

the mystery of the lost rhoades

the duck creek mysteries
book five

Don Jones

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Cory and Dylan

the duck creek mysteries

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foreword

Unless you own one, you have no idea what a pain it can be to own a cabin. Oh, also beautiful, relaxing, and rewarding, but... a really big pain. Getting contractors up to a remote area can be incredibly difficult, and so a lot of times you end up DIY-ing it. And with the nearest “big box” hardware store (Home Depot) an hour away, you get really thankful for the little Country Store in the Village.

I’ve learned to do plumbing, electrical, framing, drywalling, and a ton more in the time we’ve had our place near Duck Creek Village, and Doug and Sam at the Cedar Mountain Country Store have been invaluable advisors. From the time we needed a water pressure regulator *like right now please* to just picking up replacements for cracked light switch face plates, they somehow manage to pack pretty much everything you need into their little store. A store that has, in recent years, picked up a solid selection of basic groceries, a walk-in beer cooler, and more than a few gifts and items of clothing. The store is at one end of the Village... but in a lot of ways, it forms part of its heart.

Now, as always, I have to warn you that while folks like Doug and Sam are undeniably real, they’re *not* the characters you’ll meet in this story. My characters are made up from scratch, and don’t even physically resemble the real store owners that much. I’ve also taken huge liberties with the layout of the store, the Village, and indeed much of Cedar Mountain, all to make the story flow the way it need it to. Heck,

Deck Creek Village doesn't have a Mayor, a Historical Society, or a lot of other stuff I've given it. But that's what makes storytelling fun!

The Lost Rhoades Mine is very much a real thing though, and I invite you to Google it to learn more about it.

Enjoy the mysteries!

Don Jones

April 2026

Duck Creek Village, UT

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one

the golden hook

CHLOE ALWAYS SAID that the Duck Creek Country Store had the best lighting of any grocery west of Kanab, even though nobody else seemed to care or notice. The windows behind the cash register let in slanted afternoon sunlight that made everything glow: the mountain fudge in its glass case, the dusty jar candles that nobody ever bought, the cans of green beans stacked so high you could imagine a giant's beanstalk growing straight through the tin. It was a place built for quiet, golden afternoons, which was precisely what Chloe and Maya were having, perched on wire stools by the battered coffee stand, refueling before the final mile home.

Today, the store had its usual background actors: a pair of tourists in head-to-toe Patagonia discussing protein bars, an old-timer who might actually have been carved from driftwood by one of the local chainsaw artists, and a mom whose two small children were orbiting the candy rack in ever-tightening, sugar-hopeful spirals. The air was seasoned with pine, fresh coffee, and the sharp ozone of winter's last snow. Over it all, the faint stereo in the ceiling played an endless shuffle of John Denver, Johnny Cash, and the occasional Bee Gees track for color.

Chloe's fingers were mottled blue and black with ink from her latest round of costume sketching, and she used the tip of her little finger to trace a series of concentric circles on the surface of her paper coffee cup.

Maya sat next to her, one knee propped up on the stool rung, one hand cradling her own mug, and both of them watched the door with the idle interest of people who had nothing in particular to do.

"So, what's the verdict on the Lava Flats trail?" Chloe asked. "Last time, I felt like we were extras in a B-movie remake of *The Lost World*."

"It's the mud," Maya replied, deadpan. "Always the mud. They should just call it the Brown Lagoon."

"But the birches! The way the white trunks stand out—cinematic, right?" Chloe twirled her cup, as if conjuring the image from the air.

Maya considered. "Maybe if you're a birch."

Chloe grinned, and Maya's mouth twitched with the beginnings of a smile. "You're just mad you lost a boot."

"That boot died a hero's death," Maya said, raising her mug in a salute.

They both laughed, the easy, nothing-to-prove kind of laughter that only really came after two years of summer-winter, snow-melt-and-pollen friendship.

They were still smiling when the door to the store banged open so hard it rattled the little bell above it, and the room changed like someone had spliced a new reel into their afternoon.

Victor Vane didn't just enter a room—he annexed it. He was tall, not so much in the "imposing" way as in the "I want to be the tallest one in every photo" way. He wore a vest that looked hand-tailored, complete with a patchwork of badges and insignias that Chloe had only ever seen on History Channel specials, and his boots (suede, bright orange laces) hit the pine floor with a click that probably echoed all the way to the deli section.

He stopped, scanned the store, and offered a wide, toothy smile that might have come straight out of a toothpaste ad, if toothpaste ads targeted retired sheriffs and B-list celebrities. In his left hand, he held a black velvet pouch, and in his right, a plastic bag that looked entirely too pedestrian for a man who seemed to have been born wearing a cravat.

A subtle shift went through the store's background actors. The tourists straightened up, trying not to stare. The old man at the hardware aisle looked over, muttered something inaudible, and then looked

again. Even the children paused, mid-wheedle, at the candy rack. Victor had that effect on people—something between a magician and a late-night infomercial host.

Maya's voice went low. "That's the guy I was telling you about."

Chloe leaned in, her eyebrows arching. "The Gold Whisperer?"

"Victor Vane," Maya said, "and I swear, every time he comes into the store, it's like he's auditioning for his own reality show."

He didn't waste time. Victor cut a diagonal through the produce, avoiding the mom and her children with the smooth, practiced motions of someone who had never once needed to say "excuse me" in his life. He stopped just short of the coffee stand, angled himself toward the room, and then addressed them all like he'd been waiting for this his entire life.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, voice loud enough that the stereo seemed to lower itself in deference, "I apologize for the interruption, but I have an announcement that may interest some—nay, all—of you, especially those who appreciate local history."

The tourists perked up, their snacks forgotten. The old man shuffled closer. Even the cashier, who had been expertly ignoring the world by scanning barcodes, looked over the top of his register with a glimmer of actual curiosity.

Victor held up the velvet pouch. "As some of you know, I've been conducting a little fieldwork in the surrounding canyons. This morning, just past the southern fork of Mammoth Creek, I made a discovery." He waited, letting the silence ferment.

Chloe glanced at Maya, who rolled her eyes but looked ready to bolt from her stool if things got interesting.

Victor went on, savoring every syllable. "What I have here is not merely a rumor, not just a legend or a tall tale. This is tangible proof, a genuine artifact, and I wanted to share it first with the community that has so warmly welcomed me and my family."

He made a show of loosening the drawstring and pulling back the pouch's mouth. A hint of something metallic caught the sunlight, and Victor let the crowd's attention gather like static before reaching in and drawing out a rectangular bar that gleamed with improbable brilliance.

"A gold ingot," he said, holding it up like an Olympic torch. "Ladies

and gentlemen, I believe we've found the first confirmed cache of the Rhoades Mine."

The effect was immediate. The tourists, who probably wouldn't have known Rhoades from Rhodes, looked at each other in disbelief. The old man's jaw actually dropped a notch, which Chloe hadn't thought physically possible. The mom shushed her children, and even the cashier let out a soft whistle.

For a long moment, nobody spoke. Victor let the silence build, turning the bar so the light refracted in different directions. "It's not just the gold," he said, "but the markings." He rotated the bar, showing the bottom edge. "Here—see? Spanish characters, some numbers. And a cross."

A little crowd began to form, as if the gold had its own gravity. Chloe watched, fascinated, as Victor passed the bar to the nearest tourist, who held it like she'd just been handed a baby made of nitroglycerin.

Chloe leaned forward, voice low. "I thought the Rhoades Mine was a myth."

Maya kept her gaze on Victor. "He's banking on exactly that. But if he's found real gold—"

"It's probably not even real," Chloe said, but she was already reaching into her bag for her phone. "People fake this stuff all the time."

Maya shook her head. "Victor's too smart for a total con. He'll make it just plausible enough to get people talking."

The gold bar made its way down the line, everyone getting a turn at holding it, inspecting the markings, weighing it in their hands. The old man took the longest, holding it up to the light, then to his nose, as if he might sniff out the truth.

Victor stayed at the center, orchestrating it all. "There's more," he said, projecting his voice over the whispered reactions. "Tomorrow, I'll be holding a demonstration at the visitor center—testing the bar, explaining the find. If you're interested in history, in truth, in the spirit of discovery, I'd be honored to have you all attend. Questions? I welcome them."

A barrage of questions followed. What did it weigh? Had he notified anyone official? Was it really from the mine, or just a lost souvenir

from some park service promotional campaign? Victor fielded each question with the ease of a politician, offering just enough detail to intrigue but never quite enough to satisfy.

Chloe watched him work the room, her mind flipping through costume ideas for “Mountain Prospector with a Dark Secret.” She looked at Maya, who seemed both skeptical and piqued.

“Do you want to see it up close?” Chloe asked, already knowing the answer.

“Yeah,” Maya said. “Let’s go meet the legend.”

They rose from their stools and joined the little knot of people by the coffee bar, where Victor was expounding on the chemical signatures of the gold and its relationship to early Spanish exploration. He saw them, and his face lit up in a way that was too perfect to be anything but practiced.

“Ah! Maya, isn’t it?” he said, as if they were old friends. “And this must be Chloe. I’ve heard you’re the local artist.”

Chloe smiled, caught off-guard. “Guilty as charged.”

“Wonderful!” Victor beamed. “It’s people like you who truly appreciate the significance of these discoveries. I’m hoping we can enlist some local talent for the presentation tomorrow. Historical illustrations, perhaps?”

Chloe shot a sidelong glance at Maya, who was busy turning the bar over in her hands. “It’s heavy,” Maya said.

“It’s supposed to be,” Victor replied, leaning in confidentially. “And those etchings—see here? That’s a Spanish cross. Not common. We believe it denotes a royal claim.”

Chloe studied the bar, the way the light bent off its surface. The marks looked old, but the edges were too crisp, too perfect. “It’s beautiful,” she said, because it was, in the way a movie prop was beautiful: real enough to believe in, but just artificial enough to keep you guessing.

Victor moved on, glad-handing the next in line, but Chloe felt his eyes linger on her as she handed the gold back to Maya.

“So what do you think?” Chloe whispered.

Maya handed the bar to the tourist behind her, careful and slow. “I think it’s a setup. But a really good one.”

Chloe grinned. “If he’s faking, he deserves an Emmy.”

They stepped away, giving the next batch of gawkers room to marvel. Behind them, Victor resumed his showman's patter, promising tales of lost explorers and hidden treasure. The gold bar gleamed, the velvet pouch lay open like the world's most expensive magician's hat, and Duck Creek's slow afternoon had become something else entirely—something theatrical.

Chloe sipped her coffee, the bitter tang suddenly sharp against her tongue. The store felt warmer, more crowded, more electric, and Chloe found herself thinking: maybe this was what it was like, when something truly strange was about to happen.

Maybe, she thought, they had just witnessed the first act.

Victor let the gold bar linger in his upraised palm, his arm bent at a dramatic angle that caught the sunbeams streaming through the clerestory windows. The effect was instant: gold became a prism, a hot blaze of yellow that sent a ripple of reflected light across the faces in the room. Chloe watched the tourists shield their eyes and laugh, watched the old man's pupils contract to pinpricks as if the bar itself might ignite. Even Maya leaned forward, one hand shading her brow, her lips pressed tight.

Chloe couldn't help herself—she saw it all as a series of storyboards. The gold bar was the central prop, the lighting designed for maximum drama, and every head in the room had been blocked and staged for a perfect reveal.

Victor's voice took on a softer, more confiding tone. "I know you're skeptical," he said. "Heck, I'd be too." He passed the bar to the nearest tourist, a bearded man in a neon windbreaker, who held it up, weighing it as if trying to memorize the feeling for a later retelling. "But you'll see here—" Victor tapped the bar, his finger landing on a cross etched into the metal, "these markings. Spanish. Dated to the late 1700s, maybe earlier."

The tourist squinted, then passed the bar to his companion, who turned it over reverently, as if expecting it to reveal a secret map.

The crowd thickened as word spread. The mother with the children

edged closer, children in tow, their hands twitching with the desire to touch. The old man was now only a few feet from Victor, his face carved with a hard skepticism but his eyes hungry. Even the cashier abandoned his post to peer over the display of beef jerky, drawn by the collective magnetism of precious metal and a good story.

Victor pointed to a string of numbers just beneath the cross. “We believe these were batch numbers, perhaps even a way to track royal shipments from the New World. This, my friends, is the kind of thing you only see in textbooks—until now.”

A chorus of low murmurs swept the room. Chloe’s head buzzed—not with belief, necessarily, but with the sheer performance of it. She caught herself sketching invisible outlines with her finger in the air, mapping out the arcs and lines of Victor’s gestures, the gleam on the bar, the way the crowd’s posture bent toward the artifact.

He was a master of audience control. At just the right moment, he pulled the gold bar back to himself, cradling it with both hands, as though afraid it might vanish if he looked away. “I found this,” Victor said, letting his voice fall to a confidential hush, “not two miles from here, in an arroyo I won’t name—yet. But let’s just say it’s in a spot that’s had more than its share of rumors over the years.”

Chloe noticed the effect this had: the room’s collective heartbeat quickened. The words carried old magic, the sort that turned harmless hills into haunted treasure maps. She felt herself caught up in it, picturing the arroyo bathed in moonlight, shadowed by the gnarled fingers of bristlecone pine.

He let the moment simmer, then grinned. “Rhoades Mine,” he said, finally saying what everyone had been thinking. “The legend isn’t just legend anymore.”

That did it. The old man inched forward, both hands trembling slightly. “You’re saying you found the Rhoades stash?” His voice cracked in the dry mountain air.

Victor smiled, the perfect blend of humility and triumph. “I’m saying I found evidence of it. And I intend to find the rest, with the help of this community.”

Maya, who’d been silent until now, spoke up. “Have you had it tested?” Her tone was level, but Chloe caught the edge in it.

Victor's eyes crinkled with delight. "I'm glad you asked. I've got a metallurgist coming up from Cedar City this weekend. The visitor center will be hosting an open session. Transparent, scientific, all above-board. We want everyone to see the process—no smoke, no mirrors."

He pivoted, addressing the room at large. "But I'll tell you this: the initial scratch test showed nothing less than twenty-four karat. Pure as the day it was cast."

A few people whistled, a few more whispered to each other, their voices vibrating with the possibility of sudden fortune. Chloe felt a surge of heat in her chest—part excitement, part disbelief, and part envy that anyone could so easily command a room.

Victor didn't stop. "This is more than history, folks. It's a rare opportunity, a chance to put Duck Creek on the map. For those who are interested, we'll be forming an exploratory committee. There are opportunities for—well, for partners." He paused, making pointed eye contact with several members of the little crowd, as if sealing a secret pact with each of them. "Ground-floor involvement, so to speak."

Maya, always quick on the uptake, leaned toward Chloe and whispered, "He's running the script. Watch—he'll start using the word 'exclusive' in three, two—"

"—exclusive exploratory group," Victor said, right on cue. "We want to keep things small, manageable. If you're interested, please see me after. No obligation, of course."

Chloe snorted into her coffee, almost spilling it. Maya's mouth curled up in a half-smile.

The tourists had their phones out now, snapping photos of the bar, of Victor, of themselves with Victor, as if proximity to the gold might confer some secondhand magic. The children finally got their chance to hold it, their sticky fingers making new prints on its surface. The old man, too, got his turn—he hefted it, his face folding into a deep frown of concentration.

For a second, Chloe wondered what the gold meant, really. Whether it was real or a trick, or whether that even mattered, as long as people believed it. The whole store was moving in Victor's orbit now, pulled closer by each careful word.

Chloe's mind slipped sideways, envisioning the scene as a set:

sunlight, velvet pouch, skeptical locals arranged in a semicircle. Victor, dead center, playing his role to the hilt. The bar itself, shimmering on cue.

She wondered if it was always this easy for some people. Or if maybe, just maybe, you could fake it so well that the difference between performance and reality disappeared altogether.

The crowd began to disperse, some lingering for a chance at another touch, others already buzzing on their way to the parking lot, no doubt texting friends about what they'd just seen. Chloe stood rooted in place, watching Victor accept congratulations, field questions, and pass out business cards from an inside jacket pocket.

Maya nudged her. "You still thinking what I'm thinking?"

Chloe glanced at her, at the tilt of Maya's head, the slight furrow of her brow. "That it's too perfect?"

"That, and the fact that he never said exactly where he found it. Or let anyone hold it for more than a minute."

Chloe nodded. "But you have to admit, he's got style."

Maya grinned, and this time it was a real grin. "If he's lying, he's the best liar I've ever seen."

Chloe watched Victor one last time as he packed up the gold bar, sliding it back into its velvet shroud like a magician returning a rabbit to its hat. His smile never slipped. The light from the windows caught the edge of the pouch, and for a moment, the gold seemed to glow even brighter, almost as if the sun itself had been bottled up in that small rectangle.

Chloe felt her fingers itching to draw, to capture the moment—the hunger in the faces, the glint of promise, the possibility of something rare and wild and maybe just out of reach. She'd remember this scene for a long time. Maybe forever.

The bell above the door jingled as Victor left, entourage of hopefuls and skeptics trailing behind him. The air in the store seemed thinner, like a stage after the final curtain, and all at once Chloe realized she was hungry. Not for snacks, but for answers.

And maybe, just a little, for gold.

The mood inside the country store felt as buoyant as helium, even after Victor's departure. Chloe watched the aftershocks ripple through the crowd: couples conferring at the endcap displays, the old-timer recounting his brush with treasure to a clerk who pretended not to care, the candy-crazed kids giving dramatic eyewitness testimony to their mom, who filmed a video for her sister back in Florida. Even the tourists, now loitering near the window, couldn't resist holding their phones up to the sunlight and miming the gold bar's weight for their Instagram feeds.

Maya lingered by the coffee counter, her eyes narrowed in the way Chloe recognized as "deep diagnostics mode." She didn't speak right away, which was unusual, and she barely noticed when Chloe knocked her own cup into Maya's hand, sloshing lukewarm coffee over the lid.

"Sorry," Chloe said, dabbing at the splash with a napkin.

Maya shrugged it off, her gaze fixed on the door where Victor had just vanished. "Did you see the way the markings caught the light?" she asked, voice so soft Chloe had to lean in.

"I saw the way they caught the tourists," Chloe said. "It's like the bar's got its own paparazzi."

Maya's lips twitched, but she didn't smile. "That's what I mean. The etchings. They're perfect—too perfect. If that's really from the 1700s, I'm the Queen of Spain."

Chloe bit her lip. "You think it's a fake?"

"I don't know," Maya said, "but I don't buy that Victor just 'stumbled' on it a week before tourist season opens. Not with his history."

Chloe tapped her finger on the countertop, watching Maya's profile. She'd never seen Maya ruffled, not even in the face of lost boots or minor avalanches. Now, though, she looked rattled in a way that made Chloe's own pulse flutter.

"You should have seen the look on Old Man Dalton's face," Chloe said, gesturing toward the checkout, where Dalton was animatedly retelling the story for the third time. "If that's what gold does to people, no wonder the hills are full of crazy prospectors."

Maya leaned in closer, voice barely above a whisper. "Did you catch the part where he mentioned an 'exploratory committee'?"

Chloe nodded. "Sounds like a pyramid scheme, but for adventure."

“Or a way to get a bunch of locals to do his digging,” Maya said. “He’s setting up a prospecting operation without ever lifting a shovel himself. Smart, if you’re into crowdsourcing your labor.”

Chloe shivered, though the store was warm. She thought about the way Victor’s smile never reached his eyes, the way he’d held the bar just out of reach, doling out access like it was a holy relic. She wondered if he’d rehearsed every line in front of a mirror.

Across the store, the mom with the kids was chatting with a young man who must have wandered in after the reveal. Chloe caught the words “real gold” and “Spanish treasure,” followed by the kind of hushed laughter that meant a story would be retold with embellishments by sundown.

A few feet away, the tourists compared iPhone pictures of the bar, zooming in on the marks. “It looks laser-cut,” said the woman, skepticism in her tone. Her companion shrugged, already adding a hashtag to the photo.

Maya’s skepticism only sharpened as she replayed the scene. “Scratch test doesn’t prove it’s old,” she muttered. “And why wouldn’t he want more eyes on it if he’s trying to prove it’s genuine? The whole ‘I can’t say where I found it’ thing—classic misdirection.”

Chloe sipped her coffee, licking a smudge of ink from her thumb. “You sound like a detective.”

Maya finally smiled, but it was brief. “You know how my granddad raised sheep for thirty years? He said the best con artists always have the cleanest boots, because they never get their own hands dirty.”

Chloe tucked that away, letting it spin in her brain. She remembered Victor’s spotless vest, the gold ring on his finger, and how he’d touched the bar with almost theatrical delicacy. She pictured the velvet pouch again, the way it looked too new to have been dragged through a canyon. She tried to imagine Victor on his hands and knees in the mud, and couldn’t.

A beep sounded from the register. The old man had finished his monologue, and the clerk, a woman in a faded Red Sox cap, was now quietly restocking the candy shelf. She glanced at Maya and Chloe, her eyes bright with unspent gossip.

“So,” the clerk called over, “you two joining the treasure hunt, or just gonna stand there lookin’ pretty?”

Maya didn’t miss a beat. “We’re the research department,” she said. “Somebody’s got to fact-check these legends.”

The clerk snorted. “Good luck. I’ve lived here twenty-three years and the only treasure I’ve ever found is a six-pack somebody left in the snowbank.”

Chloe laughed, feeling the air lighten a notch. “Maybe that’s the real secret stash,” she said.

The clerk grinned. “More likely, yeah.”

They left the counter, drifting back toward the fudge display where the view was less crowded. Chloe wanted to ask Maya what she was thinking, really, but she already knew. The two of them had always been good at silent conversations, reading each other’s signals better than most people managed with actual words.

Finally, Maya leaned against the glass and said, “We should go to the visitor center tomorrow. See if the metallurgist is even real.”

Chloe nodded, eyes wide. “We’ll blend in. Act like innocent bystanders.”

Maya grinned. “You’ll be the one with the notepad.”

“You’ll be the one with the questions.”

They watched the rest of the afternoon play out, more tourists filing in, the rumor gaining mass with every new arrival. Someone started a pool at the deli counter: was it real, or wasn’t it? Even the old-timer eventually gave up skepticism, settling for a cup of chili and a long stare out the window.

Chloe saw it all as if through sepia filters—washed with nostalgia and the promise of something extraordinary, but rimmed with doubt. She glanced at Maya and saw the glint of determination that meant they weren’t done with this story, not by a long shot.

Just as they headed for the door, Maya leaned in and whispered, “Something’s definitely off about this whole gold mine story.”

Chloe grinned, a wild idea already sketching itself across her mind. “Let’s make sure we’re there for the next scene.”

They stepped out into the golden light, the door closing behind

them with a soft thud, the country store abuzz and the legend of the Rhoades Mine—real or not—already growing by the minute.

two

the duck creek soup

THE AIR outside still buzzed with the lingering electricity of Victor's gold reveal, but Chloe wanted none of it. She and Maya set off up the service road behind the country store, ducking beneath the sagging boughs of ponderosa pine and juniper. The snowmelt had finally retreated, leaving only patches in the shade and little rivulets streaming down the path. Their boots crunched on last autumn's needles and the glassy ice chips the sun hadn't gotten to yet.

Chloe loved this walk in early spring. She liked to think of the world as a movie set, and this time of year was all about lighting: sharp, clean, no haze, nothing to smudge the outlines. She pretended she was in a cold open, marching off into the next act, no special effects, just the truth of how the sun hit the land.

They didn't talk at first. There was plenty to process, and Chloe preferred to wait until the right line occurred to her. Maya didn't seem to need to fill the silence, either; she walked with a measured stride, hands tucked into the pockets of her work jacket, eyes fixed on the switchbacks ahead. She'd only glance at Chloe now and then, as if to confirm they were still in the same scene together.

The final slope led them to the overlook above their favorite meadow. Chloe's pulse always picked up here, the way the hillside opened suddenly into a flat so wide you could imagine a cavalry charge. She went up first, poised to deliver some clever line about the grandeur

of the wilderness—except today the tableau waiting for them was not the serene sweep of grass and scattered wildflowers she'd been expecting.

Instead, the meadow was pure chaos. Neon orange and yellow rental ATVs—at least seven, maybe more—were embedded in the field at random angles, like the aftermath of some botched product placement. Each one was mired axle-deep in wet, gray-brown goo. Clumps of tourists in slicker jackets and matching helmets stood around gesturing, shouting, and snapping pictures with their phones. A pair of college-aged men had taken off their shoes and socks and were thigh-deep in the mud, attempting to push their vehicle free, while a woman in a metallic turquoise windbreaker directed them from the sidelines, as if volume and color might be enough to break the suction.

From across the meadow came the distant drone of a rental company shuttle van, its driver standing beside it, arms folded, emitting the universal “not my fault” posture. Several rental operators—Chloe could pick them out by their matching polos—stood together at a safe, mud-free distance, talking in low voices and eyeing the scene like undertakers at a wake.

Chloe whistled. “I was expecting a landscape shot, but this is more like a deleted scene from *Fast & Furious: Duck Creek Drift*.”

Maya squinted, shading her eyes. “It’s Duck Creek Soup. I told you it’d be like this.”

Chloe couldn’t help herself; she started to laugh. “It’s like the bog ate a parade.”

But Maya didn’t seem amused. Her mouth set in a line as she watched the tourists struggle. “Someone’s going to lose a foot in that stuff,” she said. “Or a boot.”

“Tragic,” Chloe said, but gently. She watched as one of the barefoot college guys tried to pull his leg free and nearly toppled headfirst. “Think they’ll make it out?”

Maya shook her head. “Not unless they brought a winch. And even then—” She trailed off, eyes narrowing at the sludgy ruts leading up to the ATVs.

Chloe was ready to keep riffing, but then Maya snapped her fingers, sudden as a camera shutter. “Hold up,” she said. She reached around to her backpack, fished out a compact canvas bundle, and unrolled it.

Inside, neatly coiled, was a length of synthetic winch line and a set of heavy-duty shackles.

Chloe gaped, delighted. "You brought the extension? I thought you were just humoring Leo."

Maya grinned, the first real smile all morning. "I was, but then I figured—what's the harm in being ready?"

Chloe gave a theatrical bow. "You're the real Boy Scout, Maya. I am merely the comic relief."

"Help me set the anchor?" Maya said, already heading for the nearest pine at the meadow's edge.

They skirted the mud, which was more like trying to thread a needle with a baseball mitt; even the margins were spongy, each step making a deep, satisfying schluck as the ground threatened to slurp off their boots. The smell hit next: wet earth and mineral tang, overlaid with the sweetly toxic whiff of spilled gasoline and engine grease. Chloe wrinkled her nose, but there was something weirdly comforting about it—like the memory of every camping trip gone slightly sideways.

By the time they reached the tree line, the drama in the field had only escalated. A small crowd had gathered, two rental staffers attempting to organize an ad hoc rescue while the tourists debated the merits of "rocking it back and forth" versus "full throttle all at once." Voices carried in the thin air, punctuated by the whine of engines and the occasional profanity when a wheel spun and splattered bystanders.

Chloe helped Maya wrap the winch line around the thickest pine, her own ink-stained fingers going clumsy in the cold. "You ever used one of these before?" she asked.

Maya nodded. "First learned on a sheep truck." She started threading the shackle, movements crisp and certain. "The trick is to go slow at first. Let the mud release a little at a time, or else—" She mimed a miniature explosion.

Chloe pictured it instantly: ATV rocketing backward, mud geyser, maybe a tourist or two flung dramatically into the muck. She snorted. "You should be in charge out there. Those rental guys look like they're about to unionize and call it a day."

Maya shrugged. "People never believe the small-town girls know more than the paid guides."

Chloe glanced back at the tableau: the expensive rental gear, the posturing, the general air of doomed optimism. “You’d think they’d at least color-coordinate the disaster,” she said, gesturing at the clash of helmets and rain shells. “Or maybe that’s the point. In all the chaos, the only thing you can see is the mess.”

They unspooled the line, threading it through the worst of the muck. Chloe did her best to keep her boots clear, but by the halfway point, both her toes and her dignity were splattered a deep, sticky brown. The tourists eyed them warily at first, but as Maya explained what she was doing—using terms like “tension load” and “extraction angle” with casual authority—the attitude shifted from skepticism to tentative hope.

The guy in the metallic turquoise jacket—Chloe decided his name was probably “Trey”—asked if they “really thought that would work.” Maya just grinned and handed him the shackle. “Every time,” she said. “As long as you listen and don’t try to Instagram it while I’m pulling.”

Chloe watched as Maya took charge, her voice calm and matter-of-fact as she positioned the helpers and coached them through the process. Chloe’s own job was to keep the onlookers clear, which she did with a combination of dramatic gestures and the kind of theater teacher’s voice that cut through the din without sounding shrill.

“All right, everyone,” she called, “let’s try not to form a human pyramid this time. Unless you want it immortalized on Duck Creek’s unofficial TikTok channel.”

That got a laugh, and more importantly, got the tourists to back up. Chloe stationed herself just behind Maya, ready to catch any heroic flailers who might lose footing.

The extraction itself was a slow-motion spectacle. Maya cranked the winch, the line growing taut, the ATV’s frame straining as it crept inch by inch out of the bog. Each movement was punctuated by a chorus of nervous “Whoa!” and “Keep going!” and the occasional shriek as the vehicle lurched free with a stomach-dropping pop. Mud splattered in a spray that arced gloriously against the blue sky, painting Chloe’s jeans and Maya’s jacket with a new set of stains.

When the first ATV broke loose, the crowd went wild. Tourists high-fived, and the rental staff broke into spontaneous applause. Maya

took it in stride, simply reeling in the line and resetting for the next stuck rig.

Chloe caught Maya's eye. "You're a miracle worker."

"Just physics," Maya said, but she looked pleased.

They worked their way down the line, freeing each vehicle in turn. Chloe kept the mood lively with running commentary—"Here comes the mudshot!" or "Ten bucks says the next one does a wheelie"—and even the most disgruntled tourists were soon rooting for each other. At one point, a woman in a pink helmet asked if Chloe and Maya were "part of the search party," and Chloe just grinned. "We're a two-woman rescue squad. But we take donations in the form of fudge from the country store."

By the time the last ATV was clear, everyone was caked in at least two layers of Duck Creek Soup. The rental staffers shook their heads in disbelief, and more than one tourist took a selfie with Maya and Chloe, mud stains and all.

As they packed up the winch line and hiked back up the meadow edge, Chloe looked over her shoulder at the aftermath. Where before there had been chaos, now there was only a series of neat, muddy ruts and a string of ATVs lined up like a parade that had learned humility.

She wiped a streak of mud from her cheek and turned to Maya. "You know, if the gold thing doesn't pan out, we could totally run an extraction business."

Maya smiled, brushing a splatter off her own sleeve. "Only if you handle customer relations."

"Deal," Chloe said. They walked on, the soft squelch of mud and their own laughter trailing behind.

As they crested the hill back toward the village, the breeze picked up, carrying with it the scent of pine, wet earth, and just the faintest trace of gasoline—a reminder that, in Duck Creek, even the wildest legends still had to share the stage with a little mess and a lot of mud.

The aftermath of the first ATV rescue was less of a denouement and more of a scene change. No sooner had Maya reeled in the winch than

three more drivers lined up, each hoping to be the next success story. Chloe found herself swept along in the tide of onlookers, sticky with adrenaline and more than a little mud.

Maya knelt by the next vehicle, inspecting the axle with a deliberate calm that made Chloe think of surgeons on TV dramas. She ran her hand along the frame, checking for weak spots, then unspooled the cable again, eyes flicking up at the cluster of tourists as if gauging the distance to the next potential catastrophe.

Chloe squatted next to her, boots making faint squelch-squelch sounds in the damp grass. "You know, you're kind of amazing at this," she said, voice low. "Is this like...an inherited gene?"

Maya smirked, not looking up from the winch. "Sheepherders don't get a lot of AAA coverage," she said. "If you get stuck, you either fix it or start walking."

Chloe nodded, then turned to the nearest group of stranded adventurers. "You all might want to back up just a bit," she announced. "There's a chance of, uh, dramatic reversal."

A pair of kids giggled and scurried backward, while their dad—balding, but with the resolute face of someone who'd once led a cub scout troop—tried to look casual as he did the same.

Maya looped the winch around a thick branch, double-checking the knots. "Leo's timing is either incredible luck," she said, "or something else entirely."

"Cosmic convergence," Chloe replied. "Like the mountain knew."

Maya gave her a look, half amused, half not. "Or Leo knows who buys the most fudge and which trails they're likely to wreck."

Chloe grinned and stood up, dusting off her hands. She surveyed the impromptu crowd, some of whom had now taken up posts as sideline cheerleaders. A woman in a neon-pink rain poncho clapped her hands in time with the winch's ratcheting noise; a couple in matching beanies pointed their phones at the action and narrated to imaginary followers.

As Maya started the slow, steady pull, Chloe decided the situation called for a little levity. She threw her arms wide. "Ladies and gentlemen, Duck Creek's world-renowned mud rescue is now in session! Step

right up for a front-row seat to science, spectacle, and the sweet, sweet promise of not spending the night in a bog.”

A ripple of laughter spread, which Chloe found deeply satisfying. She eyed the crowd, looking for her next target.

But the real star was Maya. With every precise adjustment, she coaxed the ATV forward, pausing to let the tires find purchase, then pulling again. When the frame finally jolted free, a spray of mud flew skyward, and the onlookers broke into applause, whooping as the vehicle rolled onto firmer ground.

Chloe did a little bow. “Thank you, thank you. Don’t forget to tip your extraction experts.”

The woman in the pink poncho leaned in, her voice a nasal whisper. “Did you hear about that gold bar they found in the canyon?”

Chloe perked up. “Oh, you mean the one with the haunted Spanish curse, right?”

The woman blinked, uncertain, but the man with her jumped in. “Yeah! Victor Vane’s gold bar! My brother sent me the video. Looks legit. They say it’s got authentic Spanish markings.”

Chloe let her eyes go wide. “They say whoever finds the rest of the treasure gets to rename the mountain after themselves.” She gave the kids a wink. “Imagine—Mount You!”

They giggled, eyes shining. Even the parents seemed charmed.

As Maya unhooked the line and wiped her hands, Chloe narrated the next steps for the crowd. “In the annals of Duck Creek history, there have been at least—what, Maya?—a hundred similar incidents? Maybe more?”

Maya shrugged, lips quirked. “Depends if you count the tourists who try to drive up the ski slopes in July.”

A chorus of groans and laughter met this, and a grey-haired man in a Utah Jazz hoodie chimed in: “Last year, my wife got our Subaru stuck in a ditch. Took two hours to get her out.”

Chloe seized the moment. “That’s nothing. My Aunt Marnie once got a Toyota Camry stuck in a horse trough. Don’t ask me how.” She could see her stories building rapport, gluing the group together in their shared embarrassment and relief.

As they prepped for the next rescue, Chloe noticed the conversa-

tional tide shifting. People began swapping stories not just of mud and mishap, but of the gold bar and its rumored origin. “Vane says he’s got the inside track on the Rhoades Mine,” someone whispered. “He’s holding a presentation tomorrow. Supposed to be an open demonstration.”

“Bet the mayor gets a cut if they actually find anything,” another muttered.

