

# **the mystery of the hermit's hideout**

the duck creek mysteries  
book four

**Don Jones**

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## foreword

If you don't live in a pretty small town, the word "diner food" probably calls to mind an IHOP or a Denny's. But in towns too small for those chains, you'll often find a mom-and-pop place that serves breakfast all day, amazing hamburgers, and hopefully a French Dip, one of my favorites. Also homemade meatloaf. Well, in Duck Creek Village, that place is Aunt Sue's Chalet. A family operation through multiple generations, it's basically our only "full service restaurant" in the Village (as of this writing), and it's known for its warm atmosphere, amazing house-made pies, and the only salad bar on the mountain. And it's a decent salad bar, too, expanded fairly recently to include easily a couple of dozen traditional salad bar items. Maybe it's a bit of a cliché from the 1980s, but even if I'm ordering a burger I add a trip to the salad bar. It's like vegetable comfort food smothered in Ranch dressing.

And no, Aunt Sue's salad bar doesn't actually include all the weird stuff Macy forages for. Me, I'm happy with iceberg, shredded cheese, half a hard-boiled egg, some peas, some beets, and some croutons. With Ranch, of course.

Silas Thorne was a real person in the area, back in the day, and he's the Hermit mentioned in this book's title. Give him a Google, if you like, although unlike in this story, the real Silas passed decades ago. Everyone else in this book is fictional, even if they share a name with a real-world Duck Creek Village resident or proprietor. As always, I've

taken a few liberties with the geography of the area, including the Village, and with the layout of the Village businesses—all to help support the story.

The retaining wall? Yeah, that's a real thing and it really happened. That story ends differently (more amusingly, I hope) in this telling, but it was quite the concern in the real-world Village. If you visit, you'll really appreciate the work that went into that wall o' boulders, which help provide more and better parking all along Movie Ranch Rd.

Oh, and if Aunt Sue has Mountainberry Pie on the menu, just order it. Order it as an appetizer, in fact, to make sure you have room. And let's maybe start a tradition of asking for a spare napkin, jotting down a note of appreciation, and asking your server to cary it back to the kitchen... and to Aunt Sue.

Don Jones

April 2026

Duck Creek Village, UT

# contents

|                                     |         |
|-------------------------------------|---------|
| 1. Duck Creek Disturbances          | 1       |
| 2. The Echo Chamber                 | 9       |
| 3. Seeds of Suspicion               | 17      |
| 4. The Donkey Basketball Connection | 27      |
| 5. The Forager's Trail              | 37      |
| 6. Crossed Paths                    | 49      |
| 7. Echoes of Truth                  | 59      |
| 8. Sabotage and Secrets             | 69      |
| 9. The Retaining Wall               | 79      |
| 10. Free the Boulders               | 93      |
| 11. Storm Warning                   | 111     |
| 12. Shelter from the Storm          | 127     |
| 13. The Empty Canyon                | 141     |
| 14. Four Inches of Compliance       | 163     |
| 15. Seasonal Transitions            | 181     |
| 16. The Hermit's Message            | 199     |
| 17. Autumn's End                    | 211     |
| 18. The Last Echo                   | 219     |
| 19. First Snow                      | 227     |
| <br>Epilogue: Winter's Promise      | <br>239 |
| Want Free Novels?                   | 249     |
| Also by Don Jones                   | 251     |
| About the Author                    | 257     |



# one

## **duck creek disturbances**

FINN TOOK his breakfast with an unhurried satisfaction, as if it were the last meal of a long, satisfying life. The eggs were perfectly runny, the bacon thick-cut and crisp, the sourdough a local specialty with crust you could break a window with. Aunt Sue's Chalet wasn't known for gourmet flare, but nobody in Duck Creek could accuse it of skimping on the essentials. The air held a permanent hint of coffee and maple syrup, and the knotty-pine paneling soaked up the warmth like a wool blanket.

Outside, autumn tourists slushed up and down Movie Ranch Road, eyes red from the thin air and cold, shuffling between the general store and the novelty fudge counter. Finn watched them with the detached curiosity of a local: how their rental fleeces never fit quite right, how their hats always boasted some pun about moose, how they inevitably underestimated the way wind sliced through the canyon and left them sniffing before noon.

He sopped up the last of the yolk with a bread heel and leaned back in his chair, letting the din of the dining room buzz around him like flies on a warm day. Over by the pellet stove, a pair of retirees bickered over the merits of snowshoeing versus cross-country skiing. At the counter, two seasonal workers in forest green uniforms traded guesses about the actual ingredients in the "local wild berry" syrup. Aunt Sue herself was invisible, as always—she only communicated through

napkins passed discreetly by her staff, never appearing in the flesh. It was a running gag that she'd spent a decade sequestered in the walk-in freezer, binging detective novels and running the restaurant like some spectral mob boss.

A high-pitched squeak of sneakers on tile cut through the mid-morning lull. Then, as if a whirlwind had been let loose in the entryway, Leo flung himself through the door and skidded to a halt at Finn's table. His mountain bike helmet was still buckled under his chin, his cheeks raw with windburn and the thrill of gossip.

"Dude, you would not believe what I just saw."

Finn wiped his fingers on his napkin and considered Leo, who vibrated like an overcaffeinated squirrel. "Let me guess—someone bombed the ski hill in a banana suit again."

Leo shook his head so vigorously that flecks of mud spattered onto the salt shaker. "No, bigger. Like, Duck Creek level ten. Two social media people. The real ones. With the expensive camera, the whole deal. They're here!"

Finn raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. "It's a public road. Sometimes people pass through."

"They're not passing through. They're staying." Leo leaned in, lowering his voice as if the bear-shaped syrup dispenser might be listening. "They're at the Lodge right now, and get this—their followers think they're gonna go find the hermit."

Finn snorted, but the sound lacked conviction. "Nobody finds the hermit."

"That's what I said! But apparently, these guys have, like, sponsors. Gear companies. And there's this viral hashtag—#HuntForTheHermit. They're crowd-funding bounties for proof he's real. People are losing it online."

Finn stared out the window at a huddle of tourists, their phones pointed at a sign boasting Duck Creek's elevation in foot-tall letters. Somewhere out there, beneath the scarves and selfie sticks, was the pulse of a rumor. The sort that spread faster than campfire smoke and stuck around just as long. "What do they want with him?" Finn asked.

Leo's eyes got even bigger. "Apparently, he's some kind of survival legend. There's a story he used to be in special ops, but went rogue and

lives off the grid. They want to make a video about his ‘untamed spirit’ or whatever. Word is, they’re offering a grand to anyone who can get them a photo.”

“People are idiots,” Finn said, but the words tasted less certain than he’d intended.

Leo plopped down in the booth across from him, resting his helmet on the vinyl seat. “If anyone’s gonna find the hermit, it’d be you.”

Finn shrugged, folding his napkin into increasingly tight triangles. “I’m not interested in getting mixed up in influencer drama.”

“Yeah, but think about it—if you found him first, you could warn him. Give him a heads up.” Leo said this with the conviction of someone who’d spent the better part of a decade watching Finn get dragged into community problems he wanted nothing to do with. “Plus, there’s a theory he only talks to locals. And you basically qualify, even if you’re not technically from around here.”

The egg timer on the kitchen pass-through dinged, and a server in a Duck Creek beanie shuffled over with a plate of pancakes for the next booth. He also deposited a neatly folded napkin on Finn’s table, like a diplomatic pouch at the end of a hostage negotiation. On the napkin, in purple marker and Aunt Sue’s unmistakable blocky scrawl, was a single instruction:

*Check the salad bar.*

Finn glanced up at the server, who shrugged as if to say, “Don’t shoot the messenger.” Leo, instantly curious, craned his neck toward the rear dining room.

“Is it another critter?” Leo whispered. “Last time it was a baby snake.”

Finn shook his head. “If it were a snake, she’d say ‘bring a bucket.’ Salad bar’s probably just out of lettuce.”

But even as he said it, he knew Aunt Sue only sent napkin orders when it mattered. The last time he’d gotten one, it was to alert him to a suspicious van loitering around the elementary school parking lot. He slid out of his seat, downed the rest of his coffee, and squared up his bill

at the counter with the practiced efficiency of someone who never wanted to owe anyone a favor.

"Come on," he said to Leo, who had already unbuckled his helmet and was fumbling for his phone. "Let's see what's up."

They made their way past the register and into the back dining area, where the salad bar sat like a lonely raft in a sea of mismatched chairs. At this hour, it was deserted except for a single young couple poking disinterestedly at potato salad. Finn scanned the offerings, expecting wilted greens or maybe a repeat of the "salad bar mouse" incident from last spring. Instead, he saw a jumbled chaos of wild greens, scattered acorns, and a sludgy, half-filled bowl of what appeared to be home-brewed vinaigrette.

Leo took out his phone and began filming instantly. "Dude, this is awesome," he whispered, panning dramatically over the carnage. "It's like a wilderness crime scene."

Finn leaned in, poking a fork through the unfamiliar leaves. Mixed in with the standard lettuce and shredded carrots were fronds of wild ferns, tiny edible flowers, and what looked suspiciously like a fistful of freshly-picked chickweed. The acorns, some still capped, had been artfully arranged around the perimeter, like a warning or a signature.

"Somebody's messing with her again," Finn said, not quite under his breath.

Leo grinned, pleased by the escalation. "Do you think it's a message?"

Before Finn could answer, a voice bellowed from the kitchen—a voice as ragged as an old snowplow: "If you're gonna stand there gawping, at least help me clean this up!"

Chef Gary, in full apron and with a handlebar mustache gone rogue, stomped out from behind the swinging doors, brandishing a pair of tongs like salad bar calipers. His face was redder than the pickled beets, and he looked one rant away from total detonation.

"Third time this month!" Gary hissed, gesturing at the mess. "Someone's breaking in, doing this on purpose. The cost alone—don't get me started." He paused, realizing Finn was holding Aunt Sue's napkin. "She sent you, didn't she?"

Finn nodded, holding up the napkin like a badge. "You notice anything missing?"

"Not missing. Added." Gary jabbed at the salad bar. "We don't buy this stuff. Who even knows if it's edible?"

Finn peered closer at a cluster of white berries, their stems still wet from morning dew. He recognized a few from his own hikes—safe, if you knew what you were doing. "Someone's foraging local and sneaking it in."

"Why?" Leo asked, still documenting. "Is it, like, a prank?"

Gary shrugged with both hands. "Whatever it is, it's killing my margins. People see this and they think we serve roadkill." He threw the tongs into the bin and muttered, "Tell your aunt I'm not cleaning this up again. She needs a lock on this thing."

Finn considered the salad bar, the strange plants, the way the scene had been arranged not with carelessness, but intention. He felt the tickle of a puzzle forming.

Just as he was about to say something, the front door slammed again. A burst of cold air announced two newcomers—both in expensive athleisure, both wearing brand new beanies with ironic tags still attached. One carried a camera with a lens the size of a soup can; the other scanned the room with the focus of a wildlife biologist at a watering hole.

Leo nudged Finn. "That's them. The influencers."

Finn watched as they conferred in hushed tones, then made their way straight to the salad bar, camera already rolling. The girl swept her hair behind her ear and began narrating into her phone: "Day one, Duck Creek Village. Already, the locals are showing us how to live off the land. You see these?" She lifted a handful of foraged greens, eyebrows raised. "These are the real superfoods. Forget kale."

The boy behind the camera zoomed in for a close-up. "This is LITERALLY wild salad. Nature's salad. It's insane."

Gary's jaw clenched so hard Finn thought he might chip a molar. Leo tried not to laugh, and Finn, for his part, just watched.

If they'd come for a story, Duck Creek was about to give them one.

And Finn had a feeling it was going to be his job to keep things from blowing up.

The napkin in his pocket felt heavier than it should.

*Check the salad bar.*

He checked, all right. And now he was very sure Aunt Sue already knew exactly what he'd find.

They found the salad bar under siege. At first glance, it looked like a normal case of someone restocking in a hurry—tongs out of alignment, cucumbers askew, cottage cheese lapping into neighboring bowls. But if you looked longer, you could see the sabotage. The wild greens were woven through the romaine like hidden threads, ferns drooped over the sneeze guard, and a miniature cairn of acorns marked the center of the crouton tray.

Leo pressed record on his phone, narrating the scene with a kind of reverence. "Local establishment under attack by nature itself. It's chaos, folks. Actual chaos." He zoomed in on a mushroom, then panned to Finn, who was already picking through the mess with a practiced eye.

Finn recognized half of what he touched: dandelion leaves, some wood sorrel, the unmistakable fuzz of lamb's quarters. Not stuff you'd ever find in a commercial bag, unless the supplier had gone on strike and let a goat pack the boxes. Some of the plants were delicately edible, some less so, but all of it screamed "intentional."

He dug into the acorn pile, letting the smooth, dusty caps roll between his fingers. There was a rhythm to the arrangement, a symmetry even in the sabotage. Someone had taken their time to build this, and probably enjoyed every minute. The realization made Finn smile in spite of himself.

That's when Chef Gary stormed in from the kitchen, his apron already a Jackson Pollock of berry stains and ranch dressing. "Unbelievable!" he shouted, voice bouncing off the taxidermy mule deer overhead. "Third time this month! Is it so much to ask to get one shift without a disaster?"

He circled the bar, clenching and unclenching his fists. "Who even does this? Who breaks in at dawn just to destroy a perfectly good salad bar?"

Leo kept the phone pointed at Gary, mouthing the chef's tirade as if they'd practiced it together. Finn ignored the performance and checked the perimeter, eyes scanning the metal lip and under the sneeze guard for anything out of place. That's where he saw it—a flash of dark brown, wedged under the edge of the metal tray.

He fished it out. It was a pine cone, but not one that had rolled in by accident. It was small, maybe two inches long, with each scale meticulously wrapped in copper wire, making a kind of lacy net around the natural form. At the top, a ring of rough twine turned it into a pendant—handmade, clever, and a little obsessive.

Finn held it up to the light. The wirework was intricate, each twist and bend deliberate. He'd seen this kind of handiwork before at the village craft fairs, but never in the restaurant.

"Hey, check this out," Finn called, and Leo swung the camera over.

Gary paused in mid-rant to glare at the pendant. "If that's another one of those homemade keychains, you can tell the Girl Scouts I'm not buying."

"It's not from the Girl Scouts," Finn said. He turned the pendant over. There were flecks of green still stuck to the wire—bits of the same wild greens in the salad. Whoever did this had left it behind. Maybe on purpose, maybe not.

"Looks like a signature," Leo said, breathless. "Or, like, a calling card. The Wild Salad Bandit strikes again!"

Gary groaned, then grabbed a rag and began mopping up the acorn dust. "I'll tell you what it is. It's a lawsuit waiting to happen. Last week it was dandelion root in the potato salad. I had to comp three tables."

Finn pocketed the pine cone, then ran his hand along the rim of the bar, checking for more. Nothing else. He looked back at Gary, who was now muttering darkly about county health inspectors and the village's "war on fine dining."

"If I were you," Finn said, "I'd check your locks. Or maybe your staff schedules."

Gary snorted. "You think it's an inside job? Please. The only people who come in that early are Aunt Sue and the bread delivery guy. And Sue's too busy running this place from a bunker, if you ask me."

The mention of the bread delivery jogged something in Finn's

memory, but it floated out of reach before he could grab it. He studied the salad bar one last time. There was no residue, no footprints, no left-over tools. Whoever had done this was careful, and probably knew the place better than Gary did.

Leo stopped recording and pocketed his phone. "So what's the plan, detective? You gonna track down the Salad Bandit?"

Finn shrugged, running a thumb over the twine ring of the pendant. "Maybe. Or maybe I'll let them keep at it. Adds a little excitement to the day."

Gary stared at him in disbelief. "Excitement? I'm running a restaurant, not a botanical garden! You want excitement, go find that hermit everyone's blabbing about. Maybe he'll eat your wild salad and save me the trouble."

Finn smiled, noncommittal, and turned the pendant over in his hand one last time. He could see the logic in Gary's suggestion—the hermit was probably the only person for miles who'd know which wild plants were safe to eat, and who'd have the nerve to pull a stunt like this.

He considered the possibilities as he and Leo headed back toward the main dining room, leaving Gary to his muttering and the influencers to their next "authentic" shot.

Out in the sunlight, Finn held the pine cone up, watching the copper glint. It was evidence, sure. But it was also something else—a clue that not every mystery was meant to be solved by force. Sometimes, you just had to wait for the next move.

And in Duck Creek, there was always a next move.

two

## the echo chamber

FINN HAD ALWAYS FOUND a peculiar comfort in the original knotty-pine booths at Aunt Sue's Chalet, and after seeing the chaos of the salad bar, the booth's homey feeling of comfort was doubled. He and Leo slid back into the corner one, backs brushing against wood rubbed glossy by a thousand winter parkas. The table wobbled just enough to demand a careful balance of elbows, but the bench cushions were newer this season, blue vinyl still springy under Finn's weight. The whole setup was overkill for two, but Finn liked the way the booth's walls soaked up conversation and rerouted it—a little fortress of muffled voices, the air perfumed with maple and coffee.

The Chalet was slow for a Tuesday, sunlight cutting in at a steep angle and brightening up every glass of orange juice on the tables. Outside, the aspens were on their final week of color, gold leaves scattered across parked trucks and the uneven walk. Every time the door opened, it spilled in a draft of cold and the distant tang of woodsmoke. In here, it felt like mid-October could last forever.

Finn finished his still-warm breakfast with military precision, careful not to let syrup bleed into the bacon. He had that down to a science, years of shared breakfasts with people who considered food a practical fuel rather than an experience. Leo, by contrast, hadn't even opened the menu; he was hunched over his battered tablet, thumbs flitting across the screen.

Finn watched him for a second. “You ever take a day off from screens?” he asked.

“Only if I’m dead or in a blackout,” Leo replied without looking up. “Or if the WiFi’s out. Which is basically the same as dead, for me.”

Finn grinned and pushed the empty plate aside. “You could at least order. The cinnamon rolls are fresh.”

Leo made a noise somewhere between a laugh and a sigh. “Nah, I’ll just steal half your bacon next time you’re not looking.”

A waitress—Darlène, three decades on this same stretch of linoleum—came by with a fresh carafe and topped Finn’s mug. She offered Leo a look of pity reserved for lost children and those in the throes of digital withdrawal.

“You boys need anything else?” she asked.

“We’re good, thanks,” Finn said, and Darlène moved on, her orthopedic shoes squeaking against the tile.

Finn leaned back, letting the bench press into his shoulders, and rolled the pine cone pendant between his fingers. He hadn’t noticed how perfectly it fit his palm before, all symmetry and slight tackiness from the sap. The wirework caught at the grooves of his thumb, leaving tiny pinpricks of sensation.

Leo finally looked up from the tablet. “You already on the salad bandit thing?” he asked.

Finn shook his head. “It’s too careful. Whoever it is, they’re not trying to hurt anyone. It’s almost... artistic.”

“Yeah, well, Chef Gary’s one bad Yelp review away from a meltdown, so I’d call it terrorism.” Leo’s eyes flicked back to the screen, but he added: “You know, there’s a security cam right by the salad bar.”

“You check it yet?”

“Why do you think I’m on here?” Leo tapped the side of the tablet. “I asked my cousin to run the overnight tape. Should be here in, like, two minutes.” He sounded proud, as if hacking the Chalet’s cheap DVR was a kind of community service.

Finn let his gaze drift out the window. The trees beyond Movie Ranch Road stood tall and mostly bare, their trunks all in a row like an honor guard for passing ATVs. Most of the morning tourists were gone by now, leaving only the ghostly aftertaste of their fleece jackets and

novelty hats. He liked it better this way—quiet, settled, the village's true pace.

He looked down again, spinning the pine cone in slow circles. "Hey, remember that story from when we were kids? The one about the hermit?"

Leo grinned. "Which one? The time he scared the road crew with a bear mask, or the time he—"

"No, the one where the old-timers tried to chase him out of town."

"Oh, yeah. Classic Duck Creek legend. Supposedly he was hoarding dynamite or something."

Finn shrugged. "I never believed it. Seemed too... organized, for a guy who lives alone and eats tree bark."

Leo paused, then looked at Finn over the top of the tablet. "So what's your theory?"

Finn shrugged again, softer this time. "People like to make enemies out of what they don't understand. Always seemed to me the hermit was the one being hunted, not the other way around."

A sharp pop echoed from the pellet stove at the far end of the room, and Finn's ears caught the sound in an odd way—like it had been played backward, or from underwater. He blinked, suddenly aware that the air in the booth had gone thick, the buzz of the dining room receding into a pale hum.

He shifted on the bench, the creak of the wood warping in his ears. The light streaming through the window flickered, or maybe it was just his eyes. Finn's hand tensed on the pendant, and for a moment, all other sensation dropped out.

A hollow, distant voice filled the booth—clear and sharp, but wrong for the present. It sounded like a man, heavy with authority and frustration:

"He's dangerous to this community! We can't let him keep setting fires out there—one dry month and the whole canyon goes up."

Another voice, higher and more frantic, cut in: "He threatened my husband with a shovel last spring. Said he'd bury us both if we came near his fence. Why is he still here?"

A third, the slow drawl of someone older: "All I know is, before he showed up, we didn't have these problems. Town was peaceful."

Finn felt his heart pound in his throat. The voices overlapped, rising and falling, all echoing in the bubble of the knotty-pine booth. He wanted to turn his head, to see if anyone else was reacting, but he couldn't move. The air buzzed with anger and fear, but also something else—grief, maybe, or the kind of sadness you get when you realize a story's been told wrong for too long.

The last voice came softer, but it hit Finn like a cold hand on the back of his neck: "He's got nowhere to go. Only thing keeping him out there is that people won't leave him alone."

A rush of static, then the sounds of the Chalet flowed back in: the clatter of silverware, the soft huff of the heater, Leo's voice right next to him.

"Dude, are you listening? You zoned out for a second."

Finn blinked hard, the world snapping back into focus. The pendant was digging into his palm, and his coffee had gone cold.

"Yeah," he said, trying to collect himself. "Just thinking."

Leo eyed him. "You looked like you saw a ghost."

Finn almost laughed. "Something like that."

Leo pulled the tablet around to show Finn. "Look, the time stamp from last night. If you skip to 5:03, you can see—wait, let me zoom in—yeah, there. Mystery saboteur, caught in the act."

Finn leaned in. The video was grainy, but the salad bar sat in an empty dining room, time stamp rolling in the corner. After a few seconds, a hooded figure slipped into frame, moved quick and precise to the bar, and began arranging the wild greens. The person moved like they'd done it a hundred times—no wasted motion, no hesitation.

Finn watched, his brain still half-in the echo, and noticed the way the figure's hand moved as it placed the acorns. Familiar, maybe? Or just deliberate.

The hooded person stepped back and glanced around, then reached into their pocket and set something on the salad bar. The pine cone pendant. Finn felt a fresh pulse of adrenaline.

Leo whistled. "Whoever it is, they're a ninja. You can't see their face. Wait—" he paused, rewound, and played it again. "There's a flash of hair when they turn. Look—kind of, like, reddish?"

Finn saw it too—a curl of auburn peeking from under the hood. That was new.

He sat back, brain spinning. For a moment, he imagined voices rising again in the wood, all their old anger waiting to be heard.

“You okay, man?” Leo asked, softer this time.

Finn nodded. “Yeah. Just—thinking about history. How it gets stuck in places.”

Leo smiled, not really getting it, but not needing to. “Well, maybe we just found our next project. Unmasking the wild salad ninja of Duck Creek.”

Finn laughed, and this time it was genuine. “Maybe we did.”

The booth creaked again as he shifted, and for a brief, hopeful second, all he heard was Leo, the rattle of dishes, and the easy warmth of the Chalet. But he knew the echoes were there, waiting.

And this time, he was listening.

By the time Darlene looped back with the bill, Leo had cued up the security footage and was playing detective with all the subtlety of a puppy on a scent trail. The tablet's grainy night-vision cast his face in greenish light, making his excitement look almost radioactive. He stabbed the screen with one finger, grinning at Finn.

“Pause—there! Mystery saboteur, 5:01 a.m., rocking a hood and some serious auburn flair.” Leo jabbed at the freeze-frame. “Tell me that's not a statement piece.”

Finn squinted, letting the motion loop a few times. The figure darted in from the left, head down, then stopped and methodically rearranged the salad bar. All the movements were fast, almost rehearsed, as if the intruder knew exactly where everything should go. The camera caught a side profile for less than a second—just a blur, but there it was: a fan of reddish hair flaring out from under the hood. The face itself was just a pale ghost in the lens flare.

He replayed it twice, then a third time, slow as molasses. The figure's hand shook as it set the pine cone on the bar. Nervous, or just cold? The temperature readout in the corner suggested the latter, but Finn filed the detail away.

Leo was less interested in nuance. “Could be anyone,” he said, “but

could also be everyone. Half the village has at least one hoodie and bad hair.”

“Not like that,” Finn said, pointing. “Look at the hand.”

Leo did. “Glove?”

“Bandage,” Finn said. He leaned in, rewound, and watched the flash again. The person wore fingerless gloves, but the thumb was taped up. That was more specific. More... human. “Someone’s been getting blisters.”

Leo’s gears whirled in real time. “Maybe the same person who leaves wild mushrooms on public benches,” he said, “or the one who swapped out the country store’s muffin tins for recycled tin cans.”

Finn laughed. “That was you.”

Leo didn’t deny it. “Still, we’re dealing with a professional here. I say we set up a stakeout tonight.”

Before Finn could reply, Darlene returned, bill in hand and worry lines stacked up on her brow. She slid into the booth like a favorite aunt, dropping her voice so the words landed just for them. “You boys hear about the latest mess with the salad?” she asked. “Chef Gary’s threatening to quit, and Sue’s fielding calls from that health inspector up in Panguitch.” Darlene’s look suggested this was about as catastrophic as a wildfire.

Finn nodded, keeping the mood light. “You think it’s a local, or someone passing through?”

Darlene’s answer was immediate. “Locals wouldn’t risk Sue’s wrath. And who else knows the layout here so well?” She eyed the empty mug in front of Finn, topped off his coffee with a flourish, and slid the bill toward him. “Word is, this year’s leaf peepers are getting spooked. Had three tables yesterday ask for their salad sealed, like it’s radioactive. Autumn’s supposed to be our busiest time. If this keeps up...”

Leo, ever the opportunist, brightened. “Think of the PR! ‘Duck Creek: Come for the trees, stay for the live-action Clue.’”

Darlene’s lips twitched, almost a smile. “I’ll run that by Sue,” she said, but there was more worry than mirth in her eyes. “You boys let me know if you see anything. And tell Gary to stop calling me in the middle of the night.”

Finn nodded, but she was already off to triage the next crisis. The

comfort of the booth felt a little less solid now. The air had picked up a faint trace of chemical cleaner, as if someone had tried to erase the memory of the morning's sabotage.

Leo chugged the rest of his water, then elbowed Finn in the ribs. "So what's next, detective? You wanna break into the kitchen and check for bandages?"

"Or," Finn said, glancing out the window, "we could start with the obvious." He nodded toward the street.

Down the steps, in the middle of Movie Ranch Road, a pair of outsiders were holding court. Finn didn't need Leo's commentary to peg them as the influencer couple—Toby and Summer, the talk of the breakfast circuit. They wore matching windbreakers, their brand logos screaming for attention even at a distance. Toby was fiddling with a camera setup that looked like it belonged to National Geographic; Summer was reading lines off her phone, practicing intonation. At their feet, a portable ring light blinked to life, pulsing on and off as they lined up their shot.

The duo made Finn's skin crawl, but not out of jealousy or even resentment. There was something about the way they moved—every gesture a performance, every smile aimed just past the lens. They weren't here for the woods, or the village, or even the people. They were here for the story they could export.

He watched as they waylaid a pair of older tourists in duck-embroidered fleeces, asking something that made the couple laugh and point up the hill. The camera tracked every motion, Toby narrating with wide sweeps of his arms. Finn couldn't hear the words through the glass, but he didn't need to. He'd seen the script play out before: locals as background, the land as a commodity, the legend of the hermit as spectacle.

Leo followed his gaze, then rolled his eyes so hard it was almost audible. "You think they're the salad bar bandits? Please. They probably haven't had a vegetable in years."

"They might not be doing it," Finn said, "but they're definitely stirring things up." He felt the pine cone pendant still warm in his pocket, the wire's pattern pressing faintly into his thigh. "If they start sniffing around the salad bar, we'll know."

Leo snorted. “You just want an excuse to interrogate Summer. She’s hot.”

Finn ignored that. “What if it’s not about the food?” he said. “What if someone’s trying to get a message across, and the influencers are just... a megaphone?”

Leo considered this, then shrugged. “It’s Duck Creek, man. If you shout loud enough, everyone hears you eventually.”

The wind rattled the Chalet windows, bringing with it the echo of distant chainsaws and a generator starting up down the block. Finn realized he’d been holding his breath, waiting for some clue to click into place. Instead, all he felt was the pressure building—two mysteries, one public and loud, one buried in old stories and the weird thrum of the knotty-pine booth.

He closed the bill, left cash on the table, and nudged Leo to the aisle. “Let’s take the long way around,” he said, “and see if our friends out there know anything about wild greens.”

Leo grinned, already anticipating the social awkwardness. “You got it, Columbo.”

They stepped out into the sunlight, the air sharp and pure as a new page. The aspen leaves glittered in the wind, each one catching the light and tossing it back in a slow, silent riot. Finn scanned the road, half-expecting the auburn-haired saboteur to materialize in the shadows. Nothing. Just the influencers, huddled now over their footage, reviewing, curating, manufacturing a narrative that would outlive their presence here by a hundred hashtags.

For a brief moment, Finn thought he heard another echo—a phrase, a warning, or maybe just his own paranoia. It was gone before he could grab it.

But he could feel the story tightening, lines drawing closer, mysteries stacking up like wood before a long winter.

And in Duck Creek, there was always another story.

## three

# seeds of suspicion

LEO'S STUDIO above the garage was where organization went to die. Every surface was some degree of horizontal landfill: coffee-stained mugs crowding out memory cards, thrift-store lamps doubling as tripods, a brittle bike chain coiled in a bird's nest of USB cords, all of it arranged with the logic of a fever dream. The far wall was dominated by a thrifted flatscreen, big as a diner window and surrounded by sticky notes in every hue Duck Creek's stationary aisle could provide. The air up here was different too—drier, thinner, shot through with the warm plastic tang of overclocked electronics and the faint ghost of Leo's last protein shake.

Finn set down the evidence, which, for now, consisted of three quart-sized Ziplocs bursting with wild salad and a battered Tupperware containing the pine cone pendant. The morning sun knifed in through a streaked window, illuminating the debris with a kind of forensic finality. Leo flopped into his rolling chair, which whined in protest, and wrenched the mouse to life. The screen flickered from the desktop (a photo of the old logging mill in a snowstorm) to the grainy green of the Chalet's night-vision security feed.

"You want the 10x experience?" Leo grinned, blowing a crumb off the keyboard. "I can run this through my upscaling filter. Won't make the saboteur any prettier, but we might catch another detail or two."

Finn nodded, already standing over Leo's shoulder. He didn't

bother sitting; years of guide work had taught him to distrust chairs with more than three moving parts. Instead, he poked through the salad evidence with methodical care, separating the ferns from the dandelion, the lamb's quarters from the chickweed, all with the light, exacting touch of someone who'd spent too long foraging for food in places where supermarkets were a rumor.

Leo ran the footage. The mystery figure in the hoodie played out again, only this time Finn noticed the gait—quick, but not panicked. Each motion had intention, the way some birds moved in the brush: not scared, just built to disappear.

He glanced at Leo, who was already running the footage back and forth, toggling between color enhancements. "You get anything off the profile?"

"Not unless you want a free demo in the Dunning-Kruger effect," Leo said, dragging a slider on the screen. "Best I can say is the person's not huge. Kind of a narrow build. And..." He paused, leaned in, and traced a pale blur. "See that wrist? Tattoo, maybe, or some kind of smudge."

Finn squinted. "Looks more like dirt than ink."

Leo snorted. "You would say that."

"Because it is." Finn reached into the Tupperware and fished out the pine cone pendant, holding it up to the light. He turned it over in his palm, slow and deliberate, the way his grandfather used to turn over river rocks for caddisfly larvae. "This kind of handiwork—see the twist on the wire? That's not craft fair stuff. That's a specific pattern. I've seen it at the trailhead bulletin board—someone makes these as trail markers."

Leo perked up. "You think they're marking territory?"

"Or sending a message. Either way, it's not random." Finn set the pendant down and began picking seeds from the salad bag, rolling them between his fingers for texture and scent. He brought one up to his nose, sniffed, and nodded. "This is yarrow. Edible, if you know what you're doing. But it's hell to grow indoors."

Leo fired up his camera and started taking macro shots of the salad evidence, shifting from one baggie to the next with quick, birdlike head

movements. "You're not going to get famous on yarrow, though. Most people can't even spell it."

"That's the point." Finn said, "Nobody on staff at the Chalet would recognize it, but whoever made this wanted to be recognized by someone who could." He arranged the salad specimens in a line, from least to most exotic, and photographed the progression with his phone. "Gary won't know what hit him, but Sue might. Or she already does, and she's testing us."

"Classic Sue." Leo grinned. "She'd rather train a pack of raccoons to run the place than hire another human."

Finn watched the security video one last time, studying the saboteur's pause at the end—almost as if they were waiting for applause. He filed the detail away, then moved to the window, picking up the view: the harsh brilliance of autumn sun over the still-frosted rooftops, a few orange-banded trucks already crawling Movie Ranch Road. Below, the early shift at Ground + Toasted had started the day's first brawl over parking spaces. He tapped the glass, then checked the time.

"Any luck with the pendant ID?" he asked, turning back to Leo.

"Already on it," Leo said, clicking through a forest of open tabs. "There's an Etsy shop that does wire-wraps like this, but they're all shipped from Salt Lake. Way too neat, anyway. Local stuff is more... rustic. But—wait—" He snapped his fingers and spun in his chair, nearly decapitating his own laptop. "Check this. Duck Creek Classifieds. Somebody posted about a lost pine cone necklace two weeks ago. Username 'Malloway.' That ring a bell?"

Finn blinked, then pieced it together. "Halloway. The Halloway family's been up here forever. Old man Halloway ran the fire lookout, daughter's the one with the foraging classes."

"Bingo." Leo copied the link and sent it to Finn's phone. "Her name's Macy. She runs a foraging walk every Saturday out of the Village green. Which is tomorrow, if you're counting."

Finn considered this, and the knot in his gut relaxed just a touch. "She ever cause trouble?"

"Depends who you ask." Leo flashed a grin. "To the HOA, she's a one-woman ecological disaster. To everyone else, she's a legend."

Finn checked the time again, then started packing the evidence back

into its bags. “We should swing by the market tomorrow. Quiet-like. See if she’s wearing the other half of this.” He nodded to the pendant.

Leo made a mock salute. “Operation Salad Recon. We blend, we observe, we collect wild gossip.”

Finn stuffed the pendant into his jacket pocket and scanned the rest of the workbench for anything incriminating. Satisfied, he headed for the door, then stopped. “You still have the drone with thermal?”

“In the trunk,” Leo replied. “You want to hunt for a warm-blooded salad bandit?”

“Not yet,” Finn said, but the idea was filed for later. “For now, we keep eyes open.”

He was nearly down the stairs when his phone buzzed—a reminder, bright and unignorable: “Deliver coffee to Village Inn, 9:30.” Finn rolled his eyes. He’d promised the new owners at the Inn he’d keep them in the good stuff, and he was already pushing the edge of acceptably late.

He detoured through the garage, where Leo was already test-firing the drone controller, and grabbed two bags of fresh roast from the back-seat of his truck. The air in the garage was even colder than outside, edged with the gasoline and WD-40 that clung to every wall.

“Hey,” Leo called after him. “You want backup at the Inn? Heard the influencers are staying there.”

Finn shook his head, shouldering the coffee. “If I’m not back in twenty, send a rescue team.”

“Copy that, chief,” Leo said, not looking up.

Finn ducked out into the street, coffee bags in hand, and made for the footbridge over Highway 14. The wind was up, and the aspens along the road had started to shed leaves in great, gold sheets, making every step a wet gamble. Halfway across the bridge, he paused, looked back at Leo’s window, and caught a flash of movement—a quick, pale arm waving a tablet in some kind of victory gesture. Finn shook his head, smiled to himself, and continued on.

The Duck Creek Village Inn was a solid, two-story lodge with faux river-rock pillars and a shingle sign that creaked in the morning gusts. Finn had delivered here before, but never with such urgency—he could already see a couple in matching athleisure wear at the front desk, and

he recognized them from their performance in the Chalet. The influencer duo.

He squared up his shoulders and gripped the bags tight. All he wanted was to dump the coffee, collect his tip, and avoid being conscripted into someone else's viral stunt.

But in Duck Creek, things rarely went as planned.

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Finn stepped into the lobby of Duck Creek Village Inn, hands full, nose assaulted by a clash of scents: last night's woodsmoke from the oversized stone fireplace, a half-hearted spritz of artificial "alpine meadow," and the fresh, sharp punch of two pounds of Ground + Toasted's signature dark roast. It took him a second to spot the influencers, but only because they'd set up camp behind an unstable barricade of wheeled suitcases and gear crates stacked taller than the check-in counter itself.

The front desk clerk—a compact guy in a fleece vest, hair buzzed down to stubble—looked like he'd already survived a full week of reality TV before nine in the morning. He gripped the counter with both hands, eyes darting between the reservation computer and the avalanche of luggage threatening to bury him alive.

Toby was the first to notice Finn. He wore his sunglasses perched on his forehead, leaving both hands free to gesture dramatically as he narrated their every move to his phone's front-facing camera. "—and so, after thirty-six hours of travel and two canceled flights, here we are. The legendary Duck Creek Village Inn. The actual start line for the #HermitChallenge." He paused, flashed a practiced smile at Finn, and then turned to help Summer extract a soft-sided duffel bag from the pile.

Summer was even more camera-ready in person. She wore a puffer jacket the exact turquoise of a Miami swimming pool and leggings with a reflective side stripe that seemed engineered to blind anyone in direct sunlight. She had her phone in one hand, a small ring light in the other, and every so often she'd lift both to take a test selfie, pursing her lips and tilting her chin. Finn watched as she took stock of the lobby's lighting, sighed, and muttered, "Maybe we can get a sunrise shot on the patio. There's nothing here to bounce."

Toby shouldered a GoPro rig with the nonchalance of a trophy winner, then raised his voice enough to make the front desk clerk wince. “So, uh, do you guys have, like, a spot to store gear? Or a maintenance shed? Some of this stuff is expensive and doesn’t really fit through doors.” He didn’t wait for an answer before turning the question into a hashtag for his audience: “We’re asking the real questions out here, folks. Never forget to secure your gear!”

The desk clerk forced a smile and typed something into the system, then slid two room keycards across the counter. “It’s just the one king room for now. I’ll see if we can move you when something else opens up.”

Toby rolled with it. “No worries, man. We’re survivalists. We can rough it.” He held up the keycards for the camera, then handed one off to Summer, who tucked it into a pouch on her waistband.

Finn sidled up to the desk, cradling the coffee bags like they were the most precious objects in the room. He waited for the desk clerk to acknowledge him, but the clerk’s eyes flicked briefly to Finn’s armful of beans and then right back to the influencers.

Summer, meanwhile, had wedged herself into a patch of indirect sunlight near the breakfast bar and was testing angles for a Boomerang video. She caught Finn’s stare and, with the speed of someone who’d spent years refining her reactions, smiled at him. It was the sort of smile engineered to say, “We’re all in this together, aren’t we?” but Finn recognized the insulation behind it.

He nodded politely, then cleared his throat. “Coffee delivery. For the staff.” He set the bags gently on the edge of the counter, away from the mounting gear disaster.

“Bless you,” the desk clerk said, exhaling a week’s worth of tension in two words. “You can just leave it right there. Sue’s Chalet, right?”

Finn nodded. “Her special blend.”

Toby seized on the opening, stepping between Finn and the desk. “You from around here, man?” He dropped his content voice a half-octave, trying for what Finn assumed was authentic camaraderie. “We’re hunting for the legendary hermit. Figure locals know all the best stories.”

Finn eyed the camera, then Toby’s feet—brand-new boots, laces

barely crimped, tags probably still in the box. He kept his own answer flat. "Heard of him. Never seen him."

Toby grinned like he'd found a hidden clue. "Nobody's seen him, that's the thing! But there's, like, a million rumors. My DMs are exploding with tips—crazy stuff, some of it probably true. We're gonna blow the whole legend wide open, get the exclusive." He clapped Finn on the shoulder with a practiced, chummy force. "You got any inside info? Anything off the record?"

Finn shook his head, resisting the urge to shake off Toby's hand like an uncooperative dog tick. "If I did, you wouldn't want it. Hermit's not a fan of attention."

Summer, still in selfie-mode, drifted over. "Is it true he lives in a cave? Because the last two people said he has, like, a fortress in the woods." She blinked at Finn, all curiosity and perfect teeth.

Finn shrugged. "Depends who you ask. Some say he winters in town, just wears a beard and hood so nobody recognizes him."

Toby whooped, "Plot twist!" and spun his phone to catch Finn's reaction. Finn gave him nothing. The moment stretched just long enough for Summer to scan Finn's face and decide he wasn't worth further investment.

She turned to the desk clerk. "Is the WiFi fast here? Last place we stayed, we had to drive to a gas station to upload anything."

The clerk managed a small, pained smile. "We have business-class. But the signal's best in the lobby."

"Perfect," Summer said, tapping out a note on her phone.

Toby, still half-ignoring Finn, started to assemble the gear pyramid for the trek to their room. He narrated each bag and case as if giving a TED Talk to the checkout counter. "Three-point lighting, portable green screen, three drones—one thermal, one night-vision, one for B-roll. We'll need to scout locations before the sun goes down."

Finn watched with a mix of disbelief and dread. The inn's lobby was built for lodge tourists and retired couples, not the full assault of twenty-first century media. But here they were, already mapping out a social conquest of the mountain before their boots had even touched trail.

His phone buzzed—a sharp, brief vibration, like a mosquito that

bites and vanishes. He fished it from his jacket. The message was from Sergeant Buck Miller, one of the few people in town who still used full sentences and signed his texts:

Saw on Facebook we've got some influencers hunting for old Silas. Got something interesting in the old National Guard files. Rather not hand it over to strangers. Stop by when you can. And bring Leo, he knows the social stuff. - Buck

Finn felt his hackles rise at the word “strangers.” He looked at the influencers, already self-documenting their first steps toward the room, and wondered if the hermit had ever been a person to them, or just a clickbait concept. He pocketed the phone, offered the clerk a nod, and started for the door.

“Hey, man,” Toby called after him, “if you want to be part of the legend, let us know! Seriously. Locals make the best guest stars.”

Finn didn't turn around. “I'll keep it in mind.”

Out on the porch, the chill bit deeper than before. The sun was still low, casting long shadows over the parking lot. Finn set his hands on the railing, drew in a lungful of cold, and waited for the last traces of ring light and selfie chatter to fade.

The phone buzzed again. Leo, this time:

“Operation Salad Recon go for tomorrow. You bring the snacks, I'll bring the plant nerd trivia.”

Finn snorted, feeling the day's tension shed a little. He watched the aspen leaves flutter in the wind, the gold of them already threatening to go brown, and remembered why he liked this place: not for the stories people told, but for the ones they were willing to keep secret.

Finn lingered at the edge of the lobby just long enough to see the influencer duo wrangle their gear pyramid toward the stairs, Summer narrating every step for her followers while Toby gave the luggage a running commentary like it was a playoff game. The desk clerk waited until they'd disappeared around the landing, then slumped

against the counter and let out a sound somewhere between a sigh and a groan.

"Thanks for the delivery," he said to Finn, nodding at the coffee bags on the counter. "Didn't realize we'd be hosting the Duck Creek version of a TV crew this weekend."

Finn gave a wry smile. "It's just two of them, but they move enough air for a football team."

The clerk laughed, then eyed the clock. "You ever notice how it's always the same story with these types? They show up with more cameras than common sense, dig up some old local legend, and suddenly everyone's inbox is full of interview requests from LA."

Finn nodded. "We had a group of ghost hunters here two winters ago. Stayed four days, left a mess, never found anything but their own shadows."

"Yeah, but those ghost guys didn't jam the reservation line with calls from twelve-year-olds trying to get shout-outs." The clerk grinned, then leaned in conspiratorially. "Maybe I'll flick the WiFi on and off now and again, just to keep them honest."

Finn liked that idea more than he would admit. He glanced around the lobby—empty, for now, save for a couple of battered armchairs and a display of tourist pamphlets for the Bryce and Zion parks. He remembered a time when the biggest scandal was a raccoon making off with the breakfast muffins. Now the drama came with sponsorship deals and hashtags.

He reached for the door, but the clerk stopped him. "Hey. You live up on Cedar Rim, right?"

Finn nodded. "Just past the old fire road."

"Then you know the legend. The real one." The clerk's eyes held a kind of dare.

Finn hesitated, then shrugged. "I know what people say. Doesn't mean it's true."

The clerk considered that, then let it slide. "Well, if any of them actually see the guy, I'll eat my own name tag." He tapped the embroidered badge on his vest. "Take it easy."

Finn pushed through the lobby doors, out into the sharp morning, and felt the cold cut through the last of the influencer static. The air was

clearer out here. The highway was busy with trucks, not tourists, and the only cameras belonged to the deer eyeing the world from the brush.

He walked back across the footbridge, the bags of coffee now just ballast, and tried to decide whether to tell Leo about the desk clerk's WiFi sabotage plan or keep it for his own amusement. He decided to keep it.

By the time he reached Leo's place, the studio above the garage was already humming. The windows glowed with the sickly light of too many screens and the distant, hopeful smell of popcorn. Leo was hunched at his laptop, typing so fast it sounded like rainfall.

"Mission accomplished?" Leo asked without looking up.

Finn dropped the empty coffee bag onto the desk. "They're checked in, and the clerk's got a whole counterintelligence campaign ready."

Leo grinned, then pointed at his screen. "Wait till you see this. I found a whole forum thread about the hermit. People are betting on whether he's real, and some guy named 'GonzoSurvivor' claims to have a map."

Finn arched an eyebrow. "We're up against professionals, then."

"Yeah, but I don't think they know about the forager lady. Or her salad bar calling card." Leo clicked to a new tab. "You ready for tomorrow?"

Finn nodded. "As I'll ever be."

The rest of the day stretched out, quiet and unremarkable—just how Finn liked it. There was still time before the storm hit, before the influencers ramped up and the secrets of Duck Creek got dragged through the comment sections of the world.

For now, it was enough to know there were still places where real stories hid, and real people were willing to keep them safe.

four

## **the donkey basketball connection**

FINN'S TRUCK crunched over the gravel shoulder outside Valley High, and he let the engine idle for a few seconds to savor the contrast: inside, the faint aftertaste of gasoline and last week's spilled coffee; outside, the raw blast of autumn wind, redolent with hay, manure, and a faint medicinal tang of liniment. The parking lot was already overrun with horse trailers and four-by-fours, a steady stream of kids in team jackets and parents in Carhartt overalls trailing toward the gym entrance. Donkey Basketball only happened once a year, but it drew half the county and most of the weirdos from the surrounding three.

Finn killed the engine and eased out. The wind caught the edge of his jacket, flapping it like a flag. He locked up the truck and headed across the packed dirt, careful to avoid the half-frozen slush that had survived the sun by hiding under the bumpers of suburban SUVs.

He'd barely made it past the concession stand trailer when he spotted Buck Miller, parked in front of the gym's loading doors like a sentry. Miller's National Guard dress uniform was so sharply pressed it could have doubled as body armor, and his cap sat dead-level above his sharp blue eyes and the kind of mustache usually seen in grainy photos from the Western Front. The manila folder under his arm looked more battered than the rest of him, edges curled like a molting snake.

"Finn," Buck called, squaring up his posture so fast it made Finn's own spine twinge in sympathy.

“Sergeant,” Finn replied, giving a nod as he closed the distance.

Buck did not shake hands, just held out the folder like a relay baton. “Appreciate you coming down.”

Finn took the folder, careful not to crease it further. It felt heavier than it looked, weighted with the promise of secrets and the faint, acrid aroma of a half-century of storage.

“Didn’t figure you’d want this sent by email,” Buck said, his voice pitched low to avoid competing with the braying donkeys inside the gym.

“Probably not.” Finn flicked the folder open, eyes skimming the first page—a standard-issue incident report, complete with triplicate carbon copies and an official seal rendered in muddy blue ink. “Your old man wrote this up?”

