he’s going to blame the sabotage on Mrs. Crabtree.”

Cody checked his phone for the time, already thinking about the next step. “If we hurry, we can get a head start before everyone decides to follow the world’s first marmot-borne raptor.”

They gathered their things and, before leaving, tossed a donut hole toward the trash can as a tribute. Bandit caught it on the first bounce, looked them dead in the eye, and gave a chirp of approval.

Above, the last spark from Higgins’ detection rig fizzled out in a faint curl of smoke, and the day rolled forward, full of promise, absurdity, and the faint, electric scent of something about to happen.

As the laughter faded and the crowd drifted back to its various forms of waiting, Cody took a moment to scan the edges of the parking lot. That was where the real action usually lurked: not in the center

ring, but just offstage, where the distractions lost their shine and people's true faces came out.

Sure enough, at the far corner of the lot, a gleaming black SUV idled, windows rolled up tight against the noise and dust. The paint had the kind of obsessive, deep-clean shine that only came from either a rental contract or an owner who feared germs more than hail. Corbin Vaught sat behind the wheel, sunglasses perched on the bridge of his nose, hands gripping the wheel at ten and two. He wasn't looking at the circus, not exactly; every few seconds, his gaze ticked back and forth, scanning the crowd as though expecting a jailbreak or a sudden shift in the weather.

Cody nudged Leo, who followed his line of sight. "Someone's not enjoying the festivities," Leo said, a smirk in his voice.

"Someone is waiting for the clown car to empty," Cody replied. He fished Powell's telescope from its canvas sheath, popped the lens cap, and lifted it for a closer look.

Corbin's outline jumped into crisp detail, the glass giving him a hyperreal clarity. He looked composed enough on the surface—button-down shirt, flawless stubble, the faintest tan line where a ring might have been. But through the telescope, Cody saw more than physical detail. He saw the telltale shimmer of agitation: a restless red shadow radiating off Corbin like heat from a stove, pulsing with each impatient tap of his thumb on the wheel.

Cody zoomed out a hair, letting the lens take in the whole vehicle. The passenger seat was empty, save for a laptop and a stack of legal pads. In the back, a pair of black cases lay buckled in with seatbelts, and a camera tripod jutted up at a weird angle, as though bracing itself for a hard stop.

Cody pulled back from the scope, just as Corbin checked his watch—some luxury make that flashed gold in the sun—and then punched a number into his phone. His lips moved, tight and clipped, the way people talked when they didn't want to be overheard but needed to get a message across.

Leo sidled up, his own gaze on the SUV. "You think he's calling in the reinforcements?"

"Either that or ordering an air strike," Cody said, lowering the telescope. "He's not happy. The crowd's ruining his plan."

They watched as Corbin's jaw worked, the conversation growing more animated. He gestured once, sharply, and then the look on his face changed—first from irritation to something colder, then to a sudden, resolved urgency. Cody, unable to resist, brought up the scope again.

Through the glass, the aura around Corbin darkened, tightening like a band. He ended the call with a hard jab at the screen, then gunned the engine and spun the wheel, sending the SUV coasting forward with a slow, predatory grace.

"Let's get closer," Cody said. "I want to hear what comes next."

They skirted the edge of the lot, feigning interest in the racks of branded soda and the wall of "Golden Talon" bumper stickers that had appeared overnight. Corbin parked next to the air hose, rolled down his window, and waited.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then a second car—a dull silver sedan with Utah plates—slid up beside him. The driver's face was lost in shadow, but a tattooed arm handed a small object through the window. Corbin took it, glanced at it, and pocketed it in his shirt.

They caught only fragments of the conversation—"...can't wait until dusk, there's too many eyes..." and "...primary nest site, but double-check the water line..."—but the tone was unmistakable. Urgency, frustration, and a promise of action before the opportunity closed.

Leo pretended to tie his shoe, using the moment to tilt an ear toward the exchange. "They're moving up the timeline," he whispered to Cody. "They're going after the main nest tonight."

Cody nodded, his brain slotting pieces together faster than he could name them. "They're worried about all the extra traffic. If they hit it after dark, it'll be chaos—no way to track them, and the birds will be off guard."

The silver sedan pulled away, slow and cautious, leaving Corbin alone again. He lingered just long enough to wipe his face with both hands, the gesture of a man preparing to do something he really didn't want to do. Then he started the engine and peeled out, tires spitting gravel. The SUV rocketed up the side street, out of sight in seconds.

As the dust settled, a commotion erupted behind them. Bandit the marmot had reappeared, this time from beneath the fender of Higgins' still-smoking vehicle. The marmot was victorious: in his jaws, he clamped the end of a power cable, the plastic sheath frayed and trailing like a streamer. He paraded his trophy for the nearest cluster of children, who cheered as though watching a halftime mascot.

Bandit, undaunted by the adulation, hopped onto the curb, deposited his find at the base of the trash can, then sat upright and chirped—once, sharp and insistent.

Leo pointed. "That's the face of a creature who knows he's already won."

Cody looked from the marmot to the retreating shape of Corbin's SUV. "Maybe it's contagious."

They retreated to their own car, reloading the packs, the whole time talking in quick, low bursts.

"He'll go for the water approach, if the main road is watched," Leo said.

"Then we cut across the old pumice line, intercept by the spillway," Cody replied, already mapping the route in his head. "But we'll need to move now, before he sets up another lookout."

Leo grinned. "Race you to the first switchback."

They took off, not quite running, but moving with the energy of two people who knew their quarry was already ahead but not yet out of reach.

Back in the parking lot, Bandit basked in a shaft of sun, licking his paws and watching the world reassemble around him. The detection dish sagged, defeated, and Higgins had retreated to the relative safety of his notes, muttering to anyone who would listen about "unexpected electromagnetic interference."

Mrs. Crabtree, notebook in hand, watched the two researchers disappear down the road. She smiled, small and secret.

For now, the day belonged to the marmots and the mad inventors, the snackers and the skeptics. But as the sun climbed, the real chase was already on, somewhere in the wild, blue-shadowed ridges where the only rules were the ones you could improvise before breakfast.

And if there was a lesson to be found in all this—besides "never

underestimate a marmot”—it was that legends only grew in the telling, and sometimes the best way to save a story was to make sure nobody got there first.

fourteen

the final scrape

THE HIKE up to Cascade Falls wasn't steep so much as relentless. The trail rose in switchbacks carved out of sandy clay and sharp-edged limestone, every step hurrying toward the source of the distant roar. As they climbed, the air grew colder and the angle of the sun sharpened every shadow. By the time Cody and Leo crested the last outcrop, the sky above the trees had gone molten—fire orange at the horizon, melting upward through pink and then a bruised, royal purple.

Cody paused to catch his breath, hands on his knees. His calves ached from the climb, and sweat, slick and icy, ran under the collar of his shirt. Up ahead, Leo moved with an ease that made Cody want to both curse and admire him. He walked with his head up, shoulders loose, not so much conquering the hill as escorting it. At the top of the ridge, Leo waited, silhouetted against the sunset like the hero from an old, bad western.

"Not much farther," Leo said. "You'll hear it before you see it."

He was right. The sound of Cascade Falls had been building for the last half mile, growing from a vague hissing into a continuous, rolling thunder. It was a white noise so dense it made your eardrums tickle. As they crested the rise, the wind picked up, carrying with it a chill mist and the scent of wet rock. At the edge of a battered split-rail fence, the world dropped away. Below, the creek tumbled over a shelf of volcanic stone, vanishing into a ribbon of white that spun itself into the canyon

below. The falls themselves were maybe thirty feet tall, but the force of them, funneled by the bowl of the cliff, made the air vibrate in your lungs.

Cody found himself staring. The view was absurdly beautiful, but it was also the last place on earth he expected to find himself on a Friday evening. He checked his watch out of habit, then remembered there was no signal here. No clock but the sun.

Leo fished a battered thermos from his pack and took a swig, then handed it to Cody without a word. It was coffee, thick and dark, shot through with the metallic tang of whatever Leo had used to keep it hot. Cody drank, wiped his mouth, and passed it back. Neither of them spoke for a while.

When the silence finally broke, it was Cody who spoke first. "What if they're already here?" he said.

"They're not," Leo replied, still looking out over the canyon. "Corbin's team won't risk it in daylight. Too many people on the trail, even now."

Cody scanned the overlook. Down by the chain-link fence at the official viewpoint, a pair of hikers leaned against the rails, their matching puffer vests fluorescent in the gloom. They lingered just long enough for a selfie, then turned and started the long walk back to the parking lot. After that, the ridge was empty.

"Come on," Leo said, lowering his voice. "Best angle is off the main trail. I'll show you."

They ducked under a faded warning sign—SENSITIVE AREA: DO NOT DISTURB NESTING SITES—and picked their way along a faint game trail. The ground here was slick with moss, the rocks black and crumbly underfoot. Cody followed, ducking under branches, the battered telescope case bumping against his hip with every step.

They found their vantage point on a shoulder of rock that jutted over the falls, maybe thirty feet below the trail. From here, the drop was near vertical, but a narrow ledge—no wider than a shelf in a library—ran along the face of the cliff. Leo crouched and scanned the canyon wall with a practiced eye, then pointed.

"There. That's the nest platform. See the stain under the lip?" he said.

Cody squinted. It took a minute to pick it out: a patch of paler stone under an overhang, streaked with white and scattered with tufts of something that looked like pale lint. “Looks like a mess,” Cody said.

Leo grinned. “That’s how you know it’s working. If you want to see the birds, now’s your chance.”

Cody unslung the telescope and set it on the rock. The brass barrel was cool, but as he adjusted the focus, it warmed under his fingers. The etchings—faint constellations, an arc of engraved script—caught the last rays of sunlight and glowed as if backlit by fire.

He drew a deep breath and lined up the lens on the nest platform. The world compressed and clarified: the rough texture of the stone, the patchwork of lichen, and, just below the lip, the unmistakable oval of a peregrine nest. But the nest was wrong. Instead of the expected huddle of downy chicks, there were three... things. Small, the right shape and size, but too perfect. Their coloring was uncanny—almost right, but the edges were too sharp, the pattern of the feathers repetitive in a way that set Cody’s nerves on edge.

He nudged the focus, trying to bring out more detail. As the image sharpened, he realized what he was seeing.

“They’re fakes,” Cody whispered, a cold prickle running up his arms.

Leo looked at him, one eyebrow raised. “Say again?”

Cody didn’t answer at first. He kept the scope trained on the nest, heart thudding. “They’re not real. The nestlings.” He turned the scope toward Leo, letting him look through. “See for yourself.”

Leo pressed his eye to the glass, then let out a low, surprised laugh. “Damn. That’s... weird. Is that wax?”

“Wax, and real feathers,” Cody said, pulling out his phone and snapping a few shots through the scope. “They’re decoys. Whoever did this, they were good. Maybe even professional.”

Leo whistled. “Corbin’s team?”

Cody nodded. “Has to be. But why bother with the fakes?”

He pulled the telescope back, cradling it in his hands. The glass glimmered, and—just for a second—he saw something else. Not the nest, but a thin, wavering line of blue, like a burn mark, stretching away from the platform and down the cliff face. It was the same effect

he'd seen in the cave, only now it looked deliberate, as if someone had drawn a path with a fine-tip marker. It pulsed, faint but regular, running from the nest to a shadowed notch in the stone fifty feet below.

"There's a trail," Cody said, almost to himself.

Leo gave him a sidelong glance. "Show me."

Cody angled the scope, adjusted the focus, and pointed out the faint blue streak. Leo, after a few seconds, grunted. "Okay, now that's not normal."

"It's an energy signature. Maybe just thermal, or maybe something else," Cody said, the words tumbling out as his brain ran to keep up. "It leads to that overhang. See it?"

Leo nodded. "Looks like a shelf. Hard to reach without climbing gear."

Cody snapped more photos, documenting the line, the nest, the overhang. "Whatever Corbin took, he left these behind so no one would notice. But he messed up. The decoys don't match the live signature." He hesitated, then looked at Leo. "Can we get down there? To the notch?"

Leo took his time, tracing the cliff face with his eyes, then scanned the trees and the slope below. "Maybe. There's a natural chimney, just west of the falls. It'll be slick, but we can use it to get most of the way down, then traverse the ledge to the shelf."

Cody felt his pulse spike, a mix of excitement and dread. "You sure?"

Leo shrugged, all confidence. "I've done worse. Besides, if we don't try, we'll never know what he took."

They packed up, careful not to leave a trace. As they moved, the last light of the sun caught the waterfall and turned it gold for an instant. Cody glanced back at the ledge, and, for just that moment, thought he saw movement on the nest—something real, something watching.

He blinked, then lost it in the glare.

Leo led the way, skirting the edge of the outcrop until they reached the break in the stone. The "chimney" was less a passage than a runnel gouged by a thousand years of snowmelt, steep and slick, but Leo took it in stride, testing each hold before committing his weight. Cody

followed, keeping his eyes on the ledge below, the telescope slung across his back like an old friend.

Halfway down, Leo stopped, bracing himself on a wedged log. He looked up at Cody, his face dead serious for once.

"If I slip, don't come after me. Just get the birds out," Leo said.

"You're not going to slip," Cody replied, but his mouth was dry.

They moved together, each step deliberate. At the bottom of the chimney, the trail leveled out for a dozen feet, then narrowed to a ledge barely wider than a boot. Leo went first, shuffling sideways, one hand always on the wall. Cody followed, the wind tugging at his jacket and the sound of the falls a dull roar in his head.

When they reached the overhang, Leo ducked under the lip and scanned the shelf. There, nestled in the shadow, was a black crate—a carry case, the kind used for live animal transport, but the vents were sealed and the handles reinforced with tape. Cody moved closer, and in the light from his headlamp, he saw the letters "VANE VISUALS" stenciled on the side.

Leo tried the latch. It wasn't locked, just wedged tight. He levered it open with a pocketknife. Inside, lined with soft cloth and heat packs, was a cluster of three falcon chicks. They blinked up at the light, feathers ruffled, eyes dark and wild.

"Alive," Leo said, relief flooding his face.

Cody scanned the box, then the area around it. The blue line was strongest here, a wash of color that made the air feel thick and charged.

He checked the birds for injury—none that he could see—then pulled out his phone and snapped more photos. "We need to get these back to the service," Cody said. "And fast. They need food, and this box will only keep them warm for a few more hours."

Leo nodded, already prepping the crate for transport.

Before they left, Cody looked one more time at the ledge above. The nest was still there, decoys unmoved, perfect in their stillness. But now, in the last light, he thought he saw a flicker of something else: a gold shimmer, gone before he could name it.

He smiled, despite everything.

The world was full of fakes, but also full of people who could spot the difference. Sometimes, that was enough.

They started the climb back up, birds cradled in the box, and Cody felt the mountain shift around them—not in anger, but in a slow, tired relief.

Maybe legends were just stories that someone cared enough to save.

They reached the ridge well after sunset, feet raw and hands scraped, but the birds safe and warm in the crate. Leo set it gently on the bench at the overlook and watched as Cody dialed the ranger's number.

As they waited, the wind picked up, pulling at their jackets and making the trees whisper. In the darkness, the falls sounded farther away, less urgent, almost peaceful.

Leo leaned back and looked at the sky, now velvet dark and punched with stars. "You did good, city boy," he said, not looking over.

Cody smiled, exhaustion making his whole body buzz. "Couldn't have done it without the telescope. Or you."

Leo shrugged, but his eyes were proud. "Guide's Eye, meet Guide's Luck."

The sound of boots on gravel signaled the approach of the ranger. She moved fast, headlamp bouncing, and when she saw the crate, she let out a breathless, "Is that—?"

"Three of them," Cody said. "They're hungry, but healthy."

She took the crate, then radioed the wildlife center. After a quick, professional check, she shook their hands, her own still trembling with adrenaline.

"We'll take it from here," she said. "But if you ever want to join a rescue team—"

Leo grinned. "He's got a job already, but thanks."

As the ranger carried the crate to her truck, Leo and Cody stood at the edge of the overlook, letting the cold sink into their bones.