Chloe filed the gossip away, each new rumor a puzzle piece for later. She liked the way the legend grew with every telling, how it passed from person to person, changing shape in the process. Like the mountain itself, stories here never stayed still for long.

On the third rescue, Chloe really let her stagecraft run wild. As Maya spooled out the cable, Chloe narrated every step. “Notice the technique, folks—she’s using the classic duck-under-tension method. Developed right here in Utah by the world’s leading experts in getting stuck.”

A teenager in a GoPro chest rig nodded solemnly. “That’s what my uncle calls it, too.”

Chloe continued, raising her voice over the winch’s whine. “And now, the critical moment. Will the machine break free, or will it be lost to the quagmire forever? Place your bets, folks!”

As Maya cranked, Chloe orchestrated a countdown: “Three, two, one—”

With a wet shudder, the ATV leapt forward, flinging a rooster tail of mud that painted the GoPro kid from shoes to sunglasses. The crowd cheered. Even Maya cracked up, her usually composed expression giving way to laughter.

As they reset for the last stranded vehicle, the mood had shifted entirely. What started as an inconvenience had become a performance, with Chloe as the reluctant ringmaster and Maya as the miracle worker.

In a lull between rescues, Chloe overheard a group of women discussing Victor Vane. “He says there’s more gold up there,” one said, “but he won’t reveal the spot. Says it’s for the safety of the town.”

“Probably wants to stake his claim first,” another replied.

Chloe leaned in, dropping her voice for effect. “That’s how it always starts. Then the next thing you know, you’re crawling through a

haunted mine with a flashlight and a half-charged phone, praying the bats have gone to bed.”

The women laughed, nodding in agreement. For a moment, everyone seemed to forget about the mud, the mess, and the cold. They were united by the possibility of something more—a little adventure, a little gold, a little notoriety.

After the final ATV emerged victorious, Chloe clapped her hands. “Folks, you have witnessed the miracle of modern mountain know-how. Please remember to thank your extraction experts on Yelp, and don’t forget: the true treasure is the friends you make along the way.” She said this last bit with a wink, but she meant it. Sort of.

The crowd dispersed, newly muddy but a lot happier, some taking selfies with Maya and Chloe, others gathering around to rehash the stories and share new rumors about the gold. Maya wound up the winch, packed it away, and together they started the walk back.

Chloe looked over at Maya, voice soft. “You’re the best sidekick a girl could ask for, you know that?”

Maya smiled, slinging her muddy backpack over one shoulder. “We’re both sidekicks. That’s the secret.”

They left the field behind, the echoes of laughter and wild speculation following them up the trail. And if Chloe had to guess, the legend of the gold—and of their rescue—would be retold a dozen different ways by nightfall.

But the next act, she was pretty sure, would be even better.

When the last ATV made it out of the mud—its wheels caked, its fenders decorated with handprints like a kindergarten art project—the field erupted into applause that was part genuine relief, part celebratory disbelief. The bedraggled drivers and their impromptu pit crew crowded around Maya and Chloe, transforming the muddy battleground into a kind of outdoor cast party.

Chloe tried to wave off the fuss, but the attention came in tidal waves. First, there was the couple in the matching Utah Jazz hoodies, beaming like they’d just made the playoffs. The woman insisted on

getting a photo with “the rescuers,” and when Chloe tried to duck out, the man looped an arm around her shoulder anyway, grinning so wide his sunglasses nearly fell off.

Then came the kids, who all seemed to know Chloe and Maya by first name even though they’d met less than an hour ago. They tugged at Maya’s sleeve and demanded to see the winch up close. Maya obliged, giving a brief demonstration while the parents looked on in awe. More than one kid asked, “Are you superheroes or something?” Chloe deadpanned, “Just a couple of friendly neighborhood mud slingers,” which sent them into shrieks of laughter.

Next in line was the older man with the expensive fishing vest, who’d spent most of the ordeal filming the chaos on his phone. He shook Maya’s hand so vigorously it nearly knocked her off balance. “You saved our vacation!” he declared. “That rental company never warned us about these mud traps. You gals ought to get a medal—or at least a cut of the rescue fee.”

Before Maya could protest, the man pressed a crisp twenty into her hand. Chloe tried to return it, but the man waved her off. “No, no, you earned it! Best story I’ll have all year.” The gesture caught on like wild-fire: soon, a handful of tourists and even one of the rental staffers were sneaking bills or fives into Maya and Chloe’s pockets, like it was a superstition or an inside joke. Chloe couldn’t tell if she felt more like a local celebrity or a street magician with a tip jar, but it was surreal either way.

The highlight, at least for Chloe, was the young couple who had chronicled every moment on their phones. “We’re totally tagging the Cedar Mountain Country Store,” the woman said. “And you two—are you on Insta? TikTok? Our friends are gonna freak when they see this.” Chloe confessed she didn’t have anything to tag, so the couple insisted on taking a selfie with both her and Maya, plus their thoroughly bespattered ride. “Hashtag #DuckCreekRescue,” the guy said, like he’d just coined the phrase himself.

While Chloe played along, she watched the crowd’s energy change as the story of the gold bar began to ripple outward. The first mention was casual—a tourist telling her spouse, “That Vane guy at the store, did you hear about the gold he found?”—but soon it was everywhere,

blending with the mud and the morning's rescue into one seamless, irresistible legend.

"They say it's from the Spanish explorers," a teenage girl informed her little brother, who gazed up at her like she'd just revealed the secret to eternal life.

Another group speculated, "If they can find one bar, there's probably more. What if there's a whole hoard buried out here?"

Even the rental staff, who'd initially been all business and eye rolls, got in on the action. One of them, a twenty-something guy with a diamond stud in his ear, sidled up to Maya and lowered his voice. "So, you ever hear about weird stuff out here? Like, treasure? Creepy old mines?"

Maya shrugged. "It's mostly just mud, honestly. The rest is all stories."

He grinned, unconvinced. "Well, if you hear anything, let us know. I'm pretty good at digging."

Chloe snorted, but the man only winked. "That's what we're here for, right? The stories."

As the crowd thinned, Maya and Chloe wandered the edge of the meadow to collect their gear. Chloe gathered the winch cable, coiling it with a flourish, while Maya wiped the worst of the muck from her hands. For a long moment, they stood side by side, just watching the trampled field as the sound of engines faded into the distance.

Chloe let out a breath. "Not what I pictured when we left the store."

Maya shook her head. "Nope. But I can't say I'm surprised." She turned, eyes bright. "Funny how Leo knew exactly what we'd need today."

Chloe grinned, flicking a fleck of mud off her boot. "Almost like he saw this coming."

"Or someone did," Maya replied, voice soft.

They looked back at the meadow. It was transformed—a patchwork of churned earth, streaks of rubber, and the memory of a hundred footprints. In the distance, they could see a new line of cars and rental vans turning off the main road, pulled by the gravitational force of the legend that was already growing in retelling.

Chloe felt the story bubbling up in her, ready for the next chapter. She reached into her bag for her sketchbook and caught Maya's gaze. "You think we'll ever get to the bottom of the gold thing?"

Maya shrugged, but there was a glint in her eye. "Maybe. Or maybe we'll just get stuck in the mud a few more times."

Chloe laughed, hoisting the coil of cable onto her shoulder. "I can live with that."

The wind picked up, carrying voices and rumors and the promise of more trouble to come. The girls headed back down the trail, walking in step, ready for whatever the mountain had in store.

Behind them, the meadow glistened with fresh mud and the hope of something extraordinary buried just below the surface.

three

the legend reborn

WHEN CHLOE and Maya trudged into the Cedar Mountain Country Store, their boots carried half the meadow's mud across the threshold. It hit the warm, piney air and baked into the scent of sawdust, stove wood, and the sharp tang of diesel. Chloe thought if she'd had to choose a single smell for her personal heaven, it would be the weird, specific cocktail of chain oil, pine sap, and chocolate fudge that defined this store. The mud was just an extra brushstroke on an already chaotic canvas.

The place wasn't empty, but the regulars gave the new mud stripes a wide berth, scooting closer to the coffee urns or the magazine rack, anything to keep their own shoes pristine. Chloe saw Doug behind the counter, sleeves rolled up over a faded flannel, sorting box-cutter blades into a vintage glass jar. Beside him stood Sam, peering through her smudged glasses at a battered ledger and making little pencil notations with the intensity of a human lie detector. Behind them, Leo ghosted between the aisles, restocking screws in one hand and texting with the other, his face half lit by the blue phone light, the rest by the store's jaundiced bulbs.

Doug looked up and saw them, and his eyes crinkled above his beard, then narrowed to take in the state of their jeans and boots. "Hell's bells, girls. Were you chasing pigs through the bog again?"

Maya held up a hand, half salute, half admission of guilt. "Not pigs this time. ATVs."

Doug's snort was pure static. "That's just pigs with engines. And tourists for brains."

Sam straightened, her attention lasering onto the mud like it was a fresh crime scene. "Did you use the extension line?" she asked Maya, voice urgent as a math teacher at the start of a pop quiz.

"Twice," Maya replied, looking pleased. "Worked like a charm. No casualties, unless you count a pair of sneakers lost to the cause."

Doug whistled, and a smile yanked at his mouth. "That's a record for May, I think."

He beckoned them closer, then shooed a cluster of paint-splattered old-timers off the benches in the corner. Chloe followed, half aware of the way her boots left a crumb trail for the next unlucky broom, but mostly focused on the wood stove that sat like a cast-iron Buddha in the corner. The stove radiated pure comfort, and Doug's hospitality was all but a guarantee of a hot drink and a good story.

They settled in, Chloe on the stool nearest the window, Maya perching on a bag of steer manure with an ease born of lifelong exposure to dirt. Doug filled two mugs with what might have started as hot chocolate, then scooped clouds of whipped cream onto both. Sam produced a tin of ginger cookies from beneath the counter, and the scene rearranged itself so naturally it might have been choreographed.

Chloe wrapped her hands around the mug. The heat of it lit up all the way to her elbows, and the whipped cream melted into the top in fat, slow blisters. She let herself sink into the moment, watching the way Sam and Doug orbited each other's movements, the practiced dance of people who shared both a business and a secret.

After the first silent minute (during which Chloe demolished two ginger cookies and Maya stirred the whipped cream into patterns reminiscent of satellite photos), Doug set his elbows on the counter and nodded at Maya. "So what brings you in today? You running from the legend, or chasing it?"

"Chasing, I guess," Maya said. "The gold bar. Vane's got everyone in town talking about it."

At that, the mood in the corner changed. Doug's eyebrows did a

slow climb, and Sam's pencil froze, mid-scribble. Even Leo paused his shelf-stocking and glanced over, one eyebrow raised in the arch of pure gossip anticipation.

Doug grunted. "I'll say this for the man, he's got the sense of drama. Brings a gold bar into town, flashes it like a Vegas showgirl, and expects everyone to just buy the story?"

Sam cut in, gentle but insistent: "The bar is convincing. The assay tests, the markings. It could be the real thing."

Chloe licked a stripe of cream off her finger. "It looks like a movie prop to me. Too...shiny."

"Most people don't know real gold from a brass candlestick," Doug said. "They just see the color and lose their minds." He leaned forward, lowering his voice for effect. "But here's the thing: there's always been gold up here. Just not as much as the legends say."

He ducked behind the counter, rummaged for a minute, and returned with a battered wooden box. The lid squeaked as he opened it, revealing a handful of black-and-white newspaper clippings, a tangled chain of tiny mining pans, and—at the bottom—two lumpy, tarnished nuggets, each the size of a walnut.

Doug fished out the clippings and slid them across to Chloe. The headlines screamed 19th-century optimism: "RHOADES STRIKE CONFIRMED," "LOST GOLD MINE OF CEDAR BREAKS," "SPANISH TREASURE HAUL DISCOVERED." Chloe paged through them, trying to match the bold fonts to real human faces. The grainy photos mostly showed men in hats, all with the same hollow, hopeful stare.

"My grandfather used to say these mountains are littered with more rumors than rocks," Doug said. "And every time someone thinks they're close, all they end up with is a hole in the ground and an empty wallet."

Maya took one of the nuggets and rolled it between her fingers, weighing it like a dice before a big throw. "Where did you get these?" she asked.

Doug smiled. "Gift from a lady who ran a card room in Parowan. Said her daddy panned them in Mammoth Creek. Or maybe she just wanted to impress me." He winked, then shrugged. "Doesn't matter. It's the story people want."

Sam cleared her throat, then spread a faded map across the counter. Her hands were precise and clean, fingers tanned and marked by years of ink but not a single scar. "There's history to it," she said, drawing a line along a tributary with her pinky. "Thomas Rhoades—he's the one most legends are about—really did find gold. There are records. But every rush ended the same way: big claims, bigger fights, and nothing to show for it except ruined dreams."

Doug nodded, lips pursed. "And now we've got Victor Vane, rolling in just as the snow melts, waving his 'discovery' like a ticket to salvation. I'll give him this—he knows how to time a performance."

Chloe looked at Maya, who was studying the clippings with an intensity that made Chloe think she was mentally solving for X. "Isn't it convenient he found the bar just when everyone's coming back for the summer?" Maya said. "He gets the whole town talking. He gets a free search party, too."

"Not just the locals," Sam put in. "We got calls from Salt Lake last night. People want to know if the find is real. If there's more."

Chloe leaned back, tipping her head until she could see the ceiling. It was lined with old license plates and hand-painted snowboards. "It's like the air has changed," she said, letting the thought spin out. "Half the people I passed today were buzzing with excitement. The other half looked like they were expecting to get robbed at any minute."

Doug barked a laugh. "That's how it always is. Gold makes friends and enemies in the same heartbeat."

"Maybe it's both," Chloe said. She eyed the golden nuggets again. "Do you think Vane's bar is a fake?"

Sam hesitated, then answered carefully. "If it's fake, it's a masterwork. But if it's real, the question isn't who found it. The question is: who lost it first?"

Chloe liked the sound of that. She tucked the phrase away for later, to see if she could sketch the answer.

While they talked, Leo drifted over, carrying a box of brass hinges and a stack of LED flashlights. He set the box on the counter, but didn't say anything. Chloe noticed how he watched the map and the nuggets, the way he smiled when Doug laid out a particularly wild theory, and how he gave Sam a half-nod every time she corrected a fact.

Leo was like an extra in a movie who was definitely going to have a big reveal in act three.

Doug launched into a new story, this one about Spanish conquistadors who supposedly camped near Navajo Lake, hiding church gold from bandits. Chloe had heard it before—everyone had—but Doug's version was better, with added bear attacks and a subplot involving lost love. Maya listened with eyes half-lidded, but her foot tapped out a rhythm, like she was counting out the beats for the legend's eventual punchline.

When Doug finished, he handed the two "gold" nuggets to Chloe and Maya. "Souvenir," he said. "For the girls who tamed the Duck Creek Soup."

Chloe let the nugget rest in her palm. It was heavier than it looked, cold as a forgotten coin. She wondered if she'd ever find anything that weighty in her own life, anything that could make people lose their minds the way gold did.

Maya tucked her nugget into her jacket pocket and grinned. "Maybe we'll get lucky and dig up a whole chest of these."

"Just remember who you got it from," Doug said, wagging a finger.

Sam was already rolling up the map, but Chloe caught her gaze. "Do you ever wish it was real?" Chloe asked. "That there really was a lost mine?"

Sam's smile was soft. "I think it's real enough, as long as people believe in it."

Leo chose that moment to break his silence. "You know what they say: the best treasure is the story itself." He winked at Chloe, and then disappeared back into the shadows of the hardware aisle.

Doug snorted, but Chloe caught the glint of pride in his eye. "That kid," he said, "always knows how to wrap it up."

The bell over the door jingled, and for a minute, a whole family with matching T-shirts and sunburns trundled in, tracking new dirt and energy. The regulars grumbled, but Doug stood and squared his shoulders, ready to take on the next scene.

As Maya and Chloe finished their drinks, the conversation drifted to local politics, fishing reports, and the odds of another snow before June. But the gold lingered. Chloe felt it in the weight of the nugget, in

the thickness of the air, in the way the stories wrapped themselves around everyone in the room, binding them to the mountain and each other.

When they stepped back outside, the light was flat and cold again, but Chloe felt a spark under her skin. She walked next to Maya, boots still muddy, pockets heavier, head full of gold.

“Do you think we’ll ever find anything?” Chloe asked.

Maya shrugged, smiling. “Maybe. Or maybe it’ll just find us.”

Chloe liked that idea, and as they headed down the steps, she decided she’d believe in it. At least until the next scene called for a plot twist.

four

the tool of intent

THE NEXT DAY dawned blue and cloudless, and Chloe woke up to the kind of sunlight that practically shouted, “Get going!” She and Maya met at the Cedar Mountain Country Store just before lunch, drawn by the promise of warm air, fresh gossip, and Doug’s bottomless reserves of good sense.

Inside, the air was already seasoned with the familiar pine-and-butter aroma, this time cut through with the yeasty sharpness of rising sourdough from a bakery delivery. The wood stove was crackling at a lazy pace, and the place was thick with the hum of conversation—locals clustered in flannel knots by the register, while tourists milled near the display of snow globes and honey.

Chloe brushed a lock of hair out of her eyes and motioned to Maya, who was already making a beeline for the hardware aisle. Today’s mission was clear: build their own “explorer kit” for a little investigative work, with the express goal of seeing whether the Vanes’ gold was real, or just the world’s shiniest tourist trap.

The hardware section was Chloe’s favorite. She loved the way every bin and shelf seemed to vibrate with the possibility of being exactly what you needed, even if you had no idea what that was when you walked in. Right now, she was fixated on a rack of flashlights, all shapes and sizes, each one promising a different kind of enlightenment.

Maya joined her, hands jammed in the pockets of her oversized

jacket. “Headlamp or tactical?” she asked, with all the gravity of someone choosing a superpower.

Chloe picked up a stubby, neon-yellow model and squinted down the row. “Headlamp says ‘I’m here to fix a sink,’ but tactical says ‘I’m here to uncover dark secrets and possibly punch a bear.’”

“Go with tactical,” Maya decided. “The Vanes look like the type to hire bears as bodyguards.”

They snorted, and Chloe grabbed a heavy-duty flashlight from the hook. “You think we’ll actually need this?”

“I think the gold’s real, or at least real-adjacent,” Maya replied, voice soft enough that only Chloe could hear. “But it doesn’t hurt to be prepared.”

They drifted along the aisle, picking up a geology hammer (Maya insisted) and a pack of fingerless gloves (Chloe’s contribution, for “aesthetic purposes”). There was a rhythm to shopping together, a kind of unspoken choreography—Chloe paused to read the labels, Maya eyed the shelves with a quiet hunter’s focus, and every so often they traded opinions like playing cards.

Chloe was about to suggest a pit stop at the candy rack when she heard the gentle, metallic tap-tap-tap of someone rearranging hardware behind them. She turned, expecting Doug, but instead found Leo standing there, a box of S-hooks in one hand and a mischievous grin on his face.

“Ladies,” he said, with a half-nod. “I see you’re gearing up for adventure.”

“Research,” Maya said. “But, yeah. Adventure-adjacent.”

Leo set the box down and eyed their haul. “You’ll want batteries for that,” he said, gesturing at the flashlight Chloe held.

“We’re not amateurs,” Chloe shot back, but Leo had already vanished into the next aisle, returning seconds later with a pack of top-shelf lithium cells.

He handed them over with a flourish. “If you’re poking around the Vanes’ claim, you might need all the run time you can get.” His voice was lower now, words running together like a secret handshake. “Just saying.”

Chloe glanced at Maya, who gave Leo a look that landed somewhere

between suspicion and gratitude. "You heard anything new?" Maya asked.

Leo shrugged. "Nothing official. But the Vanes have been back and forth to the visitor center all morning. And rumor has it, someone's already staked out a perimeter up by the old sawmill."

Chloe shivered. She'd passed the sawmill ruins dozens of times, but the idea of it crawling with prospectors and treasure-hunters felt weirdly personal.

Leo must have seen the look on her face, because he added, "You two'll probably get there before the circus sets up. Just keep your eyes open."

They nodded, and Leo disappeared again, this time in the direction of the register. Chloe watched him go, then turned to Maya. "You think we should bring snacks?"

"Essential," Maya said. "If we get lost, I'd rather eat jelly beans than my own foot."

The next stop was the counter, where Doug was deep in conversation with a pair of elderly men, both of whom were arguing in escalating tones about the best way to remove a tree stump. Doug saw Maya and Chloe and broke away, raising his chin in greeting.

"You find what you need?" he asked, voice loud enough for the whole store to hear.

Chloe set down their haul on the counter. "Flashlight. Hammer. Gloves. And a map?"

Doug reached under the counter and produced a folded topo, marked with greasy fingerprints from years of use. "Here's the best one. Just watch out for the washed-out bridges. And the Vanes—if you ask me, they're not as clever as they think."

Maya smiled, thin but sincere. "Thanks, Doug."

He rang them up, then paused when he got to the flashlight. Instead of scanning it, he turned it over in his hands, examining the grip and the lens with the care of a jeweler. "You know, this one just came in last week. It's industrial. Real deal."

Chloe reached out to take it, but Doug didn't let go. "It's a loaner," he said, fixing them both with a stare that made Chloe feel like she was

being measured for something invisible. "Just bring it back when you're done. If you get in trouble, it'll get you home."

Maya nodded, and this time Doug released the flashlight. "Good luck," he said, voice dropping to a near-whisper.

They packed up their gear and made for the door, the bell above it giving a single, bright ring. Outside, the light was even sharper than before, and Chloe blinked against it, feeling the day spread wide and full in front of them.

She glanced at Maya, who was already studying the map, lips moving as she calculated the route.

Chloe hefted the flashlight, feeling its surprising weight settle in her palm. She clicked it on and watched the beam carve a path through the shadow under the porch, pure and clean.

It was just a tool, she told herself. Just a really good flashlight.

But as they set off for the Vanes' site, Chloe couldn't shake the sense that every step forward was taking them somewhere stranger than either of them could imagine.

The plan, in classic Duck Creek fashion, was to rendezvous at the visitor center before making their move toward the Vanes' dig site. But as Maya and Chloe stepped out onto the wooden porch, Chloe realized they'd forgotten one critical item: the trail snacks. Before she could even voice it, Maya jerked a thumb back at the door. "Go get them. I'll wait here."

Chloe ducked inside, the bell's little clang setting off another round of nostalgia, and saw Sam behind the counter, reorganizing stacks of local history pamphlets like she was prepping them for a space launch. Sam's eyes were quick to spot Chloe, and the hint of a smile played at her lips.

"Back already?" she asked, voice just above a whisper.

"Forgot our survival food," Chloe replied, heading for the candy rack. "No adventure is complete without sugar."

Sam's smile widened, but she didn't look up from her sorting. "You never know when a good jelly bean will save your life."

Doug was over by the wood stove, inventory clipboard in hand, humming a tune Chloe couldn't place. She caught the phrase "bring it back when you're done" echoing in her mind. The flashlight felt heavier than before, warm against her side through the canvas of her tote. Chloe had the wild idea that if she left it alone for too long, it might get up and walk away on its own.

She scooped a couple of trail mix packets and a sleeve of gummy worms from the shelf, then circled back to the register. Sam was still absorbed in her pamphlet stacks, but as Chloe placed the snacks on the counter, Sam's eyes flicked to the flashlight poking from the tote.

"That's a good one," Sam said, her tone casual, but Chloe sensed a deeper current beneath the words.

Chloe nodded. "Doug said it's industrial. A loaner."

Sam reached out, turning the flashlight in her hands. She tapped a tiny, nearly invisible switch on the side. "Did he show you this?" She pressed the switch with a thumbnail, and the beam that came out wasn't white, but a ghostly violet, faint and rippling.

"That's the UV setting," Sam said. "Rare on this model. It's excellent for checking mineral compositions in rock samples, or...well, sometimes weird stuff turns up around here. Might come in handy."

Chloe grinned. "What kind of weird stuff?"

Sam's eyes sparkled, but she only shrugged. "The kind worth seeing."

She clicked off the beam and handed the flashlight back. "Just don't shine it on your teeth. The effect is...unflattering."

Chloe snorted, then glanced at Doug, who was now only a few feet away, his back turned but his shoulders angled like he was definitely listening. "So, what's the deal with this thing? Leo said it just 'showed up' last week."

Sam considered, then leaned in, lowering her voice. "Sometimes, things come to this store when they're needed. Not before, and not after. Tools, mostly. But other times—" she paused, as if weighing whether or not to continue, "sometimes they're more than just tools."

Chloe took the hint, thanked Sam for the tip, and paid for the snacks. She stuffed them in her tote and headed for the door, the UV flashlight now tingling in her hand like a live wire.

Outside, Maya was crouched at the edge of the porch, inspecting the flashlight under the noonday sun. She turned it over and over, brows furrowed.

“Check this out,” Maya said, handing it to Chloe.

On the barrel, faint at first but unmistakable as the sunlight caught the metal just so, were a series of engravings: tight, swirling patterns that seemed to move when you looked away, like the afterimage from a camera flash.

“Did you see this before?” Chloe asked.

Maya shook her head. “It wasn’t there inside. Or at least I didn’t notice.”

Chloe traced the designs with a finger, then flicked the switch to UV mode. Instantly, the patterns fluoresced, glowing a soft lavender against the matte black casing.

“What do you think it means?” Chloe asked, voice lower than she’d intended.

Maya was silent for a long moment, then said, “I think Doug’s right. Sometimes a tool is just a tool. Other times, it’s...something else.”

They stared at the flashlight together. Chloe felt a shiver run up her arms, but not the bad kind. More like the feeling she got on opening night, right as the house lights dimmed and the stage went silent.

“Ready to go prospecting?” Chloe asked.

Maya smiled, that little half-cocked grin Chloe knew meant business. “Let’s go see what the mountain wants us to find.”

They set off down the path, the flashlight’s weight between them, and neither said another word about what they’d seen. Chloe thought about Doug, about Leo, about Sam and her careful, precise hands—and she wondered what else the mountain would put in their way before this was over.

But for now, there was sunlight, and trail snacks, and a mystery to solve. Chloe could hardly wait for the next act.

five

the vane auction

IT TOOK Chloe a full ten seconds to recognize the Duck Creek Town Hall. The familiar tangle of painted horseshoes and commemorative ribbons on the front porch had been replaced by a velvet rope and two potted aspen trees, staged like something out of an art auction. Inside, it was unrecognizable. Gone was the faint smell of propane and old ballots; in its place, a curated atmosphere of brushed steel, glass, and high-end exhibition lighting. The tables—usually reserved for PTA fundraisers and the annual chili cook-off—had vanished. In their place: sleek, museum-grade display cases, each one lit from below and guarded by a low, humming security system that, in Duck Creek, probably doubled as a bear deterrent.

Victor Vane stood dead center, flanked by banners in deep blue and gold. He wore a suit of such bright, improbable crispness that Chloe wondered if it came with its own lighting crew. Every hair was in place; his tie matched the accent color on the banners exactly. He held the room the way a seasoned actor holds a stage—chin up, arms just far enough from his body to suggest command, but not arrogance.

The crowd was dense, half familiar faces from the village, half newcomers in branded parkas and fresh-off-the-rack hiking boots. Chloe and Maya drifted along the back edge, swept immediately into the gentle crush of spectators. Maya, all subtle edges and calm, scanned the perimeter as if mentally mapping the exits. Chloe trailed her,

drinking in the spectacle, the way locals and outsiders mingled, the electric current of something rare and new.

Victor's voice was tuned for the room, not too loud, not too soft, and calibrated to drop perfectly between the low hum of conversation and the whirl of the heating fans. He moved from display to display, narrating the provenance of each artifact with a rhythm that Chloe could only describe as "addictive." You could see the way he worked the crowd: linger on a child's awed face, pivot to lock eyes with a doubter, always finish with a joke or a slice of homespun wisdom. The man was good.

"Here," he said, gesturing to the nearest display, "we have the earliest evidence of Spanish exploration in southern Utah." His hand floated over a shallow glass box. Inside, set on navy blue velvet, were three hammered coins, a row of corroded buttons, and what looked like a fragment of oxidized metal, its edges wrapped in green patina. "Recovered just this week," Victor continued, "from the site of our gold discovery. The coins are Spanish, minted in Mexico City between 1745 and 1789."

He let the words settle, then stepped aside to allow a cluster of tourists a closer look. From the other side of the room, Rebecca Vane advanced, clipboard in hand, moving through the crowd with the smooth assurance of a veteran socialite. Her leather portfolio never left her grasp, and Chloe saw at least two people discreetly hand her business cards and folded checks in a span of ten steps.

Chloe watched, enraptured. It wasn't just about the gold. This was theater, and Victor and Rebecca were the headliners.

Maya, meanwhile, had zeroed in on the artifacts themselves. She sidled up to the edge of the nearest case, fished a pair of thin cotton gloves from her coat pocket, and donned them with the solemnity of a surgeon about to perform a rare procedure. Chloe hovered just behind her, doing her best not to draw the attention of the docent—a local in an ill-fitting blazer and bolo tie—who was responsible for guarding the relics.

Maya leaned in, her breath fogging the glass. She pointed to the coin at the center of the display, a dull silver disc stamped with the faint

outline of a crowned king. “Can I see the edge?” she asked, polite but insistent.

The docent hesitated, then glanced at Victor, who gave the subtlest of nods. The man unlocked the case with a flourish, lifted the coin, and offered it to Maya.

She turned it over slowly, peering at the rim, then at the surface. “May I?” she said, gesturing to a small hand lens on the table.

“Of course,” Victor said, now directly over her shoulder. “Take your time. We want this to be a learning experience for everyone.”

Maya raised the lens and examined the coin. “These are in amazing condition,” she said, not quite a compliment. “Do you mind if I check the others?”

Victor grinned, showing teeth. “That’s what they’re here for.”

Maya proceeded, methodical. She handled the buttons, the metal fragments, every movement careful and precise. Chloe watched the performance, noting the way the rest of the crowd leaned in with barely disguised envy. Even the locals, who might otherwise have grumbled at the “outsider show,” now watched with the collective hope of witnessing something—anything—that would make Duck Creek more than a footnote on a map.

Chloe surveyed the room, cataloguing reactions. The retired shop teacher and his wife lingered longest at each case, faces set in hungry curiosity. Two teenage boys pointed at the artifacts with muttered expletives, while their mom pretended to be interested but checked her phone every thirty seconds. The mayor, conspicuously overdressed, made sure to shake Victor’s hand twice in the first hour, all while a photographer hovered nearby, catching it all for the next newsletter.

“See this?” Maya whispered to Chloe, keeping her tone light for the crowd’s benefit. She gestured to the coins, then to the metal fragment. “They’re all the same color. They shouldn’t be.”

Chloe nodded, lowering her voice to a register she’d once used for backstage gossip. “Patina?”

“Patina,” Maya said. “Silver and copper age differently, especially in this climate.”

Chloe grinned, but before she could press the point, Victor interrupted with another story—this one about a lost Spanish galleon that

had allegedly made its way to the Great Basin by accident, depositing treasure along every canyon. The man could spin a yarn.

Rebecca Vane now moved within arm's reach, portfolio pressed tight to her chest. She smiled at Maya and Chloe, the warmth of it slightly over-polished. "Are you two local?" she asked.

"Born and raised," Chloe answered, as Maya handed the coin back to the docent.

Rebecca's eyes flickered to the gloves, then to Maya's face. "You must have a background in science. I'm so glad you're here. We want the community to be involved in every step."

Maya's smile was sharper than Rebecca's, but just as practiced. "That's good. Is there any third-party testing yet? For the coins, or the site?"

Rebecca's answer was instant. "Our partner in Salt Lake is analyzing the finds. Once the initial reports are in, we'll publish everything." She reached into her portfolio, extracted a glossy pamphlet, and handed it to Chloe. "We're hosting a field day next weekend. Would you like to join the guest list?"

Chloe took the pamphlet, flipping it open to a full-color spread of Victor standing heroically at the edge of a canyon. "We'll think about it," Chloe said, and saw the micro-flinch of disappointment in Rebecca's eyes.

Victor, overhearing, drifted over. "Any questions?" His smile was unflappable, but Chloe could see the faint lines of strain at the edges.

"Actually, yes," Maya said. "If these coins are Spanish, shouldn't there be more organic material in the soil? Like, broken ceramics, or bits of textile?"

Victor's pivot was a master class in misdirection. "An excellent point! But you see, the arroyos here are prone to flash floods. Organic material rarely survives. What we find is almost always metal."

Chloe watched as the answer rippled through the crowd, shifting doubt into acceptance with the efficiency of a well-timed plot twist. She marveled, again, at how Victor could snip a question off at the root and leave the audience feeling grateful.

"Besides," he continued, "this isn't just about the artifacts. It's

about connection. The living history. The way these objects tie us to the land and to each other.”

He finished with a flourish, then moved on, leaving Maya and Chloe in a small eddy of silence.

“I don’t trust him,” Maya said, barely moving her lips.

Chloe shrugged. “You don’t have to. But look at everyone else.”

They did. The faces in the room were lit not by the display cases, but by the story Victor had layered around each object. Belief was a commodity here, and Victor was selling it at a premium.

Rebecca returned, this time with a clipboard. “If you’re interested,” she said, “we’re taking names for a private tour of the dig site. It’s strictly limited, but we’d love to have you.”

Maya hesitated, then signed her name at the bottom of the list. “Just to see,” she said, passing the clipboard to Chloe.

Chloe scribbled her own name, then handed it back with a theatrical flourish. “Looking forward to it,” she said.

Rebecca beamed, then floated away to the next group of prospects.

As the crowd thickened, Chloe and Maya drifted toward the exit. The artifacts glittered under the gallery lights, and Victor’s voice—always poised, always in control—echoed across the room, promising more discovery, more wonder, more history. Outside, the light was sharp and cold, but Chloe felt the hum of the room still stuck to her skin.

“Next weekend?” Maya said.

“We’ll be there,” Chloe replied.

And as they walked away, the last thing Chloe saw through the glass door was Victor, shaking hands with a stranger, eyes shining in the artificial dusk. For now, at least, the town was his.

The air outside the town hall had shifted from sharp to syrupy, thick with the echo of Victor’s voice and the scents of coffee, perfume, and damp asphalt. Chloe pretended to study the event flyer, posted askew on the announcement board, but her eyes were fixed on the cracked window just

above their heads. The old casement was wedged open an inch or two, probably for the benefit of the three trailing smokers who loitered just out of sight, but it also let the sound of heated voices spill out onto the steps.

She nudged Maya, who was pretending to read the pamphlet about the dig site tour but was obviously more interested in the argument happening inside. They kept their heads bowed, postures casual. Chloe risked a glance at the window: the curtains were only half drawn, and she caught a flicker of Victor's bright blue suit and Rebecca's perfectly coiffed profile as the couple paced the room.

"We're right on schedule," Victor said, his voice richer and rougher than the one he used for the crowds. "Two more weeks of hype, then the gala. We'll have a full buy-in before the ink is dry on the press release." Something clinked—probably the gold watch Chloe had seen him fidget with all afternoon.

Rebecca's reply was softer, tense. "I'm telling you, we've got to watch that chemistry girl. She's not like the others."

Maya's lips curled up in a small, private smile.

Victor's laugh was a practiced, high-gloss sound. "She's nobody, Becca. Just a bored local who likes to play detective. We'll be long gone before she can even get a test run." He lowered his voice, but the words still carried: "By the time the experts weigh in, we'll be in Belize, counting the money."