Buck nodded once, precise. “1975. First year the Guard had us run search and rescue out past Cascade. He thought it was just another missing hiker, but when they got out there...”

Finn flipped to the next sheet, yellowed and faintly brittle. Typed lines described “unidentified survivalist figure, male, possibly 50+, spotted at 1100 hours carrying what appeared to be a takeout container from Aunt Sue’s Chalet.” He couldn’t help the half-laugh that sneaked out.

“He’s got a taste for fine dining,” Finn said.

Buck’s mustache twitched. “Dad said they found the box later, scrubbed clean. Guy never left a trace. All the stories say he was dangerous, but off the record? Dad never bought it.”

A sharp wind cut between the buildings, bringing with it the sound of distant whinnies and the sweet, acrid bite of deep-fried concession food. Finn shielded the folder with his body and let the silence do the heavy lifting for a beat.

“Did you ever see him?” Finn asked, keeping his tone flat.

Buck shook his head. “Once, maybe. Could’ve been a trick of the light. You know how it is up on the rim—sun comes through just right and every tree looks like a man with an ax.”

Finn did know. He thumbed through the rest of the folder, found a hand-drawn map annotated in tidy block letters: “First sighting—Rim Trail, 0900.” Then, in pencil, a line tracing the creek east to a

marked "cache." Someone had drawn a tiny, grinning donkey in the corner.

He shut the folder and looked back at Buck, who was already scanning the horizon like he was expecting an ambush. A group of middle schoolers in matching T-shirts stumbled past, all carrying pool noodles and making donkey noises with alarming accuracy.

"Still on the Guard?" Finn asked, though he knew the answer.

Buck allowed himself a hint of pride. "Nineteen years and change. Retirement in the spring, unless the world ends first." He eyed Finn. "You ever think about re-enlisting?"

Finn shrugged, noncommittal. "I like the hours, but the benefits aren't as good as they used to be."

Buck huffed out a single syllable of laughter, then glanced at the gym entrance. "You sticking around for the game?"

"Wouldn't miss it," Finn said. He tucked the folder under his arm, feeling the gritty, lived-in texture of it against his ribs. "You know any of the players this year?"

Buck pointed with his chin at the far end of the parking lot, where a man in a neon windbreaker was unloading what looked like a mobile petting zoo from the back of a livestock trailer. "Two of my cousins are reffing. They like to keep things in the family." He dropped his voice again. "And if the salad bar thing keeps up, my money's on the donkeys."

Finn smirked, then let the moment linger before nodding toward the gym. "You mind if I ask about the old man? Before I go in."

Buck's face pinched for a second, then smoothed. "He's good. Slower than he'll admit, but still runs the CB radio at the fire station when they let him." He looked at the folder, then at Finn. "He'd want you to know—don't believe the stuff they say about the hermit. Most of it's just what people want to believe."

Finn nodded, considering the weight of that. He watched as Buck moved off to direct a wayward group of basketball players toward the locker room, voice carrying commands with the easy authority of someone who'd never once questioned his own chain of command.

Finn lingered in the lot for a minute, flipping the folder open again and staring at the map. The stories were always the same: a figure

spotted at dawn or dusk, never approaching, never making trouble. But if Buck's old man hadn't been lying, Silas Thorne had survived up there for almost half a century without hurting a soul.

He tucked the folder inside his jacket and headed for the gym, bracing himself for the next round of chaos, the noise, and whatever else Duck Creek had planned for the evening.

But the whole way there, he couldn't stop thinking about the line: "never left a trace."

In Finn's experience, even the best survivors left something behind.

He wondered what, if anything, Silas wanted them to find.

Inside the gym, the world funneled into a single, raucous sense: noise. The donkey basketball court was a temporary installation of plywood and sawdust, ringed by hay bales and populated by a herd of what could generously be called "seasoned" donkeys. The air reeked of livestock, popcorn, and the arctic aftershave of cleaning solvent. The crowd, packed shoulder to shoulder on bleachers, was a rolling tide of small-town faces: ranchers, teachers, kids in scout uniforms, and at least three tourists looking wildly out of place in neon trail jackets.

Finn wormed his way up the sideline, taking a seat two rows behind the scoring table. Buck had said the game was the real draw, and judging by the size of the bets being exchanged on the spot, he was right. The teams—Valley High's staff versus a medley of local "celebrities"—were busy corralling their donkeys and pretending to strategize. At the whistle, the animals responded with a general refusal to move, punctuated by the occasional short burst of chaos as a kid tried to mount up and was promptly ejected into the straw.

The first quarter was a war of attrition. Every made basket was met with a sound that started as laughter and ended as a barnyard chorus of brays and yelps. Finn watched, grinning, as the donkeys dictated the pace of play, more interested in sniffing the corners of the court than chasing the ball. When someone actually scored, the moment was so unexpected that the home team nearly missed their next possession, still celebrating.

He glanced down at the pine cone pendant in his pocket, rolling it between his thumb and first two fingers. It felt denser here, as if the

noise and energy of the game charged it up. Or maybe that was just the coffee from earlier.

A few minutes into the second quarter, the game was interrupted by a spontaneous animal strike: every donkey, as if on cue, clustered together at the far end of the court and refused to budge. The emcee, a retired science teacher with a voice like a busted trombone, took the opportunity to announce halftime and call for volunteers for a special "spectator round." The crowd erupted in heckling and peer pressure, and before Finn could duck, Buck was at his shoulder, arm outstretched.

"C'mon, Finn," Buck said, dragging him into the light. "Show these people how it's done."

Finn groaned, but the momentum of small-town goodwill was a force even inertia couldn't resist. He found himself paired with a woman he didn't recognize—tall, maybe an inch on him, hair the color of matchstick ember tied back with a scrap of blue surveyor's tape. Her eyes, green as new willow, sized him up with a flicker of appraisal.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Macy."

"Finn," he replied, shaking her hand. Her grip was dry and warm, with a callus that suggested she spent more time outdoors than most.

They mounted their donkeys. Finn's beast was a dappled gray named "Burger," according to the tape on its bridle. Burger stared into the distance, unmoved by the sudden weight on its back or the roar of the crowd. Macy's donkey was a lean brown with a mane like a punk rock wig.

"Yours looks fast," Finn said.

Macy grinned. "He's a classic underachiever. But he hates to lose."

At the whistle, Burger launched into a slow, deliberate shuffle toward the ball, which had been placed, inexplicably, in the middle of a puddle of spilled orange Gatorade. Macy was already ahead, her donkey threading through the confusion like a parade grand marshal. Finn nudged Burger to keep pace, but the animal was more interested in getting a head rub from a kid near the baseline.

The ball pinballed from hoof to hoof. Macy corralled it first, scooping it up one-handed and swinging low over her donkey's side like a circus trick. Finn tried to close the gap, but every time he leaned in,

Burger stopped dead, forcing Finn to grab for the mane or risk a faceful of hay.

Macy had a clear shot and took it, the ball arcing up and banking perfectly off the makeshift backboard. The crowd lost its mind. Finn couldn't help but join the applause, even as Burger made a beeline for the far exit, dragging Finn in an unplanned victory lap.

When the round ended, they dismounted in a cloud of straw and adrenaline. Macy's cheeks were flush, eyes sharp with post-contest spark.

"Good ride," Finn said, catching his breath.

She smiled, showing small, even teeth. "Not my first time, but you're a natural. You just need a better partner."

They shook hands again, and Finn noticed the pendant at her throat—a pine cone, wrapped with copper wire and finished with a ring of twine. It was a twin to the one in his pocket, but bigger, brighter. For a second, Finn forgot the words he'd meant to say.

"Is that homemade?" he asked, nodding to the necklace.

Macy glanced down. "Yeah. It's my thing, I guess. Not everyone gets it, but I think the world could use more pretty trash."

Finn wanted to say he did get it, but the emcee was back on the mic, calling for "Team Halloway" to take a bow. Macy winked and darted off toward the far bleachers, leaving Finn in the fluorescent dust.

He stood there, turning the pendant over in his palm, the weight of the new evidence settling in. The noise of the game, the chaos, the warmth of the handshake—it all blended together, leaving him with a sense that maybe, just maybe, the real story was right in front of him.

The whistle blew for the second half. Finn found his way back to his seat, still feeling the echo of Macy's laugh, and wondered just how long she'd been playing her own version of the game.

He watched the rest of the contest with half an eye, the other half focused on the possibilities—what connected the wild salad, the crafted pendant, and the quiet, ferocious intelligence he'd seen in those green eyes.

By the time the game ended, the crowd was already thinning, kids herded out by parents, the smell of livestock giving way to the sharper scent of cooling night. Finn pocketed the pendant, made a note of the

name "Macy Halloway," and resolved to follow up before someone else did.

Because in Duck Creek, secrets had a way of riding to the surface, whether you chased them or not.

And in Finn's experience, the ride was always worth it.

The court was nearly empty by the time Finn made his way back to the sideline. The cleanup crew—two sophomores with an industrial broom and a knack for ignoring instructions—swept hay into vague piles while a teacher in a reflective vest led the last of the donkeys out a side door. The air, now stripped of crowd heat, cooled fast, and every echo of movement carried a bit farther.

Buck Miller waited on the lowest row of the bleachers, elbows planted on his knees and hands folded as if he were reviewing a particularly difficult playbook. He didn't look up until Finn dropped down beside him, the folder now rumpled at the corners from its tour of the gym.

"Nice game," Buck said, voice carrying just enough to bounce off the empty seats.

"Couldn't have done it without Burger," Finn replied. "Though I think the donkeys are running the long con."

Buck smirked. "Smartest animals in the building, most nights." He let that hang for a moment, then turned his full attention to Finn. "You get a look at that file?"

Finn nodded, flipping it open and pulling out the hand-drawn map. "Your dad was thorough. He ever find that 'cache' he marked?"

Buck shook his head, slow. "No one did. Legend has it, Silas moved it every few years—never the same place twice. Guard guys used to run unofficial sweepstakes on who could spot him first. Some said he'd plant fake clues just to keep you busy."

Finn stared at the map, tracing the penciled line with his finger. "Was there ever any trouble? Real trouble, I mean—not just campfire stories."

Buck's mouth tightened. He reached up, tugged absently at his mustache, then leaned closer. "There's a thing my dad used to say—'The real story's the one nobody wants to talk about.' The mining company that hired most of the town back in the seventies? They were

dumping tailings in the wash. Stuff that would make your hair fall out if you drank the water too long.”

Finn’s chest went tight. “Let me guess. Silas was the whistleblower.”

“Bingo.” Buck’s tone was flat, almost bitter. “He worked maintenance, had a chemistry degree from somewhere back east. Found the documents, tried to report it, got canned for his trouble. Next thing you know, every fire, every missing livestock, every power outage—people blamed the ‘hermit.’ The company kept a PR guy on payroll just to feed the stories.”

Finn closed the folder, fingers white on the cardboard. “So all the stuff about him sabotaging the plant—”

Buck cut in. “Never happened. Dad said if anything, Silas was patching leaks, not making them.” He looked out over the now-vacant court, jaw set. “Town needed a villain. Easier to chase a ghost than take on the people who sign your paycheck.”

Finn felt the words settle in his gut, heavy and sour. He watched the two janitors angle their way down the bleachers, one dropping a paper cup every third row just to annoy the other. At the far end, someone cranked open a door, letting in a rush of real night air—sharp, clean, almost medicinal after the day’s chaos.

He turned to Buck. “You believe it? That he’s still up there, after all this time?”

Buck considered. “If anyone could, it’s Silas. Dad said he was like a damn coyote—show up where you least expected him, then disappear before you could say his name. He probably hears every story people tell about him and just keeps on living.”

Finn nodded, chewing over the implications. The influencers hunting for Silas weren’t chasing a ghost; they were dredging up old lies, maybe hoping to make new ones. And somewhere up on Cedar Rim, the man himself was probably watching, waiting, keeping his own score.

Buck slapped his knees, then stood. “Look, I know I shouldn’t get involved. National Guard’s got enough scandals without me poking around retired ones. But if you do go up there—take a radio. Cell phones cut out fast on the north side.”

Finn smiled. “You offering backup?”

Buck grinned, and for a moment, he looked ten years younger. "Hell no. But if you want advice on donkeys, I'm your man."

They shook hands, a quick, firm squeeze with no fanfare. Buck's palm was callused, the grip unflinching.

Finn tucked the folder under his arm and made for the exit, weaving through the last few stragglers still picking up the evening's detritus. Outside, his breath plumed in the dark, and the world felt suddenly sharper, edges cleaned up by the first promise of frost.

He crossed the lot, passed the empty trailers, and paused at the door of his truck. He looked back at the gym, lights still buzzing inside, the faint hum of voices now a distant, safe thing.

He ran his hand over the folder, feeling the grooves and scars and the layers of story pressed into it. Fifty years ago, Silas tried to warn them. Now, it was Finn's turn to keep the truth safe, maybe even bring it out into the open.

He unlocked the door, slid into the cab, and started the engine. The heater groaned to life, and for a moment, he just sat there, letting the new knowledge settle in.

As he pulled away, the dashboard clock flicked past nine. Somewhere ahead, up on the Rim, the real story waited—no longer a ghost, but a man with a past, a purpose, and maybe even a friend.

Finn drove into the night, the folder a silent passenger, the road open and hungry for the next chapter.



## five

# the forager's trail

THE DUCK CREEK farmers market was never more alive than on a Saturday at opening bell. It didn't matter that the air still bit with frost, or that the sun barely scraped above the mountain rim; by seven a.m., the green was already staked out by awnings in every color of expired sunscreen and truck-bed tarps. The regulars jockeyed for position, lining up before the first apple could bruise. You could set your watch by the click of folding tables and the thunk of tent weights hitting wet grass.

Finn and Leo arrived at precisely 6:55, which meant they were already late by local standards. They parked in a patch of rutted mud, the only space left between a Prius with custom "locavore" stickers and the battered Ford belonging to the McKelvey twins. Leo, ever the opportunist, pulled his phone and started filming the moment his feet hit gravel.

"Opening rush," he narrated, sweeping the camera across the early crowd. "A true spectacle. Duck Creek's answer to Burning Man, except everyone's hydrated and the only thing that gets torched is last year's honey stock." He panned to Finn, who ignored the camera and focused on scanning the rows of pop-up tents.

Finn had no intention of buying anything, but he'd brought his own market tote—a battered old canvas job with the logo half-worn to oblivion. It was his armor, or maybe a disguise. Here, everyone had a

tote, a mug, or at least a re-used grocery bag. To walk the stalls empty-handed was to declare yourself a tourist, and tourists never got the real prices.

Leo edged up alongside him, still narrating quietly. "The target is in position," he said, tilting the phone toward a navy-and-lavender tent set up at the far end of the row. "She's got prime real estate: first hit on the walking loop and right next to the kombucha stand. Smart."

The tent in question belonged to Macy Halloway. She was already busy, animatedly discussing something with a middle-aged couple in puffy vests. Her table was a carefully orchestrated mess: three baskets overflowing with wild herbs, a half-dozen pine-cone pendants dangling from bare birch branches jammed in a mason jar, and a scattering of pamphlets fanned out like cards on a blackjack table. A sign, hand-lettered on a recycled cereal box, read "Eat Wild: Sustainable Foraging & Forest First-Aid." Beneath that, in smaller script: "Ask about our workshops!"

Finn watched as Macy pointed at a bunch of bright yellow flowers—likely arnica—while the couple listened, transfixed. Her hands moved with practiced confidence, fingers splayed wide to show the soft fuzz of the leaves, or pinched to indicate caution. At one point, she plucked a single flower from the stem, sniffed it, then passed it over for inspection, all with the gravity of a priest handling relics.

She had the same aura as she did at the basketball game: total command of her space, at home in the wind and morning light. The auburn hair was less tamed today, loose under a woven beanie. The pine-cone pendant from last night was visible, swinging at her throat. Even from fifty feet, Finn could tell it was a close cousin to the one in his pocket.

He and Leo orbited the market in slow, unsuspecting loops. The play was to get close, blend in, and observe. Leo ducked into the syrup vendor's line, pretending to film a feature on "artisan breakfast solutions," but mostly keeping Macy's booth in frame at all times. Finn drifted by a table piled high with apples, pausing to squeeze a Braeburn and listen to the ancient man running the stall hold forth on the decline of western civilization.

When Finn finally made his way toward Macy's end of the green,

she was solo, tidying up her spread. He slowed, pretending to check his phone, but she spotted him immediately.

"Hey, it's you!" Macy called, voice carrying with the easy volume of someone who'd given up on ever being ignored.

Finn smiled, tried for casual. "Your donkey's in better shape than I am this morning."

She laughed, a quick burst. "Burger's a legend. You should see him in the off-season—absolute menace in the community garden." She packed a cluster of lamb's quarters into a paper bag with deft, gentle hands, then set it aside.

"You doing all right?" she asked, softer now. "You looked a little... stunned, last night."

Finn hesitated, caught off-guard by her read. "Just not used to that much chaos. Or hay."

Macy nodded, eyes flicking to his tote. "You on a mission today, or just here to window shop?"

Finn shrugged. "Aunt Sue's out of dandelion root. She says she'll die if she doesn't get some before next week."

Macy grinned, the smile deepening the spray of freckles across her nose. "She's the only person who can make dandelion root taste good. I've tried and failed."

Finn edged closer to her table, pretending to study the pendants. He picked one up, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger. The copper wirework was different from the security-cam piece, but the twist on the top was identical. He turned it over, feigning interest.

Macy watched him. "You into foraging, or just the jewelry?"

Finn set the pendant down. "The jewelry's cool, but I'm more of a scavenger than a forager."

"Same thing, sometimes," she said. Then, dropping her voice, "Though I hear you've got a nose for mysteries."

Finn smiled, but said nothing.

She slid a small brown bag across the table. "Dandelion, on the house. Tell Sue I said hi." Her expression was somewhere between friendly and knowing, as if they were both in on the same secret.

He took the bag and nodded his thanks. Before he could move on, a man in an old scout leader jacket approached, eyeing the pine cones.

Macy shifted instantly into educator mode, running through the basics of wire wrapping and the best way to preserve sap. Finn stepped back, blending into the foot traffic, and watched as she handled the next few customers. Each time, her face went bright and animated when someone asked a real question about plants or local ecology, but when a looky-loo asked about “gift options,” her expression dimmed a touch—never rude, but never quite as warm.

Finn looped back to where Leo had set up near the end of the cider tasting. Leo was busy filming a vendor slicing apples with the flair of a sushi chef, but paused the video when Finn sidled up.

“She’s good,” Leo murmured. “Like, politician good. Plays every type, but she’s totally herself the whole time.”

Finn agreed. “She’s got a plan, too. Her table’s set up to filter people. You can see who actually cares.”

“Did you get anything?”

He showed Leo the dandelion bag. “Only this. She’s too sharp for me.”

Leo shrugged. “Wait. She’s getting up.”

Macy was closing a travel mug, then slipping it into a side pocket of her utility vest. She made a quick gesture to the kombucha vendor next door, then disappeared behind a row of tents toward the public restrooms.

Leo’s eyes widened. “Now or never, dude.”

Finn waited a beat, then beelined for the tent. He pretended to browse, but as soon as he was sure nobody was watching, he leaned in and scanned the cluttered table for anything unusual.

The surface was a textbook mess, but the pamphlets caught his eye first: “Duck Creek Edibles: A Beginner’s Guide,” “DIY Pine Tar Remedies,” and a slick-printed sheet with a picture of a head of iceberg lettuce and a skull-and-crossbones. This last was titled “The True Cost of Commercial Food.”

He thumbed through the pamphlet. The inside was full of charts and callouts, facts about nutrient depletion and how far food traveled to reach Duck Creek. In the margins, Macy had annotated in blue pen—footnotes, plant substitutes, even hand-drawn arrows for emphasis. But on the back panel, under the headline “Local Offenders: Who’s

Poisoning Your Plate?" he saw a bullet-point list. Aunt Sue's Chalet was circled three times, the ink so heavy it bled through the paper.

Finn felt his jaw tighten. He slipped the pamphlet back where he found it, then scanned the rest of the table for anything more. Nothing. He straightened up, and as he did, he caught a flash of blue surveyor tape moving back into the tent row.

He melted into the crowd before Macy spotted him.

Back at the apple table, Leo was waiting with his phone at half-mast, ready for a debrief.

"She's targeting Sue," Finn said, voice low.

"You sure?"

Finn nodded, still feeling the echo of the circled name. "She's got the Chalet at the top of her hit list."

Leo looked toward Macy's tent, where she was now packing a new customer's order into a paper bag. "She's leaving early," he said. "Most people hang until ten at least."

Finn watched as Macy started breaking down her table, working with the brisk, systematic efficiency of a forest firefighter packing for a head-count. She moved like she had somewhere else to be, somewhere that mattered more.

"She's probably going straight to her next project," Finn said.

Leo considered this, then grinned. "Maybe she's not the only one who knows how to stalk a trail."

Finn smiled, but his brain was already in gear, mapping the likely routes, the side trails, the places a forager might go to harvest or to hide.

As Macy finished packing, she slung her backpack over one shoulder and made for the edge of the green, boots churning up the dead grass. She didn't look back, but Finn had the distinct sense she was counting every second, every footstep.

Leo held up the phone, ready to document whatever happened next. "After you, Sherlock."

Finn took a breath, squared his tote, and slipped into the current, following the wake Macy left through the market. He had questions, and he was finally ready to ask them.

But first, he wanted to see where she went when she thought no one was watching.

Leo tracked the influencers by the sound of their voices before he ever saw them. There was a certain pitch that only the very online could achieve—something that cut through even the most stubborn of local chatter, a hybrid between game show host and podcast addict. He sidled up to the firewood vendor's stall and tilted his phone's camera just enough to catch the action without looking like a total creep.

Toby and Summer, the “adventure power couple,” were working the market like seasoned politicians. Their branded jackets, a blinding white with neon orange accents, practically glowed under the weak sunlight. Leo had to hand it to them: no one in Duck Creek had ever worn anything so clean, or managed to keep it that way for longer than two minutes. They'd even gone full “wilderness chic”—brand-new boots, matching utility belts (still stiff from the packaging), and a tripod that probably cost more than the average local's monthly rent.

Summer handled the camera work, holding a gimbal-mounted phone in one hand while she flashed a dazzling “engagement smile” at every passing market-goer. Toby was the point man, working the crowd with all the desperate energy of someone who'd just downed three cans of Monster and a shot of cold brew. He stopped a pair of teens by the kettle corn stand, and Leo drifted closer to eavesdrop.

Toby popped the question with zero warmup: “You ever hear about the Duck Creek hermit? Some say he's not even real.” He leaned in, eyebrows up, as if the fate of the world hinged on the answer.

The taller of the two kids—a local, if the faded high school baseball cap was any clue—looked at his friend, then at the camera. “Yeah, everybody's heard of him. My cousin says he lives off Rainwater Hollow, but he's, like, never at the same spot twice.”

Toby nodded solemnly, like he'd just uncovered a lost manuscript. “So, what's your cousin's name?”

The kid hesitated, but the other one elbowed him and stage-whispered, “He'll tell you if you give him a free t-shirt.”

Toby laughed, playing to the camera. “I'll do you one better,” he said, and reached into his backpack. He pulled out a folded packet of

glossy tickets. "How about two backstage passes for my next DJ set in Cedar City? You give us the details, we'll make you famous."

The local's eyes went wide. "Seriously?"

"Serious as a heart attack," Toby said. "But you gotta promise—when we find the hermit, you'll help us tell the real story."

Leo watched as the kid nodded, and then, with the nervous pride of someone confessing a crime, said, "My cousin said he saw him, like, a month ago? By the old dam up past Cascade Falls. He was carrying a five-gallon bucket and wearing a poncho made from a blue tarp. Said he looked like a mountain yeti." The kid laughed, but there was a flicker of real excitement in his face.

Toby grinned, then pulled a sharpie from his pocket and signed the ticket sleeves like he was headlining Coachella. Summer was already moving around for a better angle, holding her phone up to catch the handshake.

"Is this going to be on YouTube?" the kid asked, looking half-hopeful and half-scared.

"Everywhere," Summer said, voice caramel-sweet. "We're going to make you Duck Creek famous, babe."

Leo suppressed a smirk. They were good. Annoying, but good.

He stepped back just in time for Finn to materialize from the traffic jam by the honey booth. Finn's eyes were tight, like he'd just chewed a lemon.

"They've got the whole market on tape," Leo murmured. "And they just bribed the Sanders kid for hermit intel."

Finn scanned the crowd. "What'd they get?"

"Cascade Falls. Blue tarp poncho, five-gallon bucket. Typical."

Finn sighed, but his eyes stayed on the influencer duo. "They'll try the Falls this afternoon. They're relentless."

Leo nudged him. "What about the target? Macy?"

Finn jerked his chin back toward the tents. "She's packing up. Must've seen us watching. She's making a break for the trailhead, west end."

"Want me to tail her?" Leo asked.

Finn shook his head. "You keep an eye on these two. See if they hit the café or stick around the market. I'll catch up with Halloway."

Leo nodded, then pointed the phone at Finn's back as he peeled off through the maze of folding chairs and breakfast burrito wrappers. He waited until Finn was out of sight, then checked the influencer situation again. Summer was snapping product shots of a half-eaten apple fritter, while Toby was reviewing footage on the gimbal, nodding along to his own narration.

Leo wandered past them, pretending to be interested in a soap vendor's "foraged pine tar exfoliant." He loitered long enough to overhear Summer's actual, off-camera voice—a flat, tired monotone as she scrolled her phone with one hand. "If we get one more old person who says the hermit 'ain't my problem,' I'm going to scream."

Toby didn't look up. "Don't sweat it. We'll get better tape at the Falls. Just need the B-roll, then we can bounce."

Leo snapped a photo of the soap display—mostly as cover—then texted Finn a quick update: "Influencers staying put for now. Will follow if they move. Good luck with the stalker run."

He lingered at the edge of the green, eyes flicking from vendor to vendor, every so often catching the bright glint of the influencer jackets weaving through the crowd. They worked with the precision of heat-seeking missiles, moving from one likely interview to the next, always upbeat and always on. At one point, Leo caught Toby rehearsing an entire monologue to the camera, flubbing a line and then instantly resetting, the smile never quite leaving his face.

It was impressive, in a way, but also a little sad. Leo wondered if either of them would notice if the real hermit showed up in the next tent over, or if they'd just keep chasing the story until the battery died.

A ruckus broke out near the front of the market—a commotion over a dropped cooler of eggs and a minor, but extremely loud, argument between two of the local bakers. Leo edged closer, filming the chaos for posterity, and caught a glimpse of the influencer duo trying to get the spat on camera. They were, in that moment, indistinguishable from the tourists they usually made fun of online.

He stepped back, watched the clouds roll in, and checked his phone again. Nothing from Finn yet. Leo did a slow pan of the market, getting the morning in full—kids with sticky fingers, a dog snoring under a

vendor table, old-timers clutching coffee and debating the real origins of the hermit myth. It was all painfully, perfectly Duck Creek.

He grinned, then sent another message: "You owe me a cinnamon roll if I have to interview these two. Not kidding."

On the other side of the crowd, Finn kept Macy in sight. She was already on the move, boots hitting the uneven dirt at a brisk clip, her tent and table folded down with military efficiency. Finn hung back a dozen yards, careful to let her turn every corner before he did, using the wall of food trucks as cover. Once, he thought she'd spotted him, but she just paused to retie her bootlace and kept moving.

He shadowed her as she passed the edge of the market, then ducked into the thin pines at the edge of the village green. He slowed, letting a gap open, and watched as she cut a sharp left onto the Deer Hollow trailhead, the blue surveyor tape now flagging her as a moving marker in the brush.

He texted Leo:

On her tail. Heading Deer Hollow. Will report if anything weird.

From his spot at the edge of the green, Leo watched the influencer duo strike camp and head for the parking lot, gear in tow. They were moving with purpose, probably gunning for the Cascade Falls trail before the locals woke up enough to block the path.

Leo snorted. "Predictable," he muttered, then started after them, phone at the ready.

But he kept thinking about Macy, about how she'd moved through the crowd like she was born to blend in, but always left a faint wake, like a story trying to write itself. Leo had seen that look before—in Finn, in himself, and once in the eyes of the last kid who ever believed in Duck Creek's magic.

He wondered if today was the day the legends caught up to them.

He watched the influencer car peel out of the lot, leaving only tire ruts and a confetti of business cards behind.

He hit record on his phone, and followed.

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The Deer Hollow trail rose sharp from the edge of the village green, shucking off civilization in two switchbacks and a half-mile of untrimmed underbrush. Finn moved light-footed on the damp earth, boots barely disturbing the quilt of needles and the wind-thrown drift of last autumn's leaves. Each step took him deeper into the hush of the pine woods, the sounds of the market already smothered by distance and the thickening trees.

He could still see Macy ahead, sometimes as a flash of movement between trunks, sometimes only by the bright flicker of surveyor's tape at her wrist. She walked with an easy, ground-eating stride—neither urgent nor careless, but never letting her pace sag. Every so often, she stooped to collect something from the trail's edge, a sprig of herb or a tiny mushroom. Finn watched her movements with the respect of one tracker to another. She never glanced behind; never needed to.

The sun had not yet climbed above the canopy, but the light was already breaking into geometric chunks, dappling the dirt in shifting patches of gold and shadow. The air was sharper here, carrying a resinous bite and the faint promise of snow still tucked in the shadowed creases of the valley.

Finn's plan was simple: keep her in view, stay out of sight, and look for a break in her armor. He'd tailed elk with less caution. He shifted his route just off-trail, using the soft give of the duff to cover his approach, careful not to snap a twig or set off a squirrel. He felt the nerves in his legs wind tight, but the rest of him was calm, tuned to the subtle signals of a world that rarely gave up its secrets without a chase.

A mile or so up, the trail narrowed and the grade steepened. Macy slowed, checked her phone, then turned up a narrow side path Finn hadn't noticed before—a seam in the brush flagged with a single, faded orange ribbon. She didn't hesitate, just shouldered her pack and plunged in.

Finn waited thirty seconds, then followed. He passed the trailhead, breathing in the churned-up earth, and found the faint print of her boot in a patch of mud. It was almost too neat—a little signpost, left just for him. He grinned, in spite of himself.

The side trail twisted and rose, winding through stands of young aspen and pockets of thimbleberry. At one point, Finn heard the far-off

rattle of a woodpecker, then nothing but his own heartbeat and the steady, metronomic crunch of Macy's boots somewhere ahead.

He lost sight of her near a shallow dip where the trail faded into a mess of blowdown and toppled logs. Finn stopped, ears straining, and caught the faintest whisper of cloth scraping bark. He dropped low, circled wide, and tried to get eyes on her through a scrim of branches. Nothing. He waited, barely breathing.

A minute passed. Then two. The forest stilled, as if waiting for a cue.

Finn crept forward, scanning for fresh tracks or a glint of copper wire. He ducked a branch, then stepped into a small clearing ringed by boulders and the broken bones of ancient pines. The clearing was empty.

He moved to the far side, picking his way slow, and that's when it happened—a sudden shift, a snap, and then Macy stepped out from behind a trunk not six feet away, the end of her walking stick aimed at Finn's solar plexus.

"Why are you following me?" she asked.

Her voice was low, controlled, but her eyes—green as willow, and twice as sharp—were wide with challenge. The stick wobbled, just a little, before she steadied it with both hands.

Finn gulped and mustered his friendliest smile.



## six

# **crossed paths**

FINN RAISED both hands in the universal sign of harmlessness, the motion almost comical with his canvas tote slung awkwardly from one wrist. “Truce,” he said, voice a notch above the wind. “I’m not here to rob you or whatever.”

Macy’s eyes flicked to the tote, then back to Finn’s face. She kept the stick leveled at his ribs. “Then why are you tracking me?”

He considered the usual tactic—deflection, a joke—but thought better of it. She seemed like the kind to see right through both. “I saw you at the market,” Finn said. “And before that at Donkey Basketball. I recognized the pendant.” He tapped his chest, where the twin to hers sat warm against his shirt. “Figured I’d return it, but you vanished.”

The stick wavered, just a millimeter, as she processed this. “You expect me to believe you bushwhacked two miles for a necklace?” Her voice was sharp, but there was a tremor of curiosity under the bark.

“I’m persistent,” Finn admitted, then took a risk. “Also, there’s some weird stuff going down at my aunt’s restaurant. I thought you might know something.”

At “weird stuff,” the stick dropped a hair further. “The salad bar,” she said, not a question.

Finn nodded. “And the foraged greens. The acorn cairn. The... statement pieces.”

Macy didn’t smile, but the corners of her mouth relaxed. She

stepped back, lowering the stick to rest like a shepherd's crook. "So you're not here to narc. Just to solve the mystery."

"Mostly," Finn said. He realized he was still holding his hands up and let them fall. "You do this often? Play cat-and-mouse in the woods?"

Macy planted the tip of her stick in the dirt, steady and sure. "Only with people who think they're sneaky." She eyed Finn's boots, the hem of his jacket, then gestured at the trail behind him. "You backtracked twice in two hundred yards. Amateur move."

"Consider it a test," Finn replied, but he was smiling now.

She watched him a moment longer, then seemed to reach a decision. "You want to learn about the woods, or just keep watching from the shadows?"

Finn gestured up the trail. "Lead on."

They walked, a new kind of tension settling—a peace treaty with clauses and amendments yet to be ratified. The path narrowed, crowded in by low pine boughs and the bramble of young aspen. Finn was content to let Macy set the pace, which she did without apparent effort, her stride easy and loose.

She spoke first. "You're Finn, right? Related to Aunt Sue?"

"My claim to fame," he said.

"She makes the best carrot cake on the mountain," Macy said. "Even if her chicken salad could double as grout."

He laughed, surprised by the normalness of the jab. "Noted. I'll tell her to cut back on the mayo."

Macy crouched suddenly, stick angled like a divining rod. She parted a clump of grass with her fingers and pointed. "Wild onion. See the leaf? Smells like green onion, only sharper." She pinched off a blade and handed it to Finn, who sniffed then nibbled. The taste bit back—like scallion, but wilder, more electric.

"Careful with these, though," she continued, "they have a lookalike that'll put you in the ER."

"Show me?"

She obliged, moving a few feet down-slope and finding the fake. "Death camas. No onion smell, and the bulb's all wrong. But if you're desperate or not paying attention—" she shrugged.

Finn studied the difference, more by the way her hands traced it than by the details themselves. Her nails were short and lined with soil; the movements were quick, decisive, confident.

"How long have you been doing this?" Finn asked, genuinely interested.

Macy straightened, dusting her palms. "Since I was six. My granddad was the last real forest ranger on Cedar Mountain. Before they automated the fire towers. He said if you couldn't eat, heal, or build with what you found, you might as well be living on Mars." Her face softened on the memory. "He was a character."

"Sounds like it," Finn said.

They made their way farther up, Macy narrating the landscape as they went. She flagged red currant berries—"Best after the first frost, unless you like sour"—then ducked to show Finn a mushroom growing in the shadow of a rotting log. "Turkey tail," she said, running a finger along the layered, fan-shaped cap. "Medicinal. Don't eat it raw, but you can steep it into tea." She gave the scientific name, too, but Finn missed it in the rhythm of her voice.

He pointed at a patch of waxy red berries clinging to a low, thorny bush. "Safe?"

"Not for humans," she said. "But every bird in the forest treats it like candy."

"Do you ever get tired of having to know the difference?" Finn asked, thinking about all the ways the woods could trip up the unwary.

"Never," Macy said, almost sharply. She spun her stick in her hand, then jabbed it forward at a stand of willow. "Every season, something changes. New plant, or an old one moves. Fires, floods, even just a cold snap in June. You never get the same hike twice."

Finn nodded, falling silent for a stretch. The sun slanted down through the branches, glinting off dew that hadn't yet burned away. He inhaled, the air sharp with pine and the ghost of smoke from someone's distant cabin.

As they walked, Finn watched the way Macy swept her stick ahead, sometimes parting the brush, sometimes pausing to draw a circle around a patch of ground as if marking territory. He realized she was deliberately steering him away from certain places—bypassing a downed

tree here, choosing the rocky side of a stream instead of the mossy, easier route. She'd glance back after each, checking to see if he'd noticed.

He played along, but tucked away the information. Maybe there was something she didn't want found.

After a half mile, the forest opened onto a shelf of slickrock and lichen, the ground warm underfoot and the horizon wide. Macy set her basket down and knelt to free a tangle of roots from a crevice. She worked in silence for a minute, focused, then held up a gnarled tuber. "Biscuitroot," she announced. "Pioneers used it for flour when their supplies ran out."

Finn leaned in, then looked past the root to the valley below. "I always thought these slopes were empty. Like nothing could survive."

She shook her head. "Everything here is built to survive. You just have to look."

He watched her work for a moment longer, then said, "You know, I still have your pendant." He fished in his shirt pocket and brought it out, holding it at eye level.

Macy's eyes lit for a fraction of a second, but she shook her head. "It's not mine. I just make them."

"For what?" Finn asked, but the answer was already forming.

"Markers," Macy said. "Sometimes for classes, sometimes for people who get lost and need a landmark. Or, in your case, a clue."

"Is this all part of the lesson plan?" Finn said.

She snorted, an actual snort. "If you want a certificate, I'll draw you one on birch bark." She took the pendant and spun it by the twine. "But if you really want to solve your salad bar mystery, you need to know how to see what's invisible."

He raised an eyebrow. "Like what?"

Macy pointed to a dry wash running down the slope, barely visible through the grass. "If you know the right time of day, or the right angle, you can spot where animals walk. Where people walk, too. The ground always gives up its secrets, if you're patient." She met Finn's gaze, and for the first time there was something like respect in it. "You don't miss much, do you?"

"I try not to."

She nodded, then got to her feet, brushing her knees. "Come on.

There's a patch of wild mint past the next bend. You can help me gather."

They started up the trail, the rhythm of the walk easier now, with Macy occasionally tossing facts over her shoulder or quizzing Finn on the names of plants they passed. He played along, sometimes getting it right, sometimes inventing his own names just to make her smile. She didn't smile often, but when she did, it stayed in the air longer than any joke.

By the time they reached the mint patch, the tension had dissolved into something friendlier—a low, steady current of mutual curiosity. Macy knelt to pick, explaining how to take only the new growth so the rest of the plant could rebound. "Never strip it bare," she said. "Take only what you need, and leave enough for the next forager. Or deer. Or whoever gets here first."

Finn crouched beside her, hands brushing the soft, serrated leaves. "You ever worry about running out?"

"Of mint?" She shook her head. "Of trust? Maybe."

She met his eyes, and this time there was nothing hidden.

"You want to keep walking?" she asked, voice gentler than before.

Finn nodded. "Lead the way."

They set off, shoulder to shoulder, the morning giving way to a new kind of light. Finn felt the weight of the pendant in his pocket, and wondered what other secrets waited for them just beyond the next bend.

---

They crested a shallow rise, and the lake revealed itself all at once, blue and flat and ringed by the spent gold of late September grass. Navajo Lake in fall looked more like a mirror than water, the surface giving back every cloud and hint of sun, only sharper for the cold that rode the wind.

Macy stopped at the edge, balancing on a sheet of igneous boulders that dropped off into the shallows. Finn hung back a second, letting her have the first moment. Her profile was outlined by the light, hair loose again and shoulders softening as she breathed in the lake air.

"This is my favorite place on the mountain," Macy said. "Most people miss it—they go to the trailheads, or the waterfall, but here? You can see the whole world shrink down to what's right in front of you." She crouched, unlacing her boots, then waded out, not caring when the icy water swallowed her ankles.

Finn followed her to the water's edge, hopping rock to rock. "What are you after?" he called.

"Cattail," she answered. "And some of the lake mint, if I'm lucky. You can help if you want, but be careful where you step. There's a mud shelf about ten feet out, and if you hit it wrong, you'll be swimming."

She showed him, hands already wet, how to find the base of a cattail shoot and ease it out in a single, slow motion. "Don't rip it," she said, "or the whole stand gets uprooted. Take only what you need, and never more than a third of what you see." Her fingers, red from the cold, worked with a calm efficiency, twisting the root free, then tucking it into her basket without a drop of waste.

Finn tried, and was almost comically bad at it. His first pull yanked the whole top off a cattail, leaving a ragged stump and a puff of pollen floating on the wind.

Macy laughed, but not unkindly. "It's not as easy as it looks. That's why people stopped doing it."

He tried again, more gently, and this time came away with a clean white root, cold and slick in his palm. "This is survival food?"

She nodded. "High energy, tons of starch. My granddad said you could keep a family going all winter with just what you could pull from a marsh." She rinsed the root, then bit off a piece, making a face at the crunch. "Not gourmet. But if you're cold and hungry, it tastes like hope."

They filled the basket together, working their way down the shoreline, Finn learning by imitation. The cold worked through his boots, but he barely felt it; the wind off the water kept his senses sharp, and Macy's voice kept the day from freezing over completely.

They found a patch of wild mint, and Macy instructed him how to take only the newest leaves, pinching them without damaging the core of the plant. "Nature doesn't care if you're picky," she said, "but it

remembers every careless hand that comes through.” Her voice had gone soft, almost reverent.

Finn gathered a handful and brought it to his nose. The scent was bright, green, and slightly medicinal. “Better than the tea bags at Sue’s.”

“Tell her I can hook her up with the good stuff,” Macy replied. Then, after a pause: “You’re not like the others who come up here.”

“Which others?”

She shrugged, looking away. “You know. The influencer types. Or the ones who want to ‘conquer’ the woods, like it’s a theme park.”

He thought of the influencer couple, their ring light and script, and felt an odd pang of shame. “I’m not a great conqueror,” Finn said. “I’d rather just walk and listen.”

She smiled at that—fleeting, but real.

The wind picked up, bringing a chill that seemed to cut the water in half. Macy straightened, shaking out her hands, then started to re-tie her boots. “You ever hear stories about the hermit?” Finn asked, the words coming out almost casual.

Macy froze mid-motion. For a second, the only sound was the wind and the ripple of water over stone. Her posture had gone rigid, like a startled animal’s.

“Yeah,” she said, not turning. “I’ve heard the stories.”

Finn stepped a little closer, careful not to crowd her. “Do you think he’s real?”

Macy started lacing her boots with quick, sharp pulls. “Does it matter?” she asked.

“It does to some people,” Finn said. “Especially now, with everyone gunning to get his picture, or turn him into a hashtag.”

She stood, basket hooked over one arm. The air between them felt suddenly thinner, as if the mention of the hermit had drained the color from the day. “He just wants to be left alone,” Macy said. Her voice was flat, and she didn’t meet his eyes.

“Is that why you left markers in the woods?” Finn asked, softer now.

She flinched, but only barely. “Maybe. Maybe I just like art projects.”

Finn held up his hands, palms out. "Not trying to accuse you. Just trying to understand."

Macy's jaw worked, then she shook her head. "You can't. Unless you've tried to disappear and found out people don't like it when you vanish." She took a step back, then another. "I need to go," she said, her voice clipped. She turned and walked up the bank, not running but not wasting any time either.

Finn watched her go, basket bouncing against her hip. He wanted to call after her, to say something clever or comforting, but every word stuck in his throat. After a minute, he stooped to pick up a stray cattail root, then tossed it into the lake, where it floated away with the current.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. He checked it, thumb hovering over the screen.

"Influencers interviewing Level Pendergast about illegal retaining wall on Movie Ranch Rd," Leo had written. "They look bored. Clearly wanted juicier Silas stories."

Finn pocketed the phone and stood by the lake a little longer, watching the gold on the water go pale as the sun drifted behind a rack of clouds. The air smelled of mint and something older, a hint of mud and memory that pulled at the back of his mind.

He turned toward the path home, the day suddenly colder, and walked in the direction Macy had gone, wondering which stories were meant to be told, and which were just meant to be carried.

---

Duck Creek's main drag felt almost empty as Finn coasted through, the after-market lull stretching the shadows until every storefront looked like a stage set waiting for its cast. The tourist vehicles had vanished, replaced by the usual battered pickups and a few forest service rigs. Finn cut across the lot behind Aunt Sue's Chalet, boots silent on the soft needles underfoot, and ducked in through the side door the staff used for their smoke breaks.

Inside, the familiar wash of coffee and maple syrup layered over the sharper notes of kitchen disinfectant. The lunch crowd was long gone, the dinner crowd not yet begun. For the first time all day, the place was

quiet enough to hear the heater's slow exhale and the click of the cooler behind the bar.

Finn gravitated to the corner booth—the one that sat half-sunk in the floor from decades of weight and weather. The surface was shiny with varnish but scarred with initials, hearts, and the map-like lines left by generations of cutlery. He slid in, letting the backrest catch him, and ran his finger over the familiar grooves: a constellation of tiny dots, his own contribution from a bored winter years back.

The booth was known for its acoustics; a whisper here could bounce under the table and come back strange, like it'd aged in transit. Finn didn't test it, but he listened for a moment—just the kitchen hum, the soft shuffle of a waitress closing out her shift.

A different server than usual approached—a college kid who wore the Chalet's beanie at a rebellious angle. He set down a mug of black coffee, then, almost as an afterthought, a folded napkin.

"This was left for you," he said. "Sue said it's important."

Finn took the napkin, feeling a pulse of old suspicion. The handwriting was unmistakable—Sue's blocky, left-leaning print, purple marker bleeding into the paper.

"Some secrets are best kept. Ask me about the pie deliveries."

Finn set the napkin down and stared at it, as if expecting the meaning to ripen. He knew the Chalet did a roaring trade in desserts, especially during hunting season, but "pie deliveries" had a different ring. He turned the words over in his mind, thinking about what Leo had told him: that the hermit sightings always peaked the week Sue's special was Marionberry, the one flavor nobody could ever get a source on.

The server cleared his throat, awkward. "She said to ask, so—"

Finn nodded, "Thanks," and watched as the kid vanished to bus a deserted table.

He traced the edge of the napkin, thinking about the chain of events that had landed him here: the salad bar incidents, the wild greens, the way Macy flinched at the mention of the hermit. He remembered the folder from Buck, the maps, the careful way old-timers talked about Silas Thorne—as if the man was both a myth and a neighbor, something to protect as well as fear.

The implication was obvious now. Sue knew more than she'd let on. Maybe she'd been sending pies up the ridge for years, or maybe she was the reason Silas had managed to stay two steps ahead of every influencer, ranger, or local rumor-monger. It was the kind of small-town collusion Finn recognized instantly: not a conspiracy, just a gentle, stubborn refusal to let the outside world decide the fate of one of their own.

He folded the napkin, tucked it into his jacket, and finished the coffee in two quick sips. The taste was bitter, but it grounded him, brought the day back into focus.

Finn stood, left cash on the table, and ducked out the way he'd come. The sun was down now, and the air had that raw, metallic edge that promised a cold night. He pulled his collar up, started down the sidewalk, and tapped out a message to Leo:

"Tomorrow, we ask about the pies."

He grinned, thinking of how Sue would pretend not to know what he meant, how she'd deflect until he finally asked the right question. He thought about Macy, her careful hands and wary eyes, and decided he'd try to see her again. Not to interrogate, but to offer a little truth of his own.

As Finn passed under the Chalet's neon sign, the only sound was his own footsteps, the echo soft, almost musical. The night was clear, the first stars out, and above them all, the dark ridge where Silas Thorne was rumored to walk.

Finn looked up, then ahead, and kept moving. The story wasn't done yet—not by a long shot.

## seven

# echoes of truth

THE AFTER-HOURS hush at Aunt Sue's Chalet was a different animal from its daylight roar. The only illumination came from the dimmed overheads and a cheap, battery-powered candle left burning at the center of Finn's favorite knotty-pine booth. The rest of the restaurant had dissolved into brown shadow, all the better to hide the parade of ghosts that tended to show up after close.

Tonight, Finn was the last customer. He sat at the booth's far corner, nursing the world's most stubborn cup of coffee and waiting, just waiting, for the next Echo.

Behind the kitchen's swinging doors, the night shift was mopping up. Now and then, the floor buffer squealed, or a voice would rise in laughter before falling back into work-mode hush. Out front, though, the only movement came from the coffee's steam slowly giving up the fight. Finn stared into the mug, searching for signs: a tremor in the light, a funny taste in the air, the gentle press of static on his scalp. The last two times it had started with a sharp whiff of ozone and a tightening in his chest. Tonight, it was just a slow creep—no drama, only the sense of a memory fermenting in the linoleum and pine.