"You know, the news crews are going to be pissed when they find out they missed the whole thing," Leo said, voice full of wicked glee.

Cody laughed, a real sound, sharp and clean.

"Maybe that's how it should be," he said.

They stood together, the falls below and the stars above, and for the first time, Cody felt like he was exactly where he belonged.

The mountain always looked different at dusk. On the way down, the rocks lost their midday glare and seemed to lean in, turning the path into a hallway where every angle and handhold mattered. Leo liked it that way—edges softened, sound muffled by the coming dark. But he could hear Cody behind him, breathing quick, steps clipped and careful, the way someone moved when every inch of terrain was a test.

The chimney wasn't the most dangerous descent Leo had ever done, but it was close. The entry pitch was a steep, C-shaped groove that funneled straight down for ten feet before easing out onto a tilted bench of stone. The rock was scoured clean, slick in places, and where water had run after spring melt, the grip was glassy as a bathroom tile.

Leo went first, as usual. He planted his feet, tested each hold before he put weight on it, and used his body to block stray pebbles from tumbling onto Cody below. The kid was good—his hands were steady, and he moved like someone who'd read every climbing book ever published but only recently started putting theory to practice.

Halfway down, the sun vanished behind the ridge, leaving the world blue and cold. Shadows thickened, but the falls below threw just enough light to turn the mist into a floating veil. Leo paused on a ledge barely wide enough for a hiking boot and waited for Cody to catch up.

"You alright back there?" Leo called, voice just above a whisper.

Cody's response came after a short, careful pause. "I'm... good. Just recalibrating." His face was pinched, sweat already evaporating off his forehead in the chill.

Leo grinned, unseen in the gloom. "Almost there. Last five feet are the trick. You see that old juniper root? Grab it and swing left."

Cody reached, fingers shaky at first, then found the root and clung tight. It bent but didn't break. Leo held out his hand, and Cody took it—too hard, but that was to be expected. Together, they eased onto the narrow bench, which ran along the cliff like a warped balance beam.

The falls roared off to their right, the noise so loud it felt like the world was boiling.

They crouched there for a moment, catching their breath.

Cody wiped his hands on his pants, then looked up at Leo. "Is this where we...?"

"Yeah," Leo said. "If I was hiding something, I'd do it right here."

He pointed along the ledge, where the blue "energy scar" Cody had seen through the scope seemed to pulse in the gloom. To the naked eye, there was nothing, but Leo trusted Cody's intuition—and, if he was honest, the mountain's way of guiding people who were paying attention.

They crept sideways, careful not to send rocks rattling down the drop. Every ten feet, Leo scanned for signs: a scuffed heel print, a chunk of rock knocked out of place, the telltale pattern of dirt that meant someone had knelt and braced themselves. It wasn't long before he found the first clue.

"Look," Leo said, pointing with his chin. "Leftover piton. You see how the rock around it is bruised?"

Cody leaned close. The piton was hammered deep into a seam, but the angle was wrong for a regular climber. "It's a belay," Cody said. "For lowering something heavy."

"Or fragile," Leo countered, already looking ahead. "Bet we'll find more."

They found a second piton, then a scrap of blue cord, friction-burned and cut clean. Farther along, a wadded square of netting—black, thin-mesh, and probably designed to be invisible against the cliff face—caught on a knob of lichen-crusting stone. Cody examined it, holding the fabric up to the last bits of sunset.

"This isn't hobbyist stuff," he said, awe mixed with something closer to anger. "It's custom. Could hold a grown raptor, easy."

Leo sniffed, taking in the chemical whiff of something synthetic. "That matches the box at the overlook," he said. "Vane Visuals doesn't do things by half."

They rounded a curve in the ledge and found a shallow nook, just big enough to duck into if you wanted to hide from above. At the back of the nook, buried under loose shale and leaves, was a battered field

notebook—its cover soft, the edges gone fuzzy from weather. Leo picked it up and handed it to Cody.

“Go on,” he said. “You’re the document guy.”

Cody hesitated, then flipped the book open. The handwriting inside was tight, slanted, and obsessively neat. Pages were stuffed with GPS coordinates, times, weather notations. Every few entries, a drawing—a falcon, a clutch of eggs, once a full-color rendering of the Golden Talon, the beak exaggerated, talons extended like a monster from an old field guide.

Cody read aloud: “Specimen collected: 1. Physical characteristics consistent with previous morph. Phenotype preservation required—attempt low-impact extraction. Site 7: Golden Variant Potential—coordinates match.” He glanced up, eyes big. “Site 7 is here. This exact ledge.”

Leo let out a low whistle. “They did it. They actually got one.”

“Or tried to,” Cody said, still flipping pages. “Listen to this: ‘Decoy nest in place. Camera active. Harvest team will regroup at the next waypoint. If challenged, use the script—deny, distract, relocate.’”

Leo grinned, dark and proud. “That’s a professional operation. The script part—that’s how you know it’s not their first rodeo.”

Cody looked from the notebook to the ledge, then back at Leo. “Do we keep going?”

Leo weighed the risk. The ledge narrowed here, and the wind off the falls made it hard to hear anything but water. But there was a compulsion, as if the cliff wanted them to finish the circuit.

“We keep going,” Leo said. “But slow.”

They pressed on, the light now barely enough to see by. Where the ledge pinched to just a few inches, Leo pressed his back to the wall and moved in half-steps. Cody mimicked the movement, less graceful but more determined with every foot.

They’d gone another twenty yards when Leo saw it—a subtle notch in the pattern of rock, maybe a foot square, framed by stone just a shade lighter than the rest. He stopped, reached out, and felt the edge. It was smooth, not eroded like the surrounding surface. He tapped it; the sound was hollow.

He motioned to Cody, who crouched and squinted. In the last bit

of dusk, the outline became clear: a false rock panel, hinged at the bottom, set into the wall like a secret post office box.

Leo pried it open, careful not to jolt whatever was inside. The panel swung out, and behind it was a narrow shelf packed with electronics—tiny cameras, battery packs, and a bank of memory cards. There was also a plastic zip-bag labeled “emergency cache,” filled with protein bars, a compact field guide, and a small, high-powered flashlight.

“Jackpot,” Leo whispered.

Cody reached for the camera array, but Leo stopped him. “Don’t touch the cards yet. If they’re monitoring, any tampering will tip them off.”

Cody nodded, eyes wide as he cataloged the gear. “This is next-level. The cameras—they’re not just for footage. They’re set up to record who comes and goes. Maybe even stream live.”

“Which means Corbin’s crew knows exactly who’s been here, and when,” Leo said. He peered over the edge of the shelf, looking for tripwires or other surprises. None were obvious.

They crouched there for a while, soaking in the gravity of it all. Below them, the roar of the falls was so loud it felt like the stone was shaking. Above, the sky went from purple to black, and the first pinprick stars blinked awake.

Cody closed the field notebook, then carefully tucked it inside his jacket. “We need to get this to the rangers,” he said. “But first, we should find a way to copy the camera data.”

Leo nodded, a hundred ideas firing off in his head. “We’ll use my phone—pop the card, dump the files, replace it before morning. They’ll never know we were here.”

Cody’s hands trembled, but not from cold.

“You ever think about why people do stuff like this?” Cody asked, after a long beat. “Not just the money, but... the obsession.”

Leo mulled it over. “Same reason people climb cliffs, probably. Prove something. Be first. Leave a mark.”

He looked out over the edge, at the thousand feet of nothing between them and the creek below. “But sometimes you get more than you bargained for.”

Cody smiled, small and sad. “Story of my life.”

They worked together, fast and silent, popping the SD card and dumping a copy of the contents to Cody's battered laptop. The whole process took less than five minutes, but it felt like forever with the world so exposed around them.

When the last file copied, Leo slotted the card back in place, wiped the surface with a bandana, and swung the rock panel shut. The click was almost inaudible, but it sounded final.

They started back along the ledge, this time moving with the confidence of people who had seen everything and survived it. At the chimney, Cody let Leo go first, but didn't wait for help. He swung out, grabbed the juniper root, and landed next to Leo with a heavy exhale.

"Nicely done," Leo said, clapping him on the shoulder.

Back on level ground, they stopped just out of sight of the main trail and watched the falls in the dark. Leo took the field notebook from Cody, ran his thumb along the spine, and then handed it back.

"You know what comes next?" Leo asked.

Cody nodded. "We catch them in the act."

They looked at each other, two idiots on a mountain, and both started laughing.

It was a good sound, even with the night closing in.

By the time they made it back to the camouflaged blind, the only thing left of the sun was a faint purple smear behind the trees. The wind had died, the noise from the falls softened by distance, and every sound they made seemed huge against the hush.

Leo took point, head low, careful to sweep the path for anything that might trip them up. The entrance to the blind was nearly invisible—just a small, slanted cut in the rock, half-concealed by a tangle of dead limbs and a camo tarp splattered with dirt and moss. He lifted the flap, ducked inside, and immediately felt the temperature shift. The space was small, maybe four feet deep and barely shoulder-high, but insulated with spray foam and lined with a patchwork of thick, dull-gray blankets. Inside, the air was warm, still, and smelled faintly of birdseed and electronics.

Leo flicked on a mini flashlight, careful to keep the beam tight. The interior was a masterwork of field engineering—barely any wasted space. In the back corner, a tripod cradled a camera that looked military-grade, its lens the size of a soda can and braced for high wind. A snake of black cable ran to a battery bank, the whole rig designed to run for days without human attention. There were directional microphones, too, mounted on a flexible stalk and aimed out through a slit in the tarp.

Cody slid in behind Leo, then stopped cold. “Whoa.”

“Yeah,” Leo said, letting the kid soak it in. “Not exactly amateur hour.”

They spent a minute just looking. There were bins of gear—zip ties, latex gloves, rolls of waxed thread. In one box, a row of soft carriers lined with synthetic fleece, each tagged with a barcode. Some were empty, others showed a scatter of down feathers or, in one, the sad, sharp smell of antiseptic. Everything was labeled, everything accounted for.

Cody leaned over the workbench, his hands hovering above the gear but not touching. “They planned for every scenario. Even the nest decoys. Look—” he pointed at a side pocket, which bulged with neatly wrapped wax models, identical to the fakes they’d seen in the nest above.

Leo picked one up. It was weirdly lifelike, but cold and a little greasy. “You think they rehearsed?” he asked.

“Of course,” Cody said, flipping it over to show a tiny, almost invisible seam. “These are modular. You can change the pose, even add or subtract weight if you want them to look like growing chicks.”

A chill crept down Leo’s spine, not from the cold but from the idea of someone putting that much work into fooling the world. He shined the flashlight higher, and the beam caught a binder wedged between two battery packs. Cody snatched it and started thumbing through.

Inside, dozens of color photos—every one a close-up of a falcon, or sometimes a nest, or sometimes just a single feather, backlit to show color variation. Some photos were marked up, circles and arrows in red Sharpie pointing out “unique signature” or “potential hybridization event.” Every few pages, a sticky note in a new, sharper handwriting:

“Possible GOLDEN variant?” or “Confirm at dusk—plumage shifts under direct light.”

Cody’s voice trembled with the force of not wanting to be excited. “This is amazing,” he said, then caught himself. “I mean—awful. But also kind of genius.”

Leo grinned. “It’s okay to be impressed. Doesn’t mean you’re on their side.”

Cody nodded, still scanning pages. “Look at this—here’s the same bird, three days apart. They’re tracking individual falcons by their facial markings. And—wait—” He turned the page, then the next. “They have a whole section devoted to the Golden Variant. Actual documentation.”

Leo leaned in. The photos were different—more like mugshots, with harsh flash and hand-written numbers. The birds in these were... beautiful, but strange. Their plumage wasn’t just gold, but banded and dappled, with a shimmer even the camera caught.

“Worth more on the black market?” Leo asked, already knowing the answer.

“Or maybe just for bragging rights,” Cody said. “But yeah—there are people who’d pay a fortune to have the only one.”

They made sure to photograph every page, Cody’s hands shaking less as he worked. Leo took a short video of the gear layout, his own narration a low mutter so the mic would catch: “Hidden blind, Cascade Falls, current date, equipment unmodified, evidence preserved. Potential violation of three state and two federal statutes.”

They were about to leave when Cody paused at the exit, holding the wax decoy in his hand.

“You ever think about how close we were to missing all this?” he said, voice softer than the wind outside.

“All the time,” Leo replied.

Cody tucked the decoy back in its spot, then looked up. “We can’t just give this to the rangers. We have to expose the whole crew. If there’s more blinds, or more birds, we need to get them first.”

Leo smiled, sharp and bright in the flashlight’s halo. “Now you’re thinking like a local.”

Cody let out a nervous breath, then nodded toward the trail. "Let's get moving. Before we lose our nerve."

They exited the blind, replaced the camo, and scrambled back up the ledge, this time faster and surer. The stars were thick above, and the world felt different—quieter, maybe, but also crackling with the energy of a secret about to break wide open.

Halfway up, a falcon screamed from the canyon. Not a sound of pain, but of warning, or challenge, or maybe just pride. It echoed in their ears long after the bird had gone.

At the top, Leo looked at Cody, who was already checking the copied data and field notes for leads. "You ready for the next round?" he asked.

Cody grinned, all adrenaline now. "Let's see if the legend can outsmart the legend-hunters."

They walked back toward the village, the falls at their backs, and the night full of possibility.

fifteen

the standoff

NIGHT ON CEDAR MOUNTAIN was a cold-blooded animal. The kind that waited for you to forget how sharp its teeth could be. After the village fell dark, Cody and Leo made their move, slipping past the back alleys of Movie Ranch Road and into the true wild, where even the dogs didn't bother barking.

The plan was simple: reach the Rim before sunrise, follow the Guide's Eye to the coordinates in the notebook, and catch Corbin Vaught in the act. Cody ran logistics in his head with the precision of a chess engine. Leo—true to form—had packed nothing but a bike light, two protein bars, and a multitool with four blades he'd honed to surgical sharpness. They dressed in black, not because it made them invisible, but because it let them vanish into the negative space of moonlight and shadow.

They took the lower service road past Cascade Falls, then hiked north by deer trail, boots crunching on hoarfrost and rotting pine needles. The moon was barely a day past full, but high clouds shredded its light into strips, laying bars of shadow across the ground. Every few hundred yards, Leo would freeze, holding up a fist, and they'd listen: for engines, for footsteps, for the unnatural hush that meant they'd tripped a silent alarm.

On the upper shelf above Duck Creek, the wind carried the smell of cold sap and a sweet, ghostly whiff of fermenting berries. At the first

viewpoint, they stopped and scanned the valley. Cody used the telescope, sweeping in slow arcs across the ridgeline. What he saw gave him chills that weren't from the cold.

Light, low and green, flickered like a will-o'-wisp from the far side of the notch—barely visible, but regular, like a heartbeat.

He passed the scope to Leo. "Look," Cody whispered. "Left of the rim, see the glow?"

Leo grinned, teeth white in the dark. "That's a work light. Amateur hour."

They moved up the slope, zigzagging through old blowdowns and the razorwire tangles of manzanita. The green glow resolved as they got closer: it bled through a camo tarp stretched tight between two standing spruces, and pulsed with the mechanical regularity of a science fair volcano. Every so often, a brighter blue-white flash would pop from behind the tarp, then fade.

They reached the edge of the depression—deeper than it looked from above, a perfect sinkhole masked by downed limbs and the old bones of a burned-out lodgepole pine. Leo dropped flat and belly-crawled the last twenty feet, pulling Cody down behind him.

"See that?" Leo whispered, pointing with a gloved finger. "Solar rig. It's charging a bank of deep-cycle batteries."

Cody followed the line of sight. The whole setup was more advanced than he expected: not just the solar array, but a field of temperature probes staked in a ring, their wires leading into a hard plastic case the size of a mini-fridge. All of it nestled in a bed of leaf litter, invisible from the trail above.