Rebecca pressed back, voice shrill enough that Chloe flinched. "You said that about the Florida thing. I don't want another close call, Victor. I want this clean."

Victor's tone snapped to steel. "Then keep her away from the artifacts. That's your job. And get the buy-in forms printed by Friday."

Rebecca's heels clicked hard on the wood. "And the car?"

Victor exhaled, weary. "Tomorrow. We swap the tags before dawn. Nobody will notice."

The window slammed shut, leaving Chloe and Maya blinking at each other in the sudden silence. Somewhere down the street, a generator rumbled to life, and the late sunlight caught the edges of freshly printed brochures fluttering from the town hall door.

Chloe was the first to speak. "They're actually going for it. A full-blown scam, with a gala and everything."

Maya checked over her shoulder, then pulled her phone from her jacket and snapped a photo of the Vanes' SUV, parked two spaces down. The plates were from Nevada, the window dusted with the same pollen haze as every other vehicle in town.

"That's their third car since March," Maya whispered. "And look at the tires—barely even dusty. They only use it for show."

Chloe tried to keep the panic out of her voice. "Do you think anyone will believe us? The whole room was eating out of Victor's hand."

Maya's mouth set in a stubborn line. "You heard him. They're betting on nobody checking the science until it's too late. But if we document everything—"

"—and get it out fast," Chloe finished, "maybe we can beat them to the punch."

They turned their attention back to the flyer, this time actually reading it. The "exclusive dig site experience" was scheduled for the following Saturday, limited to fifteen guests at a cool \$750 each. It was already more than half sold out.

Chloe's fingers twitched for her sketchbook, but she forced herself to focus. "You said the coins were wrong," she whispered. "The patina."

"They're all the same," Maya replied. "Real coins from different periods, buried at different depths—they'd never age the same way. Plus, not a single trace of manganese oxide. Not possible if they were ever in Duck Creek soil."

Chloe's heart beat a little faster. "So how do we prove it before they disappear?"

Maya looked up at the sky, searching for the answer. "We get a sample. And we get help."

From inside the hall came the sound of laughter and the bright, happy buzz of a crowd unaware of the trap being laid for them. Chloe and Maya moved away from the window as the first tourists began to spill out the doors, waving brochures and shaking hands, their pockets already lighter from deposits placed in Rebecca's leather folio.

They lingered long enough to watch Victor and Rebecca step out to the porch, all smiles and photo ops, the con never slipping even for an

instant. Then Maya tugged Chloe's sleeve, and they melted into the crowd.

"We need to move," Maya said. "Tonight, if possible. Before they cover their tracks."

Chloe nodded, falling into step. There was a story here, and she was suddenly sure of her role in it—not just as witness, but as participant. Maybe even as hero, if they played it right.

The crowd thickened around the front steps, and the town's collective heartbeat sped up, all hope and greed and the wild, irresistible pull of a good legend. But Chloe and Maya were already gone, off the main drag and into the blue shadow of evening, their path lit by the cold promise of the mountain and the secrets it kept.

Next time, Chloe thought, the spotlight would be theirs.

six

chrome and clues

DUCK CREEK VILLAGE usually smelled like fresh-cut pine, but on Father's Day weekend, the air belonged to gasoline and smoked brisket. Even at sunrise, the meadows behind the country store were already a living engine show: row upon row of vintage trucks and UTVs, each glinting a different shade of chrome in the rising light. Every local and every second-home owner within a hundred-mile radius had brought out their shiniest, loudest toy to the edge of the forest.

Maya and Chloe picked their way through the lines of lifted rigs and custom-painted OHVs, dodging the tangle of extension cords and folding chairs, every third step interrupted by the enthusiastic bark of a blue heeler or the yip of a Chihuahua in a patriotic bandana. The soundscape was a loop of throaty engines, bad country covers from a rented sound system, and the clatter of dads showing off their grill setups. Chloe wore her usual layered knits, the sleeves rolled so her wrists could move freely as she drew the event into her sketchbook, while Maya had opted for her dad's old work shirt, the one so faded it almost matched her eyes.

Chloe stopped to gawk at a row of restored Broncos, the bodies buffed to mirror finish. "This is—what's the word?—orgiastic," she said, waving her arms in a circle. "All this horsepower! All this—" she paused, searching for something dramatic, "testosterone!"

Maya grinned, surveying the crowd. "And yet it's mostly dads and

golden retrievers. I don't see anyone flexing. I see a lot of middle-aged men comparing tire treads and drinking caffeine."

Chloe bent over her sketchbook, tongue stuck between her teeth, as she tried to capture the exact swoop of a grill guard in a single line. She didn't look up. "That's what makes it perfect. It's pure. Like a parade, but for people who can't walk in a straight line."

It wasn't just locals. Overland tourists from all over the Southwest clustered in little knots, swapping stories about axle breaks and where the real gnarly mud could be found. Chloe eavesdropped as one man in a Sedona Jeep Club T-shirt explained how he once had to winch out a celebrity chef who'd tried to ford Duck Creek in a stock Land Rover.

As they passed the midway point of the meadow, Maya spotted the Vanes, and, as predicted, they looked as if they'd just stepped off the cover of a catalog for outdoor lifestyle gear. Victor wore a tan technical vest over a pale blue button-down, the pockets suspiciously flat, as though nothing inside had ever actually been used. Saffron had on a soft shell jacket the color of moss, but the cuffs were clean, and there wasn't a single mark on her "authentic" hiking boots. They worked the crowd with practiced ease, Victor handing out business cards with a smooth flick, Saffron laughing in perfect sync with each new dad joke.

"Look at them," Chloe murmured. "It's like they bought the wrong costume for the part."

Maya made a noncommittal noise, but her eyes were on Victor. "He's not here to make friends. He's here to sell the story. Watch how he never holds a conversation for more than a minute. Always on the move."

They hovered by a pop-up tent where a father-son duo were offering "Mountain Rescue Chili" out of a battered Dutch oven. Maya took a sample cup and let the flavor sit on her tongue while she listened to Victor's pitch to a group of retired engineers from St. George.

"We're just so grateful to the community," Victor said, voice just the right volume to be heard two rows over. "This discovery isn't just ours—it's for all of Duck Creek."

One of the engineers, a spry woman with a head of silver hair, looked at the gold bar Victor produced from his case with a mixture of

skepticism and barely hidden desire. “How do you know it’s authentic?” she asked.

Victor gave her the soft, conspiratorial smile he’d been wearing all morning. “That’s why we’re doing the open dig next week. Transparency is everything. You’ll see the proof with your own eyes.”

From the corner of her gaze, Maya saw Saffron make a subtle sweep of the crowd, her gaze pausing fractionally when it passed Maya and Chloe. Chloe did her best to blend, pretending to be fascinated by a rebuilt Suzuki Samurai parked behind the chili tent.

The engineers moved on, and Victor, not missing a beat, turned his attention to the next group—a couple of Utah State students, both in branded hoodies and clearly star-struck. Saffron handled them with the lightest of touches, all warmth and invitation, and in moments the students were following the Vanes down the line of display cases, swept along by the promise of gold.

Chloe gave a low whistle. “They’re good. Not even one wasted motion.”

“Not yet,” Maya said, her attention drifting to the far edge of the show, where a battered Ford F-250 sat surrounded by an ever-changing circle of off-road lifers. The truck’s paint was a patchwork of stories, every dent and sticker a badge of survival. Its owner, a man with a beard like volcanic ash and hands the size of catcher’s mitts, held court from a folding stool, his voice gravelly and loud.

Maya steered Chloe in that direction, hoping the old-timers would have something different to say about the gold rush sweeping the town. The closer they got, the more the air smelled like old tires and bourbon.

“You girls here to see the rigs or the legends?” the man said as they approached. His tone was rough, but not unkind.

Maya shrugged. “Little of both. You think that bar they found is real?”

The old man snorted. “If it’s real, I’ll shave my beard and run a Prius up to Mammoth Overlook.” He laughed, and the others joined in. “I seen a hundred stories like this. They’re always real until the check clears and the marks disappear.”

Chloe flipped open her sketchbook to a blank page. “You ever find anything out here?”

"All the time," he said. "Rusted tools, bullets, the occasional fossilized gopher. But never gold. Never nothing that couldn't be explained with a little science and a lot of imagination."

Maya smiled, but kept her thoughts to herself. The man shifted forward, elbows on knees, and eyed the girls more closely. "You two working for the Vanes?"

"Just curious," Maya said, "but thanks for the warning."

He nodded, satisfied. "Keep your heads on straight. Gold fever's real. Gets into people and makes 'em crazy."

Chloe thanked him, and they moved on, the warning sticking like a burr.

They drifted back toward the heart of the show, passing a stand where a mother and daughter were selling cherry hand pies from a cooler. Maya bought two, and they sat on the curb to eat, watching the social currents swirl. Victor was at the center of it now, holding his little court near the DJ booth, the gold bar glinting in the sun as he fielded questions and posed for selfies.

"He looks so comfortable," Chloe said, "but I bet he's sweating bullets inside."

"He's selling the legend," Maya said. "But the legend is full of holes, and people are starting to see it."

As if on cue, a hush fell over the nearby crowd. Victor, still holding the bar, was face-to-face with a new arrival—a man Maya hadn't seen before, but who carried himself like someone who'd been around. He wore a battered field vest, battered boots, and a sunburn so deep it looked permanent. The crowd parted for him, as if expecting a confrontation.

The man didn't waste time. "I know that bar. You say it came from Navajo Wash, but it doesn't match any sample I've seen from there. Not even close."

Victor's smile flickered, just a fraction, and Maya caught the flash of something new in his eyes: annoyance. "We're still analyzing the site," Victor said. "There could be multiple sources."

The man folded his arms. "You ever panned up there yourself? Or you just send in your people to do the dirty work?"

Victor's smile snapped back into place. "We do our own research,"

he said. "But that's what the dig is for. You should come by—bring your own pan."

The man laughed, rough and unimpressed. "Don't need to. I already know what's in those hills."

There was a moment, just a hair's breadth, where Maya thought Victor might actually lose his cool. But instead, he turned to the watching crowd, lifted the bar high, and addressed them all at once.

"This is exactly why we're doing what we're doing," Victor said. "There are doubters everywhere. That's healthy. But sometimes you have to believe in the impossible. Otherwise, where's the adventure?"

The crowd, hungry for drama, gave him a round of applause, and the momentary threat was swept away. But Maya saw the way Victor's jaw clenched, the way he handed the bar back to Saffron with a little too much force.

The old man walked off, giving Chloe and Maya a half-salute as he passed. "Keep your eyes open," he muttered.

They did.

As the sun crested noon, Maya watched the Vanes move through the crowd, their performance flawless, their confidence only briefly shaken. But she remembered the look in Victor's eyes when challenged. It wasn't just annoyance—it was fear.

"Did you see that?" Maya whispered to Chloe, who was already sketching out the scene in rapid lines.

"He's scared," Chloe said. "He's not used to someone not believing him."

Maya nodded. "Next week, when the dig starts, I bet he'll be even more on edge. We just have to be there when he slips."

Chloe grinned, holding up her sketchbook. She'd captured the moment, Victor's arm up, the gold bar gleaming, the crowd in a semi-circle of anticipation. "Theater, right?" she said.

Maya smiled. "Yeah. But the best part is always after the curtain drops."

They finished their hand pies in silence, watching as the show went on, the promise of gold shimmering above it all like the world's oldest mirage.

After an hour of people-watching, Maya nudged Chloe and nodded toward the far end of the field, where a makeshift obstacle course drew a new crowd every few minutes. "I'll loop around the food stands," she said, "see if anyone's got dirt on the Vanes' last 'expedition.'"

Chloe flashed a thumbs-up and drifted toward a cluster of jeeps, the kind with rock sliders and winches that looked like they'd survived a war. She circled once, drawing in the details: beadlock rims splattered with red clay, a hood ornament shaped like a rubber chicken, a row of hand-painted "trophy" dents along the door. She could feel the hum of community here, not just the literal engines, but the way the off-roaders swapped stories with an ease she envied.

"Hey, you look like you know your way around a Jeep," someone said, and Chloe turned to find herself face-to-face with a wiry guy in a shirt that read, in peeling vinyl, 'Duck Creek Recovery Team.'

She didn't, really, but she knew how to fake it. "I just like to draw them," she said, "but this one looks like it could climb a tree if you let it."

The man's smile deepened. "She's done a couple of things I can't print on a T-shirt." He gestured at the battered blue rig, the hood still steaming from its last run. "Want a closer look?"

Chloe set her bag down and let herself be inducted into the offroader circle. There were four of them: Recovery Team Shirt, a bearded man in a sun-bleached baseball cap, a woman in mirrored aviators and cargo shorts, and a teenager who looked like he could bench-press the jeep if properly motivated. They introduced themselves only by first names and the mods on their vehicles ("Locker Larry," "Turbo Sue," "Matt, no relation to the other Matt"). Within minutes, Chloe felt like she'd been a regular at their after-action debriefs for years.

They peppered her with questions about her art, about which rigs looked best on paper, about whether she'd ever tried to sketch with mud as a pigment. ("It's more archival than you'd think," joked Larry.) In return, she asked about the trails, the way the snowmelt shifted the landscape every year, and the best line to take up through the Devil's Wash.

"Depends on the year," said Sue, who had a dust tan that ended at her sock line. "Last spring, the left fork was pure silt. You needed a winch or a sacrificial friend."

Larry pointed his thumb at the kid. "That's what Matt is for."

Matt shrugged. "I've eaten worse."

They all laughed, and Chloe couldn't help but notice the casual, good-hearted ribbing was a whole different flavor than the Vanes' slick banter. There was nothing polished here, just the stories layered and retold until they stuck.

Eventually, Chloe steered the conversation to the topic she'd been burning to ask about. "So, you all hear about the Vanes' new find?"

The group stilled, just for a second. Then Larry said, "You mean the cave up by Second Creek?"

Chloe nodded, and Sue blew out a breath, the sound halfway between a laugh and a snort. "That cave doesn't exist. We've mapped every inch up there. There's some overhangs, a few pockets that fill with snow, but nothing a grown man could even stand in."

Matt, who'd been quiet until now, added, "There's a story that a surveyor found a Spanish helmet in the '80s, but it was fiberglass. For a diorama."

Larry leaned in, elbows on knees. "We get a couple of treasure hunters every year. They rent quads, dig holes where the GPS tells them, then they get bored and leave trash behind."

Chloe scribbled a note in her sketchbook. "So what's the deal with the Vanes?"

Larry's eyes crinkled. "They're playing the crowd. It's the third 'discovery' they've announced in five years. Every time, it's the same pattern: big tease, a limited tour, a fundraiser, and then—" he snapped his fingers, "—they vanish."

Sue nodded. "And every year, people want to believe. I don't blame them. Wouldn't you rather the mountains had buried treasure than just more rocks?"

Chloe let the idea settle. "You think they'll pull it off again?"

"They always do," said Matt. "Until someone actually finds something. Then maybe the story ends different."

They shared a moment of silent agreement, eyes turned to the horizon where the mountain met the sky.

Chloe felt the need to share, just a little. "My friend and I—we're trying to get to the bottom of it. We don't want anyone to get hurt."

Larry gave her a look she couldn't quite read. "It's good to care," he said, "but you gotta let people make their own mistakes. That's the only way some of us learn."

She understood, but she didn't agree. Not entirely.

At that moment, Chloe caught sight of Maya across the way, standing with her hands in her pockets, listening to a pair of women in matching fleece vests. Maya met her gaze and raised an eyebrow, the universal signal for "get over here, I've got news."

Chloe excused herself, promising to come back for a jeep portrait later, and crossed the field. As she drew close, she caught the tail end of Maya's conversation.

"—not a single geologist on their team," one vest woman was saying. "They're just in it for the social media. Saw it with the dinosaur bones two years ago."

The other woman nodded. "My brother's on Search and Rescue. Says they flagged the Vanes' GPS tracks—they never even got within a mile of where they say the bar was found."

Maya thanked them and waited until they were out of earshot. She dropped her voice. "They're getting ready for the dig, but they haven't set foot on the real site. Everything's staged for the cameras."

"Locals know it's fake," Chloe whispered, "but the tourists don't."

Maya grinned. "Classic Duck Creek."

They watched as the Vanes moved from booth to booth, Saffron stopping to flirt with a news crew, Victor making a show of shaking hands with a kid who'd won the RC car rally. Their faces were pure confidence, but their posture was tight, like people who knew they were being watched.

Chloe shivered, and not from cold. "If we're going to stop them, we need a real plan."

Maya nodded. "Meet tonight, after sunset?"

"Doug's? Or the meadow?"

"Doug's. If they're watching us, we don't give them a show."

Chloe felt the charge of it, the sense of a script in motion. "We'll write a new ending," she said.

Maya smiled. "One with actual justice."

They parted again, each blending back into the event. Chloe, now fully inside the flow of the festival, took her time. She wandered back to the Recovery Team, asked more about their best (and worst) trail recoveries, learned how to pop a tire bead with starter fluid ("it's all about timing"), and even accepted a dare to ride the obstacle course in the back of Larry's Jeep. It was loud, and bumpy, and absolutely worth the mud streak that ended up across her cheek.

She watched Victor and Saffron from afar, but this time, she felt like she understood the play. The Vanes were good, but they'd never survived a Duck Creek mud pit. And Chloe had a feeling that, before this was over, they were about to hit one.

As the sun fell and the air cooled, the offroaders began to pack up, the field slowly returning to its normal, piney state. Chloe made her way toward the store, head buzzing with new stories and a plan forming just behind her eyes.

There was a legend in Duck Creek now, but for once, Chloe knew how it would end.

seven

tales from the tailgate

IF THERE WAS a grand unified theory for rural commerce, it lived on the rickety folding tables of Duck Creek's country store booth at the Father's Day Offroad Show. Chloe and Maya knew the drill by now: roll in at sunrise, help Doug unload battered milk crates of hardware and regional snacks, then race Sam to see who could unfurl the store's home-sewn banner first. Every detail mattered. If you wrinkled the sign, Doug would notice. If you smudged the tablecloth, Sam would re-iron it in front of you, all the while recounting the tragic story of her cousin's failed linen service in Parowan.

They worked in tandem, Chloe stringing up the banner while Maya laid out the piles of pocket knives and hand-warmers like museum exhibits. Sam stood over the arrangement, correcting any pattern that dared to be less than symmetrical.

"People buy more if you display it as a grid," Sam announced, her eyes flicking over the inventory with a mathematician's hunger.

"They buy more if you stand in the middle of the aisle and shout 'free fudge samples,'" Chloe countered, grinning.

Doug barked a laugh from the back of the pickup, where he was stacking surplus cases of soda and Gatorade. "She's not wrong," he said. "Last year we ran out by noon. Only place I ever saw a tourist tackle a Mormon bishop was right here, over the last hunk of peanut butter fudge."

Maya and Chloe exchanged a glance, each storing the anecdote for later deployment.

The offroad show was, as always, a sensory overdose: the air thick with the oily cologne of two-stroke engines, BBQ smoke, and the distant scent of sunscreen baking on plastic chairs. You couldn't swing a trail map without hitting a vendor tent, and every tent had a theme—turkey legs, antler art, pocket-sized survival gadgets, or, in the case of the Duck Creek Country Store, “Everything You Didn't Know You Needed Until Right Now.”

Chloe set the last length of banner cord in place and stood back to admire their work. The booth was perfect. The fudge display was arranged by flavor gradient, the knife rack sparkled in the sunlight, and Doug had even managed to wedge a hand-painted arrow sign (“Restrooms: That-a-Way”) between two tubs of jerky.

Sam, satisfied, awarded both girls a cookie from her private stash, then scuttled off to audit the show's main tent for possible infractions. Doug tossed Maya a bottle of apple soda, then leaned against the tailgate, surveying the festival.

He lowered his voice, as if about to reveal a state secret. “You see that pack of grandpas over by the Broncos?”

Chloe craned her neck. At the edge of the meadow, a semicircle of ancient Ford and Chevy trucks formed a kind of council ring. On the beds and tailgates sat a crew of old-timers—ex-miners, retired rangers, and lifelong locals—each one decorated with a personal archive of sunspots, mustache, or both. They held court over the crowd, sipping black coffee and dissecting the morning's spectacle with the world-weary authority of men who'd seen every possible permutation of weather, rumor, and human folly the mountains could conjure.

“That's the real town hall,” Doug said. “They know every ridge and rumor, every shortcut and scam this side of Kolob Terrace.”

Chloe bit into her cookie. “Are they actually here for the show, or just for the gossip?”

“Why not both?” Maya said, smiling. “Besides, if you want to know what's really up with the gold bar, I bet that's where the answers are.”

Doug nodded, a slow smile spreading. “Those old boys have

forgotten more about Rhoades Mine than most folks will ever know. Why don't you two go pay your respects? Tell 'em I sent you."

Chloe brushed cookie crumbs from her fingers. "What should we ask?"

Doug shrugged. "Just listen. That's how you get the good stuff."

Maya led the way, threading them between quads and coolers. The closer they got to the truck circle, the more the mood changed: the offroaders' party energy faded, replaced by a deep, magnetic calm. Here, voices stayed low, and stories accumulated in the shade under brimmed hats.

As they approached, the men sized them up with the wary curiosity of barn cats. One had a forestry badge still pinned to his battered fleece; another sported a mesh trucker cap so ancient its original color was a riddle. Their faces were a field guide to Duck Creek's last five decades—scarred, sunburned, mapped with lines as fine as topo marks.

The eldest, his beard gone entirely silver and his eyes so blue they looked artificial, set down his mug and gestured to the bed of his pickup. "You two lost, or just avoiding the beer tent?"

Maya smiled. "Doug sent us. Said you were the guys who really knew about the mountain."

A ripple of amusement passed through the circle. The silver beard nodded, then whistled low. "That's a high compliment, coming from that mule-headed son of a gun."

Chloe tried for her most winning smile, which was to say she smiled exactly the way she always did. "He also said you've got the real story on the Rhoades Mine."

At that, several of the men shifted, as if realigning for a more serious conversation. They made space, one sliding over to offer Maya a spot on the tailgate, another patting the plywood crate next to him for Chloe. The effect was welcoming, but also a little bit like being invited to the witness stand in a very gentle court.

"Name's Bill," the silver beard said, "and you probably want to know why nobody's ever found more than a fleck or two up here, even though every summer there's a new batch of treasure hunters tearing up the mud."

He glanced around at the others, as if daring someone to contradict him. No one did.

Chloe, perched on the crate, let her hands rest on her knees, palms up. "We're here to listen," she said, echoing Doug's words.

Bill nodded once, satisfied. "Good. Now, before you get your hopes up, let me tell you: Rhoades Mine is more curse than legend. Every few years some city slicker rolls up, waves around a shiny rock, and promises to put Duck Creek on the map. Never works out."

A man in the yellow windbreaker, who'd introduced himself as Joe, chimed in. "Last time it was a guy from St. George—said he'd cracked the Spanish code and mapped the whole vein using old missionary records. Spent a month digging. Came out with his hands empty and his credit ruined."

Maya listened, her elbows on her knees, gaze intent. "But there's real gold, right? Enough that people keep coming back."

Joe grinned. "Sure. And there's trout in Duck Creek. Doesn't mean you're gonna catch the big one unless you know what you're doing."

The next man, whose face was a single landscape of moles and broken capillaries, added: "The mountain gives up a secret only when it feels like it."

The council of granddads all nodded, the consensus as solid as basalt.

Chloe pulled her feet up onto the crate and hugged her knees, making herself comfortable. "Have any of you ever seen the gold bar?" she asked, careful not to sound like she doubted their stories.

Bill snorted. "The Vanes' bar? Looked at it this morning. Too clean. Smelled like it just came out of a safe deposit box. Maybe it's real, maybe it isn't, but it doesn't have the mountain's mark."

Maya perked up. "What's the mountain's mark?"

This drew a real laugh from the group. Bill leaned back and scratched his beard. "You ever see true Duck Creek gold? It's got a mineral signature. Tiny flecks of manganese, trace silver, and the color's never right. Locals know the look, and they know when someone's faking."

The next granddad—Hank, whose voice was smoke and silt—added, "The real stuff, it's ugly. Comes out in these lumps, almost

green. Most folks wouldn't look at it twice if they weren't after a legend."

Chloe tapped her foot, as if counting down the beats. "So you think the Vanes' bar is fake?"

Joe shook his head. "Not fake, exactly. But it isn't from here. I'd bet my last set of snow tires on that."

They lapsed into silence, the only sound the distant engine roar and the occasional clink of a coffee thermos against the tailgate.

After a while, Bill fixed his blue gaze on Maya. "You've got the look of someone who actually wants to solve this, not just sell a story."

Maya grinned. "I'd like to prove a few people wrong. If I can."

Bill nodded slowly, as if weighing the truth of it. Then, without looking, he reached into the breast pocket of his vest and drew out a tiny, battered leather pouch. He opened it and shook a single, rough gold nugget into his palm. It was a lump the size of a pea, gnarly and knotted with black inclusions.

He passed it to Maya. "That's real. Found it with my granddad in the 1960s. Look at the color, then look at the Vanes' bar next time you see it."

Maya turned the nugget in her fingers, studying it with a careful, scientific focus. "It's...almost green," she said, surprised.

Bill smiled, all pride and no teeth. "Told you."

Chloe leaned closer to see, then looked up at the old men. "Why do you think the legend won't die?"

Hank shrugged. "Because some part of it is true. Or maybe because people want it to be true more than they want it to be false."

Bill's eyes glinted. "Or maybe the mountain wants the legend to live, and keeps it going for the right people to find, when the time is right."

This last line hit Chloe in the chest like a well-placed stage cue. She watched Maya close her hand around the nugget, her face drawn in a line of concentration.

The conversation wound down, but the old men lingered, content in the slow warmth of the afternoon. They told a few more stories—of flash floods, of lost surveyors, of the time Joe rescued a lost hiker by luring him out with beef jerky and a joke about city shoes. The stories

grew less about gold and more about the mountain itself, the way it changed and held onto secrets.

When Chloe and Maya finally stood, the men all tipped their hats in unison, and Bill pressed the nugget back into Maya's hand. "You keep it. Maybe it'll bring you luck."

Maya blinked, then closed her fist around the nugget. "Thank you," she said. "We'll take care of it."

As they walked back toward the booth, Chloe said, "Did you notice how none of them ever answered the question directly?"

Maya nodded. "That's how you know they're telling the truth. At least as much as the mountain lets them."

They passed the fudge stand, where the crowd had doubled, and Chloe saw Sam waving at them from the booth. Doug stood with arms crossed, but his face broke into a rare, proud smile as they approached.

"Well?" he said. "Did you get the real story?"

Maya grinned, holding up the nugget. "Maybe," she said. "Or maybe the mountain's saving the best story for later."

Chloe liked the sound of that. She let herself picture the mountain as a silent, patient archivist, doling out rumors and facts one at a time, always just enough to keep people coming back for more.

The afternoon pressed on, and the festival roared. But at the heart of it, Chloe felt a quiet certainty—like the first glint of gold in a pan of muddy water. The legend wasn't dead. Not yet.

And as the sun dipped behind the ridgeline, she was certain: it was only a matter of time before the mountain told the next part of its story.

The engine noise of the offroad show faded as the sun started its slow descent behind the pines, but the granddad circle only grew sharper, the stories rolling out as naturally as tire tracks in soft sand. Bill, whose beard had gone pure moonlight in the afternoon, took back the battered gold nugget from Maya and cradled it in his palm.

"Here's the thing about mountain gold," he said, drawing his words out like they deserved to be savored. "Most folks think it's all the same, but they're wrong. Up here, the real stuff's got a fingerprint you can't

fake, not unless you grew up eating the dirt and drinking from the springs.”

He nudged the nugget toward Chloe, then dug a magnifying loupe from his vest and balanced it between two fingers, the glass clouded at the rim but clear in the center. “Take a look,” he told her.

Chloe, ever the theater kid, made a show of squinting one eye shut and holding the loupe up like a monocle. The nugget was heavy, ugly as promised, shot through with black veins and a weird, oily green luster. “It looks... alive,” she said, genuinely startled.

Bill cackled. “That’s the manganese. Real Duck Creek gold comes out with just enough of it to piss off a proper assayer. The refineries back east won’t touch it unless you roast out the impurities first, which means it never leaves here without a story attached.”

Maya took the loupe next, steady and methodical. She turned the nugget under the light, watching the inclusions pop against the battered yellow. “How do you know it’s real?”

Bill grinned. “You don’t. Not really. But you know when it isn’t.” He jerked his chin toward the vendor row, where the Vanes’ tent still sparkled with its own gravity. “The bar they’re waving around? No trace of the manganese tell. Shiny as a politician’s promise. My guess, it came from a pawn shop in Phoenix, or off a tourist with more money than sense.”

Joe, who’d been silent, his fingers laced tight, nodded hard. “Not a doubt in my mind,” he said, voice gone soft. “My old man lost our whole spread over a scam like that. Sumbitch out of Provo convinced him the claim was loaded, all the paperwork checked out, even had a sample assayed at the college. Dad mortgaged the house, the cattle, everything. Three years later, all we had left was a stack of IOUs and a mess of brass shavings.”

The men murmured, heads bowed. The loss was old but never quite healed.

Joe’s voice was raw when he added, “Nobody ever paid the bastard back. But the mountain got him, in the end. Him and his partner both disappeared during a thunderstorm, up near Strawberry Point. The Forest Service never found more than a piece of tire tread and a shoe with no foot in it.”

Hank, the one with the smoker's voice, snorted and spat. "You see? That's the pattern. Every time someone tries to work a fast one on these hills, something gets in the way. Weather, a landslide, a busted axle—sometimes just bad luck, but it always lines up."

He jabbed a finger in the air, making a point. "You know the quarry fire of '98? Started the day after that film crew dug up the coyote den by the ridge, looking for 'Spanish treasure.' Fire burned the whole north slope, but skipped the exact spot they'd been digging. It's like the mountain remembers."

Chloe felt a prickle at the back of her neck. "You all really believe that? That the mountain protects itself?"

Bill's blue eyes glinted. "Wouldn't you, if you'd seen what we have?" He leaned forward, voice dropping to a whisper. "There's a reason the old-timers never mapped anything more than they could see from the ridge. The rest, they kept up here." He tapped his temple, then tapped his heart.

The loupe had made its way back to Maya, but she wasn't inspecting the gold anymore. She was scanning the men's faces, measuring the conviction. There was no performance here—just certainty, carved into wrinkles and worn into the bones.

Another granddad, whose name they'd never caught but who wore the calm of a park statue, said, "We call 'em guardians, for lack of a better word. Sometimes it's a bear, sometimes a storm, sometimes a feeling that says 'don't go there today.' Doesn't matter how careful you are—if your reason's wrong, you never get what you're after."

He shrugged, like it was the most natural law in the world.

Chloe nudged Maya, voice low. "You ever seen anything you couldn't explain?"

Maya hesitated, then admitted, "I've seen snow hit only one side of a ravine, and a herd of sheep refuse to cross a line I couldn't see." She rolled the gold nugget between her fingers. "Never figured it was anything but chance. But maybe that's the point."

The men exchanged another of their famous glances, this one layered with approval.

Joe sat forward, elbows on knees, his face open and plain. "You girls

want my advice? Don't chase the gold. Chase the story. That's where the truth is. The gold's just a lure to get you looking."

Bill snorted. "Amen. And if you ever find something that feels off, you come tell us first. Don't go flashing it at the Vanes, or anyone else. Some people don't take kindly to having their illusions spoiled."

The conversation drifted, but every few minutes, a new story would bubble up—a lost hiker rescued by an owl's call, a quartz vein that turned out to be nothing but glass, a year when the lake froze so perfectly clear you could see the petrified logs a hundred feet down. The thread that ran through every tale was this: nobody ever got rich off the mountain, but everyone got a story. Some better than others.

Chloe grew quiet, thinking about the nugget, the loupe, the way the men described the "tells" and "signatures" of a real thing. She wondered if the same rules applied to people, and what her own tell might be.

Maya was still weighing the gold, but her eyes were distant, as if watching the ghost of a story she'd missed the first time around.

As the light faded, Bill packed away the nugget and loupe, then stood, stretching his back with a satisfied groan. "Alright, girls. You got your education for the day. Remember what we said."

Hank clapped them both on the shoulder as they left, and Joe offered a final nod, like a blessing.

Chloe and Maya made their way back toward the noise and light of the festival. Maya dropped the loupe in her pocket and gave the gold nugget one last look before returning it to its pouch.

"You believe in guardians now?" Chloe teased, but gently.

Maya looked at her, thoughtful. "I believe that sometimes you don't need to see something for it to change you."

The air was cold and electric, the voices from the booths floating over the meadow like lost radio signals. As they reached the edge of the festival, the crowd had thinned; most people had wandered off for food or the evening music. Doug was breaking down the store's display, and Sam was already haggling over the leftovers with a local baker.

Chloe and Maya hung back for a minute, watching the shadowed ridgeline glow with the last scrap of daylight. They said nothing, but

both felt the day's stories settling somewhere inside, heavier than any gold.

A gust of wind rattled the empty soda cans and sent a swirl of dust across the field, then died as quickly as it came. For just a moment, Chloe thought she saw movement at the top of the ridge, something big and slow and gone before she could point it out.

She decided to keep it to herself.

They gathered their things and headed for the parking lot, the festival a fading hum behind them. The world was quiet, except for the pulse of the mountain, steady and strong.

As they walked, Maya pressed the pouch into her own pocket, the weight of it a small, stubborn reminder that legends never really die. Not in Duck Creek.

And, as night rolled in, Chloe was almost certain that something—or someone—was watching, making sure of it.

As the Father's Day Offroad Show faded into a memory of campfire smoke and engine echoes, the world at the edge of the meadow grew strangely quiet. The vendor tents slumped in the dusk, their bunting limp, and the last of the day's BBQ haze clung to the treeline like a superstition. But the granddad circle was still at full strength, fortified by another round of bitter coffee and the expectation of twilight revelations.

Chloe and Maya returned to the tailgate parliament, finding the old men exactly where they'd been all day, only with a new gravity to their posture, as if the coming dark had emboldened them. They'd made a ritual of the evening: as the shadows stretched across the ruts, the stories themselves grew longer, stranger, and less bothered by the need for evidence.

Bill, who'd spent the afternoon as their chief historian, leaned back and announced, "Now's when the real stuff comes out. Don't have to believe it, but you should hear it at least once." He motioned to the man beside him, who wore the uniform of a forest ranger—even off-duty—and whose eyes were the sharp green of new pine needles.

“Tell ‘em about the tracks,” Bill said.

The ranger—his name was Hal, but nobody had used it yet—sighed like he’d been holding the story in for decades. “Late ’80s, before the Forest Service had GPS on every clipboard, I was running a backcountry sweep with another guy out by the lava beds. We were checking for squatters, lost dogs, maybe the odd wildcat. Got up to a shuttered shaft near Cascade Falls, saw prints in the snow. Not cat, not bear, not even human. Toes were too long, stride was too wide. If I had to put money on it, I’d say it was made by something that never made it out of the fossil record.”

Chloe’s first instinct was to joke, but she caught the way Hal’s hand trembled a little around his mug. “Did you follow it?”