He leaned back, bootheels hooked on the bench support, and let his eyes roam the Chalet's main room. Without people, the space looked smaller, stripped of its daily pageant of spilled syrup, birthday songs, and bad date silences. The walls bore the usual taxidermy—elk, trout, a

single baffled muskrat—but in the half-light, they took on the presence of witnesses, not trophies.

Finn closed his eyes, counting breaths, until the warmth from the kitchen guttered out completely. When he opened them again, the world had rearranged itself.

The plastic candle was gone. The table's lacquer, usually chipped and dulled, shone with the gloss of a fresh re-varnish. Even the air had changed: heavier, not with the perfume of maple and coffee, but something sharper, edged with cigarette smoke and a ghost-note of gasoline. The windows were steamed over, and outside, darkness pressed in absolute.

Finn flexed his hand. He was still there, still himself, but the world around him had folded—seamless, as if he'd always belonged to this moment. There was movement at the kitchen pass, a shuffle and clang, then the heavy push of a door as three men entered the dining room in a knot.

They wore work jackets and company ties, hair slicked back with the discipline of pre-digital adulthood. Behind them came a fourth figure: a young woman, no older than twenty-one, her strawberry-blonde hair piled in a dated but careful updo. Her eyes were fierce and unblinking, and even in this faded world, Finn recognized her instantly.

Aunt Sue. Younger by decades, but all sharp corners and impossible momentum.

She led the men to a booth—the same booth, Finn noted, though here it was unmarred by generations of initials. As they sat, the men arranged themselves so Sue was trapped against the wall, a trick as old as management itself.

The big one, a man with a foreman's paunch and a badge that said "Basco," took the lead. "Susan, we appreciate you staying late to talk this over. But we're all on the same side, here."

Young Sue's voice came out brittle but loud: "If we were, you wouldn't be threatening my job for bringing up the water reports."

The two other men exchanged glances, synchronized like a duet. Basco spread his hands, palms up, and leaned in as if about to bless a sacrament. "Nobody's threatening anybody. We're just concerned about the way you've been—"

“—telling the truth?” Sue interrupted. “You want me to ignore what’s in the well logs, just file the next delivery and keep quiet. That’s what you said on the phone.”

Finn leaned forward. He couldn’t be seen, couldn’t even move a spoon, but the scene vibrated with the kind of friction that promised someone was about to get hurt, or saved, or both.

Basco tried a smile. “We’re just saying, sometimes young people get passionate and see monsters in every shadow.”

Sue’s chin jutted out. “The only monster I see is the one dumping solvent upstream. And you know it.” Her hands were trembling, but the voice stayed level.

The man to Basco’s right—taller, with a sickle-shaped scar across his eyebrow—put in: “What you saw was probably just runoff. Happens after every thaw. There’s no evidence.”

“I found the binder,” Sue shot back. “The real one. Not the copy you gave the county.”

Finn’s heart started a slow thud in his ears. He remembered the line from Buck’s folder—Silas had found documents, but the story got buried in rumors of sabotage and arson. Here was the real moment, playing out in front of him, and it was Aunt Sue who’d walked into the line of fire.

The third man, younger but with the impatient twitch of someone who’d rather be anywhere else, said, “It’s late, Susan. Maybe you should go home, get some rest. Think about whether this is the hill you want to die on.”

Sue’s lips pulled back in a thin, bloodless line. “You want me quiet, you’ll have to fire me in public. I already made copies. I already sent one to the regional.”

Finn saw Basco’s face darken, the charm wearing off in a heartbeat. “Do you know what happens to people who try to make trouble, Susan?” The voice was soft now, dangerous.

Sue stood, her hands braced on the table’s edge. “They get written into history as the ones who told the truth.”

For a moment, nobody moved. The silence sharpened, cut into Finn’s chest like a splinter of ice.

Then the Echo rippled. The men blurred out, their voices rising and falling over one another, their words losing meaning in a rush of static.

Finn drifted with the current, finding himself alone in the booth again, coffee cup now room-temperature and ringed with the brown scum of neglect. The battery candle flickered, the room caught up in the dark again, except—

A waitress stood at the table, holding a carafe she'd forgotten to use, eyes shining with more than tiredness. Her name tag said "Sierra," but in that moment, she could have been any one of the lost voices in the memory Finn had just lived.

"You okay?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Finn nodded, slow. "Just—thinking about old stories."

Sierra set the carafe down and fished a napkin from her apron, sliding it across the table. The purple marker was back, shaky but deliberate. "She says: 'Don't believe the company line. The truth is in the records, not the rumors. Be careful, Finn.'"

The girl blinked fast, then added, "She wanted me to say it just like that."

Finn stared at the napkin, the words trembling in his vision. "Thanks," he managed. "Can you tell her... I heard her?"

Sierra nodded, wiped her eyes, and vanished back toward the kitchen, her steps as light as the ghosts in the walls.

Finn sat alone for a long time, letting the Echo settle. He listened to the whisper of the mop in the kitchen, the occasional creak from the building's old bones, and the distant, unspeakable memory of Aunt Sue, who had stood up to the monsters and paid in ways no one ever counted.

When he finally left, the night outside was colder, the darkness thinner. Every star above Duck Creek looked new-minted, like the world had earned another chance to get it right.

He walked home slow, keeping one hand on the napkin in his pocket, the truth written plain as daylight.

Tomorrow, he'd find a way to finish what she started.

---

Finn showed up before sunrise, expecting a locked door and maybe a scowl through the glass. Instead, the Chalet's sign was already flipped to "OPEN" and a triangle of gold light cut across the empty parking lot, summoning him inside.

The restaurant was as still as an aquarium after feeding time. The pellet stove hadn't woken up yet, so cold air hugged the floor and made the sugar packets shiver in their plastic tray. There were no customers, no cooks, only Sierra, the night waitress, setting out cutlery with the deliberation of someone assembling a bomb.

She saw Finn and paused, holding a fork like a divining rod. "You want coffee, or...?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Thanks."

Sierra poured, then hovered. Her eyes were rimmed red—not from sleep, but from something she was holding back. She placed the mug on the table, then fished in her apron and came up with another napkin, this one folded into a tight triangle and sealed with a dab of syrup, as if to keep the words from leaking out.

"From her," Sierra said. She slid the napkin across the table, then stepped away, back rigid.

Finn peeled it open with careful fingers. The ink bled a little, but Aunt Sue's print was as distinct as always—blocky, stubborn, leaning a little left:

*"I lied, Finn. For fifty years, I've left food for him—pies, stews, fresh bread. Always in the same place, always before first snow. People called it charity, but it was an apology. I let them turn him into a monster. The only bad thing Silas Thorne ever did was trust the wrong person. If you want to help, don't let them find him. Don't let them turn his last years into a circus."*

Finn set the napkin down, the words still vibrating in his chest. He thought of all the stories, the rumors spun out of nothing, the comfort

small towns took in choosing their monsters. All this time, the truth had lived in a sandwich bag, left in the crook of an old cedar at the edge of the village.

Sierra was watching from the counter, her face pale. “He always sent a note back,” she said, her voice thin. “Just a thank-you, or a story, or sometimes a flower pressed in wax paper. Sue said they were pen pals, but she never let anyone else read the letters.”

Finn let that settle. “You ever meet him?”

She shook her head. “Once. I was ten. My dog got lost up on the rim. Came home with a bandage on her paw and a note in her collar: ‘Too smart to stay lost for long. —S.’ My mom cried for a week.”

There was a silence, the kind that made the sound of the fridge compressor in the kitchen seem deafening. Finn took a sip of coffee, bitter and bracing.

Sierra looked like she had more to say, but instead she reached under the counter, rummaged for a second, and came up with an old Polaroid. She held it between two fingers, pinched at the white border, and brought it to Finn’s table like a peace offering.

He took it. The photo was sun-faded, the colors warped, but the image was clear: a man in his late thirties or early forties, standing at the edge of a rock outcropping, arms folded. He wore a battered canvas jacket and a beanie, and his beard was less wild than the stories said, but the eyes were sharp, clear, and kind. There was a little smile, just at the corner of the mouth, like he knew exactly what people thought of him and didn’t much care.

“That’s him?” Finn asked.

Sierra nodded. “Sue said he let her take one picture. ‘To prove I’m not a ghost,’ he said. Never let another one happen.”

Finn slid the photo back. “You want to keep this.”

She hesitated, then tucked it away. “He’s still alive, you know. Sue said she saw him last year, up by Cascade. He’s old now, but still... himself.”

The kitchen door creaked. The dishwasher—barely out of high school, face half-hidden by a mop of hair—appeared with another napkin, this one crisp and uncreased. He dropped it on Finn’s table with a grunt.

Finn unfolded it. More blocky print, but this time the lines sloped sharp, urgent:

*"Tomorrow, they're coming for him. The influencer and the girl. You're the only one who can get there first. If you're reading this, I trust you. Please. Don't let them catch him."*

Finn looked up at Sierra. "Did Sue write this just now?"

"She's not here," Sierra whispered, as if the walls were listening. "She's been at the hospital since midnight. Blood pressure thing. But she called and said I'd know what to do."

The dishwasher lingered, not meeting Finn's eye. "They really gonna chase a grandpa through the woods for a YouTube?" His voice cracked on the last word, like he couldn't believe this was the world he lived in.

Finn stood. "Not if I can help it."

He pocketed the napkin, nodded to both of them, and started for the door. But Sierra grabbed his arm, fast, then let go just as quick. "Don't let them take a picture," she said. "Promise?"

Finn met her eyes, saw the years of worry and pride and disappointment in the lines around them. He thought of Aunt Sue, young and scared but unbending, and the Echo that had left a burn scar on his heart.

"I promise," he said.

He left the Chalet behind, the door swinging shut on a cold morning and the last secrets of a town that had learned, finally, how to take care of its own.

---

Finn cut a straight line through the crusted snow behind Leo's garage, boots silent in the blue hour before sunrise. From the outside, the studio looked dead: all the windows dark, the clapboard siding gleaming like a strip of old VHS tape. But as Finn drew closer, he saw a

flicker at the top floor—a steady, manmade glow, flickering with the pulse of too many monitors and at least one ridiculous LED party lamp.

He found the side door unlocked, as always, and ducked into the warm, charged air of Leo's command center. It smelled like burnt popcorn, coffee gone nuclear, and that weird plastic tang that only came from overclocked USB hubs. Every surface was a thicket: tripods doubled as coat racks, sticky-note storyboards climbed the wall in overlapping colors, and somewhere under it all, Leo sat hunched in his rolling chair, tapping at his phone with dangerous speed.

"Long night?" Finn asked, pulling up the least-piled chair he could find.

Leo grunted without looking up. "Haven't slept. Can't risk missing a post. It's like a tsunami out there—one good meme, and we're all washed out to clickbait sea."

He spun his phone around for Finn to see. "Look. Thirty minutes ago, Toby and Summer dropped a teaser for their 'Monster Hermit of Cedar Mountain' special. Hashtag's already trending in three states."

Finn squinted at the screen. The video was a masterwork of bad taste: dramatic shots of the forest, snipped together with stock footage of wilderness disasters, overlaid with headlines like "IS THIS THE MADMAN OF DUCK CREEK?" Toby narrated with the breathless urgency of a cable news anchor, while Summer punctuated every sentence with a new layer of concern, awe, or manufactured suspense.

They'd even gone for costumes—Toby in a surplus flight suit, Summer in matching arctic camo. The trailer promised "exclusive footage" and "the real truth behind the man the government can't catch."

"Not a lot of chill in this one," Leo said. "But you gotta respect the hustle."

Finn didn't smile. "They're going to Cascade Falls. They've mapped out the exact ridge."

Leo nodded. "Already pinged their GPS. They bought snowshoes and rented a drone, too. Plan is to start at the main trailhead and follow the creek north, then cut through the old fire break."

Finn felt the knot of anxiety in his gut cinch tight. "How long?"

"They hit the road at nine. Want to get that golden hour. They'll be at the overlook by ten-thirty."

Finn ran a hand through his hair. "We have to beat them there. Or find another way to block them."

Leo nodded, then swiveled his chair around, clearing a patch of desk with a single sweep. He pulled up a digital map of the area, markers already flagged in neon pink. "They'll take the ridge. But if we cut up through Deer Hollow and swing west, we can get to the ledge an hour ahead. It's more vertical, but you're part goat anyway."

Finn scanned the screen, his eyes quick and certain. "Here. If we stash the ATV at the service gate, we can skip the first two switchbacks."

Leo grinned. "Love that for us."

For a moment, neither said anything. The air hummed with caffeine and anticipation.

Finally, Leo asked, "What's the play when we get there? You want to scare them off, or just outpace?"

Finn thought of the napkin, Aunt Sue's confession, and the promise he'd made to Sierra in the pre-dawn. "We keep them from seeing him. We make sure they leave with nothing but the stories they came with."

Leo nodded, then shrugged on his jacket. "I'll warm up the drone. You charge the coffee."

Outside, the morning was still black and bitter, but for the first time in days, Finn felt clear. The horizon was a flat line waiting to be drawn, and if they hustled, they could set the ending themselves.

He looked back through the cracked window, saw the blue pulse of the screens still fighting the dark, and grinned. Not everything online was real, and not every story had to end in a capture.

He and Leo would make sure of it.



## eight

# sabotage and secrets

FINN NEVER SLEPT well the night before a hunt, and this morning wasn't going to be the exception. At 5:04 a.m., with his boots freezing solid on the floorboard and yesterday's socks still crumpled in the footwell, he watched Aunt Sue's Chalet through the fogged-up windshield of his truck. There were no lights on inside, not even the usual bathroom glow or early-shift prep. Just the long dark silhouette of the building under a patchy wash of stars and the nervous strobe of the Open sign, already flickering though there wasn't a soul in the world to read it.

Finn's coffee was already cold, but he took a sip anyway, the bitter tang giving his nerves somewhere to go. He wiped the glass with his sleeve and kept watch over the stretch of parking lot between his tailgate and the back door of the Chalet. Every ten minutes, a gust of wind would slide down off Cedar Mountain and set the dumpster lids banging. Every hour, a highway plow would grumble past, not even slowing for the village. But otherwise, nothing moved. Not even a mouse.

He'd learned patience the hard way. Long-ago stakeouts for summer camp bunk thieves, late-season elk on the edges of sunrise, the occasional brush with Forest Service guys looking to catch firewood poachers red-handed. You could freeze your toes off waiting for a ghost. But he'd also learned that, most times, the ghosts came to you.

At 5:51, the back alley picked up a new shadow. It walked in care-

ful, measured steps—quick but not rushed, close to the building, as if the wall itself offered some protection against cosmic bad luck. The shadow ducked under the overhang and paused just outside the delivery entrance. Finn set down his mug and keyed the ignition, ready to roll if she bolted.

But the figure didn't bolt. She crouched, reached into the kangaroo pocket of a battered old hoodie, and came up with a lockpick set that gleamed in the sodium light. Finn recognized the hand, the way it moved—a conductor's precision, not a burglar's. He waited another five seconds, then eased his door open and slipped out, boot soles whispering across the frost-laced gravel.

He let her get the cylinder turned—no sense in ruining good work. Then, as she went to test the handle, he closed the distance and said, in a voice just shy of neighborly:

“Going somewhere in particular, or just out for a walk?”

Macy Halloway startled hard. She spun, hands out, one holding the pick set, the other already balled to punch or maybe just block. In the sickly yellow light, her face looked both too young and too old—shadowed eyes, hair wild around her hood, jaw clenched so hard he thought he heard her teeth grind.

“Hands where I can see them,” Finn said. He didn't reach for her, just planted himself in the triangle of space between Macy and the open woods beyond. He kept his voice flat but not mean. “You want to try for the door again, or you want to tell me what's so urgent in there?”

She stared at him, chest heaving, then tucked the picks away and flicked both hands up, palms open. “Are you seriously arresting me? Or is this some local tradition, busting kids for breaking and entering before sunup?”

“You're not a kid,” Finn said, and she knew it. He glanced down at her boots—scuffed, wet, but built for miles. “And you're a lot better at this than the actual criminals we get out here.”

Macy licked her lips. Her eyes darted past Finn, taking the measure of the alley, the distance to her left and right. “Look, if you want to play mall cop, fine. But this has nothing to do with you.”

He shook his head, slow. “That's where you're wrong. My aunt owns this place.” He thumbed toward the blank-lit bulk of the Chalet.

"You want to explain why you're breaking in to the one kitchen in the county that never cuts corners?"

Something in her posture shifted, shoulders dropping half an inch, the line of her mouth gone less knife-sharp. "I'm not here to steal anything," she said. "I'm here to fix it."

"Fix what?"

She ran a hand through her hair, the gesture both exasperated and calculated to buy a second's thought. "You know what's in the walk-in? A lot of iceberg, a lot of industrial 'spring mix' from California. You ever seen what's on the salad bar in July? You could feed half of St. George on the stuff they throw out. And don't get me started on the dressings."

Finn shrugged. "It's a restaurant, not a sustainability workshop."

Macy's laugh was brittle. "Then why do half the locals eat here and then talk about the old days, when everything tasted like something besides cold storage?"

He let the question hang. A coyote barked once from across the meadow. Somewhere, a relay clicked, and the compressor in the Chalet's outside cooler kicked on.

"So what's your plan?" Finn asked. "Rebrand the lunch rush? Swap out the lettuce for wild greens and hope nobody calls the health department?"

Macy straightened up, the defiance back in full. "The only health problem around here is how dead people's palates are. You know what I did last week?" She jabbed a finger at him, as if daring him to answer. "I swapped the salad bar's 'superfood blend' with stuff I picked within a hundred yards of this building. Lamb's quarters. Miner's lettuce. Dandelion root. Nobody even noticed—except three old-timers who said it tasted better."

"Chef Gary noticed," Finn said, and was surprised to find himself grinning. "He's been on a warpath ever since."

She smirked, but it was mostly just to keep from shivering. "He'll survive. He's got the world's strongest immune system."

Finn shifted, putting his hands in his own jacket pockets, a signal that the standoff was losing steam. "Why not just ask? Sue hires half the teenagers in town every summer. She'd at least listen."

"You think I haven't tried?" Now Macy's voice picked up volume, not angry, but tight with frustration. "She said she liked my 'enthusiasm,' but she's not changing anything for 'trendy diets.' She called my project 'dietary graffiti.'" The words were spat more bitter than Finn's coffee.

He waited a moment, letting the wind carry off the heat of her confession. "Look, I'm not gonna call the sheriff," Finn said. "And I know a few things about wanting to fix what's broken."

Macy looked at him, wary, like he'd just flipped the board mid-game. "Then what do you want?"

He considered it. The easy thing would be to let her go, call it a draw, and go back to his coffee. But the Echoes in the Chalet, the stories in the wood, the promises made to Aunt Sue and Sierra—they all argued for something else.

He thumbed over his options. "I'll make you a deal," he said finally. "You help me out for a day. One day. There's some people in town who want to drag an old story into the light, and it's going to do a lot more damage than a few pine needles in a Caesar salad."

She regarded him, suspicion fighting against intrigue. "What kind of people?"

"The kind with a camera and a platform and zero respect for the lives they're about to trash. You help me keep them away from Silas Thorne, and I'll talk to Sue about letting you demo your foraged menu. Legit. You can even use the back door."

Macy made a show of considering it, but Finn saw her decision in the way she flexed her fingers inside the gloves. "You're really that worried about the hermit?"

"He's not what they think," Finn said. "And neither are you. We keep the legends out of their hands. No drama, no YouTube spectacular. We both get a win."

She pursed her lips, eyes searching his face for some catch, some angle she could undercut. "And if I say no?"

Finn shrugged, then pointed to the security camera mounted above the alley, red LED glowing in the cold. "Then we both spend the rest of the day writing statements for Deputy Latham, and nobody gets anything they want."

It wasn't the hardest sell he'd ever made, but it wasn't the easiest, either. In the end, Macy stuffed her hands back in her pockets, bounced once on her toes to shake off the cold, and said, "Deal. But I get naming rights on my signature salad."

Finn allowed himself a small, real smile. "You can call it whatever you want, as long as nobody calls the paramedics."

She gave him a look that was almost fond, then turned and vanished around the side of the building, moving with the confidence of someone who already had a plan for sunrise.

Finn watched her go, waited until the echo of her boots faded, then let his breath out in a slow cloud. He wondered, briefly, if he'd just signed on for more trouble than he could chew. But it beat another morning of watching other people make all the decisions.

He reset the lock, checked the door for damage, then headed back to his truck. His coffee was colder than ever, but the day already felt warmer.

And somewhere out there, the hunt was about to get interesting.

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Macy's "deal" handshake had been all posture at first, but by the time her fingers left Finn's palm, something in her expression had slipped—a note of real surprise, like she'd expected to be ratted out or left to freeze, but not recruited. Finn led her away from the loading dock and into the deep, pine-shadowed pocket behind the Chalet, out of range of the security lights. The trees here caught the first hint of sunrise, their needles soaked in a light neither gold nor green but somewhere in between.

She waited for Finn to speak first, but when he didn't, she let her guard down by increments. "You're really not just using me to get ahead on your own mystery?" she asked.

Finn shrugged, hands in his jacket pockets. "I've got enough to keep me busy. Besides, if I wanted the easy way out, I'd have called Latham already. I just—" He paused, searching for the right phrasing. "I don't like the way people talk about Silas. Never have."

Macy exhaled hard, fogging the air. "You know, my grandfather was

a ranger here back in the day. He met Silas, twice. Said he was smarter than half the PhDs in Utah, but so shy he could vanish if you blinked. Granddad said the only thing dangerous about him was how much he cared about the mountain.” She smiled, then lost it almost instantly. “They don’t tell those parts in the stories. Just the fire stuff. The ‘madman with a shovel.’”

Finn nodded, slow and deliberate. “My dad used to say the real threats were the ones wearing nice boots and giving safety talks in the rec center. The wild men, they just wanted to be left alone.”

Macy let out a dry laugh. “I’d give anything to talk to him—Silas, I mean. He left my granddad a bundle of pressed wildflowers once. No note, just the Latin names on slips of paper. Granddad said it was the best letter he ever got.”

They fell silent for a bit, listening to the old building tick and settle, the little burps of warmth from the vents mixing with the sharp chemical tang of fryer oil. Finn squatted, picked up a broken chunk of concrete, and tossed it underhand, watching it disappear into the darkness. “You ever get tired of being the villain?” he asked.

“Every day,” she said. “But I’m worse at being invisible than the guy I’m supposed to hunt.”

Finn grinned. “You’ve got a bigger mouth.”

She shot him a look, but there was less heat in it than before.

The moment held, then Finn’s phone vibrated in his jacket, the screen lighting up blue against the predawn. He answered, putting it on speaker.

“Yo,” came Leo’s voice, already tight with energy. “Change of plans. Our influencer friends just posted—they hired a guide. Some ex-outfitter out of Cedar. Rumor is, they’re going to try and ‘track down’ Silas’s hideout tomorrow. Early.”

Finn glanced at Macy, then back to the dark. “They got a name for the guide?”

Leo rattled it off. Macy’s face flickered with recognition.

Finn kept it business. “You know the guy?”

“Bad news,” Macy said. “He’ll bushwhack for beer money and doesn’t care about posted signs.”

Leo jumped in, "We gotta get ahead of them, man. You want me to make a move?"

Finn's answer was automatic. "Meet at Ground + Toasted in twenty. We'll need a plan, and coffee."

"You got it, boss. Oh—and bring the salad bandit."

Finn hung up and let the phone rest in his hand. He waited for Macy to argue, but she just rubbed her hands together for warmth, looking somewhere over Finn's shoulder.

"You still in?" he asked.

She hesitated—one last show of independence—then said, "I'm in. But I'm not running from them. If we get cornered, I want the first word."

Finn nodded, respect plain on his face. "Deal."

They broke for the front lot, walking shoulder to shoulder, the world around them waking up by slow degrees. Finn felt the weight of the new alliance, and, for the first time in a long time, a sense that maybe this one wasn't going to end in disaster.

He didn't say it out loud, but he suspected Macy felt it too.

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If the outside world ran on frostbite and silence, Ground + Toasted ran on pure combustion. Finn was barely through the door before the tang of burnt espresso and fresh cinnamon roll hammered his sinuses. A crowd of locals—forestry techs, snowplow guys, two women in puffer coats talking logistics for a charity fun run—already stacked the line three deep, all of them operating at a volume just under the level of a gas generator.

He saw Leo right away, holding court in the back corner, tablet propped up by an empty tip jar and surrounded by a debris field of napkin sketches and battery packs. Leo waved them over, already grinning, and made space by shoving a community art flyer and two half-mauled cookies onto the seat beside him.

Macy hesitated at the edge of the booth, then slid in, her body language dialed to minimum: elbows in, eyes scanning, jacket zipped to

the throat. Finn sat across from her and set his phone, face down, on the table.

Leo started without preamble. "We got about an hour before those chuckleheads hit the trailhead," he said, "so let's get our plays straight." He tapped the tablet, bringing up a garish mashup of TikToks and Instagram blasts. "They're running a full social snipe. Already posting about the 'epic journey to confront the Monster Hermit.' And get this —" He flicked to a selfie of Summer, hashtagged #TrailBae, complete with her signature turquoise necklace and a caption promising "never-before-seen evidence."

Macy made a face. "Subtle."

Leo shrugged. "Subtle doesn't get you likes."

Finn scanned the screen, eyes narrowing. "What's the plan? Just outrun them?"

"I can do better," Leo said, now leaning in. "You know how everyone loves a GPS story? I can seed false coordinates. Breadcrumbs. Every time they check in, they'll get a digital trail leading them miles off-course."

Finn raised an eyebrow. "That's legal?"

Leo grinned, "Nothing in the rulebook says you can't spoof a little, especially when it's for the public good. Besides, they'll be too busy vlogging to notice the difference."

Macy sipped from a mug, then set it down with care. "Digital is fine, but they'll want physical proof. Photos, landscape, maybe even 'accidentally' bumping into the hermit."

"Which is where you come in," Finn said, then met Macy's eyes. "You know the trails better than anyone. Where do we send them that looks good on camera, but keeps them away from Silas?"

Macy pulled her own phone and called up a satellite map, fingers moving quick. "Here," she said, zooming in on a bend in Duck Creek where the canyon opened into a slot of red rock and ancient juniper. "It's gorgeous, but dead ends at a wash. No way through. They can stage a dramatic reveal at the overlook, and then nothing. Just a pretty picture for the feed."

Leo nodded, impressed. "You really do your homework."

She allowed a small, closed-mouth smile. "I hate surprises."

Finn leaned forward, voice low. "All right. Leo does the digital trail, Macy and I walk the real one. We leave nothing for them to follow—no trash, no footprints, no clues. We lead them on, then let the wild do the rest."

"Who's handling the guide?" Leo asked.

Macy already had it covered. "He'll take the cash and lead from the GPS. If he gets suspicious, I know how to stall him. He owes my family a favor."

For a moment, the noise of the café faded, and all that remained was the certainty in her voice. Finn realized he trusted it.

Leo tapped his cup to the table, signaling consensus. "Then we're a go. But if you want a window before they catch up, you'll need to move. I can scramble their check-ins for an hour, max."

Finn checked the time. "Plenty."

He stood, and so did Macy, who left her mug unfinished but wiped the rim out of habit. Leo stuffed the tablet in his bag, then threw a couple crumpled bills on the table.

As they reached the door, Macy paused. "Hey," she said to Finn, just above the rush of the room. "I didn't expect you to be on Silas's side."

Finn stopped, considering his answer. "Some secrets deserve to stay secret," he said. "Especially the ones that belong to someone else."

She nodded, her expression softening a degree. Then she was out the door, already in motion.

Leo followed, hoisting the pack, and for once didn't try to crack a joke. He just gave Finn a quick look—a blend of pride and disbelief—and then hustled after Macy.

Finn lingered for a second, letting the warm air and cinnamon hang around him like a shield. He felt the shape of the plan in his bones: simple, effective, and, most importantly, not a single drop of blood spilled. He allowed himself a moment to savor it.

Then he buttoned his coat, pulled his gloves tight, and stepped into the new day.

The cold punched him, but the sunrise was working its way up the canyon, painting the snow a million shades of promise. At the trailhead, Macy was waiting, arms crossed, scanning the line of parked cars. Leo

was already firing up the drone, controller in his hands, eyes laser-locked on the LED display.

Finn joined them, and the three set off as one. Not a word passed between them for the first hundred yards, but the crunch of their boots and the snap of the cold was enough. They moved like people with a mission, a strange little pack united by the desire to keep one secret unbroken, just a little longer.

Finn checked over his shoulder, saw the early-morning glint of influencer neon and selfie sticks at the lot behind them, and felt an odd kind of peace.

Maybe, for once, the mountain would keep its own.

nine

## the retaining wall

FINN AND MACY set out from the Chalet just after eight, the sun no higher than the treeline but already sharp enough to glare off the night's crust of frost. The parking lot was glazed in ice, and the new day seemed to creak under its own weight. Finn led, his stride loose but precise, and wore his Prime Adventure Outfitters cap pulled down just above the eyebrow. Macy trailed a half-step behind, boots thumping in defiance of the cold, her wild hair corralled under a bandana the color of last summer's blueberries. She carried a backpack of army surplus vintage, patched at the seams with trail tape.

They were a strange pair, a little mismatched in the daylight—Finn neat and sinewy, his gear all just this side of obsessive; Macy wild at the edges, but walking with the compact confidence of someone who knew exactly how far she could push her own luck. Their breath hung in the air, visible reminders that they were alive and on the move, even if the rest of the village wanted nothing more than to stay in bed until spring.

The first stretch followed Movie Ranch Road, the unofficial main street of Duck Creek. At this hour, the only traffic was the constant trickle of meltwater and a half-dozen magpies arguing over a garbage can. The village green, still wet with dew, showed only the footprints of deer and the squared-off tire tracks from the village's utility side-by-side. The silence was so complete that Finn found himself whispering, not wanting to disturb the balance.

He glanced over his shoulder. "You sure you're good with a full day out?" he asked, voice low.

Macy nodded, tightening the strap on her backpack. "I've hiked twenty on less coffee than this. Besides, we're not the ones making the news. We're just the cleanup crew."

Finn smiled at that, then broke left onto the footpath that skirted the pond behind the Taco Stand. The air here was sharper, the scent less of pine and more of frozen mud and exhaust. The ice along the shore was already pitted and thin, but the ducks—real and decoy—floated undisturbed, only moving when Macy tossed a pebble for the fun of it.

They hiked in companionable silence for a few minutes, falling into a natural cadence. Finn would pause to inspect a section of trail, or point out where the path would flood if the thaw came too fast. Macy never interrupted, but she'd offer a quick observation, like "watch for sheet ice on the north side" or "that boulder's a favorite for marmots after ten a.m." Their exchanges were short and precise, the language of people who'd both grown up in places where a wasted word might mean a twisted ankle or worse.

As the path curved around the green, Finn angled them up the hill toward the Duck Creek Historical Society Museum—a log cabin painted a defiant barn-red and perched on a bluff above the main drag. He could already see the silhouettes: a skinny man in a County Services jacket, legs braced wide like a surveyor; and a much shorter, squatter woman with a helmet of white hair, her parka cinched so tight it looked welded on.

Macy caught the setup first. "Is that—"

"Level and Martha," Finn confirmed, and felt a traitorous surge of delight. "I bet you anything they're at it over the wall again."

They slowed and drifted to the side of the path, ducking behind a clutch of blue spruce to avoid being pulled into the crossfire.

Martha Wilkins, president-for-life of the Historical Society, stood arms crossed, face tipped to the morning sun as if hoping to scare up enough warmth to outlast her opponent. Lawrence "Level" Pendergast, Duck Creek's code enforcement officer, worked with a laser level in one hand and a battered surveyor's tape in the other. The focal point of their conflict was the infamous historical rock retaining wall, a lovingly

stacked run of basalt river rock meant to keep the museum's lawn from slumping into the parking lot.

Level was in top form, his khakis creased enough to slice cheese, the County Services logo on his jacket clean as a new license plate. He adjusted the level, squinted at the bubble, and then double-checked the measurement by hand. "I'm not saying it's an eyesore, Martha. I'm saying it's a full four inches over code." His voice was nasal but weirdly soothing, like a librarian reciting a rulebook.

Martha's lips didn't move, but her eyes could have started a brush fire. "Level, I'll tell you again. My son-in-law built that wall with his own hands. It's been standing since 1997."

"That's not the point," Level replied, now wielding the surveyor's tape like a blade. "Regulations say thirty inches max, top to grade. We're clocking in at thirty-four—thirty-four and a quarter, actually, at the northeast edge."

Macy pressed her fist to her mouth, stifling a laugh. She whispered, "He measures that wall every single day."

Finn smirked, not looking away from the drama. "And every day, it's still exactly four inches too tall."

"Within the margin of error," Martha shot back, as if reading from a prepared statement. She uncrossed her arms long enough to point a mitten at the offending section. "The ground settles, Lawrence. Sometimes it's more, sometimes less."

"Not according to my tools," Level said, patting his hip pocket with the fondness some men reserved for pets or grandchildren.

They both fell silent for a second, each pretending to admire the scenery. Above them, the flag at the museum entrance snapped in the breeze, and a red squirrel zipped along the fence line, unimpressed by either side's argument.

Finn and Macy watched, hidden but not really hiding, both aware that at any moment, one of the combatants might spot them and conscript them as an "impartial witness." Finn shifted his weight, the soft crunch of boots on old needles barely audible, but Level's head snapped in their direction instantly.

He waved, almost friendly. "Finn! You hike this way every morning, or just when there's a controversy?"

"Neither," Finn called back. "We're on a mission. The north rim."

Level looked pleased, as if this proved something. "Take note of the wall while you're up there. This is a community matter, after all."

Martha rolled her eyes, but her smile gave her away. "Tell your Aunt Sue I want her lemon bars back in the gift shop. None of this gluten-free nonsense."

Finn nodded, suppressing a grin. "Copy that."

He and Macy edged past the line of pines and started up the hill, leaving the dispute unresolved but, for now, contained.

When they were out of earshot, Macy said, "You know, when I was a kid, I thought Level was a cyborg. Like, literally part machine. He measured my lemonade stand once."

Finn glanced at her, saw the sideways quirk of her lips, and felt a sudden kinship. "Did you pass inspection?"

"Failed. Said my cash box was a tripping hazard."

They both laughed then, the sound clipped but genuine. Finn realized, with a little surprise, that he liked the way Macy laughed—no apology, no holding back, just the quick punchline and then done.

They walked on, the path growing steeper, the air richer with the scent of thawed earth and the promise of sun. The village and its endless drama faded into the trees behind them, replaced by the urgent, private world of the mountain.

Finn pointed to the cut in the ridgeline where the trail switch-backed up the slope. "If we stay on the north, we'll hit the overlook just before noon. After that, we cut cross-country to the waterfall."

Macy nodded, her focus already on the horizon. "You think the influencers'll even make it this far?"

He thought about it. "Maybe. But only if they don't get lost filming the world's longest slow-mo selfie."

Macy's smile lingered. "Good. That gives us time to set the decoy."

They hiked on, their boots carving fresh tracks through last night's powder. Neither spoke for a long time, but the silence was easy. Even the wind seemed to cooperate, holding off on the usual tricks until they'd put a solid mile between themselves and the last line of human quarrel.

For the first time all morning, Finn felt like they might actually win.

Not just the little war for Silas, but the bigger, weirder campaign to keep something in Duck Creek wild, even if it was just a four-inch slice of rock wall standing a little taller than the rules allowed.

He looked over at Macy, who was humming softly to herself, and wondered what other rules she'd broken just to keep things interesting.

They pressed on, the sun now strong enough to melt the frost from Finn's cap, and the day was still theirs.

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The trail steepened past the museum, switchbacking through a clutch of old-growth pine that grew in fits and starts along the north rim. Finn took the lead, boot soles finding purchase on the frost-stiffened duff, while Macy slipped easily into step behind. The air thinned with every dozen yards, each breath tinged with the resinous bite of sap and the distant smoke of someone's overzealous woodstove.

For the first mile they didn't talk, just moved. The only sounds were their own footfalls, the occasional creak of a pack strap, and a blue jay's yell somewhere out of sight. The trail was barely a rumor—sometimes marked by blazes, sometimes vanishing under a drift or the dense mat of last season's needles. Finn navigated by muscle memory and the subtle signposts known only to those who'd grown up losing and finding themselves in these woods.

Halfway up the ridge, the path narrowed to a deer track and slalomed through a thicket of twisted oak. Macy ducked a branch, then poked a gloved finger at a burst of red berries clinging to the shade.

"Thimbleberry," she said. "Look at that color."

Finn paused, admired the cluster. "Almost ripe. You know pikas always cache those first? Even over dandelion."

She shot him a sidelong grin. "You forage much?"

"Grew up on whatever we could find," he replied. "Mostly out of spite for the Forest Service."

Macy plucked a berry, rolling it between finger and thumb. "You ever notice how the best ones are just out of reach? I swear the squirrels laugh at me."

Finn shrugged. "Survival of the laziest. Animals always get the low-hanging fruit, so the rest get left for the next round."

They kept walking, the brush closing in and then opening up again as the elevation ticked higher. Every bend offered a new flavor: the sweetness of willow sap, the medicinal stink of yarrow crushed underfoot, the faint mint of wild bergamot growing in ragged fans along the verge.

Macy played tour guide without even trying. "There's a patch of wild mint up ahead," she said. "If you're into field tea."

Finn's smile was a sliver, but real. "Better than the bagged stuff at Sue's."

They made the turn and, as promised, found the low, dark leaves of mint tangled in the snowmelt. Macy crouched, brushed off the slush, and pinched a sprig. "Smell that?"

He obliged. "Strong. Almost citrus."

"Granddad said it's the cure for everything, but especially cold feet."

Finn looked at her boots, then back to her face. "Is that a hint?"

She laughed, the sound quick and bright. "If I wanted to quit, I'd say it. But if you keep setting this pace, I'll have to start loading up on calories."

They forged on, the climb growing steeper, the switchbacks tighter. Sweat beaded on Finn's brow, but he barely slowed. Macy kept up without complaint, her breath even and steady. For a while, they moved as a unit, hands and feet working in sync, the rhythm of the climb making it easy to ignore the growing ache in calves and lungs.

The next obstacle was the stream—technically just a trickle this time of year, but with the thaw, it rushed cold and clear over a bed of slick granite. The crossing was a sketchy string of boulders, half-submerged and wobbling in the current.

Finn tested the first stone. "Step where I do. It's less icy in the center."

Macy nodded, eyes sharp. She let him go first, watched the angle of his foot, then mirrored the move exactly. Two hops in, the last boulder pivoted under Finn's weight. He shifted, steadied himself, then turned and reached out. "Here. This one spins."

She hesitated—only for a breath—then took his hand. Her fingers

were warm, the grip strong. Finn steadied her as she landed, and for a second, neither of them let go. It was nothing, but it was also something.

When they hit solid ground again, Macy was the first to break the contact. She wiped her palm on her pants, then smirked. "You planning to catch me every time, or just when it looks heroic?"

"Just the icy parts," Finn said. He meant to keep it cool, but there was a warmth to his voice that surprised both of them.

The trail after the stream doubled back on itself, winding up a scree slope littered with old snow and the splintered bones of wind-thrown branches. Here, the world felt wider: a sweep of sky, the basin below, the sharp line of the opposite ridge. Macy slowed her pace, letting Finn get a little ahead, then called up to him:

"You ever get sick of the view?"

He paused, letting the panorama fill his chest. "Not once."

She caught up, standing beside him at the edge of a granite outcrop. "If I had a dollar for every influencer who's shot a selfie from this exact spot..."

He glanced at her, waiting.

Macy made a face. "You want to know what makes me really mad about them?"

Finn gestured for her to go on.

"They talk a big game about wilderness, about conservation. But they don't even look. I saw a whole group last year—drove a rental up the old fire road, shot a thousand pictures, and left so much trash the chipmunks nearly died of sodium overdose."

He nodded. "Saw the same thing on the lake, once. Two hours of drone footage, three broken kayaks, and a spilled cooler of microbrew."

She looked down, angry again. "It's like the point isn't to see anything, just to be seen."

Finn gave that a few beats, then said, "You know, my grandfather always said the mountain doesn't care who's on it. If you want it to like you, you have to know its moods."

Macy squinted at him. "You're quoting your grandfather now?"

He shrugged. "He was right a lot."

She softened, just a touch. "What else did he teach you?"

Finn considered. “How to find north by the way the moss grows. How to spot a storm by the shape of clouds. He could track a fox by the difference between its prints and a housecat’s. And once, he made a compass out of a sewing needle and a leaf.”

Macy’s lips curled, impressed. “You still remember?”

“Never forgot. Some things you don’t.”

For a moment, neither spoke, just stared out at the patchwork of forest and meadow below. The silence felt like an old wool blanket—rough, but warm.

Macy broke it first. “You know, you’re not what I expected.”

Finn looked at her, eyebrow raised.

“I mean, you’re not a jerk about knowing things. Most people up here, if you give them a chance to show off, they’ll run you over.”

He shrugged again, not comfortable with the compliment but not refusing it. “I figure there’s always more to learn. Even if it’s just how not to break your neck on the icy bits.”

She smiled, the expression lopsided but bright. “You ever get tired of knowing things?”

“Not yet. But I’d trade a few for your plant tricks. The names, the uses. I know the trails, but not what’s growing beside them.”

She looked pleased, almost bashful. “My granddad used to say the same thing. But he never remembered the Latin.”

“Neither do I,” Finn admitted. “But you can teach me.”

She turned to him, the wind tugging at her hair. “Maybe I will.”

They started up the next switchback, the trail now nothing more than a line of cairns and faded blazes. Finn watched as Macy picked her footing, knees bent, arms loose, the motion almost effortless.

He realized he was enjoying her company, and maybe had been for a while now. Not just because she was smart, or funny, or could spot a hidden patch of mint at thirty paces—but because she moved through the world with purpose. Even her anger, the way she talked about the influencers or the salad bar, was the anger of someone who wanted to fix things, not just shout about them.

The next mile passed quicker. They traded stories—Finn about the old Duck Creek search-and-rescue drills, Macy about her failed attempt to start a community garden behind the ranger station (“The deer won

by a landslide"). He told her how to use the first stars of the evening to set a straight line at dusk; she showed him how to make a poultice from yarrow and willow bark, just in case of blisters.

By the time they hit the plateau, the sun was warm on their backs, and the world below was a patchwork of gold and green and blue. Finn dropped his pack, sat on a convenient boulder, and let the ache settle into his bones. Macy followed suit, stretching her legs and then flopping back into the needles with a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sigh.

They sat side by side, not touching, but close enough that their elbows would brush if one of them shifted.

Finn broke the quiet. "You think they'll find what they're looking for?"

Macy propped herself up on her elbows. "The influencers? They'll find a cliff, a view, and maybe a dozen likes for their trouble. But not the real story."

He nodded, watching as a hawk circled slow above the valley.

Macy reached into her pack and pulled out a battered thermos. "Mint tea?" she offered.

He took the cup, the heat welcome against his fingers. "Thanks."

They drank in silence, letting the wind and the sun and the bright, improbable luck of the day fill the space between words. Finn watched the way Macy's hair caught the light, how her eyes went distant when she looked at the ridgeline, how she tapped her foot to some inner rhythm only she could hear.

He realized, with a start, that he wanted to keep climbing. Not just the trail, but the moment—this odd little partnership, this patch of borrowed peace before the world caught up and made them pick sides again.

He looked at Macy, and she looked back, and neither said anything for a long time.

The view stretched on, big enough for both of them.

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By two o'clock, the sun had climbed past the ridge and was working its way through the thin, high clouds, turning the world to a kind of filtered gold. Finn and Macy descended the far side of the plateau, following a faint trail that hugged the wall of the canyon like it owed the stone money. The land here was different—less trees, more sky, the ground breaking up into ledges and slabs, every few yards scattered with scree and spattered with lichen the color of oxidized copper.

Finn stopped at a narrow point, the path hemmed in on one side by a drop-off and on the other by a tangle of deadfall. He knelt, checking the integrity of the ledge, and waved Macy through. "Go slow," he said. "There's a fracture just past that white pine."

She gave him a skeptical look but followed directions, her boots careful, testing the ground before trusting it. When they rounded the next bend, the world opened up: a hidden cut in the hillside, the walls raw and streaked with iron-red, banded in stripes of white quartz and the soft, ancient gray of volcanic tuff. At the far end, a thin waterfall traced a path down the wall, the water sparkling in the light like someone had spilled a purse full of dimes.

Finn let out a low whistle. "That'll do."

Macy shaded her eyes, scanning the ledges. "It's perfect. Nobody comes down here unless they're lost or in love."

He glanced at her. "Or both."

She snorted, but didn't argue. They made their way down a goat path to the floor of the canyon, the ground cool and shadowed. The air was rich with the smell of moss, water, and the faint, metallic perfume of the rock. Finn set his pack down by a flat boulder and took a long drink from his bottle, eyes never leaving the wall.

Macy paced the perimeter, touching the stone with bare fingertips, sometimes stopping to squat and examine a plant at ground level. "Look at this," she called, voice echoing off the walls.

He walked over. She pointed at a patch of green fanned against the base of a slab, tiny white flowers clustered like snowdrifts. "This is Cliff-brake fern. It only grows where there's seeps or run-off. And if you ever see this one—" she tapped a stem with a purplish fuzz—"it means the water is so clean, you could bottle it."

Finn crouched beside her. "You should put that in the influencer packet. Tell them to film themselves drinking the seep."

She smiled, then let her hand drift over the damp moss. "They'd rather buy Fiji in a plastic bottle."

Finn was about to reply, but a quick flash of color caught his eye—a hummingbird, no bigger than his thumb, darted in and out of the spray, wings invisible. "You ever see a hummingbird go for water, not nectar?"

Macy considered, eyes following the blur. "Only when there's minerals in the runoff. Or if they're just showing off."

They watched the bird vanish, then turned their attention to the waterfall. Up close, it was less impressive than from above—just a thin ribbon of water, broken up by stone and wind, but the way the light hit it made every drop glow.

Finn looked around. "So, the influencers come in from that draw, they get a dramatic reveal, and then a whole background that looks like Utah's best-kept secret."

Macy nodded. "And if they actually pay attention, there's enough here to fill a month of posts. But they'll probably just shoot a three-second slow-mo and call it a day."

He pulled out his phone, snapped a picture. "No signal down here, but the GPS is solid. Want to take a few so we can seed the fake trail?"

She grinned. "You do know how to play dirty."

He shrugged, not apologizing. "Whatever keeps them from heading toward the old mill road."

They spent the next hour scoping angles and staging sample shots—Finn focusing on the dramatic, camera-friendly vistas, Macy on the best spots to catch wildflowers or the dense carpet of ferns. Occasionally, their paths would cross: Macy showing Finn how the light hit the moss at just the right hour, Finn walking her through how a drone shot would pan across the canyon for maximum effect.

They didn't talk much, but when they did, it was all substance. "If you want to draw attention, set something bright at the foot of the wall," Macy said, arranging a handful of goldenrod by the seep. "Makes a contrast for the camera."

Finn nodded, "And if you want them to stay out of the water, post a

warning about rare salamanders. They won't want the hate mail if they step on an endangered species."

She smiled, approval clear. "Good thinking."

When they finished, the sun was lower, but still strong. The canyon glowed, the red walls hot to the touch, the water a band of mirrored silver. Finn checked the time. "We've got maybe two hours before it's dark. Want to keep going, or...?"

Macy brushed her hands off and looked up. "Let's see if there's a better lookout higher up."

They scrambled up a side cut, using the roots of juniper and the occasional toe-hold in the rock. At the top, they found a small plateau, choked with aspen gone gold in the sun. The leaves shivered in the breeze, the whole stand alive and humming.

Macy flopped onto a fallen trunk, breathing hard but happy. Finn joined her, the log just wide enough for two. The wind carried the scent of dust and sun-warmed bark, and the first hint of wood smoke from the distant cabins. For a few minutes, they just sat, shoulder to shoulder, letting the moment stretch.

Macy broke the silence. "This is the part I like. Nobody talking, just listening to the trees."

Finn agreed, content to let the world fill the space between words.

After a while, Macy spoke again, voice softer. "You ever think about leaving? Like, for good?"

He took a while to answer. "Thought about it. Never made it stick."

"Why not?"

He looked at her, considered. "Nowhere else feels right. Out there, it's just more rules. Here, you can still get lost if you want to."

She nodded, understanding. "I used to want to get lost all the time. Now I just want to find something worth coming back for."

He watched her profile, the way her hair caught the last light, how her fingers kneaded a strip of birch bark. "You ever find it?"