There was no tent. Corbin didn't need a tent. He sat on an aluminum folding stool, back straight, clipboard resting on his knees. He wore a white parka zipped to the chin and a pair of crisp, fingerless gloves, the kind of gear you'd see in a mountaineering catalog, not a late-night field op.

Ten feet to Corbin's left, a cluster of clear plastic incubation units glowed with that faint, aquatic light. Cody counted at least six. Inside each: trays of eggs, some speckled, some matte white, each nestled in cotton and monitored by tiny digital thermometers. The readouts blinked, cool blue against the gold and silver of the eggs.

At the far end of the tarp, another case held three baby birds—live peregrine chicks, eyes closed, heads wobbling on pencil-thin necks. Their peeping was nearly drowned out by the gentle whine of the fans and the low, steady hum of the solar inverter.

Cody felt his stomach twist. “How many—?”

“More than I thought,” Leo whispered. He lifted his phone and snapped a few photos through the gap.

They watched Corbin work. He was methodical: check the data, log the numbers, open a unit, candle an egg with a tiny UV pen, then reseal the hatch. Once, he withdrew a syringe from a sterilized wrapper, drew a sample from a chick, then labeled and bagged it in one smooth motion.

It was so casual, it almost looked legal.

Then, as if bored by his own efficiency, Corbin set the clipboard aside and poured a finger of whiskey from a hip flask into a plastic cup. He drank, wiped the rim, and pulled a phone from his coat. He didn’t speak into it, just tapped at the screen with his thumb, eyes narrow and tired.

Cody shifted his weight, trying to see the screen. In the pale light, he caught only a flash: a sequence of barcodes, then what looked like a live feed—maybe from another camera nearby. He wondered if Corbin had a lookout. Probably. But not here, not at this hour.

Leo nudged Cody with his elbow. “Your move,” he mouthed.

Cody nodded, flexed his gloved fingers, and pulled out the battered telescope. He popped the lens and sighted on the chick tray, careful not to let the glass catch moonlight. Through the scope, every detail sharpened: the fuzz of the chicks, the condensation on the inner wall of the unit, the faint shimmer that lined the rim of each egg.

That shimmer wasn’t just color. It looked like a liquid halo, swirling slow under the blue light. Cody remembered the blue “energy scars” from the cave, the same spectral trace now coiled around these eggs like a defense mechanism or a curse.

He sucked in a slow breath and passed the scope to Leo, who watched for a minute before raising his eyebrows. “That’s... not natural, is it?”

"Not in any published journal," Cody said. He risked a glance at his phone, searching the old field notes for any mention of such a thing.

Before he could find it, a new shadow moved inside the tarp.

It was Corbin, standing now, glass in hand, looking straight at them.

"Well," Corbin called, voice calm and edged with amusement, "I wondered how long it would take."

Leo didn't hesitate. He stood, brushing off the frost, and stepped into the ring of cold blue light. "Nice setup," Leo said, hands raised to show he wasn't armed. "How much of this is for show?"

Corbin squinted, set the whiskey down, and brushed a speck from his sleeve. "You always were a glutton for drama," he replied, not quite smiling. "I suppose you brought the cavalry?"

Cody climbed up after Leo, blinking in the sudden glare. He felt naked, exposed, but he couldn't look away from the array of incubators.

"We came to see if the legend was real," Cody said, not trusting himself to keep the anger out of his voice.

Corbin nodded, almost approving. "And what do you think?"

"I think you're crossing a line," Cody said. He scanned the perimeter, looking for signs of other people, but saw only the wind shaking the tarp and the pulse of green from the power bank.

Corbin paced, slow and deliberate, then stopped beside the nearest incubator. He pressed a button on the front, and the blue light faded to a soft white. Inside, the eggs gleamed like little planets. "I had to see if it could be done," Corbin said, voice soft as a confession. "A new morph, an entire evolutionary event—right here, in our backyard. But the old rules don't work anymore. The world won't save what it can't see."

Cody felt the moment sharpen, like the crackle before a lightning strike. "So you steal them?"

"Preserve them," Corbin corrected, with the patience of a parent explaining bedtime to a stubborn child. "They're safer here than in the wild. If I can get just one viable clutch—"

Leo cut him off. "You're not saving anything. You're just playing god."

For the first time, Corbin looked tired. "Maybe that's what it takes. You think any of your precious legends survived by asking permission?"

Cody wanted to scream, or punch, or throw something, but instead he just stared at the chicks—breathing, blinking, so small and helpless under the LED glow.

Corbin spread his hands, as if to say, well, here we are.

“Call the rangers,” Leo said, voice steady as bedrock. “We have everything we need.”

Cody reached for his phone, but Corbin just shrugged. “Go ahead. By the time they get here, this all packs up in five minutes. The only thing you’ll have left is your conscience.”

He started to close the lid on the incubator, then paused, considering. “You want to see the real prize?”

Neither Cody nor Leo answered, but Corbin popped a latch on the farthest case and swung the door wide.

Inside was a single egg, larger than the others, and banded with gold so vivid it looked painted on. It sat on a nest of black felt, monitored by three different sensors, its shell glowing with a kind of inner light.

Corbin lifted it, gentle as a relic. “This is it,” he said. “The next step. If I hadn’t intervened, it would have been gone by next week—eaten by a raccoon, trampled by an idiot hiker, or harvested by someone who doesn’t give a damn about the science. I did what I had to.”

Cody stepped forward, unable to help himself. He leaned in, watching the egg pulse under Corbin’s hand.

It was beautiful. It was wrong. And it was evidence enough to put Corbin away for life.

Cody looked at Leo, then at Corbin, then at the cold sweep of stars above the tarp.

The wind shifted. Somewhere far off, a falcon screamed, and the sound was pure defiance.

Cody felt the mountain watching. Waiting.

He raised his phone and took a picture.

Corbin just smiled, tired and proud, and set the egg back in its nest.

“History won’t remember your names,” Corbin said, voice soft. “But it will remember mine.”

Leo folded his arms, the set of his jaw pure mountain stubborn. “If that’s what you want out of life, you’re welcome to it. But tonight, you’re not going anywhere.”

Corbin looked from Leo to Cody, then back again.

He nodded, slow. "We'll see."

And for a moment, in the flicker of blue-green light, they were all just animals—each one fighting to survive in a world that was always, always watching.

Corbin moved like he'd been expecting them for hours. He left the egg in its blue-lit cradle and dusted imaginary lint from his parka, giving Leo and Cody a look that wasn't hostile, just annoyed—a cat disturbed from its sunbeam.

"Please, sit if you want," Corbin said, indicating the cold log beside his workstation. "I have coffee. Not much else."

Leo snorted. "I'll pass."

Cody ignored the invitation and kept his focus on the birds. He counted again, this time noting the meticulous tags on each egg and the microchips glued to each chick's ankle. It wasn't just poaching. It was a clinical operation, every detail logged for some future audit.

Corbin poured himself coffee and eyed them over the rim of the cup. "You know, I always figured it would be a local. The Forest Service has eyes, but they're soft. You, on the other hand—" his glance landed on Leo, then Cody—"You actually care."

Leo said nothing, letting the cold do the talking.

Corbin kept going, voice measured. "You've read the notebook. You understand what's at stake."

"What's at stake," Cody said, voice shaking but getting stronger, "is a wild population. A real ecosystem. Not just your petri dish."

Corbin's smile was thin as a scalpel. "You think I'm the first to do this? That the birds out here are the product of pure, untouched evolution? Every species on this mountain is the survivor of a thousand interventions, accidents, and disasters."

He set the cup down and opened a battered portfolio. Inside were diagrams, genetic printouts, a page of color photos showing peregrines with bizarre, luminous patterns. "We're looking at a founder effect in real time. These 'golden talons'—they're not just a myth. The morph is

stable, possibly even dominant. But with this much attention?" He flicked a hand at the empty sky. "They'll be wiped out before they can establish."

Cody found himself drawn in, despite everything. "But you don't need to take all of them. You could—" He hesitated, searching for the right words. "You could study from a distance. Band, tag, monitor."

Corbin raised an eyebrow. "And what? Wait for the next idiot with a GoPro to kick the nest apart? Or for a drone pilot to flush a parent at the wrong moment?"

He leaned in, eyes sharp. "These eggs are the last, best chance. A new phenotype—one that might survive the coming climate. If I leave them, they die. If I take them, they might live. There's no morality in letting nature take its course when nature's already rigged the dice."

Leo finally broke his silence, voice low and dark. "There's a difference between helping and stealing."

Corbin looked him up and down. "You really believe that?"

Cody did. He wanted to believe it so bad it hurt. He stepped closer to the table, hands clenched. "You didn't even tell anyone. You just took what you wanted."

Corbin smiled again, like a teacher who'd heard the same question for years. "I tried. The paperwork is endless, the bureaucracy even more so. Every minute you waste is another brood lost to development or some fool with a camera. So I bypassed the process."

With a deliberate gesture, he plucked a folder from his bag, fanned the pages, and set them in front of Cody. "Here. All the permits. All the ethics waivers. You want to call the Feds? Go ahead. You'll see I'm not the villain."

Cody scanned the top page. The letterhead looked official: US Forest Service, Special Research Permit. It was even signed by a regional biologist—one Cody recognized. The permits allowed for collection, temporary holding, genetic sampling.

He looked at Leo, hope flickering for a second. "If these are real..."

Leo took the page, turned it in his hands, then read the fine print. "I've seen enough of these to know a real signature from a photocopy," Leo said. "But I'll check."

Corbin made a show of tucking his glasses into his shirt. "Suit yourself."

The mountain was silent, except for the soft tick of the solar fans and the ever-present wind. Cody felt his resolve slip. If Corbin was telling the truth—if the paperwork was real—then the best they could do was monitor, report, and hope for a slap on the wrist.

He looked at the nearest chick. Its eyes opened, unfocused, then closed again. So vulnerable, so trusting.

He thought about the field notebook, the blue scars, the old stories his parents used to read him. Stories where the good guys won not because they followed the rules, but because they did the right thing.

He set his jaw.

"Even if the permit's real, it doesn't mean you can do whatever you want," Cody said.

Corbin looked at him, measuring. "If you'd seen what I've seen—what's coming for these mountains—you'd understand."

He started packing the eggs, one by one, into soft-lined carriers. "You want to stop me? You can try. But you'll have to do better than a phone call and a pair of angry stares."

Leo, still reading, noticed something on the page—a raised seal that didn't quite line up, a typo in the Forest Service motto. He looked at Cody, and there it was: the old, dangerous spark.

"Nice touch with the watermark," Leo said, voice almost admiring. "But you forgot the motto changed last year. They dropped the 'Land of Many Uses' and switched to 'Caring for the Land.' This one's the old style."

Corbin's face didn't move, but his eyes flicked, just for a second.

Cody's heart hammered.

Corbin closed the carrier, zipped it tight, and stood. "Then I guess we're done here."

He reached for the case of eggs, moving fast.

Leo blocked his path, stance low and solid. "Not so fast."

For a second, it was just three men in the woods, the world on hold.

Then Cody reached out and set his hand on the carrier. "Put them back," he said, voice soft but unyielding.

Corbin didn't answer. He looked at Cody—really looked—and something behind his eyes changed. He set the carrier on the table.

"This isn't over," Corbin said, every word cold.

Leo shrugged. "Nothing ever is."

Corbin stepped back, hands raised in a gesture of surrender—but even then, he was measuring exits, weighing the odds.

Cody let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. He checked the carrier. The egg was still there, warm and impossibly gold.

Corbin lingered at the edge of the depression, watching them with an almost clinical detachment. "You could have been a great scientist, Westbrook," he said. "But you let your emotions get in the way."

Cody smiled, even if it stung. "I'll live."

Corbin laughed, one sharp bark. "Not if you stay out here too long."

Then he turned and walked into the woods, vanishing into the dark.

The wind came back, sharp and clean, erasing the last trace of him.

Cody and Leo stood in the ring of blue-green light, surrounded by the hum of machines and the soft, impossibly alive sound of birds.

For the first time all night, Cody felt like the mountain was breathing again.

He picked up the carrier, gentle as could be. "Let's get them home," he said.

Leo nodded, his grin small but real. "Race you to the top?"

"Not this time," Cody said, and together they started back through the shadows, eggs safe in hand, the legend preserved for another night.

They made it halfway back to the main trail before Leo caught the telltale flash of headlights through the trees. Corbin had been behind them all along, hustling fast with a gear pack slung over his shoulder and the gold-banded egg cradled like an infant in his arms. His composure was impeccable, but something desperate had crept into the way he moved—longer strides, less care for noise, a tendency to look back even when he knew no one could be following.

At the rim of the depression, Corbin paused. He checked his watch, scanned the darkness, and then hustled up the last grade toward the forest service road where his van waited, silent and unmarked under a heavy net of pine boughs. The moon was gone, clouded over by a weather front that Leo guessed would bring snow by dawn.

"He's not giving up," Cody whispered. "He's going to try to beat us to the village."

Leo grinned, a rare, wolfish thing. "Let him try."

They gave Corbin a hundred-yard head start, then moved up the trail, taking a shortcut that only a local would know—a deer run that curved along the rim and dropped them directly onto the access road a quarter mile ahead. The ground was loose with scree and ice, and Cody nearly lost his footing twice before they reached the edge of the cut.

At the base of the slope, the road was blocked by a fresh "TRAIL CLOSED—WILDLIFE RESTORATION" barricade, held upright by a pair of orange-painted posts and a length of rusted cable. Leo had set it up the day before, right after he'd gotten the first whiff of Corbin's plan, using the same rig he once used to keep mountain bikers off the muddy switchbacks after a spring thaw.

Corbin saw the barricade and slowed, then stopped entirely. For a long minute he just stared, as if by will alone he could make it vanish.

Then he looked up and saw Leo, arms folded, leaning against a signpost like he owned the mountain.

"Good evening," Leo called, voice echoing in the still. "Road's out."

Corbin didn't respond. He turned, angling for the switchback to the west, but found the way blocked by a new deadfall—another bit of trail work, this one courtesy of an afternoon's effort with a handsaw and a borrowed pry bar.

Cody and Leo took the slope slow, giving Corbin time to process.

At the van, Corbin fumbled for his keys. He tried the door, got it open, but found the way blocked by a stack of evidence bags—plastic bins full of eggs, labeled and ready for transport. He tried to load the gold-banded egg inside, but his hands shook, and the case clattered to the ground.

Leo watched, almost feeling sorry for the man. Almost.

"You want to tell us where the rest are?" Leo said. "Or do you want to wait for the rangers to sort it out?"

Corbin slammed the van door and spun, anger finally breaking through the chemical calm. "You don't understand," he said, voice tight. "If you stop me, you stop everything. The research, the preservation—the whole future for these birds."

Leo shrugged. "Maybe the future isn't yours to take."

Cody hung back, watching the scene unfold. He pulled out the field notebook, flipped to the page with the permit copy, and held it up. "You know this isn't legit, right? Even if you got it signed, you're holding protected wildlife. That's federal. And local."

Corbin didn't answer. He set the egg down, hands raised. "What are you, the local enforcers? You think anyone's going to believe two kids over a respected researcher?"

Leo smiled, a patient, tired smile. "I've lived here long enough to know people believe the truth if you shout it loud enough."

Corbin tried one last time for dignity, straightening his coat, smoothing his hair. "You're making a mistake," he said. "They won't thank you. The world never does."

Leo shook his head. "We don't do it for thanks."

Behind them, a pair of headlights bounced up the road—Forest Service, called in by Cody's message the minute they left the depression. The truck braked hard, tires sliding on the loose cinders, and the ranger stepped out, face set in a don't-mess-with-me scowl.

She took one look at the tableau—the eggs, the gear, Corbin standing with empty hands—and sighed.

"Mr. Vaught?" she said, reading the name from her notes. "You know you're not supposed to be up here after dark. Or at all, with those birds."

Corbin, defeated, didn't argue. He just waited as she snapped photos, read him his rights, and zip-tied his wrists together with the same clinical efficiency he'd shown the chicks.

Leo kept an eye on the eggs, making sure each one was accounted for. He helped the ranger load them into a padded box, signing the chain-of-custody paperwork with a flourish.