Hal nodded. “To the mouth of the shaft. And that was it—just ended. We went in twenty feet with flashlights. Nothing. Came out and the tracks were gone, like the snow healed itself.”

Joe grunted. “No offense, but Hal here’s the most practical son of a gun I’ve ever known. He won’t put sugar on his oatmeal. He’s not making this up.”

Hal shrugged. “Some things just don’t add up. You let it be.”

Chloe let the silence hang. She could feel the charge in the air—the kind that made hair stand up before a thunderstorm. She asked, gently, “Did you tell anyone?”

Hal looked at her, then at Maya. “Sure. Every time a rookie shows up for orientation, I tell it to them. Most forget. But sometimes, a year later, they come back and say they saw something too.”

The men shifted. There was a collective nod, as if the memory had been signed and notarized.

Hank, the smoker, chimed in. “Seen it with engines, too. Never fails—somebody comes up here wanting to get rich quick, their vehicle craps out for no good reason. Starters turn to mush, axles snap like pretzel sticks. You try to haul gold out with a lie, it’s like the mountain finds you and says ‘nope, not today.’”

Chloe laughed, a nervous sound, and said, “Maybe that’s why I keep flunking out of science electives. The mountain knows I’d misuse the knowledge.”

Maya, who had been quietly processing, said, "I think I get it. The mountain's not just geography. It's...intention."

All the men nodded. For a long moment, nobody filled the silence.

Bill finally broke it. "Your dad ever tell you about the summer he found the cave with the standing stones?"

The question was for Maya, and it hit her like a line-drive to the chest. "No," she said, too quickly.

Bill seemed to expect that. "Ask him next time you see him. He'll say it was just a pile of old survey markers. But he spent two weeks after that camped on the front porch, and he didn't hunt for a whole season."

Maya tried to make sense of it, but every explanation she came up with sounded thin and dry. She reached into her pocket, felt the gold nugget, and let the weight ground her.

The stories began to slow, as if the old men had wrung the last of them out. The circle drifted toward a kind of reverent silence, watching the stars emerge overhead. The meadow was empty now, save for the faint chorus of insects and the distant pop of someone's leftover fireworks.

Chloe said, "What if the mountain really is protecting something?"

The men didn't answer, but their faces said, "Now you're getting it."

The silver-bearded elder, who had let Bill and the others do most of the talking, suddenly fixed his gaze on Maya. It was a blue as moonlit ice, and it made her want to look away, but she didn't.

He beckoned her closer, then reached into his jacket and drew out a thin, crumpled packet, wrapped in oiled canvas. He unfolded it with careful, almost ceremonial movements, revealing a single sheet of hand-drawn map—yellowed, frayed at the corners, annotated in a spidery hand.

"This," he said, "is not a treasure map. But it shows the places where not to look. My father drew it, and his before him. I'm giving it to you now, because I think you'll know how to use it."

He pressed the map into her palm, his hand dry and warm, callused as driftwood.

Maya almost laughed at the solemnity of the gesture, but the look in

his eyes dared her not to. She said, "Thank you," then, quietly, "We'll be careful."

The old man nodded, just once. "You two are different. Not greedy, not here to make a show. The mountain notices things like that."

Chloe edged closer, peering at the old map. "Does it lead anywhere?"

The man's voice was almost gone, just a rasp of wind. "It leads away. That's what matters."

The men sat back, as if satisfied. The ritual was complete.

Chloe and Maya walked into the dark, the map folded safe in Maya's jacket. They didn't talk at first. Chloe hummed a bit of a show tune, off-key, until Maya elbowed her and said, "You're ruining the mood."

The evening was cold and silent, and the outline of the ridge was sharp against the sky. Maya thought of every story she'd heard that day—every failed expedition, every wild rumor, every strange coincidence—and realized she'd started believing in the "guardians," just a little.

Chloe said, "You know, I think the mountain just gave us its blessing."

Maya snorted. "That, or it's setting us up for a really good punchline."

They kept walking, the map and the memory of the old men's stories the only guide they needed.

And as they left the meadow behind, Maya felt the hush of the mountain settle around her, a promise and a warning.

She smiled, and walked faster.

eight

the flickering truth

THE DUSK LIGHT found Chloe and Maya climbing a dirt ribbon up the first set of foothills, the sun caught between two ridgelines like a special effect designed to make the world feel more important than it was. Behind them, the village had already started to blur into twilight—just a set of gold-tinged windows and the faint rumor of barbecue drifting up from the last offroaders packing up for the night. In front of them: the map, the mountain, and a stretch of brush country that was equal parts beautiful and hostile.

Chloe huffed a little as she rounded the next bend. “If this was a movie, we’d already have tripped over the treasure and called it a day,” she said, voice bouncing off a low outcrop.

Maya shot her a look, but she was out of breath and grinning too. “If this was a movie, you’d be the first to fall in a hole.”

“That’s typecasting, and I reject it,” Chloe said, though she could absolutely picture herself as the comic relief tumbling into the unknown. She looked up at the sky, which was hitting that improbable color between tangerine and theater-curtain red. “Seriously, though, have you ever seen lighting this good? The sun’s practically begging for a dramatic reveal.”

Maya stopped to unfold the battered map, squinting at the lines. The sun set the edge of the paper aglow, making the pencil marks pop and the thin patches where it had been folded and refolded into little

windows of fire. She traced a finger along the route they'd taken so far, then measured the distance to their supposed destination using the breadth of her thumb. "We're close. The map says to follow the east draw past the big rock, then look for a 'shadow gate.' That's...not a thing, is it?"

Chloe clambered onto the boulder in question, nearly slipping on the lichen. "If it's not a thing, we're allowed to invent it. 'Shadow gate' is very Goonies. Or Lord of the Rings. Or, like, any direct-to-streaming fantasy show. I'm here for it."

Maya folded the map and pocketed it. She didn't say anything, but her smile showed all the pride of someone who'd just solved a Rubik's cube while walking. "Let's keep moving. I want to be in and out before it gets full dark."

They pressed on. The trail, if it ever deserved the word, devolved into a tangle of scrub and volcanic scree. Above, the sky turned moodier, the orange dying out and the blue deepening with every few steps. The mountain loomed, a little too close and a lot too silent, the only sounds their boots on the gravel and the faint chitter of things that didn't care about legends or gold.

Chloe noticed the change first. The hillside on their left rose and steepened until it became a wall, with the top overhanging in a way that blocked out half the remaining light. The dirt path flattened and then all but vanished, pinched tight between a stand of deadfall and the rock face. It felt intentional, like a choke point in a video game, and Chloe couldn't help narrating: "The intrepid heroines faced the first obstacle on their quest—an ancient, impassable barricade, or so it seemed. But armed with nothing but pluck, a suspiciously sturdy flashlight, and excellent hair, they—"

"—went through it, not around," Maya cut in, picking her way over the logs and finding a faint gap where the slope funneled into darkness. "Look. The map is right. It's a literal gate."

She pointed, and Chloe had to admit the spot looked exactly like someone had drawn a line between two worlds. The gap between the boulders was barely wide enough for both of them, and the shadow it cast was so absolute it could have been painted on. On either side, the rock surface had deep grooves, like they'd been scraped by something

bigger than a bear, or maybe by generations of hands moving in and out.

They stood for a moment, just breathing it in. Even Chloe found herself short of words, so she defaulted to sound effects: the low, trembling “oooOOOooo” of a haunted house narrator.

Maya grinned, then clicked on their old headlamp. The cone of light pushed the shadows back a little, enough to show more wall, more darkness, and the faint suggestion of a path winding inward. Maya went first, careful not to trip. Chloe followed, narrating sotto voce: “The tunnel, never before breached by outsiders, pulsed with anticipation. Danger, yes. But also destiny.”

The passage twisted, the sides pinching together and then opening suddenly into a hollowed-out gully. Here, the earth dropped off in a series of uneven ledges, each one coated with a fine dust and the broken bones of small creatures. In the last of the day’s light, it looked like a place nothing living had business being.

Maya consulted the map again, holding it close to the lamp. “We’re in the right place,” she said, more to herself than to Chloe. “It says to go down to the bottom and look for—” She turned the map sideways, brow creasing. “A ‘carved warning?’ That’s not very helpful.”

Chloe made her way to the edge and looked down. The gully bottom was a mess of boulders, but just above it, the far wall was banded with a strange white crust that glowed against the black basalt. She pointed. “Is that it? The...warning?”

Maya flicked the headlamp up, but the beam barely cut through the dark. “Let’s check it out.” They picked their way down, the dust rising in pale clouds around their boots. At the bottom, Maya aimed the lamp at the rock. The light flickered—once, then again, then gave out altogether.

“Are you serious?” Maya muttered, whacking the headlamp against her palm. “Battery’s dead.”

Chloe tried to take it with good humor. “Or maybe the universe wants us to go in blind. Very on-theme.”

Maya dug through her pack for the spare batteries, but then paused. Her hand closed over something solid, cool, and heavier than it should have been. “Wait,” she said, a little breathless. “Let’s try Leo’s special.”

She pulled the “Intent” flashlight from the bag. Even in the gloom, the barrel glinted strangely, the engraved patterns catching what little light there was. Maya thumbed the switch, and a narrow, intensely golden beam shot out, brighter than anything that size had a right to be.

Chloe let out a low whistle. “Now that’s a flashlight. It’s like the sunrise got compressed into a stick.”

Maya aimed it at the white crust, and the wall responded like a movie set coming to life. The light revealed patterns in the crust—a series of sharp, angular glyphs carved deep into the rock. Some of the lines glowed back, refracting the gold light into reds and purples, while others remained stubbornly black, absorbing all color. The effect was both dazzling and weirdly three-dimensional, as if the carvings had just been laid down yesterday.

Chloe crowded closer, her voice hushed for once. “Those are...Spanish, aren’t they? Like, real Spanish. Not the stuff from the gift shop.”

Maya stepped closer, tracing the edge of the carving with her finger. “They’re warning markers. I saw something like this in a book on Cibola trails. They’d use these to mark boundaries—don’t enter, or you’ll die. Or maybe, only enter if you’re worthy.”

Chloe fumbled for her phone, then thought better of it and grabbed her sketchbook instead. “This is the real deal. If we show this to anyone, the Vanes’ story is going to fall apart. Look at the weathering. It’s totally different from the stuff at the show.”

Maya nodded, only half-listening, her eyes moving from one glyph to the next. The carvings were arranged in a strange progression—starting with a cross, then a spiral, then a kind of trident shape, each one more deeply cut than the last. Between the symbols, the wall was pocked with tiny holes, each ringed with a rusty red halo.

She swept the flashlight down and right, and another section lit up. Here, the rock was marked with a different set of signs—arrows pointing up and down, a square with a dot in the middle, and, most chillingly, a crude skull etched so deeply the nose and eyes were almost tunnels.

Maya shivered, then reached for her own phone. She snapped a dozen pictures, moving the beam slowly so the camera could catch the difference in texture. The golden light from the “Intent” flashlight

brought out every scratch, every chip, making the wall look alive with history.

Chloe narrated in a whisper: "And so, in the very heart of darkness, the heroines found the first clue—a puzzle left by those who came before. A warning. A dare. Or maybe a promise."

They stood in silence for a moment, the weight of it settling around them. Then Maya let the beam wander over the base of the wall, and there, just above ankle height, was a final symbol. A tiny, perfect spiral, different from the rest. Underneath it, someone—maybe the original carver, maybe a later visitor—had scratched a word in block letters:

INTENTO

Chloe saw it at the same time Maya did. "Intent? Like the flashlight?"

Maya was quiet for a beat, then said, "No. Like...intentions. Purpose. The thing that gets you through the gate."

She clicked the flashlight off, and for a heartbeat, the world was black. When she switched it back on, the golden beam seemed even stronger, as if the wall itself was feeding it energy.

"Let's get pictures of everything," Maya said, already moving with new urgency. "If we can document the real markers, it doesn't matter what the Vanes try to pass off. We've got proof."

Chloe nodded, feverishly sketching. "This is so much better than I thought it'd be."

They worked in tandem, Maya snapping photos, Chloe making quick, gestural notes. The temperature dropped as the sun finished setting, and the walls of the gully seemed to lean closer, as if listening.

At last, when they'd recorded every inch of carving, they took a step back. Maya felt the map burning a hole in her jacket pocket. She pulled it out, flicked the beam over the penciled lines, and saw something she hadn't before—a faint mark at the bottom of the gully, right where they stood. A spiral, nearly rubbed out by years of folding and handling.

Chloe was already packing up, but Maya caught her wrist. "Look. The map. It matches."

Chloe peered at the spot, then at the wall, then back at the map. "We found it," she said, awe catching her for once without a joke. "We actually found it."

Maya switched off the light. The dark was total, but in it, she felt calm. "Let's get out of here before we end up as a warning symbol ourselves," she said.

Chloe giggled, but her voice was shaky. "Next stop, expose the Vanes and win the Nobel Prize for local history."

"Let's just start with the Vanes," Maya said, and together they climbed back up the ravine, the golden flashlight tucked safe in Maya's hand, and the real story just beginning to write itself.

There was a fever to the way they worked, the cold gnaw of dusk forgotten in the press of discovery. Maya kept the Intent flashlight tight in her fist, the golden beam so steady it made Chloe's usual headlamp seem like a toy from a cereal box. The wall was alive with marks, and Maya's hands shook a little as she traced each line, not from fear but from the charge of knowing she was touching history—real, raw, and unfiltered by anyone's story but the stone itself.

Chloe balanced her sketchbook on her knees and got right to work, her pen scratching fast, the sound almost a match for the clink and scuff of Maya's boots as she moved along the base of the gully. "I feel like this is where Indiana Jones would get out the brush and start mumbling in Latin," Chloe said, only half joking. She drew quick, looping lines to catch the cross and the spiral and the wild tangle of warning signs, each one rendered with the urgency of someone afraid the wall might vanish if she looked away too long.

"I'm not sure even Indy could fake this," Maya said, voice echoing a little. She squinted at a trident mark, then turned the beam sideways to highlight the shadow inside each groove. "Look at the cut depth here. That's not modern—those edges are hammered out, not laser-cut or rotary drilled."

Chloe kept her pen moving but shifted to voice notes on her phone, holding it out like a boom mic. "Field report, Duck Creek expedition: these are not tourist carvings. Zero graffiti, zero modern polish. Just pure, unfiltered Spanish panic." She caught Maya's eye and smirked.

“Which is saying something, because most old graffiti is about as subtle as a car alarm.”

Maya stepped back and swept the beam across the wall in a slow arc. Where the light touched certain marks, the rock seemed to drink it in, then shimmer faintly at the edges, as if the wall was lit from within. “Do you see that?” Maya asked, barely above a whisper.

Chloe nodded, her face gone suddenly serious. “It’s like the marks want to be found. Or maybe want to warn us off.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “If this is a movie, it just switched genres.”

They kept working, and the cold began to bite harder, bringing with it a sense of urgency. Maya got down on her knees, brushing away loose dirt at the base of the spiral. There, under a thin layer of dust and time, was a second spiral—smaller, offset to one side, as if someone had made a correction or added an amendment to the warning.

Chloe dropped to her knees beside Maya, sketchbook forgotten. She traced the smaller spiral with her pinkie. “It’s a double, like an echo. Or maybe a trap?”

“Or a direction,” Maya said. She looked up at the cliff face. The first spiral pointed in, but the second seemed to draw the eye out, toward the far end of the gully, where the light failed and the stone got rougher and less inviting.

Chloe swept the flashlight ahead, and the beam, for the first time, flickered. Not off, not weak, but it wobbled, like a compass needle caught between two magnets. “Is it just me, or did the light get...weirder?”

Maya clicked it off and on again, then pointed it down the pathway. The beam surged—no other word for it—illuminating a strip of ground that looked for all the world like a literal yellow brick road. “I think it’s pulling us,” Maya said, in the tone of someone who didn’t want to believe her own words.

Chloe hoisted her bag and grinned. “This is where we get to say ‘follow the light.’”

They went single file, Maya in the lead, Chloe close behind with her sketchbook and phone out, documenting every shift in the rock, every twist of the path. The farther in they went, the narrower the gully got, the walls climbing and tilting so the sky above was just a sliver, colored

now by the last, aching blue of twilight. But the beam didn't falter. It grew bolder, and the carvings changed, too—less formal, more frantic, the lines chopped in with increasing haste.

"This part looks almost desperate," Maya said, stopping at a cluster of jagged marks arranged in no pattern Chloe could make sense of. "Like whoever did it was running out of time."

Chloe snapped a photo, then squinted at the shapes. "What if it's a map? Not to the treasure, but to the exit?"

They looked at each other, then at the wall, and Maya let herself imagine the artist: hands numb, the light nearly gone, leaving a warning for anyone foolish enough to follow.

"I don't like the way this feels," Chloe said, voice small. "It's like we're trespassing on a funeral."

But she didn't stop drawing, and Maya didn't stop documenting.

Then, as if on cue, the sun's last edge crested the far wall. For one brief, almost holy instant, the beam of light aligned perfectly with the gully's axis. It shot straight down the passage, hit a high rock outcrop, and reflected off a vein of quartz that neither of them had noticed before. The quartz caught the Intent flashlight's gold and the sun's last red, setting the whole corridor ablaze in a spectrum that defied description.

Chloe gasped. "That's the Eye," she said, remembering the granddad's words. "The Eye of the Sun. This is the moment. We're supposed to see something."

Maya panned the flashlight along the illuminated line, letting the golden glow ride the quartz. There, halfway up the wall, was a cluster of new markings—a series of arrows, each etched with a slight upward cant, guiding the eye toward a narrow cleft in the rock. At the top of the cleft, so faint it could only be seen in this exact light, was a final spiral.

Chloe didn't hesitate; she scrambled up the loose stones, using the grooves as handholds, and pressed her face to the opening. It was a slot, barely wider than a fist, but the air that came out was impossibly cold and damp.

She turned back, eyes wild. "I can hear water," she said. "Like, a lot of it. A river, maybe."

Maya joined her, the flashlight beam now steady and unwavering.

She pressed it into the slot and saw the sparkle of moisture on the walls, then the faintest glimmer of something metallic at the very bottom.

"Is that...?" Chloe started, then cut herself off, as if naming it would break the spell.

Maya wedged her phone into the gap and snapped a photo, using the Intent beam as a fill light. When she pulled the phone out and checked the screen, her breath caught. The metallic glimmer was a ring of gold—no bigger than a wedding band, but unmistakably gold—embedded in the rock as if someone had tried to hide it, or maybe anchor something with it.

Chloe whooped. "This is it! This is the real thing!"

Maya took a dozen more photos, from every angle. The beam of the Intent flashlight, which had started to feel like a live thing in her hand, now pulsed in time with her heartbeat.

They documented everything, every spiral, every arrow, every desperate gouge. Maya dictated her notes: "Gully is roughly seventy meters from shadow gate; all carvings are on the east wall, facing the direction of the setting sun; last marking indicates a slot with embedded metallic ring, possibly original Spanish or indigenous artifact; humidity consistent with underground water source."

Chloe filled two pages of her sketchbook with overlapping arrows, tridents, and spirals, labeling each with film references: "Temple of Doom Vibes," "National Treasure But Real," "Final Boss Room."

The sun was nearly gone now, and the Eye effect faded as quickly as it had come. The gold in the rock dimmed, the carvings faded into ordinary scratches. Maya flicked off the flashlight, then turned it on again, but now it was just a normal beam—no shimmer, no supernatural pulse.

They stood at the edge of the gully, the evidence saved and safe in phone and book and memory, and for a long moment said nothing.

Chloe broke the silence first. "You know, I was expecting a chase, or a puzzle, or a villain monologue. But this? This is better."

Maya just nodded, feeling something settle inside her—a sense of closure, or maybe the opposite, an opening up to possibilities. "I think we just found the one story nobody else gets to tell."

Chloe grinned. “Until tomorrow, when we tell it to the whole town.”

The shadows had grown together now, erasing all but the first few yards of the gully. Maya pocketed the flashlight, and together they picked their way back up to the shadow gate, one last look over the shoulder confirming that the pathway was, for now, invisible to anyone who didn’t know exactly what to look for.

They’d beaten the sun, barely, and in the process found the one thing the mountain had promised: the truth, or something so close to it, it hardly mattered.

As they reached the top, Chloe flipped to a blank page and wrote, in all caps:

“THE MOUNTAIN KNOWS WHAT IT’S DOING.”

Maya smiled. “So do we.”

And with that, they headed for home, the story—finally—entirely their own.

It was full night now, the kind that swallowed even the memory of daylight, and Chloe felt every step on the return hike as a drumbeat under her ribs. The mountain had switched gears—gone was the sunset grandeur, replaced by the deep, secretive hush of predators and prey. The path they’d made to the gully was still there, but the footprints had been erased by falling needles, the air itself thicker and more watchful.

They were a hundred yards from the shadow gate when Maya stopped cold, her hand flying up to freeze Chloe mid-sentence. Chloe’s instinct was to narrate the moment—“the tension is so thick you could slice it with a cheese knife”—but she bit down on the urge. Instead, she followed Maya’s gaze, eyes adjusting to the dark, and caught a flicker of unnatural white far down the slope: the bounce and arc of several flashlights, moving with purpose.

Chloe ducked low behind a boulder, Maya following suit. They watched as the search party fanned out along the hillside, three, maybe four people, all in matching headlamps and utility jackets. They weren’t tourists; the movements were too smooth, the formation too practiced.

One of the beams locked onto the entrance of the gully, and a sharp voice cut the air: "This is it! You said they were here."

Chloe and Maya pressed closer together, the rock cold through their jeans. For a long minute, nothing happened. The searchers held their position, talking in low, urgent tones.

Chloe wanted to breathe, but it felt like even that could give them away.

Maya leaned in, her lips close to Chloe's ear. "That's Victor. I'd bet my last jelly bean on it."

Chloe risked a peek around the boulder. She caught the silhouette of Victor Vane, his profile unmistakable even in the dark—jaw set, chin thrust forward, one hand planted on his hip like a disgruntled game show host. He pointed to the mouth of the gully, then turned to a second figure, this one broader and weighed down by a heavy, rectangular case. They conferred, then split up: Victor and the muscle heading straight for the carvings, the other two fanning out in a sweep.

"We need to move," Maya whispered. "If they catch us here—"

"We're the buried treasure," Chloe finished, trying to sound braver than she felt.

Maya nodded, then flicked the Intent flashlight to its lowest setting. The beam shrank to a pinhole, barely enough to see the ground, but it was the only way to stay invisible. They began to crawl—yes, actually crawl—along the base of the cliff, using every dip and outcrop for cover.

They made it fifty feet before a boot scraped rock just above them. Chloe nearly inhaled a mouthful of dirt, then held perfectly still. Overhead, the searcher's beam played over the stone, painting the ground in harsh slices. A minute later, the footsteps retreated, and the voices moved farther up the gully.

At the mouth of the ravine, Victor's voice was louder now, crisp and petulant. "They said there were marks. Where are they? We're running out of time."

Chloe and Maya kept moving, hearts synced like metronomes gone haywire. They reached the edge of the draw, only to find their return route blocked by the two other searchers. The men had set up a lantern on the main path, the light casting grotesque, shifting shadows that threatened to betray any movement.

Maya gestured for Chloe to keep low. She scanned the map in her memory, then pointed to a narrow animal trail that cut behind the lantern's reach, up and around to the next ridge. Chloe followed, stifling a yelp as a branch caught her ponytail, and together they slipped through the brush, trading speed for silence.

Below, the searchers prowled the gully, their lights bouncing, their frustration mounting with every empty pass. Victor's shouts grew sharper. "You told me this was the spot! I want results, not more wild goose chases!"

The intent flashlight's glow was now the barest ember, but it was enough for Maya to spot the white of quartz in the darkness. She steered them up the switchback, the terrain turning brutal—loose stone, hidden sinkholes, icy patches that lurked in the hollows. They climbed until the air thinned, and the voices below fell away, replaced by nothing but the sound of their own breath and the pounding of their hearts.

When Maya judged them clear, they stopped to catch their breath, huddled behind a standing snag. Chloe glanced back and saw the flicker of lanterns now far below, trapped in the gully, never once looking up to where the girls watched.

"Are we clear?" Chloe asked, barely a whisper.

Maya nodded, then let out a shaky laugh. "I think we're officially out of their league."

Chloe pulled her sketchbook from her backpack and clutched it to her chest, her hands trembling. "I've never been so glad to have proof," she said. "It's all here—the marks, the pathway, the gold ring. Even the Eye of the Sun."

Maya checked her phone. "My photos, too. Every carving, every weird effect with the light." She smiled, the exhaustion clear in her face but her eyes bright. "We did it. We actually did it."

They moved quickly now, cutting across the ridgeline, the mountain's silhouette a black seam against the stars. By the time they saw the lights of Duck Creek Village, the adrenaline had faded, replaced by a giddy, exhausted relief.

They stopped just once, at the crest where the last of the searchers' lights twinkled like distant campfires. Chloe looked down, then up,

then turned to Maya. "So, what do we do now? Run to Doug's and call the FBI?"

Maya shook her head, grinning. "We go home. We sleep. Then we show everyone the real thing in the morning."

Chloe exhaled, a slow, disbelieving smile breaking over her face. "Promise?"

"Promise."

They linked arms for the last stretch, the flashlight now off, the way clear and safe. In her bag, Chloe could feel the weight of the sketches, and she realized the story was theirs now—untouchable, and real in a way gold bars or legends could never match.

The night closed in gently around them, the kind of dark that no longer felt threatening, but instead felt earned.

As they reached the first porchlight of the village, Chloe nudged Maya with her elbow. "If anyone asks, we just say we got lost in the dark and found the mountain's secret."

Maya grinned. "Nobody will believe it."

"That's the best part," Chloe said, and together they stepped into the light.

nine

hardware wisdom

MAYA AND CHLOE burst through the door of the Cedar Mountain Country Store on a wave of shared adrenaline and stale backpack air. The store was nearly dark, only a handful of lamps burning, their gold and orange halos tossing long shadows across the familiar aisles. The smell was richer at night: woodsmoke and old varnish, dust on filament bulbs, and something faintly sweet—maple syrup, or maybe the memory of syrup from years of pancakes on the battered counter.

Sam was behind the register, broom in hand, the hem of her dress dusted with pine needles. She froze mid-sweep at the sight of the girls. Her face registered a quick flicker of surprise, then softened into what Chloe had always thought of as her “archivist’s smile”—private and knowing, a little melancholy around the edges.

“I was about to lock up,” Sam said, voice pitched low for the empty store. “But you look like you’ve just outrun the law, or the next best thing.”

Chloe wanted to launch into the story, to unload every detail before it leaked out of her head, but Maya put a calming hand on her arm. Maya always had better emotional brakes. “We were hoping we could hang out for a bit. Maybe a late cocoa?” Maya’s voice was just a little hoarse from the cold.

Sam gestured to the barstools by the window and set the broom aside, like she’d been hoping for an excuse to ditch it all night. “That’s

an easy yes," she said. "Just give me a minute with the kettle. You want extra marshmallows, or the existential kind?"

Chloe said, "Both," and then, when she realized she meant it, laughed and went to claim her seat.

The store at night was a different animal than the daylight version: the harsh edges softened, the shelves looking less like a supply depot and more like the cluttered den of some benevolent hoarder-god. The coolers hummed, the only other sound besides the wind shaking the tin sign outside. Chloe watched as Sam crossed to the woodstove, picked up the battered enamel kettle, and poured out two mugs so chipped and loved that they looked like survivors of a long war.

"Not gonna ask what you were up to?" Sam called, back turned. "Or should I let the cocoa work its magic first?"

Chloe caught Maya's eye. "It's a story," Chloe said. "It's a whole legend, actually. And maybe a crime, if Victor Vane gets his way."

Sam's hands never paused as she frothed the cocoa, but her head tilted a millimeter—Sam's version of a spit take. "That one again," she murmured. "The Vane family is like head lice, you think you're rid of them and then it's spring and everyone's scratching."

Chloe snorted, then looked down at the counter, where someone (Sam, probably) had arranged three decorative rocks and a single, out-of-season fir cone into a contemplative little shrine. She ran her finger along the groove of the wood, feeling the ridge of every stain and scar. The warmth of being here, safe and inside, after the dark hike and the adrenaline of escape, made her almost sleepy.

Sam slid the mugs in front of them, then grabbed her own and perched on a stool, folding herself with the precision of someone who'd practiced the maneuver a thousand times. "So," Sam said. "You gonna tell me, or do I need to start guessing?"

Maya sipped, wiped foam from her upper lip, and said, "We found the actual carvings. Not the ones in the Vanes' brochures. The real ones. There's a whole sequence—crosses, spirals, the trident thing, skulls. And the gold band, Chloe, tell her about the gold—"

Chloe took the handoff. "It was set in the stone, like a marker. The intent flashlight went nuts over it. The carvings glowed, but only in the

UV. And the spot was perfect. Like the wall itself was trying to tell a story.”

Sam didn’t interrupt. She listened with her whole face, letting the story fill the air, only blinking when Maya mentioned the gold ring and the way the quartz in the cliff caught the light.

“The kicker,” Maya finished, “is that the Vanes have no idea. They’re looking in the wrong place entirely. And tonight, they were out there, hunting for us. I think we lost them, but it was close.”

Sam’s hands gripped her mug so tightly Chloe half-wondered if it would snap. “You two are very lucky,” she said softly. “Most people who cross the Vanes don’t come back with stories. They come back with bruises, or not at all.”

The room was quiet, but in a charged way, like someone had just set off a memory bomb.

Chloe tried to break the spell. “What, is this where you tell us the mountain’s haunted, or that there’s an ancient curse?”

Sam set her mug down, and for the first time, her smile faded. “I’m going to tell you about the last time someone tried what the Vanes are doing,” she said. “Twenty years ago, there was a man named Corbin Pruitt. Claimed to be a professor—geologist, anthropologist, even said he had a cousin in the Smithsonian. He arrived just before the first heavy snow, said he was tracing the original Rhoades claim, and set up camp by the south fork.”

Chloe and Maya exchanged a glance, the kind that meant, *Is this on the test?*

Sam went on, her voice dropping. “He didn’t come for the gold, or so he said. He wanted the truth. He mapped everything. Took samples from the creek, the cave, even the air. Brought in drones—before everyone had drones. Always alone, but always watching the rest of us.”

The store felt smaller now, like the lamps were all leaning in to hear.

Sam tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, eyes distant. “After three weeks, he ‘found’ a Spanish helmet, half buried in the creekbed. It made the local news, even got a short write-up in National Geographic online. But when Doug looked at it—he was an amateur metalsmith, even back then—he noticed the helmet wasn’t real bronze. It was gold-plated lead. The solder was modern, and the inside was stamped

‘Mexico DF.’ We would have laughed, except the professor didn’t care. He just shrugged, took his find, and went back to the city.”

“Did he get in trouble?” Maya asked.

Sam shook her head. “Not even a little. In fact, the story made him famous. He started a podcast, wrote a book. Every year, someone new came to Duck Creek with a metal detector and a fever for the legend.”

Chloe’s hands curled around her mug. “But why? He had to know people would catch him.”

“Because the story was always bigger than the facts,” Sam said. “And because the people who want to believe will always believe, no matter how fake the evidence.” She smiled, but it was a sad smile. “That’s what you’re up against with Victor and Saffron. They know exactly how much truth to bury in the gold.”

From the next aisle, a faint metallic clatter echoed as someone shifted a shelf of boxed screws. Chloe glanced over and caught sight of Leo, stacking something on a top shelf. He hadn’t made a sound during the whole exchange, but now he turned, met Chloe’s gaze, and held it for a beat. Then, with a tiny, conspiratorial nod, he went back to work.

Sam noticed the glance. “Leo’s heard all this before,” she said. “He’s got a sixth sense for when history’s about to repeat itself.”

Chloe pushed her mug away, marshmallows half-melted on the rim. “What happened to the professor? Did he ever come back?”

Sam’s eyes creased at the corners. “He did. Once. Showed up in the middle of summer, said he was researching a follow-up. But he didn’t last a week. Some kids from the youth camp threw him in the lake, shoes and all. He never came back after that.”

Maya laughed, but softly. “I like that ending.”

“Me too,” Sam said, and for a moment, the tension in the air broke like a snapped thread.

They sat in silence for a minute, letting the warmth of the cocoa and the story settle in. Chloe found herself staring at the shop’s old clock, the hands creeping toward midnight. It felt safe here, but also like the whole world was waiting just outside the windows.

Sam broke the quiet. “So what’s your next move?” she asked, voice light again.

Maya shrugged. “We have the photos. We have sketches. We’re

going to bring it to Doug first thing in the morning. If anyone knows how to shut the Vanes down, it's him."

"Good," Sam said, "but don't go alone. And don't let them see you coming."

Chloe had a thought. "Do you think the Vanes know about us? Like, what if they're watching the store right now?"

Sam smiled, not kindly. "Let them. This place has outlasted every con man, every treasure hunter, and every bad winter Duck Creek ever threw at it. If they want a fight, they're going to get more than they bargained for."

A soft thump from the back room announced Leo's return, and a moment later he drifted past, hands in pockets, the look on his face half amusement, half challenge. "You girls want a lift home?" he asked. "It's gonna snow."

"Thanks," Maya said, "but I think we'll walk."

Chloe nodded. "It's better that way."

They stood, stretched, and prepared to leave. Chloe felt a pang at the idea of stepping back into the cold, but something about the story—and the way Sam had told it—made her feel lighter, more dangerous.

Sam followed them to the door, keys in hand, and as she opened it, a gust of night air rushed in, full of ozone and the promise of new weather. "Be careful out there," Sam said. "The mountain never gives up its secrets easy."

Chloe grinned, eyes shining. "That's what makes them worth finding."

Outside, the porch light was the only lamp on Main Street, throwing their shadows long and dramatic across the muddy lot. The mountain loomed black and infinite overhead, but Chloe felt ready for it. She looked at Maya, then at the lamp, then at the world ahead.

Together, they walked into the night, the store door clicking shut behind them.

The next morning, the Cedar Mountain Country Store gleamed in the cloudless sunlight, its east-facing windows catching every watt of June

brightness and bouncing it through the aisles. It was Saturday, so the parking lot already held a peppering of pick-ups and beat-up Subarus, their owners inside wrestling with propane tanks or haggling over fishing lures. But inside, at the battered oak counter, it felt like a separate world: one of slow clocks, lazy ceiling fans, and the softest country music Chloe had ever not-listened to.

Maya and Chloe drifted in, bleary and sun-dazed, the aftertaste of last night's adventure still fizzing between them. Doug was off in the back, arguing with a supplier on the ancient rotary phone, but Leo was behind the register, standing so still he might have been part of the display.

He noticed them right away—he always did, Chloe suspected—but instead of calling out, he reached below the counter and came up with an object in both hands. It was an antique compass, brass and battered, the lid engraved with a weathered spiral pattern. He set it on the counter with a gravity that suggested it deserved its own spot in the Smithsonian, then stepped back, leaving the thing to introduce itself.

Maya hesitated, then stepped forward and picked up the compass. It was heavier than she expected, the metal cold and smooth, the lid's hinge opening with a click that sounded both deliberate and relieved. Chloe leaned in, elbows on the counter, and made a reverent sound: "Oh wow. Did this come out of a pirate chest, or is it just me?"