She turned, met his eyes. "Not yet. But it's closer than it used to be."

They sat, the day cooling around them, neither in a hurry to break

the spell. The aspen leaves rattled overhead, the sound like gentle applause.

Finn dug in his pack, came up with a couple of protein bars. "You hungry?"

She made a face. "I'll trade you for dried huckleberries." She fished a battered Ziploc from her bag and shook some out into his palm.

He tasted one, surprised by the punch of flavor. "These are great."

She beamed, then held up a berry between thumb and finger. "I picked these at three in the morning last July, under a full moon. Got so many mosquito bites, I couldn't move for two days."

"Worth it?" he asked.

"Totally," she replied, popping the berry in her mouth.

The conversation wandered, sometimes drifting into silence, sometimes looping back to the same handful of topics: best trails, worst tourists, the time Macy fell asleep on a boulder and woke up surrounded by sheep. Finn told her about the time he lost a whole troop of Boy Scouts in a fog, only to find them at the Taco Stand an hour later, eating free churros.

They shared the last of the huckleberries, watched as the sun slid behind the far ridge, and waited for the world to change color.

It did—slowly at first, then all at once, the sky going from blue to orange to a kind of translucent lavender. Down in the canyon, the shadows grew deep, but up here, everything was gold and electric and alive.

Finn stretched his legs, then leaned back on his hands, content. "You think they'll make it up here tomorrow?"

Macy shook her head. "Not without a guide, and even then, they'll get distracted by the first cell signal."

He laughed, then grew serious. "We did good today."

She smiled, a real one, nothing hidden. "Yeah. We did."

For a while, they watched the first stars appear, the air growing colder but not quite biting. The space between them was less than it had been at the start, and when Finn's shoulder brushed Macy's as he shifted, she didn't move away.

They sat like that, side by side, until the sky was dark and the moon just a pale rumor on the horizon.

When they finally stood, stretching sore legs and collecting their packs, Finn looked at Macy and said, "You want to do this again sometime?"

She slung her pack over one shoulder. "What, run interference for mountain hermits, or just hike?"

He shrugged. "Both."

She grinned, teeth bright in the dusk. "I'll think about it."

They started down the trail, moving slow, careful of the new darkness and the old roots. The world below was already settling into night, but the glow from the aspen grove lingered, lighting the way just enough.

As they walked, neither said another word, but the silence between them was easy, unafraid, and full of promise.

The first cold wind swept the leaves overhead, and the sound followed them all the way down.

ten

## **free the boulders**

THE FIRST SIGN of life in Leo's studio, long after midnight, was the steady pulse of his wall-sized monitor array. The screens cast everything—desk, walls, the unsteady towers of Duck Creek Gazette back-issues—in a shifting wash of high-contrast blues and ghostly whites. The second sign was the collection of half-crushed energy drink cans, already outnumbering the empty mason jars and enamel mugs that lined the windowsill.

Leo worked in shorts, wool socks, and a faded “Vibe Curator” T-shirt. He wore a mesh trucker hat even though there was no one to see it, the bill slightly warped from too many years sunbaked on the dash of his Subaru. His phone pinged every couple of minutes, a dopamine IV drip of group chat memes, emergency weather alerts, and the relentless drip of influencer content from the world beyond Duck Creek.

He'd rearranged the studio for maximum mischief: the main workstation flanked by two side tables—one for electronics, the other for tactical snacks (gummy bears, jerky, and a “sacrificial” bag of kale chips he'd only bought to impress Summer, who never came). Gear overflowed the old cubbies: GoPro mounts, drone propellers, a retired avalanche beacon, and, above it all, Leo's pride—a corkboard labeled “Operation: Keep Cedar Weird.”

Pushpins held up a roadmap webbed with paracord, locations

marked in green for local flavor, red for “urban legend hotspots,” and a special string of neon yellow tracing a dotted line from the edge of town to the far, wind-hammered ridge where Cascade Falls let out its last breath of water before it vanished underground. In one corner, three printouts—screenshotted from Instagram—showed Summer and Toby in their influencer prime, each with a different Mountain Dew colorway and a matching hashtag: #TrailBae, #ContentKing, #LeaveNoTraceMyAss.

Tonight, the focus was on a single objective: convince every Silicon Valley wannabe and content-starved millennial within a hundred miles that the hermit of Duck Creek—Silas Thorne, real or not—was exactly where Leo wanted them to look. Which was, ideally, not even close to where the real Silas would be.

He started with the hiking forums. Years ago, Leo had cultivated a handful of burner accounts for “community engagement” purposes. On a good night, he could bump a rumor to the top of a thread in under fifteen minutes. Tonight, he seeded the usual haunts—Reddit, two regional Facebook groups, and the all-but-forgotten Duck Creek Angler’s Listserv—with a series of posts about odd lights, shadowy figures, and a suspiciously well-maintained fire ring spotted in the bristlecone pine groves near the old ghost town.

Every post was a tiny masterpiece of plausibility: just enough typo, just enough GPS error, and always accompanied by a blurry photo or link to a Google Maps pin. Leo cycled through the posts, nudging the best ones with his own sock-puppet accounts and using the rest as background noise.

He checked his progress against the “Silas Matrix” he’d built on a spare monitor. Overnight, the number of unique references to “Silas” in Utah-based social feeds had tripled. Not bad, considering the guy hadn’t been actually seen in public since Reagan was president.

Leo took a celebratory swig of lime seltzer and flicked his phone to the Finn thread.

Update: Sighting reports already doubled. Most are tracking north, as predicted. If Summer and Toby are on script, they’ll skip the Creek tomorrow and head for Bristlecone.

Finn's reply came quick, like always: "Let's keep it going. We need at least 48 hours. Macy's prepping the wall tomorrow night, so stall as long as you can."

Leo grinned at the mention. He liked Macy. She didn't treat him like a freak, and she'd once called him a "wizard of the low-level grift," which he'd immediately added to his Twitter bio. The plan was classic: while he kept the internet crowd distracted, Macy and Finn would set up a physical "scene" to divert anyone who came poking around the actual habitat.

He set an alarm for 2:00 a.m., the peak time for West Coast engagement, then dug back into the forums to fan the flames. He dropped an old photo of the bristlecone overlook—breathtaking even in low-res—and claimed it was "taken at dawn, just after an unexplainable shouting match between two men." The caption dripped with just enough weird to sound authentic.

As the likes and comments trickled in, Leo allowed himself a few seconds to just enjoy it. He loved the click and thrum of the machine, the way a rumor, once seeded, could propagate faster than a brushfire in July. He pictured the wannabe sleuths and TikTok hikers rerouting their plans in real time, all because a handful of bytes told them to. There was poetry in it.

Leo's eyes burned from screen glare, but he couldn't stop. He tracked the influencers' posts, noting every re-share and dupe. He recognized the usual trolls, but also a handful of real-world names—old classmates, Duck Creek's own children, now scattered across the digital landscape but still tuned to the home frequency.

He shot off another text to Finn: "Good chance we'll get some on-foot recon tomorrow. You want them to hit the falls at the same time, or stagger?"

Finn: "Stagger's better. Macy says early morning is best. Sunrise crew is less aggressive."

Leo flagged the note on his board and returned to the campaign. He swapped hats (literal and metaphorical) to a beanie for "stealth mode," then typed up a longer, more personal post under his oldest, most credible account. It read:

"I was out scouting for the marathon next week. Saw a guy fitting the Silas description—beard, parka, old Army surplus pack—moving real fast through the shale above Bristlecone. If you're thinking of looking for him, I'd be careful. He's not a fan of visitors, and the terrain up there is gnarly."

He added a map, marked it with a pulsing red "X," and attached a two-year-old dashcam photo of a distant figure on the rim. By the time Leo refreshed the page, three separate users had already confirmed the sighting. One even claimed to have "video proof," which Leo knew for a fact was just a YouTube rip of a Discovery Channel hermit special. No matter—the crowd believed what it wanted to.

A fresh ping sounded, this time from his other, even more private account. He opened it and read a single, cryptic line: "Nice work, Duck-Boy. But don't get caught. Some of us like the old ways."

Leo had a suspicion it was from one of the real forest rangers, or maybe just a retired bus driver with too much time on his hands. Either way, it made him smile. There were still players out there who respected the hustle.

By 4:00 a.m., Leo had planted a half-dozen more threads, seeded a dozen fake DMs to local journalists, and tweaked the Instagram "#Silas-Watch" tag to trend at just the right hour for maximum exposure. The finish line was in sight.

He leaned back, stretched his shoulders, and glanced at the corkboard. The final step was a classic: the "credible sighting" from an out-of-town expert, ideally someone who'd never actually been to Duck Creek. He pulled up an old burner email and composed the tip:

"Longtime wildlife tracker here, passing through for the weekend. Saw a man—very tall, thin, definite survivalist energy—setting up a camp at Bristlecone Canyon overlook. Not saying it's Silas for sure, but I've tracked animals my whole life and he moved like nothing I've ever seen. Two hikers nearby got spooked and left quick."

He sent the email to the Gazette tipline, the regional Facebook group, and the inbox of a friend at the local radio station. He even blind-copied it to the influencer couple, just for the fun of it.

As the first light worked up the edge of the world outside, Leo closed his laptop with a satisfied thump and finally let the quiet

catch up to him. He surveyed the chaos of his studio—the energy cans, the glowing screensaver, the hand-drawn map of Duck Creek's off-limits areas pinned under a rusty hatchet. For the first time in weeks, he felt like he'd done something that mattered, even if it was just for a day.

The phone buzzed one last time. Finn again: "Nice work. Give yourself a raise."

Leo grinned, picked up the phone, and snapped a photo of the corkboard, with its feverish patchwork of plans and paracord.

He texted it to Finn, then typed: "Duck Creek stays weird. At least until breakfast."

He put his feet up, shut his eyes, and listened to the wind rattling the old double-paned glass, already dreaming up the next round of chaos to come.

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The first sound was the gentle snap of a zip tie, then the flump of Finn's backpack landing in the dirt. He and Macy skulked through the historical society's back lot, eyes squinting in the grainy half-light that barely filtered down from the main drag. It was after hours in Duck Creek, which meant everything felt three degrees colder and a dozen times more suspicious.

"Next time, we use the community center," Macy whispered, unslinging her bag and unrolling a painter's tarp in one smooth flick. "There's heat. And coffee."

Finn shrugged, kneeling to help anchor the tarp's corners with half-frozen cans of refried beans and a decorative iron horsehead he found next to the dumpster. "You'd rather get glitter in the community center's carpets and be banned for life?" He grinned, voice low.

"I'm already banned," Macy shot back. "Last summer, Level caught me running a fermentation experiment in the kitchen fridge. He said the kraut smell broke their thermostat."

She knelt beside Finn, spread out the supplies—cardboard, poster paint, a tangle of stencils, and a plastic toolbox labeled "M. Halloway: ART/SCI SUPPLY." For a second, the only light was Finn's headlamp,

which he clicked to its dimmest setting, just enough for colorwork and plausible deniability.

Macy set to work sketching the first design freehand: three cartoon boulders, each with an exaggerated frown and stick-figure arms straining against a leash. She wrote "FREE THE BOULDERS!" in blocky capitals above them, then dotted the exclamation point with a red berry sticker.

Finn watched the lines fill in, then cut his own stencils from the cardboard scraps. "You ever do this in high school?" he asked. "You know, student council election posters, prom invites, vandalizing the bathroom for science club solidarity?"

Macy didn't look up. "No time for committees. I was home-schooled, mostly in the woods. If I wanted to rebel, I'd smuggle bugs into the neighbor's mailbox."

Finn imagined her at twelve, all wild hair and contraband insects, and felt a flicker of sympathy for the neighbor. "That explains a lot," he said, and received a sidelong look that was part threat, part invitation.

She squeezed a glob of tempera blue onto the palette, then passed the brush to Finn. "You do the fill. I'll finish the next headline."

They settled into a rhythm: Macy outlined, Finn blocked in color, Macy lettered slogans, Finn did the background details and attached the zip ties. They worked quiet, except for the soft swish of brush on board and the occasional near-snort when a new slogan hit the mark.

"Boulder Rights Now!" Macy read off the next sign, then, after a second, amended it to "Boulder Rights: Right Now" and circled the colon in orange.

Finn tried to keep a straight face, but when she followed it with "Stop Rock Oppression!"—in neon green, with a doodle of a judge's gavel crushing a pebble—he lost it and almost tipped a can of paint onto his boots.

"You're going to start a geological uprising," he said.

"Good," Macy replied, loading her brush with pink. "Maybe the stones will unionize and make Level's life miserable."

Finn worked on his favorite, a simple "SET THE WALL FREE" with three stick-figure boulders marching off arm-in-arm, one holding a tiny protest flag. He handed it to Macy for inspection. "Needs more

drama,” she said, and drew a single tear on the lead boulder’s face, then shaded the flag to look wind-whipped.

Above them, the wind kicked up and made the pine branches chatter. Finn checked the time—nearly midnight—and started sorting the finished signs into order of deployment.

“You got a route?” Macy asked, screwing the top back onto the black paint.

“Yeah,” he said. “We start at the north side, post one every ten meters, then finish with the big reveal right in front of the wall.” He tapped the main sign, the only one not yet painted, and slid it to the center of the tarp.

Macy uncapped a fresh marker and drew a thick line down the middle. “What’s the headline?”

Finn hesitated, then grinned. “Four Inches Too Far.”

She snickered, then added: “A cautionary tale.”

They finished the main sign together: Macy did the cartoon boulder, Finn added the four-inch tape measure and a Level Pendergast caricature, all squint and scowl. By the end, they were both shaking with the effort of keeping quiet.

Finn packed the signs into his tote, careful not to smudge the paint. Macy rolled up the tarp, swept the area for stray evidence, and pocketed the leftover markers.

They crept around the museum side, boots muffled by last year’s leaves, and started the install. Each sign went up with a quick loop of zip tie to the nearest fence, light pole, or, in one case, the tailgate of a rusted-out Jeep that had not moved since 2018. They worked in tandem—Finn setting, Macy adjusting the tilt and the dramatic angle for maximum morning visibility.

At one point, headlights swept the street. They ducked behind a ponderosa, giggling in silence until the car rolled past. Finn’s breath puffed in the cold, and he watched it drift toward Macy, then scatter in the wind.

“You know,” he said, voice low, “I bet in the morning, Level will try to confiscate every one of these.”

Macy nodded, eyes gleaming. “That’s the fun part. He’ll make it a

crusade. And Martha will write a letter to the Gazette about censorship and the public right to geological whimsy.”

Finn laughed, feeling a buzz in his legs that had nothing to do with the cold. He reached for the next sign, but Macy took it first, holding it close to her chest for a second.

“You’re not like the other prank guys,” she said, suddenly quiet.

He waited, not sure if it was a compliment or a warning.

“I mean, you actually care if the wall gets lowered or not.”

Finn shrugged, suddenly awkward. “It’s a dumb wall, but it means something to Martha. She kept it up after her son-in-law died. Level just wants it fixed so it matches code. It’s like—” he stopped, searching for the words. “It’s the last dumb argument anyone in town will have before the snow comes and everyone’s stuck together again.”

Macy looked at him a long time, then smiled, smaller than before, but real.

“Let’s finish,” she said.

They rounded the block, passed the dark hulk of the post office, and made their way to the retaining wall. It stood four inches too tall, by official decree, and wore the battle scars of two winters’ worth of snowmelt, salt, and the occasional community “repair” with epoxy and hope.

Finn set the main sign at the center, angled to catch the sunrise. Macy planted the foot of the sign in the frost and stood back, arms folded.

The two of them gazed at it, neither speaking, as if the boulder cartoon could explain all the logic and lunacy behind the night’s work.

Finally, Finn said, “We should get out of here before Level shows up early.”

Macy nodded, but lingered, just a second more.

“You’re going to come watch in the morning, right?” she asked.

He grinned, and this time there was no chill in it at all. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

They walked back through the sleeping town, shadows trailing, the only evidence a line of painted signs and the low, persistent echo of their own laughter.

The next morning broke so bright it hurt. By seven-thirty, Finn was already at Ground + Toasted, mug in hand, watching the world come undone through a plate-glass window that still bore last Christmas's snowflake stickers. Across Movie Ranch Road, the retaining wall was nearly lost beneath a scrum of bodies, some in expensive down, others in thrifted flannel, all of them craning for a shot at the new protest signs.

It was as if the town had sprouted a second farmers market overnight. The main sign—Four Inches Too Far—stood front and center, flanked by a rotating cast of selfie-seekers and minor celebrities of the Duck Creek circuit. Finn counted three dogs in bandanas, two kids in full ski gear, and at least one GoPro on a selfie stick. He sipped his coffee and tried not to look too pleased.

Macy sat across from him, cradling a mug of her own. She wore the same green beanie as last night, and her hair—less wild now, but still defiant—was already dusted with cinnamon from her first scone. She kept her voice low, every word clipped with suppressed glee.

"You think Level's seen it yet?" she asked, nodding at the cluster of people around the wall.

"He'll be here the second the County Services office opens," Finn said. "But he might stroke out before then if Martha gets to the press first."

They both laughed, but softly, as if sharing a joke with the sunrise. Finn felt the old, familiar tick of anxiety—pranks were fun, but Duck Creek was small, and gossip moved faster than any truck on the highway.

Through the window, Finn spotted two figures emerging from the Duck Creek Village Inn across the street. Even from a distance, it was obvious: Toby and Summer, decked in coordinated performance outerwear, each piece blindingly new and tagged with enough visible branding to make a NASCAR pit crew blush. Summer wore her signature turquoise pendant and a scowl that could freeze over Navajo Lake. Toby lugged a tripod, camera, and the air of a man whose personal saga had been interrupted by a plotline he didn't write.

"Targets acquired," Finn murmured, eyes flicking to Macy.

She turned, followed his line of sight, then grinned. "I give them five minutes before they try to stage-manage the protest. Ten if they get distracted by a 'latte situation' in here."

Finn watched as the influencer duo surveyed the crowd, clearly baffled to find their hunt for the hermit upstaged by a cluster of locals rallying around what was, to an untrained eye, a children's art project. Toby tried to approach the wall, but was blocked by a ring of seniors with clipboards, one of whom lectured him on "the historic right of stone to be heard."

Summer scrolled her phone with growing intensity, fingers stabbing at the screen. Finn could practically see the hashtags blooming across her retinas. He wondered how many times she'd refreshed #FreeTheBoulders in the last hour.

At the table next to Finn and Macy, a pair of tourists from somewhere in the Midwest tried to interpret the scene.

"Is it some kind of protest?" asked the woman, sipping what looked like half cream and half coffee.

Her companion, a man in a ballcap reading "Land of the Free," shrugged. "Maybe it's performance art. Or a climate thing."

Macy leaned over and offered, "It's a geological justice movement. The boulders have been trapped for years."

The woman nodded, as if this made total sense, and typed something on her phone.

Finn nearly lost it.

Outside, Level Pendergast arrived. You could tell from the way he parked: perfectly parallel to the curb, hazard lights on, tape measure already out before he'd even closed the truck door. He surveyed the wall, noted every sign, and began the methodical process of documenting each with a digital camera. When he got to "Stop Rock Oppression!" he frowned, then took an extra photo just for posterity.

Beside him, Martha Wilkins held court. She'd staged a folding table (commandeered from the museum, Finn was certain) and was distributing home-baked lemon bars to anyone who agreed to sign her petition to "Uphold the Wall." The petition itself was a single sheet of lined

notebook paper, already half-filled with names and a few questionable doodles.

Finn and Macy watched the tug-of-war, sipping coffee and trading running commentary like ESPN hosts.

"I give Martha the edge," Macy said. "She's got treats and nothing to lose."

Finn countered, "Level's got the full weight of county code behind him. And a pen that bleeds pure bureaucracy."

They clinked mugs in mock solemnity.

Suddenly, Summer and Toby pivoted. Instead of the wall, they beelined for the café, the camera swinging in a slow arc behind them. Finn tensed, ready for a confrontation, but they swept past, ignoring him and Macy entirely.

"Didn't even recognize us," Finn whispered.

"Why would they?" Macy said. "We're not the main characters in their feed."

Toby and Summer took a window seat, all business. They each had a phone and a laptop, and within seconds, the table was a command center of charging cables and auxiliary batteries. Summer pointed to the wall, gestured animatedly, and Toby began narrating their experience into his phone's microphone, voice low but intense.

"They're live," Macy observed. "Are we about to get doxxed?"

Finn shook his head. "No. Look at their screens—they're searching for the next 'Silas sighting.' I think Leo's campaign is working."

Sure enough, a few minutes later, Summer's face lit up, and she spun the laptop toward Toby. They both huddled over the screen, then began frantically texting. Finn craned to see the map displayed on their screen: a big red X over Bristlecone Canyon, courtesy of Leo's handiwork.

He felt a surge of pride, tinged with relief. "They're leaving. They're really leaving."

Outside, Level was in a heated debate with Martha, her lemon bars forgotten, his arms slicing through the air as he tried to reason with her. The rest of the crowd had thinned, leaving only the die-hard partisans and a smattering of confused onlookers. Macy took a long drink, then exhaled in satisfaction.

"Mission accomplished?"

"Mission accomplished," Finn echoed.

They sat in companionable silence, basking in the afterglow of their small-town mischief. Macy toyed with her pine cone pendant, twirling it as she watched the wall across the street.

Then, abruptly, the café's door slammed open, and a new wave of sound crashed in behind it: the booming baritone of Chef Gary, still in his stained white apron, face flushed from equal parts cold and fury.

"There you are!" he bellowed, beelining for Finn and Macy's table. "You think you can just walk in here after what you did to my salad bar?"

The entire café went silent. Even the espresso machine seemed to pause, waiting for the next move.

Finn put his mug down, heart ticking up a notch. Macy froze, eyes wide.

Gary slammed a hand on the table, making the mugs jump. "You —" he pointed a sausage-thick finger at Macy—"are the reason my best customer nearly called poison control last night. Dandelion root? Chopped up in the croutons?"

Macy opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

Gary jabbed the table again, then fixed on her pendant, the copper-wrapped pine cone swinging at her throat. He looked from it to Finn, to Macy, then back to the necklace.

"Wait a minute," Gary said, voice dropping to a menacing rumble. "That's the same thing I found by the salad bar. Don't play dumb. You're the one who's been messing with my *mise en place*."

The room waited, tension strung tight as piano wire. Finn saw every eye in the café locked on them, some with curiosity, a few with genuine admiration.

Macy glanced at Finn, panic starting to give way to stubborn pride. She squared her shoulders, lifted her chin, and said, "If you're looking for the Salad Bar Saboteur, you found her."

A gasp—half real, half performative—rippled through the café.

Gary sputtered, ready to launch into another tirade, but Finn spoke up, voice calm but loud enough for the room.

"Maybe you should thank her," he said. "People loved the wild greens, didn't they? Best buzz the Chalet's had in weeks."

Macy shot Finn a look—equal parts gratitude and are you crazy?—but he held steady.

Gary glowered, but the wind seemed to go out of him. He slumped a little, then growled, "Aunt Sue will hear about this. Don't think you're off the hook."

He left as fast as he'd arrived, door slamming again behind him. The espresso machine, apparently satisfied, hissed back to life.

In the stunned quiet that followed, Macy leaned in and whispered, "Well, that was dramatic."

Finn laughed, low and easy. "You have a talent for making an entrance."

They watched through the window as Toby and Summer loaded up their SUV, luggage and camera gear spilling out the hatch. The last thing Finn saw was Summer snapping one last selfie with the protest wall, her turquoise necklace catching the sun.

He raised his mug to Macy. "To the next diversion."

She clinked his mug, then drained hers to the dregs.

The wall stood, at least for today, and the story rolled on.

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Finn was already standing by the time Chef Gary's second shout hit the window. He slipped around Macy's side of the booth, putting himself between her and the incoming avalanche of chef. Gary loomed, fist cocked and face as red as his signature sauce, but Finn raised both palms, steady and calm.

"Gary," Finn said, "take a breath. You're going to rupture something and Aunt Sue will have to redo the dinner menu."

This drew a nervous titter from the counter regulars, but Gary wasn't laughing. He glared at Finn, then at Macy, then at the empty space between them.

"You have no idea what it took to get that salad bar in compliance," Gary spat. "And she—" he jabbed a finger at Macy, who didn't flinch—"is out here pulling a health code clown show!"

Finn nodded, accepting the accusation. "You're right. And I'm sorry for the drama. But what if there's a way to turn this into good press for the Chalet?"

Gary blinked, momentarily thrown.

Finn pressed on. "Duck Creek's full of people who'd kill for a story like this—local forager teams up with historic restaurant for a one-weekend wild food menu. We can spin it as a pilot, bring in the press, and you get to pick the safe stuff. But you have to be in the room with us. No surprises."

Gary's jaw worked, but he was listening. Finn shot Macy a quick look, and she nodded, picking up the thread.

"I shouldn't have gone around you," Macy said, eyes level with Gary's. "You run the best kitchen in the county. I just... I can't stand the taste of iceberg when the mountain's covered in better things. Let me show you. Worst case, you say no and I disappear."

The whole café seemed to lean in. Even the kid running the espresso machine stilled, one hand hovering over the grinder.

Gary exhaled, long and ragged, then said, "Aunt Sue will never go for it."

"Let's find out," Finn replied. "You call her, set the meeting. We'll bring samples, a full write-up. All aboveboard."

Gary's shoulders dropped another inch. The fight wasn't gone, but it had nowhere left to go. He pointed at Macy's pendant again, but softer this time. "You better bleach that thing before you come back to my kitchen."

Macy almost smiled. "Wouldn't dream of bringing contamination."

Gary left, slamming the door half as hard as before.

The energy in the café bled out, replaced by a low-grade hum of speculation. Macy let out a slow breath, then slumped back against the booth. Finn sat, aware that every eye was still tracking their movements.

After a minute, Macy whispered, "Did you mean all that?"

Finn grinned. "Every word. And if Sue wants to ban us both, at least we'll go down together."

They finished their coffee in silence, letting the world resume its usual background noise. When the moment felt right, Finn cocked his

head toward the street. "You want to see the one place in Duck Creek where you can't get caught?"

She shot him a sideways look. "Is that a dare?"

He grinned. "It's an invite."

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The knotty-pine booth at the Chalet was empty except for the scarring of old initials and the hush that lingered after a crowd. Finn slid in first, gesturing to Macy to take the side with the better view of the wood stove. She sat, hands folded on the table, her eyes roaming the room like she was casing it for a heist.

"So what's the trick?" she asked, voice low.

Finn ran his fingers over the carved dots and lines in the varnish. "Sometimes, if you sit here long enough, you hear things. Like, real things. Stories that don't make sense. Once, I heard Aunt Sue fighting with three mining guys, decades before she even owned the place."

Macy frowned, but didn't laugh. "You believe in ghosts?"

"Not the sheet kind," Finn said. "More like... echoes. The way a place holds a memory."

She seemed to consider this, then nodded. "I get that. Sometimes, I walk a trail I haven't seen since I was little, and I remember everything at once—the weather, what I was wearing, what wildflower was blooming. Like the air remembers."

Finn leaned forward, elbows on the worn wood. "People don't believe it, but I've heard the same voices, years apart. They're never out loud, exactly. More like you get stuck in the memory and can't look away."

Macy looked at the wood grain, running a finger over a patch that shimmered with age. "Ever try writing it down? Maybe you're supposed to."

Finn thought about this. "Never tried. It always feels like if I move too fast, it'll vanish."

Macy's lips quirked. "Maybe you need to share it. Like pollinating a memory."

He laughed, the image so perfectly her.

They sat in silence, waiting, the air thick with expectation and old kitchen smells. Finn thought about all the times he'd felt the strange tug in this booth, but now, with Macy there, it was different—less lonely, more electric.

Macy looked up. "Is it happening?"

Finn was about to say no, but then, all at once, the room shifted.

It was subtle—first the light changed, the wood stove glow replaced by the harsher yellow of a single hanging bulb. The air smelled sharper, like pine sap and cold metal. There was a voice, close but not quite in the room.

It was a man's voice, old but strong, speaking with the urgency of someone who hadn't been listened to in years.

"...I told them, the barrels were never sealed right. The river ran yellow for three weeks, but the paperwork said 'minor incident, fully contained.' I have the documents. I have the soil tests. But nobody wants to listen. They said if I spoke up, they'd ruin me—'no one believes a hermit,' that's what the company man told me. But the water's poisoned. The deer, the birds, even the moss along the rock is dying. It's all in the files. If you ever find this, tell the truth. Don't let them bury it again."

The voice faded, but the sense of it stayed, pulsing in the grain of the booth, vibrating in the resin of old varnish. Then, as quickly as it had started, the light shifted back. The hum of the fridge, the low murmur of customers, all came rushing in.

Macy was staring at the table, eyes wide but focused. "Was that—?"

"Silas," Finn said, his own voice a whisper. "Or at least, the part of him the mountain wants to keep."

Macy's face shifted—part awe, part something heavier. "He wasn't running. He was warning people."

Finn nodded. "They called him a villain, but he was the only one who cared enough to fight."

She reached across the table, not quite touching his hand, but close enough that he could feel the heat of it.

"Do you believe in fate?" Macy asked, voice small.

He shook his head. "I believe in unfinished business."

They sat like that, letting the story settle into the space between them, each turning over the weight of what they'd heard.

After a long silence, Macy said, "You think Sue will go for the menu?"

"If she doesn't, maybe we'll haunt the place until she does."

Macy laughed, low and bright. "Deal."

They left the booth together, Finn stopping to run a hand over the old varnish one last time. The day outside was full of sun and wind and the noise of a town waking up to itself.

But for Finn and Macy, the real work had just begun. The secret was safe—at least for now—but the story wanted out.

And together, they were going to see it told.



## eleven

# storm warning

THERE WAS something about an empty restaurant after closing that made every sound carry, every coffee spoon click or chair-leg drag echoing just a little too long. In the Chalet's back corner booth, Finn sat flanked by Chef Gary—arms folded tight, white coat almost luminous in the dim light—and, across from him, Macy, who had already colonized half the tabletop with Tupperware, Ziplocs, and lumpy canvas bags. The overheads were dimmed, the pellet stove's blue glow the only real fire left. Everything else—smell, sight, noise—belonged to the three of them, and, in absentia, to Aunt Sue, whose presence was announced only by the steady thump and shuffle of the kitchen staff mopping up and, more dramatically, by the sudden arrival of napkin notes delivered at a dead run by whatever waiter or busser Sue had conscripted at the moment.

Gary exhaled so heavily the table shook. "Let's try this one more time. You want me to serve weeds? To humans?"

"They're not weeds," Macy said, and Finn could practically hear her counting to ten. "They're wild greens. Lamb's quarters, miner's lettuce, purslane. People pay twenty bucks an ounce for this at Sprout & Vine in St. George."

Gary made a dismissive noise. "St. George is full of masochists. My customers want salads they can pronounce and dressings with names

that end in ‘-ese’ or ‘-berry.’ You want to sneak a leaf in, fine. But I’m not dying on a dandelion hill, okay?”

Finn moved a Tupperware—soft-sided, faded from the sun—into Gary’s line of sight. “Try the mushrooms. If they’re half as good as she says, it’s worth a shot.”

Macy took the lid off with a flourish. Inside, the caps shone clean and dewy, each with its own smell—earthy, peppery, a little floral. She set out a small, battered field guide beside it, already bristling with sticky notes and margin scribble. “Red-capped scaber stalks. Porcini. Morels, if you’re lucky with the snowmelt. All field-checked, all safe. You can sauté them or roast them, but they’re best with nothing but a little butter and salt.”

Gary plucked a scaber stalk from the lot, rolled it between his thumb and index like he expected a secret to drop out. “You’re not worried about lawsuits? There’s no such thing as a minor mushroom accident, kid.”

“I sign a release,” Macy said, deadpan. “I also eat the first batch, every time.”

Gary looked at Finn for backup, but Finn just shrugged. “I’ve seen her do it. She brings her own epi-pen and activated charcoal. It’s extremely on-brand.”

The chef huffed, but this time less violently. He turned the mushroom over, then set it on the plate like it was a chess piece. “And what’s that supposed to be?” he asked, pointing at a tiny brown paper pouch with the trembling disgust some people reserved for unlabelled leftovers in a shared fridge.

Macy beamed. “Piñon nuts. Shelled by hand. They’re sweeter than the store kind, with this weird hint of... resin, I guess? You can grind them into a pesto or just toast and toss with pasta. If you want to lean into the Utah thing, add sage and lemon zest.”

Gary unfolded his arms, only to cross them again, and gave the smallest of nods. “That’s not bad. But you know it’s impossible to scale. You’d have to strip-mine every piñon for a hundred miles to keep up with Friday lunch rush.”

“Unless you charge more for a special,” Macy said. “People love a

special, especially if it sounds exclusive. And if you give it a fancy name, they'll post about it." She cast a sly look at Finn, who grinned.

"Call it 'wild harvest' or 'heritage menu,'" Finn said. "Put a little blurb on the table tents. You'd be the only place in the county doing it."

Gary grunted, but Finn could see the gears turning. The man lived for any advantage, however petty, over the competition.

Before Gary could object again, a busser slalomed through the dining room, slipped a folded napkin onto the table, and vanished.

Finn opened it. Aunt Sue's handwriting—always in purple marker, always slanted like it was in a hurry—read:

*"TASTE EVERYTHING FIRST. DON'T BE  
STUBBORN!!! -SUE Also, do not poison Macy.  
Health inspector was here last month."*

Finn slid the napkin across to Gary, who read it, then let his lips twitch into something like a smile. "She never leaves me alone," Gary grumbled, but there was less venom in it now. "Fine. I'll taste it. But if my tongue goes numb, you're cooking brunch tomorrow."

Macy grinned, uncapped another container—this one filled with a tight, moist bundle of tiny green leaves—and set it between them. "Sorrel. Like a lemon, but milder. Use it in a salad or as a garnish, but it also does this magic with cream soups—cuts through the fat, leaves a little tang."

Gary pinched off a leaf, chewed, then blinked. He did it again, this time with a second variety. "This is wild? Not from a greenhouse?"

Macy shook her head. "Picked it myself. From land with no pesticide in at least a decade. I keep logs if you want proof."

Gary looked at Finn. "She's like a foraging lawyer. Is this what I'm up against?"

"Could be worse," Finn said. "She could be in charge of your dessert menu."

Macy didn't rise to the bait, but she did slide forward a Mason jar full of something murky and green. "Spruce tip syrup," she said. "If you want to get really weird, try it on pancakes. Or vanilla ice cream."

Gary uncapped the jar, sniffed, and made a face. But then he stuck a spoon in and tasted. His eyebrows went up.

"That's... different," he said, which, from Gary, was practically an endorsement. He took another spoonful, then set the jar in front of him, protectively.

Macy explained how the spruce tips were harvested ("before the needles get tough, while they're still a little sticky"), how she simmered them low and slow with cane sugar, how the result tasted like Christmas plus electrolytes.

Finn let the conversation find its own rhythm, only jumping in when it looked like Gary was about to retreat into full-bore skepticism. He watched as Gary relaxed, started asking real chef questions—how long would it last in the fridge, what about food safety, could she find enough in spring, what would it do to a marinade for pork? Macy's answers were short, factual, unflappable. He saw Gary's left eyebrow quirk, then drop, each time Macy met a technical with a technical, never once blustering or bluffing.

After a while, Macy set her hands flat on the table. "If you don't want to run the menu, that's fine," she said, and there was a sudden seriousness, like the gloves had come off. "But the mountains are full of food if you know where to look. The old people here knew it. My granddad taught me. I'm just saying, maybe it's time to remember."

Gary looked at her, for the first time not as a pain or a project, but as someone with a real thing to offer. "You ever work a real kitchen?" he asked.

Macy shook her head. "I've only ever cooked for people I liked."

Gary laughed, short and surprised. "Good answer. And if you want the truth, I've never met a line cook who didn't try to poison me at least once. At least you're honest about it."

Finn caught the way Macy's face softened, just for a second, before she masked it with another quick-fire fact about the acidity of sorrel and how it made you crave more water. He liked the way the two of them, so different in every visible way, could connect over the simple, ancient business of feeding people.

Another napkin note arrived, this time slid across the table with less urgency and more theater. Finn read it aloud:

*"If you can agree to play nice, I'll run a pilot weekend. Chef's rules, but Macy picks ingredients. NO FIGHTING IN THE KITCHEN. ALSO, CLEAN UP AFTER YOURSELVES."*

Gary rolled his eyes, but Finn saw the glint in them. "She thinks she's a war general. All right. We do it her way. But I get final say on what goes out."

"Deal," Macy said, and offered her hand.

Gary shook, his grip short but not unfriendly. "Fine. But you better show up early. We prep at seven."

"I'll bring doughnuts," Macy said, and you could hear the grin in her voice.

Finn leaned back, a little giddy with relief. "You want to get started with a test run?"

Gary looked at the collection of wild and weird on the table, then shrugged. "Why not. I'm not sleeping tonight anyway."

They started mixing and matching, Gary pulling from his mental file of classic Chalet dishes and Macy throwing out curveballs—what if you did the spruce syrup on the fried chicken? What if you candied the pine nuts with brown butter and put them on French toast? Finn watched them volley ideas, each suggestion knocking a bit more skepticism out of Gary, each defense making Macy seem less of a wild card and more of a legitimate, if quirky, sous chef.

Finn was just about to declare the meeting a miracle of small-town diplomacy when the Chalet's entry bell let out a long, metallic whine.

The front door, heavy with the weight of decades of paint and varnish, creaked open and slammed shut again, letting in a rush of cold and the unmistakable smell of outside. Leo—hair askew, tablet in hand, cheeks pink with urgency—made a beeline for the booth.

He stopped short at the edge of the table, caught his breath, and blurted, "The decoy didn't work. They're not on the GPS trail. They're at the senior center, interviewing everyone about Silas."

He dropped his tablet onto the table, screen bright, where a video played on loop: Summer and Toby, both bundled in influencer-issue

parkas, surrounded by a ring of white-haired elders, every one of them talking at once, some gesturing with canes for emphasis.

Finn felt the adrenaline dump hit, cold and fast. "How long ago?"

"Twenty minutes," Leo said. "I only found out because my mom called—she's mad they didn't stop for bingo."

Gary looked up, alarmed for the first time all evening. "You think they'll try for the hermit tonight?"

"Not tonight," Leo said, "but as soon as they get a lead. They're asking about trail markers, about where the wildlife corridor cuts behind the mill ruins. They're not even pretending to care about the menu anymore."

Macy stood, already packing up the containers with a speed that said she'd known this would happen. "They're going to blow through every private spot on the rim. If they're not careful, they'll get themselves lost."

Gary looked at Finn, then at Macy, then back to Finn. "You think they'll try the caves?"

Finn nodded, once. "I think that's exactly what they'll do."

Leo scanned the table, his voice low but urgent. "You want to head them off?"

Finn was already halfway out of the booth. "We have to. If they get caught in the narrows after dark, the Forest Service will have a field day. Or worse, they'll flush Silas into the open."

Macy followed, shouldering her pack. "You coming?" she asked Leo, and for the first time, Leo didn't joke or stall.

"Wouldn't miss it," he said, and fell in beside them.

Gary watched them go, then yelled, "Don't get killed! I need you for Saturday brunch!"

Finn gave a thumbs-up, and as the trio hustled out the door, the last thing he saw was another napkin note, delivered just as they left. He caught a flash of purple marker:

*"PROTECT THEM ALL. EVEN THE ANNOYING  
ONES."*

It didn't say who "them" meant, but Finn had an idea.

The cold outside felt like home, and the three of them walked fast, boots crunching on the first real frost of the season. Above, the sky was clear, every star a pinprick of purpose.

They didn't say much, but they didn't need to. The mountain was waiting, and somewhere out there, so was the truth.

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Leo led the way back through the frigid dark, his boots crunching gravel and old pine needles, his breath coming in quick, nervous puffs. Finn and Macy fell in behind him, Finn's stride all purposeful momentum, Macy's a staccato of anxiety she didn't bother to hide. They cut across the side lot, then into the kitchen entrance of the Chalet, where the light and the promise of hot coffee dulled the first bite of the night air.

Gary was still inside, scrubbing the prep table with a focus that suggested he'd been standing there the whole time. The moment the trio appeared, he dropped the rag, wiped his hands on his coat, and gestured to a tray at the end of the pass. "Fuel up before you do anything else," he said. "Those two idiots are going to give me a heart attack."

Macy grabbed a paper cup and filled it from the big, burnt-edge urn by the window, then turned to Leo, who already had his tablet open and was cueing up a video.

He propped the tablet on the table, and they crowded in.

The feed was raw—Toby's voice echoey and nasal, Summer's tight with performative concern. "We're here at the Duck Creek Senior Center, talking to the amazing locals about the legend of Silas Thorne. Do you guys think he's still alive?" The camera panned to a ring of seniors, every one of them wrapped in crocheted blankets and the scent of mothballs.

An elderly man, eyebrows wild as lichen, leaned in. "Son, I saw Silas last Christmas. He was poking around the dumpster, same as always. Scared the bejeezus out of my grandkids." He grinned, clearly enjoying himself.

Summer faked a gasp, leaned into the shot. “What do you think he wants? Why does he still haunt the woods?”

A woman with hair shellacked into a perfect dome snorted. “He wants to be left alone, is what. Not made into a sideshow for tourists.” She glared at the camera. “You’re not going to catch him with a GoPro and a hashtag.”

Toby pressed, “But you must have theories—”

Another senior interrupted, “He lives in the caves. Always has. My brother says there’s a whole system under the ridge, all the way to Cascade.”

Leo paused the video and zoomed in on the last speaker, then the printed map in the background. “They got a location. Caves near Cascade Falls.”

Finn gripped his cup tighter. “That’s a real risk. It floods fast, and if the storm hits, they’ll be trapped before they know it.”

On cue, Leo’s screen chimed with a weather alert. He swiped it open. “High wind warning. Plus, the rain is supposed to be insane. If they go tonight—”

“They’ll be headline material by breakfast,” Macy finished, her voice grim.

Finn stood, already thinking a step ahead. “We need to cut them off before they make the turn at the mill. The shortcut is all shale and loose rock, and they’ll get lost if they try to bushwhack in the dark.”

Gary reached behind the counter and tossed them a small, insulated duffel. “Snacks. High-cal. And a first-aid kit. Don’t make me regret this.”

A sudden metallic rattle drew everyone’s attention to the side door, where Sergeant Buck Miller let himself in, uniform as sharp as his gaze. He sized up the room, then addressed Finn directly. “Heard you were planning a rescue.”

“More like a preemptive intervention,” Finn replied.

Buck nodded, then reached into his coat and produced a battered envelope. He slid it onto the table. “Found this in the historical archives. Old map—my dad’s. He swore Silas used these caves, marked them himself back in the day.”

Finn unfolded the map, careful of the yellowed creases. It was hand-

drawn, contour lines in faded blue, with a network of caves outlined in red. Some had dates and cryptic notes beside them—‘Thorne’s Den,’ ‘Spring Entrance,’ ‘Danger: drop 12 ft.’

Buck pointed to a cluster near the edge. “These are accessible from the north. If you cut overland from the overlook, you’ll beat them there. Unless they try the drainage, but that’s suicide in weather like this.”

Macy ran her finger along the line of caves, then looked up. “You ever been inside?”

Buck shook his head. “Just the first two chambers. After that, the ceiling drops and it gets tight. Dad used to leave supplies in the main room, just in case.”

Finn traced a route on the map, then checked it against Leo’s tablet. “We can make the trailhead in twenty minutes, if we hustle. Once the rain starts, it’s going to be a mudslide.”

Macy snapped the map’s photo with her phone, then rolled it up. “If we get there first, do we call the sheriff, or...?”

Buck frowned. “Better to keep it local. Latham’s a good guy, but he can’t keep his mouth shut. This will go viral faster than we can stop it.”

Gary reached into the snack bag and produced a foil-wrapped wedge of lemon bar. “You’ll need sugar for the climb,” he said, tossing it to Finn. “And remember, if you get lost, hug a tree. Or each other.”

The tension broke, just a little, but the sense of urgency held.

As they finished loading their packs with whatever emergency gear they could find—headlamps, a coil of rope, two space blankets, and a bright orange rain poncho they argued over but finally agreed to split—Aunt Sue sent one last napkin note, delivered by the dishwasher on a tray of coffee refills. Finn opened it, and even in the rush, he had to smile:

*“Protect them all. Even the annoying ones. Also, bring back my good thermos.”*

No signature needed.

They zipped up, braced for the cold, and stepped out into the dark.

The wind was picking up, the first spatters of rain tapping the metal awning like urgent fingers.

Buck shouldered his rucksack and nodded to Finn. "You lead. I'll bring up the rear."

Leo toggled a headlamp and double-checked his pocketful of batteries. "If I die," he said, "clear my browser history."

Macy just shook her head, tucked the map into her coat, and muttered, "Let's go before I change my mind."

They crossed the lot in silence, boots thumping out a nervous cadence. At the edge of the village, Finn glanced back once—through the rain, through the spill of kitchen light, to where Gary watched from the window, arms folded, face unreadable.

Then the trail bent away, the darkness swallowed them, and the village was nothing but a memory.

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They hadn't made it three blocks from the Chalet before the storm hit full force, the first gust nearly tearing Leo's headlamp clean off and turning the rain poncho into a flapping sail. The main drag—usually so dry you could skate a golf ball across it—became an instant river, surface slick with pine needles and the shrapnel of summer's last, desperate cone drop.

Finn led, keeping his body tight against the wind, the map clutched under his rain jacket. Every few paces, he'd glance over his shoulder to check the line: Macy a half-step behind, hood cinched, her whole outline aglow in the weird, flickering blue of the storm. Leo stuck to her like a remora, the white oval of his face alternately grimacing and grinning at the sheer absurdity of being outside. Buck Miller, closing the column, moved with the patient, stubborn power of a man who'd done worse in worse weather, his every step careful but committed.

They made the edge of the village in minutes, the world behind them already melting into a smudge of yellow porch lights and the faintest memory of warmth. Ahead, the trailhead to Cascade Falls was a mess—parking lot abandoned, the gate rattling in the wind, the interpretive sign about "Karst Topography" bent double by the force of the

gusts. Finn ducked behind the sign, checked the compass, and held up a hand.

Macy caught up, breath hissing in sharp, white jets. "They're ahead," she said. She pointed at the mud: a set of deep, erratic prints—two pairs, one slightly staggered, both wider and messier than any animal would ever tolerate. "Their stride's off. They're fighting the wind, but moving fast."

Finn nodded, scanning the woods. "They'll aim for the shortcut, but it's washed out. Bet they stay on the main trail until the switch-backs, then try to cut north."

Leo pressed close, hunched against the squall. "You think they'll make it?"

"Not if Summer's shoes are as cheap as her Instagram filter," Macy said, deadpan.

Finn turned, started down the path, and the group followed—four shadows moving in the noisy dark, the cones of their headlamps doing almost nothing to push back the night. The trail, so familiar in sunlight, felt like a foreign country now: every root a booby-trap, every puddle a blind risk.

A half-mile in, the first thunder hit—a low, full-body rumble that Finn felt in his sternum more than he heard. The lightning that followed split the sky in a way that was less a flash and more a full, blinding slap, all the world gone to negative for a second.

Leo yelped. "You ever seen it this bad?"

"Once," Buck said, not even winded. "Nineteen ninety-eight. We lost power for a week and the wildlife guys found a bear living in the post office." He seemed utterly unflustered by the elements, eyes squinting through the mess.

They pressed on, Finn picking up the pace where he could. The trail was now a cataract—water sheeting down the grade, clay washing over boots and making every step a calculated slide. Macy kept her eyes on the edges, where bracken and willow made a tangle. She spotted the broken twigs, the odd leaf pressed flat, the telltale drag of an unsteady hand against a branch for balance.

At the first big turn, Finn halted the group, then pointed. "See that?" He dropped his voice.

A few dozen yards up, something blinked: a moving, blue-white strobe, way brighter than any headlamp setting. “That’s them,” Finn said. “Selfie light.”

Macy gave a short laugh, edged with worry. “They’re going to get electrocuted if they keep waving that around.”

Buck murmured, “If the hypothermia doesn’t get them first. Their jackets are all show—no insulation.”

Finn weighed the options. The caves were still a good half-mile away, and the last stretch was open, no cover. The storm would be at its worst by then. He looked at Macy, and she looked back, and for a moment they shared the exact same thought: if the city kids got into the caves and tried to shelter, they could end up trapped, or lost, or worse.