Cody, relieved but exhausted, leaned against the van. "What do you think will happen to him?"

Leo thought about it. "He'll get a lawyer. Maybe even keep his job. But he won't ever set foot on this mountain again."

The ranger finished with Corbin and motioned for Leo and Cody to follow. "You boys want a ride back to the village?"

Leo shook his head. "We'll walk. Feels right to do it on foot."

Cody grinned, despite the ache in his bones. "Guide's Eye?"

"Guide's Luck," Leo said.

They watched as the ranger truck wound down the hill, red tail-lights painting the trees in stripes of warning and triumph.

When the last sound of the engine was gone, Leo turned to Cody. "You hungry?"

"Starved."

They set off down the dark road, the eggs and the legend safe for another season.

At the crest of the ridge, the sky began to clear. Stars punched through the cloud cover, bright and fierce.

Cody paused, looked back at the empty road, and thought about what Corbin had said—about how the world didn't thank people for doing the right thing. Maybe that was true.

But sometimes the mountain did.

He caught up with Leo, and together they walked on, two black shapes moving through the silver pools of moonlight, the night full of possibility.

sixteen

the falcon's return

DAWN ON CASCADE Falls came in with a hush, then a roar. First, it was the wind nudging at the survey stakes, then the river below catching a flash of gold and shooting it in a hundred directions. The falls themselves glared so white and loud that even the most determined wildlife biologist could only stare at it for a few seconds before giving up.

Leo watched the sunrise from the edge of the old viewing platform, hands jammed deep in his pockets. Cascade Falls was the highest drama on the mountain—a drop so sudden that visitors sometimes left their stomachs behind at the first bend in the trail. Today, though, all the drama was up here, at the makeshift field station the Forest Service had turned into a command post.

He did a quick mental roll call: three rangers (one with a clipboard and a sense of humor, one with a mustache like a snow shovel, and one who looked about twelve), two wildlife rehabbers, one battered picnic table covered in tarps, and, off to the side in the world's most obvious “unmarked” government SUV, a very tired and slightly less smug Corbin Vaught.

The evidence table looked like a yard sale for the world's most boring supervillain: climbing gear, duct tape, three varieties of bird carrier (two custom, one off-the-shelf), a thermal-imaging scope with a cracked housing, and a stack of field notebooks rubber-banded together. There was also, for good measure, a Ziploc full of what Leo

recognized as forged research permits. The ink was already running in the morning dew.

Cody was there, too, sleeves rolled up and talking to the lead rehabber. He looked more alive than he had in days, like he'd plugged into a fresh socket and was just waiting for someone to throw the switch. Every few seconds, his eyes darted to the horizon, then to the crate at the center of the table.

Inside the crate were four peregrine nestlings, lined up in fleece like a box of Christmas chocolates. Their bodies were soft and barely feathered, but already the beaks were curved for business. Each bird had a tiny leg band, color-coded and numbered, and all four blinked in sullen, sleepy synchrony.

"Support the body fully, but don't restrict the wings," Cody said, demonstrating for the youngest ranger—who looked at the chick as though it might explode if he blinked wrong. Cody made it look easy, cradling the bird with the steadiness of a surgeon and the reverence of someone holding a priceless fossil. "The trick is to move slow, but not nervous. Birds smell it."

The ranger nodded, swallowed hard, and repeated the gesture. The nestling made a halfhearted attempt to nip him, but then decided against it and settled back into the crook of his hand.

Leo sidled over, took one look at the tableau, and couldn't help himself. "No coffee jitters today, right?"

The ranger gave a strangled laugh, almost dropping the chick. Cody shot Leo a look, but he was already moving down the table, scanning the rest of the gear. There was an air of high alert around everything: the way the rangers checked and re-checked the evidence tags, the way the reporters kept their distance but aimed parabolic mics with the precision of snipers, the way Corbin's face stayed locked in neutral even as the SUV's windows fogged from his breathing.

Above, a pair of adult peregrines circled. Their calls—a kind of rolling, metallic "keeeeee"—cut through the static of the falls. Leo looked up and watched them wheel overhead, shadows flickering across the clearing. The birds flew with a tight, angry energy, like they'd been awake all night and weren't planning to let anyone forget it.

He turned back to the table, where Cody was mid-explanation:

“We’ll use the soft carriers for the scramble. Once we’re at the ledge, we’ll do a handoff one at a time. If the parents are still in the area, they’ll approach within minutes.”

The lead rehabber, a woman with a short crop of silver hair and a dry, desert-wind accent, nodded. “You want to do the placement?”

Cody hesitated, then shook his head. “You know the nest site better. I’ll spot and document.”

Leo caught the look between them—mutual respect, but also the sense that neither of them was quite ready for what might happen next.

Reporters milled at the boundary rope, cameras bristling. One of them, a woman in an orange parka with a voice that could cut drywall, called out, “Is it true the birds were genetically altered?” Her tone was half joke, half serious.

The mustachioed ranger handled the answer with a shrug. “It’s a wild population. Nature’s the biggest mad scientist.”

Leo liked that answer. He drifted closer to the edge of the overlook, where the ground sloped down in a fast, loose tumble to the creekbed below. The falls sounded different from here—deeper, less sharp, almost like a growl.

Cody joined him, hands still in falconry gloves. He was flushed with adrenaline, but he leaned on the railing and let out a long, slow breath.

“Feel weird?” Leo asked.

Cody nodded. “It’s like... one wrong move and the whole season’s wasted.”

Leo grinned. “You’ll do fine. Just don’t drop a baby bird on national television.”

Cody gave a small, doomed smile. “No pressure.”

A commotion at the evidence table drew their attention. The youngest nestling had slipped out of the ranger’s hand and was making a break for the edge of the crate. The rehabber snatched it mid-roll, tucked it back in, and gave the ranger a look that said, “Nice try, rookie.” The chick, undaunted, fixed Leo with a beady, prehistoric glare.

Another round of calls echoed overhead. One of the adult falcons dove low, strafing the clearing before swooping back up to rejoin its mate. The move was pure bravado, but it sent a ripple through the

crowd. The reporter in orange ducked, then looked around, pretending she hadn't.

Leo watched the birds, then looked at Cody. "They know what's up."

Cody's reply was soft. "So do we, now."

A siren whooped from the village below—a sound that meant, in this part of the world, either the volunteer fire crew had caught a break, or someone had finally lost a fight with a four-wheeler. The news crews tensed, then, realizing it wasn't for them, sagged back to their regular stakeout posture.

The lead ranger called everyone in. "We're ready to move. Path is clear to the first site."

Leo fell in behind the procession: the two rehabbers, Cody at their shoulder, then the evidence ranger and, bringing up the rear, the youngest of the group, cradling the last carrier with the wary devotion of a bomb technician. The news crews followed at a respectful distance, though a couple of the braver ones tried to edge ahead, only to be corralled by the ranger with the snowplow mustache.

They reached the first nest site in under ten minutes—a battered slab of limestone thirty feet above the water, half-concealed by a patch of old-growth juniper. The way up was a scramble, but Leo took point, testing each foothold, then signaling back when the way was safe. The rehabber followed, moving with a confidence that said she'd done this a hundred times, then Cody, then the rest.

At the ledge, everything changed. The roar of the falls was closer, now, and the light of morning cast the whole canyon in a weird, cathedral glow. The nest itself was just a shallow scrape in the dust, lined with shed feathers and a single, iridescent pebble. Leo recognized the handiwork—he'd seen a dozen like it as a kid, before he knew what a peregrine was or why people cared about them.

The lead rehabber set down the first carrier, popped the top, and, with a quick, efficient motion, lifted the chick and eased it into the nest. The bird didn't protest. It huddled, shivered, then, as if remembering a job it had left unfinished, began to chirp.

Cody watched, notebook open, but didn't speak.

Above, one of the adults circled lower and gave a sharp, chiding call. The chick answered with a thread of noise so thin you'd have to lean in to hear it.

Leo leaned in anyway. He watched as the rehabber did the same with the next bird, then the third. Each time, the sound built, a little chorus of squeaks and whistles that got louder with every addition. By the time all three were back in the nest, the noise was enough to draw both parents down. They flared wings, hovered in a stall, then landed at the far end of the ledge.

The first contact was tentative—one adult, stepping with tiny, precise movements, nudged at the nearest chick, then at the second. The birds sniffed, then nipped, then settled.

Cody drew in a breath, and only then did Leo realize he'd been holding his, too.

"They'll stay," the rehabber said, voice flat but triumphant. "You can call the next team up."

Cody nodded, then, on impulse, turned and clapped Leo on the shoulder. "Guide's Eye," he said. "Guide's Luck."

Leo gave him a lopsided smile. "You did the hard part."

They made their way back down, careful not to slip. At the bottom, the news crews pounced, but the rangers kept them at bay with a perimeter of polite but unyielding bodies.

Leo took a last look at the ledge, where the adult falcon now stood sentry over the nest, eyes locked on the humans below.

He lifted a hand, as if to salute.

The bird watched, silent and still, then turned its head and vanished behind the curve of rock.

By noon, the evidence table had shrunk to a single file box, and most of the gear was packed away, tagged and ready for transport. Corbin Vaught remained in the SUV, face blank, only his eyes moving as they tracked every movement of the rangers and rehabbers. When the last chick was returned, the Forest Service officer approached the SUV and said something low through the open window. Corbin didn't react, but after a moment, he looked away from the table, stared at the sky, and didn't move for a long time.

Leo found Cody leaning against a rail, the battered telescope cradled in his arms. He looked down at the falls, then at the field notebook he'd rescued from the smugglers' ledge.

"You sticking around?" Leo asked.

Cody shrugged. "I have data to log. And a story to write up, I guess."

Leo grinned. "Could always use another local. We've got better coffee than the university."

Cody smiled, genuine. "I'll think about it."

They stood together, not talking, while the world shifted around them. The wind blew colder, the sun flashed off the river, and somewhere high above, a falcon screamed—not in anger this time, but in something like joy.

Leo listened, then closed his eyes and let the sound carry him.

For once, it felt like the mountain was saying thanks.

The drop to the nest shelf was a lot less terrifying if you knew what to expect. Leo played the part of mountain goat, showing the others how to twist their weight to avoid rolling an ankle, how to use the exposed tree roots as handholds. The limestone was wet and slick, shot through with narrow bands of moss that looked innocent but would send you skidding with zero warning.

He stepped out first, boots anchoring on a divot he'd found years ago. Behind him, the wildlife rehabber—the one with the silver crewcut and nerves of steel—followed. She'd tucked the chick carrier under one arm, keeping the other free for balance. Cody brought up the rear, both hands wrapped around the battered telescope like it was made of spun glass.

"Step exactly where I step," Leo said, his voice barely above the tumble of the falls. "No improvising."

"I don't improvise," Cody said, breathless but game. "That's your department."

The ledge narrowed, then widened into a shallow bowl with just

enough room for all three of them to huddle. The nest scrape was at the far end, exactly where they'd left it yesterday—a pocket of dust and fine gravel, lined with the down feathers of previous generations.

The noise here was different. The waterfall, so loud on the rim, became a low, steady engine. What took over was the sound of wind and wings—every few seconds, a shadow would break over the ledge as one of the parent falcons made a pass.

Leo crouched and waved the rehabber forward. She knelt, then opened the carrier and, as gently as if handling a bomb, lifted out the first chick. The bird squirmed, then went still, its eyes locked on the sky above.

Cody, positioned just out of the way, popped the cap on the telescope. He held it up, fiddling with the focus until the nest filled the glass.

"What do you see?" Leo asked, keeping his attention on the ledge.

Cody didn't answer at first. Through the battered scope, everything sharpened—he could see the tremble in the chick's neck, the fine, quivering dust motes around its beak. Then he saw something else.

A thread of light, so faint it looked imaginary, stretched between the chick and the parent circling above. At first it was a wisp, almost torn by the wind, but as the rehabber set the bird down, the thread brightened. It pulsed once, twice, then held steady.

"Got eyes on the little one—almost there," Cody whispered. His shoulders dropped, a whole overnight's worth of tension evaporating in a heartbeat.

Leo grinned, though he kept his focus on the chick. It shuffled, then burrowed its beak into the nest lining. The parent falcon wheeled again, then tucked its wings and dove—a power move, but it pulled up at the last second and landed on a branch ten feet above.

"They'll check from a distance first," Leo said. "Make sure it's safe."

Cody made a noise that could have meant agreement or just awe.

"Ready for number two?" the rehabber asked. She was already prepping the second bird, hands steady as a metronome.

"Go," Leo said.

This chick was feistier. It peeped, flapped, and nearly wriggled free

before being set down. Instantly, both parent falcons screamed from above, voices echoing off the rock. The sound was sharp, electric, and even Leo felt his pulse double.

Cody brought the telescope up again. The thread of light appeared faster this time, arcing in a clean, golden line from parent to chick. The bond snapped tight, then spread—a web, a net, something that looked alive. Cody exhaled, the breath shaky.

“It’s working,” he said. “They’re responding.”

Leo leaned in, looked through the scope. The lines of energy were invisible to his naked eye, but he trusted Cody’s word. He’d seen what the telescope could do, seen how it picked out the hidden stories of the mountain.

The third chick went even smoother. By now, both parent birds had landed—one on the branch, the other on the edge of the nest. They bobbed their heads, eyes never leaving the humans, but made no move to attack. The rehabber set down the third bird, which immediately rolled onto its back, feet in the air like a goofball. Leo snorted.

“They always do that?” he asked.

“Only the confident ones,” the rehabber replied.

Cody tracked the exchange through the telescope. “The web is holding,” he said. “It’s like... they’re weaving the family back together.”

Leo took a step back, giving the birds space. “That’s your science at work,” he said. “Or maybe just your luck.”

Cody didn’t argue.

They lingered, crouched against the wind, watching as the parent falcons shuffled closer to the nest. One reached out with its beak, nudged the nearest chick, then gave a low, soft call—a different sound than before. Leo recognized it. It was the sound birds made when the danger had passed.

He looked at Cody. “You want to give the last one a shot?”

Cody hesitated, eyes on the scope, then nodded. “Yeah. I do.”

He took the carrier from the rehabber, who watched him with the patience of a teacher letting a student take the lead. Cody knelt, opened the top, and cupped the bird in both hands. He paused, then set it in the nest with a kind of gentleness Leo hadn’t expected.

He raised the telescope, eyes wide.

"It's different," Cody said. "This one—" He faltered, then turned the scope to Leo. "You have to see."

Leo looked. Through the battered glass, the chick shimmered, edges soft and golden. The thread of light between it and the parents was thicker than before, almost a cable. The whole scene looked unreal—a family made of light and motion, humming in the early sun.

Leo pulled back, grinning. "You seeing this?" he said to the others.

The rehabber laughed. "I'm seeing a lot of birds who just got their lives back."

Above, the wind changed. One of the parent falcons screamed again, but this time it was a cleaner sound, proud and sharp. The family was whole.

Leo nudged Cody, who was still staring through the scope. "Let's get out of their way. You want to go first, or should I?"

Cody lowered the glass, blinking hard. "You lead. Guide's Luck."

Leo flashed a thumbs-up, then picked his way back along the ledge, careful as ever. Cody followed, the telescope slung across his back. At the bottom, the rehabber shook their hands.

"That was one for the books," she said.

Leo just nodded, but he knew what she meant.

At the top, the rangers and the news crews waited, cameras poised. Leo gave a quick debrief: "All three accepted. Parents are on-site. No aggression, no rejection."

Cody added, "Bonds re-established. Family unit holding."

The words were technical, but the meaning was simple: the chicks were home.

The crowd relaxed, the tension draining from the air.

Leo glanced up, saw the falcons riding the wind. He wondered, for a second, if they even knew what had happened—or if, in the world of birds, this was just one more weird day on the mountain.

He looked at Cody, who seemed different now—more sure, less haunted.

"Not bad," Leo said, bumping him with an elbow.

"Not bad at all," Cody replied.

They stood together in the morning sun, letting the mountain settle back into its own rhythm.