Leo grinned, his first words of the day. "It's always been here," he said. "Never belonged to any one person, but everyone in town's tried to buy it at least once."

Sam drifted out of the side office, her hands still dusted with flour from morning inventory. "That compass is stubborn," she said. "Comes and goes from the shelf, but it always ends up right back where it started."

Maya turned the compass in her palm, running a thumb along the rim. "What's it for?" she asked.

Leo shrugged. "I think it's for you."

The moment hung in the air, sticky and strange. Chloe tried to laugh it off, but the compass made her want to whisper, not shout. She watched as Maya pressed the little latch and opened the lid fully. The needle spun three times in quick, nervous circles, then snapped to a

direction with a force that made the whole body shiver in her hand. Chloe swore she saw the needle vibrate, pointing almost due west—away from the Vanes' dig site, away from the meadow, and straight toward the far ridge.

"That's not even north," Maya muttered. She moved the compass, but the needle resisted, like it had decided this was the only true heading.

Sam leaned over, peering at the instrument like it was a rare butterfly. "Sometimes, the right tool finds the right person," she said. "Not the other way around."

Leo nodded, but said nothing more. He watched Maya with an odd intensity, as if waiting for her to do something important.

Chloe couldn't help herself: "It's like the Sorting Hat, but for hardware."

Sam's laugh was gentle, and she took the compass from Maya to show them a detail: inside the lid, beneath the spiral, someone had scratched a set of initials—barely legible now, but definitely "J.R." "Every time we get a new owner on the store," Sam said, "the compass reappears with a new set of initials. Sometimes it stays a year, sometimes only a day. But it always points somewhere."

Maya took the compass back, her hand trembling with the same excited energy Chloe had seen last night in the gully. "What if it's pointing to the next clue?" she asked, not quite daring to hope.

"That's usually how these things work," Leo said. "At least up here."

Chloe pulled her sketchbook out, already mapping the compass heading to the topography of her own memory. "Do we follow it now? Like, right now?"

Sam spread her hands. "You could, but you might want to eat first. That's a long hike."

Chloe grinned. "I've survived on trail mix and legend for days. Let's go."

They bought a couple of granola bars, but when Chloe tried to pay for them, Sam shook her head. "Stories are payment enough," she said, with a wink.

As they stepped out into the sun, Maya held the compass flat in her

hand. The brass gleamed, and the needle seemed to pulse with impatience, dragging her gaze to a spot on the horizon that looked utterly unremarkable.

Chloe, never one to let a good metaphor slip by, said, "It's like we're in a movie, right? The magical object that guides the heroes to the truth."

Maya just nodded, her attention fixed on the little arrow. She turned once, twice, trying to throw the needle off, but it clung stubbornly to its heading, as if daring them to question its purpose.

Chloe let herself be pulled by Maya's sense of mission, the old country store shrinking behind them, the promise of new secrets unfolding with every step. The world felt bigger, and scarier, and better than ever.

As they set off down the dusty road, the compass pointed true, and so did they.

ten

the vegas connection

CHLOE'S CORNER office was actually just the east-facing window seat in her mom's old A-frame, but she'd built it into something worthy of a stage: pillows heaped like clouds, wall festooned with sticky notes and yarn-threaded pins, and the battered coffee table perpetually hidden beneath yesterday's mugs and the remains of three different snack attacks. Her laptop thrummed under a patchwork of emoji stickers, and her phone, propped against a half-eaten tangerine, was already aglow with three competing social feeds.

She was, in a word, thriving.

"Interrogation, take one," she whispered, and wiggled her fingers over the keys, warming up as if about to perform live. This was not the first time Chloe had slipped into character for a digital deep dive. Her friends called it cosplay for introverts, but Chloe knew it was something closer to improv: every forum post and DM a new chance to play out a hundred tiny scenes, each with its own audience, each with its own drama.

Today's mission: expose Victor Vane for the serial grifter she was now 95% sure he was.

She started with the Nevada tourism groups. It was classic infiltration—set up a throwaway Reddit, build a backstory ("Seasonal hospitality worker. Loves haunted hikes, hates sagebrush allergies."), and

then slowly, like a mouse at a cheese trap, insert herself into the chitter of the group.

@duckcreekartist: “Hey y’all! Does anyone remember that Paiute artifact thing in Tonopah? Heard there was a big deal about it last year, but can’t find the article. My uncle says the guy running it moved to Utah. Ring any bells? #historybuff”

She mashed send, then shifted personas. Next, the artifact collectors’ subforum—a world thick with wariness and the kind of sentences that always included “allegedly.” Here, Chloe adopted a tone of veteran skepticism, signing off with an alias that sounded like a failed Indiana Jones villain.

She scrolled. Dead end, dead end, some dude trying to sell a “genuine” spear point, and then—

A forum thread titled, “Tonopah Scammer Moves East??” from only four months ago.

Chloe almost sang the opening lines of *Law & Order*, but caught herself and kept reading.

The thread was a slow-motion trainwreck: a half-dozen collectors griping about a “Professor Austin Vale” who’d run a so-called Paiute dig and vanished with the tour fees. Photos attached were blurry, but the profile fit: clean-shaven, outdoorsy, and sporting a turquoise bolo so gaudy it practically needed its own area code.

She opened the image, squinted, and then gasped so loudly she scared the squirrel perched on the porch railing. On the “Professor’s” hand was a gold band, capped with a turquoise chunk the size of a peanut M&M—the same ring Victor Vane had wagged at every Duck Creek press event, usually while making a fist for “the future of education.”

“Gotcha,” she breathed, then hammered Print Screen like her life depended on it.

Chloe spun her laptop around, nearly scattering a mug in the process. She pulled up her Notion doc, “Case File: Vanes,” and started pasting screenshots, highlights, cross-links. She even included a running commentary in italics, because she knew future Chloe would need the drama to keep from falling asleep:

- 2/10/23: “Professor Vale” opens Paiute artifact experience in

Tonopah, NV. (See flyer PDF.)

- 2/17/23: Local press covers discovery of “ancient ritual marker” (spoiler: it was a broken manhole cover).

- 2/25/23: Forum post—collectors complain about suspicious forgeries, link to eBay seller “ringmaster17.”

- 3/15/23: Experience closes. No refunds. Professor disappears.

- 5/5/23: Same guy pops up in Kanab, UT as “V. Vane, Adventure Curator.”

- 5/12/23: Sighting at Duck Creek, advertising “Gold Bar Gala.”

She read back over the timeline, then let herself do a quick, celebratory wiggle in her chair.

But Chloe was not a rookie. She knew one damning coincidence was not enough to take down a pair of practiced frauds. So she pulled up another tab, this time a reverse image search on the professor’s old headshot. The results splintered: some links dead, some leading to low-rent conference websites, but two were gold. The first was an old Las Vegas news segment, “Desert Oddities: The Man with the Golden Smile,” starring none other than “Valentine Austin,” self-styled expert on lost mining towns. The second was a Facebook album from a fundraiser in Albuquerque, and in half the photos, Vane (or whatever he’d called himself) was joined by a smiling woman in a wide-brimmed hat and a vest embroidered with “Ambassador.” She looked a little older, the hair a different shade, but the cheekbones and the practiced, pageant-perfect smile were unmistakably Saffron Vane.

Chloe grabbed her phone and fired off a text to Maya, all caps: “HE’S BEEN RUNNING THE SAME SCAM FOR YEARS!! PHOTOS IN SHARED FOLDER. LOOK AT THE RING!!!”

The three dots danced for a full minute before Maya replied, “On it. Try running their names with ‘Nevada’ + ‘lawsuit.’”

Chloe grinned, then did exactly that.

By now the room was thick with the energy of a dozen half-open browser tabs, the air perfumed with the tang of citrus rinds and the nervous hum of caffeine. Chloe’s hands ached, but she didn’t slow. She copied and pasted, sketched out connections on her wall map, even rearranged a few sticky notes to reflect the new timeline.

Her favorite was the one she moved to the very center, just under the Polaroid of Victor Vane at the Duck Creek parade:

“Every con leaves a signature. Find it.”

Chloe’s phone pinged again.

Maya: “Try the PACER database. They probably covered their tracks, but court cases are public record.”

Chloe’s fingers flew. She found nothing under Victor or Saffron Vane, but the alias “Valentine Austin” pulled up two small claims suits in Nevada and a third, larger civil action in New Mexico—dismissed without prejudice, but the complaint included scanned emails from “the Professor” promising “a once-in-a-lifetime investment in the revival of American heritage.” Chloe laughed, then screenshot it, then sent it to Maya with a string of fire emojis.

Finally, she sat back, breathing deep for the first time in an hour. She took in the chaos around her—empty mugs, snack wrappers, the string map straining under the weight of a dozen new pins—and let herself feel, for a moment, like the star of her own detective drama.

She glanced at the squirrel, now back on the porch and licking the condensation off her old travel mug. “The plot thickens,” she said, dropping her voice to a noir growl. “But the walls are closing in.”

She saved every file twice, then three times, then once to the cloud just in case. She wanted to tell Doug, or even Sam, but she knew she’d need Maya to help her figure out the next step. If Victor Vane was running a scam, odds were good he had a getaway plan—and odds were even better that Chloe and Maya had a very short window before the con man vanished for good.

Chloe shut the laptop, cradled it in her arms, and stared into the blank blue of the sky beyond the window. For once, she didn’t feel like a theater extra or a “sidekick.” She felt like the main character, racing the clock with all the clues in hand.

And this time, she knew exactly how the act would end.

Chloe’s second act was always the best part: the montage. She imagined it unfolding in split-screen, the kind where every new cut

raised the stakes and the tempo, and the music (in her mind, synth-heavy and relentlessly upbeat) built toward a crescendo that promised answers.

Her living room had transformed into a set worthy of a true-crime docuseries. The wall behind the couch bristled with color-coded sticky notes, overlapping printouts, and at least two feet of red embroidery floss. Thumbtacks marked the high drama: LLC filings, mugshots, Yelp rants. In the center, above the fireplace, a hand-drawn calendar mapped the last six months in Duck Creek, with key dates circled in fluorescent marker: “Gold Bar Gala,” “Dig Site Open,” and, more ominously, “Investor Potluck.”

She’d started with the basics: Nevada’s online business registry. It was supposed to be a chore, but Chloe quickly found herself in a rabbit hole that made the Spanish Mine legend look tidy by comparison. The Vanes’ real genius wasn’t in inventing stories—it was in burying the truth under layers of bureaucracy.

Every LLC followed the same template: “Heritage Exploration, LLC,” “American Legacy Holdings,” “Sundown Solutions.” Each had a different registered agent, but the mailing addresses all circled back to three UPS boxes in the Las Vegas valley. Chloe sketched each company into a web, using string to connect “managers” to “agents” to “mail stops.” It was, she thought, almost beautiful—if you liked your beauty with a side of embezzlement.

She found the pattern in less than an hour: every operation lasted three months. Day one, buy a cheap web domain. Day thirty, drop some “discovery” on the press. Day ninety, dissolve the company, pack up, and vanish with the “investment” money. Chloe ran the math: in the last two years, Victor and Saffron had left a trail from Las Cruces to Cedar City, changing names but always using the same boilerplate for their “exclusive opportunities.”

She rolled her chair over to the printout pile and started pinning complaint after complaint: “Buyer beware—Professor Vale took our deposit and never delivered,” “No refunds, no replies, not even a postcard,” “Total scam.” The voices changed, but the story didn’t.

Chloe highlighted one review in neon orange: “Saffron was so convincing, we bought four shares. I guess the only thing real was her

smile.” Next to it, she stuck a photo of Saffron from a Duck Creek press release—same smile, same hat, same schtick.

As the timeline filled, the mood in the cabin shifted. Even the dog, who’d been napping under the table, started to look suspiciously at the evidence wall.

But Chloe pressed on. She traced the Vanes through Arizona and New Mexico, watching as each scam not only ramped up the buy-in but got bolder with the advertising. “Certified by two state geologists,” one flyer bragged. “Backed by the Museum of Mining History,” said another. Only, when Chloe dug deeper, the “geologists” were either long retired or never existed, and the “museum” was a P.O. box with a dusty web page and a Paypal donate button.

The dollar amounts started small—\$5,000 here, \$8,000 there—but by the time they’d landed in Duck Creek, the game was bigger. Chloe counted at least three testimonials from the local newspaper that referenced “significant buy-ins” and “seven-figure backing.” She copied a chunk from the latest article and tacked it up:

“Victor Vane has brought unprecedented interest to our town. He claims that ‘in the next 30 days,’ his team will unearth the largest historical find in Southern Utah.”

Chloe checked the date. Thirty days from the announcement was next Wednesday. Today was Friday. If the pattern held, the Vanes would be gone in under a week.

She let that land. The air in the cabin suddenly felt thinner, colder, as if the whole mountain was holding its breath.

Chloe ripped open another tab on her laptop and started cross-checking names from the complaint boards with Duck Creek locals. She found two matches instantly. One was a retired schoolteacher, quoted in every article as the “first investor” in the Vanes’ project. The other, a local realtor, had posted photos of himself with Victor at the dig site, holding what looked suspiciously like the same “ancient” gold bar from the Vegas news segment.

“Why do people fall for this?” she asked the room, not expecting an answer. But her phone, always the best supporting actor, pinged just then—a DM from Maya.

Maya: “Check out the state business licensing database. Sometimes they post scanned docs with real signatures.”

Chloe was already there. She paged through the PDFs, looking for the tell: the handwriting, the email domain, the notary’s stamp. It took a minute, but she found what she wanted—a dissolution filing for “Silver State Prospects, LLC,” signed “V. Austin” in a loopy script. She compared it to the “Duck Creek Historic Discovery, LLC” paperwork, signed “V. Vane.” The slant, the loops, the flourishes—identical.

She didn’t scream, but she let out a whoop loud enough to startle a jay on the bird feeder. “It’s the same guy! He didn’t even try to change the signature!”

For the grand finale, she ran both through a free handwriting comparison app. Result: 94% match. Chloe printed the page and tacked it dead center on the corkboard, then drew a thick, angry red circle around it.

She took a breath, scanned the board, and realized she’d built a case that would make any TV detective proud: the aliases, the corporate shells, the timeline, even the photo proof. She felt a surge of pride, and then—almost immediately—a stab of fear. Because if she’d figured it out, there was no way the Vanes hadn’t planned for exactly this kind of exposure.

She checked her phone again. No new messages. The quiet felt dangerous.

Chloe’s gaze went to the last empty space on her timeline. She needed one more thing, a smoking gun to link the pattern to Duck Creek. She flipped through the latest PDFs, digging into the footnotes and the boilerplate. There, buried in an addendum to a routine business license renewal, was a line about a cease-and-desist order from the Nevada Gaming Commission: “fraudulent historical claims; violation of the Nevada Unlawful Trade Practices Act.” Attached was a scan of the order itself, with two signatures: “Victor A. Vane” and “Saffron Vane,” both in the same pen as all the other documents.

Chloe printed it, ran a yellow highlighter over the names, then posted it at the top of the timeline.

She sat back, stared at her handiwork, and felt the moment snap into focus: This was real. Not just a story or a prank or some town

gossip. Victor and Saffron were about to fleece her community out of hundreds of thousands, and no one would stop them—unless she did.

Her fingers trembled as she took photos of the evidence wall, one section at a time, then uploaded everything to the shared drive she and Maya used for “paranoid overkill.” She zipped the best images and attached them to an email, addressed to Maya with the subject line: “THEY’RE RUNNING! Read NOW!”

Chloe tried to stand, but her knees felt hollow. She braced herself on the arm of the couch and let the adrenaline slow. In the movie version, this would be the part where the detective clinked a whiskey glass and vowed justice, but Chloe’s reality was a cold can of sparkling water and a desperate hope that the wif wouldn’t die.

She stared at the wall, the angry constellation of evidence, and let herself be scared for a second. The Vanes were pros, and people who threatened their grift usually found themselves on the wrong end of a legal threat—or worse.

But she shook off the doubt. This was bigger than her own nerves. If she could get the story to the right people, she could save the town, save Maya’s grandfather’s legacy, maybe even save a little bit of her own.

Chloe popped the can, took a deep breath, and dialed Maya.

“Are you sitting down?” she asked when Maya picked up.

“Is it that bad?” Maya’s voice sounded alert, focused.

“Worse. They’re scheduled to bail by Wednesday. We have five days.”

Maya didn’t hesitate. “Bring everything. We’ll figure it out.”

“On my way,” Chloe said, and hung up.

She gathered her laptop, her notes, her phone charger, and the one file folder she labeled “If Found, Deliver to FBI.” She took a last look at the wall—her evidence, her story—and felt a shiver of satisfaction.

If the Vanes thought they could slip out of Duck Creek with a standing ovation, they had another thing coming.

Chloe flicked off the light, locked the door, and stepped into the mountain night, ready to play her part in the last—and best—act.

If Chloe's cabin was organized chaos, then Maya's was a bunker for rational thought. The walls were lined with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves—actual, physical books, not just spines for show. The only decorations were a half-dozen plant cuttings and a framed poster from the 2002 Perseid meteor shower. A low electric fire hummed under the mantel, and the whole place smelled like simmering sage and roasting squash.

When Chloe shouldered open the door, the warmth of the cabin met her like a long-lost friend, while Maya, halfway through peeling a butternut, eyed Chloe's avalanche of folders, printouts, and duct-taped evidence like it was a science fair experiment run amok.

"You're early," Maya said, voice steady as always.

Chloe dumped her haul on the kitchen table, nearly sending a salt shaker off the edge. "We have a problem. I mean, not a problem—a crisis. Like, full DEFCON."

Maya's eyebrows lifted half a millimeter, her version of "go on."

"Vane and Saffron? Total pros. Serial scammers. I have receipts." Chloe fanned out the clippings, pushing squash peels aside, then swung her laptop open and pulled up the "Greatest Hits" folder.

Maya wiped her hands on a tea towel and sat, scanning the growing heap of color-coded chaos. She didn't say a word, just started stacking the evidence into subject piles—legal filings, newsprint, forum rants. Chloe watched, still vibrating from adrenaline, as Maya brought order to the madness in three passes flat.

Chloe couldn't sit still. She paced between the table and the fire, narrating the greatest hits: "Three different states, six LLCs, same scam every time—promise a 'historic find,' run a press campaign, collect investor fees, then ghost the scene. The LLCs never last more than three months. They vanish and start over with new names."

She stopped pacing, winded by her own urgency. "We're their next mark. I mean, Duck Creek is. And the timeline says they're about to run."

Maya turned the evidence over in her hands. "Why here? Why now?"

"Because they work by season," Chloe answered, flipping open her printout calendar. "Look at these—every new operation launches during a major holiday, runs for one cycle, then resets before anyone can

investigate. They showed up here at Easter, dropped the gold bar news right before the off-road festival, and now they're gearing up for the summer rush."

Maya started scribbling dates on her notepad, lines connecting each event, each media spike. She was so focused she didn't even notice when the butternut rolled onto the floor, or when Chloe dropped into the chair opposite her with a full body flop.

"They're using the same timeline here as in Nevada," Maya muttered, more to herself than to Chloe. "Publicity, event, investment window, vanish. You said the Nevada op was three months?"

"Almost to the day," Chloe said, then scrolled her spreadsheet. "The last investor email went out on July 4. The company dissolved July 10. All payouts bounced, all emails went dark. Here, they just announced the 'Gold Bar Gala' for next weekend. If we're on the same pattern, they're out by next Friday."

Maya's pencil hovered over the page. "Five days."

Chloe nodded, then let her chin drop to her hands. "That's not a lot of time."

They stared at the table, the stacks of evidence looking suddenly much heavier.

After a moment, Maya slid the top document—an official cease-and-desist from Nevada's consumer protection office—across to Chloe. "This is good, but we'll need more. If we go to Sheriff Cooper now, he'll just see 'he said, she said.' The Vanes haven't broken any laws here. Yet."

Chloe's eyes widened. "You're right. We need the actual moment of the scam, or at least the transfer of funds. That's when it turns from shady to criminal."

Maya nodded. "The evidence is compelling, but it's circumstantial until they take the money and run."

Chloe went full theater, rising to pace again, arms swinging in wild arcs. "We need a sting. Not the cop kind—just, like, surveillance. We follow them, we document the drop, then we hit the sheriff with everything at once. No way to ignore it."

Maya grinned, small and sharp. "And while we're at it, we get the locals to see the real story. If they know what's coming, maybe they won't buy in."

It was the classic Maya/Chloe split: science and drama, numbers and narrative, truth and story, working in tandem.

They mapped out the plan right there on the kitchen table, using string cheese as makeshift highlighters and a roll of washi tape to mark key dates.

Maya's job: Run the numbers. She'd dig into the financial trails, track the fake LLCs, monitor bank records where she could, and line up all the proof of fraud.

Chloe's mission: Watch the Vanes. She'd use her online networks to follow their every move, document all the pitch events, maybe even sign up for a "VIP Tour" under an alias to get close to the action.

"Are you sure you want to be the bait?" Maya asked, eyes not leaving the page.

Chloe shrugged. "It's not really acting if you don't risk a little, right? Besides, if anyone gets suspicious, I'm the town's reigning queen of being weird. No one will question it."

They sealed the pact with a pinky shake, because some things are sacred.

For the first time all night, Maya looked up, her eyes bright with a dangerous kind of certainty. "We can do this," she said.

Chloe leaned back and let herself believe it, too. "Yeah. We really can."

They fell silent, watching the fire cast wild shapes across the ceiling. The world outside was pitch black, but inside, the table glowed with the warmth of friendship and evidence. Neither of them needed to say it, but both knew: the fate of Duck Creek was in their hands.

And the Vanes, for the first time in years, were about to be outperformed.

eleven

the 'ghost' of the mine

THE CEDAR MOUNTAIN Country Store had never felt so alive. Every table was occupied, not just with locals but with tourists—the kind who wore new hiking boots that had never touched a trail and thought anything with the word “artisan” was twice as good. Today’s excitement wasn’t the usual drama about gas prices or wild elk sightings. No, today the whole store pulsed with gossip about the “ghost guardian” that had manifested overnight at the Vanes’ mining site.

The story was everywhere, bouncing off the windows and ricocheting around the knotty-pine walls. It came in different flavors depending on who was telling it: a spectral blue flame that hovered above the ground; a deep, otherworldly voice echoing through the pines; a pair of disembodied eyes that followed you if you dared the service road after dark. Maya and Chloe sat at their favorite table in the back, boxed in on two sides by stacks of locally-printed “Duck Creek is Gold” sweatshirts and the week’s delivery of peach rings. The air between them was tight with anticipation and the earthy smell of brewing coffee.

“I’m telling you, it was like a glowing...river,” one tourist said, voice pitched high for drama. She wore a fleece jacket the color of traffic cones and gestured as if conducting an orchestra. “I got it on video, but the light is all weird—doesn’t show up right. I think it’s electromagnetic or something.”

At the next table, a couple of year-rounders compared the ghost story to the legendary Rhoades Mine curse. “My uncle saw the real guardian back in ’89,” one said, “and it nearly froze him solid. This was just a light show. No disrespect, but the old spirits don’t do blue.” His companion nodded, chin slick with breakfast gravy, and countered, “It’s all a hoax, anyway. Vane probably paid some kid to run a drone with an LED.”

Maya sipped her cocoa, letting the sugar melt the last edge off her nerves. She kept her expression neutral, but every tall tale and theory stoked the critical engine behind her eyes.

Chloe, on the other hand, had her sketchbook out and was already outlining possible “ghost” shapes, embellishing each version with dramatic squiggles and the occasional superhero cape. She glanced up from her work only to eavesdrop more efficiently.

“It’s so theatrical,” Chloe whispered. “If you listen, every person in this room is running the scene in their own genre.”

“Technically, it’s all folklore,” Maya replied. She lowered her voice, leaning in. “But the detail that keeps repeating is the color. Blue-white. And the sound. People keep saying the voice was ‘everywhere at once’ but also a little tinny.”

Chloe’s next sketch was of a glowing blue cowboy hat, which she labeled “Ghost, Local Flavor.” “You want to talk to the kid who started it?” she said, nodding to the front corner, where a skinny teen in an oversized Duck Creek High hoodie hunched over a styrofoam plate of pancakes. His name tag, still stuck to the chest from a summer job at the tackle shop, read “Toby.”

Maya nodded, already rearranging her list of questions in her head. “Let’s do good cop, good cop,” Chloe said, collecting her art supplies into a single dramatic sweep and leading the way.

They approached Toby’s table with the casual stealth of two people who had spent a lifetime interrogating friends for secrets. Chloe slid onto the bench opposite him, smile dialed up to “chill older cousin,” while Maya perched at the edge, careful not to crowd.

“Hey, Toby. Mind if we join?” Chloe said, already pulling a pen out.

Toby looked up, startled, his eyes flickering between them. “Uh. Sure? I mean, I guess.”

Maya smiled, aiming for the gentlest possible version of herself. “We just wanted to hear what happened. You don’t have to answer if you don’t want.”

Toby shrugged, then seemed to realize the attention was mostly friendly. “It’s okay. People keep asking, anyway.” He stabbed a sausage link and tore off a bite. “I was just goofing off, honestly. I work up at the bait shop, and we got dared to check out the old dig after closing. So me and Alex biked over.”

Chloe nodded, open and nonjudgmental, like she’d spent her entire life defusing nervous freshmen. “Did you actually see it, or just the video?”

“I saw it,” Toby said, voice trembling only a little. “It started as this blue ball of light, floating, like, six feet off the ground. Then it stretched out, like a person but not...solid? And the voice was—” He stopped, searching for words.

“Was it a real voice? Did you recognize it?” Maya asked, gentle.

Toby shook his head. “Not really. It was loud, but not like it was yelling. More like it was inside my ears. And it said, ‘Turn back. Trespassers will suffer the mountain’s wrath.’” He made finger quotes, then looked embarrassed. “I know it sounds dumb.”

Chloe grinned, not at him but with him. “It sounds epic,” she said, and Toby relaxed a little.

Maya glanced at her phone, where she’d jotted questions. “Did you notice anything else? Weird smells, or maybe something on the ground?”

Toby poked at his pancakes, thinking. “There was a clicking sound. Really fast, like a Geiger counter? And the blue light blinked a few times before it showed up. Alex said it looked like a projector but there was nothing to project onto, just air.”

Maya’s heart did a little leap; that was exactly what she’d suspected.

Toby took another bite, chewing like it helped him think. “Also, the voice didn’t match the light. I mean, the light would get brighter or dimmer, but the voice stayed the same. Sometimes it even lagged, like in a video call when the sound gets ahead of the picture.”

Maya exchanged a glance with Chloe, who had stopped doodling and was just listening now, absorbing every detail.

“What happened after?” Maya asked.

“We booked it,” Toby said, sheepish. “Alex dropped his phone. I went back for it and the ghost was gone, but there were footprints. Not, like, regular ones—just bare patches in the dirt where the pine needles had been scraped away. In a weird pattern, like a three-toed bird or something.”

Chloe couldn’t help herself. “Did you take a picture?”

Toby nodded and pulled out his own phone, flipping through a dozen blurry shots. He held it out for them to see. The blue light was smudged by motion, but the last photo showed a faint pattern in the dirt: an arc of three oval shapes, like the heel and two toes of a cartoon dinosaur.

Maya filed every word away in her brain, already assembling the pattern. “That’s a great catch, Toby. Do you mind if we send the pictures to ourselves?”

Toby shrugged. “Go for it.”

Chloe took the phone, texting the photos to her own number with a quick flourish, then handed it back. “You were really brave, you know,” she said. “People will be talking about this all summer.”

Toby’s smile was quick but real. “I hope so. I mean, not the running away part, but...yeah.”

Maya tapped her mug, eyes distant. “Thanks, Toby. You’ve helped more than you know.”

They left him to his pancakes, drifting back to their corner table, the phones now buzzing with evidence.

“Projector and playback, probably synced with a motion sensor,” Maya said, keeping her voice low. “Blue-white LED, maybe a fog machine for effect. The voice was pre-recorded, but with a phaser filter. And the footprints? A weighted rolling stamp, maybe. It’s all smoke and mirrors.”

Chloe nodded, flipping to a new page in her sketchbook and writing “VANE’S STAGECRAFT” in block letters. “Do we out them, or do we follow the plot?”

Maya considered, then smiled with a hint of mischief. “I say we let it play out. But we get ahead of it this time.”

As the morning rush crested and ebbed, Chloe added the final

touch to her sketch: a blue-glowing ghost, outlined in projector dots, with the words “STAY CURIOUS” written under its spectral feet. She snapped a photo and texted it to Maya, who replied with a heart.

It was, after all, their show now.

The old quonset hut at the edge of town was the closest thing Duck Creek had to a proper garage. Locker Larry’s Trail Recovery and Repair had started life as a one-bay snowmobile shed, but over the years had mutated into a sprawling, tin-roofed maze of tools, busted axles, and the whine of air compressors. Chloe thought it looked like the set from an ‘80s kids’ movie—one where the real magic came from what you could cobble together with duct tape, elbow grease, and three best friends who didn’t mind getting dirty.

Inside, it was all action. Larry was under the hood of a battered red Jeep, cussing cheerfully at a stripped bolt. Turbo Sue was perched on a rolling stool, methodically piecing together a transmission the size of a birthday cake. Matt, ever the muscle, was at the workbench hunched over a sandwich, his hands too greasy to risk a touch on his phone.

Maya and Chloe stepped over a heap of tangled winch cable and were greeted by the blast of hot, oily air and the pop of classic rock from a radio somewhere in the rafters.

“Hey, it’s the Duck Creek Detectives!” Larry shouted, sliding out from under the Jeep. He wiped his hands on a rag and tossed it, with remarkable aim, straight into a barrel labeled “More or Less Clean.”

Matt saluted with his sandwich. “You girls here to join the pit crew?”

Chloe pointed at Maya. “Actually, we need your expertise. It’s kind of a stakeout. Ghosts and high jinks included.”

Sue’s ears pricked up, and she rolled over with an arched eyebrow. “Spill. You want to catch the Vane crew, right?”

“Exactly,” Maya said, and laid out the theory: how the “ghost” was a stage illusion, how the footprints could be mechanical, and how someone needed to bust them with real evidence.

Larry grinned, all teeth and dimples. “You’re talking my language.

Nothing I hate more than a cheater, especially if it's the kind who thinks the rest of us are dumb."

Matt licked a glob of mustard off his finger. "I'm in. Sue?"

Sue stretched, popped a vertebra, then snatched a rag and tied back her hair with it. "Give me ten minutes to finish this beast, and then let's plan. I got fresh topo maps and I know every sightline up there."

Chloe couldn't help but admire the way the group moved—no wasted words, no drama, just three people who liked a problem and knew how to solve it. Within the hour, Sue had the transmission back together, Larry had switched to a less urgent Jeep, and the four of them gathered at the battered shop table, which was covered in maps, dented travel mugs, and a half-finished chess game.

Sue unrolled the topographic map with a flourish and stabbed a finger at a blue-shaded depression. "Here's the Vane site. The blue ball showed up on the west slope, but every photo I've seen has the apparition facing this way—downhill, toward the access road."

Maya hovered, intent. "So whoever's running it wants to spook people approaching from the road. Which means the gear is probably set up just out of sight, but with line-of-sight to the entrance."

Matt nodded. "I got a scope for that. Also night-vision binocs. Old hunting gear, but it works."

Larry pulled out a battered notepad and scribbled a quick list. "We go in quiet, stay upwind, and we don't use flashlights unless we have to. I know those woods better than the people who planted them."

Chloe added, "And if we can get video, that's best. The Vanes love a spectacle, but I'd love to see the look on their faces when we drop the receipts."

Sue's mouth twisted in a pleased grin. "Even better, I got two electric ATVs. Dead quiet. We park at the old ranger shack and go in on foot from there. Nothing with an engine gets within earshot of the Vane site without me knowing about it."

Larry was already drawing loops and arrows on the map, marking where they'd position themselves: one at the access road to spot arrivals, one by the creekbed for cover, one on the ridge for an aerial view. "We treat it like a proper stakeout. Three teams of two, radios set to channel

seven. Anybody gets a visual, we converge. Worst case, we get a license plate. Best case, we get a shot of the magic show.”

Matt rumbled, “I call top of the ridge. I want to see this ghost up close.”

Chloe flashed a grin at Sue. “You and me, then? I’ll bring the camera, you bring the muscle.”

Sue grinned right back. “Deal. I’ll bring snacks.”

Maya, meanwhile, had started sketching in the margins of the map—a rough diagram of where she thought the projection gear would be hidden, based on Toby’s description. “They need something to hang the light from, or to stabilize a projector. Trees, probably, or a makeshift tripod. The voice playback could be run off a Bluetooth speaker, maybe buried in a fake rock.”

Larry nodded along, then raised his mug. “We are going to blow this wide open.”

The rest of the day blurred by in a whirl of packing, double-checking batteries, and running through comms check. Sue produced an old tackle box filled with granola bars and little plastic tubes of instant coffee. Matt tuned the radios and gave everyone a crash course on hand signals, which Chloe translated into exaggerated pantomimes.

At sunset, the crew met up at the edge of the meadow. Chloe and Maya wore black hoodies, which felt like overkill until the temperature dropped and the forest started to suck up all the warmth. They loaded up on the silent ATVs—one blue, one camo, both with tires the size of large pizzas—and took off down the gravel road, the only sound the crunch of dirt and the occasional giggle as Chloe pretended to be a secret agent.

At the old ranger shack, they dismounted. Larry gave a last pep talk: “We keep our heads. If it’s a bust, it’s a bust, but I got a gut feeling we’re gonna catch something wild.” He checked the channel, then sent Matt and Maya up the ridge, Sue and Chloe to the east treeline, and parked himself at the road.

Chloe clipped her camera to her belt and checked the lens twice, then whispered, “This is better than any movie.”

Sue only grinned, eyes scanning the dark. “Just wait till we get to the third act.”

They moved into position. The woods were deep and old, and Chloe felt every snapped twig and breath of wind as a tiny performance for their benefit. Somewhere up the hill, she saw the faint pulse of Matt's radio, green in the dusk.

And then they waited.

At 11:40, Sue's radio crackled: "Movement. SUV, black, coming up the road."

Larry whispered back: "Copy. I see lights. One driver, no passengers. Watch the tree line."

Chloe crouched behind a log, angling her camera toward the dirt service road. Sue handed her the night-vision monocular, and through it, the world turned sharp and green and strange.

The SUV rolled to a stop, engine running. The driver's door opened, and out stepped Rebecca Vane, her hair pulled back, face set with the focus of someone who meant business. She popped the trunk, pulled out a hard-sided case, and carried it toward the slope.

"Showtime," Sue whispered.

From her position, Chloe could see Rebecca haul the case through the brush, then squat and set up what looked like a small, black tripod. She adjusted a rectangular device—probably a projector—then ducked behind it, fiddling with her phone. At the same time, she planted two rock-shaped objects on either side of the trail.

Maya's voice came in soft but tense: "She's doing it solo. That's pro-grade projection gear, I'd bet my last paycheck. Watch for a test run."

As if on cue, a thin band of blue-white light shimmered into existence, hovering above the trail. Chloe hit record. The "ghost" started as a loose sphere, then stretched into a person-shape—exactly as Toby had said. The voice kicked in, perfectly in sync: "Turn back. Trespassers will suffer the mountain's wrath."