He checked his phone, but the storm had eaten all bars. “Leo,” Finn said, “how’s your battery?”

“Good for an hour,” Leo said, “and I’ve got backups. But nothing’s getting out.”

“Keep filming,” Finn said. “If we lose them, at least we’ll know where they turned.”

They moved again, this time more urgent—Finn taking the lead, feet finding old steps and muscle memory, calling out every shift in the trail. When the trees thinned and the world opened to a slash of sky and cliff, he motioned the group to get low, then edged forward.

Below, on a broad ledge ringed with deadfall and cut through with a small, angry creek, were the influencers: Toby, shirt untucked, hair wet but still styled, standing at the edge of the creek with a selfie stick held high like a torch. Summer huddled a few feet behind, speaking into her phone with the practiced poise of a news anchor on location, never mind the rain streaming down her nose and the way her teeth chattered even as she smiled.

“We’re here, on the trail of Duck Creek’s most elusive legend!” Toby’s voice echoed in the hollow, full of false bravado and a little bit of real fear. “We’ve just crossed the point of no return, and the conditions are INTENSE.”

He pantomimed shivering, then mugged for the camera. Summer tried to cut in, but the wind snatched her words and flung them downstream.

Finn whispered, "They're close to the next fork. If they take the left, it dead-ends. If right, they're straight for the cave."

Buck said, "We'll have to move now. That creek's gonna double in ten minutes."

Macy nodded, then, without waiting for a vote, started down the slope. Finn followed, Leo next, Buck covering.

At the bottom, the mud was everywhere, black and deep and eager to pull at boots. Finn slogged to the edge of the creek, judged the jump, then waved the others over. Leo made it with a squelch and a whoop. Macy barely hesitated, taking the leap with both feet, arms pinwheeling but landing square.

Finn called, "Toby! Summer! You need to get off the ridge—storm's about to cut the trail."

Toby whirled, almost dropping his phone. "Hey! Are you following us?"

Summer, eyes wide, immediately played to her audience. "It's Duck Creek's own adventure squad! Did you guys come to rescue us?" Her sarcasm had an edge of hope.

Macy, panting, said, "If you don't want a Search and Rescue cameo, you need to turn around. Now."

Toby took a step back, a little less sure. "We're almost there, right? The caves?"

Finn said, "You won't make it. The next draw is already flooding. If you get past, you won't get back."

Thunder banged overhead, the sound rolling down the canyon like a wave.

For a second, nobody moved. Then, in the distance, a new light: a single, small beam, higher on the ridge and moving fast, cutting through the rain with a purposeful, scanning motion.

Buck swore under his breath. "That's not us. Somebody's out there."

Leo pointed. "It's coming from the upper rim. Maybe a local?"

Macy squinted, blinked rain from her lashes. "Or it's Silas."

Finn weighed the odds. The ridge was all scree and bristlecone, and nobody in their right mind would be hiking the upper trail in this weather unless they knew it cold.

He called up, "We see you! Come down to the ledge!"

The light held still for a beat, then blinked in an obvious pattern—long, short, long. Finn recognized the code from wilderness first-aid: "Need help."

He looked at Macy, who was already halfway up the draw.

"Watch her," Finn said to Leo, then bolted after Macy.

The scramble was a disaster: every step a guess, rock giving underfoot, the world a chaos of rain and sound. They gained on the light, even as it moved steadily west, staying always just out of reach. Macy called out, "Silas?" and the light stopped, waited.

They got to the crest at the same moment the storm broke wide open, a wall of water and wind nearly knocking Finn flat. The light was close now, maybe thirty yards, shining through the haze.

Macy said, "We're not here to hurt you. We just want to help."

Nothing, for a second. Then the light dipped, once, twice.

Finn stepped forward, hands open. "We're not with the authorities. Just locals."

A voice, ragged with cold but clear, carried on the wind. "So am I. But I don't want company."

It was a man, face hidden by a hood, silhouette all sharp angles and exhaustion. The way he stood—slightly hunched, weight on the back foot—spoke of a lifetime of waiting for the worst.

Finn said, "We have a storm rolling in. Those two kids down there are about to get themselves killed. Can you help us get them back?"

The man considered, then nodded once.

He turned, beckoned them with the light, and Finn realized the path was not visible at all—just a thread of memory through the black. Macy followed, unafraid.

Together, the three of them made it down the switchback, guiding each other by touch and shouted instructions. At the bottom, the man paused, adjusted the light, then slipped away before Finn could thank him.

They reached the creek again—now a proper river—and saw Leo and Buck, backs to the water, hauling Summer and Toby to safer ground.

Toby yelled, "Who was that? Is he the—?"

Buck cut him off. "You're lucky he found you. Or we'd be pulling your camera out in the spring."

Summer just cried, silently, the tough shell gone to pieces.

Macy got the thermal blanket from her pack and wrapped it around the shivering pair, then glared at them until they stopped trying to document the moment.

Finn checked the trail behind them: empty, the light gone, only the memory of it cutting through the dark.

They hiked out slow, the group doubled in size but halved in bravado. The storm finally eased, just as the lights of the village came back into view, weak and yellow and impossibly dear.

Back at the Chalet, they were met by Gary and Sue—who looked, for once, more relieved than annoyed. Sue hustled Summer and Toby inside for soup and a space heater, never saying a word about the mess or the lost thermos.

Buck peeled off with a salute, heading home to dry out and, maybe, call his dad to let him know the mountain was still in one piece.

Leo flopped onto the nearest bench, peeled off his poncho, and said, "You think they'll ever come back?"

Macy wrung out her hair. "Only if they want to get famous for being the slowest people on Cedar Mountain."

Finn just sat, letting the exhaustion and the gratitude and the relief crash in all at once.

Through the window, the world was all storm-wash and fresh pine, the air inside thick with the promise of hot food and, if they were lucky, a new menu item or two.

He glanced at Macy, who was already scribbling notes on a napkin—new greens to try, maybe a recipe for wild mint cocoa. She smiled when she caught him looking.

He smiled back.

In the darkness, somewhere above, a single light moved along the rim, steady and sure.

And for once, Duck Creek could rest easy.



## twelve

# **shelter from the storm**

THE RAIN HIT Finn square in the face, stinging like a handful of needles. He gripped a sapling for balance, boots threatening to skate out on the sodden ground, and checked over his shoulder. Macy was just behind, huffing steam and mud with equal parts grace and violence. Her hair, usually a messy exclamation point on her head, was plastered flat to her skull, bandana abandoned somewhere back in the first quarter mile.

“Left!” he shouted, knowing the wind would chew off most of the word.

She heard anyway, or else guessed right, and cut through a curtain of willow, snapping branches as she went. They were both past the point of fighting the weather; it was enough to keep upright, to keep moving, to not lose the trail.

Down the slope and into the gully, the storm hit a new octave. The air tasted green, sharp with wet pine and the tang of churned earth. Finn blinked rain, trying to make out anything ahead—any flicker of the two influencers, any hint of reflective tape or softshell jackets in the gloom.

But Toby and Summer had vanished, swallowed up by the world gone all color and noise.

Finn hunched, hands on thighs, squinting for clues. The world felt sped-up: rain coming at them sideways, branches whipping, every

breath a dare. Macy came up beside, boots sloshing, and jabbed a finger at a patch of churned mud. "They went this way," she said, voice tight. "Fresh. See the waffle print?"

Finn knelt for a second—Macy was right, you could almost read the brand logo in the mess. He looked up, caught her eye, and nodded. They moved as one, following the new line of destruction up the bank and through a seam in the trees.

The trail, such as it was, had gone from hard-packed dirt to a slurry of clay and pine needles. Finn felt his feet go out twice, only catching himself by grabbing at the nearest trunk. Macy fared better, knees bent, every step an athletic calculation. The wind stole all sound, so their communication was hand signals, nods, the occasional yell when the trail dog-legged and one of them got ahead.

A fallen log slowed them, black with rot and slick as glass. Finn climbed first, then reached back. Macy took his hand, no drama, just necessity, and swung over. For a half-beat, they shared the log, rain pelting their faces, and Finn thought it'd be easier to just sit and let the storm win. But Macy was already moving, so he followed, teeth chattering.

Thirty yards on, the trail forked. Both options looked bad: the left arched toward the creek—now a frothing, brown river where yesterday there'd been barely a trickle—while the right climbed into the teeth of the wind, disappearing into a tangle of alder and what looked like an actual wall of water.

Macy went to the left, found a boot print, then paused. Finn joined, took in the two sets of tracks. "They split here," she said. "I don't know if it's on purpose."

Finn tried to think. "Creek's going to rise," he said, "but if they make the crossing, it's a straight shot to Cascade."

Macy traced the mud with a finger, quick and sure. "Unless they get swept."

The wind flexed again, hard enough that Finn had to widen his stance to keep from toppling. "Other path?" he asked, pointing up the ridge.

She bit her lip, rain beading on the tip of her nose. "It's slower. If they're panicking, they'll take the short way."

A crack of thunder, then the air felt charged, electric. Finn scanned the sky—barely a hint of light now, storm sucking it all down. He pictured Summer, hypothermic and shaky, or Toby playing it macho and getting swept off a rock. Or worse, running into the one thing none of them wanted to find.

“Your call,” Finn said, ceding it.

Macy didn’t hesitate. “Creek,” she said. “But if it’s impassable, we double back and try the ridge.”

Finn nodded, grateful. They took the left, arms up to shield their faces from the stinging rain, and trudged through the muck.

After a minute, the noise shifted: the hiss of rain giving way to the full-throated roar of water. The creek, which Finn remembered as a lazy slip of blue, was now a brown, surging muscle, thirty feet wide and impossible. Finn checked the bank—fresh gouges, scoured roots, and there, halfway down, a pair of bright orange sunglasses clinging to a branch.

“Summer’s?” Macy asked, voice almost lost in the wind.

“Has to be,” Finn said. He slid down the bank, mud over the tops of his boots, and snagged the glasses. The water below was a liquid sawmill, all foam and noise. He looked for footprints, for any sign that someone had made the jump.

“Here,” Macy called from up the bank. “I see a handprint. Someone slipped—see?” She pointed at a clay smear, half-washed away.

Finn’s chest went tight. “You think—?”

She shook her head, fierce. “If they went in, we’d see more. There’s no drag marks, no scramble. I think they freaked and backed off.”

Finn let out a breath, but it didn’t help the cold any. “Okay. Ridge route.”

They scrambled up the bank, each step a fight. Above, the trail was all puddles and slick rock, the mud grabbing at every step. Finn’s legs burned, but he didn’t dare slow—each second felt like it mattered. They found the upper fork, a set of prints leading away, deeper into the woods.

They followed, Finn and Macy locked in a pace. The trees grew close, the path a shadow line through the understory. Occasionally, Finn would catch a flash of color—maybe a parka, maybe a hallucina-

tion. The rain soaked straight through, chilling bone, but he barely noticed anymore.

A half-mile up, the trail ducked through a narrows in the rock. The wind died, replaced by a heavy, green silence. Finn could hear Macy breathing, close behind, and the squelch of her boots in the soft duff. He risked a look back—she was pale, but still moving, jaw set.

They paused under a tangle of old man's beard lichen. Finn leaned on a tree, shivering. "You good?" he managed, voice thin.

Macy nodded, then coughed. "Just hate losing," she said.

They waited, catching breath. Rain dripped from the trees in fat, heavy drops. Finn felt the ache in his legs now, the way his hands had gone numb.

"Remind me," Macy said, eyes scanning the path ahead, "why we're saving people who'd probably post our rescue as a viral fail?"

Finn snorted, but it came out as a half-laugh, half-shudder. "Because if we don't, Gary will never forgive us. And Leo will meme it until we're dead."

She smiled, just a little, then turned back to the trail.

They moved again, the incline steeper now, the mud more treacherous. Finn kept his eyes on the ground, looking for signs: crushed grass, a torn scrap of plastic bag, anything.

And then, as the rain eased for a second, he heard it: a human voice, shouting.

He couldn't make out the words, but the tone was pure panic.

Macy heard too, and they broke into a run, bodies slamming branches, boots flinging mud. Finn felt the adrenaline hit—everything hyper real, each step an explosion in his chest.

They topped a rise and saw, fifty yards ahead, a flash of blue and pink. Summer and Toby, both huddled on a slab of slick granite, Summer's parka turned inside out, Toby's face streaked with blood and dirt. Summer was yelling into her phone, which was clearly dead, while Toby looked like he was bracing for a helicopter drop.

Finn skidded to a stop just uphill, calling out, "Hey! Over here!"

Summer's head snapped up. She gave a shriek, part relief, part horror. Toby tried to stand, slipped, and nearly took both of them over the edge.

Finn and Macy closed the distance, skidding, grabbing at rock for balance. When they reached the pair, Finn crouched, hands open, like he was trying not to scare a wild animal. "You guys all right?"

Toby's answer was a dazed "No," but he seemed in one piece. Summer just started crying, which Finn took as a good sign.

Macy fished a mylar blanket from her pack, snapped it open, and wrapped it around Summer's shoulders. "We have to get you out of the wind," she said, her voice firm. "You'll freeze."

Toby managed a nod, but then looked past Finn, eyes wide. "Did you see it?" he whispered.

Finn frowned. "See what?"

Toby's teeth chattered. "Up there. Something moved. Huge, white, I swear it wasn't a deer."

Macy exchanged a look with Finn, then squeezed Summer's arm. "You saw it too?"

Summer only sobbed, but nodded.

Finn stood, peering up the ridge. The woods were dark, everything blurred by the last curtain of rain, but he saw nothing out of the ordinary. He glanced at Macy—her face was calm, but her eyes were bright, alert.

"Let's move," Finn said. "Downhill, slow, follow the path." He kept one hand on Toby's elbow, Macy guiding Summer.

Step by slow, shivery step, they made their way down. The rain slackened, the air warming by degrees. Eventually, they reached the lower bench, a wide spot under an overhang of rock.

Finn called a halt. "Rest here," he said. "Out of the wind."

He set Toby down, propped Summer next to him, and turned to Macy. "You okay?"

She exhaled, and the breath shook. "Yeah. Are you?"

Finn looked at his hands, mud-slick and trembling, then at the two huddled figures. "Not even close," he admitted. "But I'm glad you're here."

Macy made a noise—maybe a laugh, maybe just a way to keep from crying.

They sat together, backs to the rock, sharing the thin warmth of the

emergency blanket. The storm tapered off, replaced by the slow drip of water from the trees above.

Finn closed his eyes, just for a second, and listened to the world settle: the tick of raindrops, the shudder of breath, the quiet that always followed a near miss.

Macy nudged him, then pointed. Through the thinning mist, just up the hill, was a dark mouth in the rock—a cave Finn had never noticed before.

She met his eyes. “Shelter?”

He nodded, and together, they helped Toby and Summer up, the four of them moving as one toward the promise of dry stone and, if they were lucky, a little peace.

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The cave was less a cave and more a crevice—ten feet deep, maybe, and barely wide enough for all four of them to crouch inside. The floor was slick with runoff, the air so saturated with fog that every breath felt like swallowing soup. But it was dry, or dry-adjacent, and the wind couldn’t touch them.

Toby and Summer collapsed first, a heap of fluorescent polyester and pale skin. They huddled at the far end, legs tangled, faces vacant with the come-down from panic. Summer’s lips were almost blue, but she still managed to glare at Toby like it was his fault, not hers, that they’d nearly washed down the mountain.

Macy eased herself down with a wince, massaging her calf. Finn dropped beside her, the last reserves of adrenaline leaking out of his arms and legs. He fished in his pack, pulled out a roll of mylar, and draped it over Macy’s shoulders before she could object.

She didn’t say thanks, but she didn’t take it off, either.

He leaned back, letting his head rest against the rough, cold stone. Rain pelted the mouth of the cave in white noise, but inside, all was quiet but for the ragged chorus of their own breathing.

“You think it’ll let up?” Summer asked, her voice brittle as wet leaves.

Finn checked his watch, then the slit of gray sky beyond. "Maybe in an hour. Maybe not."

Toby looked miserable. "Is it safe to light a fire in here?"

Macy gave him a flat look. "If you're asking for a smoke break, read the room."

But Finn nodded, pulled his emergency kit from the pack, and started collecting the driest sticks and needles he could find from just outside. The air was wet enough to drown a match, but Finn had a stubborn streak, and the ferro rod was good for hundreds of strikes.

He built the pile slow and methodical, a teepee of twigs, a base of birch bark, each step a small act of defiance against the world's wet intent. Macy watched, silent, then slid over to help. Her hands shook from cold, but her movements were precise. She fluffed out the bark, then cradled it close to her chest as Finn scraped the rod, each strike a flash of hope in the dim.

It took a dozen tries. Then a tiny flame caught, orange and angry, and Finn shielded it with his hands while Macy fed it dry grass in pinches. The flame grew, uncertain at first, then sure, and Finn felt the knot in his chest loosen a notch.

He set the fire near the back, careful of the rock ceiling, and the warmth began to creep into the space, one degree at a time.

They hung their jackets on makeshift hooks—broken branches jammed into the cracks—and draped hats and gloves over their knees. Steam lifted off Macy's sleeves, and the chemical stench of melting polyester filled the air.

Summer's eyes went soft with relief, and she sidled closer to the heat. Toby followed, unashamed.

Finn glanced at Macy, caught her watching the flame with a look he couldn't name. Not quite awe, but close.

"Nice work," she said. "You're wasted on the Chalet gig."

He shrugged, but the words made something glow behind his ribs. "Years of scout camp," he said. "And stubbornness."

Macy nodded, then tucked her knees to her chest and leaned in to the fire. For a while, nobody spoke. The wind and rain outside took all the urgency with them, leaving only the gentle pop of sap in the sticks and the slow, grounding return of body heat.

It was Toby who broke the silence, voice low. "You ever think about just... staying out here? Like, for good?"

Summer snorted, but there was less venom in it now. "He'd die in a week. He needs an audience."

Toby shrugged, unoffended. "Wouldn't be the worst way to go."

Finn's eyes tracked the shadows on the cave wall, each flicker painting them in primal, giant shapes. "A lot of people tried," he said. "Most don't last a winter."

Macy turned her head, gaze unreadable in the shifting light. "Except the ones who know the land," she said. "The ones who see what's coming before it arrives."

Finn felt the words settle. "You mean Silas."

She didn't answer, but she didn't need to.

The fire warmed the space, and Finn moved a little closer to Macy, not touching, but closing the gap between them to a margin. He could see the way her hands were curled, half for warmth, half for security.

Toby, never one to sit with silence, asked, "You really think he's out there? The hermit?"

Macy snorted. "He's smarter than you, that's for sure. And faster. He could be watching us right now, and you'd never know."

Summer shivered, and not just from the cold. "Why? Why not just come back to town?"

Finn met Macy's eyes. He could see the answer there—a mix of anger, sorrow, and something else, almost reverence.

She spoke slow, like she was weighing each word. "Sometimes the world is easier to take when it's just trees and sky. People make it too loud."

The fire snapped, throwing a constellation of sparks up the wall. Finn poked at it, buying himself a second to figure out what he wanted to say.

"I always thought," he began, then stopped, listening to the rain. "I always thought I'd leave Duck Creek as soon as I could. Go somewhere bigger, where the only thing people cared about was themselves."

He glanced at Macy. "But then I realized the mountain's in my blood. Even when I'm cursing the snow, or the tourists, or the endless parade of local drama."

She smiled, softening. "You love it here."

He nodded. "I guess I do."

Summer and Toby, to their credit, stayed quiet for once, sensing the turn. The two of them wrapped in a blanket, heads together, looking out of the cave mouth at the storm beyond.

Macy watched Finn for a long minute, eyes reflective as the damp stone. "My granddad," she said, voice almost a whisper. "He taught me everything about these woods. How to find morel mushrooms in June, how to track elk by the way they flatten the grass. How to listen for the weather in the sound of the aspen leaves."

She toyed with the edge of her sleeve. "He was the first to tell me about Silas. Not as a monster, not as some boogeyman. As a guy who wanted the land to heal. Who tried to warn people, and got crushed by the companies and the gossip and all the rest."

Finn let the silence stretch, let her fill it as she chose.

Macy's voice broke just a little. "After he died, I used to come up here at night, just to see if I could feel him. Like maybe the woods would remember him longer than I could."

She gave a shaky laugh. "Stupid, I know."

Finn shook his head. "Not stupid at all."

He reached out, slow and obvious, and set his hand on hers. It was cold, still trembling, but she didn't pull away.

For a while, neither spoke. The fire burned low, and Finn added a handful of twigs, careful not to crowd the flame. The steam rose from their jackets, mixing with the woodsmoke and the sweet funk of decaying leaves.

Macy squeezed his hand, not looking at him. "You think we'll ever see him?"

Finn thought about it. "Maybe not. But if we do, he'll make the choice. Not us."

She nodded, letting the idea settle. "He's a part of the mountain now. Maybe always was."

Finn liked that, the logic of it.

He glanced at Summer and Toby, both asleep now, or at least pretending. The cave was warmer, the storm easing by degrees. Finn turned back to Macy, her profile sharp against the glow.

"You saved their lives tonight," he said. "Not me. You."

She gave him a sideways look, part skepticism, part gratitude. "Don't make a big deal."

But Finn shook his head. "It is a big deal."

He pulled her in, gentle, the move as natural as breathing. She fit against his chest, small and stubborn and shivering, but not from cold.

The fire cracked, and for the first time since the world went all water and fear, Finn felt wholly, perfectly present.

Macy looked up, eyes bright in the reflected firelight. "This is going to be a good story someday," she whispered.

Finn smiled. "You want to tell it, or should I?"

She leaned in, nose bumping his, lips just a degree from his own. "Let's write it together," she said.

And then she kissed him, soft and tentative at first, then sure, the warmth of her mouth pushing back the last, lingering trace of winter inside him.

They broke apart, grinning, and Finn let the quiet settle, the two of them pressed close while the night did its worst outside.

Eventually, Macy rested her head on his shoulder, and he wrapped both arms around her, holding on to the moment as if it were the only sure thing left in the world.

The fire burned steady, casting their shadows up the stone in wild, impossible shapes.

And for the first time all day, Finn believed they might actually make it through the night.

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The rain broke before sunrise. It didn't stop, exactly, but it softened, shrinking from a war-drum to a gentle, irregular tapping on the stone above. The cold came in right behind it—sneaking up Macy's sleeves and down the collar of Finn's shirt, a reminder that for all the fire's hard work, they were still just animals in a hole in the dirt.

Finn opened his eyes to a cave full of pale blue light and the faint, rising smell of smoke. He wriggled his fingers, then his toes, making sure nothing had gone fully numb in the night. Macy was still tucked in

beside him, breathing even and soft, her hair plastered to her forehead in damp, erratic waves. Her hand rested against his chest, fingers curled as if she'd fallen asleep mid-argument.

He moved slow, not wanting to wake her. But after a minute, her eyes fluttered open anyway.

She yawned, the sound somewhere between a cat and a chainsaw. "You alive?"

Finn grinned. "Best night's sleep I've had in months."

"Liar."

"Would you rather I said you snored?"

Macy smirked, then propped herself up on one elbow and surveyed the cave. Toby and Summer were already gone, a tangle of footprints and a couple of energy bar wrappers the only evidence they'd ever shared the space. The fire had burned down to coals, throwing just enough warmth to make the air smell like last summer's bonfire.

Macy blinked. "They leave us for dead?"

"Looks like it," Finn said. "You want to chase them down, or give them a head start?"

She shrugged. "Let's make sure they don't walk off a cliff."

They repacked in silence, rolling up the blanket and scattering the fire's ashes so the next wanderer wouldn't know they'd been there. Finn found a stick, broke it down the middle, and used it as a crude broom to hide their tracks at the mouth of the cave.

When they stepped out, the whole world felt scrubbed new. The forest was a cathedral, all silver trunks and blue-shadowed snow, every branch draped in water drops that caught the light and held it like a promise. The air was clean, almost sweet. It made Finn want to breathe so deep he'd pass out.

The mud sucked at their boots, but the way ahead was clear. Finn followed the fresh tracks down the slope, eyes on the divots where Summer's heels had dug in, the way Toby's stride had widened as the ground got slicker.

Macy walked just behind, every few steps pausing to point out a bent stalk or a chunk of moss that had been kicked loose. "They're moving fast," she said, squinting. "Probably hungry. Maybe a little scared."

Finn said, "Scared is good. Means they'll head for the road."

They followed the tracks through a shallow draw, then up a rise where the trees broke open onto a ledge of raw, sun-bleached rock. The world beyond was all mist and fractured color, clouds still moving in layers across the basin.

Macy stopped, hand on Finn's arm. "There," she whispered.

At first, he saw nothing. Then, between two wind-battered junipers, a figure: thin, a shadow among shadows, one foot slightly forward as if about to step off the earth and into the gray. The beard was unmistakable—long, wild, and streaked with white. The jacket looked older than Finn, sleeves patched with duct tape and stitched with clumsy, loving hands. The pants were muddy, cuffs stiff with old salt.

The eyes were black coins set deep in a face that might have been carved from stone or regret.

Finn didn't move. Macy breathed, soft and even, at his side.

The figure regarded them for a long moment, not hiding, not hurrying. Then, slowly, he raised one hand—not to wave, but to rest it on the trunk of the tree beside him. It was a gesture of patience, maybe, or of warning. Finn thought he saw a glint—metal? Glass?—on the strap across the chest, but couldn't be sure.

He didn't try to speak. He knew better.

Instead, Finn nodded. Just once.

The figure nodded back. Then, with no sound at all, the man turned and walked into the woods. He vanished between the trees, so thoroughly that Finn would have doubted he'd seen anything at all if Macy's hand hadn't tightened around his own.

They stood for a minute, neither speaking.

Macy let out a breath, slow and shaky. "You think he'll be all right?"

Finn said, "He always has been."

The sun crested, throwing gold into the gaps between clouds. For a heartbeat, everything glowed. Then the moment passed, and the world resumed its slow thaw.

Hand in hand, Finn and Macy followed the trail down. The ground was soft and alive, the air fresh, every step easier than the last.

They didn't see the hermit again.

But Finn felt, with a certainty rare in his own head, that the mountain was looking out for them, at least for today.

When the path met the road, Finn paused and looked back, the forest behind them whispering with water and secrets.

Macy bumped his shoulder. "You coming?"

"Yeah," he said. "Let's go home."

They walked out together, boots heavy with mud and hearts, for once, light as air.



## thirteen

# the empty canyon

LEO'S STUDIO apartment looked the way a tech startup might, if the only employees were a twenty-four-year-old mountain biker, a half-feral calico cat, and a week's worth of snack wrappers. The entire room pulsed with the flicker of three monitors, each running a different social channel, while his tablet perched on the edge of the bed, its notifications popping off like fireworks.

Outside, the post-storm morning was so clear it looked fake. Sunlight poured through the old RV window, blasting every corner of the room that wasn't hidden behind blackout curtains. Leo wore the same shorts from yesterday (because why change a winning formula?) and a vintage hoodie with a Duck Creek "Stay Wild" logo cracked across the chest. His hands flew across the keyboard, the click-clack as much a part of the ambiance as the soft purr of his cat, Knucklehead, who batted at the tablet every time a new notification pinged.

The algorithm had done its thing overnight. Toby and Summer's latest post—a wild, rain-streaked selfie video from the heart of the storm—was climbing to the top of every hashtag in the canyon. Leo watched the views tick up, every comment a perfect blend of "y'all are insane" and "omg be careful." The video was a masterpiece of influencer drama: Toby screaming over the wind, "THIS is Duck Creek! No filter, no fear!" while Summer clung to him with white-knuckled sincerity, soaking wet and still somehow camera-ready.

Leo scrolled down to their captions: “We’re closer than ever to finding the legendary hermit,” and, “Stay tuned for EXCLUSIVE footage. You will not BELIEVE what happens next!! #SilasHunt #TrueStory”

He snorted into his coffee, nearly getting instant grounds up his nose.

A new DM from Finn popped onto his phone:

you seeing this? it’s like Blair Witch but with less emotional maturity

Leo thumbed back, one-handed:

They’re trending in five states. U want me to escalate or meme it into oblivion?

The reply came in seconds:

Both

Leo grinned. He queued up a few of his sock-puppet accounts, started a “DuckCreekTruthers” thread about whether Silas was secretly living in the walls of the Village Inn, and got to work. He had a special meme folder for occasions like this—Bigfoot in a ski mask, “Silas Sighting” bingo cards, deepfake videos of the hermit photobombing national park ranger group shots. By the time he finished his first scone, the new post was trending in two subreddits, and a small but vocal Facebook group was convinced that Silas was Finn’s long-lost uncle.

Knucklehead headbutted the tablet, yowled at the sudden glare, and then, satisfied, curled up on the back of Leo’s neck. “Yeah, buddy,” Leo muttered. “Go team.”

His phone vibrated again, a group text this time, labeled “Meme Team Six.” Finn had looped in Macy:

need u at Ground + Toasted in 10. plan needs tuneup. also, get the deer filter ready.

Macy, always punctual in her digital life if not her real one, already replied:

Will bring the arsenal. Save me a corner table.

Leo finished his coffee, gave Knucklehead a scratch between the ears, and slipped on his best “I did not just get out of bed” flannel. He shoved his tablet and phone into a weatherproof sleeve, then stepped out into the morning with the slow satisfaction of a man who knew his memes were working overtime while he was out getting a pastry.

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The world outside was the exact opposite of the night before. Movie Ranch Road, which had been a wind tunnel of horizontal rain and sideways snow, now shone like a greeting card. Meltwater traced neat lines down the gutter, the air so clean it practically squeaked. Even the Taco Stand, normally so foggy with fryer grease and damp flannel, was airing out through propped-open windows, their breakfast burrito sign already slumped to one side from the night's wind.

Leo biked the two blocks to Ground + Toasted, stashing his ride in the rack out front. The coffee shop was doing a brisk trade, its porch full of early-bird locals and half-dry tourists basking in the sun like lizards. Inside, the air was a wall of cinnamon and espresso, with the faint background whine of the owner's '90s indie playlist.

He spotted Finn instantly—nobody else could take up so little space at the counter and yet look so ready to take over the world if called upon. Finn wore the same Prime Adventure Outfitters cap as yesterday, but his eyes were clearer, the bruising under them reduced to mere evidence of a bad night's sleep rather than existential defeat.

Macy sat across from Finn, not so much occupying the seat as daring anyone to take it from her. She wore a fresh flannel, sleeves rolled, the wild stampede of her hair tamed only by a new bandana in garish orange. She had her field guide open on the table, a spread of battered notecards fanned out like tarot.

Leo took the open chair. “You two look like you're plotting an insurrection,” he said. “Or at least a very enthusiastic bake sale.”

“Not far off,” Finn replied, pushing a scone Leo-ward. “They're doubling down. Summer posted a story at 4 a.m. about how they almost died but will NEVER GIVE UP THE SEARCH.”

"Her capitalization is a hate crime," Macy said, eyes still on her notes. "But it gives us an opening."

Leo pulled up the post on his phone. "So what's the plan? You lure them out with trail mix and hope they imprint on you like ducklings?"

Finn looked at Macy. "She has a proposal."

Macy folded her arms, rocked back in her chair. "We go for the hard sell. They want a 'Silas sighting,' we give them one. I offer them a special 'locals-only' guided tour. We control the route, the story, the outcome."

Leo raised his eyebrows. "And you're the local expert?"

She nodded. "I used to do interpretive hikes in high school. They still have my name on the board at the ranger station." She flipped a notecard, showed them a picture: her, aged maybe fifteen, grinning between two bemused park rangers and holding up a laminated map.

Finn's lips quirked. "If you can get them to stop and listen to you for longer than a TikTok, you deserve a medal."

Macy shrugged. "They're not dumb, just hungry for attention. Give them a new thing to post, and they'll follow."

Leo leaned in. "What's the 'new thing'?"

"Civic duty," she said, the corners of her mouth twitching. "We get them interested in the ecosystem. If we can't make them care about Silas, we make them care about the land. I'll have them hashtagging native plants before the end of the day."

Finn looked skeptical. "And you think that'll actually get them off the Silas scent?"

"It doesn't matter," Macy said. "Once we're the gatekeepers, we can filter what they see. We show them the decoy trail, then guide them right back to safety."

Leo nodded, then sat back, arms folded behind his head. "It's elegant. Also kind of evil."

"Thank you," Macy said.

The trio let the moment settle, the noise of the café filling the gaps. At the counter, a line cook shouted "Eggs up!" in a voice that carried all the way to the porch. Two old-timers at the next table argued over the finer points of snowmobile repair, their hands greasy even at breakfast.

Finn sipped his coffee, eyes drifting to the window, where the morning was turning into a parade of dog walkers, joggers, and side-by-

side ATVs crammed with giggling children. The world had survived the storm, and so, apparently, had the myth of Silas.

He looked back at Leo. "You still monitoring?"

Leo grinned, toothy. "Their comments are about to hit critical mass. If you want an intro, we could stage it at the Village Inn lobby. They're already there, giving a TED talk to anyone with a camera."

Macy closed her field guide, snapped a hair tie onto her wrist. "Perfect. We let them find us. It'll feel organic. I can even drop hints about the best photo angles, maybe feed them a few 'secret' GPS points."

Finn shook his head, smiling despite himself. "Just don't get sucked into a podcast. You'll never escape."

They paid up, Finn sliding a scone into his jacket pocket for later, then headed for the door as a new wave of visitors streamed in behind them. Leo lingered a second, scanning the message boards for any last-minute drama, then shouldered his pack and followed.

Outside, the sun was higher, burning away the last hints of fog and damp. The parking lot of the Village Inn was already a circus: a local TV van (paint job held together with hope and duct tape), several oversized pickups festooned with hunting stickers, and a forest of selfie sticks. On the porch, Summer and Toby held court—posing, narrating, filming, every move choreographed but somehow still less artificial than what Leo had seen from them yesterday.

He watched as Finn and Macy wove through the crowd, sticking to the shade, approaching with the casual confidence of people who had always belonged. Leo hung back, phone at the ready, knowing his role in this act was mostly to bear witness and, if necessary, provide a timely distraction.

He scrolled back to the latest group thread, fired off a message:

operation GO. wish us luck. also, if I don't return, feed Knucklehead.

He set his phone to record, angled for maximum coverage, and settled in to watch the show.

Inside the lobby, it was all wood paneling and stale carpet, the air thick with the scent of burnt coffee and the less pleasant tang of de-icer. Summer leaned against the counter, her platinum hair perfectly arranged despite the prior night's ordeal, while Toby paced back and

forth, clearly relishing the attention of a group of road-trippers in matching tie-dye hoodies.

Macy sidled up to the tourist desk, flipping through a rack of local hiking brochures. Finn hung back, hands in his jacket, looking for all the world like a bored boyfriend but eyes sharp and alert.

Summer noticed Macy, then the field guide in her hand. "You're Macy Halloway, right?" she said, voice pitched high with performative delight. "Someone tagged you in a comment last night. Are you, like, the local plant expert?"

Macy looked up, gave a small, knowing smile. "Guilty. I heard you were looking for the mountain's most famous recluse."

Toby, smelling fresh content, came over instantly. "We are literally this close," he said, holding up a thumb and index finger. "You have any hot leads?"

Macy flipped her guide closed, tucked it under her arm. "Maybe. But it's not the kind of thing you stumble onto." She dropped her voice to a stage whisper. "You have to know where to look."

Summer's eyes got wide. "Can you show us?"

Macy considered, as if weighing the decision. "There's a place—off the main trail, easy to miss if you don't know the markers. But if you want, I could take you there. It's where I'd go, if I was him."

Toby didn't even hide his glee. "Can we film it?"

Macy shrugged. "If you promise not to geotag it. Some things should stay secret."

Toby and Summer exchanged a look, the kind only possible between people who have already agreed to say yes to everything, forever.

"We're in," Summer said. "Can we go today?"

"Best time is just after noon," Macy said, "when the shadows are shortest. Otherwise you won't see the signs."

Toby checked his phone, then clapped his hands. "Content gold. I'll get my camera. Summer, charge the batteries."

Leo, watching from the doorway, allowed himself a slow, contented smile. The plan was in motion, and it was going to be a work of art.

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They met up at the trailhead just before noon, the sky clear and the air so crisp that every word and footstep echoed. Toby had traded his storm gear for a tactical vest, complete with an unnecessary array of carabiners, and Summer wore the same hiking boots as before but somehow even cleaner.

Macy led, Finn close behind, and the two influencers flanked them like a camera crew tailing a celebrity chef on a foraging special. Leo brought up the rear, mostly to make sure nobody doubled back or wandered off to start a forest fire.

Macy set a brisk pace, her stride easy, and every few minutes she'd stop to point out a plant or animal sign, weaving facts and stories as if she were auditioning for her own educational show. Finn chimed in when appropriate, but mostly let Macy run the performance. Summer filmed everything, her narration less shrill now, more genuinely curious. Toby kept up a steady stream of questions, some goofy, some unexpectedly sharp.

As they broke through the treeline to the first overlook, Macy paused, gestured at the sweep of valley below, and said, "Most people never see it like this. They're too busy looking for the headline, not the story."

Summer lowered her camera for the first time, stared at the view.

"It's beautiful," she said, voice soft.

Macy smiled. "That's the real secret. Not Silas, not the caves. Just—this."

Finn looked at Leo, and for the briefest second, Leo saw the tiniest hint of awe in his friend's face. He captured it, quietly, with a photo, then tucked the phone away.

For the next mile, the only sounds were birdsong, the soft crunch of boots on needles, and the distant echo of a world still learning how to listen.

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The Duck Creek Village Inn lobby was at its morning best—meaning it was only about half as loud and twice as clean as it would be by midafternoon. The floors still gleamed, tourists buzzed at the coffee

urn, and the air was thick with fresh donut holes and the faint, lingering ozone from last night's industrial dehumidifier session.

Finn entered first, eyes tracking the layout. Macy followed, scanning the crowd. It took her about three seconds to spot Toby and Summer: they were both positioned on the room's one vintage ski lift bench, ringed by a clutch of wide-eyed kids and two ladies in state park fleece. Summer's boots were so spotless that Finn wondered if she'd used a can of compressed air on them before coming downstairs. Toby wore a tactical vest, because why not, over a navy henley that probably cost more than Finn's monthly gear budget.

The couple had the audience in the palm of their hand. Toby gestured broadly, pantomiming their night in the storm. "I held on, one-armed, to the pine, rain in my face, the wind howling louder than an ambulance!" he said. "But did I give up? No way. We kept tracking the story. For you!"

Summer nodded, adding, "We did it for the followers, you guys. We made a vow: we will NOT leave until we find the truth."

There were scattered gasps and a round of applause from the crowd. A kid in a BYU hat asked, "Did you see any bears?" Summer said, "Only the ones in the gift shop," with a perfect wink.

Macy leaned over to Finn and whispered, "I hate how good they are at this."

"They have practice," Finn replied, but he could admit—even to himself—that the performance was weirdly magnetic.

He caught Summer's eye. She looked over, did a rapid influencer scan: local or tourist, threat or collab opportunity? Finn smiled, did his best "just a fan" wave, and pointed at Macy.

"Excuse me," Macy said, squeezing through the crowd. "Are you guys really hunting the hermit?"

Toby lit up. "That's us! #SilasWatch. You follow the page?"

Macy did an awkward shuffle, nodding. "My granddad used to talk about Silas Thorne all the time. It's kind of a family obsession. Sorry, I don't want to interrupt, but—I'm Macy Hallowsay. I do plant surveys for the Forest Service."

There was a subtle flicker in Summer's eyes, like she was recal-

brating the threat level. "Nice to meet you," she said, then to the crowd, "Macy here's a real-life wild plant scientist. That's so cool!"

Toby, always on brand, asked, "You ever actually see the guy? Or is it just all stories?"

Macy shrugged, playing it cool. "I've seen traces. The guy knows the woods—never leaves the same route twice, always covers his trail. But if you know what to look for, you can sometimes find his sign."

A hush fell over the group, the kind that always showed up when someone mentioned the "real" Duck Creek.

"Like what?" asked the BYU kid, wide-eyed.

Macy crouched, made eye contact. "There's this trick with willow bark. If you strip it just right, it dries in a spiral. I found a length of it once, tied around a rock cairn. Nobody but Silas would bother with that. I think he's got a message in them, if you know how to read it."

Toby sat forward, fully invested. "Could you show us? Like, take us to a spot?"

Finn pretended to be shy, but piped in, "Macy's probably seen every corner of the mountain. If you want to catch a hermit, you need her."

Summer shot a glance at Toby, then at the camera crew—well, the one guy from the Gazette with a GoPro. "That's... actually a great idea."

"Of course," Macy said, and added a dash of casual. "If you want. It's not really my thing to do the camera stuff, but I can take you to a place where he's probably been. If he wants to be found, that's where he'd make the first move."

Toby and Summer leaned together, whispering in urgent content jargon. Finn caught phrases like "fresh angle," "exclusive," and "viral velocity." After a huddle that lasted maybe seven seconds, Toby turned back with a practiced, earnest expression.

"We would be honored if you'd join our search," he said, projecting just enough for the rest of the lobby to hear. "Do you want to say that again, maybe for our feed?"

Macy's cheeks turned pink, but she nodded. "Sure."

Summer had her phone out, live already. She did a quick hair check in the reflection, then counted down, "Three, two—" and pointed at Macy.

Macy cleared her throat, looked into the camera. "I'm Macy

Halloway. I've studied the flora of Cedar Mountain for most of my life, and I think there's a good chance the hermit is out there right now. If you want to see a sign of him, I can show you the place."

Toby panned the camera, caught Finn in the background. "And who's your friend?"

Macy, totally deadpan, said, "He's my field assistant."

Finn played along, nodding. "I carry the snacks."

A few in the crowd laughed. Summer grinned. "We've got a team!" she said. "You guys, this could be the day. We're going to find Silas, or at least get closer than anyone else has in, like, years. Stay tuned, and remember—leave no trace except your story."

As the live ended, Summer's phone began pinging so fast it was almost audible. She high-fived Toby, who looked genuinely pumped.

The Gazette guy lingered, camera still running. "Anything you want to say for the local audience?" he asked Macy.

She thought a moment. "Just... respect the woods," she said. "If you go looking for the hermit, don't leave garbage or mess up the trail. He's not a monster, just someone who likes quiet."

Finn found himself a little proud, watching the way the lobby's energy shifted—from spectacle to something like respect.

Summer and Toby packed up their gear, already plotting routes and hashtags. "Let's meet at the Bristlecone trailhead in an hour?" Summer asked, all business.

"Works for us," Macy said. "I'll bring a field kit and some basic supplies."

They parted ways at the door, but not before Macy was mobbed by a group of middle-schoolers wanting to know if she'd ever eaten a bug or if she could survive in the woods for a whole year.

Finn waited outside while Macy fielded the questions. When she emerged, he said, "You ever think you'd get groupies?"

She rolled her eyes, but he could see she was glowing. "They're not groupies. They're... fans of nature."

"Same thing," Finn said.

They crossed the lot to Leo, who was leaning against a birch, smirking. "You guys killed it," he said. "You're already on four different feeds."

And they're getting hammered with questions about native plants instead of cryptid conspiracy. Macy, you're an icon."

She punched him gently on the arm. "Let's not jinx it."

Leo grinned. "The tide is turning. This is how we win."

Finn checked his watch. "Let's get our stuff together before they change their minds."

As they walked, Macy glanced back at the inn, where Summer and Toby stood on the porch, phones up, already strategizing the next move.

"They're going to expect something big," she said.

Finn shrugged. "We'll give them something real."

And as the three of them headed down Movie Ranch Road, Macy realized that, for the first time, she was actually looking forward to the search.

---

The next morning, the trailhead at Bristlecone Canyon was alive with sunlight, dew, and the churning energy of a field trip crossed with a low-budget documentary crew. Macy arrived early, as promised, with a small daypack, her battered field guide, and two pairs of loaner trekking poles "in case the snow gets weird." Finn was there too, already sipping a thermos of coffee and scoping the sky for any sign of trouble.

The influencers arrived as a matched set—Toby in a day-glo rain jacket, his tactical vest freshly festooned with two GoPros and a brand-new hydration pack, while Summer sported the kind of sleek, seamless leggings that looked more at home on a yoga mat than in the brush. Both wore sunglasses even though the trail was still half in shadow.

They launched into a pre-hike intro right there in the parking lot. "We're LIVE," Summer said, bouncing on her toes. "It's the big day! We're heading out with a real local expert, and if we find anything, you'll see it FIRST."

Toby swept his camera in a wide arc, capturing the sign, the trail, and then a deliberately slow pan across Finn and Macy. "There's rumor," he said, doing his best Joe Rogan voice, "that the hermit leaves

secret messages for those who know how to read the land. Today, we become the readers.”

Finn kept his own expression neutral. Macy gave a small, unbothered wave to the camera, then turned to business. “The path’s a little washed out from the storm,” she said, “but we can skirt the edge here and pick up the old cattle track.”

The group filed out, Macy in front, the two influencers in the classic formation of eager tourist and wary documentarian, Finn trailing with the ease of a local who’d done this a hundred times. Leo, having gotten his “mission accomplished” selfie at the lot, peeled off to set up remote posts for later.

They made quick work of the first mile, the air damp and crisp, trail spongy but not yet treacherous. Toby narrated every move: “Notice the incline,” he said, pointing the camera at Summer’s calves. “This is what separates real hikers from posers.”

Summer, to her credit, ignored him and focused on the task. She paused every so often to film a patch of moss or the weird, lacy ice left over from the night’s freeze.

Macy, after a minute, caught Finn’s eye and gave a barely perceptible roll of the shoulders. He got the message: Let them run. It would calm down once the novelty wore off.

As the trail turned into a pinch point between two stands of aspen, Macy called, “Watch your step—there’s often washout here,” and planted a pole on the higher edge. The group slowed, footing careful, and Toby almost slipped but caught himself.

“Man,” he said, “you do this every week?”

“Every day in summer,” Macy said, not breaking stride. “The plants don’t check Instagram before blooming. I have to keep up.”

Finn laughed. “You’re more reliable than the Forest Service schedule.”

The next hour went in a rhythm: hike, shoot, talk, repeat. The influencers kept up a stream of content, but the farther they got from the road, the more they watched Macy. She stopped now and then to point out something small but precise: a spiral of lichen on a fallen log (“That’s a clue for where snowmelt lingers longest”), or a scatter of tiny red berries tucked under old snow.

Halfway up the switchback, Macy knelt by a tuft of green clinging to a shady rock. "Pause," she said. "This one's special."

Toby and Summer angled their cameras down. Macy brushed aside a mat of needles to reveal a fern—delicate, with an almost fractal spiral.

"Alpine lady fern," she said. "There are only a few spots it grows on this ridge. Super picky about water and temperature."

"Is it edible?" asked Summer, genuine curiosity peeking through.

"You can eat the fiddleheads, but only early in spring," Macy replied. "Mostly, it's important because it tells you how cold the slope stays at night."

Toby crouched, eyes level with the fern. "How do you know Silas has been here?"

"Sometimes he leaves them alone," Macy said. "Most people trample or pick them, but he moves the rocks around them to make a shield. See that?" She pointed to a careful ring of pebbles, half-hidden by leaf litter.

Finn, close enough to see, nodded. "That's not natural. Even a rodent wouldn't do it that even."

Summer zoomed in. "So this is, like, a signature?"

Macy grinned, more at the term than the implication. "It's a clue, sure. But it also means someone cares enough to protect it."

Toby, suddenly less performative, ran a finger along the stone ring, then looked at Macy. "So what else does he do out here?"

Macy's answer was pure trail nerd. "Builds bridges out of deadfall. Grafts willow for new growth. Sometimes he leaves carved sticks—never sharp, always rounded—maybe as markers, or maybe just because he likes to make things."

Summer's camera hovered, but her eyes tracked Macy. "You ever want to meet him?"

Macy considered. "If he wanted to be found, he'd come to town. I think he prefers the forest."

They moved on, the mood quieter now, even reverent. Finn found himself admiring the way Macy led—not by force, but by inviting curiosity. She kept her facts short, her stories true, and never once tried to outshine the land itself.

The next section of trail was steep, switchbacking up a cut where a

stream ran white and loud over the rocks. Summer paused to film the water, getting low to capture the shimmer. Toby, breathing a little harder, asked Finn, "You do this for fun?"

"Some of us don't need likes to enjoy the view," Finn replied, but he said it with a smile, and Toby grinned back, not taking offense.

They crested the ridge and stopped for water. The air was thin, sun hot despite the lingering snow. Macy handed around dried huckleberries, passing them out palm to palm.