The day wasn't even half over, but Leo felt like he'd seen a whole year pass in an hour.

Sometimes, the best stories wrote themselves.

They saved the golden one for last. Not because anyone said so, but because every person in the recovery team, from the mustachioed ranger to the news crew clustered at the overlook, felt it: the little bird in the final crate was different.

In the soft, amber light of late morning, Leo watched as the wildlife specialist prepped the carrier on the overlook bench. This chick was the largest by a margin, more alert, more vocal. Where its siblings were dusty gray and cream, this one flashed copper and yellow along its pinfeathered shoulders, and when it stretched a wing the edge gleamed like the tip of a fresh-minted coin.

Cody hovered nearby, making himself useful by re-checking the field notes and running through the reintegration protocol out loud, a mantra for anyone within earshot: "Place the nestling, withdraw, observe for ten minutes. Look for parent response. No interference unless the bird is at risk."

The ranger with the clipboard smiled. "You sound like you're prepping a Mars rover, Westbrook."

"Better success rate," Cody said. "No offense to NASA."

The wildlife specialist shot Leo a look that said, "Is he always like this?" Leo just grinned and gave a thumbs-up. "Only before the good stuff happens."

At the edge of the ledge, the wind made the pine sapling bow low, releasing a gust of scent that mixed sharp and sweet in Leo's nose. The falls below shot mist high enough to chill the back of his neck. Somewhere to the east, a hawk kited on the updraft, casting a long shadow that seemed to stretch all the way from the desert to the rim.

Leo took the lead again, shuffling sideways along the cliff edge, but this time Cody followed without waiting to be asked. The wildlife specialist brought up the rear, handling the chick carrier with the delicacy of a bakery box.

They reached the nest shelf. The parent falcons had not left. In fact, they perched closer than before, silent now, the color of their heads stark against the bluff. Leo could feel the tension in the way they

gripped the rock, the way they twitched their tails. A single wrong move and the whole mountain would know about it.

Cody set the telescope down and braced it against a patch of moss. He didn't look at the chick. His entire focus was on the glass and the ledge below.

"Ready?" the wildlife specialist asked.

Cody just nodded.

Leo got down low, signaling the specialist forward. She moved with catlike caution, unclipping the carrier, then sliding the top open with one slow breath. The chick let out a single, piercing call—like a whistle through a reed—then clambered to the front of the carrier, eager as a puppy at a half-open gate.

She scooped it up, both hands secure, and carried it the last two feet to the scrape. The other chicks shuffled and made space. The golden one settled in, wings trembling, eyes fixed on the adults overhead.

Cody was already at the telescope, hands white-knuckled around the barrel.

Leo whispered, "What do you see?"

Cody didn't answer, but his mouth dropped open.

Through the battered brass lens, the chick glowed. Not just an edge of gold, but a full, luminous aura—pulsing at first, then steady, like the filament in a perfect old light bulb. The glow spilled from the chick's wingtip, formed a line in the air, and reached up, a gold-plated cable running straight to the breast of the closer adult falcon.

The adult didn't dive. It didn't shriek. It just stepped off the ledge and glided down, landing two feet from the nest. The other parent followed, swooping in a tight circle, then folding its wings and dropping into place beside the golden chick.

For a moment, the four of them sat perfectly still.

Then, as Cody watched through the scope, the aura from the chick's wings flickered, split, and reached out to the other nestlings. The entire family glowed, each in their own shade—blue, white, a faint orange, but the gold from the fourth chick was strongest, tying them all together in a knot of light.

"They're bonded," Cody breathed, so quiet Leo had to lean in to

hear. "They're—" He struggled for words, then settled on, "It's all one system. They're family again."

The parent falcon stepped to the edge of the nest, tapped the golden chick's beak with its own, and made a sound so soft Leo barely heard it. The chick bobbed its head, then nuzzled into the feathered crook of the parent's chest. The other chicks followed suit, scooting in, tiny bodies radiating trust and warmth.

The wildlife specialist let out a whoop, then caught herself and covered her mouth. Leo beamed. The mustachioed ranger, watching from above, gave a tiny fist pump. Even the news crew forgot to stage-whisper, instead breaking into a spontaneous round of "did you see that, did you see that?"

Cody lowered the telescope, eyes shining in a way that had nothing to do with the sun.

He looked at Leo. "It's done," he said, voice steady now. "They're home."

"Guide's Eye?" Leo teased, just to break the moment.

"Guide's Luck," Cody agreed.

They gave the birds their space, retreating up the ledge as carefully as they'd come. At the overlook, the wildlife specialist scribbled a line in her log, then offered the pen to Cody. He wrote something quick, then set it down.

The crowd at the overlook shifted, the atmosphere somehow lighter. The rangers packed up their gear. The news crew called in their wrap. The rehabber shared a silent high-five with the youngest ranger.

Leo and Cody drifted to the edge of the overlook, where the falls ran so white in the sun it looked like someone had sliced the mountain open.

The telescope, battered and beautiful, sat between them. Cody lifted it one last time, then, without looking through the glass, pointed it at the sky.

"Never thought I'd see the end of a legend," Cody said. "But here it is."

Leo looked at the river, then the birds, then his friend.

"Don't bet on it," he said. "These mountains are full of stories. You just gave them another one."

Cody smiled, a real, easy one.

They watched as, below, the falcon family huddled in the nest—four sparks of light against the blue stone and white river, too small for most eyes, but not for theirs.

The golden hour stretched on, and the legend lived, bright and new and wild as ever.

seventeen

the ethics of the lens

CODY LET the heavy pine door swing shut behind him, the wood sighing on its hinges with a sound that felt more like permission than protest. The Lofty Nest was a world away from the wet, wild air of the cliffs—inside, the amber-lit shop pressed close, steeped in beeswax and old leather and cedar so sharp it prickled his throat. Overhead, the stained glass hangings caught the sun and broke it into soft shapes on the walls, while the antique bulbs made every shadow glow as if on purpose. There was birdsong here, too—some trick of hidden speakers or a caged canary Cody never spotted—but it was quieter than memory, tucked under the patient ticking of clocks.

He stood just inside the threshold for a moment, telescope in hand, eyes adjusting. The interior was an organized clutter: narrow aisles flanked by shelves bowed with hand tools, explorer's journals, stone artifacts, and trays of small, numbered bones. To the right, a river rock fireplace burned low even in the late spring, filling the corners with a low, constant heat. Erica Powell, hands busy at the counter, looked up when she heard the door.

"You came back in one piece," she said, setting aside a roll of tattered linen.

Cody nodded, suddenly aware of the wildness he still carried. His boots were caked with dried mud; his jacket, which had started the trip as "alpine graphite," was now half camouflage with streaks of ochre and

pine resin. The telescope, at least, was clean. He'd wrapped it in the same flannel he'd borrowed from Leo, and for the past three days it had never left his sight.

He crossed to the counter, weaving past a low display of mining lanterns, and laid the telescope down, hands lingering. Erica wiped her own hands on her apron before picking it up. She didn't ask for explanation or context. She just cradled the brass, fingers moving slow, almost shy.

"It's changed," she said quietly, not quite a question.

Cody glanced at the barrel. Where once it had gleamed like a trophy, the metal now shimmered with patches of deep blue, near-black at the seams—an effect Cody had first noticed at the summit, when the sun and the river and the sky had all collided in his field of view.

"I think it always does that," he said. "Depending on who's looking."

Erica smiled, her eyes tired and kind. "Artifacts don't solve mysteries," she said, running her thumb along the etched constellations. "They only frame the question in ways we can see. The rest is up to us."

Behind them, a grandfather clock reset the hour with a soft, optimistic chime.

Cody looked around the shop—really looked, for the first time since his first awkward day here. The artifacts all seemed to hum with their own purpose now, as if the room was a kind of low-gear engine, always collecting energy and waiting for someone to notice. He wondered how many other objects in the room had been touched by a story like his.

"I should apologize," he said. "I thought it was just a prop. A research placebo."

Erica traced a finger around the lens ring, then set the scope on the velvet mat she'd cleared for it. "If it were just a placebo, I'd have put a price tag on it and let the tourists fight it out." She tilted her head. "But you learned something, didn't you?"

Cody thought of the nest, the impossible gold in the falcon's feathers, the way the Guide's Eye made patterns out of what he'd always dismissed as random. He thought of Leo's hands, the gentle way he'd

steadied Cody as they climbed. He thought of the field notebook in his pack, now three pages away from full.

"Yeah," he said. "But I don't think I could explain it. Not in a way that would make sense."

Erica shrugged, then gestured to the battered telescope. "You'd be surprised. People come in here every summer with a story about something they saw—usually a ghost, sometimes a bear. Most of them want me to tell them they're not crazy. Or that what they saw has a name, a pedigree, a place in the old legends. Sometimes I can, sometimes I can't." She paused, then gave him a sidelong smile. "But the people who leave here better than they came? They're the ones who stop looking for proof, and start looking for meaning."

The words sat with Cody a while. He watched Erica reach under the counter and produce a battered wooden box, padded inside with blue felt. She placed the telescope gently inside, then closed the lid with a hush of metal and air.

"It's your turn to put it back?" Cody guessed.

Erica shook her head. "Not for a while yet. I think it needs a rest." She set the box on a high shelf behind the counter, next to an old camera and what looked like a ship's compass. "There are some things even the mountain can't rush."

The shop went quiet then, save for the ticking clocks and the persistent, faraway sound of the fire. Cody felt something unclench in his shoulders, a tension he hadn't realized he'd been holding since the first hour of the hike. He watched Erica tidy up the counter, hands moving methodically, as if even the smallest job deserved respect.

He wanted to say more, but the words wouldn't organize. So he just nodded and drifted over to the bookshelf nearest the door. A cluster of field guides and slim, locally-published books stood sentry; above them, a faded photo of John Wesley Powell himself, hair wild and eyes daring the world to outlast him.

Cody pulled out a book at random, flipping to a page at the center. The section was about corvid intelligence—how crows and jays could solve puzzles, outwit researchers, even teach each other new tricks.

He read a paragraph, then glanced at Erica. "Were you always a collector?" he asked.

She looked up, considering. "No. I started as a storyteller. The collecting came later. You can't keep a legend alive if you only tell it once." She smiled again. "Artifacts help. They keep the questions fresh."

He closed the book, returning it to its slot. "It's funny," he said. "I used to think you couldn't trust anything you couldn't measure. Now I'm not so sure."

Erica tapped the side of the telescope's box, then gestured at the room. "The best science leaves room for wonder. Otherwise, you're just cataloguing the furniture in an empty house."

The door creaked again—this time a couple entered, hands linked, both smiling in the quiet way of people who had just come down from a perfect hike. Erica greeted them, and Cody faded back toward the fireplace, watching the exchange. He realized he could recite every scent in the shop, name every artifact in the display case, remember every line of the field notebook he'd filled. But he also knew he'd never be able to tell the story of the last week in just numbers and notes.

As he reached for the door, he turned to look back at Erica. She caught his eye, then pointed to the shelf where the telescope now rested.

"Come by any time," she said. "We'll be here."

Cody nodded, then stepped out into the new gold of the afternoon, the memory of the ticking clocks following him like a pulse.

He walked down Movie Ranch Road with his hands in his pockets, breathing the cold, sharp air, and realized, maybe for the first time, that every legend had to start somewhere. Sometimes the best you could do was carry it forward, one careful step at a time.

An hour later, the Lofty Nest was nearly empty, and the afternoon sun had faded to a color Cody could only describe as "ash at the edge of fire." Erica had retreated to a low, velvet-lined case beneath the front window. Each step on the old floorboards groaned as if cataloging her passage for posterity. She unlocked the display and withdrew a battered wood box, not unlike the one she'd placed the telescope in earlier, only this one was older, stained with centuries of fingerprints and the waxy fog that came from never quite being dusted.

She beckoned Cody over. He followed, leaning against a shelf that bristled with hand-tied fishing flies, antique keys, and a small, defunct wind-up bear. The air near the case was warmer than the rest of the

shop—a heat that didn’t seem to radiate from the fireplace, but instead from the artifacts themselves, as if each one was generating its own low field of memory.

Erica opened the box. Inside was a flat, sepia photo mounted on cracked cardboard: three men in rough coats, standing atop a rocky outcrop. The one on the left was so lean he looked carved from bone, while the man in the center—barrel-chested, mustache flared like a hawk’s wing—had a hand draped across a walking stick. The third man, on the right, held a telescope, its brass gleaming even in monochrome.

“My great-grandfather is the one in the center,” Erica said, tapping the photo. “He was a trail guide for the government survey, back before the maps even got the rivers right. That’s John Wesley Powell on the left, and the man with the scope—he was just called Red. Nobody remembers his last name. It might have been lost before they even got to Utah.”

Cody studied the photo, then glanced at the closed box on the shelf behind Erica. “So it really was Powell’s telescope.”

Erica nodded. “He used it for the Grand Canyon run, but lost it to a flash flood. My great-grandfather found it washed up by the Colorado months later, cleaned it, and sent it back. Powell mailed it here as a thank-you—he said the glass was better for viewing the stars than the rocks.” She closed the old box and brushed her thumb over the clasp. “We kept it here, but my mom never let anyone use it. ‘Bad luck to see through another man’s lens,’ she’d say.”

Cody tried to parse that, then shook his head. “How does that work for you, as the keeper?”

Erica smiled. “I never looked through it. Not once. My job is to hold on to it until the next person comes along who needs it more than I do.”

They stood in silence, the warmth near the display bleeding into the cold of the rest of the room. Cody could feel his posture slacken, the old grad-student hunch giving way to something softer. He found himself staring at the fishhook collection—each fly a careful imitation of a thing that wanted to live—and thought about the mountain, the birds, and the blue energy scars that still burned in his memory.

“I saw things out there,” he said finally, “that I can’t... explain. Not

really. Like the way a nest links to the rock, or how birds can change the color of the sky if you look from just the right place.” He hesitated, picking at the seam of his jacket. “Through the telescope, it made sense. But not the kind of sense I could put in a spreadsheet.”

Erica considered, then nodded. “Every person sees something different through its lens. Some see the past, some see the future. Some just get a better look at what’s right in front of them.” She set the photo back in the box and closed it gently. “What did you see?”

Cody chewed the question. “I thought it was just about tracking the birds—plotting their movement, checking the data. But then, on the last morning, I realized... I was watching the story happen. Not just as a scientist, but as someone who cared what came next.” He shrugged. “I didn’t know I could do that.”

Erica’s smile was half pride, half apology. “Sometimes the real trick is learning what questions you’re allowed to ask. The mountain is old—it’s used to people looking for answers. It’s the ones who come looking for new questions that get to see something special.”

A breeze from outside rattled the front door, stirring the wind chimes. For a moment, the room felt suspended—every artifact, every photo, every hidden history balanced and waiting.

Cody stood up straight. “You said it was bad luck to see through another man’s lens,” he said. “But what if you never take the lens off?”

Erica thought about it, then laughed, a sound as clean and sharp as the mountain air after rain. “Then you get to make your own luck.”

He let the words settle, then nodded. The floorboards under his feet felt more solid, as if the shop itself was rooting for him.

“Thank you,” he said, and meant it.

“You’ll be back,” Erica said, not as a question.

He smiled, for real this time. “Yeah. I think I will.”

She turned to tidy the display, and Cody drifted back toward the fireplace, feeling the warmth on his hands and face. The clock over the mantle ticked, and for once, he didn’t mind the sound of time moving forward.

The mountain had given him something to carry. And as he left the shop, the old floorboards didn’t creak so much as sing.

Before the sun set, Cody found himself back at the counter, field notebook open and ready. He'd returned not for another artifact, but to show Erica something of his own—a log of the last week, every page a nervous system of diagrams, GPS points, and micro-observations. The paper was warped from sweat and rain; the margins crowded with thoughts he hadn't dared to voice out loud.

He pushed the notebook across the glass. "I tried to keep track of everything. Every anomaly, every data point. But... there's a bunch of stuff I can't explain."