Chloe filmed every second, her heart thudding so loud she was sure the mic would pick it up. Sue pointed at the projection and mouthed, "Holy crap," then took three still photos with her phone, using the night mode.

Rebecca watched the show, checked the angle, made a quick note on her phone, and reset the equipment for a second pass.

After half an hour, she packed up, wiped the area with a towel, and

loaded everything back into the SUV. She drove off slow, careful, headlights off for the first fifty yards.

Larry's voice came over the radio, low and gleeful: "We got her. Let's rendezvous."

Maya and Matt descended from the ridge, Sue and Chloe circled back through the woods. They met at the ranger shack, and the night air buzzed with shared adrenaline and disbelief.

"I told you it was a setup," Maya said, grinning wide for the first time all day.

Larry slapped her on the back. "You called every detail, kid."

Chloe handed the camera to Maya. "You want the honors?"

Maya played back the footage, the green-tinted phantoms flickering across the tiny screen. She looked up, eyes shining. "We're going to bury them. And not in the fun way."

The off-roaders whooped, and Chloe snapped a group selfie, everyone mugging for the camera. "For posterity," she said. "And also Instagram."

They loaded the gear, brushed the leaves from their clothes, and set off for home.

Tomorrow, Duck Creek was in for the show of its life.

By the time they reached the ridge, the night had gone full ink—no moon, no clouds, just a billion indifferent stars and the slow drip of cold into every seam of clothing. The world below the treeline was so quiet it felt staged, as if all the animals had been paid to take the night off. But Maya's nerves buzzed with energy. Every step squelched her boots into the loam, and the only thing louder than the wind in the pines was the thud of her own pulse.

They left the electric ATVs tucked under a bank of aspen, then spread out: Matt up to the north overlook, Sue and Chloe threading the lower deer trail, and Maya with Larry, picking a slow, careful route toward the mine site. They moved in total silence, broken only by Larry's occasional hand signals or the whisper of a branch snapping under Maya's foot. It felt like a real operation. It felt, for the

first time in a long time, like she was a part of something that mattered.

Larry led them to a spot where the ridge bent toward a shallow bowl of trees, giving a direct line of sight to the Vanes' claim. They dropped into the underbrush, the needles soft and damp, and settled in to wait.

Maya's fingers itched with impatience. Every ten seconds she checked her phone—on silent, brightness set low, timer running a loop. She could see Chloe down the slope, hunched with Sue behind a cluster of rocks. Above, Matt's silhouette barely moved, his night-vision binoculars fixed on the access road.

The first sign of action came at 11:57. Matt signaled: headlights. Two flashes, then all dark. The car coasted the last hundred yards, engine a whisper, and Maya recognized it from the gas station the day before—a black Range Rover, plates dusted with Utah mud. It was Rebecca at the wheel. She drove like a person who liked control and parked just shy of the tree line.

Rebecca stepped out, zipped up a shiny black jacket, and immediately went to work. She opened the rear hatch and pulled out two hard cases—one the size of a toolbox, the other more like a carry-on. She carried them to the base of a ponderosa pine and began assembling equipment with quick, precise movements.

Maya's breath fogged the air. She pressed closer to the scope, angling for the best view. "She's not messing around," Larry whispered, barely a breath. "You see the gear?"

Maya nodded. She recognized the brand—her summer internship at the Cedar City Theater had used the same model. "It's a projection rig. Not even consumer-grade. That's pro."

Chloe's voice came through on the radio, a scratchy whisper: "We got eyes on her from the east. She's planting something by the trailhead."

Sue added, "That's a camouflaged motion sensor. Old hunting trick. I've used the same one to keep coyotes out of the garden."

Rebecca's setup was methodical. She anchored the tripod, attached a gimbaled projection head, and checked the alignment using a battered old laser pointer. Then she unspooled a bundle of wire and ran it to a

plastic rock, which Maya immediately clocked as a speaker. The whole process took less than ten minutes, but every motion was the sort of thing you only picked up after years of working in the dark.

At midnight sharp, Rebecca tested the setup. She tapped a remote and a ghostly blue-white figure shimmered into existence above the mine entrance. The “apparition” wavered, then resolved into a floating, vaguely humanoid shape. For thirty seconds, the blue form drifted, then a voice—filtered and echoing, just as Toby had described—rolled out from the rock: “Turn back. Trespassers will suffer the mountain’s wrath.” The words phased in and out, warped slightly by the wind and the pine needles, but even from a hundred yards away Maya could feel the effect: instant goosebumps.

Larry snorted, low and admiring. “She’s got the touch.”

Maya kept her eyes on the projection. “Look at the timing. The light pulse is synced to the voice, but it lags just enough to make it creepy.” She fished out her notebook and sketched the scene, labeling every piece of equipment she could spot.

Downhill, Chloe had her camera steady, recording the whole thing through the night-vision lens. Sue jotted notes on a mini-clipboard, diagramming the site and the perimeter markers.

Rebecca ran the test three more times, each at slightly different intervals. After the last, she reset everything, packed up her tools, and swept the area with a flashlight—once, twice, meticulous. Satisfied, she shut off the gear, returned to the SUV, and drove away as quietly as she’d come.

It took another twenty minutes before the team dared to converge at the mine entrance. They moved in with practiced caution, keeping voices low. Chloe was the first to break the hush: “Please tell me we got the whole thing.”

Sue grinned, teeth white in the green of the night-vision. “Better. I timed every cycle and mapped all the gear. Nobody’s going to call this a real ghost, not after we show them what’s behind the curtain.”

Matt was practically giddy. “You want to go see the rig up close?”

They did. Maya led the way, her hands shaking just a little as she picked her way through the brush. The projector was still warm, its lens dusted with the residue of condensed breath. Maya circled it, cataloging

each piece—the motion detector’s brand, the battery packs, the microSD slot for audio files. She could see fingerprints on the housing, even a strip of Rebecca’s tape labeled “TEST 3.”

Chloe photographed everything, including the tracks left by Rebecca’s boots and the faint outline of a folding chair stashed behind a fallen log. “Classic showman,” she said. “Leaves nothing to chance, but always keeps an escape route.”

Larry, who’d stayed back as lookout, finally joined the group. “You got what you need?”

Maya nodded. “More than enough.”

“Good.” He looked up at the sky, where dawn was threatening to stain the edge of the world pink. “Let’s get out before they decide to run an encore.”

They retraced their steps, gathering every shred of evidence—video, photos, diagrams, even a few clippings of blue-tinted projection film that Matt managed to peel from the setup.

By the time they got back to the ATVs, everyone was half-frozen, but nobody cared. Chloe was already editing the best footage, overlaying timestamps and writing notes for the inevitable YouTube upload. Sue and Matt started prepping a map and a witness statement for the Forest Service, who would want every inch of this documented.

Maya just sat, breathless, and watched the sun creep up behind the ridge. She felt—she realized—really, truly proud. Not just for figuring it out, but for pulling off the kind of plan that only ever worked in movies, or on the wildest days of her childhood.

Larry punched her lightly on the shoulder. “Not bad for a night’s work.”

She smiled, teeth chattering. “Let’s see them explain this one away.”

They rode the ATVs back to town, the cold biting harder every mile. When they finally rolled into the Country Store parking lot, the sky was a blur of new day and the porch light was still on, just for them. Inside, Sam had set out a row of clean mugs and a hot pot of coffee that smelled like victory.

Chloe thumped her phone down on the counter and called, “Sam! You want to see a ghost get busted?”

Sam, who never missed a beat, poured herself a mug and peered at

the phone. The video played, flickering between night-vision and regular, the blue ghost dancing, the projection gear in full view.

Sam watched it all, then looked up with a grin. "You're going to break the internet."

Sue raised her coffee. "To truth. And to the mountain, which never puts up with fakes for long."

They toasted. Matt and Larry swapped stories of the weirdest stake-outs they'd ever done. Chloe and Maya sat side-by-side, too tired to talk but too wired to think about sleep.

As the day warmed, the story started to spread. By noon, the whole village knew. By dusk, the Vanes' so-called legend had been memed, debunked, and retold a hundred ways—each one stranger, and somehow sweeter, than the last.

And in a little corner booth at the Country Store, two friends watched it all unfold, content to let the mountain keep its real secrets for another day.

twelve

the artifact analysis

MAYA'S KITCHEN TABLE—ONCE the site of so many sheep-chorus breakfasts and geology homework pileups—now looked like the set of a mid-budget procedural drama. The evidence: rows of pipettes lined up like cavalry, a bottle of ammonia, three different kinds of nitrile gloves, and a battered field microscope that Leo had lent her “for the cause.” Every inch of the pine tabletop was covered in notepads, glass vials, and little pools of chemical hope. The only touch of domesticity left was the needlepoint napkin under her beaker stand, because even in science, some things were sacred.

On the table in front of her, cradled in a velvet-lined specimen tray and ringed by enough forensic tools to frighten a jewel thief, sat the supposed sixteenth-century Spanish escudo: bright, heavy, and with an engraving so sharp it could have sliced cheese.

Maya bent close, eye level with the coin, and poked at it with a bamboo chopstick. “You are too pretty,” she muttered. “Way too pretty for four hundred years of sheep manure and volcanic mud.”

She opened her notebook, labeled “Vane Analysis: ROUND 2,” and wrote the first entry of the evening:

—Specimen: “Spanish escudo,” 16th C., borrowed from Doug’s neighbor (Forensic Accountant, Retired)

—Condition: Mint. Like, suspiciously mint.

—Hypothesis: Modern fabrication, gold-plated lead or brass core, artificially aged.

She flexed her hands, pulled on a pair of fresh gloves, and eyed the chemistry kit Leo had procured from “a guy at the high school.” Maya had never been so glad to have paid attention in Mr. Hollister’s lab class. Not that she’d ever admit that to anyone, least of all Mr. Hollister.

First up: the Cleaning Solvent Test. The Vanes had shown off the coin at the Gold Bar Gala, swearing on live video it had “never seen a jeweler’s hand.” But to Maya, the coin’s surface gleamed with the sort of polish only a determined human and a bottle of something nasty could provide.

She popped open the smallest test tube, filled it with a clear solution, and dipped the edge of the escudo for exactly three seconds. A faint hiss—like static from an old radio—rose, followed by a whiff of something sweet and chemical, the smell of a dentist’s office after hours.

Maya grinned, scribbling in her notebook: Modern solvent, possibly ethanol or variant. Definitely not original to artifact.

She gave the coin a rinse in distilled water, then placed it under the microscope. The ridges, she noticed, were impossibly crisp. She zoomed in on the perimeter: the cross-hatch pattern showed no sign of manual wear. Instead, it bore the faint, repetitive score of a modern lathe.

“Caught you,” she said, trying not to giggle. She snapped a set of photos with her phone and sent the best one to her evidence folder, labeling it “Micro—Lathe Pattern, Suspect Coin.”

Next: Aging Compound Test. Old gold, Maya knew, darkened with time, but only in a specific way—oxidation, subtle and patient, not the burned-in caramel tones that tourist shops liked to spray on their wares.

Maya used a fine pipette to drip a reagent across the surface, watching the reaction like a hawk. Instantly, the clear liquid turned amber and fizzed at the edge, making a bead of foam that looked almost festive. She checked the color wheel chart from her kit. If it was authentic, the solution would stay clear or shift slightly green. Amber meant only one thing: sulfur compounds—applied artificially, to create a fake patina.

“Unbelievable,” Maya said, and this time she let herself laugh. She

marked the result in red highlighter and added a smiley face. Not very professional, but it was her notebook.

Third test: Plating Check. She carefully scratched a shallow notch on the rim of the coin—enough to get a cross-section, not enough to ruin the evidence. Under the scope, the layers were plain as day: a thick outer skin of gold, then a band of coppery brass, and, in the very center, the telltale dullness of lead.

She let out a long, slow “haaaaa,” both at the nerve of the forger and at the realization that she’d basically won the argument before the first commercial break.

She wrote, in blue pen:

—Plating: triple layer, gold over brass over lead. (Not even a decent solid core.) Standard for high-end replicas, but definitely not period-authentic.

She sat back, rolled her shoulders, and finally noticed how cold the cabin had gotten. The space heater grumbled in the corner, doing its best, but the Duck Creek night always found a way in.

Maya lined up her photos, typed out a summary, and started color-coding her analysis for the benefit of her neighbor (who she suspected had only agreed to the loan because he secretly missed the thrill of an audit).

She picked up the coin one last time, holding it up to the kitchen light. It was beautiful, sure, and the weight of it in her hand was satisfying—but it was a lie, all the way through. She wondered, for a second, if the real scandal wasn’t that the Vanes thought they could get away with it, but that they didn’t even care to try harder.

“Okay, CSI,” she said to herself, channeling the lab technician from the show her mom used to watch. “You’ve got your report. Now it’s time to nail them with the evidence.”

She closed the notebook, packed up the coin and its damning paperwork, and started organizing the test tubes for cleanup. Halfway through, her phone buzzed with a text from Chloe:

GETTING CLOSE? LEO’S BINGE WATCHING THE GALA LIVESTREAM LOL. “VALE” IS ABOUT TO SHOW THE BAR.

Maya smiled, tapped back, “Tell him to watch for the coin. Spoiler: it’s a fake.”

She set her work aside and poured herself a mug of microwave cocoa, letting the chemical tang of the tests fade into the familiar sweetness of sugar and marshmallow. For a moment, the adrenaline wore off and she felt, underneath the triumph, a thin seam of worry. If she was right—and every test said she was—then the whole scam was about to go nuclear. The town, already buzzing, would either thank her for the save or run her out for making trouble.

But there was no way she'd let the Vanes walk off with a sack of local money, not when she could prove the fraud in three colors and two camera angles.

She finished the cocoa, rinsed the mug, and looked around the kitchen table: the battle zone, now quiet, but ready for the next round.

"Here we go," she said, and set the coin, the evidence packet, and the analysis folder by the door—ready for the morning's confrontation.

The sun was just cresting the tips of the oldest pines when Maya crunched across the village's main drag, her boots leaving neat geometric prints in the previous night's frost. Her cargo for this walk—one swaddled Spanish coin, a folder stuffed with forensic notes, and a thermos of black coffee for courage—seemed small for the size of the morning. She could already see the neighbor's house from the end of the lane, its chimney politely puffing, lace curtains glowing like frosted sugar under the rising light.

Inside, everything was perfectly as she remembered from last year's firewood-splitting favor: the plaid sofa, the ranks of hardcover audit manuals, the big grandfather clock doing its somber duty in the corner. A dish of lemon candies on the coffee table, refilled so regularly it seemed self-replenishing. The man himself—neighbor, ex-IRS, and unofficial HOA for three blocks in any direction—waited at the kitchen table, sleeves pressed, silver hair so sharp it could have been a crime scene tool.

"Morning, Maya," he said, voice already in business mode. "Right on time."

She wiped her boots on the mat and handed over the coin. He accepted it with the same gravity he might use to take a signed confession. "Any trouble with the analysis?"

"None," Maya said, sliding into the chair across from him. "But you're not going to like the answers." She unsnapped the folder and spread the first page between them: a high-res shot of the escudo, then a printout of the initial solvent test, color-coded in highlighter and annotated with her neatest, no-nonsense cursive.

He scanned the page, nostrils flaring once at the bold red "Not Authentic" flag she'd stuck at the top. "Let's start at the beginning," he said. "Lay it out like you would for a jury."

Maya smiled, nerves dropping a notch. This was the part she'd practiced all night. "First, surface polish. I ran a basic ethanol assay—" she paused, searching for a plain English translation, "—that's a test to check for modern chemicals. There's a thin layer of something like shellac, which wouldn't be present unless someone wanted to seal in the color. It's a common trick for making new gold look old."

He nodded, picking up the photo and angling it toward the window. "It's a beautiful coin," he said, almost mournful. "And that's how they get people."

Next came the microscope images. Maya flipped through each page, pointing out the patterns along the rim, the regularity of the hatching, the way the cross was more precise than any colonial mint could have managed. "You see this here?" She tapped the grainy close-up. "That's what's called a lathe chatter pattern. Completely impossible before the late 19th century. The coin is newer than both of us."

He gave a little grunt, half pride and half frustration. "And the plating?"

"Gold over brass, with a lead core." She pulled up the annotated cross-section, three colors of pencil tracing the layers. "Whoever did this had access to good materials and a decent plating rig, but the technique is straight out of an eBay kit. It's not even that subtle."

He closed his eyes for a second, just breathing, then picked up his own fountain pen and jotted down a note in his ledger. "I've seen worse jobs," he said. "But I haven't seen better at this price point."

They both looked at the coin, then at each other. In that moment, Maya understood why he'd trusted her with it—he'd known, or at least suspected, but wanted a second voice to say it out loud.

He took a long pull of coffee from his chipped ceramic mug, then set it down with a little too much force. "Do you know what this means?"

Maya hesitated. "It means the Vanes are running a con, and it's working."

He reached across the table and slid over a sheet of paper. It was a summary, in classic accountant's style: names, dates, dollar figures, all listed in clean black columns. The sums—\$12,000, \$25,000, \$43,000—made her heart stutter.

"Three investors already," he said, voice gone very quiet. "All summer residents, all with standing in the community. If it gets past fifty, there won't be enough left for lawsuits to matter. It'll bankrupt the trust fund and maybe the school foundation, too."

Maya scanned the list, eyes wide. She'd expected a grift—maybe some sucker cash, a summer's worth of rumor. Not a chunk of the village's future.

"Can you stop it?" she said, suddenly feeling young.

He folded his hands, fingers lacing tight. "We might. But only if we get ahead of the wire transfers. Once it leaves state lines, it's gone." He checked his watch, then the grandfather clock, as if calibrating his internal clock to the very second. "I need everything you have. Photos, notes, even the test residue if you kept it."

"I labeled the vials," Maya said, almost apologetic.

He cracked a smile, the first hint of warmth in the meeting. "Of course you did."

They spent the next hour building a case—Maya guiding him through every test, every annotated photo, while he made parallel notes on his audit spreadsheet. He asked sharp, precise questions ("What's the detection threshold for modern solvent?" "Do you have a comparative sample from the museum?") and took every answer with the same measured calm, like a lawyer prepping for cross.

At one point he stood, crossed to the mantel, and pulled down a

battered black binder. It was labeled “LOCAL,” and inside was a patchwork of newspaper clippings, town minutes, and a half-dozen emails printed out on old dot-matrix. “You see this?” He tapped a page near the front. “Every ten years, a new mining scam comes through. The difference is, this one’s got polish. And an Instagram account.”

Maya flipped the binder, reading as fast as she could, then stopped at a line highlighted in blue:

“‘The best cons are the ones that make you want to believe.’ – 1997, Wilkins Case.”

She thought of the Vanes, their press releases and parties, the way everyone in town had flocked to their legend because it was easier than doubt.

“People want it to be real,” she said, softly.

He sat back down, nodding. “That’s why it always works. Until someone pokes a hole.”

He unrolled a big, square notepad—the kind with grid paper—and started mapping out a tree of the Vanes’ LLCs, bank accounts, and public statements. Maya laid her evidence along the top, each page connected by sticky notes and color-coded tape. By the end, the table looked like a spiderweb, every thread leading to the same ugly truth.

“I can chase the paper,” he said. “I can call in some old favors. But we need a story the whole town can see, or nobody will believe it. Even with all this.” He gestured to the table.

Maya thought of Chloe, her voice at the festival, the way she’d made everyone listen without raising it. “I might know someone,” Maya said, “who can tell it right.”

He smiled, this time for real. “It’ll take a team.”

A moment passed, the weight of the moment settling in with the hush of the room. Maya looked up at the clock—the hour hand barely moved—and realized how fast the stakes had changed. This wasn’t a summer prank, or a one-off scam. This was the real kind, the kind that hollowed out entire towns if nobody stood up.

She rolled her shoulders, fighting off the chill of dread, and started packing up her evidence. “I’ll be back tonight,” she said, voice steadier than she felt. “We’ll meet Chloe at the store and figure out the rest.”

He nodded, already on the phone, dialing the first of what would be many careful calls.

Outside, the sun was higher now, the frost burned off and the air clear enough to see all the way to the far ridge. Maya tucked her folder under one arm, and set off down the lane with a little more purpose.

The Vanes, she thought, would never know what hit them.

thirteen

into the high country

THEY MET at the edge of Duck Creek while the world was still ink, Chloe waving her phone like a glow stick and Maya double-checking the straps on her pack. Above, the sky was all low stars and the faintest trace of purple where sunrise would eventually be. Somewhere behind them, a snowplow scraped Main Street, loud as a dare.

Chloe wore her favorite “Hike Like You Mean It” windbreaker and a vintage ski hat pilfered from the camp’s lost-and-found bin. She carried two bottles of water, a bag of trail mix, and her journal in a crossbody satchel so overloaded it had a tilt. Maya was pure utilitarian: navy technical layers, boots laced tight, her gear evenly distributed and her notebook tucked in a zippered side pocket. Slung around her neck, bouncing softly with each step, was the “Intent” compass, already twitching in its case.

“Shouldn’t we, I don’t know, do a blood oath?” Chloe said, as they trudged through the silent campground. “Or at least eat a symbolic donut before the quest?”

Maya just grinned, eyes glinting in the predawn. “We have enough sugar in this bag to bribe an entire Cub Scout troop. I think we’re covered.”

The plan was simple: follow the compass, trust their instincts, and document everything. Maya checked her watch. 5:17 a.m. Sunrise in about an hour, according to her last Google search. They crossed the last

slush-banked street, cut between two vacant rental cabins, and started up the snow-dusted logging trail that led toward the southern ridgeline.

Chloe kept up a steady narration as they walked. “Cue the dramatic theme music. Two intrepid explorers, their only allies a bag of trail mix and their wits, ascend into the forbidden heart of—” she cut herself off with a giggle when her boot snagged a root. “Okay, maybe not forbidden, but at least, like, underappreciated.”

Maya stopped at the first fork in the trail. She slipped the compass from its pouch and cupped it in her palm. The needle, instead of its usual languid drift, quivered so hard it almost vibrated. The metal was warm—warmer than it had any right to be, considering the air still pinched at their noses.

“Which way?” Chloe asked.

“Left, but uphill,” Maya said. The compass point was clear and urgent. “I think it wants us to follow the old logging road.”

Chloe fell in step behind her, narrating every crunchy step of ice underfoot. “Left into the unknown. Classic horror movie logic.”

They walked, and the woods swallowed them. The pines closed overhead, filtering the not-yet-sunrise into a gloom that was both gentle and absolute. Maya counted their steps, habit from a lifetime of sheep-wrangling and fieldwork, while Chloe stopped every few minutes to snap a photo of ice crystals or record a voice memo.

“Do you ever get the feeling,” Chloe said, at one point, “that you’re not supposed to find something? Like, if it was meant to be discovered, it’d have a sign and a handicapped ramp and probably a Starbucks?”

Maya shrugged. “Or maybe it’s just waiting for someone stubborn enough to keep going.” She checked the compass again; the needle throbbed, a tiny engine in her fist. “We’re close to the first marker.”

At 6:01, the sky began to silver. They had reached a wide, sloped basin, a place where old snow lingered in dirty patches and fallen logs had half-vanished under decades of leaf rot. It was nothing, to a casual eye—just the unremarkable midpoint between one scenic overlook and the next.

But Maya’s phone beeped, a pre-set alarm. She checked the compass, which hummed so hot she almost dropped it. Chloe stood,

breath fogging, watching Maya as she walked slow circles around the clearing.

“What are we looking for?” Chloe whispered, as if afraid to break the spell.

“Something that looks wrong,” Maya said. “Or maybe too right.”

The answer, when it arrived, was so subtle Maya nearly missed it: a cluster of five stones at the base of a dead aspen, arranged in a fan shape, each one precisely the size of an apple. If you didn’t know to look, you’d step right over them. But Maya remembered the story from the granddads—the “hand of Santiago,” five fingers spread in stone, always pointing toward the next leg of the trail.

She dropped to a knee, scraped away the moss, and found that the stones weren’t just arranged. They were nested, each in a shallow hollow scooped by a human hand. And underneath, faint but clear, was a blackened nail driven deep into the trunk—a marker, just as described, invisible unless you moved the stones.

Maya looked up at Chloe, her voice gone hoarse. “This is it. This is the real trail.”

Chloe’s eyes went round. “Holy. Crows.” She fumbled out her journal, flipped to a blank page, and started to sketch the stone fan with hands that shook a little from cold or adrenaline.

Maya snapped photos from every angle, then dusted her gloves and stood, letting herself feel the gravity of the find.

They were silent for a moment, nothing but their breath and the slow warming of the sky.

“I knew it would feel like this,” Chloe said, voice soft. “Like we’re in the middle of a movie, but it’s not a movie. It’s happening right now, to us.”

Maya nodded, still crouched by the marker. “This is the kind of story that doesn’t want to be told. Unless it’s you.”

They smiled at each other, a little giddy, a lot changed. For the first time all winter, Maya felt less like a piece in someone else’s history, and more like the author of her own.

She packed away the compass, its point now easing, and looked down the valley. The next part of the trail was a narrow cleft between

two spines of volcanic rock, exactly the sort of place the old miners would have used to stay hidden from above.

Maya checked her watch again: 6:15. The world was awake. Time to follow the story, wherever it led.

She hoisted her pack, signaled to Chloe, and together they stepped into the next chapter, leaving the marker just as they'd found it—except now, it was real.

Behind them, the five stones caught the first slant of sunlight, and for a moment, they glowed.

The second leg of the trail was a master class in selective invisibility. If the first marker had been hidden by plausible deniability, the next ones were outright ghostly—more absence than presence, more suggestion than sign. The compass, when Maya checked it, now felt neutral-cool, its needle fluttering like a moth against glass, as if the instrument itself doubted their resolve.

Chloe was the first to spot the “gateway.” It was nothing—a slim, off-camber break in the ridgeline, bracketed by two toothy basalt outcrops. But once you stood in exactly the right place, a whole new path snapped into view: a steep, switchbacking cut that had been erased from every map and, by the looks of it, every maintenance schedule.

“Right out of Labyrinth,” Chloe whispered, awe in her voice for once. “If we take the left step, do we fall into the oubliette or just get a bruised tailbone?”

“Only one way to find out,” Maya answered, setting her boots to the first gravelly drop.

The trail was less a trail now and more a rumor, a memory handed down by erosion and maybe by the generations of sheepdogs who'd herded Maya's ancestors through this same valley. The pines grew so tight overhead that the sunlight turned to shards, the world below a chopped mosaic of frost and moss. They moved slow, using tree trunks for balance, slipping twice for every three steps. Chloe's voice, even at a whisper, sounded thunderous in the hush.

At the first real break—a natural arch made by a toppled aspen

whose bark had turned the color of old bone—they found the second marker: three stones, perfectly equilateral, stacked in a wedge between root and earth. Underneath, a coil of rusty wire bound around a sliver of bone, just as the granddads had promised.

“Is this,” Chloe said, “like, an offering? Or a warning?”

“Maybe both,” Maya said, poking the bundle with a stick before tucking it back. “It’s definitely a signal. But not one you’d notice unless you were trained for it.”

They pressed on, the compass now warming slightly as the path leveled, and Chloe let her monologue loose again. “I love how this entire trail is designed to discourage lazy people. Like, every fork is an existential dare. ‘You sure you want to see what’s at the end?’”

Maya considered. “It’s more than that. Whoever made this wanted it to last for centuries. Look—every time the ground dips, the trail jumps to a rock ledge. No erosion. Every time the brush gets thick, it detours to a windbreak, so you don’t leave a visible swath. They used the landscape as camouflage.”

Chloe beamed, delighted. “It’s like stealth technology, but for history.”

At the third gateway, the path nearly vanished. Here, the pines grew in a solid wall, and the slope broke off into a mess of boulders and deadfall, each obstacle more discouraging than the last. The compass needle spun lazily, then steadied—not forward, but sideways, pointing directly at a seam in the stone that from any other angle looked impassable.

Chloe tilted her head. “Maybe we’re supposed to go off-trail?”

“I think we are,” Maya said, already scrambling up the first rock shelf. “Just don’t lose your footing.”

They navigated the seam, moving laterally along the slope, the ground dropping steeply to their right and the wall of pine pressing hard on their left. At one point, Maya felt the hair on her neck stand up—a rustle in the trees, the click of a pebble. She looked back and saw nothing, but the sense of company persisted.

“You feel that?” she whispered to Chloe.

“Yeah,” Chloe said, not at all play-acting. “It’s like we’re being watched, but not in a creeper way. More like...a test audience.”

Maya grinned, even as her breath burned in her chest. “Hope they like what they see.”

The seam ended at a narrow shelf that ringed a hidden basin. Inside, the temperature dropped a solid ten degrees, and the frost on the needles was thick and untouched. The center of the basin was ringed with saplings—impossibly young for this altitude—and in the dead center, set upright like a lost chess piece, was a single stone obelisk. No sign, no inscription, just a hand-shaped rock, pale against the dark soil.

“Stage three boss fight?” Chloe offered, voice low and reverent.

Maya knelt, brushed the frost from the base, and found—yes—another marker. This one was metal, a bent tag stamped with the outline of a spiral. She recognized it from old survey photos: a Spanish “eye” symbol, meant to confuse anyone who tried to follow without the right key.

She photographed it, careful to catch the angle of sunlight on the stamp. Chloe filled a page in her sketchbook, even adding a dramatic swirl of wind around the obelisk for effect.

They ate a quick snack in the shelter of the basin, the silence so complete it bordered on sacred. When Maya checked her watch, she saw it was past eight. The sun had cleared the eastern peak, but here, in this hollow, it felt like dusk.

Chloe found a patch of sunlight near the edge of the basin and flopped down, staring at the sky. “Did you ever think we’d get this far?” she said. “I mean, actually find something nobody else has?”

Maya lay down beside her, letting the frost wet her sleeves. “I hoped,” she said. “But it always seemed like it belonged to someone else. Like we were just spectators.”

“Not today,” Chloe said. “Today, we’re the main characters.”

They rested a few minutes more, then packed up. The trail from the basin was even fainter than before, but the compass was hot as a mug of tea in Maya’s hand, the needle trembling with anticipation.

They climbed to the next ridge, this one bare and windswept, the valley opening below in a patchwork of gold and blue. From here, the “official” trail was visible in the far distance, a parade of neon jackets winding along the prescribed path to the Vanes’ dig site. Chloe pointed, her eyes squinted against the glare.

“Look at them, all marching to the wrong ending,” she said. “That’s the studio version of the story. Ours is the director’s cut.”

Maya snorted, then caught herself, not wanting to ruin the mood. She felt giddy, almost weightless, despite the hours of hiking and the weird, growing sense of being observed.

“You still feel it?” Chloe asked, without looking over.

“Yeah,” Maya said. “But it’s different now. Like, whatever’s watching us wants us to keep going.”

A wind kicked up, sharp and mineral, carrying the scent of pine resin and cold stone. Below, the line of hikers seemed almost trivial—tiny, bright, and utterly oblivious to the secret running just out of sight.

Maya checked the compass. The needle had gone rigid, pointing straight into the next rock formation, a black outcrop that looked like the back of a giant’s hand breaking through the ground.

Chloe, who’d finally caught her breath, punched her shoulder. “Ready to see what’s next?”

“Absolutely,” Maya said, hoisting her pack. “Let’s go show the mountain what we’re made of.”

They set off, laughing a little, each step now a promise to the story that had, for once, chosen them.

The climb was brutal in the way only high desert climbs can be—air thinner than decency, sun melting the last shreds of cloud from the sky, every step turning ankles and hearts. Chloe and Maya kept their heads down, taking turns setting pace. The higher they went, the less the forest looked like a forest and more like the memory of one—stunted pines clawing for purchase, boulders flecked with lichen the color of dried mustard, wind singing a lonely harmony through every crack.

By noon, they’d reached a plateau, a ledge perched over the sweep of the whole valley. Here, the wind cut sideways, and the world opened up in all directions. Chloe stopped, hands on knees, gasping and laughing at the same time. “I feel like we should get a patch for this,” she panted. “Something that says ‘I Survived the Mountain’s Existential Ladder.’”

Maya dropped her pack and rotated her shoulders. “We’re not done yet. The compass says the next marker is close, but not obvious.”

She checked the needle—it was glowing warm again, more an extension of her hand than an instrument. The arrow pointed, unwavering, to a tumble of rocks at the far edge of the ledge.

Chloe, fueled by the promise of discovery (and two fistfuls of trail mix), scrambled ahead, calling back, “Race you to the evidence!”

The outcrop looked unremarkable, but as Maya approached, the details sharpened. There was order in the chaos: a double row of stones forming an ancient stair, barely visible beneath centuries of dust and dry grass. The steps were worn concave, as if a thousand cautious feet had shaped them. Maya knelt, running her fingers along the curve, feeling the difference between human design and accident.

Chloe caught up, all bounce and breathless commentary. “Oh my god, this is—this is like the Mines of Moria, but with less orc and more sunburn.”

Maya pointed to a shallow groove running perpendicular to the steps. “See this? It’s a channel. I think they used it to drain runoff—keep the stairs from washing out every spring.”

Chloe crouched beside her, letting the realization settle. “That’s genius. I mean, that’s actual engineering.”

“Exactly.” Maya’s voice vibrated with excitement. “And nobody would build this just for fun. There’s a reason for it, a destination worth the effort.”

They climbed the steps, following the faint compass needle and the way the stone led naturally up, around, and through. At the top, the path narrowed, bordered on one side by a drop-off and the other by a vertical face of rock. Here, the sun hit just right, turning the stone to a blinding white and forcing their eyes to squint.

Chloe led the way, shielded by her ski hat. She moved slow, pausing every few feet to tap the ground with her boot, as if testing the reality of it.

Then, as the path curved out of the wind, the world stilled. Everything—the chitter of birds, the creak of trees—faded until only their breathing remained. Ahead, a wall of stone jutted out, smooth as a page and striped with the orange lichen Chloe had dubbed “mountain tiger

stripes.” Maya reached the wall first, hands trembling with the certainty of discovery.

The face wasn’t just smooth. It had been worked—planed flat by hand and tool, then marked in a pattern so faint it was nearly invisible. She traced the grooves, which formed a deliberate arc, then a notch, then a triangle nested within a circle.

Chloe pressed close, shoulder to Maya’s, and ran her own hand across the symbol. “That’s not on any of the Vanes’ prints,” she whispered. “Not even in the fake ones.”

Maya didn’t answer, too busy measuring the angles with her compass, aligning the triangle with true north. “It’s an astronomical marker,” she breathed, half to herself. “Look—the triangle points to the notch, which lines up with the solstice sunrise. Whoever made this wanted to guide someone, or something, on a specific day.”

Chloe’s eyes widened. “Like a treasure map?”

“Or a calendar. Or a warning. But definitely not random.”

For a long time, neither said anything. They just stood there, side by side, tracing the groove of the carving, letting their bodies cool in the shadow of the wall.

It was Chloe who broke the spell. “You realize what this means, right? We have proof. Actual, irrefutable proof. Not just ‘oh, maybe the story is true,’ but ‘here’s the chapter nobody ever read.’”