Toby looked at his. "Local?"

"Picked them myself," Macy said. "They stain your fingers for days."

He tried one, face brightening at the taste. "Whoa. That's insane."

Summer chewed hers thoughtfully. "You ever want to leave?"

Macy shook her head. "Not really. The world's big, but there's nowhere else with this exact mix of weather, plants, and weird people."

Finn took a huckleberry, then looked out at the basin below. "If you leave, you miss the subtle things. Like how the snow melts faster under pine but slower under sage."

Toby, for the first time all morning, was quiet. He watched as Finn and Macy talked about the mountain as if it were an old friend, not just a backdrop for content.

They hiked on, with less talking but more noticing. Summer stopped to photograph every new patch of wildflower, and Toby asked Macy questions about every odd growth or animal track they passed. Macy always answered, sometimes with Latin, sometimes with a story.

By the time the canyon narrowed to the final stretch, the cameras were still out, but the voices were lower, the narration less about drama and more about discovery.

Finn felt the shift. He glanced at Macy, who looked over her shoulder and caught his eye.

"Think they're hooked?" he mouthed.

She smiled, lips barely moving. "Give it another mile."

And they pressed on, into the deepening wild.

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The gorge had a way of sneaking up on you. One minute the world was all slope and shadow, the next, the trail funneled down to a ribbon, hemmed in by aspen that flared gold in the midday sun. The effect was cathedral-like: light poured in slanted columns, the air cool and impossibly clean, the silence so thick that even the wind seemed reluctant to interrupt.

Macy called a halt with a raised hand. "Slow down," she said, voice barely above a whisper. "This part's special."

Finn stopped just behind her, then Toby and Summer, who almost bumped into each other in their hurry to catch the moment. The cameras came out, but even Toby held his a little lower, as if aware that anything louder would break the spell.

Macy knelt beside the trail, brushing away a frill of moss from a low outcrop. She wet her fingers from her water bottle, then dabbed at the dark stone. Lines emerged: careful, curling, old as memory.

Summer got low to film. "What is it?"

"Petroglyphs," Macy said. "See these? This one's a river. Here's a sun, here's a line of antelope." She traced the faded marks with her fingertip, slow and careful. "They're older than any of the cabins in Duck Creek."

Toby hovered, filming close, but his voice was awed. "People used to live up here?"

Macy nodded. "They passed through, mostly. The Fremont, then Paiute, then whoever wanted to keep their stories safe. They used to say this canyon was the best place for echoes. That's why the petroglyphs are here—so the stories would bounce back forever."

Summer, kneeling now, squinted at a spiral near the base. "What's that one?"

Macy hesitated, then said, "Nobody knows for sure. Some say it's a map. Or a symbol for water. My granddad told me it was the trail of the wind—always moving, but always coming home."

Finn glanced at the outcrop, then at Macy. He saw her swallow, just a bit. This wasn't scripted; this was the part of herself she usually kept quiet.

The sunlight shifted, filling the hollow with a soft glow that lit the

rock from behind. Toby, for once, left the camera dangling, just watching as Macy talked.

She stood, dusted off her knees. "Most people miss it. They're too busy looking up or down, never sideways. Silas—he'd always stop here. Leave an offering. Sometimes a pine cone, sometimes a little stack of pebbles."

Finn bent and found a cone, tucked between the rocks, dusted with pollen. "Like this?"

Macy smiled. "Exactly like that."

They stood together, taking in the ancient scratchings and the hush of the place. Summer wiped a smudge from her camera lens but didn't film for a moment.

"Does anyone protect it?" she asked.

Macy shrugged. "Not officially. Just people who care enough to check, now and then. Or leave a little token. Or not touch at all."

Toby said, "We should show this, right? People would want to see it."

Macy looked at Finn, then at the symbols. "If you do, make sure to tell them it's real. And fragile. Don't post a map. The less traffic, the better for the rock."

Toby nodded, uncharacteristically serious. "Yeah. I get it."

They moved on, voices hushed, the trail now little more than a thread through the brush. Finn fell in beside Macy, their steps in sync. He murmured, "That was good. You did them proud."

She looked at him, eyes bright. "You think?"

He nodded, not needing to say more.

As they hiked, Macy told stories—not loud, just enough for those close to hear. "There's a legend about this canyon," she said. "The aspen were supposed to be the first to speak, after the storm that covered the world. Their leaves tell secrets, if you know how to listen."

Summer, filming a stand of trees, asked, "What kind of secrets?"

Macy smiled. "Depends on the day. Today, they say 'slow down.'"

The group did, almost without meaning to. Cameras hung from wrists, ignored for whole minutes at a time. They walked in single file, boots sinking into old duff and last year's leaf mold, sunlight dappling the trail ahead.

At the first trickle of a side stream, Macy paused. "This is the best water on the mountain," she said, and cupped her hand to fill it. "You can taste the minerals. Even the animals come here."

She offered a handful to Finn, who drank, then wiped his mouth. "It's different. Sharp."

Macy nodded. "The stone filters out everything but what matters."

Summer knelt beside the creek, turned her camera off, and just listened to the sound of water. After a minute, she said, "I never knew there was so much history here. We've been so focused on finding this one hermit guy."

Toby looked at the water, then at Macy. "Maybe that's the point. Not to find him, but to find what he wanted to keep safe."

Macy just smiled, let the silence fill in the rest.

They walked on, deeper into the narrowing canyon, the past layered beneath every step.

The final stretch of canyon was narrow and shaded, the walls rising up in bands of orange and white stone. The roar of water announced itself long before they could see the source. Every footstep crunched on frost and last year's leaves; the air hummed with the cold clarity of a thousand melting icicles.

Macy led them through a break in the brush, then up a quick scramble of slick rock. "We're close," she said, voice low. "This is where the sightings always happen."

Finn knew the spot—a perfect bowl scooped from the cliff, the waterfall hidden until the last second. The pool below was small, but so clear you could see every pebble on the bottom. Around it, the aspens crowded in, their leaves still bright gold even this late in the season.

Toby and Summer crested the rise together, and both just stopped.

Macy let them have the silence. Then she said, "If I were Silas, I'd come here every day."

Toby was already unpacking his gear, moving with the measured energy of someone preparing for a moon landing. He set up the tripod, framed the shot, adjusted the mic. "We're going to do the reveal here," he told Summer, "with the waterfall in the background. It's a statement."

Summer, already live, did a slow pan of the clearing. “This is it, you guys,” she whispered. “If we see anything, you’ll know first.”

The next hour was a blur of activity. They combed the area—checking under boulders, poking through deadfall, searching for the smallest sign. Macy hung back, answering questions and gently steering them away from anything fragile.

Finn watched the progression: at first, the influencers darted from one side of the pool to the other, narrating every move. “We’re checking for footprints,” said Toby, zooming in on a patch of damp sand. “Maybe a hand-carved tool, or a sign left just for us.”

But there was nothing. No footprints. No tools. Just the quiet splendor of the place, the water falling in a slow-motion curtain, the breeze picking up flecks of mist and scattering them in the sun.

After a while, the tempo changed. The search slowed; the voices lowered. Summer took off her sunglasses and just looked at the waterfall for a solid minute, camera forgotten.

Toby, frustrated, kicked at a drift of needles. “You sure this is the right place?” he asked Macy, a hint of accusation in his voice.

Macy nodded, unbothered. “If he wanted to meet, he’d pick a day like this.”

Toby shook his head, paced the bank, then stopped. “What if he’s watching us right now?”

Finn smiled. “He probably is.”

For a long moment, the only sound was water.

Then, at the far edge of the clearing, movement. Slow and cautious.

A deer—a doe, followed by two small fawns—emerged from the brush. They were tentative, ears flicking, legs stiff with worry. But they walked right to the pool, just across from where the group sat, and lowered their heads to drink.

Finn felt the entire group still, holding breath. Even Toby didn’t move.

The light shifted, and for a second, the deer’s coats shone gold. The fawns nudged each other, then stared straight at the humans, unblinking.

Toby lifted his camera, but not to his face—he held it at waist level, slow and careful, as if any sudden movement would ruin everything.

Summer whispered into her phone, voice trembling, "We have never seen anything like this before. Look—just look."

The chat on her livestream went wild: heart emojis, "wow" in a dozen spellings, and a flood of reverent silence.

Macy watched the deer, eyes soft. Finn watched her, and felt something quiet and rare settle over the group.

After a few minutes, the deer finished drinking. The doe gave a single, dignified nod toward the humans, then turned and led her fawns back into the brush, their white rumps disappearing into shadow.

Nobody spoke for a while.

Finn felt a tingle of pride, as if he'd been let in on the world's most beautiful secret.

Toby finally exhaled. "I didn't get the hermit," he said, "but this—" He shook his head, lost for words.

Summer put her phone down, looked at Macy. "Thank you," she said, and meant it.

Macy shrugged, a little embarrassed. "It's their place, not mine."

They sat together, the four of them, letting the sound of the water and the hush of the woods fill in the space where a reveal was supposed to go.

After a while, Finn said, "Sometimes it's not about what you find, but how you look for it."

Toby nodded, and Summer smiled.

They sat until the sun began to slip behind the ridge, the gold fading to blue, the clearing colder but somehow warmer than any of them expected.

And if, far above, a figure watched from the shadowed rim of the canyon—well, maybe it was just another ghost of the mountain, content to let the living tell their own stories for a while.

They lingered by the waterfall longer than planned, the air growing crisp and the light thinning to that particular blue of late afternoon. Eventually, the spell broke, and Summer, always the one to notice time, said, "We should head back before it gets dark."

Toby nodded, but instead of packing up fast, he and Summer drifted to a flat shelf of rock by the pool, sitting close and speaking in low tones. Their phones were out, but they weren't filming. Just

scrolling, comparing footage, whispering in the language of people suddenly aware that they'd witnessed something rare.

Finn and Macy hung back on the far side of the clearing, picking through a cluster of wild currants and doing a terrible job of pretending they were only interested in the plants.

Finn crouched, plucked a red berry, held it up to the sun. "You think they'll ever see this place the same way again?"

Macy, hands in her pockets, shrugged. "Hard to say. But it's a start."

He looked at her, then at the influencers, who now seemed softer, their voices lacking the brittle edge of performance.

When they finally rejoined the group, Toby didn't launch into a recap or grand finale. He just looked at Finn and Macy and said, "We got some amazing content today. Not what we expected, but..."

Summer finished for him: "It's better."

She turned her phone screen to Macy. "Look at this. They're all talking about the deer. Nobody cares about the hermit anymore. There's, like, hundreds of comments asking about the stream, the plants, even the petroglyphs you showed us."

Macy took the phone, thumbed through the reactions. The emojis were wild, the questions about "sacred sites" and "how to visit right" pouring in by the minute. She tried not to smile too wide.

Finn clapped Toby on the shoulder. "Not all content is clickbait."

Toby grinned, lopsided. "Guess not. Maybe we should... I dunno, do a follow-up about keeping places like this wild?"

Summer nodded, and for the first time, her voice wasn't pitched for broadcast. "We've been doing it wrong. It's not about finding the secret, it's about protecting it."

Macy looked at Finn, and they shared a tiny, private smile—a little bit proud, a little bit surprised.

They started back together, the hike down the canyon slower and lighter. Toby and Summer took turns asking real questions: What would happen to the deer if too many people found this place? Was the petroglyph safe from graffiti? Did the Forest Service ever ask locals for help monitoring the springs?

Macy answered every one, sometimes letting Finn chime in, sometimes sharing her own stories. It was less an interview and more a

conversation, the kind people have when they realize the world is bigger than their own script.

When they reached the base of the trail, the last of the sun had vanished behind the ridge. The parking lot was nearly empty, the village lights a string of promises down the valley.

Toby turned, hesitant. "Hey, uh... thanks. For letting us tag along."

Summer added, "And for showing us the good stuff."

Macy nodded, cheeks pink from the wind and, maybe, something else. "Take care of it, okay?"

They promised, and this time, it felt real.

As Finn and Macy walked the last stretch toward town, boots crunching on gravel, Finn said, "That went better than I hoped."

Macy looked up at the first stars. "I think maybe the mountain keeps its own, after all."

Finn laughed, feeling the rightness of it.

When they reached the lights and noise of Duck Creek, the air was still wild with the smell of pine and the memory of falling water. They stopped at the edge, watched as Toby and Summer vanished into the café, already plotting a new story—this one about how to keep secrets, not how to break them.

Finn offered Macy a hand, not as a joke or a dare, but just because he wanted to.

She took it, warm and sure, and together they stepped back into the light.

Behind them, the canyon whispered its secrets, and ahead, the village buzzed with a new kind of story.



fourteen

**four inches of  
compliance**

BY THE TIME Finn and Macy reached the end of Movie Ranch Road, they could hear the shouting from three blocks away. It wasn't angry, exactly, but there was enough volume and repetition that even a stranger would know: something significant was about to go down, and everyone in Duck Creek Village had an opinion about it.

At the center of it all was the Wall. Four feet high (and, as of the last measurement, four inches too tall), built of thick, ice-age boulders mortared together by the collective guilt of three generations, and the singular stubbornness of Martha Wilkins, who currently presided over the scene from behind a folding table. Around her, the "Wall Warriors" massed in matching t-shirts dyed a lurid, radioactive pink, each bearing slogans like "Heritage Not Height" or "Raise the Bar, Not the Wall." One of the more enterprising teens had fashioned a crude helmet out of foam insulation and decorated it with a miniaturized parapet and a LEGO flag.

On the opposite curb, Lawrence "Level" Pendergast and his loyalists formed a neat, straight line—each equipped with a yellow badge reading "Rule Follower," the words bracketed by a pair of ominous black-and-white stripes. A good half of them wore khakis and official county windbreakers. At least four had visible tape measures clipped to their belts, and one retiree wielded a surveyor's rod like a holy staff.

Parked with its nose squarely at the epicenter of the conflict was a

battered white van stenciled “UTAH’S OWN—REGIONAL NEWS.” The camera crew had set up two tripods: one on each side of the wall, as if even their lenses couldn’t bear to take sides. In between, Leo orbited in perpetual motion, wielding his phone and a cheap shotgun mic, bouncing from group to group with the glee of a kid at a dog park. He wore his own custom t-shirt: “Duck Creek Vibes—Wall Watch Edition.” In sharpie, under the logo, someone (Macy) had scrawled “Meme Lord.”

Macy paused at the edge of the fray, folded her arms, and said, “I give it five minutes before someone gets beaned with a lemon bar.”

Finn snorted. “Ten if Level makes a speech.”

They watched as Level Pendergast performed his signature move: arms folded, stance set, he extended the tape measure over the offending section of wall, face twisted in an expression of pure, bureaucratic ecstasy. With his other hand, he brandished a copy of the county code, pages yellowed and flagged with post-its, and addressed the growing crowd.

“Four inches,” Level boomed, “may seem trivial to the untrained eye. But to the safety-minded, the code-compliant, and those of us who care about the structural integrity of our community, it is everything. It is the line—literally and figuratively—between order and chaos!”

This last bit set off a polite smattering of applause from his side. Two of the Warriors jeered and waved a sign reading “Height Doesn’t Matter—It’s What’s Inside the Wall That Counts.”

Finn grinned, then nudged Macy with an elbow. “That’s a good one. Think they brainstormed it at Martha’s craft night?”

“Bet they’re using her Cricut to churn out the stickers,” Macy said. “Old Guard’s gone full Gen Z on the comms front.”

Meanwhile, Martha Wilkins poured lemonade from a giant blue jug into rows of mismatched paper cups. The tablecloth was printed with high-res scans of the wall in its various historic phases: black-and-white Polaroids from the sixties, a faded Polaroid of her mother in front of the newly built wall, and, prominently displayed, a color printout of a young, smiling Martha holding up the Duck Creek Gazette’s “Best Yard” trophy from 1992.

"Lemonade, dear?" Martha called, spotting Finn and Macy hovering in the periphery. "You look parched."

Macy beelined over, grabbed a cup, and took a sip. "You use real lemons?"

Martha beamed. "Of course. Powdered is for cheaters and politicians."

On the other side of the table, a college-age Wall Warrior handed out zines entitled "WALL POWER: The Real Duck Creek Story." Finn leafed through one: twelve pages of dense font, poorly photocopied graphs, and a surprisingly convincing argument that the wall had saved the neighborhood from "at least three" run-off disasters in the last two decades.

Macy read over his shoulder. "They even cited the state water board. I'm impressed."

"Leo probably fact-checked it for them," Finn said.

They watched as Leo drifted into frame, cornered Level, and thrust the microphone toward his face. "Mr. Pendergast, can you explain for our viewers why exactly four inches is worth a town-wide standoff?"

Level seized the opportunity like a lion on a slow antelope. "Absolutely," he said. "Four inches is the start. Then it's six, then eight, and suddenly your precious community is buried in a landslide of exceptions and exemptions—just ask the people of Parowan after the Great Shed Collapse of '17." He eyed the camera with solemn intensity. "I am not here for personal glory, Mr. Leo. I am here to protect Duck Creek from entropy, one inch at a time."

Leo held the stare a little too long, then turned to camera and deadpanned, "You heard it here, folks: chaos comes in quarter-foot increments."

He pivoted to the Wall Warriors, where a middle-aged woman with a t-shirt reading "Boulder is Beautiful" gestured wildly with a half-eaten scone. "The only thing dangerous here is Level's ego!" she shouted. "That wall's the only reason my cat survived last spring's melt. We should be giving Martha a medal, not a fine."

Leo nodded solemnly, then whispered, "How's the scone?"

She grinned, mouth full. "Dense, but effective. Like Martha herself."

He shot her a thumbs-up, then panned across the scene for his audience. The stream chat on his screen scrolled faster than he could read: #WallWarriors, #TeamLevel, #BoulderGate, and a rapid-fire of lemon emoji.

The two sides traded chants—"Save the Wall!" versus "Law and Order!"—in a rhythm so practiced it almost sounded like a pep rally. A kid with a kazoo punctuated the end of every chant with a shrill, victorious tweet.

Finn caught the eye of a retiree he recognized from the post office. She wore both a Wall Warrior shirt and a Rule Follower badge, her loyalties apparently torn. "How's it going, Barb?" Finn asked.

She sipped her lemonade, shrugged. "It's better than Netflix."

Macy laughed, then tipped her cup at Barb. "You gonna choose a side, or just enjoy the chaos?"

Barb winked. "I'm just here for the cookies."

At the edge of the crowd, two newcomers appeared: Toby and Summer, equipped with a serious-looking video rig and wireless mics clipped to their matching windbreakers. Summer's hair was somehow both immaculate and windswept, a feat only possible through expensive product and constant vigilance. Toby's sunglasses flashed as he surveyed the scene, calibrating for maximum content.

He nudged Summer. "You feel that? That's what they call a micro-viral moment. Hashtag battleground, two sides, a human interest angle, and a built-in snack table."

Summer nodded, already prepping her phone. "We do a cold open with the measuring tape, then cut to Martha's lemonade stand. If they brawl, we'll slow-mo the first cookie toss."

They set up at the margin, working their way toward the center of the action, careful to avoid Leo's orbit. Finn saw Summer hold up her phone, whisper something to Toby, then approach Martha with a smile so wide it seemed to hurt.

"Hi, Mrs. Wilkins!" Summer chirped. "We're documenting small-town culture for our channel—do you have a second for an interview?"

Martha, ever the hostess, set down the lemonade pitcher and gestured them over. "Of course, dear. Always happy to talk about the wall."

Summer leaned in, switched on her best empathetic face. "What would you say to people who think the wall's just... too much?"

Martha snorted, then patted the boulder nearest her. "I'd say Duck Creek is built on too much. Too much snow, too much beauty, too many stubborn old women who don't know when to quit." She glanced sideways at Level, who was now in the process of teaching a small child how to read a spirit level. "But sometimes, too much is just enough. Especially if it keeps the water out of your basement."

Toby, filming, added, "And what about the rumor that you once out-lobbied the entire county council to keep a single tree?"

Martha's smile turned sly. "It was a stand of three. And yes, I did. You can still see them in the park by the ice cream stand, if you squint."

Summer nodded, impressed. "You ever think about running for mayor?"

Martha laughed, loud enough to be heard over the next round of chanting. "And give up this power? Never."

Meanwhile, Level's side was growing increasingly agitated. Someone had brought a folding ruler, and a group of teenagers took turns slapping it against the wall with a satisfying whack. Level himself had moved on to collecting signatures for an official "Lower the Wall" petition, his clipboard filling fast with names and the occasional cartoon doodle.

At the epicenter, Leo threaded between the two camps, narrating the play-by-play. "The tension here is real, folks. I'm seeing former prom queens on both sides, and if the rumors are true, there are at least three secret double agents in the crowd. The lemonade is flowing, the tape measures are flexed, and we're moments away from the first-ever Duck Creek Wall-Off."

Macy sidled up beside Finn. "You think they'd let me run the jackhammer?"

Finn grinned. "Only if you wear the helmet."

She elbowed him. "Who do you think wins?"

"Doesn't matter," Finn said, eyes on the shifting teams. "It's not about the wall. It's about not being the last one to let go."

Macy looked at him, eyebrow raised. "Deep."

He shrugged. "I've been listening to you."

Just then, the news crew powered up a generator, and the crowd hushed as a reporter, hair shellacked into a helmet of her own, stood in front of the wall. "This is Utah's Own, live from Duck Creek Village, where a decades-old retaining wall is splitting this small town in two. On one side: tradition, legacy, and the battle to preserve a piece of the past. On the other: modern regulation, safety, and the quest for compliance."

Leo, never one to miss a cue, whispered into his phone, "It's happening. We're going national."

In the background, Summer and Toby circled toward Level, who greeted them with a stiff, bureaucratic nod.

"Mr. Pendergast," Summer said, "what would you say to folks who think the code is just an excuse to force change?"

Level regarded the camera, took a deliberate breath, and said, "Change is inevitable, but chaos is optional. The code isn't a weapon, it's a safeguard." He tapped the wall with the end of his tape measure, producing a dull, resonant thunk. "If you let the rules slide, you may as well build your house on sand. Or on snow, in our case."

Toby nodded, adopting a voice of manufactured gravitas. "And do you see any path to compromise?"

Level's gaze slid over the wall, then, almost imperceptibly, to where Martha dispensed lemonade. "There's always a way, if people are willing to do the work. But I'm not backing down on the four inches."

The words hung in the air, the finality of them drawing a line even the Warriors hesitated to cross.

Across the street, Martha, watching the interview, poured herself a lemonade, then leaned over to Finn and Macy. "He's a stubborn fool, but he's not wrong."

Finn smiled. "You ever think about just... lowering it?"

Martha shrugged. "We've tried. It settles every spring. But the ground's a mess. If we dig, we risk the whole thing sliding into the street."

Macy chewed her lip, thinking. "What if you just sunk it? Dug around the base, lowered it, then filled in the gap?"

Martha blinked. "That... actually might work."

Finn raised an eyebrow at Macy. "You planning on doing the digging?"

She grinned. "Better than a jackhammer."

A surge in the crowd signaled something new: Summer and Toby, cameras rolling, approached the folding table with the lemonade and petition. "We'd like to propose a mediation," Summer announced, voice carrying above the rest. "Let's bring both sides together, brainstorm a solution, and livestream the whole thing for maximum transparency."

A hush swept over the crowd. Leo, catching on, thrust his phone into the center and declared, "The people demand a summit!"

Barb the retiree clapped, starting a ripple of applause that ran up and down the line. Even Level, tape measure still in hand, nodded once—reluctantly, but it counted.

Macy squeezed Finn's hand. "That's your cue, Mr. Local."

Finn looked at the wall, then at the crowd, and felt—for the first time in days—like the world had sorted itself into the right kind of mess. He squeezed back, then stepped forward.

"Let's get everyone together at the Chalet," he said, voice not quite loud enough to command, but enough to be heard. "If we're going to solve this, we need cookies, coffee, and maybe a backhoe."

The Wall Warriors whooped. The Rule Followers murmured their approval. Martha refilled the lemonade, and Level clipped his tape measure back onto his belt with a little flourish.

Leo caught the moment on camera, narrated it for the world. "You heard it here: Duck Creek will rise—or, maybe, lower—together."

The crowd broke, swirling into the street and heading for Aunt Sue's Chalet, the news crew and influencers jockeying for position as they went. Finn and Macy hung back a second, soaking up the buzz.

"That was fun," Macy said.

Finn smiled, feeling the pulse of something bigger than himself. "Let's hope the actual digging goes as well as the talking."

She bumped him with her shoulder. "We'll make it work. We always do."

They followed the crowd, side by side, toward the next stage of Duck Creek's great experiment.

Aunt Sue's Chalet had seen its share of oddball gatherings: snowmobile club election fraud hearings, lost pet tribunals, and at least one ill-fated attempt to draft a Duck Creek constitution over locally distilled gin. But nothing compared to the turnout for the Great Wall Mediation. The dining room buzzed with the heat and humidity of a forest floor in high July, the air crammed with old perfume, new sweat, and the ever-present tang of wood smoke and sage.

Finn and Macy arrived early enough to grab a table with decent sightlines, but not so early that they could avoid the cloud of chaos already thickening over the proceedings. By the time they squeezed into their booth, every surface was claimed: tables, benches, even the window ledges, all occupied by townsfolk in various states of anticipation, indignation, or both.

Level Pendergast stood at the front, already in high campaign mode. He wore his best khakis (creased and perfect), a county logo polo, and his ceremonial "Safety First" windbreaker zipped to mid-chest. In one hand: the clipboard, thick with forms and backup forms. In the other: the sacred code book, pages bristling with color-coded tabs. He tapped the clipboard against the podium, the staccato echo as precise and unyielding as his jawline.

He waited for the room to hush, then began.

"I thank you all for coming," Level said, voice pitched to carry through three walls and a blizzard. "I know tempers are high, but I'm here to clarify the facts, and only the facts." He raised the code book overhead, as if inviting lightning. "Municipal Code, Section Fourteen Point Three Bravo: no retaining wall within two hundred yards of a county-maintained roadway may exceed a height of four feet."

He let the words settle, then snapped the tape measure from his belt and flicked it open with a practiced, one-handed flourish. "I have measured the Wilkins Wall—personally—no fewer than six times. It is four feet, four inches. The code is not ambiguous. It is not flexible. The wall is, to put it simply, in violation."

A low murmur rolled through the room. Macy watched Level's

face, the way he gritted his teeth between every sentence, as if determined to keep the words from escaping unsupervised.

At a table near the window, the Wall Warriors prepped their counter-offensive. Martha Wilkins, in a floral blouse that was both apology and threat, paged through her album of family photos. Each image was carefully sleeved and captioned in sharp, angry cursive: "Wall Construction, 1971"; "Junior Prom, With Wall in Background"; "Wall Saves Hydrangea—Summer '86."

When it was her turn, Martha rose with a gravity that silenced even the rowdiest of her supporters. "I appreciate Level's concern for the public good," she began, "but this wall has been part of Duck Creek longer than most of you have had your drivers' licenses. It is not merely a pile of rocks. It is a landmark. A memory." She fanned out the photos, sending them down the row for all to see. "This wall survived three floods, a propane explosion, and my late husband's snow-blower rampage of '09. It is not a menace. It is a miracle."

The Warriors whooped and clapped. Even a few on the Rule Follower side gave her a grudging nod.

Level set his jaw. "I respect history," he replied, "but history doesn't trump liability. If that wall collapses, the county is on the hook, and so is every taxpayer in this room."

A man in a camo ballcap yelled, "You're not my insurance agent, Level!"

Someone else—possibly already a drink or two in—called, "Build the wall higher!"

The two sides began to shout in earnest: "It's just four inches!" "The rules are the rules!" "Her yard, her call!" "Level up, Level!" The sound bounced off the pine beams and crashed back in waves.

Near the kitchen, Leo crouched behind a tripod, live-streaming the melee for his followers and gleefully narrating under his breath. "Things are getting spicy, folks. It's like the Constitutional Convention, but with more flannel."

At the next table, Summer and Toby ran a two-camera setup: one on the crowd, one on the main event. Summer alternated between taking notes and whispering ideas to Toby, who looked like he was about to attempt a field interview in the middle of the crossfire.

The tension only ratcheted up as Level began a point-by-point rebuttal, complete with diagrams and, at one point, a PowerPoint slide deck on a battered laptop. Finn watched as he click-clicked through the slides, each bearing titles like “Precedent: The Marshall Retaining Wall Debacle” and “Risk Factor: Structural Creep.” Finn stifled a laugh, but not well enough—Macy jabbed him with an elbow, grinning.

In the lull between speeches, the kitchen doors swung open and Chef Gary emerged, arms loaded with two platters of Aunt Sue’s famous snickerdoodles and a tray of frosted lemon bars. He set them at the center of the main table, then produced a stack of napkins, each emblazoned with the unmistakable scrawl of Aunt Sue herself:

*Sweet solutions require compromise.*  
—SUE

Gary didn’t linger—he never did—but the effect was instant. A few warriors and a couple of Level’s loyalists descended on the sweets with a shared sense of relief. For a fleeting moment, the tension in the room abated as people remembered the simpler business of eating together.

But the détente was short-lived. Level tapped his clipboard, preparing for a final summation. Martha, reading the room, reached for the lemon bars and took a deep, calming bite.

The room swelled with renewed chatter. Barb the retiree, her loyalty still torn, raised a hand and asked, “What if we just cut the wall down to size? Chop off the top four inches and call it a day?”

Martha shook her head. “You take four inches off, the whole thing’s unstable. You can’t just lop off the crown—it’ll fall apart at the first thaw.”

Level countered, “We can reinforce from behind. I have the schematics right here.”

“You’ll crack the rocks,” Martha said, voice rising.

From the crowd, a voice piped up: “Why not just add four inches to the ground?”

This produced a wave of confusion, which quickly turned to derision as Level, incredulous, explained that “adding soil to a public thor-

oughfare is not only impractical, it's a violation of at least three separate ordinances."

The shouting grew, a dozen new arguments forming and dissolving with each passing second. Finn, who had spent his whole life negotiating between stubborn humans and the indifferent mountain, recognized the precise moment the room reached maximum entropy.

Macy saw it too. She stood, one hand on the table, and said—clear, level, and just loud enough to cut the chaos: "What if we just sink it?"

Every head in the room turned. Even the news anchor's pen froze mid-scribble.

Macy, unfazed, raised her chin. "You don't have to cut it or build it higher. You dig down around the base, lower the whole wall into the ground. It stays the same height from the street, which makes Level happy. It's the same wall, so Martha keeps her memory. You lose four inches of dirt, not four inches of history."

There was a pause—a real, stunned silence, the kind usually reserved for funerals and birth announcements.

Level opened his mouth, then closed it, then opened it again. "Technically... that would comply."

Martha blinked. "But you'd have to dig all the way around—"

Macy nodded. "We get the volunteer crew, do it on a Saturday. No one touches the rocks. You get the roots braced before winter. By spring, it's done."

Finn saw Level's mind working at speed, fingers drumming the code book. He turned to Martha, who was clearly torn between stubbornness and the thrill of a loophole.

Martha finally said, "I suppose... the historical integrity would remain intact."

Level, tape measure still in hand, extended it toward Martha, as if in salute. "We could collaborate on the excavation. Oversee it as a team."

She eyed the tape, then took it, hand steady. "If you bring your own shovel."

The crowd broke into applause—some polite, some genuinely relieved. Even the Rule Followers managed a few grins, the old feuds fading in the glow of compromise.

At the news table, Summer whispered to Toby, "Get that hand-

shake, it's gold." Toby did, the camera trained tight on Martha and Level as they gripped hands across the code book.

Leo, who'd caught the whole thing, closed out his live feed with a flourish. "You saw it here: crisis averted, friendship restored, and Duck Creek proves once again that the only thing stronger than a retaining wall is the stubbornness of its people."

The room began to break up, villagers collecting their things and already planning the dig. Finn and Macy lingered at the booth, watching the way Martha and Level laughed—awkward, but real—over cookies and blueprints.

Macy smiled, tired but pleased. "You think it'll stick?"

Finn grinned. "The wall or the deal?"

She considered, then shrugged. "Both, I hope."

They finished their drinks and headed for the door, the sound of old enemies plotting a construction party ringing in their ears.

Outside, the air was sharp with the promise of fall. The town buzzed with gossip and relief, already looking forward to the next unsolvable problem.

As Finn and Macy walked the quiet street, she said, "You know, you'd make a decent negotiator."

He thought about it. "Maybe. Or maybe I'm just good at knowing when to duck."

Macy laughed, and together they headed home, the village—walls and all—exactly as it was meant to be.

---

By the time the sun topped out over Duck Creek, the "Wall Lowering" had blossomed into the kind of festival people would one day deny ever attending, even as they framed the commemorative t-shirts above their fireplaces. The street outside Martha's house was lined with pop-up tents, each staked with the competitive pride of a tailgate party. Every spare surface was covered in baked goods, hand-painted protest signs, or, in the case of the recycling center's mascot, a six-foot-tall can of crumpled aluminum that someone had dragged out of storage for "brand synergy."

Children, high on lemonade and secondhand indignation, darted between the legs of adults and dogs, who themselves wore a riot of bandanas—hot pink for the Wall Warriors, caution yellow for the Rule Followers, and at least one poodle sporting a unicorn horn. The air shivered with the scent of barbecue, wet grass, and the raw sugar buzz of Aunt Sue's maple pie, which Finn had once described (accurately) as "a miracle in a crust."

At ground zero, the retaining wall loomed, dignified in its impending defeat. On one side, Level Pendergast paced a tidy grid in the mud, clutching not one but three measuring tapes, plus a digital laser level he'd borrowed special from County Services. On the other, Martha presided over a "Heritage Table" stacked with laminated news clippings, faded awards, and a diorama of the original wall crafted entirely from LEGO and hot glue.

Finn and Macy arrived to a chorus of honking horns and shouts of "It's happening!"—not from Level or the Warriors, but from the peanut gallery of locals in lawn chairs, each with a plastic cup in hand and a running bet on who would be the first to cry.

In the driveway, local contractor Lucas—bald, broad-shouldered, and universally regarded as "the guy you call when something big is stuck"—fired up a mini-excavator. It beeped and hissed, and as the bucket dipped toward the grass, a tense silence fell. Level stalked in, bent to the base of the wall, and barked, "Whoa! You're at 3.6 feet on the east end. I want it uniform."

Lucas, who had only ever been stopped mid-dig by a bear or a lawsuit, grinned and tipped his hardhat. "You got it, boss." He made a show of adjusting, then scooped out a perfect, satisfying chunk of dirt.

Martha, not to be outdone, summoned the historical society—three women in matching cardigans—to the Heritage Table. Together, they unrolled a parchment and began a dramatic reading:

"This wall, constructed by the loving hands of Duck Creek pioneers, has withstood—"

The rest was drowned out by the excavator's staccato rumble. But the sentiment carried, and the crowd dutifully applauded every time a Warrior banged a tambourine.

Near the food tent, Leo had set up his phone and was livestreaming

the whole affair, occasionally swinging the camera to catch the crowd's best reactions. He flagged Finn over.

"This is nuts," Leo said, gesturing at the chaos. "I've got three hundred people in chat and a running tally of Team Wall versus Team Level."

Macy, behind Finn, pointed at the comments scrolling up the screen: #DigForVictory, #SoilSolidarity, and, inexplicably, #BandanaLife.

Leo switched to selfie mode, panned to Finn and Macy, and announced, "And here are the unofficial peace brokers! Tell the world, did you think your idea would go this viral?"

Finn shrugged. "We were hoping for, like, ten minutes of quiet."

Macy added, "But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't thrilled about the excavator."

Leo grinned. "The internet loves a good dirt pile." He swung the camera to catch Summer and Toby, who were doing a "man-on-the-street" interview with one of the historical society ladies.

"You ever seen anything like this?" Summer asked, holding the mic at a respectful but strategic distance.

The woman, who'd survived two actual wars and four decades of small-town politics, fixed the camera with a withering glare. "Dear, I once watched a man milk a rattlesnake for antivenom, then use the money to buy himself a commemorative wall plaque. This is nothing."

Toby choked back a laugh, then switched gears. "Who do you think is going to win?"

She shrugged, unbothered. "Depends on whether Level brought his lunch."

At the center, Lucas worked the excavator with an artist's precision. Level trailed him, measuring the depth of each cut and calling out corrections. "Another quarter inch, Lucas! Let's make the county proud!" Level's apprentice, a kid from the high school robotics team, held a laser pointer and muttered coordinates while filming everything for posterity.

Martha, never one to be outmaneuvered, passed out cookies and lemonade to the workers and, at one point, posed for a picture with the wall—one hand on the boulders, the other raised in a defiant "V." The

historical society snapped away, already planning a “Before and After” montage for next year’s calendar.

Finn and Macy stood off to the side, drinking in the spectacle. “You ever get the feeling this whole place is a simulation?” Macy said.

Finn watched as a dog in sunglasses peed on a protest sign and a pair of toddlers took turns rolling down the hill into the mud. “If it is, they definitely dialed up the weird for this patch.”

She smiled, then tugged his sleeve. “Ready for our side mission?”

He nodded, and together they eased away from the crowd, slipping past the food tent and behind a row of parked four-wheelers.

They followed the old ATV trail north, the sound of the festival fading behind them. The woods here were dense, the path narrowing to little more than a rut through willow and dogwood. Finn ducked under a branch, helping Macy through the snag.

“You sure the stash is still there?” he asked.

She nodded, breath fogging in the chill. “I checked last week. But with all the traffic, I want to make sure.”

They walked in silence for a while, Macy moving with a practiced, almost foxlike efficiency. The path dipped and curved, the ground soft with leaf litter and the lingering memory of rain. They crested a small rise and stopped. Below them, the land opened out into a bowl-shaped clearing, with Cascade Falls pouring in a slow, glassy curtain over the basalt rim.

Finn felt the chill deepen. The falls looked ordinary—beautiful, even—but he knew that beneath the surface, a network of caves and water channels twisted for miles.

“Not a bad place to hide out,” he said.

Macy smiled. “He’s not hiding. He’s just waiting until we all stop talking about him.”

They picked their way down the slope, boots skidding on loose rock, until they reached the base of the falls. There, tucked under a hollowed-out stump, was the cache: a battered dry bag, cinched tight with a bungee cord and camouflaged under a mat of damp leaves.

Macy crouched, peeled back the leaves, and checked the contents. “Gone,” she said. “He took the last drop. That’s a good sign.”

Finn pulled a new dry bag from his pack. "What's the menu this time?"

"Two cans of chili, some freeze-dried stew, a roll of peanut butter crackers, and a pack of Starbucks Via."

"Luxury," Finn said, admiring the spread.

Macy scribbled a note on a scrap of Rite-in-the-Rain. "More attention than usual in the area—lay low for two weeks. Will drop again after the snow."

She tucked the note inside, zipped the bag, and replaced it under the stump. For a moment, they just sat, listening to the fall of water and the distant drone of the festival.

"You ever think he's just a ghost?" Finn asked, quietly.

"Sometimes," Macy replied. "But I like knowing there's a little chaos left in the world. Something nobody can pin down."

Finn watched her, the way she blinked in the bright reflected light, the stubborn tilt of her jaw. "He's lucky to have you on his side," he said.

She smirked. "You only say that because you get the leftovers."

"True," Finn conceded.

They stood, dusted off, and started back up the slope. As they reached the top, Macy froze. "Hold up."

At the far end of the clearing, near the shadow line of the pines, a figure stood. Or maybe not stood, exactly—more like hovered at the edge of visibility, just enough substance to register as a person, but not enough to risk a clean ID. The beard, the jacket, the ramshackle outline: unmistakable.

For a long moment, the figure watched them. Macy, breath held, raised one hand in a small, nonthreatening wave.

The figure nodded, once, then turned and slipped into the dark between the trees. Gone before Finn could even process it.

"He knows we're helping," Finn whispered.

Macy exhaled, slow and steady. "Good. I'd hate to lose him now."

They hiked back to the village in easy silence. As they broke from the trees, the sounds of the wall festival—laughter, shouts, the triumphant roar of Level's measuring tape—welcomed them home.

They walked hand in hand past the lemonade stand, where Martha

and Level posed together for the camera, each holding a tiny plastic shovel.

Leo, catching their return, panned the phone their way. "And here are the heroes of the hour! Any comment for the audience?"

Macy smiled, caught Finn's eye, then said, "Best four inches Duck Creek ever lost."

The crowd cheered. Martha whooped. Even Level managed a smile.

They stayed long enough to see the first section of wall settle into its new, perfectly compliant position. Then Finn and Macy wandered off for pie, the taste of maple and mischief warm in their mouths.

Above them, the sun dipped behind the rim, and the falls whispered secrets no one else could hear.

And for a while, at least, the village had nothing left to argue about.



## fifteen

# seasonal transitions

FINN COULD ALWAYS TELL when a room was trying too hard. The Duck Creek Village Inn lobby was the worst offender—knotty pine paneling everywhere, two sets of antlers over the fireplace, and one of those fake bears holding a “WELCOME” sign near the registration desk. It was almost enough to make you overlook the ancient plaid carpet or the fact that the “business center” was just a card table tucked behind a stack of decorative firewood. Finn liked it for the same reason he liked his own hands—workmanlike, honest, always a little worn at the edges.

He and Macy arrived together, boots still mud-crusted from the morning hike. They’d gotten the call (really more of an all-caps group text) from Toby that morning: BIG NEWS. LOBBY. 2PM. The anticipation was less about the news and more about how Toby would spin it. After last week’s misadventures in the wilds—getting themselves rescued, then sort-of going viral for the wrong reasons—Finn had half-expected the influencers to ghost Duck Creek for good.

Instead, Toby and Summer were waiting for them in the lobby’s breakfast nook, occupying the best seats in the house: a corner banquette under a window with a view of the parking lot and, beyond it, the slate-gray expanse of the Cedar Mountains. The transformation was immediate and obvious. Gone were the matching “adventure” jackets and branded water bottles; Toby wore an old concert tee and a

flannel, sleeves rolled to the elbow, hair still a mess but somehow more human. Summer had traded in her studio-perfect makeup for a messy ponytail and one of the Village Inn's freebie hoodies, the color slightly off-brand but the comfort factor dialed to max.

A battered laptop sat open between them, the screen frozen mid-video. Finn recognized the setting—the canyon overlook, with sunlight filtering through the burnt-orange cliffs and the river a distant blue thread at the bottom. In the foreground, a selfie-stick-filmed tableau: Toby, dripping wet and mud-streaked, with Summer at his side, both grinning with a kind of post-trauma elation that Finn hadn't seen on their faces before.

"Hey!" Toby said, springing up to greet them. He looked taller, or maybe just lighter on his feet. "You made it! Macy, Finn—grab a seat, check this out."

Summer slid the laptop around. "Wait, wait—rewind to the creek crossing. That's the best part."

They all leaned in, Macy closest, Finn hovering just over her shoulder. On screen, the video played: the moment where Toby slipped off a boulder and landed, flailing, in water up to his chest. There was a whoop of surprise, then Summer's peal of laughter, utterly genuine and loud enough to startle a nearby squirrel. In the background, the camera caught the briefest flash of Finn and Macy, just visible through the trees, watching with matching expressions of "seriously, dude?"

"It's not exactly how we planned it," Summer said, pausing on a frame where Toby's hair stuck out at three impossible angles, "but the comments are wild. Look at this."

She scrolled the video page. Instead of the usual mix of heart emojis and "stay safe!" spam, the top comments were thoughtful, even effusive: "Never seen this side of you guys—love the authenticity!" and "More nature, less filter. Please!" and "I never knew Utah had so many waterfalls???" A few were from kids asking what kind of birds they'd heard in the background, or whether the mud was as cold as Toby made it look.

Toby sat back, clasped his hands behind his head, and let out a whistle. "We've never had engagement like this. Even when we bungee-jumped a snowmobile off that cornice in Jackson." He flashed a grin at Finn, then Macy. "You two are magic for our algorithm."

Macy shook her head, but she was smiling. "We're not exactly influencers."

"That's the point," said Summer, leaning forward. "It's real. And not in the fake-real way." She fidgeted with the corner of the laptop, hesitating, then added, "We've been rethinking everything. The channel. The road trip. Even the name."

Finn raised an eyebrow. "Dropping the branding?"

Toby nodded, the old performative bluster gone. "We're keeping the project, but it's shifting from 'Find the Next Big Thing' to... something closer to 'Protect It Before It's Gone.'" He shrugged, a little self-conscious. "We're calling it Hidden Wonders now. I know it's cheesy. But we mean it."

Summer flipped to a spreadsheet on the laptop. "Look at the demo—our new followers aren't just doom-scrollers. They're teachers, hikers, birders, parents. People who want to, like, see the place instead of just 'conquering' it." She eyed Finn and Macy over the rim of her mug. "You two did that."

Macy blushed, and for once, Finn couldn't muster a smart comment. He settled for a shrug and a grin.

Toby, suddenly awkward, cleared his throat. "Anyway, we just wanted to say thanks. For the rescue, and for not making us look like idiots in the Gazette."

"Wasn't us," Finn said. "Leo's the one with the meme cannon."

Macy nodded. "We just pointed you at the right trail. You did the rest."

Summer looked at Macy, earnest. "Can we give you credit? Or is that too weird?"

Macy considered it, then shook her head. "Better if it's not about us. Just tell the story. But—" She hesitated, then looked Toby dead in the eye. "You're going to keep Silas's name out of it, right?"

Toby's answer was immediate. "Absolutely. Sworn to secrecy. We'll just say 'local legend' if it even comes up."

Finn watched them, weighing the promise, and saw nothing but honesty.

They sat for a few minutes in comfortable silence, the sound of the check-in desk and the distant whirr of the coffee machine filling the

space. Summer scrolled through the analytics, a soft smile on her face. Toby watched a replay of the waterfall scene, eyes glazed with what Finn recognized as genuine awe.

Eventually, Summer stood. “We should get going. The next shoot’s down in Kolob, and the ranger said to watch the flash-flood forecast. But—” She looked at Macy, then Finn, then back. “Thank you. Seriously.”

They packed up the laptop, still smiling, and made their way toward the door. Macy followed them out, Finn trailing behind. At the curb, Summer popped open the hatch of their battered SUV. Instead of the usual tangle of tripods and lighting rigs, the back was packed with trash bags—full of litter, Finn realized, probably collected on their last hike.

Toby saw Finn looking. “Cleanup’s the new clout,” he said, tossing the last bag in with a flourish. “Trying to make up for old sins.” He extended a hand, hesitated, then clasped Finn’s in a genuine, callus-on-callus grip.

Macy and Summer hugged, awkward at first, then real.

“Maybe see you in the spring?” Summer said, hopeful.

Macy nodded. “We’ll find you a better trail. One with less mud.”

Toby grinned. “Where’s the fun in that?”

They all laughed, the sound honest, unforced.

As the SUV rumbled away, Finn looked at Macy, then at the sun slipping behind the ridge. He felt something shift inside—lighter, maybe, or just a little more in balance with the rest of the world.

Sometimes, he thought, the best stories were the ones that never made it past the lobby.

And this time, he was happy to let someone else have the headline.

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Macy Halloway stood in the kitchen corridor at Aunt Sue’s Chalet, clutching a blue folder so tightly that the cardstock was starting to delaminate. She could see into the main prep area, where Chef Gary stalked the pass with the grace and focus of a retired MMA fighter. He worked the line with two sous-chefs and a dishwasher, but somehow filled the space with enough kinetic energy for a small battalion. The air

was thick with the heat of the ovens and the clatter of pans, underscored by the staccato chorus of kitchen Spanish and the sharp, herbal scent of yesterday's soup simmering for staff meal.

She watched as he tasted, corrected, and directed. When he finally looked up and met her eyes, it felt like standing in front of an avalanche that had just noticed you. He jerked his chin at her—a summons. “You got something to say?” he barked, not unkindly, but with the forced patience of a man who preferred action to talk.

Macy squared her shoulders, folder pressed flat against her chest. “Yes, Chef,” she said, projecting as much confidence as she could muster. “I want to apologize. For the salad bar sabotage.”

The word sabotage made the sous-chef nearest her snort, but Chef Gary didn't crack a smile. He wiped his hands on a rag, leaned against the prep table, and folded his arms, waiting.

“It wasn't meant as an insult,” Macy said, words tumbling out. “I just—I wanted to show how much local foraging could improve the menu. But I should've asked first. I broke your trust, and probably a couple of food safety rules.” She opened the folder with a trembling thumb. “So I wrote this. It's a proposal. For using wild, seasonal ingredients. Legally and safely. With documentation.”