Erica studied the entries, her eyebrows rising at the compressed handwriting. "That's the smallest script I've ever seen outside of a priest's bible," she said. "You know, most people just draw little stick birds and call it good."

Cody smiled, sheepish. "If I don't document, it's like it didn't happen."

She paged through, stopping at a sketch of the waterfall, the blue energy scar drawn in colored pencil. "What's this one?" she asked.

Cody's voice dipped. "That's where I started to see... I don't know. Patterns that didn't show up on the sensors. Like, when I looked through the telescope, there were these connections—between rocks, birds, even the air. It wasn't in the data, but I kept seeing it."

Erica closed the book with a gentle snap. "Sometimes the things we can't measure are the most real." She looked at the telescope resting on the counter, its brass now throwing off a soft, amber glow in the shop's evening light. "You know what I like best about artifacts? They're proof that our ancestors saw things we forgot how to look for."

She placed the telescope in its velvet-lined wooden case, slow and careful. "The best science leaves room for wonder," she said. The lid closed with a sound that seemed to hush the room.

Cody watched as she put the case high on the shelf behind her, where it sat in pride of place among relics and memories. "What happens to it now?" he asked.

Erica shrugged. "It waits. Sometimes for years. Sometimes someone

comes in and they don't even know what they're looking for, but the telescope always knows. It's patient."

Cody nodded, watching the dust motes swirl in the last rays of light through the window. He felt a strange comfort in the idea of an artifact biding its time, ready to change someone else's mind.

He shouldered his pack, tucking the field notebook inside, and thanked Erica one last time. At the threshold, he paused, unable to resist a glance back at the shelf.

The case caught the light just so, and for a moment—impossible but there—he saw the etched constellations on the barrel shift, stars sliding into new arrangements. He blinked, shook his head, and chalked it up to the angle, the way amber and shadow tangled after sundown.

But he left the Lofty Nest feeling taller, lighter, as if the mountain itself had handed him a new set of questions, one only he could see.

Outside, the wind was cool and crisp, and the village felt at peace. Cody walked up the road, his boot prints pressing into the fine red dust, the memory of the telescope's impossible vision alive in every step.

He didn't know what he'd see next, but he was ready.

eighteen

the unseen wing

NAVAJO LAKE at sunset looked nothing like it did on postcards. The water, flat and black as obsidian, turned every last bit of dying sunlight into long, trembling streaks of gold. The overlook stood on a battered concrete platform, rimmed with a fence made from rough logs so full of beetle holes they were more air than wood. Down below, the lake wound through a patchwork of reeds and drowned tree trunks, all of it half-hidden by haze that tasted sweet and sharp in the nose. Pine, mostly—some blue, some red—and the distant ghost of old campfires.

Leo propped his elbows on the rail, a Red Bull going warm in his hand. Cody sat cross-legged on top of a bench, his shoes lined up perfectly under the slatted seat, notebook open but untouched. They'd driven up here "for the view," but after five minutes it was obvious neither of them planned to look at anything except the water and each other.

The air was just cold enough that you noticed every time you breathed.

"Guess the circus really did leave town," Leo said, his voice low and loose.

Cody nodded, but kept watching the lake. "Corbin got indicted yesterday. Seven counts—two federal, five state. Illegally collecting wildlife, falsifying research records, using stolen equipment. The works."

"Bet the grant money's not refundable."

"Not unless you have a time machine." Cody smiled, but it flickered quick as it came. "They're keeping him in Kanab, at least until the judge comes back from vacation."

Leo took a long drink, then pressed the can against his cheek. "You ever feel sorry for him?"

"Sometimes." Cody picked at a corner of the bench. "He wanted to be right so badly he convinced himself there was no difference between doing good science and being good. Like, if you manipulate the data, but it's in the service of some higher cause, does it still count as fraud?"

Leo shrugged. "Only if you get caught."

Cody grinned at that, and for a second they were just two guys talking trash, not two accidental heroes of a local myth. He closed the notebook, as if that could shut out the last week's worth of adrenaline.

"Anyway," Leo said, "the wildlife center got all the birds back. They released the first clutch yesterday, up by the falls. Ranger said the parents acted like nothing had ever happened."

"I read the report," Cody said. "Adoption rate's one hundred percent if you replace the chicks fast enough. The parents can't even tell they're not the originals."

Leo whistled, impressed. "So you're saying nature is just winging it, too."

"That's one interpretation." Cody watched a blue jay swoop low over the water, its call sharp enough to cut air. "But I think it's more about... resilience. You lose something, but you find a way to keep going. Even if it means pretending nothing happened."

They both went quiet for a stretch. Far down by the shore, a family was packing up their paddleboards, kids yelling back and forth as they hunted for lost flip-flops in the mud. A dog barked, once, then went silent. The only other sounds were the wind, the creak of the old railing, and the whine of some outboard on the far side of the lake.

Leo cracked his neck, then looked sidelong at Cody. "You miss it?"

"Miss what?"

"All the drama. The chase, the cliffhangers, the chance to look smarter than every other scientist in the state."

Cody considered this, then shook his head. "Not really. I like being

right, but I think I like knowing better more. The adventure part—" he paused, trying to organize it—"I didn't hate it. But it was easier when everything fit in a spreadsheet."

"You can still have a spreadsheet, man." Leo jabbed a finger at Cody's chest. "Just fill it with legends and lies instead of raw numbers. Be a little mythic."

Cody tried to hide his laugh, but it came out anyway. "That's not how science works, Leo."

Leo grinned. "Maybe not in a lab. But out here, the stories are the only things anyone remembers."

They watched the last of the sunlight hit the water. It looked like the whole lake was trying to catch fire, every little wave toppling over itself in a scramble to stay gold for one more second. Up on the overlook, the wind shifted, bringing a hint of snowmelt and the iron tang of water fresh from the depths.

Cody turned a page in his notebook, finally jotting something down.

"What is it?" Leo asked.

"Just a thought." Cody chewed the pen cap, then glanced at Leo. "You ever wonder if we just solved the wrong mystery?"

Leo sipped his Red Bull. "How do you mean?"

"I mean, all the locals—Crabtree, Higgins, even Erica—they already knew something was up with the falcons. They could've told us, but instead they let us chase our tails. Like it wasn't about the birds at all, but about us learning how to pay attention."

Leo considered, then nodded. "Sometimes the mountain just wants to see if you're smart enough to notice."

Cody smiled, softer this time. "I guess so."

Down by the water, the family had finished loading up. The kids clambered into the back of the SUV, each fighting for the window seat. The mom snapped a few quick photos of the lake before the sun dipped for good, then climbed in and slammed the door. The dog gave a last, reluctant bark, then hopped in after.

"They'll be gone in three minutes," Leo said. "You want to bet?"

"No," Cody said. "But I'll bet the birds are back on the cliffs before we even get to the car."

Leo stood, stretching his arms overhead. "You ready to go?"

"Not yet." Cody made a show of soaking in the view. "Let's stay a little longer. I want to see if anything else happens."

They stood in silence, letting the gold fade to blue, then gray, then nothing.

The wind picked up, and for a while, neither man said a word. The lake took on a dull, pewter sheen, and somewhere in the distance a coyote howled, or maybe it was just a trick of the echoes off the hills.

Finally, Leo broke the quiet. "You know, for what it's worth, I'm glad you got stuck here this summer."

Cody turned, caught off-guard. "Thanks," he said, voice almost a whisper.

Leo shrugged. "It's rare you get to see someone change their own mind. Most people just dig in harder."

Cody looked out at the water again, then at the sky, then back at Leo. "I'll try to remember that."

The last of the light was gone now, and the overlook belonged to them alone. They stood there, two black shapes on a platform at the edge of everything, waiting for the world to decide what story it wanted to tell next.

It started with the feeling of being watched. The wind stilled, the water on the lake calmed, and every hair on Cody's arms went up at once. Leo felt it too—he straightened, looked left, then up, eyes narrowing as the last light on the horizon flickered.

A shadow passed over them, huge and silent, the kind of darkness you felt in your chest before you saw it. Not a cloud—there were none left, the sky drained down to velvet and pinhole stars—but something denser, sweeping above the treetops and blotting out Orion's belt for a solid, heart-stopping second.

Both men turned skyward at once, squinting against the dusk.

"Did you—" Leo started.

But before he could finish, it came: a single feather, so big it looked fake, twisting down from the nowhere above. It flashed gold, then scar-

let, then a weird, shifting green that had never been in any bird book. It whirled, lost momentum, and dropped, landing with a soft thump square on Leo's shoulder.

He flinched, not from the weight—it was lighter than a glove—but from the heat of it. The feather was alive, or close enough: it radiated warmth, the kind that gets into your skin and makes your blood go buzzy. It was longer than Leo's arm from elbow to wrist, with a leading edge thick as a thumb, and every barb shimmered like a river on fire.

Leo stared at it, breath coming sharp.

"Dude," Cody said, eyes round as headlights.

Leo plucked the feather off his shoulder, holding it by the base. The shaft bent, flexible as spring steel. He turned it this way and that, watching the color shift in the failing light.

"It's... wow," Leo said, lost for any other word. His thumb brushed the vane, and the feather glowed, faint but unmistakable—a gold that wasn't reflecting anything, but giving off its own light.

Cody reached for his pack, muscle memory already hunting for the evidence kit, but stopped with his hand on the zipper.

"Go ahead," Leo said, voice low. "It's what you do, right?"

Cody looked at him, then at the feather, then back again. The wind picked up, catching the loose edge and making it tremble in Leo's grip.

"I want to," Cody said, his words as deliberate as any he'd ever spoken. "But..."

He let the zipper go. "It's too good. It doesn't want to be pinned to a board."

Leo grinned, the lines in his face turning the smile into something fierce and wild. "You ever seen anything like it?"

Cody shook his head. "No. And I've read every paper."

Leo flicked the feather up, and for a second it floated, caught in the crosscurrent before settling back to his palm. He looked at Cody, something sly in the eyes. "You want to keep it?"

Cody's hand hovered, then he shook his head. "It chose you. Or you earned it. Whatever this is, it's not for me."

Leo ran his finger along the feather's spine. It hummed with a low, electric tingle, like the aftertaste of adrenaline. He tucked it under his arm, careful, and they both turned to look back at the water.

A minute passed. Then five.

Cody said, "You think there was more than one?"

Leo shrugged. "You saw the shadow. Could've been a flock. Or a family. Or just one really, really big legend."

Cody snorted, the sound more joy than disbelief. "I'll take your word for it."

He watched Leo for a while, as if memorizing the way the feather glowed against his shirt, the way the night made their shadows twice as tall.

"Hey, Leo?" Cody said. "Don't let anyone put that in a glass case."

Leo didn't answer at first. He just looked at the feather, then at Cody, and nodded once, hard.

For a moment, the air smelled of ozone and new-cut grass. The lake went glassy, the stars brightening overhead. Down in the dark, a single bird called—high, clear, unafraid.

And for the first time, Cody thought maybe there were mysteries that could stay mysteries. Not because science failed, but because the world was bigger than any kit, any test, any wild-eyed theory.

He smiled, small and secret.

So did Leo.

They stood together, not talking, until the feather's glow dimmed, and the night became just a night again.

They stood a long time after the feather's light faded, neither needing to fill the quiet. Somewhere, out on the lake, a fish jumped; the echo carried all the way up to the overlook. A breeze rattled through the pine needles overhead, and the old wood fence groaned as if settling in for the night.

Without warning, Leo turned the feather in his hands, weighing it like a javelin. He met Cody's eye, grinned, and with a sudden, loose-shouldered motion, flung it into the air above the overlook.

The feather caught the wind and lifted, not falling but rising, climbing on invisible currents. It spiraled upward, picking up speed, until it was just a glimmering line against the blue-black sky. The

motion was fluid and precise—a thing made for air, not for cabinets or glass cases.

They watched as the feather made a long, slow arc, then vanished into the clouds lit pink from the last scraps of sun. It was gone in a breath, as if the sky had always known it was coming back.

Neither spoke. There was nothing to say.

Leo leaned back on the railing, looking a little dazed, as if some part of him had just been rewired for a better frequency. Cody felt it, too—an itch at the base of his skull, a new synapse firing that had nothing to do with the old rules.

“Bet that’s not in the Audubon guide,” Leo said at last.

Cody snorted, his voice more reverent than sarcastic. “Not even close.”

They turned from the overlook, the ground under their boots soft from the day’s warmth. A few paces down the trail, Cody stopped dead.

There, in the bare dirt between boulders, were three footprints: huge, birdlike, each with three toes splayed and sunk almost an inch deep. The prints were clean, the edges sharp, as if pressed by something weighty but impossibly careful.

Leo saw them, too. He crouched for a better look, tracing the outline of one print with his finger. “That’s...” He shook his head. “No way.”

Cody reached for his phone, thumbed the camera app, but as he lifted it the next wind swept through. The dirt shivered; the tracks softened, then faded, the earth closing up behind itself like it had been waiting for the right moment to forget.

Cody kept the phone pointed anyway, snapped a picture of nothing just to prove to himself that sometimes evidence didn’t matter.

Leo straightened, dusting his hands. “You think anyone will believe it?”

Cody pocketed the phone, lips pressed tight. “Does it matter?”

Leo smiled, slow and honest. “Not even a little.”

They walked on, the night crowding close around them. The only sound was the rhythm of their boots on the hardpack, the crackle of old needles and last year’s leaves. Above, the sky shifted from navy to

indigo, the first real stars coming out, untethered by legend or need for explanation.

At the trailhead, they paused. Leo looked back once, as if expecting the feather—or its owner—to show again. Cody just kept his eyes forward, head down, hands in his pockets.

But at the last second, he glanced up, and for a single heartbeat, he thought he saw something moving far above the water: a shape, too big to be real, silhouetted in gold.

He blinked, and it was gone.

They walked on, quiet, each carrying the shape of the mystery inside them. Not to be solved, or pinned, or explained, but to be remembered, exactly as it was.

Sometimes, the best kind of science was just letting the world surprise you.

nineteen

the community toast

THE MORNING AFTER, Duck Creek Village glowed with a mood somewhere between Founders Day and a homecoming parade. Ground + Toasted Bakery—never known for subtlety—had gone all in: colored streamers spanned the windows, looping through every antler sconce and coat hook, while local artists’ watercolors of falcons and canyon scenes filled every patch of open wall. A hand-painted banner hung above the counter, the script half-cursive, half-cursive-collapse, and a little glittery at the ends: DUCK CREEK PROTECTS ITS OWN.

Inside, the air was not so much warm as saturated. Brandi, who ran the place with the speed and efficiency of a barista-slash-ranch foreman, had doubled her cinnamon roll production and moved the espresso machine to the front window, where it could taunt passersby with clouds of bittersweet steam. If you stood close, you could smell the vanilla in her new “Eagle’s Eye” blend—served with a flourish of gold sugar crystals on the foam.

The whole room was a kind of living, pulsing nest. Every table was packed. Locals, off-duty rangers, a clutch of grad students in bird-printed hoodies, two slightly hungover reporters, and—at the far end of the banquette—the Forest Service ranger who’d made the arrest. He wore his uniform, but the boots were unlaced and the hat sat on the table beside him, upended and filling with congratulatory gift cards and maybe a couple scratch-offs.

Cody stood just inside the threshold, shrinking into a corner where the air was thickest. He would have killed for a soundproof booth. Instead, he hovered near the pastry display, hands in pockets, trying to appear engaged with the sourdough croissants. They looked back at him with glossy, apricot-lacquered indifference.

The conversation in the room moved like a flock—everybody talking at once, then falling silent in synchronized swells as the ranger told the best bits of the story. “He made it all the way to the cutoff at Navajo Lake before he realized the tracker was set to live-feed,” the ranger said, shaking his head. “My kid could have seen it on TikTok.”

Laughter erupted. Someone at the next table mimed typing a hashtag, then fumbled his phone, almost spilling his macchiato.