Maya nodded, feeling the heat of the sun and the warm press of the compass against her palm. She fished her phone out and took a dozen photos, making sure to catch every shadow, every ridge. Then she unspooled her measuring tape, recording the dimensions, the angle, the elevation.

Chloe set up a page in her sketchbook, drawing the symbol in three different versions: the archaeological dig site sketch, the “fantasy map” version, and a comic-book panel showing the two of them discovering it.

When Maya was done measuring, she let herself take in the moment—not as a scientist, but as a person. She looked up, watched the sunlight creep across the stone, and tried to picture the people who had carved this, who had chosen this spot out of the entire mountain.

She turned to Chloe, and for once, the words didn't come easily. "I think the mountain wanted us to see this."

Chloe nodded. "I think it's been waiting."

They sat, backs against the cool stone, and shared the last of their water and a melted chocolate bar. The high-desert quiet returned, but now it felt companionable—a third presence in the shade, proud of their discovery.

A shadow flickered overhead, and Chloe pointed at a bird perched on the ridge, head cocked as if evaluating them. "Is that our guardian?" she joked.

Maya smiled. "I'll take all the guardians we can get."

They lingered as long as they dared, letting the story soak into them, into the record. Before they left, Chloe stood and said, "We should do something. Like, I don't know, mark the moment."

"Without wrecking the evidence," Maya warned.

"Of course," Chloe said, already unzipping her pack. She pulled out a folded bandana, bright blue with gold spirals, and tied it around the base of the stone stair. "If anyone else ever finds this, they'll know we were here."

They started the hike down, every step lighter than the last. The compass, tucked away, felt content, its heat a steady reassurance in Maya's pack.

The last thing Maya saw, before the trail vanished into the trees, was the blue bandana flapping in the wind—a signal, a story, a promise that secrets could be shared, if you were just stubborn enough to look.

Below, the "official" trail sparkled with the press of tourists and the distant echo of the Vanes' show. But above, on the ledge, a new chapter had been written—one that belonged to the mountain, and to the girls who'd dared to listen.

They never once looked back.

fourteen

the broken rope

MAYA SHOULDERED the rope bag and edged out onto the lip of the ravine, boots crunching on a frost so fine it looked painted by hand. The mountain had been gentle with them all morning, but here—at the drop—they met the first true frown in the landscape: a gash in the earth, thirty feet at its deepest, narrow at the top but flaring out in a weird parabola as it swallowed light and sound.

She and Chloe stood, arms folded, just outside the blast radius of the drop. Behind them, the wind splayed the treetops in nervous semaphore, and Maya tried not to think about the number of internet videos that started with someone saying, “Should be fine,” before a snap and a yelp and a blackout.

Chloe balanced on a split granite boulder, scanning the ravine like she was casting for extras in an action movie. “If we were in Star Wars,” she said, “this would be the trash compactor scene. Only instead of garbage, it’s just doom and, like, a million tiny pine needles.”

Maya traced the ancient handholds—worn smooth, spaced in not-quite human intervals—down the north wall. In some places, the stone looked as if it had been gouged by chisels the size of baby arms, then eroded to the barest suggestion of grip by three centuries of rain and ice. There were places where the old miners—or whoever—had left black scorch marks, maybe from torches, maybe from failed experiments. Every inch was a catalog of violence and stubbornness.

"It doesn't look so bad from here," Chloe said, voice strained by the effort to sound casual. "Maybe we don't need the rope."

Maya didn't answer. She uncoiled the store-bought climbing line, tested the sheath with a thumb, then gave it a hard, angry tug between her fists. It flexed, the core just stiff enough to inspire confidence. She'd read every warning label twice and watched four how-to videos the night before. Still, there was a part of her that believed the best safety measure was to expect failure as the default.

She looked at Chloe, who was squinting at the sun. "Want to anchor it?"

Chloe nodded and circled behind the old pine at the lip, fingers scrabbling for a spot to wedge the rope. "Do you think it's better to go high, like, up in the crook, or low where it's thickest?" she called.

"Low," Maya answered. "But wrap it twice. That's what the guy at REI said."

Chloe executed a complicated ballet of rope, pine bark, and body weight, then tested the anchor by putting her full weight on the harness end. The tree groaned in a way Maya didn't love, but the rope held.

"Okay. Rigged and ready," Chloe said, a nervous energy making her bounce on her heels. "Should I go first, or...?"

"I'll go," Maya said, voice clipped but not unkind. "You can coach me down, then follow."

Chloe handed her the climbing gloves—thin, battered leather, the kind you'd buy at a farm supply, not a mountaineering shop. "For dramatic effect," she said, and wriggled her eyebrows. But her hands were shaking.

Maya shucked her pack, then triple-checked the harness she'd built from a jury-rigged webbing set and two borrowed carabiners. The hardware all passed the stress tests. If it didn't, at least the dirt below was soft.

She looked at the drop—vertical for eight feet, then an angled slide to the first landing, where the ancient handholds started. Below that, a shelf, then darkness, then a final sprawl of ferns and loam at the bottom. If you fell the whole way, it wouldn't kill you. Probably.

Maya didn't pray, exactly. But she took a moment to mentally list

the things she liked about life—sheepdogs, unbroken bones, the way Chloe made everything sound like a movie—and then she swung over the edge.

The first two feet were easy. Her boots found purchase, the gloves bit the rope, and the wall felt less like a vertical grave and more like a playground designed by a lunatic. The next two feet, the stone got slick, and she had to pivot her hip to keep from scraping down the wall like a cheese grater. Chloe coached from above: “Nice form! You look like you’ve done this before!” Maya wanted to laugh, but her teeth were clenched.

At the first ledge, Maya stopped to catch her breath. She looked up; Chloe was a haloed outline against the sky, shading her eyes, grinning. “Piece of cake, right?”

Maya, panting, managed a nod. “You’re next.”

Chloe called back, “Don’t rush me! I’m savoring the drama!”

The next phase was the traverse—a sloped section where the hand-holds zigzagged left, then right, like someone had installed a cruel version of monkey bars. Maya checked the rope, then eased onto the old notches, moving hand-over-hand. Each grip was different: some a perfect bowl for her palm, some only a memory of grip, others cold, sharp, and waiting for a mistake.

It was halfway across that the first problem started. A soft popping sound, almost too faint to notice, echoed up the line. Maya stopped, heart thundering, and looked down.

The outer braid of the rope had begun to fray, a cluster of white fibers stretching apart like snapped dental floss. She took her weight off it, clutching the rock face, then gave a gentle bounce. The rope held, but the popping continued—now sharp, rapid, a staccato warning.

Above, Chloe must have heard it. “Is that...is that the rope?” she called, voice thin with panic.

“Maybe,” Maya said. “Just—give me a sec.”

She tried to move faster, but the next hold was slicker than oil. She shifted, her boot slipped, and she dropped six inches, all her weight suddenly on the rope. The popping went from a soft threat to a clear, loud “this is bad” noise.

Chloe's face appeared over the edge, pale. "Maya? Do you want me to—?"

"Get the backup rope," Maya said, voice cracking for the first time all day.

Chloe dropped the bag, scrabbling with her hands. She threw a coil over the edge. Maya reached for it, but it was too short; she was stuck, one hand on the slick wall, one on the failing rope, feet smeared on a ledge so thin it might have been a hallucination.

The rope snapped another dozen threads, the core now visible, a plastic blue that looked like a cartoon vein. Maya clung to the handhold and looked down: twelve feet to the shelf, another ten to the floor. She ran the math. If the rope went, she'd break something, maybe just pride, maybe more.

"Maya, hold on!" Chloe yelled, and the backup rope arced down again, this time with a carabiner knotted at the end. But the angle was all wrong—Chloe couldn't throw it far enough, and Maya was pinned by the weight of her own body.

Chloe made a sound somewhere between a sob and a swear. "I can't — It won't reach!"

Maya braced herself, searching the wall for an answer. There were no answers. Only the burning in her arms and the fact that the old handholds, for all their centuries of loyalty, had never promised to save her.

That's when the intent rope showed up.

Not the one Chloe was hurling from above. This was the cord Leo had handed her outside the hardware store, a length of paracord so unimpressive she'd almost left it behind. "You never know," Leo had said, winking. "Sometimes a tool just knows what it needs to do." She'd rolled her eyes, but packed it anyway, because Leo's weird luck was a running joke in the village.

The intent rope was wedged in the side pocket of Maya's pack. Now, as the last threads of the store-bought rope gave way, it seemed to slither free—maybe gravity, maybe desperation, maybe the world deciding not to kill her just yet. It looped around her waist, catching on the carabiner, and when she jerked, expecting the whole mess to drop, the rope held. Firm as hope.

Maya blinked, dazed, then clung to the handhold while she tested the new line. It dug into her hip, but the fibers didn't budge. She swung a little, then a lot, getting a feel for the physics, and every time the line creaked, it felt more alive, like it was responding to her panic with a stubbornness of its own.

Above, Chloe's hands shook as she tried to control the rope's tension. "Are you—are you okay? Is it holding?"

"I'm fine," Maya said, and was shocked to discover she wasn't lying. She moved laterally, hand over hand, and the intent rope gave her just enough slack to find the next foothold. It seemed to know where she was going before she did, guiding her toward the safest route down.

At the ledge, Maya finally let herself breathe. Her gloves were torn, palms stung raw, but she was intact. She looked up at the top of the ravine and saw Chloe, still white-knuckled, still refusing to blink. "You're next," Maya called, and her voice was steadier than it had any right to be.

Chloe laughed, then hiccuped, then called back: "I'll take the magic rope this time, thanks."

Maya unbuckled the intent line, looped it twice around a stub of rock, and secured it. She double-checked the knot, then called, "Ready!"

Chloe swung herself over the edge with a gusto that would have been comic if it weren't so sincere. She used the handholds when she could, but when the path ran out, she let the rope do the work. It never once slipped or snagged, and even when the angle changed, the cord seemed to anticipate, tightening or relaxing to keep her upright.

Halfway down, Chloe paused to catch her breath. "If you ever write my obituary," she called, "say I died heroically, saving a friend with a rope that probably belonged to Wonder Woman."

Maya smiled, her hands finally steady. "Deal. But I'm not planning to write it today."

At the bottom, they collapsed together, backs to the wall, eyes bright with adrenaline. The ruined store rope dangled overhead, its frayed ends still twitching in the wind.

Chloe held out her hand for a fist bump. Maya obliged. "That was almost fun," Chloe said, "in a heart-attacky way."

Maya looked at the intent rope, now limp and ordinary, and said, “I think Leo’s right. Sometimes, a tool knows what it’s for.”

They sat in silence for a minute, the cold stone soaking through their jeans, but the fear had drained away. The world above was all light and safety. Down here, it was shadow, secrets, and a stubborn cord that had decided—for today—not to let them go.

Maya stood, dusted herself off, and repacked the ropes. “Ready for the next part?”

Chloe grinned. “Do I get to lead this time?”

“Only if you promise not to monologue about certain death,” Maya said.

“No promises,” Chloe replied, but she started up the next section with a confidence Maya hadn’t seen before.

They moved forward, deeper into the ravine. The walls pressed in, the light faded, and the mystery thickened. But the intent rope trailed behind them, a line of stubborn magic linking their luck to the mountain itself.

Above, the broken store rope swayed, useless. Below, the girls moved, together, into the story only they could write.

The ledge, once Maya had trusted the intent rope enough to reach it, was barely wider than a sandwich. It was shaped like the top of a tombstone, slicked with rime, and shaded by a wind-polished fin of basalt. For a moment, Maya just clung to the wall and let the aftershocks run through her bones—then she looked up and called, “It’s okay! This rope is holding!”

Chloe hovered at the rim above, eyes wide, her bravado left somewhere in the loose scree near the top. She scrambled to the edge, knuckles white on the pine roots, then shouted down, “That shouldn’t even be possible, right? You—are you sure you’re okay?”

Maya forced a grin, but it trembled. “Come down. I’ll guide you in. The handholds are better than they look.”

Chloe nodded, more to herself than to Maya, and steeled her limbs

for descent. She had always assumed, at least deep down, that Maya would be the one to keep her alive when plans went off-script, but the image of Maya swinging in space like a broken marionette was enough to rewrite the rules, if only for today.

She checked the harness, triple-knotted the belt, then took the intent rope in both hands. It didn't burn her palm; it was just warm, like a loaf of bread an hour out of the oven. She started down, and the cord played out in little increments, feeding her enough slack to move but never more than she needed. When she faltered, it tensed; when she reached for a grip, it almost leaned her into it. She wondered if Maya was controlling it from below, but every time she called out, Maya just urged, "You're good! Keep going! Left hand, there's a notch!"

The ledge came up fast, and Chloe landed beside Maya in a tangle of knees, elbows, and gasping laughter. The two of them, side by side on the tombstone rock, took a breath and then ten more, their hearts ratcheting down from panic to the background hum of near-miss adrenaline.

Chloe's hand found Maya's, and for a long moment neither let go.

The first thing Maya did was reach for the snapped store rope, hauling it up for inspection. It was worse than she'd thought: the outer sheath peeled away in two neat spirals, and the blue plastic core had been scored, at intervals, by a razor so sharp that the cuts only revealed themselves when tension was applied.

Chloe stared at the frayed ends, then ran a shaking finger along the cleanest cut. "Did we buy a lemon, or is that—?"

Maya's face was stone. "This was done with a knife. See the angle? It's pre-cut to fail when loaded."

"Who does that?" Chloe whispered, voice tiny even by her standards. "Who cuts ropes on a trail?"

Maya shook her head, but she was already scanning the ledge for further evidence. She didn't have to look hard. In the muddy apron beside the rock was a set of boot prints—sharp, deep, almost arrogant in their clarity. They were too small for Doug, too narrow for Leo, and too stylish for any of the old-timers. Chloe recognized the pattern: the little triangle of rubber treads at the heel, the honeycomb texture. It was the

same brand the Vanes wore, the same boots Chloe had seen propped on a desk at the lodge, the same ones Saffron had Instagrammed with a hashtag about “adventure chic.”

Maya pointed. “They were here last night. Or this morning.”

Chloe blinked. “So...they wanted us to fall.”

“They were willing to kill us,” Maya said, and her tone was so flat, so matter-of-fact, that Chloe felt cold all over.

For a while, neither said anything. The world outside the ravine kept moving—wind hissing through the pine, distant calls of a jay, the faint clang of something metal in the valley below. But down here, everything was narrow and sharp and real. Chloe had always treated risk as a punchline, a prop in the play of her own life. But now, with Maya’s hand in hers and the snapped rope in front of them, it felt like the mask was off.

She let herself shiver, then met Maya’s eyes. “I guess this isn’t just a scavenger hunt anymore.”

“No,” Maya said. “But we know their next move.”

Chloe ran her other hand along the intent rope, feeling the strange, almost organic grain of it. “Good thing they didn’t count on Leo’s magic tricks,” she said. It was meant as a joke, but her voice cracked on the last syllable.

Maya squeezed her hand, hard. “We’re alive because of a prank from a mountain biker,” she said. “If I ever see him again, I’m buying him a year’s worth of Gatorade.”

Chloe managed a laugh, but it stuck in her throat. She stared at the boot prints, then at the wall above, then at the void below.

The moment stretched until it lost all sharp edges, and the two of them sat in silence, letting the mountain steady their pulse. Chloe’s mind spun in small, fast circles: the Vanes, the knife, the way the intent rope had caught Maya at the last second. She wanted to write it all down, to sketch it or monologue it or give it some kind of meaning. But the only thing that mattered right now was Maya, alive and beside her, and the way their hands fit together on the ledge.

Eventually, Maya stood, dusted the grit from her jeans, and started rigging the next section of line. Chloe helped, her hands steady now that the first terror had burned off.

They moved with care, sharing the intent rope between them, checking every anchor twice and every footfall three times. The boot prints continued along the ledge, then vanished where the trail picked up again in the next shadow.

Chloe found her voice as they edged along. "Why do you think they want this so bad? Why risk people for it?"

Maya didn't hesitate. "Because they know we're close. And they know we're smarter."

It was, in its way, the best compliment Chloe had ever gotten.

They pressed on, each step more careful than the last, the intent rope trailing behind them like a lifeline, like a promise that the story wasn't over.

Just before they rounded the bend to the next drop, Chloe stopped, pulled Maya close, and looked her straight in the eye. "Whatever happens," she said, "don't let go. Not ever."

Maya smiled, and for once, it was Chloe's turn to hold her steady.

Together, they vanished into the shadow of the next bend, the frayed rope abandoned, the intent line drawn tight, and their hearts—despite everything—light as air.

The next hundred yards narrowed into a corridor of stone, the world above receding until even the wind was just a rumor. Maya led the way, the intent rope feeding out in small, anticipatory loops from the coil at her hip. It moved with a will that was hard to rationalize: sometimes slack, sometimes taut, sometimes pulsing warm at her wrist like a live thing. Every so often, it would steer her hand a few inches left or right—at first subtly, then, as the rock got more treacherous, with all the subtlety of a sheepdog nudging an errant lamb back into the flock.

Chloe was right behind, shoes crunching on stone chips and old, dry needles. She made fewer jokes now, but when she did, they sounded as if she was auditioning for a role she desperately wanted to keep: side-kick, best friend, maybe something more. "If we die in here," she said, "I hope someone at least finds the notebook. Or, barring that, my hat. It's vintage."

"Both would survive an apocalypse," Maya answered, not out of sarcasm but because the line felt true.

A few paces further in, the walls closed tighter. The air grew cool, then cold, then so dry it seemed to wick the breath straight out of their lungs. The stone changed, too—here it was paler, more brittle, shot through with little seams of what looked like crushed bone. And that was when the first marking appeared.

It was nothing like the staged "Spanish" artifacts the Vanes had paraded for the tourists—no florid cross, no obvious iconography. Instead, it was a spiral, scored into the wall so deeply that dust had pooled in the grooves, the edges softened by a hundred freeze-thaw cycles. Beneath the spiral, a line of dots, then a triangle, then nothing.

Chloe stopped dead, holding her phone's light at a shallow angle to bring the cut into relief. "That's not on any of the maps," she said, almost reverent.

Maya ran her fingers along the spiral. The cuts were clean, the lines uniform. She took three photos, one close, one wide, then compared them to the fakes on her phone. "This one's real," she said. "Look at the wear. Look at the layering."

They pressed on, the intent rope guiding them down a shallow ramp, then a switchback so narrow Maya had to go sideways. At the bottom, the next marking: this time a cross, but crooked, bent, the arms splayed like it had been made by a child or a person in a hurry. More dots. Another triangle, but inverted.

Chloe sketched it in her journal, tongue poking from the corner of her mouth. "If we survive, I want this tattooed somewhere weird," she said.

Maya didn't answer, too absorbed in the way the symbols seemed to align. The pattern was obvious, but she couldn't say why. She took more photos, even a video for the record, then looked up and realized the tunnel was closing around them—a crack, barely shoulder wide, black at the end.

She checked the air. No wind, no odor of rot or dead animal. Just cold, and the faint metallic taste she always associated with blood or a really good science fair.

"Chloe," she whispered, "you see that?"

Chloe peered over her shoulder. "See what?"

"The wall at the end." Maya pointed. "There's light coming through. Not much, but...it's blue."

Chloe pulled out her phone, shined it into the void, then laughed in disbelief. "That's not possible, right? There's no light source."

But the light was there: faint, almost a ghost of color, but enough to tinge the rim of the crack in a way that made Maya's skin crawl and her curiosity spike.

They moved forward. The intent rope stiffened, then seemed to slacken, as if it knew the job was almost done. The girls reached the end together, standing shoulder to shoulder in the chill.

The crack in the wall was just wide enough for an arm. On the other side, a hollow—maybe an old mine shaft, maybe a natural chamber—opened in the dark. The blue glow pulsed from somewhere within, steady and unblinking, not the bounce of a flashlight or the flicker of a phone. It was more like moonlight trapped in a bottle.

Maya pulled the intent rope from her waist, knotted it around a sliver of stone at the crack, then fed the line through. It wriggled in, as if eager, and vanished into the dark. She hesitated.

Chloe, to her credit, didn't mock the pause. She just squeezed Maya's elbow. "If it's an alien, I hope it's friendly," she whispered. Then, before Maya could answer, she pushed her phone through the gap and took a burst of photos.

They waited a heartbeat, then another. Maya pulled the phone back and flipped through the shots. At first, it was just a blur—dust, the edge of the rock, a hint of blue—but in the last frame, the intent rope was lit up like a wire in a toaster, and beyond it, something reflective and bright, half-glimpsed in the lens flare.

"I think we found it," Maya said, though she wasn't sure what "it" was.

They widened the crack as best they could, scraping their knuckles, pushing with boots and bone. When they finally got through, the space beyond was much larger—a round chamber, hollowed out and black as the inside of a smoker. On the far side, the source of the blue: a thin column of water, dropping from an unseen fissure and splashing onto a

shelf of stone. Where it hit, the rock glowed with a faint, shimmering glaze, like a fairy tale version of frost.

The intent rope ended at the edge of the pool, its tip fused to a crust of minerals. Maya touched the water; it was so cold it burned, and her finger came away coated in a dusting of blue-white powder.

She looked at Chloe, whose face was all awe and disbelief. "Is it real?" Chloe asked.

Maya nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She dipped her phone in, careful, and caught a video of the water spiraling and the way the blue light bled into the darkness.

For a while, neither said anything. Then Maya did what came natural: she started to sample. She scraped the powder, filled a vial, even scooped a bit of the water into a plastic bag. Every test she'd ever run in her life felt like it was leading to this—an impossible phenomenon, a mystery with no clear rules.

Chloe, meanwhile, kept sketching, her hands frantic to record every shadow and curve.

Eventually, Maya found her voice. "You were right," she said. "It wants us to find something. Or maybe it just wants to show off."

Chloe grinned, still breathless. "If you were a mountain, wouldn't you want to be famous?"

Maya had to laugh. "I don't know. But I think we need to tell someone."

"Doug first," Chloe said, matter-of-fact. "Then Leo. Maybe Sam. Maybe...nobody else, for a while."

Maya agreed. She packed the samples, took another set of photos, then helped Chloe loop the intent rope around her waist. Together, they backed out of the crack and into the corridor, the blue light fading behind them, but the memory of it burned into their retinas and bones.

They retraced their steps, the intent rope never once snagging or slipping, almost eager to guide them home.

As they climbed the last incline, Chloe paused, squinting into the sky above. "Did you notice," she said, "that the air feels different now? Like the whole mountain is...watching us?"

Maya felt it, too—a charged hush, an expectation. But instead of fear, she felt, for the first time, a kind of welcome.

She took Chloe's hand, and together they finished the climb, the intent rope slack in their wake, the world above waiting for the story only they could tell.

Behind them, in the deepest part of the mountain, the blue light kept glowing. And in front of them, the future opened wide, every step a new secret, every breath a new beginning.

fifteen

the secret cache

MAYA AND CHLOE took the last five feet of the climb on hands and knees, their lungs raw with cold and the taste of iron. The ravine's bottom was nothing like the surface—down here, the air dripped, slow and patient, and every footstep sent up a little shudder of water from the mats of moss and flattened pine needles. Maya's boots left a print, filled instantly with cold, and Chloe followed, holding the "Intent" compass as if it might bite her.

The world narrowed to the beam of Chloe's headlamp, every stone spattered and shining, each trickle from above catching the light like a nerve.

"You still with me?" Maya asked, voice gone thick.

Chloe thumbed the compass, watching as the needle spun its last lazy arc and fixed hard, pointing toward the cliff face just ahead. "You won't believe this," Chloe whispered, "but I think the mountain wants us to go through the wall."

Maya wiped her nose on her sleeve and closed the distance, boots grinding on the shifting, wet gravel. She set a palm to the spot the needle indicated: just a slab of rock, mottled grey, veins of something black and shiny running through it. She pressed—nothing. She looked for a keyhole, a seam, even the smallest nick that would give away a passage. Nada. The compass warmed in her palm, as if urging her to be smarter.

Chloe moved beside her, headlamp ringed with condensation. “Maybe it’s symbolic?” Chloe said. “Like, the wall is our own limitations, and we’re supposed to blast through with the power of friendship and snacks.”

Maya snorted, but the wall wasn’t joking. She ran her fingers higher, searching for a catch, until a ripple of cold told her the truth: the wall wasn’t a wall. It was a double layer of basalt, cracked vertically by centuries of frost and thaw, and what looked like solid stone was only a thin veneer over a seam as subtle as a pencil line. Maya tapped it, and the sound came back hollow.

She traced the seam down, past her knees, all the way to the gravel floor, and found a small, smooth handhold chipped into the base. It wasn’t natural; someone had cut it centuries ago. She curled her fingers in, and gently—not hard, not like the movies—pulled sideways. The seam widened, just a hair.

Chloe gave her a sidelong grin, “Should I say ‘Open Sesame,’ or would that be overkill?”

“Try it,” Maya said, already bracing her feet for more leverage.

“Open—” Chloe said, and then the stone gave a low, wet pop, sliding inward by the width of Maya’s shoulders.

Beyond was nothing at all, only the memory of blackness.

They looked at each other, both smiling now, the kind of smile you get just before the drop on a roller coaster.

Maya turned off her headlamp. The black was absolute. “Okay. One at a time.”

“I’m not scared,” Chloe said. “I just want to see if it eats you first.”

Maya went in, sideways, her pack scraping and her elbows leading. The world closed around her, the rock cool and unyielding, but the seam was just wide enough to allow movement if she went slow and kept her breath. At the midpoint, the seam bent left, then abruptly widened into a pocket of still, musty air.

Chloe’s voice, echoing behind her, said, “You’re good? You didn’t get stuck and have to eat your arm or anything?”

Maya answered by tugging the intent rope, sending a dull vibration back through the stone. “I’m through. It’s bigger in here.”

Chloe’s turn took less than half a minute, but she filled it with a

running commentary: “If I die, I want a shrine in the Country Store,” and “Tell my story in a way that makes me sound taller.” Then, with a grunt and a pop, she tumbled into the space with Maya.

They stood in a shallow vestibule, no bigger than the hardware store’s stockroom, and let their headlamps play across the walls. The air was thick with the smell of wet wool and an undertone of something sharp—old metal, maybe, or the slow breath of a closed-off place. The ceiling arched, irregular and high, and the floor sloped away into the mountain.

“Musty, but not deadly,” Chloe said, inhaling. “This is better than any haunted house.”

Maya’s lamp picked out the marks on the rock: not scratches, but careful lines—surveyor’s marks, maybe, or a tally of days. She shot a photo for the record, the flash turning Chloe’s shadow into something huge and hunched. The ground underfoot was pocked with old boot prints, some newer, most so ancient they looked like rumors.

Chloe eyed the passage ahead. “I bet you a week of chores there’s a secret tunnel in that direction.”

“Not taking that bet,” Maya said, her heart already beating faster. “But let’s find out.”

They moved together, step for step, the intent rope now just a comfort at Maya’s wrist. The headlamp beams jittered with their movement, bouncing off the walls in a weird, alive pattern. At one point, Maya thought she saw a glint of something red in the wall—a vein of iron, maybe, or a fossilized drop of blood—but when she looked again, it was gone.

The air grew colder as they went deeper, and the dampness turned the stone slick. Once, Chloe slipped, and Maya caught her by the sleeve before she could sprawl. “Thanks,” Chloe breathed. “If I die here, at least I’ll die with style.”

The tunnel narrowed, then widened, then at last, in a twist that felt more intentional than natural, opened into a space that swallowed the beams of both their lamps. The walls retreated, the floor leveled, and the sound of their breath came back doubled, tripled, like a choir.

For a moment, they stood silent, just listening to the echo of themselves.

Then Chloe whispered, "I think this is it."

Maya checked the compass, which was no longer warm but pulsing faintly in her palm. The needle didn't spin; it lay flat, aimed straight at the far wall.

They edged forward, side by side, until the lamps caught something impossible.

On the wall, carved with infinite patience, was a map. Not a map of trails, or of mines, but of stars—constellations, crowded and overlapped, with each star marked by a tiny, hammered-in nail. There were symbols beneath, some they recognized (the North Star, the sickle of the moon), but others entirely foreign.

"Holy...crows," Chloe whispered. "We found the real thing."

Maya reached for her phone, but her hand shook so hard the first three photos blurred into blue-and-white noise.

Chloe found her journal and, with the steadiness of someone who'd spent years sketching under pressure, started to copy the map by hand.

Maya traced the line of the compass needle to the wall, then stepped closer, squinting at the symbols. One, near the bottom, had been chipped away—recently. The dust of the wound still lay at the base. Maya frowned. "Someone was here. Not long ago."

Chloe stopped drawing. "Do you think it was the Vanes?"

"Has to be," Maya said, kneeling to examine the dust. "But I don't think they found what they were looking for."

She followed the line of the stars up, searching for a clue, then paused. There, at head height, was a hollow in the wall. A perfect, fist-sized depression, and in it—something wrapped in oilskin.

Maya hesitated, then reached in and drew it out. It was heavy, cold, and the oilskin made her gloves slick. She peeled it open with care.

Inside, a coin. Not gold, not fake, but a disk of silver, rough and pitted, stamped with a single star. Around the edge, a ring of letters, none in an alphabet Maya recognized.

She handed it to Chloe, who weighed it in her hand, eyes wide. "You think this is the marker?"

Maya nodded. "It's a key. Maybe to the next passage."

They took photos, then replaced the coin, careful to tuck it back as they'd found it.

The air in the chamber vibrated, as if the mountain itself was waiting.

Chloe squeezed Maya's arm. "We're going to need a bigger notebook."

They laughed, quiet and breathless, then sat on the cold stone, backs to the wall, and let the discovery sink in.

Above them, the world went on. Below, the secret was safe—for now.

For a while, neither of them moved. The chamber held its breath, waiting to see what they would do with the truth. Chloe finished her sketch in silence, glancing up every few lines at the hammered stars in the wall. Maya circled the perimeter, her phone flash catching the shimmer of water beads and, occasionally, the surprise of something like quartz.

She pressed close to the carved map, letting her headlamp trace the battered depressions. "It's the Summer Triangle," she said, more to herself than to Chloe. "Deneb, Vega, Altair. Exactly like the granddads said. But this—" she ran her gloved finger along a crescent just below, "—that's not from any textbook. This is local. This is ours."

Chloe left her notebook open, tiptoed over to stand by Maya, and studied the wall. "They used the real stars as a guide, didn't they?"

"Looks like it," Maya said. She reached for her phone and flicked through the old photos her mom had sent of the sheep herders' summer camps—the old men lined up against the sky, pointing at the same patch of blue every year. "If you track these three—" she tapped each star with deliberate care, "—they form a pointer, right? And the pointer doesn't aim at the horizon. It aims at that." She let her beam settle on a faint, spiral cut, almost invisible to the naked eye.

Chloe's excitement was an electric current. "A secret within a secret. I knew it."

Maya snapped a picture, then used the side of her glove to clear away a dusting of silt. Beneath, the spiral became a pathway—each turn

lined with dots, then tiny arrows, so shallowly carved you'd miss them unless you were looking for a reason to see.

Chloe's eyes danced. "Is it a maze, or a path? Like, do we go in circles until something happens, or is it leading us somewhere?"

Maya squatted, tracing the lowest arrow to the floor. There, a scuffed groove—subtle, but deliberate—pointed to the left side of the chamber. "Let's try the path," she said.

They moved together, voice down to a murmur. The air felt thicker here, less like the crisp bite of outside and more like the inside of a bell: close, resonant, each footstep magnified a hundredfold. Maya took the lead, methodically scanning for the next arrow. She found it, then a third, always etched just above the dirt line, so shallow a casual hiker would never notice.

Chloe followed close, her own lamp sweeping the wall above for patterns. "This is unreal," she whispered. "It's like they were hiding the directions from everyone except each other."

"Maybe that's what you do," Maya answered, "when the story is too important for outsiders."

They navigated a pinch in the passage, ducking under a low shelf of basalt, then found themselves in a stubby corridor. The stone here was redder, shot through with bands of what looked like fossilized roots, and the air changed again: now warmer, closer, and tinged with a faint whiff of what Maya guessed was sulfur. Or maybe just very old sweat.

She stopped, took a careful photo, then copied the next arrow into her notebook. "You getting all this?" she called back.

Chloe, half a step behind, nodded. She had put her own journal away, as if afraid it would get contaminated by the realness of the place. "I'm going to remember every inch," Chloe said. "I want to draw it all, but I don't think even my hand knows how to do it justice."

The corridor snaked right, then down a sloped ramp so slick with condensation that Maya had to brace her palm against the wall. At the base, another chamber opened—a small one, barely big enough for the two of them to stand side by side.

Here, the markings changed. No more stars or spirals, but instead, a set of concentric circles on the ceiling, each ring notched with what looked like calendar marks. Maya blinked, then fumbled for her phone's

astronomy app, aligning the notches with the solstice points. “This is—this is a clock,” she breathed. “Not a clock-clock, but a calendar. A way to tell when to be here.”

Chloe touched the wall, reverent. “So the whole mine, the legend, the gold—it was all a setup for this? For a moment?”

Maya nodded. “Or maybe just a cover. The real thing was always watching the sky.”

They both stared upward, letting the beams of their lamps intersect on the calendar. At the center, a depression no larger than a grape, its edge darkened by centuries of soot or maybe, Maya thought, a thousand fires built to honor some event.

She took another photo, then, finally, let herself look at Chloe. “We’re the first people to see this in—what, two hundred years?”

Chloe shivered, then grinned. “The Vanes are going to be so mad.”

For a while, they just existed in the moment, letting the cool air dry the sweat from their faces and the history settle in around them. Maya sat down, legs folded, and sketched the ceiling as best she could. Chloe hovered near the wall, then began to trace her finger along the arrows again, her eyes half-shut, as if listening for something deeper.

“Do you think it goes farther?” Chloe finally asked.

Maya considered. “If it’s meant to be followed, yeah. And if you wanted to hide a message for the future, you’d put it at the very end, right?”

Chloe held out her hand, this time not for comfort, but for a pledge. “Let’s finish it.”

Maya gripped Chloe’s wrist, steady and sure, and together they stood and pressed onward, following the last of the arrows into a tunnel so tight that even their whispers got squeezed into silence.

Behind them, the echo of every step, every breath, lingered. Ahead, the next secret waited, patient as the mountain.

The tunnel squeezed tighter, the air flattening with the press of centuries. At first, Maya wondered if they’d reach a dead end—a trick, a false wall, a reminder from the mountain that some secrets

should stay buried. But after a dozen careful steps, the world broke open.

They tumbled out of the throat of the tunnel into a chamber no larger than a sheepfold, but the difference in air and light was instant. Here, the walls shone in their own muted way, veins of crystal shot through the basalt, glinting like starfields under their headlamps. Chloe stopped dead, her lips parted in silent awe.

The floor was pocked and uneven, but the real miracle was the order: on a ledge to the left, bundles of leather lashed tight with rawhide; above, a neat row of objects wrapped in blackening cloth, each placed with a reverence so precise that even time had not managed to undo it.

Maya's hands shook as she stepped to the ledge. She reached for a bundle, then hesitated. "Should I...?"

"Take a photo first," Chloe said. Her voice was thin, almost afraid to rise above the hush of the place.