Gary didn't take the folder, but he didn't dismiss her, either. “Go on.”

Macy drew a steadying breath. “Duck Creek has twenty-six edible plants within a three-mile radius. Most people can't name five. But these—” She fanned the folder open on the stainless counter, revealing a rainbow of hand-colored tables, annotated maps, and a Venn diagram cross-referencing wild food safety with Utah Health Code. “—could make this place a legend.”

The sous-chefs drifted closer, drawn by the novelty of someone talking back to Gary with that much gusto. Macy pointed at the chart. “Look, right now, spruce tips are tender. They'd give you a citrus hit in vinaigrettes or ice cream. Wild rosehips? High vitamin C, bright flavor, good for glazes. Lamb's quarters—free spinach, basically. And the mushrooms—” She tapped a photo of a fist-sized morel. “You could charge extra for this. People would drive up the mountain just for the plate.”

Gary finally picked up a page, studied it. "You catalogued the harvest seasons?"

"Down to the week," Macy said, proud despite the knot in her gut. "I cross-checked it with the USDA foraging advisories, and I have sources for anything with potential toxicity. I'm not saying we throw out the regular produce. Just—blend it in. Make it special. Local."

The kitchen had gone quiet, everyone waiting for Gary's verdict.

He took his time, flipping the page, then the next. "You know the cost on these?"

"Minimal. Especially if you let me supply. I don't expect payment at first—just the chance to see what works." Her voice wobbled but didn't break.

Gary set the folder down, but his stance softened. "You're passionate, Halloway. And you did save our butts last week with that last-minute mushroom risotto. But you gotta learn: kitchens are about trust. I run a ship here. I can't have my crew worrying you'll upend the line with your next wild harvest."

Macy nodded, biting her lip. "Yes, Chef. I get it."

He looked at the folder again, the hand-drawn maps and the neat columns of data. Then, with a grunt, he slid the folder back to her. "I'll read it. Every page. Then we'll test-run a dish, see if the regulars bite. If Aunt Sue likes it, you're in."

A ripple of surprise shot through Macy. "Really?"

Gary snorted. "I'm not an idiot. No one wants to eat the same Caesar with sad croutons every day." He fixed her with a direct look. "But you bring me any mystery plant I haven't signed off on, and we're going to have a talk. Copy that?"

"Copy that," Macy said, unable to stop the grin from cracking her face.

Just then, a line cook burst through the swinging door, brandishing a napkin. "Urgent from Sue," he announced, placing it in Chef Gary's hand.

Gary read the napkin, lips twitching. He passed it to Macy. In thick black Sharpie, Aunt Sue had written:

*Passion misapplied is still passion. Offer her the Seasonal Forager position.*

Macy stared, stunned. "She's serious?"

Gary grinned, this time all warmth. "She's more serious than anyone. Welcome to the team, Forager. Now, go home and get ready for the lunch rush."

He turned back to the line, barking orders, but not before giving her a nod of respect—the kind that felt weightier than any "good job" she'd ever gotten. The other cooks gave her thumbs-ups or quick, shy smiles. For the first time in forever, Macy felt like she belonged.

She lingered a second, letting the moment sink in, then tucked the napkin into her folder and slipped out. As she passed the server station, another napkin awaited her, this one folded into a paper airplane. She caught it, opened it, and read:

*Welcome to the family.*

—J

Macy smiled so hard it hurt her cheeks.

On her way out the back door, she made a mental note to start scouting for morels at dawn. If she was going to run with this crew, she'd need to bring her A-game.

And maybe—just maybe—find a way to add spruce tips to the cinnamon rolls.

She could already taste how good it would be.

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Movie Ranch Road always tried to play it cool, but today it was absolutely throbbing with energy. On most autumn weekends, you'd see four-wheelers mudding up the main drag or hunters swapping stories outside the general store, but this was a different animal: the Wall Lowering had drawn everyone from the lodge owners to the guys who

only showed up for free food. Finn thought he'd seen every possible permutation of small-town drama, but nothing prepared him for the pageantry of Duck Creek's most anticipated civic event since the time they'd tried to name the new post office cat.

The road itself had been blocked at both ends with orange cones borrowed from the fire department. In the newly cordoned zone, a couple hundred people massed on either side of the infamous Wilkins Retaining Wall, many holding up phones, a few waving hand-lettered signs ("Solidarity, Not Sinking!"; "Level's the Law!"; and, Finn's favorite, "Dig Deeper, Live Higher"). Kids zigzagged through the legs of adults, popping leftover party balloons from last night's Wall Watch, while a pair of teens worked a makeshift lemonade stand with a tip jar labeled "Legal Fund."

At the epicenter stood Lawrence "Level" Pendergast, in his full regalia: county-issued windbreaker zipped to the throat, official "Building and Safety" hard hat, and three different measuring tools strapped to his person. He clutched his clipboard like it might run off without him. His jaw worked in time with the distant rumble of the mini-excavator, which idled a few yards up the grade, waiting for the signal to start.

Finn and Macy found a spot near the curb, wedged between a pair of old-timers Finn recognized from the snowmobile club. He caught a whiff of cinnamon buns from the food cart behind them, and for a moment he was tempted to ditch the main event for a snack. But Macy was laser-focused, eyes fixed on Level and the men in hard hats as they circled the wall and talked strategy. Finn nudged her with his elbow. "Think they'll manage it without breaking the old thing?"

She shook her head, grinning. "You don't know Level. He probably spent all night making stress tests out of Legos."

A ripple ran through the crowd as Martha Wilkins made her entrance. She wore a blue windbreaker adorned with the Duck Creek Historical Society's enamel pin, and her perfectly silver hair looked freshly helmeted for the occasion. Flanked by two of her grandkids, she carried a folded lawn chair in one hand and a box of laminated newspaper clippings in the other. At every step she offered a running monologue: "Built to last, you know... Granite core, none of that concrete

block nonsense... My late husband used to say, 'If you want something to last, marry a Wilkins and build it yourself!'"

The whole scene had the air of a county fair crossed with a live-action city council hearing. People were smiling, but you could feel the charge—a mix of pride, anticipation, and the glee of seeing which neighbor might embarrass themselves next.

The work began at precisely 10:00 a.m., Level's preferred start time for "operations of public record." A crew of three from Lucas Contracting manned the mini-excavator and two shovels. The operator, a guy with a beard like a badger and a neon vest, took direction from Level, who squatted beside the wall and used a marker to indicate "acceptable penetration points."

"Easy on the root ball there, you're within twelve inches of the juniper," Level called, voice cutting above the machinery. He paced the perimeter, alternately squinting at his level and scribbling notes on his clipboard. When the machine dug its first bite, the sound was less of a roar than a drawn-out crunch—a sound that drew an immediate "Ooooooh" from the onlookers, like the prelude to a spectacular wipeout.

Martha, seated regally now in her lawn chair, offered color commentary to anyone within earshot. "Back in seventy-one, we laid those bottom rocks by hand. Took a full week, and no one threw out their back—not even Ted. These days, it's all hydraulics and paperwork." She sniffed, then leaned over to a nearby woman and stage-whispered, "Watch—if Level's numbers are off, the whole thing will tip right into the street and then where will we be? Flooded come March, that's where."

The process was slow and careful. First, the crew excavated a trench along the front of the wall, taking it down in increments so fine that Finn wondered if Level had insisted on metric. Every six inches, Level would halt the dig, drop to his knees, and run the bubble level across the exposed base, sometimes tapping with a tiny rubber mallet, sometimes consulting with the "junior safety officer"—a local high schooler who looked like he regretted volunteering for extra credit.

By mid-morning, a chorus of gravel, diesel, and Level's intermittent "Whoa!" filled the air. The sun, which had been slanting in at a

forgiving angle, started to rise high and mean, baking the backs of the spectators. Someone passed around a crate of iced sodas from the gas station. Finn took one and handed another to Macy, who never took her eyes off the trench, but accepted the drink with a grateful nod.

At the first scheduled break, Level called for silence, then announced into the crowd, "Current status: three-point-eight inches of total displacement. On target. Zero loss of structural integrity. We're go for phase two."

A cheer went up, half-mocking but entirely affectionate. The teenagers on the lemonade stand rang a bicycle bell in approval.

Next came the most delicate part: lowering the top tier of stones in a single, coordinated maneuver. Four of the crew lined up with crow-bars and heavy gloves, while Level paced and barked reminders about "angular moment transfer" and "cumulative force vectors." Martha watched with arms folded, occasionally muttering "Careful now," or "That's the pretty side, don't scratch it."

The actual movement was almost anticlimactic. With a grunt and a synchronized heave, the workers pried and nudged the massive stones until, as if in slow motion, the whole section sank exactly four inches into the fresh trench. There was a hollow thunk, then a silence so complete that Finn could hear the faint, tinny sound of a neighbor's sprinkler kicking on two houses over.

Level approached, tape measure at the ready. He lined it up, crouched, and checked the bubble. Then he did it again, just to be certain. Only when he was triple-satisfied did he straighten up and address the audience.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced, voice thick, "we have achieved full regulatory compliance."

Murmurs ran through the crowd, then applause, then—because Duck Creek loved a pageant—a round of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow," sung with as much sincerity as could be mustered by a group of people who spent half their lives arguing over which chili recipe deserved to be called authentic.

Level did not crack a smile. But there was a look of profound, almost spiritual satisfaction as he watched the crew begin backfilling the trench, the wall now a perfect, code-sanctioned four feet in height.

Martha rose, dusted off her chair, and made her way to Level, her grandkids trailing behind her like ducklings. She extended her hand, palm open and generous. "Not a single stone out of place," she said. "That's what I call a win."

Level shook her hand, a little stiff, but with real respect. "You built it well," he said. "I was just making sure it would last."

They both held the handshake a second longer than necessary, and Finn caught the glint of mutual pride—the pure, undiluted kind that only comes from fixing something the right way.

A reporter from the Gazette snapped a photo. In the background, the mini-excavator operator wiped his brow, then joined the applause as Level signed the final line of the approval form, officially closing Duck Creek's most fiercely debated case.

Kids immediately swarmed the newly sunken wall, treating it like an Olympic podium. One climbed on top and proclaimed, "I am the mayor now!" while another did a cartwheel and landed in the lap of an amused Wall Warrior.

Finn watched it all and felt the tension that had hung over the village for weeks dissolve—replaced by the kind of mellow satisfaction that only comes when everyone has gotten exactly what they needed, even if it wasn't quite what they'd wanted.

He turned to Macy, who was taking in the scene with a rare look of pure delight.

"Not bad, right?" he said.

She nodded. "Best four inches Duck Creek ever lost."

He laughed, then offered her an arm, and together they walked toward the lemonade stand, the echoes of applause and the faint, satisfying crunch of gravel underfoot following them all the way home.

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After the bustle of the day—machines, crowds, the endless stream of opinions—Finn wanted nothing more than a place to sit and recalibrate. Aunt Sue's Chalet was closed for the night, all the chairs upended on their tables, the tile floors mopped to an off-duty gleam. But Finn had a key (he always had a key), and Sue herself had once told him, "If

you need shelter, there's always a booth for you." The place was so familiar that Finn's feet carried him, muscle memory, straight to the booth under the window by the pie case.

He slid in, wincing as his knees complained about the day's mileage, and stretched his legs under the table. The only light in the restaurant was the over-booth sconce, casting a soft cone on the varnished pine. In the dim, the lines and swirls of the wood looked almost like a topographical map, a microcosm of the ridges and valleys outside. The surface of the table was etched with decades of fork marks, knife slips, and the gentle patina of a thousand elbows, but Finn ran his hand along the edge, finding the spot where it was polished so smooth that it felt almost warm.

Silence—real, absolute—settled around him. The hum of the walk-in fridge was a distant heartbeat, and every so often, a gust of wind rattled the pane. Finn let his breathing slow to match the hush. He closed his eyes for a moment, then let his gaze drift over the room: the black-and-white photos of Duck Creek in the snow, the hand-lettered "Pie of the Day" board with tomorrow's options already scribbled by Sue, the basket of condiment caddies ready for another round.

He wasn't sure when it started—maybe it had always been there—but something in the air began to change. It was like the pressure dropped half a degree, or a layer of glass slid between him and the rest of the world. Sounds receded. The whorl of the pine grain shimmered, then seemed to ripple, not with light but with memory.

Finn blinked, alert now. He knew the feeling. Leo called them "Echos," the way some people got déjà vu or migraines when a storm was coming. But for Finn, it was always this: a thinning, a pause, and then—

The voice. Not loud, but utterly clear. Not from the faraway past, but closer, closer, like someone sitting in the booth with him, just out of sight.

"Fifty years of peace because of friends like you," the voice said.

Finn's hand stilled on the table. The words were crisp, unhurried, and layered with the inflection of someone who never wasted breath.

The next line: "The mountain provides, and so do you."

The hush grew thicker, as if the entire chalet leaned in to hear.

Finn didn't try to speak. Instead, he let the words settle in his chest, where they fit perfectly—a missing piece that had been waiting for just this moment.

There was a memory, surfacing like a leaf in meltwater: his own father, decades ago, sitting in this very booth with him, sharing a piece of blackberry pie and telling Finn that there were two kinds of people in Duck Creek—those who ran when winter hit, and those who stayed put and made sure nothing precious got buried. Finn never forgot the lesson, even if he'd spent most of his life pretending he didn't need it.

He exhaled, long and deep, feeling the Echo ease its grip. The voice faded, not gone but tucked just behind the pine and the pie case and the steady tick of the clock above the register.

Finn sat for a while, letting the silence fill in the gaps. His breath came steady now, each inhale tinged with cinnamon and wood smoke and something that might have been pride.

He traced a line in the table, following the grain, and realized he was smiling. Not a big, goofy grin, but the quiet kind that starts behind the eyes and works its way out only when it's good and ready.

He nodded, just once, to the empty air—an answer, a thank you, a handshake between the living and the stories that never quite left.

When he finally stood to leave, he took the slow route around the dining room, making sure each chair was perfectly straight, each napkin dispenser filled, every little detail exactly as it should be. It was a ritual, maybe, but also a way of saying: I was here, and I kept my promise.

At the door, he paused and looked back at the booth, at the light and the lingering hush. He touched the edge of the table again—smooth, warm, belonging to everyone who'd ever needed shelter from the cold.

Finn stepped into the night, the air sharp and full of stars, and for the first time in a long while, he felt like Duck Creek was exactly where he needed to be.

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The world was amber and shadow, the hour so gold you almost felt bad for not bottling it. Finn waited for Macy by the hardware store, which

always closed at five but left its window lights burning late—one of those small-town courtesies that made even empty places feel watched-over. The air bit through his flannel, crisp enough to promise frost by morning, but he didn't mind. The cold was honest, and so was the glow that spilled down Movie Ranch Road, catching every log corner and metal roof in the act of being exactly itself.

Macy arrived in her usual not-quite-a-rush, hair wind-wild and a canvas messenger bag bouncing at her hip. She wore a parka Finn had never seen—deep green, probably vintage, with a half-dozen homemade patches sewn along the sleeves. She'd added a new one, a silhouette of a morel mushroom, stitched in orange thread.

"I see you're on brand," Finn said, nodding at the sleeve.

She smirked, wiggling her arm. "I wore it for you. Thought you might need a fashion upgrade after today's flannel fail."

He looked down, feigned offense at his own shirt. "This is a Duck Creek classic."

"Yeah, and I bet it's older than me," Macy said, but she looped her arm through his anyway and steered them onto the road.

They walked slow, letting the cold and the day's exhaustion drain from their legs. The storefronts glimmered as the sun slipped behind the west ridge, turning every glass pane into a smudge of orange and blue. Over at the bait shop, old man Phelps flicked the lights and locked up, giving them a wave and a conspiratorial smile. Finn figured half the village was watching, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

They passed the new, improved Wall, the dirt still fresh and damp around its base. Someone had staked a cheap wooden sign next to it, hand-painted in bright blue letters:

## **THE GREAT COMPROMISE OF FOUR INCHES**

### **—Duck Creek, Never Forget**

Underneath, a little plastic plaque: "Dedicated to the spirit of getting over yourself."

Macy stopped, leaned in close to inspect the mortar. "They did good work. You can barely see where it moved."

"Level measured it three times," Finn said. "He's still floating from the afterglow."

She snorted. "He was born to audit, that one."

Finn watched as Macy traced the stone line with a gloved finger, then stooped to pluck something from between the rocks. She held it up—tiny, frost-bright berries strung along a dark, wiry stem.

"Snow currant," she said. "You wouldn't think they'd survive the cold, but they're tough. Adaptable." She popped one in her mouth and chewed, face thoughtful. "You want?"

Finn hesitated, then shrugged. "Is this a forager's rite of passage?"

"It's more of a dare, honestly," Macy said, and she held a berry up between her thumb and forefinger, pressing it to Finn's lips.

He let her, the tartness surprising and a little electric. "Not bad," he said, even though his mouth was already puckering.

She grinned, satisfied. "Good for you. High in antioxidants, low in regret."

They walked on, the chill working its way through but never fully getting in. The smell of woodsmoke and distant fried onions drifted down from the diner, mingling with the scent of leaves and earth. Finn tried to remember the last time he'd walked the village with nothing to do and no one to rescue, but it had been a long, long time.

"So," Macy said, "you gonna bail on us for winter?"

"Not a chance," Finn replied. "I took the guiding job for December. They want me to teach snowshoeing and basic survival."

Macy raised her eyebrows, impressed. "Look at you, molding the next generation. You gonna tell the kids about Silas?"

Finn shook his head, smiling. "Only if they ask. And only the good parts."

Macy nodded, as if that settled it. "I start my real shift next week," she said. "Seasonal Forager and... Assistant Baker. Which means I get to invent new stuff for the menu. You're the taste tester."

Finn groaned. "That sounds dangerous. But I'll take the risk."

They passed the end of the road, where the lights of the Chalet were just flickering on. The windows glowed gold, and Finn could see the prep crew through the glass, setting up for the Friday rush. The sky

overhead was all bruised purples and streaks of pale green, the last light limping its way up the peaks.

Macy slowed, then stopped at the edge of the parking lot. She looked out over the woods, hands tucked in her pockets. "You ever think about leaving?" she asked, not looking at him.

Finn didn't answer right away. He could feel the question in his bones, old and familiar as the dirt under his boots. "Every now and then," he said. "But then I remember—this is the only place where people know me well enough to mock me about flannel, or force-feed me questionable berries."

She smiled, shy but sincere. "It's a good place. Even if it's weird as hell."

They stood in companionable silence for a while, listening to the hush that only small places can manage at the end of a long day. The leaves on the path were brittle, and every boot step sounded like a fire just getting started.

At last, Macy turned, eyes bright in the half-light. "You think you'll ever want to leave again?"

Finn looked at her, at the sky, at the Chalet and the old road and the wall and every odd, stubborn thing that made Duck Creek itself. "Not if you're here," he said.

She looked down, then up. "I am."

He felt her hand brush against his. This time, he didn't play it off as accidental. He took it, careful and deliberate, and felt the small thrill of knowing she wouldn't let go.

They started walking again, slow and unhurried, their fingers tangled together, hands warm against the cold.

The sun was gone, but the sky glowed on, and so did the windows of every cabin and shop they passed. The village seemed to lean closer as they walked, as if rooting for them to stick, to belong, to make their own weird little story.

Finn squeezed her hand, and she squeezed back.

Neither said another word, but it was enough to know that whatever came next, they'd walk the road together.

Duck Creek Village, with all its ghosts and all its noise and all its heart, watched them go.

And above, the stars came out, bright and brand new.



## sixteen

# **the hermit's message**

FINN LEFT the village before the sun had fully gotten out of bed. Movie Ranch Road still shimmered with puddles from the night's freeze, the light barely gold on the storefront windows. The only things awake besides him were a couple of magpies, hopping and arguing on the still-wet power line.

He cut across the empty lot behind the hardware store, boots crunching on frost-stiff weeds, then found the old fire road that headed north toward the rim. He preferred the less-traveled paths. Even the ones that clawed at his shins with willow and left his pant legs soaked through before he'd gone a mile.

His pack held the essentials: two tightly wrapped bundles of meat and cheese, a thermos that still radiated the memory of fresh coffee, and—per Macy's suggestion—a battered paperback, wrapped in a zip bag. The cover read "The Tao of Survival," which seemed both apt and faintly like a dare.

Finn hiked at a measured pace, breath coming in visible puffs, eyes tuned to every flash of movement in the brush. You learned early, in Duck Creek, that the world was more awake than you were. Even now, with the ground mostly dead, small things lived beneath every log. The air smelled of pine resin and last year's leaf mold, spiced at the edge with the ghost of distant smoke.

An hour in, Finn stopped at a familiar boulder to check his route. The rim was maybe a mile ahead, the falls another quarter past that. He drank from the thermos—burnt, a little sweet, and perfect for his current state—and eyed the treeline. Above, the sky was hard blue, only a few streaks of cloud to make it interesting. He liked it best that way: clean, cold, promising nothing.

The last stretch to Cascade Falls ran tight along the edge of the canyon, the ground soft from snowmelt and littered with the pale, brittle bones of windblown aspen. The sound of water grew from a distant murmur to a full-throated roar. Even in late fall, the falls ran heavy, snowmelt churning down a dark seam of basalt, rimed at the edges with new ice.

He found the drop spot exactly where Macy said it would be—a hollowed stump, black with rot and old as the trail itself. Years ago, someone had tried to carve a face into the side, but time and weather had left it a mask of moss and suggestion. Finn knelt, ran a hand around the rim, then reached inside.

Instead of the old Tupperware or empty soup can he half-expected, he felt the curve of something smooth. He pulled out a figure: hand-carved, about the length of his palm, but light as a feather. A fox, or something close to it, ears sharp and eyes deep-set, the tail sweeping back in a spiral that twisted like wind. The wood was sanded to a satiny finish, but the knife marks showed everywhere—each one deliberate, each curve confident. The kind of thing that took hours to make, and maybe years to learn how.

Finn turned it in his hand, marveling at the details. Even the paws had been shaped to rest naturally, as if the thing could stand up and dart away if you blinked. He set it on the stump, where it faced the falls, watching the endless tumble of water and spray.

He opened the pack, removed the bundles, and placed them in the cavity. The book, too, he left—propped open to the title page, which Macy had written on: “For when silence gets boring.” He felt silly doing it, but that was the point.

He stood, lingered a moment to watch the plume of mist rising from the base of the falls, then turned back to the trail.

Halfway up the path, he noticed it: a single boot print in the soft earth, just ahead of his own, not yet filled by wind or drifting needles. Finn squatted, checked the tread. Old, but not worn down, and bigger than his own. He glanced left, then right, and caught the faint echo of another print, deeper in the brush.

He followed, slow, careful not to crack twigs or disturb the old snow. The prints led to a narrow clearing ringed with aspen, the ground there clear except for a scattering of pine cones, each one placed in a line—deliberate, evenly spaced, and running in a tight, snaking pattern.

Finn stepped closer. The line of cones spelled two words:

**THANK YOU**

He stared at it, breath clouding in the cold, heart doing a weird, uneven jump.

The message was unmistakable, but there was no sign of who had left it. He scanned the tree line, half-hoping to catch a flicker of movement, a glint of beard or the flash of a dark jacket. Nothing.

He stood for a while, just taking it in—the careful placement, the strange, perfect quiet of the clearing. The message wasn't for everyone. Maybe not even for him. But it was left out in the open, like a seed or a secret, and that felt right.

On his way back, Finn's mind buzzed with questions, none of which needed immediate answers. The trail felt lighter under his boots, the sun higher, the cold now a clean kind of energy.

He reached the rim, looked back toward the falls, and saw, just for a moment, the way the water blurred the sky and the earth together, erasing the line between what was wild and what was human.

It felt, to him, like a handshake. Or maybe a promise.

He walked the rest of the way home, hands in pockets, the carved fox cradled safe and warm against his chest.

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If Duck Creek Village had a heartbeat, it thumped loudest in Aunt Sue's Chalet at noon. The day after the Wall Lowering, the dining room overflowed with people: snow-damp tourists, old-timers in flannel,

three park rangers off shift, and an entire table of influencers narrating their brunch into four different phones. Steam fogged the windows and half the conversations overlapped in a chorus of “Can we get a side of that?” and “Is that the Cedar Mountain Salad I saw on the feed?”

Chef Gary moved behind the pass like a man with four arms and zero patience. The new kitchen window—a literal cutout for open viewing—meant he had an audience now, which he claimed to hate, but everyone agreed the scowl was mostly for show. Every time someone cheered a sizzle or clapped for a fancy flip, Gary’s ears turned pink and his plating got even more precise.

Next to him, Macy worked her own small corner, arranging the garnish on Woodland Mushroom Risotto with tweezers and a level of concentration that would have impressed a surgeon. She wore a Chalet apron two sizes too big, and her hands were stained with chlorophyll from the morning’s foraging run.

“Less juniper this time,” Gary said, not looking up. “People want to taste the rice, not a pine tree.”

Macy rolled her eyes. “The juniper’s the entire point. Besides, it’s local, it’s sustainable, and it’s in the name.”

“It’s not in the name,” Gary countered, “unless you renamed it while I was prepping the mirepoix.”

She grinned, lips pursed in mock innocence. “I might have. Didn’t you see the new menu board?”

Gary paused, shot her a sidelong look. “You didn’t.”

She shrugged, then called out to the wait staff, “Order up—Risotto, extra juniper, two Cedar Mountain Salads, and a side of wild onion bread.”

The waitress—a college kid home for break—gave Macy a double thumbs-up. “You got it, Chef.”

Gary muttered, “She’s not the chef,” but the way he said it didn’t have a single ounce of heat.

Out on the floor, Leo worked the crowd with the careful subtlety of a man who knew exactly how to go viral and not a step beyond. His setup was simple: phone on a gimbal, a shotgun mic clipped to his backpack strap, and the world’s most expressive eyebrows. He’d snagged the

corner booth for a perfect angle on the kitchen, and the stream chat scrolled in a blur as he narrated the action.

"Duck Creek Vibes, episode fifty-seven," Leo said into his mic, voice low and measured. "We're watching a legit food revolution unfold—Chef Gary and Forager Macy, live, in the kitchen, making magic with wild mushrooms and the occasional ego trip."

A tourist with a neon beanie leaned in, watching the action through the glass. "Is she the one who found that fungus last spring? The neon yellow one?"

Leo nodded, winking. "That's our Macy. Word is, she once ID'd a truffle blindfolded."

The beanie guy looked awed. "That's so badass."

Back in the kitchen, the risotto order had doubled, and the ticket rail looked like it might snap from the weight. Macy worked fast, fingers flying through bundles of spruce tips and wild watercress, her mouth quietly ticking off steps: "One for the line, one for the plate, one for the garnish." She'd started adding edible flowers, too—purple violets and the rare pink Indian paintbrush that only grew on the north slope, just as a little middle finger to anyone who doubted her.

Gary noticed, of course. "Flowers, now? What's next, moss foam?"

"If you'd let me get the ISI canister out of storage, maybe," Macy shot back.

He grunted, but his lips twitched. "You're a menace."

Macy set the finished risotto on the window, took a half step back so the crowd could see, and dusted it with a final flick of ground spruce. On the other side of the glass, three phones snapped photos in perfect synchrony. One of the rangers at the bar whistled and held up his bowl in salute.

"Hey, Gary," called Leo, from his booth. "Rumor has it you swore you'd never cook with 'fancy weeds.' Any comment?"

Gary, never one to pass up an easy headline, leaned toward the window and deadpanned, "If you can't beat the foragers, join them. Also, she'll poison me if I don't."

The dining room erupted in laughter, Macy at the center. She made a little bow, then darted to the prep sink to wash up.

At the lull, Leo signaled to the kitchen. "You got two minutes for a

quick interview?” he asked, voice perfectly pitched to carry only as far as the pass.

Gary looked at Macy, then at the mounting stack of tickets, then at the clock. “Sixty seconds,” he said, wiping his hands.

They stepped out to the side hall, just out of range of the fryers and the din, but close enough to feel the heat on their backs.

Leo hit record and said, “Okay, world: Duck Creek’s best duo, uncensored. Gary, how’s business since the ‘Foraged Flavors’ menu went live?”

Gary folded his arms, playing gruff but barely hiding his pride. “We haven’t had a single table cancel. Half these people are here for the forager special. That’s her fault.” He jerked a thumb at Macy.

Macy’s ears turned the color of red currants, but she held steady. “It’s a group effort,” she said, just the right amount of humble. “I bring the ingredients, but Gary makes it taste like an actual meal. My version would be, uh, raw and slightly muddy.”

Leo grinned. “So the rumors of kitchen war were exaggerated?”

“Not at all,” Gary said. “She’s been trying to take over the specials board for a month.”

“Maybe she should,” Leo teased.

Gary glared, but it was all show. “Don’t encourage her.”

Macy cracked up. “He acts tough, but he knows how to plate a salad so it looks like a Monet. You can’t teach that.”

Leo turned the camera, gave the world a look of mock awe. “I think we’re witnessing a culinary detente, folks. They’re on the same team now.”

Gary rolled his eyes, but then put a hand on Macy’s shoulder, solid as granite. “I respect the hustle,” he said, quietly.

Macy grinned, too proud to hide it. “Back at you, Chef.”

The interview lasted less than a minute, but the comments poured in: people asking for recipes, debating wild food versus store bought, even a couple of parents demanding to know if the risotto was kid-safe.

Macy answered a few herself, borrowing Leo’s phone and typing fast between orders. “No, we don’t use anything that’s not triple-checked,” she wrote. “And yes, the cookies are still nut-free, but now with spruce sugar.”

When the lunch rush ebbed, Macy took a breath and let herself drift to the edge of the dining room, scanning the faces. It was still weird, knowing half of them were strangers who'd driven three hours just to eat her "finds." Some even took selfies with her. Someone had tagged her in a story: "#ForagerQueen #DuckCreekEats."

She found Finn near the window, a half-finished salad and a mug of cocoa in front of him. He held the wooden fox from earlier, one thumb tracing the spiral of its tail. When she caught his eye, he smiled—subtle, real, the kind that said "good job" without making a scene.

She slid into the seat across from him, still a little high on adrenaline. "Try the salad yet?"

He nodded, forking another bite. "The pine nuts are legit. Is that your own vinegar?"

"Spruce tip and cider. You like?"

He grinned, then passed her a slice of homemade bread. "You're gonna make Gary crazy with this."

"Yeah," Macy said, "but in a good way."

They sat, companionable, watching the afternoon light fade over the village. The windows fogged with every laugh and shout from the room behind them, and the air hummed with the simple joy of people eating well.

Leo swung by, dropping off a fresh set of comments on his phone. "You guys broke the record," he said. "More views than the Wall War, even. They're already asking when you're doing a wild foods dinner."

Macy blinked. "Like, a whole menu?"

"Yeah. Could be a monthly thing."

Finn looked at her, eyebrows raised. "You up for that?"

She didn't even hesitate. "Absolutely."

Gary, passing by, snorted. "You start tomorrow, you're cleaning the walk-in yourself."

Macy grinned at Finn. "Deal."

As the sun dipped behind the peaks, the Chalet glowed with firelight and chatter, the scent of sage and fresh bread weaving through every conversation. Outside, the day cooled to a hush, but inside, Duck Creek felt like the center of the whole wild world.

And Macy, arms ink-stained and heart light as birch bark, felt more at home than ever.

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Lawrence “Level” Pendergast stood, as he always did, at a perfect right angle to the world. His shoes lined up exactly with the front stoop of the Duck Creek Historical Society, the toes bisecting a seam in the concrete so neatly that he’d be forced to readjust if even a pebble knocked him off center. In his left hand: a roll of blueprints, neatly rubber-banded. In his right: the county-issue measuring tape, extended to precisely 48 inches and locked with a satisfying click.

Martha Wilkins hovered to his immediate left, waving a sheaf of papers like a flag. “It’s not just a gazebo, Lawrence,” she said, voice already gathering volume for the inevitable crowd. “It’s a gathering point. A conversation piece. A literal cornerstone for the village green!”

Level kept his eyes on the paper, tracing the cross-hatched beams and elegant, if structurally dubious, cupola. “It’s also, by my calculation, in violation of the county code. See here—” He pointed, stabbing the plan with the blunt end of his level. “The eave projects four inches past the maximum. The base exceeds the setback by—again—four inches. And this foundation? Not a frost line in sight.”

Martha rolled her eyes, expertly, as only a Wilkins could. “You measured it already?”

Level adjusted his glasses with the knuckle of his thumb. “I measured it three times. Once with the digital, once with analog, and once with a laser I calibrated myself. I even allowed for thermal expansion.”

She smacked the top page with the back of her hand. “You’re missing the forest for the gazebo, Lawrence! It’s a replica of the original, built in 1910. If we don’t honor the past, what are we even doing here?”

He circled the offending measurements in sharp, red ink. “The past didn’t have snow loads like we do now. Or insurance premiums.”

As if on cue, the historical society’s front door creaked open. Two retirees poked their heads out, craning to watch the proceedings. Across

the street, a pair of dog walkers slowed, then lingered under the pretense of untangling their leashes.

Martha planted her feet, clearly ready for round two. "Lawrence, if you'll recall, you once approved a pergola for the Peterson place that ran a full six inches over height."

He bristled. "That was before the 2019 amendment, and you know it."

"Rules are meant to serve the people, not torment them," she replied, with the righteous certainty of a woman who'd won every chili cook-off and library fundraiser since 1984.

Level pursed his lips, then drew himself up to maximum height. "As acting inspector, it's my sworn duty to enforce compliance. No exceptions, not even for history."

Martha leaned in, voice dropping to a stage whisper. "You like the gazebo, don't you? You just hate to admit I thought of it first."

He blinked, taken aback. "I don't have feelings about gazebos."

She grinned, sharp as a fox. "Of course not."

They glared at each other over the rolled plans, each waiting for the other to blink. The dog walkers exchanged a bet under their breath. The retirees from the society, emboldened by the drama, shuffled out to the top step.

"Maybe," Martha said, all reason now, "we could workshop the design together. You do the number crunching, I'll handle the style."

Level looked at the gazebo drawing, at the offending four-inch overhang, and then at the glimmer of hope in the faces of the retirees on the porch. He tried to recall if anyone had ever offered to let him design something, instead of just saying what was wrong with it.

"Propose a meeting time," he said, at last.

Martha slapped his shoulder, harder than necessary. "Tomorrow, after lunch. I'll bring lemon bars."

Level gave a brisk nod. "I'll bring the code book."

As they walked away, the dog walkers gave a low, appreciative whistle.

The historical society retirees started an informal sign-up sheet for the public input meeting. Someone, probably Leo, had already started the hashtag: #GazeboGate.

Level tucked the blueprints under his arm, feeling—against all odds—a little proud of the four-inch problem.

The next round in Duck Creek's great experiment was already underway.

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Ground + Toasted was one of the few places in Duck Creek that didn't care about the seasons. It ran at full tilt year-round, even in shoulder months, even on the days when the only customers were the owners themselves and a couple of retirees who played cribbage by the window. On this particular afternoon, it was warm inside—humid from the espresso machine, every surface sticky with a thin, invisible glaze of cinnamon sugar and steamed milk.

Finn snagged a two-top near the back, partly to avoid the glare of winter light through the windows, partly to keep the wooden fox out of casual view. He unwrapped it from the rag he'd used for protection, set it in the center of the table, and turned it so the fox's face looked straight at the seat across from him.

Macy arrived three minutes late, hair windblown and cheeks flushed from the cold. She plopped into the chair, shrugged off her jacket, and zeroed in on the fox before she even said hello.

"What is that?" she whispered, as if it might spook.

Finn pushed it forward, careful. "Found it at the drop, by the falls."

She picked it up, turned it over, traced the spiral of the tail with her thumb. The light caught every tool mark, every careful line, and her eyes widened like she'd found a living thing.

"He made this?" Macy's voice was low, somewhere between awe and reverence.

Finn nodded, then recounted the rest: the boot prints, the message in pinecones, how the whole clearing felt charged with meaning, like a story trying to write itself.

She set the fox down gently, then looked at him—long enough to make Finn feel seen right through. "He left it for you," she said.

He started to protest, but Macy shook her head. "No, I mean it.

You're the one who kept him safe. You and Leo. Even when I was ready to blow it all up." She smiled, soft at the edges. "You earned this."

Finn watched her hands, the way she hovered them near the fox, like she wanted to pick it up again but couldn't quite let herself.

"You saw the pinecones?" he asked.

Macy grinned, brighter now. "Yeah. That's classic Silas—can't sign his name, so he makes art instead. When I was little, he used to leave berry juice drawings on rocks at the old mill. Always animals, always looking out for something."

She nudged the fox with a fingertip. "You think he wants something from us? Or is it just... thanks?"

Finn considered, then shrugged. "Could be both. Maybe he's saying 'don't stop.' Or maybe 'job well done.' I dunno."

They let the silence hang. It wasn't uncomfortable. The coffee shop's soundtrack was a loop of acoustic covers and the hiss of the frother, the world outside muffled by double-paned glass and early snow.

Macy looked up, eyes bright. "You're keeping it, right?"

He started to say he hadn't thought about it, but the lie died before it left his mouth. "Yeah. Feels right."

She smiled, then reached across and closed her hand around his, careful to avoid the fox, but close enough that Finn felt the heat of her palm.

"I'm glad you found it," she said. "I'm glad we found him, even if only for a second."

Finn squeezed her fingers, gentle. "You think he'll ever come back?"

Macy looked at the fox, then at the door, then at Finn. "Maybe. Or maybe that's not the point. Maybe he just wanted to prove he was still real."

She laughed, self-conscious. "Sorry. I sound like my granddad now."

Finn grinned. "Your granddad was smart."

She rolled her eyes, but didn't let go.

They sat, the fox watching over their hands, until the coffee cooled and the shadows stretched across the laminate floor. Outside, the wind rattled the sign, but inside, everything felt held in place, solid.

Eventually, Macy broke the quiet. “What are you going to name him?” she asked, nodding at the fox.

Finn shook his head. “Already has a name. Just not one we’d understand.”

Macy looked at him like he’d just told the best secret in the world.

And that, Finn thought, was enough.

They stayed until the light faded and the barista flicked the overheads off, a not-so-subtle hint. As they gathered their things, Finn slipped the fox into his pocket, and Macy slipped her arm through his, warm and sure.

The world outside was cold and dark, but it felt a little less lonely with her next to him, the fox a quiet reminder that sometimes the best stories were the ones you never told.

## seventeen

# autumn's end

THE FIRST NOVEMBER snow always hit Duck Creek with a note of apology, as if it regretted the drama and was only stopping by to see if anyone minded. It dusted the old log cabins and service bays along Movie Ranch Road, then curled itself under the rims of mailboxes and the awning over Aunt Sue's Chalet, where the day's business had started long before sunrise.

Finn shook the powder from his boots on the Chalet's porch, then stepped into the vapor warmth of the back meeting room. The air hit him with a front of roasted coffee, cinnamon, and maple syrup—flavors of home, even if you'd only ever been a visitor. Twenty chairs crowded the perimeter of the long, scarred oak table. The usual suspects were there: the bait shop owner with his camo ballcap and fishhook tie pin, the ex-librarian knitting a scarf in school colors, the campground manager who wore his Forest Service uniform even on his day off. At the head of the table, a space had been reserved for Sergeant Buck Miller, the guest of honor.

Finn gave a quick nod to Leo, who was perched on a radiator near the frosted window, his phone out but camera strictly off. "You made it," Leo stage-whispered, gesturing at the open seat. "It's standing room only, and rumor is they're breaking out the real maple for this one."

Finn squeezed past the others, careful not to jostle the trays of pastry and the rows of mismatched mugs. He slid in beside Macy, who'd

already started doodling pine needles in the margin of the agenda. She looked up, grinning, and nodded at the paper. "They left room for public comment, which means we can filibuster if it goes sideways."

He arched an eyebrow. "You want to make a run at the snack bar budget again?"

She snorted. "Not unless you're lobbying for more dried mushrooms. I'm just here for the show."

At the far end of the room, Buck Miller cleared his throat. The effect was less "call to order" and more "let's all pretend this isn't Buck's favorite thing in the world." Even when not in uniform, he stood like he was auditioning for a recruitment poster: back straight, chin high, both hands palm-down on the table as if ready to repel a direct assault by the local garden club.

"Appreciate you all coming out, especially on short notice," Buck began. "Let's get to business."

The opening volley came from the hardware store rep, who presented a three-minute monologue about salt shortages, generator theft, and the "rampant disregard for proper snow shoveling technique." The group gave polite mm-hmms, most of them having heard it already, some version of it every year since the hardware store had changed hands. The ex-librarian knit faster, the campground manager jotted down notes, and Finn—like everyone else—waited for the real agenda to show itself.

"Next up, tourism numbers," Buck said, adjusting his glasses. "Leo, you've got the floor."

Leo, who'd already lined up his tabs, gave a summary with the speed and clarity of someone who'd practiced in the mirror: record autumn visits, uptick in restaurant reviews, and a five-fold increase in town hashtag mentions, "mainly due to the Free the Boulders movement and the—uh—unplanned media attention around the Wall incident." He tipped his phone to show a graph with a dramatic spike, and the bait shop owner let out a low whistle. "Guess we're famous now."

Finn saw Macy hide a smirk in her sleeve.

"And our channel's gotten a ton of subscribers," Leo finished, "but it's mostly folks wanting more of the 'Wall Lady.'"

From the corner, Martha Wilkins, recently dubbed "Wall Lady,"

gave a mock bow. "Tell them to come back in March, when we fight the snowplows for driveway rights."

Buck moved it along. "Appreciate the update. Moving on—main event: I've got a proposal to present to the council."

He clicked a battered old laptop, and the far wall glowed with a title slide: "Cedar Mountain Wilderness Proposal—Draft 1.0." The next slide, meticulously bullet-pointed, outlined the basics: designate a chunk of the upper mountain as "Limited Access Zone" during key months, restrict certain types of traffic, and establish a volunteer watch to monitor both wildlife and human impact.

As Buck spoke, his tone never wavered from "community service announcement," but every few lines, his eyes ticked toward the kitchen pass-through, where the swinging doors occasionally offered a glimpse of Chef Gary or a server ferrying cinnamon rolls. Finn saw the subtext as plainly as the council did: this was less about the deer, or even the watershed, and more about making sure nobody with a drone or a TikTok account went poking around where Silas—or anyone like him—wanted to be left alone.

Macy leaned in, voice barely above a breath. "He's doing it for Silas, isn't he?"

Finn nodded, watching Buck's hands as they ticked off points on the slides. "It's good cover. Nobody's gonna question a veteran who wants to protect the mountain."

The questions, when they came, were mild: would this hurt tourism? (No, most folks wouldn't notice.) Was this even legal? (Turns out, yes, if you worded the signage right and called it a 'pilot program.') What about the snowmobilers? (They already had their own trails.) Buck fielded every one with the steady, unyielding logic of a man who had spent twenty years enforcing the rules, and five years learning how to gently bend them.

The final slide read, in bold: "Propose immediate adoption. First year as trial only."

The bait shop owner glanced around the room, then said, "I move to vote."

The rest was formality: a show of hands, all up. The measure passed unanimously, to the quiet satisfaction of everyone in the room.

Only after the hands were down did Buck allow himself a smile, small and lopsided, the kind that threatened to escape and ruin his reputation.

Just as the agenda wrapped, a server in a Duck Creek hoodie hustled in with a folded napkin balanced on a plate. “Urgent,” he whispered, passing it to Buck with a bow. “From Sue.”

The room fell quiet as Buck opened the napkin. Inside, in Aunt Sue’s looping hand, it read:

*Sometimes the right thing is the quiet thing.  
Proud of you.  
—S*

Buck’s lips twitched. He folded the napkin once, then again, and tucked it into his breast pocket like a commendation. For the first time that morning, his stance softened, just a touch.

He looked toward the kitchen, and from behind the pass, a shadow that might have been Aunt Sue herself gave him a nod. Or maybe it was just the kitchen light flickering.

Either way, Buck straightened, tapped the table, and said, “Meeting adjourned. Pie and coffee are on the house.”

He left the room buzzing, the smell of cinnamon thick in the air, and the feeling that Duck Creek had done something rare and good for itself.

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Evening in Duck Creek was never about the darkness. It was about the way the light fought to stay alive: porch bulbs flickering on before the sun surrendered, icicle lights strung under every shop eave, and the rows of evergreen garland that looped from signpost to signpost like the arms of old friends stubbornly refusing to let go. Finn and Macy stepped into it from the warmth of Aunt Sue’s, their faces still tingling from the sugar, their ears buzzing from the business of small-town governance.

The snow had stopped, but the world was softer for it—every

sound hushed, every edge gentled by the fresh blanket. Their boots crunched in tandem as they made their way down Movie Ranch Road, Finn careful to match Macy's pace. She had a habit of pausing mid-step to point out whatever the snow revealed: the wind-spiraled drift at the curb, a perfect rabbit print in the slush, a spray of blue-needled spruce that caught the last glimmer from the hardware store's sign.

"This is my favorite time of day," Macy said, stopping to adjust the strap of her messenger bag. "Everything feels, I dunno—clean."

Finn agreed, though he'd never say it quite that way. "It's like you get a fresh sheet," he said, waving a hand at the unmarked sidewalk.

She laughed, low and delighted. "Or a reset button. Imagine if people actually used it."

He watched her brush a stray strand of auburn hair behind her ear, the motion as efficient as it was casual. Her cheeks were berry-bright from the cold, and she wore her patched-up parka like a suit of armor. Finn wanted to bottle the moment—her, the snow, the town humming with the memory of cinnamon and coffee. Instead, he just walked, letting his breath fall in step with hers.

They passed the dark windows of the Village Inn, then the post office, where a wreath the size of a truck tire hung slightly askew above the door. Every building on the block had gone in for some flavor of decoration: red ribbon at the gas station, gold tinsel in the lawyer's window, a spray of juniper and pine cones at the entry to the little bookstore that only opened on Saturdays. Even the wall—now sunk exactly four inches, per code—wore its own garland, draped in a lopsided swag that made Finn smile.

Macy noticed it, too. "You think Level did the decorating, or did Martha?"

"Level would have used a laser," Finn said. "Martha would have used a staple gun and half a bottle of peppermint schnapps."

They both laughed, letting the air between them fill with good, easy warmth.

For a stretch, neither spoke. Macy dug her hands into her coat pockets, then rocked back on her heels as they reached the crossroads at the edge of the village core. "So," she said, tone suddenly shy, "you think the wilderness thing will work?"

Finn considered. "If anyone can make the county leave something alone, it's Buck. He's got, like, a blacklist for bureaucrats who mess with his mountains."

Macy grinned. "You ever think about applying for his job when he retires?"

He shrugged. "They don't let you wear flannel in uniform."

She snorted. "You'd riot by week two."

He liked how she said "you'd riot," not "you'd quit." It made him feel—maybe for the first time ever—like sticking around wasn't a concession, but a choice.

They turned the corner onto the residential stretch, where every porch was lit up for the season and the snow on the rooftops glowed blue in the dusk. Macy gestured at a row of shrubs glittering with the kind of LED lights that cycled through every color in the visible spectrum. "I think the Johnsons are trying to land planes again," she said.

"They almost blinded a moose last year," Finn remembered.

Macy bit her lip, then said, "Next week, I'm running a winter foraging walk. You should come. I mean, only if you're not busy teaching Finn Jr. how to light a stove without blowing his eyebrows off."

Finn grinned. "Is that an invitation or a dare?"

She matched his smile. "Yes."

They walked on, the snow growing thicker underfoot, the houses thinning out as they moved toward the open. Ahead, the pines of the mountain started in a dark line, and above them, the stars began to appear—first just one, then a dozen, then the whole sky caught fire.

Finn slowed, then stopped. Macy looked at him, one eyebrow up. "You okay?"

He nodded, but didn't move. "Do you ever just—" He hesitated, unsure how to phrase it. "Sometimes, I think I know everything about this place. Then it does something like this, and I feel like a tourist again."

Macy tucked her chin into her collar, then looked at the snow, the lights, the far-off glimmer of the village behind them. "Maybe that's how you know it's home," she said. "If it still surprises you."

They stood together, quiet, as the cold settled in around them.

Macy shifted closer, her boot brushing against his. Finn felt a jolt of energy, sudden and unfamiliar.

"You want to see the Wall again?" she asked.

He blinked, then nodded. "It's on the way, right?"