Leo breezed through the crowd, comfortable as ever, high-fiving people who didn’t even know him. He wore the same battered flannel from the rescue, now patched at the elbow and sporting a big, ridiculous “Guide’s Eye” button someone had printed overnight. It looked like a falcon with binoculars, and the caption read, in bold comic sans: I’VE SEEN IT ALL.

He scanned the room, locked eyes with Cody, and made a beeline over.

“Dude,” Leo said, clapping Cody on the shoulder, “you’re famous. Have you checked your phone?”

Cody, who’d intentionally left his phone on silent, shook his head. “Didn’t want to, uh... mess up the vibes.”

“‘Mess up the vibes,’” Leo echoed, grinning. “You’re trending. Top of the regional for—wait, you want to see, or should I just narrate?”

“Go ahead,” Cody said, bracing.

Leo scrolled through his feed, already pulling up the best bits. “Here’s the ‘rescue montage’ with your face Photoshopped onto a peregrine chick. Here’s a meme about ‘Birds Nerds’—which I think is a compliment. And here’s you, apparently, being shipped with Brandi in the comment threads?”

Cody looked over at Brandi, who winked at him without missing a beat on the espresso machine.

Leo barked a laugh. “Oh, man, you’re a regular celebrity. How’s that feel?”

"Like I'd rather be hit by a falling log," Cody muttered, just loud enough for Leo to hear.

"You say that, but you're not even hiding in the parking lot," Leo said, nudging him toward the counter. "Let's get coffee. It's tradition."

Cody allowed himself to be steered up to the register, where Brandi leaned over the counter, elbows on the glass. "One Eagle's Eye for Duck Creek's finest," she said, sliding a mug Cody's way. The coffee was crowned with a swirl of foam and a dusting of gold sugar, glimmering like sunrise.

She lowered her voice. "Seriously, though. You saved the birds, and maybe the town's dignity. Not bad for a week's work."

Cody tried to smile, but his face wobbled in the attempt. "I had help," he said, glancing at Leo, who threw up a peace sign.

Brandi looked at the two of them, then at the room, then back. "That's how we do things out here," she said. "Nobody makes it through alone."

The words landed heavier than the mug in Cody's hand. He sipped the coffee, letting the heat thaw his jaw. The cinnamon and vanilla reminded him of the camp stove at sunrise, of Leo's battered thermos, of the best hours on the mountain when nobody cared who was right or what was next.

Behind him, a burst of applause rolled through the bakery. The ranger at the end of the banquette had finished his story and now accepted a cinnamon roll the size of a baby's head, hoisting it overhead like a trophy. The crowd cheered, someone started a chant ("US-FS! US-FS!"), and for a second, Cody wondered if anyone would notice if he just... ducked out.

No chance. The minute he tried to slide back toward the wall, a burly guy in a puffy vest intercepted him, nearly crushing his hand with a handshake.

"You the bird guy?" the man said.

Cody hesitated. "Sort of?"

"Name's Ted," the guy said, not waiting for a reply. "Used to do trail maintenance. You know how many times people swore they saw the golden talon, but nobody ever believed them? You—" he jabbed a finger at Cody's chest, "—made my whole week. Month, even."

"Oh, um. Thank you?" Cody said, voice cracking.

"Don't be humble, man," Ted said, laughing. "We need more of your type around here. Keeps things interesting."

Before Cody could answer, Ted had melted into the next group, already retelling the story with new embellishments.

Leo sidled up again, balancing two mugs in one hand. "You surviving?"

"Barely," Cody said, scanning for exits.

"Hang in there. It'll die down by lunch."

A kid with an ill-fitting ranger hat darted over, clutching a printout of one of the social-media memes. "Are you Cody Westbrook?" she asked, wide-eyed.

Cody, cornered, nodded.

She thrust the page at him and offered a blue marker. "Can you sign it? My science teacher said you're, like, an example."

He blinked. "Example of what?"

"Of not giving up," the kid said, completely matter-of-fact. "Even when you look like you're about to puke."

Leo nearly choked on his coffee, but covered it with a cough.

Cody signed the printout, managing to spell his name correctly on the second try.

The kid grinned, then zipped back to her table, showing off the autograph to anyone who'd look.

He leaned against the counter, trying to fold himself into a smaller shape.

Brandi slid over, refilling the mug without being asked. "If you want to hide in the storeroom, just let me know."

"Is it that obvious?" Cody asked, mortified.

She smiled. "It's a bakery. The whole point is letting people see you, even when you don't want to be seen."

He sipped the coffee, which was now half comfort, half fuel.

At the window, Leo was deep in a heated argument with two out-of-town hikers, gesturing at his phone and insisting that yes, he really had seen the falcon up close, and yes, the energy lines Cody described were "absolutely real, even if you can't see them in the pictures." The

hikers were skeptical, but impressed by Leo's confidence, and seemed determined to buy him another pastry as a reward for effort.

Cody watched them, saw the way Leo fit so easily into the chaos. He wondered what it would be like to move through the world that way—never invisible, never out of place.

A familiar voice cut through his thoughts.

"Westbrook! Over here!"

It was Mrs. Crabtree, perched at a table with a view of the entire bakery. Next to her sat Mr. Higgins, his bird-watching vest festooned with at least nine different pins, and a new one shaped like a tiny, golden feather. They waved him over with the urgency of a secret club meeting.

He shuffled over, coffee in hand.

Mrs. Crabtree fixed him with a look. "You did good, kid. But don't let it go to your head."

Higgins nodded, chin wobbling. "There's always another season. Another bird. Another legend."

Mrs. Crabtree leaned in, voice low. "And if you ever decide to switch allegiances—ditch the falcons, come over to the marmot side—we'd have a place for you. Right, Higgins?"

Higgins raised his mug in solemn salute. "Marmot League, honorary lifetime membership."

Cody tried to say thank you, but only managed a weird, hiccuped laugh.

Mrs. Crabtree patted his hand. "You learn fast. You'll be okay."

He believed her. For the first time in weeks, he actually believed it.

At the next table, a dozen phones aimed at Brandi as she torched a tray of crème brûlée, the flame throwing off a blue halo. Leo materialized at Cody's side, phone in one hand, a slab of strudel in the other.

"Brandi says you get the first slice," Leo said, pushing the plate his way. "Hero's perks."

Cody took it, still bashful but hungry. The first bite tasted of vanilla and cinnamon and something else—maybe relief, maybe pride.

He looked at Leo, who smiled, genuinely, without a single joke ready.

"Thanks," Cody said, and meant it.

They stood together at the edge of the bakery, watching the morning fill up with noise and color and the kind of messy, unsolvable magic that only happened when a whole town decided to be part of something wild.

And Cody, who had spent his whole life afraid of not fitting in, let himself belong.

The day rolled on, and the legend grew a little brighter with each retelling.

At some point, Leo leaned over and whispered, "You know what comes next, right?"

Cody pretended to think. "A nap?"

Leo laughed. "Sure. But after that—the next story. Mountains never run out."

Cody nodded, the words warming him better than the coffee ever could.

He finished the strudel, refilled his mug, and looked out at the village—at the people who had become, in a way he never expected, his people.

And he knew, whatever came next, he was ready.

If the Village had a weakness, it was the total inability to resist a spectacle. So, when Mr. Higgins and Mrs. Crabtree set aside their life-long feud to share a table in the corner, everyone knew something dramatic was about to go down.

They'd both dressed for the occasion—Crabtree in a blouse with a print of tiny, angry jays, Higgins in his "Official Bird Club" vest over a commemorative T-shirt from the last state fair. They sat shoulder to shoulder, a single united front, as if mere proximity might generate enough heat to hatch a new species of legend.

When Crabtree clinked her spoon against her coffee mug, the room went quiet, and all eyes turned their way.

"Ladies and gentlemen of Duck Creek Village," she began, voice carrying with the authority of a morning assembly principal, "we come before you as reformed adversaries. The events of the past week have convinced us that the pursuit of avian glory is—" she shot Higgins a look, "—best left to the professionals."

A ripple of laughter rolled through the crowd.

Higgins stood, clearing his throat with dramatic emphasis. "In light

of recent... escalations, we propose a new direction. Henceforth, the Duck Creek Bird Watchers and the Blue Jay Society will be merging efforts to form—" he paused, waiting for the room to lean in, "—the Marmot Rescue League."

This landed with a beat of stunned silence, then an eruption of applause and delighted hollers. Even Brandi, who had seen every possible permutation of Duck Creek Weirdness, had to set down her tray and wipe her eyes.

Higgins plowed on, warming to his theme. "Our new mission: to champion the overlooked, the maligned, the misunderstood underdogs of the animal kingdom. Starting with our town's bravest marmot—Bandit, the Untamable."

Crabtree raised her mug in salute. "No more turf wars. Just marmot mayhem."

At that precise moment, Bandit himself made a grand entrance. He'd apparently worked out how to open the bakery's back door, because he burst through it at full gallop, paused to sniff the air, and then bee-lined for the pastry case.

The kids at the next table shrieked with laughter, diving from their seats to chase him. But Bandit was a professional; he dodged, feinted left, and snatched a muffin crumb that had fallen in the chaos. He stood upright to inspect his prize, then—finding it satisfactory—scampered along the windowsill, trailing cinnamon dust behind him.

The children, every last one in marmot-themed T-shirts, pursued him in a whirl of high-pitched giggles. The shirts, courtesy of Erica's impromptu silk-screen operation, showed a plump, grinning marmot in a superhero cape emblazoned with a bright red "M." Some versions included little blue masks. A few kids had added their own marker embellishments—Bandit with a jetpack, Bandit holding a donut, Bandit saving a princess from a hawk.

The parents, meanwhile, documented everything with phones held high, narrating the chase as if broadcasting a nature documentary.

Bandit did a lap of the bakery, then shot under the big central table, reappearing just long enough to wave a paw at his pursuers before darting back out of reach. Higgins tried to intervene with an authoritative "Bandit, stay!" but the marmot only picked up speed.

Crabtree watched it all, eyes shining, then leaned back and declared, “You see? Birds are too complicated and contentious. Marmots just want to eat, run, and make new friends.”

The applause doubled, as if the logic was ironclad.

At the next table, Erica Powell beamed at the kids in her shirts. She was still covered in stray glitter and a smudge of gold paint from the banner, but she looked more rested than Cody had ever seen her.

She sipped her coffee and whispered to Leo, “This is the first time in ten years I’ve seen Crabtree and Higgins agree on anything. I’m expecting snow in July.”

Leo grinned. “Duck Creek, baby. Always full of surprises.”

Someone near the counter let out a whoop—Bandit had managed to vault the lower shelf and landed among the scones. Brandi, quick as a snake, scooped him up, holding the wriggling rodent at arm’s length.

“We’ve got a new mascot,” she proclaimed, setting Bandit gently atop the register. “First official order of business for the Marmot League: let the legend live!”

The bakery exploded with cheers and, for a moment, every adult in the room acted like a ten-year-old at summer camp.

Bandit, momentarily dazed by the attention, sat up on his haunches and sniffed the air. He raised his front paws in what looked like a tiny fist-pump, then returned to investigating the muffin he’d been chasing all along.

“Is it always like this?” Cody asked Leo, as the party wound up a few more notches.

“Only on weekdays ending in Y,” Leo said.

The two watched as the kids resumed their pursuit, circling the room and forming a loose conga line behind Bandit. Higgins and Crabtree, now honorary co-presidents of the Marmot Rescue League, distributed stick-on mustaches and high-fived every child who completed the lap.

A table of retirees took bets on how many days it would take before Bandit figured out the espresso machine.

A cluster of grad students designed a quick logo for the League and passed it around for votes.

And throughout it all, the golden banner above the counter—

DUCK CREEK PROTECTS ITS OWN—gleamed in the morning light, proof that every legend, no matter how weird, could find a home.

By the end of the hour, every phone in the room held at least a dozen new photos. Parents compared Bandit shots, arguing about which one best captured his “natural charisma.” The children, sticky-fingered and wild-eyed, traded stories of Bandit’s past adventures (“He once ate a whole Pop-Tart and didn’t die!”) and debated what kind of cape he should wear at the next parade.

Cody, who’d spent his life on the edge of such gatherings, found himself genuinely smiling. Even when the attention drifted his way—usually in the form of a kid asking him about falcons, or a parent congratulating him for “inspiring the next generation of science nerds”—it didn’t sting. It felt like being part of a team.

He caught Leo watching him, a kind of sideways pride in the look.

“What?” Cody asked.

“Nothing,” Leo said, bumping his shoulder. “Just thinking that maybe you belong here after all.”

Cody rolled his eyes, but didn’t disagree.

Across the bakery, Bandit had finally exhausted himself. He sat, panting, in the palm of Crabtree’s hand, accepting tiny bits of scone as tribute. The kids in their superhero shirts gathered around for a final group photo, hands raised in a triumphant “M.”

Higgins took the photo, then announced, “All right, next meeting of the League, Friday at noon! Bring snacks!”

Crabtree patted Bandit’s head. “And don’t forget your capes.”

The laughter rolled on, filling the room and spilling out onto the street. For a little while, even the grown-ups forgot about the things waiting on the other side of the window—tourists, deadlines, bigger worries.

And in that noisy, cinnamon-scented bubble, Duck Creek Village felt unbreakable.

As the day wound down and the bakery emptied out in waves, Leo, Cody, and Erica found themselves alone at a tiny table by the window,

three Eagle's Eye mugs arranged in a triangle between them. The gold sugar had mostly dissolved, leaving a faint shimmer at the bottom of each cup, but Brandi's cinnamon rolls never lasted long enough to leave evidence.

The air outside was shifting toward evening, the trees glowing in the late sun and the streamers in the bakery window flickering with a new, soft light. For the first time in a week, the three of them looked more tired than tense, more content than keyed up.

They raised their mugs in a lopsided toast.

"To not getting eaten by the legend," Leo said.

Erica bumped his mug with hers. "To keeping the weird alive."

Cody added, after a second, "And to... not being totally wrong."

They drank, and the silence that followed was friendly and thick. From their table, the world looked manageable: the clean-up in the bakery, the smudge of kids' handprints on the glass, the retreat of Bandit and the junior marmoteers toward the playground.

Erica set down her cup, studying the rings left on the table. "You ever think we'll run out of stories?" she asked.

Leo shook his head, a stray curl falling into his eyes. "Not a chance. Duck Creek grows new ones the minute you look away."

Cody nodded, a little embarrassed by the attention but not unhappy to have it. "You'd think, eventually, there'd be nothing left to find. But every time I go up to the rim, there's something new."

Erica smiled, the kind of smile that kept secrets. "Speaking of new, you hear about the sightings over the lake last night?"

"Of what?" Leo leaned in.

She wiggled her fingers. "Nobody knows. Too big for a hawk. Too fast for a drone. And at least three witnesses say it had a tail like a streamer of gold. Sound familiar?"

Leo let out a low whistle.

Cody said, "You don't actually believe it's—"

But Erica only winked, holding the silence like a magician palming a coin.

Before Cody could press, a knock on the glass startled them. Brandi stood at the door, waving everyone out. "Photo op!" she called. "Whole town. C'mon, before the sun's gone."

The three friends gathered their things and joined the slow parade spilling into the street. Every kid in a superhero T-shirt clustered up front, all parents lined up behind, and Bandit—finally leashed, if only symbolically—sat in Crabtree’s lap, nose twitching with excitement.

They crowded under the Duck Creek Village sign, the one with the painted mountain and the hand-lettered welcome. Brandi fussed with the lineup, shuffling kids and untangling a couple of stubborn dogs.

The hired photographer stood on a ladder in the bed of a pickup, counting down. “Three... two... one...”

At the last moment, as the shutter clicked, a shadow moved across the street, silent and sudden. It lasted less than a heartbeat—a wing-shape, huge and clean, passing overhead and sending every single face up in unison. The camera caught the moment: a hundred heads turned skyward, every mouth in some stage of Oh or Wow, or Maybe.

By the time anyone thought to point, the sky was clear. The sun slipped behind the ridge. The only evidence was the photo, and the way the story caught fire before anyone made it back indoors.