They retraced their steps, boots squeaking on the freeze, until they stood before the now-legendary retaining wall. The Duck Creek Historical Society had outdone itself: on the face of the top boulder, a shiny brass plaque read, in careful script—

### **THE GREAT COMPROMISE OF FOUR INCHES**

**Let This Be a Lesson to All: Sometimes It's the Small Stuff That Matters.**

Below, a little hand-lettered sign added: "Dedicated to the spirit of getting over yourself."

Macy laughed, then reached out to trace the edge of the plaque. "Best four inches I've ever seen."

Finn snorted, then caught her gaze. "You think we'll get one?"

"A plaque?"

He nodded. "Maybe next year, they'll put up one for 'Best Pie Delivery in a Crisis.'"

She grinned, mouth a little crooked. "I'll take it. As long as you're on it, too."

The streetlamps flickered on, yellow and buttery, catching the snowflakes just as they started up again. The flakes were finer this time, drifting down in lazy spirals, settling on the shoulders of Macy's coat and the tips of her lashes.

Finn reached out, then hesitated. Macy, ever the field guide, beat him to it—her gloved hand found his, fingers lacing with the ease of someone who'd done it a thousand times in her head before actually making the move.

For a second, the world held its breath. Then, together, they walked on, hands joined, footsteps matching, the snow knitting a new path ahead of them.

"Pine needles make amazing tea," Macy said, out of nowhere.

Finn grinned, squeezing her hand. "You'll have to show me."

“I will,” she promised.

They turned the corner again, this time in perfect sync, and left the wall behind—just two more names in a village full of people learning, year by year, how to stick.

Above, the lights glimmered. Below, the snow caught every secret the world had to offer.

And Finn, for once, didn’t want to be anywhere but right there, at the end of the road, with Macy beside him and everything still possible.

## eighteen

# the last echo

THE FINAL DINNER rush at Aunt Sue's Chalet always felt a little like the last campfire before winter: slow, bright, everyone gathering a bit closer before the world went quiet for a season. By the time Finn arrived, most of the crowd had thinned out, leaving behind the echo of laughter and the faint, ghostly trails of wood smoke, coffee, and something sweeter—the lemony topnote of meringue or the vanilla hush of unfinished pie.

He slid into his usual booth under the big window. The light was mostly gone, leaving the outside black and reflective, a funhouse mirror of the room. A single worker remained, sweeping under tables, careful not to disturb the crumpled napkins or upended chairs. Someone had set the stereo to a playlist of old country songs, and a vinyl Johnny Cash hummed low from the corner, like the sound of boots on a back porch.

The tabletop here was the oldest in the place. You could see where the pine had been sanded so many times the grain had turned to topographic lines, rivers and valleys mapped by the thousand hands that had lingered here: families with sticky-fingered kids, high schoolers waiting for rides, hikers with sunburned necks and nowhere better to be.

Finn flattened his palm on the surface, feeling the warmth still caught there. He traced a long, curling scar in the finish—maybe from a knife, maybe just a trick of the wood—and let his eyes go soft. He could smell polish, and behind it, the deeper memory of pancake syrup and

coffee grounds, cut with a streak of lemon and the sharp, clean tingle of recent snow tracked in on boots.

The worker glanced his way, raised a chin in silent hello. Finn nodded back, then let himself settle, body and mind both slowing down to the same tick of the wall clock.

He almost missed the first signs.

A vibration, so faint it might've been imagined, started in the bench seat. Not a true sound—more like the hush before a storm, or the way the air grows dense in a church when someone is about to sing. The window glass hummed, then the whole booth took on a sympathetic resonance, like an old upright piano being coaxed to life by a distant, unseen hand.

Finn closed his eyes. He knew this feeling; Leo called them Echos, and he'd had them before, but never this strong. This was the kind that made your breath go slow and your hair lift in anticipation.

The voices came in like radio static—layered, overlapping, growing louder by degrees.

First: anger. Not Finn's, not anyone alive in the restaurant, but from some old wound left festering in the village's boards and beams.

"Thorne's gone and lost his mind, I swear it—"

"Poisoned half the creek, just like his father—"

"He's a liar, a thief—"

"You mark me, Martha, nothing but trouble—"

The shouts weren't random, but they weren't quite in sync, either; decades of argument condensed to a single, boiling minute. The names came clear: Thorne, Silas, sometimes "that boy," sometimes "the hermit." Finn watched as the ghost of a town meeting flickered to life in the space across the table—a patchwork crowd, their faces sharp with old anger, their words cutting through the thick night air.

He felt the pulse of it in his bones. Then, almost as quickly, the scene changed.

A new voice—warmer, honeyed, carried with it a lilt that cut through the bickering like sunlight on water.

"Every village needs a legend, honey. Let 'em talk."

"Those who live wild live free. The rest can file a complaint."

"If you leave a pie on the back step, he'll always return the tin."

Finn knew the voice even before he realized it: Aunt Sue. Not the real one, but an Echo of her, piecing together all the advice she'd ever handed out to the misfits and strays of Duck Creek. The voice layered over itself, a deck of cards shuffling, until it became a chorus of comfort.

Finn let the words wash over him. The bickering faded; the room softened.

Then, in the next moment—sharp, singular, completely new—came a third voice, one Finn had never heard outside of a whisper, or maybe a campfire story, told third- or fourth-hand.

"I am not lost. Not anymore."

"I watch the water. I read the weather. I remember every root and stone."

"They never found me because I was never truly gone."

The words were plain, but they carried a kind of weight that made Finn's throat close up for a second.

He opened his eyes. The restaurant was unchanged: chairs up, a broom in motion, country music threading through the air. But over it all, he felt the pressure of the Echo, stronger now, as if the walls themselves were amplifying a message built up over years and years of silence.

"Fifty years," the voice said, low and even. "Fifty years of peace. The mountain provides."

Finn's heart kicked, then steadied. He could picture it: a man with a beard, sunburnt and wild, tucked into the shadows above the creek, eyes keen and clear. There was no sadness to the voice, no regret—only a deep, unshakeable calm.

He saw it then, not with his eyes, but with that same sense that let him track a lost hiker by the break in a branch or the pattern of frost on the moss. Silas Thorne, once the most hated man in town, had simply slipped the leash of other people's stories. He'd made his home in the hush between trees, in the wind that rattled the aspen, in the cool, dark pockets of stone that even the most determined search party could never quite reach.

The Echo twisted. For a brief, dizzy second, Finn felt like he was falling—no, flying—over the whole rim of Duck Creek. He saw the sun rise from the north slopes, caught the flash of a deer bounding through the old quarry, tasted smoke from a cookfire hidden under a ring of

boulders. He felt the ache of winter, the relief of spring thaw, the miracle of finding food where no food should grow.

He saw, too, the way Silas kept the memory of the world intact: caches of tools, messages in code left under rocks, the unbroken chain of observation that made him a ghost, but also a guardian. Every year, a new trick. Every year, another season of outwitting those who wanted him gone, or worse, brought back to answer for crimes he'd never quite committed.

"Some choose solitude," Aunt Sue's voice whispered, close and kind. "Some have it thrust upon them. The trick is to learn how to thrive in either."

Finn blinked, and the spell broke. The world snapped back to normal—the sweep of the broom, the scrape of chair legs, the hum of the stereo now more distant, almost apologetic for having intruded.

He flexed his hand on the table. It was cold, the warmth of before drained away, replaced by a fine trembling in his fingertips. He looked at his arm and saw the goosebumps, the fine, silvered hair standing at attention.

The worker had finished sweeping, now leaned on the broom, watching him with a look that said, "You okay, man?" Finn gave a tiny nod, then glanced at the clock. Only ten minutes had passed, though it felt like he'd lived through half a century in the span of a heartbeat.

He sat there, letting the sensation fade, letting the pieces settle. The voices were gone, but the story remained, not as a burden but as a gift. He'd always wondered—why did Silas never break, never crack under the pressure of being hunted, haunted, blamed? Now Finn saw the answer in the fine grain of the wood, in the way the world could close in around you and still leave room enough to breathe, to grow, to become something more than the sum of your enemies.

"Fifty years of peace," Finn repeated, softly.

He traced the scar on the table one more time, then let his hand drop, feeling the weight of the moment settle somewhere between his heart and his stomach.

In the hush of the empty restaurant, he felt lighter than he had in years.

Outside, the snow had started up again, soft and slow. It coated the

world in quiet, just as it had fifty years before, just as it would a hundred years from now.

The Echo drained out of Finn slowly, leaving his body thrumming with aftershocks. His hand still hovered over the scar in the table, as if the pattern might shift and open up again. The old clock above the pie counter clicked over, marking the hour with a crisp, unambiguous tick.

He looked up and found Aunt Sue watching him from the kitchen pass, arms folded, head cocked to the side in that particular way she reserved for kids caught stealing jam or adults on the edge of saying something they'd regret. She padded out into the dining room, feet muffled by the rubber soles of her clogs, then slid into the booth across from him.

This close, she looked just as she always did: silver hair braided into a bun, white cardigan tidy and buttoned, hands scrubbed clean but still stained in the creases with the work of the day. The lines around her mouth and eyes weren't hard, but they radiated from decades of laughter and the quiet force of holding a town together. She didn't say anything at first, just rested her forearms on the table and waited for Finn to start.

He did, finally. "I heard him," he said. "Silas."

Aunt Sue nodded. "You look like you've seen a ghost. Or ten."

"It was... loud," Finn managed.

She tilted her head. "They say this booth catches everything. Stories, secrets, sorrows. Sometimes, if you lean in, you can still hear what people left behind."

Finn believed it.

Sue went quiet, picking at a stray crumb on the tabletop. Then she sighed—a sound with weight and history. "There's one last thing," she said, voice dropping low. "You need the whole story, or it'll gnaw at you."

She looked out at the dark window, then back at Finn. "Silas wasn't born a hermit. His folks ran the phone switch, back before they moved it to Cedar. Smart kid. Bookish, always fixing things. But when the company started dumping upstream—industrial stuff, the kind that kills everything—it was Silas who figured it out. He tried to warn them, tried to stop it. But you know how it goes. The suits blamed him.

Called him a liar, a vandal. His own neighbors turned on him. You heard the rest.”

Finn thought of the bickering voices in the Echo: the suspicion, the rage, the reflex to destroy what made you uncomfortable.

“He never left the mountain,” Sue continued. “But he learned to stop being seen.” She smiled, wistful. “Aunt Sue kept him fed, kept him in dry socks and wool blankets, but the world got meaner and he got quieter. Sometimes, I think he was happy that way. Maybe happier than the rest of us.”

Finn let the words fill the air. He tried to picture Silas as a kid, hands black with grease, laughing in the sun. The image hurt and healed all at once.

Aunt Sue patted the table between them. “It’s not right, what happened. But the mountain has a way of fixing things, over time.” She leaned in, her eyes clear and blue as the November sky. “You keep that story safe, Finn. And maybe, when the world is less stupid, you help it find its way out.”

He nodded, the old sense of duty flaring up—less an order than a torch being passed, gentle but impossible to refuse.

She reached into her cardigan and pulled out a small brass key, worn smooth by years of pocket rides. She set it on the table and nudged it forward with a single finger.

Finn looked at it, then at her.

She smiled. “It opens the storage behind the walk-in. The old switchboard’s there, and a lockbox. Inside, you’ll find every letter Silas sent me, and a stack of journals. I’ve been keeping them safe for fifty years. Maybe someday, you’ll need them.”

Finn picked up the key. It was lighter than it looked.

“Is it—” he hesitated, not sure how to ask.

“Evidence?” Sue finished for him. “Yes. And more.” She folded her hands, satisfied. “I think Silas wanted it that way. He never burned a bridge, just left it quiet and waiting for someone else to walk across.”

The conversation drifted for a while. They talked about pie, about the snow coming in, about how Level Pendergast still owed the Chalet for six years of back coffee. Sue laughed at that, a quick, bright sound that made the sadness a little easier to carry.

When it was time, Sue stood, stretched her back, and collected the mug Finn hadn't touched. "You locking up tonight?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

Finn slid out of the booth, the key hot in his palm. "I'll get the lights."

They walked the restaurant together, closing blinds, checking the latches, counting the chairs. When they reached the back, Sue opened the service door, letting in the bite of early winter. The night outside was clear, the snow so white it almost glowed, and the trees stood like silent witnesses along the edge of the lot.

Sue watched him from the threshold, eyes soft but steady. "You know," she said, "I still take him pie. Once a month, rain or shine. Sometimes he leaves a note in the empty tin. Sometimes not. It's enough to know he's out there."

Finn thought of the Echo, of the last words: Fifty years of peace.

He looked at the key, then back at Aunt Sue. "Will you ever stop?"

She shook her head, smiling. "Not in this lifetime."

They stood, just inside the door, and for a moment, Finn felt the whole world pause: the weight of all those voices, all those years, balanced perfectly on the point between silence and saying what needed to be said.

He slipped the key into his pocket and stepped out into the night. The cold hit hard, but it felt clean, like stepping into the world for the first time.

Aunt Sue locked the door, then flicked off the last light. The window went dark, the village settling into quiet, the story of Silas Thorne safe for another winter.

Finn turned toward home, feet crunching on the hardpack, the sound echoing up the mountain.

He didn't look back. He didn't need to.



## nineteen

# first snow

DUCK CREEK VILLAGE did not get snow; it got snowed. There was a difference. Rain crept in—leaked, seeped, cajoled the landscape into wetness. But snow like this landed with intent, blanketing overnight, making the world over without a vote. Movie Ranch Road was a white ribbon, and every roof, sign, mailbox, and pine branch wore a pillowed cap. The kind of snow that made the whole place silent, even after the sun came up and the town theoretically woke with it.

Finn found the transformation satisfying. He scraped last night's accumulation from his truck's windshield and admired the perfection of it: no tire tracks yet, not even the sidewalk plows had bothered. Finn took a deep breath—lung-stinging cold and a scent that was half woodsmoke, half ozone. He liked the way the cold bit, as if to check his intent.

He had been up before dawn, loading the truck bed with a thermos, a two-person trail lunch, and his own snowshoes (the old ones, not the plastic kid stuff the tourists bought). When he pulled on his jacket—flannel-lined, faded from seasons of sun and snow—he felt every stitch of his own history. He ran a quick check: gloves in the right pocket, compass in the left, headlamp batteries topped off. Finn was a guide by birth and by stubborn repetition.

He texted Macy: "Ready?"

The reply came back instantly: "Always."

He rolled out of his driveway, the tires hushing a fresh path through the street. Most places were still dark; a few porch lights glimmered under their powder hoods. The entire village was smaller this way, reduced to what the plows had managed to carve out. It was only November, but the world already felt postscript.

At the edge of the lane, Macy waited by the curb. She wore her big boots, and the wool coat with the patched elbows and half a dozen pins stuck to the lapel—some of plants, some of band logos, and one that looked suspiciously like a miniature donut. Her messenger bag was slung across her chest and bulged at the seams. Two snowshoes—vintage, wood-and-rawhide—were lashed together and bounced against her knee as she rocked back and forth, impatient.

Finn pulled up and popped the passenger door. “Sorry,” he said. “Had to warm her up a little.”

Macy grinned, climbed in, and dropped the snowshoes on the dash with a confidence that said she’d never believe in airbags. “You know,” she said, rubbing her gloved hands together, “you’d think winter would kill all the smells, but it’s still very Duck Creek in here.”

He sniffed, amused. “Is that good or bad?”

“Depends,” she said, “on whether you like pine pitch and burnt toast.”

They drove through the silent main drag. Finn pointed with his chin at the General Store, the windows taped with brown butcher paper. “Closed for Season,” said the marker in loopy cursive.

Macy nodded. “The sign at the bakery is even better. ‘See you in April, unless the snow melts first!’ It’s like they’re hedging their bets against global warming and laziness.”

Finn glanced sideways. “You want to stop for coffee? Or did you already—”

She shook her head. “I brought a thermos. Leftover from last night’s experimental blend.”

He raised a brow. “Should I be worried?”

“I added pine needles,” she said, then grinned wider at his skeptical look. “Just a few. I promise you won’t get poked.”

The rest of the shops were shuttered. Some had gone in for the full hibernation: plywood over doors, patio furniture stacked and wrapped

in plastic, garden flags furled tight against the flagpoles. A few of the more optimistic business owners left up the Christmas lights, which glittered pale blue and red even in the late morning sun.

Finn slowed at an intersection, letting a pair of mule deer cross. They picked their way across the hardpack, dark against the white, pausing only to flick their ears at the truck before moving on. Macy watched them go, face pressed to the glass.

"Every year," she said, "they figure out the shortest route between the woodlot and the cabins. I used to name them, but they never stick around long enough."

He eased the truck back into gear. "I think they like the idea of you, but not the commitment."

"That makes two of us," Macy said, and then she laughed, the sound fogging up the window even more.

Their breath was visible in the cab, small clouds rising and dissipating in the chill. Finn kept the heater on low, preferring the world's temperature to the truck's. He liked how the cold sharpened the senses, kept you alert. Next to him, Macy looked right at home in the winter. She'd once told him her dream job was 'seasonal field guide,' and now, watching her crack her knuckles and scan the treeline for bird movement, Finn believed she could do it for real.

"How far you wanna go today?" he asked.

She considered. "Long enough that we can say we earned it, not so far we have to dig a snow cave to survive."

"Solid plan," Finn agreed.

The houses grew sparser, and the road twisted uphill, into the shadow of the north slope. Here, the snow was untouched—pristine, except for the signature of wind. Finn slowed at the turnoff for the Navajo Lake trailhead. He parked on the shoulder, leaving the truck at an angle that would make for an easy getaway if the storm moved in faster than forecast.

They got out, boots squeaking in the fresh powder. The world was instantly, intensely quiet. Even their voices seemed to come out softer, as if filtered through the snow.

Macy stretched, checked her gaiters, and shouldered her bag. She

looked at Finn, then up at the endless sky. "You ever feel like you're the only two people left in the world?"

He looked at her, at the path ahead, at the muffled universe waiting for them. "Maybe today we are."

She started down the trail, snowshoes in one hand, and Finn fell in step beside her. For a moment, neither of them spoke, letting the crunch of their boots and the slow, wild rhythm of breathing be the only sound.

Behind them, Duck Creek Village stood silent, every window dark, every lot untracked, the whole place waiting for spring or for whatever came next.

Finn glanced back, once, and saw their footprints already softening in the next wave of wind. He grinned, then caught up to Macy, ready for whatever the day had left to show them.

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The trailhead at Navajo Lake looked even emptier than the town, but that didn't mean they were alone. Finn spotted Leo before Macy did—hard to miss him in a puffed-out blue parka and with a tripod slung like a samurai sword over his shoulder. The open lot was otherwise unmarked except for the black skeletons of a few picnic tables, their benches trimmed in snow so thick it looked fake.

Leo was busy planting his phone on a tiny metal arm, propping it at the edge of a snowbank. When he caught sight of Finn and Macy, he waved the tripod in both hands, nearly losing his balance.

"Is it possible for a human to overdose on vitamin D?" Leo called out. "Because I think my retinas are already permanently scorched."

He crunched through the snow to meet them, the tripod leaving a line of dots behind him. Macy raised her hands over her eyes, pretending to shield herself. "You look like you're ready to climb Everest. Are you vlogging the rescue?"

Leo grinned. "Not rescue. Artistry. This is, quote, 'the sickest lighting I've ever seen outside a Hollywood set.'" He motioned toward the white lake and the untouched forest. "I'm getting drone shots later, but first I need some human-interest b-roll. You two are perfect."

He set up the tripod, fiddled with the phone angle, then backed up and gestured for Finn and Macy to walk toward the trailhead. "Just pretend I'm not here. But, like, in a way that makes you look extremely photogenic."

Finn snorted. "That's not happening," he said, but he didn't mind the attention. Macy rolled her eyes, but squared her shoulders and stomped into the frame.

"Walk slower!" Leo barked, waving his hands in the air. "I want to see the snowflakes drifting as you pass. Also, Finn—try not to look like you're being hunted."

Finn glanced at Macy, who was already smirking. He said, under his breath, "This is your fault for having such symmetrical eyebrows."

She snickered, then leaned into him, shoulder to shoulder as they passed in front of the camera.

Leo gave them a thumbs-up, then checked his screen. "Looks even better than I thought. The white balance is, like, insane. You two are gonna get me so many likes."

He quick-packed the gear, then jogged to catch up. "Mind if I tag along for a bit? I need action shots. Plus, the comments are obsessed with your dynamic."

Macy looked at Finn. "The algorithm demands it," she said solemnly.

Finn shrugged. "Trail's wide enough for three."

They started up the path together. The air was colder here, and the light sharper, every edge defined. The first mile wound through tall spruce, the branches heavy and bending under their new coats. Occasionally a limb would lose its grip on the snow and drop a curtain of powder, which the wind would scatter before it hit the ground.

Leo stopped every hundred feet, filming at odd angles or shoving the camera nearly into their faces. He offered constant, cheerful commentary. "This is wild, you guys—last week it was just mud, now it's Narnia." Or: "Hold up, look at this—paw prints! That's a fox, right?"

Macy crouched to examine the tracks. "Definitely a fox. See how close the back paws land to the front?"

Leo angled the phone down. "People in chat are gonna eat this up."

They kept going, Finn in the lead, then Macy, then Leo, who alternated between filming and narrating. Occasionally, Finn would look back and catch Leo talking into his phone about the ‘local experts’ or the ‘unbelievable trail conditions,’ the sound of his excitement echoing just slightly in the open cold.

After a half mile, they reached an overlook. The view was a stunner—lake rimmed with unbroken snow, distant hills blued by shadow, the water underneath invisible except for a thin, uncertain gleam where the sun caught the ice. Leo staged them at the guardrail, shot some close-ups, and then turned the camera on himself.

“Duck Creek Vibes,” he said, voice low and dramatic, “winter edition. Out here with Finn, the legend, and Macy, the literal forager queen. First snow, first tracks. Stay tuned, because if one of them falls in the lake, I’m livestreaming the rescue.”

Macy gave a thumbs-up. “You’ll be the one falling in, Leo.”

He grinned. “True, but I’ll get more views that way.”

Finn watched them, the way they sparred and joked. Leo’s energy was high, but not manic—he seemed genuinely happy, more at ease in this frozen quiet than Finn would’ve guessed. Macy matched him, sometimes redirecting with a fact (“That’s Engelmann spruce, not blue spruce—smell the difference”) or a dry jab (“Careful, Leo, the last person who called me ‘forager queen’ got stuck with a month of wild onion stew”).

After the overlook, the trail bent into denser woods. The snow got deeper, the sun slanted through the trees in stripes. Here, Leo got busy with close-ups—bark, lichen, drifts of snow curling off logs—and let Finn and Macy get ahead.

After a few minutes, Finn heard Leo’s voice again: “That’s a wrap! I got more than I need.” He jogged up to them, breath fogging. “I’m gonna cut back—edit this and maybe get some drone before dark. You two go on and do your, uh, nature thing.”

Finn nodded, glad for the peace but also aware he’d sort of miss the running commentary. Macy gave Leo a mock salute. “You know where to find us,” she said.

“Yeah, I do.” Leo grinned, then tucked his phone away, and for a

second looked almost shy. "Thanks, guys. Seriously. You make this way more fun."

He waved, then loped back toward the trailhead, whistling a tune that sounded like the start of some old video game.

Finn and Macy walked on, the sound of their boots the only thing left. The snow had a way of swallowing everything else: no wind, no birds, just the steady crunch and the measured rhythm of their breaths.

Macy adjusted her pack. "It's weird," she said. "A month ago, we were all yelling about walls and code and the world ending. Now it's just... this."

He looked at her. "You miss the drama?"

She smiled. "No. I just didn't expect it to feel so—clean."

They rounded a curve, and the woods closed around them, deep green and blue, shadow and snow. For the first time that morning, Finn felt the quiet settle all the way in, as if they'd stepped through a door into another world.

They walked, side by side, through the hush, leaving only two sets of tracks in the perfect white behind them.

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Finn and Macy moved at an easy pace, neither racing nor wasting energy. The trail was well-marked—if you could call any trail "marked" in this much snow—but both had good eyes for the subtle stuff: the way a branch hung lower over the true route, the places where the drifts slumped like resting animals. Macy took point through the narrows, and Finn watched the way her boots barely left more than a dent, like she'd learned to step on top of the world.

They didn't talk much at first, but the quiet wasn't awkward; it was as if the snow wanted silence, and they were polite enough to provide it. Only after a mile or so, when the trees fell away and the path widened, did Macy glance back at him and say, "You hear from Leo since last week's Wall saga?"

"Just a couple texts," Finn replied. "He's got a winter gig now. Drone tours for rich folks who want 'extreme content' without the risk."

Macy laughed. "I hope he charges extra for frostbite insurance."

Finn grinned. "He's using your phrase—'survivor's premium.' Says it's trending."

They walked on, and the trail bent into a shallow S-curve. Here, the snow had drifted into sculpted ridges, wind-carved like sand dunes. Finn pointed out a line of fresh tracks threading the ridge. "Coyote," he said. "Solo. You can tell by the way the paw print almost cuts into the next one—like it doesn't want to waste a step."

Macy squinted. "Could be a fox. Smaller stride."

He crouched, brushed the top layer away. "See the claw marks? Longer than my thumb."

She peered over his shoulder, then conceded. "Fine, coyote. But if it was a fox, it'd be way cuter."

He stood, dusting his gloves. "Death always is, up close."

She made a face. "Thanks, Thoreau. Way to kill the mood."

He offered a mock bow. "You're welcome."

They reached a clearing, and the world opened up: blue sky, white ground, a line of dark pines on the far side like the closing of a parenthesis. Finn stopped, let Macy walk ahead. She took a slow turn, head tipped back, eyes closed.

"You miss being out here?" Finn asked, not quite sure where the question came from.

Macy opened her eyes, blinked at the brightness. "Every day. Kitchen's fine, and Sue's great, but..." She waved at the empty air. "This is the only place my brain shuts up."

He nodded, understanding completely. "You ever think about guiding?" he asked.

She laughed, a little incredulous. "Me? I'd get us lost on purpose just to check out the lichen."

"That's what people pay for now," Finn said. "Personalized adventure. You'd be a hit."

She considered this. "Maybe next season. If I survive this winter."

He didn't press, just watched the way the sun caught in her hair, how the red and gold flickered in the wind.

A little farther on, the trees thinned and they could see the lake—a perfect oval, surface glassy, rimmed with a halo of snow where the wind

had swept it clean. The ice at the near edge was clear enough to show a world beneath: long, stringy weed, bubbles frozen mid-rise, and, faintly, the dark smudge of a sleeping trout.

Macy knelt by the edge, gloved hand splayed against the ice. "You ever think about what's under there?" she asked. "The whole world, just waiting."

Finn knelt, too. "Sometimes I think it's better not to know. There's enough mystery above ground."

She grinned. "You're only saying that because you're afraid of getting wet."

He didn't deny it. "Fair."

They sat, boots dangling over the edge. Finn pulled the thermos from his pack, poured two cups, and handed one to Macy. She sipped, made a face. "You hate it."

He did, but he didn't show it. "It's... bracing."

She smiled, accepting the lie. "I'll bring hot chocolate next time."

They stared out over the frozen lake. In the silence, Finn felt a pressure building—a thing he needed to say, but couldn't quite form. He turned the key in his pocket, rubbing it between gloved fingers.

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

Macy glanced over, her eyes sharp and unblinking. "Always."

He fished the key out and set it on his knee. "This is for the storage behind the walk-in at Sue's. The old phone switchboard is in there, but there's also a lockbox. Full of... letters. Evidence. Everything about Silas. Sue kept it all these years."

Macy picked up the key, turned it over, then looked back at Finn. "Why are you telling me now?"

He shrugged, awkward. "I don't know. Maybe because you'd know what to do with it. Or maybe because I don't want to be the only one who knows."

She traced the grooves of the key with her thumb. "You planning to go through it?"

"I thought about it," Finn said. "But then I thought—maybe it's better if it stays a secret. Maybe the story's more important than the facts."

Macy nodded slowly. "You're afraid of ruining the legend."

"I'm afraid of ruining the quiet," Finn said, voice lower than before.

They let it sit. The wind shifted, whistling low through the reeds. Macy set the key down between them.

"I think," she said, "that stories matter, but people do too. Maybe it's not about exposing the truth. Maybe it's about keeping the memory alive."

He looked at her, at the way the sunlight caught on her cheek, and felt something in his chest relax.

"I can hold onto it," she said. "Until you decide what's right."

Finn smiled, small but real. "Thanks."

They sipped the rest of the coffee, letting the world be still around them. The sky was so clear it looked fake, the blue bleeding into infinity. When the sun slipped lower, Finn stood and offered Macy a hand up.

"Ready to head back?" he asked.

She took his hand, squeezed it. "Race you to the top of the switchbacks."

He grinned. "Loser makes dinner?"

She was already moving, feet flying over the crusted snow. He chased after, close behind, both of them laughing into the cold.

When they reached the first rise, out of breath and faces bright with cold, they stopped to catch themselves. Macy pulled her hood tighter and said, "Weird, how a place can look empty and full at the same time."

Finn nodded. "Duck Creek's good at that."

They walked together, arms almost brushing, through the blue shadow of late afternoon. Behind them, the lake lay silent, the world beneath the ice untouched and secret. In front of them, the path home wound clear, two sets of footprints side by side, unbroken all the way back to the village.

Finn didn't know what would happen with the box, or with the story of Silas, or even with himself. But he knew this much: it mattered, and so did the person walking next to him.

For now, that was enough.

As they hiked back, the shadows lengthened and the sky went navy. The first stars came out, sharp and precise, and Finn pointed them out to Macy, naming each one as if she'd never seen them before.

She listened, not because she needed to, but because it was his story to tell.

And together, in the hush of the new winter, they wrote the next page.

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The hike back was easier, though the light had grown faint. The snow picked up a lavender hue, and every sound seemed dialed down another notch. Finn and Macy followed their earlier tracks, the old route mostly holding but the powder filling in the shallowest prints.

At the first bend, Finn noticed something new: a narrow line slashing across their trail at a steep angle, different from any animal they'd seen that day. It was a smooth, shallow groove, straight as an arrow, running from the lower creek up toward the Cascade Falls overlook.

He stopped, crouched for a closer look. "You see that?"

Macy dropped next to him, head tilted. The line was too wide and regular to be left by a hoof or paw. It was a groove, edged by the faint print of boots—worn, misshapen, never a matched pair.

"Staff," she said, voice a whisper. "It's his."

Finn ran his glove along the groove. At the edge, a single boot mark showed the heavy arch, the outside edge chewed and flat, just the way they'd always said. The stories were right: Silas came out on the first big snow, always headed the same direction, always alone.

They both straightened. Finn caught Macy's eye. In the blue hush, her face was all angles and shadows, but he could see the smile tugging at her mouth.

"You think he saw us?" she asked.

"Probably watched the whole way," Finn said. "He knows every path."

She nodded, once. Then, with perfect clarity, she stepped aside—leaving the new trail untouched. Finn followed her lead. They circled wide, crossing over the undisturbed white, careful not to trample the groove.

Neither spoke. The gesture said everything. Some things you chased; others you let be.

At the last switchback, Finn looked over his shoulder. The groove disappeared into the stand of fir, then into shadow, as if the mountain itself had swallowed the tracks. He felt a strange, settling peace, the kind that came with knowing exactly where you stood in the order of things.

When the lights of Duck Creek flickered on in the valley below, Macy slowed and let her hand fall to Finn's. He took it, no awkwardness, just a gentle squeeze.

The final stretch of trail was all downhill. As they walked, the village glowed warmer with each step. Porch bulbs and holiday strings came alive, each window a square of gold against the growing dark.

At the truck, Finn paused before opening the door. Macy leaned against him, her head just below his shoulder. Together, they watched the last blush of sunset stain the rim above the lake.

"Next time," she said, "bring better coffee."

He grinned, relief and happiness mingling in the cold air. "Deal."

They loaded their gear and climbed in, the cab fogging with breath and warmth. Finn started the engine, but neither of them moved to leave right away.

Out the windshield, the world was blue and white and endless. Behind them, a single track led into the night—one set of boot prints, one steady groove.

Ahead, the road was clear.

They drove home, lights twinkling behind them, the rest of the story waiting patiently for spring.

## epilogue: winter's promise

Duck Creek Village took on a whole new character under December snow. Not just the buried mailboxes or the roofs rimmed in fresh white, but the way the air itself seemed denser, like even sound molecules needed an extra nudge to get moving. On days like this, Finn found the quiet almost musical—the crunch of boots on the hardpack, the puffs of breath from his group, the way conversation traveled clean and true in the cold.

He led his morning hikers along the Lakeview Trail, a three-mile loop winding just north of the village proper. The group was small—a couple from Las Vegas who kept calling each other “babe” and a grad student from Cedar City who stopped every ten yards to photograph lichen or berry clusters with a camera that probably cost more than Finn’s truck. All three wore matching blue parkas from a popular brand, the logos shining new against the old woods.

The trail itself was a storybook cliché: untouched powder, tree limbs bending under the weight, animal tracks crisscrossing the path like dotted lines on a treasure map. Finn stopped the group at the first break in the trees, held up a gloved hand, and pointed to a spot just off the main tread.

“Rabbit,” he said. “Probably snowshoe hare, see the long rear prints?” He knelt and brushed the snow lightly, exposing the signature

"Y" shape. "Look at the pattern—wide apart, like it was really booking it."

The woman from the couple crouched beside him, her cheeks flushed pink and her hair already clumping with static. "Wow," she said, voice soft. "Do you think something was chasing it?"

"Good question," Finn said, scanning the surrounding snow. "If you see another set—" He stopped, found it, then grinned. "There. See the single line, little dots right in the center?" He drew a line in the snow with a stick. "That's a fox. Probably hunting."

The man nudged his partner, then pointed at Finn. "That is so wild, babe. You should get this on your story."

She already had her phone out, framing the track, the guide, the whole tableau. "Do you mind?" she asked Finn, gesturing with the phone.

He shook his head. "Go for it."

As she filmed, the grad student stepped in, peering through her big camera. "Did you know their coats turn white in winter? Camouflage," she said, eyes not leaving the viewfinder.

Finn nodded. "Almost all the mammals here swap coats when the snow comes. Weasels, voles, even some of the squirrels."

The couple exchanged a look—half amazement, half "is he making this up?"—but the woman just whispered, "So cool," as she zoomed in for a close-up.

They moved on. The air was colder in the shaded stretch, the sun not yet high enough to melt the frost from the upper branches. Finn used his walking stick to knock icicles from a bent-over aspen. "Watch your heads here," he called back. "These things are heavy when they drop."

The grad student asked, "Have you ever seen them break on someone?"

He shook his head. "Not yet. But you don't want to be the first."

As they hiked, Finn kept the conversation easy, tossing out quick facts or pointing out curiosities: the way the snow formed a shelf on the junipers, the rattle of dried seed pods when you shook a stalk of mullein, the glitter of sun through a patch of black ice. Every so often

he checked the couple, making sure the pace was good and nobody was about to faceplant.

When the path leveled out, they stopped for water. The woman took the opportunity to sidle up beside Finn, phone out again. "Hey," she said quietly, "can I ask you something?"

He shrugged. "That's the job."

She smiled, then bit her lip. "We actually found Duck Creek from a video. These two influencers—Toby and Summer? They were here in the fall, did this big piece on 'hidden wonders.' Anyway, it totally worked. We'd never even heard of the place before."

Finn smiled, feeling a mild rush of pride—an emotion he'd never once associated with Toby. "They didn't mention the cold, though, did they?"

She laughed. "They did, actually. But they made it look magical. Like Narnia but with better pie."

"That's pretty accurate," Finn admitted. "The pie here is legendary."

She brightened, then called over her partner. "See, babe? I told you."

He gave a thumbs-up, already unwrapping a granola bar.

The grad student piped up, "I follow their channel, too. They pivoted to, like, sustainable travel last month. I think they're doing a whole piece on how to not mess up places when you visit?"

Finn nodded, surprised to find that the knowledge didn't annoy him at all. "That's good. Duck Creek could use more of that."

They sipped water and snacked in silence for a minute. Finn let himself enjoy it—the camaraderie, the weird new energy that came from sharing a trail with strangers who weren't looking to conquer the mountain, just to witness it.

When they started moving again, the woman asked, "How long have you been doing this?"

He considered. "Guiding? Since I was sixteen. In Duck Creek, you learn early."

"Do you ever get tired of it?" she pressed, breath fogging in the air.

Finn thought of the summer jobs in the heat, the springs spent ankle-deep in slush, the endless, thankless autumns digging out tree

roots or resetting boundary markers for people who didn't know how to read a map.

He shook his head. "Not really. There's always something new. Or someone."

She smiled, and Finn sensed she wanted to say something else, but the moment passed.

They finished the loop just as the sun cleared the pines, sending daggers of light across the snow. At the trailhead, the couple paused to take a selfie with the iced-over lake in the background. The grad student wandered off the path, camera up, snapping a flurry of shots at a cluster of ice crystals fanned out on a fallen log.

Finn lingered a little longer, watching them—tourists who, for once, looked like they might actually leave the trail better than they found it.

He checked his watch. Eleven sharp. Time to get back to town.

As he walked the final stretch, boots breaking the thin crust that had formed since sunrise, Finn thought of all the times he'd taken this route: with Leo, with his father, with people who only stayed long enough to miss what they'd lost. He wondered what it would look like if, for once, nothing changed—not the trail, not the snow, not the little world they'd built from the dust of all the old stories.

At the parking lot, the couple loaded into a rented Subaru, still laughing, still passing the phone back and forth to check the photos. The grad student lingered by the map kiosk, jotting notes in a battered field book.

Finn stood for a moment in the hush, letting the air bite his cheeks, then started the walk toward the village center.

Every step sent a clean, satisfying crunch up his legs. Every breath tasted like the best parts of winter: cold, pure, and alive with possibility.

Finn smiled, just a little. It felt like being home.

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Finn cut through the center of the village, breath coming in sharp pulls that fogged and vanished almost instantly. The cold was clean, but the sky had shifted; light now filtered through high clouds, turning every-

thing blue and silver, as if the world had been dipped in old film stock. He pushed open the door to Ground + Toasted, instantly losing all sense of winter's bite.

Inside, the place was alive with quiet energy. Every table was claimed by some configuration of local: a pair of snowplow drivers, hands red and knuckly around their cups; a retiree with a library book and a slice of pie; a knot of high schoolers, their jackets still dusted with snow, arguing in whispers about whether they'd risk the hill behind the school after lunch. Every breath in the room smelled of coffee, cinnamon, and the syrupy topnote of bread just out of the toaster.

Leo sat in the back corner, already waving both arms like he was marooned on an ice floe and Finn was the rescue plane. He'd ditched his parka, revealing a Duck Creek Rec basketball tee, and had his phone set up on a little tripod facing the street. His laptop, open and glowing, displayed a video paused mid-frame: a drone's-eye view of snow-wrapped rooftops, the mountains gold at sunset, and a looping banner at the bottom—"HIDDEN WONDERS: Duck Creek Unplugged."

Finn made a beeline for the counter, ordered a black coffee (just one, he'd learned his lesson about Leo's experimental blends), and took it to the back, boots thumping hollow on the wide-plank floor.

"Get over here, man," Leo said, grinning big. "This is the best day for lighting—I mean, look at it!" He gestured at the window, then at the laptop. "Toby dropped the new winter feature last night. Three hundred thousand views and counting. And the comments? I've never seen people this hyped about a place I actually live in."

He clicked play, and for a minute they just watched. Toby and Summer, bundled up and breathless, narrated the cold with a sincerity Finn hadn't known them capable of. They hiked the falls, ate pie at Aunt Sue's, even spent a whole segment cleaning up trash on the edge of the rim—never once mentioning Silas or any of the old ghosts. The message was different now: here's a place, here's how to visit without screwing it up, here's why it matters.

Finn watched the couple from his hike pop up in a wide shot, blue parkas vivid against the white, waving shyly at the drone overhead.

When the video ended, Leo spun his laptop and pulled up the comment section. "Look at this. 'Bucket list.' 'Booked a cabin for next

year.' 'I'm obsessed with that pie place.' And—my personal favorite—'Wish we could see more locals telling their stories instead of just influencers.'" He pointed at Finn with the last line. "They mean you, man."

Finn sipped his coffee, letting the warmth seep into his hands. "It's not like I'm gonna start a channel."

"Never say never," Leo said, but he wasn't pushing. He looked proud, in a way that made Finn both pleased and embarrassed.

The bell over the door chimed. Both looked up. Macy stepped in, a woven basket looped over one arm and a wool hat pulled down low over her ears. The basket was filled to the brim with things that had no business looking that bright in December—sprigs of wintergreen, fat pine cones, a twist of cattail, and a plastic bag crammed with scarlet rosehips. Her cheeks were red as the berries, and her hair, not quite contained by the hat, caught the café lights in a soft halo.

She spotted them, picked her way through the tables, and set the basket down between Leo and Finn. "You would not believe how hard it is to harvest pine nuts in mittens," she said, shaking her hands out. "Or maybe you would."

Leo raised both eyebrows, impressed. "What's the haul for?"

Macy shrugged. "Some of it's for the Chalet—Gary wants to test a new cake. The rest is foraged curriculum. I've got six Girl Scouts showing up tomorrow, and Sue bet I couldn't get them to eat wild food before spring."

Finn grinned. "You're going to win. No kid can resist free candy, even if it's a berry that's mostly seed."

She smirked, then pulled a thermos from her coat pocket. "Want to taste?" She poured Finn a shot in the plastic cap, and he steeled himself before taking a sip.

He braced for another round of 'experimental blend' trauma, but the liquid inside was sweet and sharp, like Christmas in a bottle. "That's actually... really good," he said, surprised.

Macy looked satisfied. "Rosehip syrup, with a little spruce tip. Vitamin C, and it'll keep for months."

Leo leaned in. "If you bottle that, you could go viral. Cottage food hustle is, like, the next big thing. I'll shoot you a promo video."

Macy shook her head, but she was laughing. "Maybe after finals."

They sat there, the three of them, watching the world outside turn a softer shade of gray. People came and went—retirees, a snowmobiling couple, the middle school science teacher with his two rambunctious kids. Finn saw the couple from his hike pass by the window, still in their matching coats, the woman pointing excitedly at the roofline of the General Store.

For a while, nobody spoke. It was the kind of easy silence that only worked when the company was exactly right.

Leo broke it, as he always did, but softer this time. “You ever think about how weird it is, all of us still here? I mean, this place? Most people can’t wait to bail.”

Macy set the thermos down, her hand lingering on the table. “I used to want to leave,” she said. “But now it feels like I’d be missing something if I did. Like the mountain would go on, but I’d just be watching it from the outside.”

Finn nodded, feeling the truth of it. “It’s not perfect. But it’s ours.”

Leo made a face, but there was nothing mocking in it. “This is the best crew I’ve ever run with,” he said. “Even if you two are both, like, one bad day from going full hermit.”

Macy rolled her eyes, but she was smiling. “I’ll take the woods. You can have the algorithm.”

He gave her a salute. “Copy that.”

Outside, the clouds thinned, and a last gold streak of sun hit the peaks above the rim. The whole valley seemed to pulse for a moment—brighter, sharper, more itself.

Leo checked his watch, then started packing up. “Sunset shoot’s at four. If I hustle, I can get drone before the snow starts again.”

Macy put the thermos back in her pocket, tucked the basket under her arm, and slipped on her gloves. “Good luck. Watch out for the wind—it’s picking up.”

He gave them both a half-hug, then was gone, out the door and into the whitening light.

Finn and Macy sat a while longer, the table now littered with the debris of their little summit: a single capful of syrup, a napkin scribbled with notes, the faint memory of coffee and cinnamon lingering in the air.

"So," Macy said. "You want to walk back together?"

Finn nodded. He grabbed his empty cup, tossed it in the bus bin, and followed her out. The bell chimed after them, a sound that felt like both an ending and a beginning.

Behind them, the windows glowed warm. Ahead, the street was already filling with new snow, and the day's last light bent over the roofs in a bright, impossible line.

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The wind had gone slack by the time Finn and Macy stepped out onto Movie Ranch Road, but the new snow came just the same—small, lacy flakes that caught in their hair and tickled their eyelashes as they walked. The world was quieter than ever, and the late afternoon light spilled long pink stripes across the mountain peaks, painting the whole village in watercolor shades of blue and rose.

Most of the shops kept their holiday lights up until well after New Year's. Even in daylight, you could see them winking from window sills and strung along porch beams: bright bulbs, handmade ornaments, a spray of gold tinsel curling around the Outfitter's sign. The air buzzed with an energy that made the day feel less like winter and more like a prelude to something grand.

Finn felt Macy's hand slip into his, the skin cold but the grip certain. They moved in easy sync, boots leaving twin lines in the undisturbed snow. He liked walking this way, with no real hurry—just letting the world reveal itself bit by bit.

They stopped at the corner by the new-old wall, where the village had thrown its biggest party and its worst argument of the fall. It looked different now. The fresh stones had been scrubbed clean, and someone—maybe Level, maybe the Historical Society—had wound the whole length with garlands of pine boughs and clipped holly, green against the pale stone. A string of battery-powered fairy lights blinked in and out, soft and cheerful.

Macy laughed, seeing the decoration. "That's got to be Martha. No way Level would approve of non-regulation wiring."

"Level would cite the wall for being too festive," Finn said.

As if on cue, a white county truck rumbled past, the word "INSPECTION" stenciled on the door. Lawrence Pendergast himself was at the wheel, one arm propped on the window, the other glued to a clipboard even in the cab. He glanced at the wall, then at Finn and Macy, then offered a solemn, grudging nod before disappearing down the lane.

Finn saluted with two fingers, and Macy giggled, squeezing his hand.

"Four inches of compromise," she said. "That's what it takes to save a town."

They started to move on, but something at the base of the wall caught Finn's eye. He squatted, brushed away the dusting of snow, and found a small wooden figure—maybe three inches tall, perfectly carved. Two people stood side by side: a man and a woman, their faces set in profiles so detailed you could see the arch of a brow, the squint of a smile. The woman wore her hair in a loose knot; the man wore a ball-cap, a detail so precise it couldn't be coincidence.

Macy stooped beside him, her breath turning to cloud above the figures. "That's us," she said, soft.

Finn turned the carving in his hand. The base was signed with a single letter S, burned in with a hot pin.

They looked at each other, the whole world briefly compressed into that narrow strip of sidewalk, the distant echo of Level's truck, and the heavy hush of falling snow.

Macy touched the figure's head. "He knows. He's happy for us, I think."

Finn nodded, not trusting his voice. He tucked the carving into his pocket, feeling the wood warm instantly to his thigh.

They walked on, past the houses now lit up, porch by porch, the smell of dinners and fireplaces mixing on the air. It was almost dark when they reached Aunt Sue's Chalet. A hand-painted "Closed for Season" sign hung on the door, but the windows were gold and fogged, and somewhere inside a radio played old country in muffled bursts.

Smoke coiled from the chimney, and through the glass Finn saw someone moving in the kitchen—one of the cooks, probably, prepping

for the holiday parties that ran all winter long. He wondered if Sue herself was somewhere in the back, or if she'd finally taken a night off.

He and Macy lingered on the walkway, watching the light, the snow, the steady rhythm of the world at rest. They were so close that Finn could see the pale freckles on her nose, the frost collecting on her eyebrows. She looked up at him, her eyes almost violet in the dusk.

"I've been thinking," Finn said, voice scratchy from cold and from everything he wanted to say at once. "When the thaw comes, maybe we could do something different. Like, a real foraging trail. With signs, maps, teaching kids what's edible and what's not. I could clear the paths, you could teach the classes. We could get Leo to do the promo."

Macy grinned, wide. "Like a pilot program?"

He shrugged. "More like a way to get people out here without destroying what makes it special."

She squeezed his hand, hard. "I think I know someone who's been running that program for fifty years already," she said.

Finn smiled, feeling the shape of her words settle into his bones.

Behind them, the Chalet glowed on, and the village slowly gathered itself for evening—people heading home, windows winking out one by one, a hush falling as the snow thickened.

They stood a long time, just letting the silence and the cold and the faint warmth from the lights soak in.

When they turned to leave, Finn glanced down and saw two sets of prints, side by side, running from the Chalet all the way back to the start of the road. And, faintly, another set: older, one-footed, leaving only a dragging line from the edge of the woods to the village and back again.

He didn't point them out. He knew Macy had already seen.

They headed home, the carving pressed safe in his pocket, the world around them settling into the kind of peace you only found at the tail end of winter.

Above them, the stars sharpened one by one, and in the dark between the lights, the mountain kept watch.

Somewhere, high on the ridge, a fox called out—just once, just enough.

And Duck Creek listened, and was glad.

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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.