They all looked at one another, faces glowing in the last spill of day. Leo cracked up first, his laugh rolling down the line. Then the kids, then the parents, then everyone. Cody, who’d expected to feel out of place in a crowd like this, laughed too—so hard he forgot to feel embarrassed.

Later, as they drifted apart—some to cars, some to the path by the creek, some lingering to swap theories and gossip—the legend had already grown: the size of the shadow, the color of the tail, the exact noise it made (if any). The kids swore it circled twice before vanishing. The adults, less certain, agreed it was “unusual” but not impossible.

Back at the bakery window, Leo, Cody, and Erica watched the tail end of the celebration. The smell of sweet bread and melting snow drifted through the air, and the glow from the sign above the street made the village look like a storybook.

Cody looked at his friends. “You think they’ll remember it?” he asked, voice almost shy.

Erica raised her empty mug in a mock salute. “They’ll remember. That’s how legends work. You catch a glimpse, and the rest gets filled in by whoever needs it most.”

Leo nodded, arm draped around Cody's shoulder. "Besides, the mountain wouldn't let us forget if we tried."

The sun dipped, the sky cooled, and the last people in the street tilted their heads up, just in case the shadow decided to come back for an encore.

In the photo, later hung in the bakery, every single person looked upward, eyes bright, not with fear or disbelief but with that rare, electric hope that there really could be something new in the world.

And in Duck Creek Village, that was the best kind of science.

twenty **the legend in the clouds**

THE BRISTLECONE PINES in the Twisted Forest Trail didn't grow—they endured. Leo had always thought of them as the original misfits: barkless, hunched, their roots exposed like nerves, the kind of trees that looked perpetually surprised to still be standing. There was a reverence in the way the oldest ones crowded the ridgeline, forming a natural archway over the switchbacks. It was less a forest and more a cathedral, if cathedrals could smell so sharp with pine resin and ancient dust.

Leo and Cody hiked the first mile in a silence that felt chosen. Their boots packed the duff and shed needles with a crunch that faded before it could echo. The trail wound steeply at first, then leveled off where the forest opened in a broad sweep—just enough to frame the moon, full and milk-white, as it floated above the east rim.

Cody had packed light. His only gear was a battered field notebook, half a bottle of water, and an LED headlamp he refused to turn on until the last possible moment. Leo respected that. Most people wanted a flashlight in their fist the second the sun went down. Cody seemed content to let the darkness claim what it wanted.

Halfway up, Leo stopped at a break in the trees. He pointed with his chin, voice low. “You ever see a bristlecone this big?”

Cody looked. The trunk was wider than a rain barrel, twisted so hard on itself that the grain ran in spirals like the threads of a bolt. There was a scar at the top, maybe fifteen feet up, where lightning had

torn the wood into splinters. Below that, the living tissue had wrapped itself around the wound, seaming it shut over centuries.

“How old do you think?” Leo asked.

Cody ran a hand across the bark, which felt more like polished stone than wood. “At least three thousand. Maybe four.” He sounded almost reverent. “This would have been a sapling when Aristotle was alive.”

Leo grinned. “I like to think it would’ve out-argued him, too.”

The wind picked up, moving in slow, cold breaths. It carried a tang of sage and, underneath that, something sweet and sharp that Leo could never quite identify. It was the same scent he remembered from his first real hike up here—before the bikes, before he’d started chronicling the “Duck Creek Vibe” for anyone who would listen.

They walked on. The trail narrowed, weaving between pines that grew in pairs or triplets, roots so entangled that you could trip if you didn’t watch your step. Leo led, as always, but checked his pace. Cody didn’t say much, but he matched stride for stride, never breathing hard, always watching.

A quarter mile from the overlook, Leo spotted fresh scat in the trail—a cluster of black pellets dusted with white. He nudged Cody, who crouched instantly, poking at the evidence with the back end of a pen.

“Mule deer,” Cody pronounced. “And recent. See how it’s still wet at the edges?”

Leo made a show of being grossed out, but he was secretly pleased. “I know people who couldn’t tell deer from dog,” he said. “You pick that up in grad school?”

Cody shrugged. “My advisor had a chart. And a weird sense of humor.”

They kept going. Now and then, Cody would pause and angle his head, listening for the whistle of a nighthawk or the far-off cackle of a coyote. Every time he heard something, he’d jot it in the notebook, quick and cryptic. Leo didn’t press for details. He knew some things were meant to be written, not spoken.

The forest thinned as they gained elevation. At the edge of a shallow bowl, the trees retreated, and for the first time all night, the world felt sky-sized. Navajo Lake flashed silver below, its surface so still it looked

like glass poured between the hills. Above them, the moon had climbed high enough to cast full, crisp shadows of every snag and boulder.

Leo steered them off the main path and up a scramble of rock slabs. Here, the wind hit harder, bending the low juniper flat against the ground. Leo pointed out the best handholds, remembering how Cody used to hesitate on anything steeper than a loading dock. Now, Cody just took the route and kept pace.

They reached the outcropping and sat, backs against a chunk of granite still warm from the day. Leo exhaled, the fatigue in his legs replaced by something that felt like relief.

"This is your last night on the mountain," Leo said, not looking over. "You sure you want to spend it with me?"

Cody's answer came after a pause. "I've seen enough of the inside of my head. I wanted to see this." He gestured out at the lake, then up at the bristlecones, haloed in blue.

Leo nodded. He'd expected a joke, or maybe a subtle dig about "local color." Instead, Cody sounded... grateful.

The silence that followed was different from before. Not heavy, not awkward. Just the sound of wind, and the brittle hush of a million pine needles catching the moonlight.

Leo tossed a pebble off the edge and watched it skip down the scree. "You think you'll ever come back?"

Cody grinned, the lines at the corners of his mouth catching the silver. "If I publish three papers, Cornell lets you pick your next field site. I hear the Red Cliffs are good for lizards."

Leo snorted. "Lizards don't need you. Too smug already."

They sat for a while, trading quiet. Leo pointed out a faint trail on the opposite ridge, a place he'd once biked in a thunderstorm. Cody showed him a satellite photo on his phone, the Twisted Forest drawn in impossible color, every tree a pixel in a bigger mosaic.

The moon inched up, flattening the world to black and blue and white. The air was colder now, but neither of them moved.

"You know," Leo said, after a long stretch, "when you first showed up, I figured you'd wash out in a week. You wore hiking boots with the tags still on."

Cody laughed. "I kept the receipt, just in case."

Leo smirked. "Now you're the only one here who can tell a deer from a dog without sniffing it."

Cody said, "I'll add it to my resume."

Leo looked over, met Cody's eyes. There was no challenge left in them, just a quiet kind of pride.

"I'm glad you came up," Leo said, surprising even himself.

Cody nodded, then turned to the view again. "Me too."

They watched as the shadows below shifted, the lake brightening with each inch the moon gained. Somewhere far off, a night bird called—sharp, lonely, but beautiful.

Leo let the sound settle. He thought about all the stories he'd spun for the "Vibe," all the legends he'd tried to keep alive. None of them felt as real as this.

He looked at Cody, then at the trees, then at the night.

"I hope the mountain remembers us," Leo said.

Cody closed his notebook, as if sealing the wish inside it.

"I think it already does," he replied.

And for the first time, Leo believed it.

The moon rose slow and heavy, dragging a tide of silver up the mountain. On the outcrop, Cody and Leo sat shoulder to shoulder, backs against the stone, boots stretched out in a tangle of old lichen and wind-smoothed pebbles. The world below was painted blue and black, every tree casting a long, perfect shadow that pointed down to the distant bowl of Navajo Lake.

For a while, neither of them said anything. It was enough just to be here, at the top of the world, feeling the temperature fall by degrees as the sky went from denim to navy to black.

Cody tapped the field notebook against his knee, weighing it in his hand before opening it. He thumbed through the pages, fingers hovering over the notes from their first hike—awkward and clinical, full of doubts about the "legend" and twice as many about Leo.

"I used to think there was a right answer for everything," Cody said, voice low. "Like, if you just dug deep enough, you'd hit bedrock. Absolute truth."

Leo made a soft noise, not quite agreement but not sarcasm either.

"But out here—" Cody gestured with the notebook, the lines of ink

sharp in the moonlight, “—sometimes the best you get is what holds together for now. And the next storm changes it all.”

Leo grinned. “Guide’s Luck.”

Cody smiled, folding the notebook closed. “Guide’s Luck.”

Below them, a breeze moved across the lake, leaving ripples that turned the water from mirror to mercury. The wind brought a hint of woodsmoke and the clean, mineral bite of the snowfields still hiding in the north gullies. Leo leaned back, propping his arms behind him. He looked more relaxed than Cody had ever seen him—loose, almost happy.

“So what do you do with it?” Leo asked, nodding at the notebook. “You going to write it up?”

Cody shrugged. “Some of it. The rare morph, the migration patterns, the nest data. Maybe even the part about the field scope—if I can make it sound less like magic.”

“And the rest?” Leo watched him, eyes steady.

Cody hesitated, then shook his head. “I don’t think it fits. There’s no journal for... whatever that was.”

Leo nodded, as if he’d expected it all along. “Some stories are better told around a fire than in a PDF.”

They both laughed, the sound quick and real.

Cody picked up a pebble and rolled it in his fingers. “You ever regret not leaving?” he asked. “Like, not doing the college thing, or seeing more of the world?”

Leo considered this. “I used to. But the world comes through here eventually. It’s easier to find your place when the place needs you back.”

Cody nodded, taking it in.

They fell quiet again, but it was the good kind of silence. Cody felt the chill of the rock seeping through his jeans and didn’t mind. For once, he wasn’t in a hurry to document the next thing, or explain away the weirdness.

He thought about the falcon, the gold in its feathers that no camera could catch, the way the legend had shifted every time they tried to pin it down.

He looked at Leo, who was staring up at the moon with a goofy, contented half-smile.

"I'm glad it was you up here," Cody said.

Leo grinned. "Me too, man. Me too."

A cold wind whipped over the ridge, ruffling Leo's hair and making Cody shiver. Leo reached into his pack, pulled out a candy bar, and broke it in half.

"Energy for the descent," Leo said, passing Cody a piece.

Cody took it, their fingers brushing for a second.

They sat and ate, sharing the kind of comfort that came from surviving something together—something nobody else would ever believe, not the way they'd lived it.

When the candy was gone and the wind got colder, Leo stood and brushed the crumbs from his jeans.

"Ready?" he asked.

Cody nodded. "Yeah."

They stood together at the edge of the outcropping, watching the moon cast one last shadow over the Twisted Forest. Below, the world waited, unchanged and completely different.

For a heartbeat, neither of them moved.

Then, with the same unspoken understanding that had carried them through the worst of it, they started down the trail, two shapes outlined in moonlight, walking together until the path split and the story carried each of them onward.

The way down was easier, even in the dark. Leo took the lead, finding the best route through the loose rock and twisted roots, and Cody followed without question. The moon, higher now, cast every snag and switchback in high relief—no shadows deep enough to hide anything, not even old doubts.

A mile from the summit, the trail doubled back and climbed a short rise before dropping into a shallow ravine. Leo paused at the top, stretching his back, and Cody pulled up beside him, hands on his knees.

That was when they heard it—a flutter, soft but heavy, like someone shaking out a bedsheet over their heads. They looked up, and the moon caught the world at the exact right moment.

There, clean against the face of the moon, was a bird. But not just any bird: it was enormous, wings extended so wide they seemed to brush the ridgeline on either side. The silhouette hung there, perfectly still, and for a second, neither Leo nor Cody breathed.

The bird drifted, then banked, and the light caught its feathers—first just a suggestion, then a shimmer, then a flare of impossible gold, so bright that it looked like the sky had cracked and let sunlight leak in by mistake.

Leo felt the hair on his arms go up. Cody made a sound, something between a gasp and a laugh, but didn't reach for the notebook or his phone. Neither of them moved.

The Golden Talon hovered, suspended on the air, and then with a single, lazy stroke, tilted into a slow arc and vanished beyond the rim. It left behind a trail of gold dust that faded instantly, as if the mountain itself wanted to keep the secret.

They stood in silence. The forest below was so quiet, Leo could hear the wind moving between the needles, the faint hiss of his own breath.

He looked at Cody, who looked back, and that was all there was to say.

They kept walking, and the only evidence was the echo of wings and the memory burning bright in their heads.

Not everything needed to be written down.

Not every legend wanted to be caught.

The way down felt different now, like a new trail laid over the old one. Leo took the path at a measured pace, letting the silence grow as thick as the night. Every now and then, the wind would gust and stir the bristlecone branches overhead, reminding them both of the thing they'd just seen—too big to be real, too vivid to doubt.

Cody was the first to break the quiet. "You know," he said, "when I first came here, I thought all the magic was just... confirmation bias. Or altitude. But some things..." He trailed off, searching for the word.

Leo finished it for him: "Some things don't want to be explained."

Cody laughed, soft and breathless. "Yeah. And I used to hate that."
"Still do?" Leo asked, looking back over his shoulder.

Cody shook his head. "Not as much. Now it's more like—curiosity with the volume turned down. Like, it's okay for a question to stay a question."

They walked on, boots scuffing old pine needles, the air cold enough that every exhale came out visible. The whole world felt tuned to a lower frequency, the kind of night where every word carried farther than it should.

Near the base of the switchbacks, the path forked: one way into the village, one toward the lake. Leo hesitated at the split, then took the village trail, letting Cody fall in beside him.

"You think anyone would believe us?" Leo asked.

"Probably not," Cody admitted. "And honestly, I don't want them to. Not really."

Leo grinned. "Secrets make the best stories."

They reached the edge of town, where the houses started up again, each one spaced far enough apart that the dark could creep between the walls. The bakery's lights were off, but the banner still fluttered in the breeze, and the chalkboard sign—"Try the Eagle's Eye!"—stood stubborn and proud in the moonlight.

At the end of the street, they passed The Lofty Nest. The shop was shuttered, but through the window, Leo caught a glint of metal on the display shelf. The telescope—Powell's refractor, or its twin—sat in the center of the room, aimed straight at the moon. In the dark, the etchings on the barrel looked like they moved, the constellations shifting and realigning as the moonlight played off the brass.

Cody paused, hand pressed to the glass, and stared in. "You ever think the legends are just... waiting for someone to notice them?"

Leo shrugged. "Or maybe they're just bored."

Cody smiled, then turned from the window and started down the street. Leo walked beside him, the last of the moonlight shadowing their faces.

At the bottom of the hill, they stopped. The trail would split again—one way to Cody's rental cabin, the other to Leo's place above the bike shop.

"You heading back tomorrow?" Leo asked.

Cody nodded. "Flight's at six. I'll probably miss it and have to hitchhike."

Leo didn't say goodbye. He didn't need to. They stood there, side by side, looking up at the ridge one last time.

"You think the bird will still be here next year?" Cody asked.

Leo smiled, wide and bright. "I know it will."

They started walking, each to their own place, but the silence between them was different now. It wasn't empty. It was full—of what they'd seen, of what they'd keep to themselves, and of everything that still waited in the hills above.

And if, as they reached their doors, each of them looked back one more time at the mountain, that was nobody's business but their own.

The moon set late, painting the tops of the bristlecones gold as it slipped behind the ridge. In the glass of the bakery window, Cody caught his own reflection—rumpled, wind-chapped, alive—and grinned at it.

He didn't know what he'd tell the people back east. Maybe nothing. Maybe the truth.

But as he let himself into the cabin, he felt the story settle in his chest, light and real as a feather.

And somewhere, high above the lake, a shadow circled—silent, patient, and golden as memory.

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about the author

Don Jones is a multi-award-winning author of fantasy, science-fiction, cozy mysteries, and cozy fantasies. After a career in tech, numerous positions at tech startups, and more than sixty published tech books (the ones they seemed to sell by the pound, back in the day), Don left it all behind and started writing down the stories that had been banging around in his head. The result is more than two-dozen novels—with more every year—that have received rave reviews and numerous industry awards. Today, Don writes primarily from a cabin near Duck Creek Village, UT, diligently overseen by a Goldendoodle named Corentin.