Maya snapped a picture, then used both hands to lift the top bundle. The leather peeled away in flakes, but inside, protected from rot and rodents, was a long, slender brass cylinder. It was heavier than she'd expected, greened with age and wound in places with silk thread. She recognized the make—a surveyor's scope, or maybe a primitive telescope.

Chloe reached over her shoulder, her own gloves trembling. "Can I?"

Maya nodded, and Chloe lifted out a smaller bundle, unwrapping the cloth to reveal a thick, squat disk of brass. The face was etched with angles, numbers, and a crosshatch of lines. Maya gasped. "It's an astro-labe," she breathed. "They brought this to—"

She couldn't finish. The thought of Spaniards, centuries before, calculating the night sky in this very spot, made her heart beat so loud she could feel it in her teeth.

Chloe found a cluster of scrolls, their ends black and crumbly but the cores intact. She eased one free, and together they unrolled it on the smoothest patch of floor they could find. The parchment was dark, almost translucent, and the writing faded. But the diagram at the top was unmistakable: a map of the local ridges, the peaks

outlined in black, and above them, the same three stars they'd seen on the wall.

Chloe smiled, then—careful, so careful—found the right page in the bundle and began to read aloud. “The celestial alignment confirms our calculations. This position will serve as the perfect observation point for mapping the heavens of the New World.”

Maya nearly fell over. She dug through the rest of the bundles, finding more instruments: a sextant with mother-of-pearl inlays, a folding quadrant, even a battered old notebook filled with tables and sketches.

“These aren’t mining tools,” she said, wonder and certainty in equal measure. “This was a scientific expedition.”

Chloe ran her hand along the inside of the chamber, finding a shallow shelf carved into the rock. In it, sealed away from the damp, were more scrolls—some in Latin, some in a Spanish so archaic Maya could only pick out every third word. But the theme was always the same: stars, calendars, the obsessive mapping of seasons and cycles.

She looked at the arrangement of the artifacts again: the bundles layered so nothing was crushed, the cloth packed to wick away moisture, even the ceramic jars lined up at the foot of the ledge. She unscrewed the lid of one, expecting dust, and found instead a lump of wax, still faintly scented after all this time.

“They left everything on purpose,” Chloe said. “Like they knew someone would come looking.”

Maya nodded. “And not for gold. For the truth.”

They sat, cross-legged on the cold floor, paging through the journal fragments and the maps. Every new find made the world outside seem smaller, less relevant. Here, in the echo chamber of the old scientists, Maya felt the tightness in her chest give way to something wild and giddy.

“This is going to change everything,” she whispered. “I mean—this proves they were here, not for conquest, but for science.”

Chloe beamed. “And you’re the one who found it.”

“No,” Maya said, half laughing, half close to tears. “We did. You saw the path. I just followed.”

They handled the rest of the artifacts with the same care,

photographing every piece, then rewrapping each one in the original cloth. When they'd finished, Maya tucked the main bundle back in its niche and paused.

"They trusted the mountain," she said, thinking of the care and order. "They knew it would keep the secret until it was time."

Chloe touched the edge of the shelf. "And the Vanes—if they even got this far—they didn't get it, did they?"

Maya shook her head. "If they did, they'd have wrecked the place, trying to find treasure."

Instead, the chamber was perfect, a sealed time capsule.

When they'd finished, they gathered their notes and made a final sweep for anything they'd missed. There was one last scroll, tucked behind the largest jar, and Chloe insisted on reading it in full. The writing was shaky, the ink faded, but the message was clear:

"To whomever finds this, know that our work was not for greed but for wonder. The heavens change, but curiosity does not. Record what you find, and let the world see that we were here, and we tried to understand."

They left the chamber as they'd found it, their packs no heavier but their hearts stuffed with the weight of centuries. At the tunnel's mouth, Maya looked back one last time, letting the moment settle.

Then she reached for Chloe's hand, and together, they stepped back into the present.

The return trip through the tunnel felt both shorter and longer: shorter, because the spell of discovery had rewired their nerves for urgency; longer, because neither wanted to leave the hidden chamber behind. They double-checked every bundle, every notebook entry, making sure the past would be as intact for the next finder as it was for them.

Maya paused at the exit, brushing the dirt from her knees, and looked back at the ledge where the leather bundles and brass glinted in the headlamp's faint circle. She memorized the arrangement—the silent

lineup of tools and journals, the way the calendar ceiling hovered above like a patron saint.

Chloe lingered, sweeping her lamp along the cracks in the floor. "You think they'll ever let us publish this?" she asked, tone half-joke and half-daring.

Maya grinned, already planning her thesis. "If we don't, we should be thrown into the ravine."

They started their slow squeeze back through the throat of the tunnel, arms and elbows scraping, the intent rope trailing behind like a loyal, exhausted pet. The air got colder as they went, the world growing less magical and more real with every step. Maya's pack clanked with vials and swabs—she'd taken only the smallest samples, careful to leave the real treasure undisturbed.

Near the pinch point, Chloe stopped short. "Hold up," she said, voice suddenly sharp.

Maya twisted to look back. Chloe had knelt by a fracture at the very base of the wall, right where the floor dipped to its lowest. She tugged at something wedged into the crack, her gloved fingers worrying at it like a bird with string.

"Is it another journal?" Maya whispered.

"Better," Chloe said, and rocked back on her heels, holding up a small leather pouch, the string tie stiff with age.

They crouched together, breath fogging the narrow space. Maya untied the knot, which crumbled, and turned the pouch upside-down over her palm.

A handful of irregular lumps dropped out—dense, dull-gold, with streaks of reddish brown running through each one. Maya caught her breath. "There is gold," she whispered, the words a benediction. "But look—" She held a nugget up to the lamp. "It's not pure. The brown is iron oxide. Hematite. That's what gives the soil the color. That's what granddad always said."

Chloe rolled a nugget between her fingers, smiling as if she'd conjured it by force of will. "If the Vanes ever saw this, they'd have a field day."

Maya nodded, slipping a nugget into a tiny evidence bag, then putting the rest back in the pouch. "But they won't. They'll keep

digging for the big vein, and they'll never understand the story right under their feet."

Chloe stood, holding the pouch against her chest like a relic. "So the legend was true, but not the way anyone thought."

"Exactly," Maya said, the word soft with wonder. "The real treasure was knowledge. A time capsule of minds trying to map the universe with nothing but patience and the night sky."

They made their way to the vestibule, where the cold and the echo of their earlier laughter returned. The seam of the rock still waited, the exit to the world above just a short scramble away. Chloe went first, boots wedged in the same slots as before, and in a minute they were both blinking in the weak sunlight, back at the bottom of the ravine.

It had snowed a little while they were underground, frosting the world with a clean new layer. The sky was open, blue, and for the first time in days, the clouds looked more like possibility than threat.

Maya slipped the cooled intent compass from her pocket. The needle floated, directionless, as if satisfied.

Chloe closed her eyes and stretched her arms to the sky. "We did it," she said, and the words felt bigger than the moment, almost too big to hold.

Maya grinned. "We did."

They started up the slope, boots crunching on the new snow, the gold nugget pouch tucked safe in Chloe's jacket and the notebook heavy in Maya's pack. Every so often, Maya caught herself turning to check that the seam was still there—that the passage to wonder hadn't closed behind them, erasing the proof of their adventure.

At the crest of the ravine, they stopped to catch their breath. The air tasted like pine and iron and a little bit of magic. The world below looked the same, but nothing about it felt ordinary.

Chloe nudged Maya's shoulder, eyes bright. "You know, I think we found the mountain's secret."

Maya nodded, her smile so wide it hurt. "And I think we're the only ones who'll ever understand it."

Chloe looked at the pouch, then at the view, then back at Maya. "Worth it?"

"Every minute."

They set off for home, the sun warming their backs, the intent rope looped around Maya's wrist as a reminder that sometimes, stubbornness and hope could literally change history.

At the edge of the trees, Chloe glanced back one last time at the hidden seam in the rock. "You think it'll still be there next time?"

Maya considered. "I think it'll wait. Just like it always has."

They walked the rest of the way in comfortable silence, the story of the mountain settled between them like a third companion.

And behind them, in the deep, cold dark, the secrets of the past slept soundly, knowing they were finally understood.

sixteen

tracking the scammers

THE FOREST WAS different after dark. It wasn't the way the air temperature dropped or how the pines seemed to fold in, one shadow at a time, until the world was all edges and absence. It was the way sound changed: their boots, which crunched and squeaked with every step during daylight, now barely whispered, as if the snow itself was in on the secret.

Maya moved first, intent flashlight clamped in her hand, thumb worrying the button even though she knew she wouldn't turn it on until the right moment. The beam had felt heavy in her pack the entire hike; now, in her palm, it thrummed like an anxious heart. Behind her, Chloe's steps had lost all theater—no fake trip, no musical narration, just the low, regular pace of someone who had run the simulation so many times there was nothing left but to execute.

They'd left the cabin just before full dark, the horizon still faintly sugared with blue. Chloe had insisted on wearing black, which made her look like she was going to a punk funeral, but Maya had gone with her standard fleece and battered cargo pants. In the dark, they both looked like moving voids, and that was good enough.

Chloe checked the watch at every break in the trees. "According to their Nevada schedule, the fraud runs happen between 7:30 and 9:00 p.m. local," she said, voice so low Maya barely caught it. "They do the

‘salt and show’ first, then stage the night-vision test for the most eager buyers.”

Maya nodded, eyes on the snow. “What time is it?”

“7:12,” Chloe answered. “Plenty.”

They crept along the ridge above the old mining camp, breath steaming, the scent of resin and iron sharp as lemon on the air. At the top, they dropped to their knees behind a slash pile of pine branches. The Vanes’ dig was spread out below—a shallow notch in the hillside, with a neat rectangle of tarps and a canvas tent glowing amber with LED lanterns. Beside the tent, a small generator rattled under a muffler can. Shadows moved across the site: Victor and Saffron Vane, unmistakable even at a distance, plus two helpers. One was all bulk and beard, the other just a dark outline with a long ponytail. They were moving boxes—plastic tool bins and five-gallon buckets—off the back of a black pickup.

Maya set her phone on silent, then took the tripod from her bag and clipped the phone to it. She checked the sightline, then started the camera rolling. Chloe, for her part, had brought an actual notepad, the kind with perforated pages and a faux-leather cover. She scribbled quick notes in a shorthand only the two of them would ever understand.

“You’re sure they can’t see us?” Maya whispered.

Chloe snorted, amused. “Their night vision is for the money shots, not the real world. Besides, we’re upwind and camo’d by the world’s ugliest pine nest.”

Below, Victor Vane clapped his hands and gestured for the helpers to gather. He launched into a speech—Maya couldn’t hear every word, but the rhythm was classic con man, all rises and pauses and gestures designed to fill a lens. Saffron circled, checking the boxes. She wore a white parka that caught the lantern light like a film negative.

Maya checked her phone. Already recording. She considered zooming in but decided against it—digital zoom was a lie, and she wanted to keep everything crisp for the sheriff.

“Ready to sweep?” Maya asked, nodding to the intent flashlight.

Chloe hesitated, then gave a thumbs-up, her gloves making the gesture cartoon-huge.

Maya thumbed the intent flashlight. It clicked, but instead of a

normal LED glare, the beam came out as a ghostly, diffuse cone. It had an afterimage, a sort of ghost-shadow, like when you stared at a bright light and then blinked. She swept it across the edge of the site, careful not to catch the tent or the people.

Instantly, the snow lit up with a lattice of footprints, all sizes and depths. Not just from the Vanes and their team, but a tangle of overlapping paths leading out from the mine entrance, through the woods, and back again. There was a patch of flattened ground with no visible disturbance in regular light, but under the intent beam it flickered with the memory of something heavy being dragged. Maya swept back and forth, noting every shift in shadow, every print.

She whispered, "It's like the snow remembers."

Chloe grinned. "Ghost CSI. Take a video of the sweep, too."

Maya set her phone to record in her other hand, panning slowly as she walked the beam along the perimeter. It was easy to see where the helpers had made trips to the truck, but what fascinated her most was the mass of older, partially melted tracks. They led to a stump thirty feet upslope, then stopped dead—no return prints. She made a note to check it in daylight.

They spent ten minutes like that: Maya scanning with the intent flashlight, Chloe alternating between scribbling and taking quick phone photos whenever something interesting showed up. At one point, they watched Saffron Vane step into the tent and emerge with a gleaming metal canister. She set it beside the generator, then opened the lid, revealing a set of smaller vials and a rack of test tubes.

Chloe's pencil froze. "They're doing the chemical prep now. This is the 'evidence salt.'"

Maya watched as Saffron poured a viscous, honey-colored liquid into a shot glass and handed it to Victor, who sniffed it theatrically before dumping it into the snow near the mine entrance.

"They want a reaction," Chloe whispered. "It'll turn the snow gold. Instant proof for the Instagrammers."

The helpers moved to the mouth of the mine, one carrying a steel rod, the other a plastic sieve. Victor supervised, arms crossed, the very model of a man in charge.

Maya aimed the phone, zooming in as far as she dared. "They're going to bury the 'finds' for tomorrow," she said.

"Classic," Chloe muttered. "Plant the gold tonight, dig it up tomorrow with the whole world watching."

Maya took a still from the video and sent it, in real time, to the shared "VaneWatch" folder she'd set up with Doug and Leo.

Below, Victor produced a gold bar, or what looked like one, from a zippered case. He passed it to the bearded helper, who buried it in a shallow hole right next to the surveyor's flag.

Chloe tensed. "If we could get close enough, we could swap it for the real stuff. Or, like, a Snickers bar. Imagine the look—"

"Too risky," Maya whispered. "Tonight is just recon. We get everything we can, then call it in."

They watched for another half hour, fingers frozen, the only warmth the hum of adrenaline. The helpers cycled through, digging a few more holes, then packed up and retreated to the tent. Victor walked the perimeter with a flashlight, but never looked up. Saffron checked her phone, then gestured for everyone to come inside.

Maya and Chloe waited until the generator noise died, then packed their own gear and slithered back from the ridge.

"You got enough?" Maya whispered.

Chloe flipped her notebook shut, smiling with fierce satisfaction. "We have everything. And if they deny it, we'll be ready for the live stream tomorrow."

Maya smiled, even as her jaw ached from the cold. "Let's go home."

They melted back into the woods, the intent flashlight illuminating only the path in front of them. But as they walked, Maya glanced back over her shoulder, just once, and caught the faintest afterglow of all the footprints, crossing and recrossing in the snow—a memory of every secret the mountain had ever seen.

She squeezed the flashlight, certain for the first time that they were going to win.

They picked up the pace, never once looking back again.

When the girls circled back, the mine site was almost theatrical in its perfection. Every prop had its place, every actor hit their mark, and the tented canvas glowed with a pulse that felt, even from a hundred yards, like the stage-light heartbeat of a show about to start. If you looked quick, you might believe it—a genuine archaeological dig, late-shift work under the stars. But Maya and Chloe were past believing.

They took up position behind a boulder closer to the action, crouched low and careful not to silhouette themselves against the open snow. Maya re-checked her tripod, the phone lens aimed straight at the dig. Chloe had switched from notebook to voice memo, holding her phone as close to her mouth as she dared and whispering a running commentary for the “future docu-series.”

Below, Victor Vane strode the site with a director’s precision, arms wide, every gesture radiating the confidence of a man for whom the world was just a set to be arranged. “All right, people, let’s make it beautiful. Tomorrow is our finale, and the world is watching,” he said. Even the helpers seemed infected by the pace: the bearded one (who Chloe dubbed “Beardo, Second Lead”) lugged a bucket of what looked like rock chips, while the ponytail helper set about planting survey flags in a winding trail up the slope.

Maya watched, eyes narrowed. The helpers didn’t just scatter the chips; they tamped them into hand-chiseled grooves along the open face, dusted the seams with something from a squeeze bottle, then polished the surface with a rag before dusting the whole patch with snow. The pattern matched the “evidence” from the Vanes’ other sites: a breadcrumb trail of staged anomalies, waiting for a camera and a hungry believer.

“You seeing this?” Maya whispered.

Chloe, giddy, whispered, “It’s perfect. It’s every bad reality show rolled into one. They even have a continuity guy.” She pointed to Saffron, who checked each flag and took a photo before letting the helpers move on.

But Saffron was busy with more than documentation. She’d set up a portable forge—Maya recognized the type, a propane “micro-kiln” meant for jewelry work. From her tote, she lifted a lined tray of what, in

the right light, looked like authentic Spanish coinage, but Maya's phone caught the telltale mold marks on every edge.

Saffron heated the pieces, then used a clamp to dunk them in a vat of liquid—probably the sulfur compound Maya had identified in the kitchen last week. Steam rose in quick, angry bursts. Saffron fished the metal out, blotted it dry, then checked the color against an image on her tablet. When satisfied, she'd hand the coin off to Victor, who gave it an approving nod, then dropped it into a velvet pouch.

"Those are going in the next 'discovery' video," Chloe said, glee barely contained.

Maya zoomed in, getting a clear shot of Saffron's tablet. Onscreen, an open museum database showed side-by-side images of colonial coins—Vane's latest batch was a dead ringer, down to the fake nicks and "weathering."

Saffron moved to a work table and took up a fine-point engraver, the kind hobbyists use for dog tags or keychains. She etched the cooled coins, referencing not just the tablet but a printed stack of "authentic" markings, probably screen-shotted off a history subreddit. Each motion was deliberate and unhurried—a forger's patience, not a scientist's curiosity.

"Look at her technique," Maya whispered. "No hesitation. She's done this a thousand times."

Chloe was shaking, whether from cold or adrenaline she didn't know. "This is the best TV I've ever seen."

The helpers brought the next round of artifacts to the mine mouth—this time, brass ingots shaped like the gold bars from the Vanes' promotional reels. Victor handled each one with gloved hands, holding it up to the lantern for the full dramatic effect before laying it gently in the dirt. "We want it to look natural, boys. Like it's been waiting here since the dawn of time."

"Or since lunch break," Chloe muttered, scribbling a note.

As Victor conferred with his team, Maya turned the intent flash-light back on, careful to keep the beam low. She swept it along the base of the site, the old blue shimmer illuminating seams and shadows the regular light missed.

Instantly, the outlines of three hidden “caches” appeared—sections of the ground ringed in a faint, iridescent haze. One was under a fake rock; another was buried in the base of a pine stump, the third in a plastic storage bin camouflaged with a scatter of leaves. All three were marked with faint tape, barely visible unless you knew to look.

Maya nudged Chloe and pointed. “They’re stashing something.”

Chloe flipped to video mode on her own phone, getting a shot through the scope of the intent beam. “This is like finding the cheat codes,” she said.

Maya slipped closer, careful not to make a sound. She found a notch in the rock where she could peer directly into the nearest cache. Inside, under the layer of snow and leaves, was a gallon jug of blue-green liquid—the very chemical she’d isolated in her own tests. Next to it: a stack of latex gloves, a box of Q-tips, and a blister pack of the very sulfur tablets Saffron was using at the forge.

“Direct evidence,” Maya whispered. “That’s the chemical recipe. Everything we need to prove it.”

Chloe scanned the camp, focus split between the operation and the logbook in her lap. She was in full director mode, narrating the shots for their future exposé. “Camera one, tight on Victor. Camera two, swing to Saffron on the patina. Cue the helpers, act natural—oh, you’re not even trying.” She barely whispered, but her smile was radioactive.

The Vanes staged a final run-through: Saffron loaded the coins and “historical” gold bars into a crate labeled with an elaborate logo and a batch number. Victor signed a document on a clipboard, then handed it to the bearded helper, who stuffed it into a briefcase. From their perch, Maya and Chloe could hear the pitch-perfect delivery: “Chain of custody, for the records. Everything documented, every artifact accounted for.”

“Except the real chain of custody is between two criminals and a rental truck,” Chloe said.

The helpers left first, walking to the pickup and driving off with the loaded bins. Victor and Saffron lingered, checking every detail—one last inspection for loose ends. Saffron swept the area with a high-lumen lantern, then squatted to smooth the snow over the helpers’ tracks.

Victor adjusted the “gold vein” with a trowel, then flicked a business card into the hole and stomped it down with his boot.

Maya zoomed in on the card, getting a sharp image: “VANE EXPLORATION GROUP, INVESTORS WELCOME.” The irony made her want to laugh, but she kept her mouth shut.

“Can you believe these guys?” Chloe whispered, awe and disgust in equal measure.

Maya grinned. “I almost admire the effort. If they’d put half as much work into science, they’d have tenure.”

They waited, barely breathing, as Saffron extinguished the forge and zipped it into a fireproof duffel. Victor packed up the tent in a series of brisk, angry motions. When the final lantern went dark, the mine site dropped to absolute black.

Maya checked the phone. Forty-five minutes of video. Dozens of stills. Chemical evidence, staged artifacts, dialogue. It was the case of a lifetime, the kind of thing that made you a legend in high school for at least a semester.

Chloe tucked her phone into her jacket, then pulled the hood tight around her chin. “Let’s get out of here before they do a perimeter check.”

Maya hesitated, wanting just one more sweep with the intent beam. She turned it on and aimed at the patch of snow where Victor had left his boot print. There, glowing just beneath the surface, was a blackened length of paracord—the same kind as the “safety” rope that had nearly killed her two days ago. The knot at the end was spliced with a razor, the cut edges still fresh.

She felt her stomach freeze, colder than the night.

“Chloe,” she whispered, “they didn’t just fake artifacts. They tried to kill us.”

Chloe’s breath fogged the air. She knelt beside Maya, saw the cord, the razor, the unmistakable evidence of sabotage. For a second, neither of them moved.

Then, with the silent coordination of sheepdogs in the dark, they started backing away, slow and careful. Maya packed the tripod, Chloe gathered her notes, and they inched through the underbrush, every sense alert for the crunch of a misstep or the sweep of a searching light.

Behind them, the tent was gone, the forge cold, but the mine entrance glowed faintly—a memory of fire, or maybe just the lingering energy of a night’s fraud.

When they reached the ridgeline, Maya risked a look back. She saw nothing, but the hair on her neck stood up anyway.

“We have to go to the sheriff,” Maya whispered.

Chloe shook her head. “Not yet. If we wait, we get them at the big reveal. Catch them with the loot and the money in hand.”

Maya swallowed, hard. She was tired, terrified, and more alive than she’d ever been.

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s win the whole thing.”

They melted into the trees, every step the promise of one last twist, one last scene.

And behind them, on the mountain, the truth waited, patient as ever.

The moon had climbed a little higher by the time Maya and Chloe doubled back along the deer trail, but the cold had not let up. It gnawed at their ears and stung the backs of their hands, numbing every exposed thought. Even so, the adrenaline made them almost forget the chill—at least until the next wind, which cut through fleece and resolve alike.

They moved in silence at first, just the quick crunch of boots and the soft mechanical whir of Maya’s phone, still recording in low light. When they reached the stand of old aspen, they stopped to regroup, dropping low behind the white trunks. Only then did the words come, in short, tight bursts.

“Did you get the shot of the forger’s table?” Chloe asked, breath pluming.

“All of it. Even the close-up on the sulfur,” Maya whispered.

They peeked back at the mine site. The helpers had gone, but the tent’s lantern had flared back to life. Victor and Saffron Vane were arguing, voices sharper and easier to catch now that the generator’s hum was gone.

“They’re staying,” Chloe said, almost a groan.

"Maybe they suspect," Maya said. Her stomach flipped. "Or maybe they're just greedy."

The Vanes' silhouettes moved in tight, angry circles. Victor paced, cell phone glued to his ear. Saffron hunched over a pile of papers, counting with furious jabs. Suddenly, Victor slammed his phone down on the crate and started speaking fast, his voice carrying up the slope in cold, clear bursts.

"They're pushing the timeline," he said, "because the big investor's getting cold feet. We have to prove the vein tomorrow, or we're done."

Saffron hissed, "We'll prove it. No one here knows the difference. These mountain yokels eat it up—'local color,' Spanish legend, whatever. Just make sure nobody gets in the hole before us."

Victor shot a look toward the woods. "You locked the claim line?"

"Yes," Saffron snapped. "And I booby-trapped the old approach. Anyone comes in from the back, they get a faceful of loose scree."

Victor grunted, then pulled a cash lockbox from beneath a tarp. He thumbed through stacks of bills, counting under his breath. "After tomorrow, we move to Idaho. Change the names, clean slate."

Saffron snorted. "After tomorrow, we go to the beach for a month. I never want to see another pine tree."

Maya and Chloe exchanged a look—equal parts relief and loathing. For a moment, it seemed almost over. Just a con, a classic grift. Then Victor lowered his voice, leaning in so close his shadow merged with Saffron's.

"They never found out about the rope?" he whispered.

Saffron shrugged. "If they did, they'd be dead. The kid—what's her name, the sheep girl—she's too stubborn to quit, but I saw her at the store today. No sign of injury."

Victor's laugh was low and mean. "Next time, make sure the break is clean. A rescue only makes them famous."

Maya felt Chloe's hand clamp onto her wrist, so tight it hurt. For a split second, they were both ten again, listening at the air vent while Chloe's parents argued in the next room. That same hush, that same certainty: the world could be crueler than you ever planned for.

They watched as Saffron set up a burner phone, dialing in slow, practiced taps.

"It's the buyer," Saffron said, voice back to full volume. "They want one more show of 'authentic' ore before they wire the funds."

Victor spat in the snow. "Give them the blue stuff. Say it's from a deeper vein."

Saffron started to argue, but Victor cut her off, "Just do it. We're on a clock now."

For a long minute, the world was only the sound of wind, the crackle of old snow under Maya's boots, and the hollow ache in her ribs.

Chloe breathed, "Let's go. I can't listen anymore."

But Maya hesitated. She wanted—needed—a last sweep of the site, one more check for evidence that would nail the Vanes to the wall. "You go first," she whispered. "I'll follow. Just give me two minutes."

Chloe started to object, but one look at Maya's jaw set her off. "Be quick," she said, then turned and melted into the trees.

Maya circled downwind, using the aspen shadows for cover. She crept to the edge of the clearing, then swept the intent beam in a slow arc. The moon was high enough now that the snow shone in places, but under the flashlight, the blue haze lit up every cheat and shortcut: a cache of fake artifacts half-buried by the tent, a line of plastic baggies tucked under a pile of logs, and—most damning—a small toolbox filled with identical spools of paracord, each labeled "TEST" and cut at the same razor angle as the one she'd found by the ravine.

She got it all on video, then started to back away, careful not to disturb the drift of snow by her feet. But just as she turned, a dry branch—so small it shouldn't have mattered—snapped under her heel.

The sound, in the cold air, was a gunshot.

Victor's head snapped up. "Who's there?" he shouted, and swept a flashlight across the tree line. The beam washed over Maya's jacket, catching the edge of her glove. She hit the ground, heart hammering so loud she thought it would echo.

Saffron hissed, "There! Someone's watching!"

Victor grabbed a Maglite and charged up the path, boots breaking the crust with every step.

Maya slid behind the boulder, then sprint-crawled, army-style, to the next copse of trees. Victor's light cut left, then right, then straight at her. She stopped breathing.

“Show yourself!” Victor yelled. “Or I’ll call the sheriff right now!”

Maya heard Saffron on the phone, already dialing, her voice frantic and thin.

She bolted for the shadow beyond the rocks, the intent flashlight clenched in her teeth, both hands scrambling for purchase on the ice. The beam from Victor’s light flickered past, close enough that Maya saw the whites of his eyes. She kept moving, silent, fueled by pure fear.

She reached the top of the ridge, doubled back toward the original trail, and saw Chloe waving at her from behind a fallen log, two fingers raised in the old “peace out or die” signal.

They ran.

Behind them, the beams of two flashlights lashed the night, painting every trunk and snowbank. Victor yelled for the helpers, but they didn’t return. Maya and Chloe hurtled down the slope, ducking branches, every muscle screaming. Once, Chloe lost her footing and slid twenty feet, cursing as she tumbled; Maya pulled her up and kept running.

They didn’t stop until they hit the road, a half-mile from where they’d parked the old Subaru. Only then did they let themselves breathe, gulping in the night air, lungs full of cold and something dangerously close to joy.

Chloe slumped against the car, hair wild, face flushed. “You got it?” she panted.

Maya grinned, holding up the phone. “Every last scam.”

For a long minute, they just stood there, laughing and shivering and making sure all their limbs still worked.

Chloe wiped her eyes. “You know, for a minute I thought we were dead.”

Maya shrugged, still buzzing. “For a minute, I thought it didn’t matter. But now, we burn them.”

They slid into the car, doors slamming against the night, and pulled onto the icy road, headlights off until they were out of sight.

As they drove, Maya looked in the rearview and saw only trees, silent and ancient and probably glad to be rid of the Vanes. Ahead, the moon traced their way home—a perfect, pale coin, lighting the path for the girls who had finally, truly, won.

They didn’t speak for a while, but when they did, it was the easy

talk of people who had walked through the worst together and come out the other side.

“Tomorrow?” Chloe said.

“Tomorrow,” Maya agreed.

And with that, the mountain settled back into its old, quiet secrets, content to let the new ones ride out the night.

seventeen

the trap is set

DAWN DID NOT SO MUCH ARRIVE as seep through the east-facing kitchen window, pale and unfinished. The world outside was frosted and silent, the snow holding its secrets in hard, crystalline ridges. Inside, Maya and Chloe had claimed the kitchen table as their war room: two laptops open and bleeding tabs onto the screen, five coffee mugs in a tight defensive cluster, and enough scattered printouts to papier-mâché the walls. On one end of the table, Maya hunched over a ledger page with highlighter poised, teeth clenched around the cap. Across from her, Chloe sat cross-legged on the chair, journal balanced on her knee, staring at a freeze-frame on her phone like she could will it into a confession.

The only sound was the faint clack of keys and the angry tick of the ancient wall clock. At 6:58, Maya snapped the highlighter shut and said, “We have to make this idiot-proof. Like, able-to-survive-a-senate-hearing idiot-proof.”

Chloe rotated her phone so Maya could see. “I made a GIF of Victor handing off the fake coins. If they say they never touched the evidence, this shows the exact handoff.”

Maya exhaled, half laugh and half fog. “Remind me to never get on your bad side.”

Chloe grinned, ink-stained fingers flicking between screenshots. “I

think we should open with this sequence at the reveal. Like, right after the sheriff walks in and before anyone has time to lawyer up.”

Maya rifled through the printouts, then pointed to a line on her spreadsheet. “Look at this wire transfer,” she said. “It routes through a shell LLC in Wyoming, then to Curaçao, then into a new account every two weeks. And every time, it’s just under the federal threshold for automatic reporting.”

Chloe made a face. “So they’re smart?”

Maya shrugged. “Smart is relative. They reused a password for the first three transfers. The only reason I found the Curaçao jump is because Saffron used the same email address for her Instagram influencer gig.”

Chloe leaned back, stretching arms overhead. “If this wasn’t destroying a whole community trust fund, I’d almost root for them. It’s like an Ocean’s Eleven for people who shop at REI.”

Maya set the highlighter down, the hands on the clock clicking to 7:01. “They’re running a classic exit scam. They bait the town, buy enough time with fake gold and spectacle, and then disappear as soon as the final checks clear.”

Chloe tapped her phone, eyes narrowing. “That means we have one shot.”

Before Maya could answer, a knock at the door rattled the window glass. Chloe bolted upright, but Maya just grinned and called, “Come in, it’s open!”

Mr. Winters, retired forensic accountant and neighbor for three years running, let himself in. He wore a parka zipped to the chin, a scarf so thick it could have doubled as padding, and reading glasses perched low on his nose. He carried a battered briefcase and a yellow legal pad.

He eyed the table, then nodded. “I see you’ve made progress. And a mess.”

“Progress is always messy,” Chloe said, smiling as she cleared a seat.

Mr. Winters shucked his parka and set the briefcase on the counter. “I brought coffee,” he said, “and the best danishes the Country Store had left.” He handed the box to Chloe, then took his own mug from a high shelf, a souvenir from some arcane audit conference.

Maya gestured to the ledger. “We mapped all the major transfers.

The LLCs check out, and we think the Vanes are prepping for a big withdrawal right after the gala.”

Winters took a seat, opened the legal pad, and pulled a pencil from behind his ear. “Walk me through it,” he said, voice both gentle and uncompromising.

Maya launched in, her words clipped but precise: how the Vanes seeded the rumor, how they used the staged discoveries to draw in investors, how the timing of the wires always tracked with the local events calendar. Winters listened, only interrupting to clarify a point or scribble a note. When Maya finished, he paged through her spreadsheet and whistled softly.

“Not bad,” he said. “Not bad at all. You’ve documented it more thoroughly than some of the agencies I used to work for.” He slid the laptop toward him and scanned the highlighted cells.

Chloe, who’d been arranging the photo stills into a storyboard, added, “The physical evidence matches the money trail. Every time they stage a ‘find,’ there’s a corresponding deposit from a new investor, and every investor is listed on the mailer for tomorrow’s gala.”

Mr. Winters looked up, one eyebrow arched. “So tomorrow is the payout.”

Maya nodded. “If we’re right, they’ll run the big con tomorrow, then empty the accounts. If anyone asks, they’ll blame the collapse on ‘unforeseen geological complications’ or sabotage by competitors. There’s even a draft press release scheduled on their company site for 11:59 p.m. tomorrow night.”

Winters smiled, dry as the kitchen’s breadbox. “It’s always the same story,” he said. “Just different tools.”

He turned to the ledger, pencil tapping a spot three lines down. “What about their local enablers? The attorney, the notary, the so-called geological consultant?”

Chloe shrugged. “Most of them are part-time, or they work for the country club. We haven’t found any smoking gun, but they all stand to lose face if this blows up.”

Mr. Winters circled three names on the notepad, then wrote “KEY WITNESS?” next to one. He looked at Maya. “You said you got the notary to admit they never verified the provenance?”

Maya hesitated. "Off the record, yes. But she's scared of getting sued, so unless we have something more, she'll clam up in front of the sheriff."

Chloe added, "We do have video of Saffron giving her the envelope. She tries to pass it off as a routine drop-off, but the timestamps line up with the wiring of the shell company. I think we can rattle her."

Mr. Winters made a small, approving grunt. "You girls are wasted on academia. You could have run a task force."

He stood, stretching his back, then started sketching a diagram on the notepad. "This is what we do," he said, voice shifting to teacher mode. "The Vanes are expecting to sweep the money out after the gala, yes? But there's a lag—half an hour, maybe an hour—between the final wire and the posting of the funds overseas."

Maya nodded, understanding. "A honeypot."

"Exactly," Winters said, stabbing the notepad for emphasis. "If we can time it just right, we can catch the transfer in the system, freeze it with a warrant, and force a forensic audit before they get it out of the country."

Chloe, who had started to bite her thumbnail, stopped. "How do we do that? We don't have a judge on speed dial."

Winters sipped his coffee, the steam fogging his glasses. "But the sheriff does. And if we present the evidence before the gala—clear, concise, undeniable—he can prep the paperwork in advance. We only need to convince him it's real."

He flipped Maya's spreadsheet back around, his finger running down the line of transactions. "The key," he said, "is that we have to tip the sheriff before the Vanes get suspicious. Otherwise, they'll vanish or destroy the hard drives, and we'll be chasing shadows."

Chloe scribbled a reminder on the margin of her storyboard: "D-Day = GALA NIGHT."

Maya, feeling the familiar pressure of time and responsibility, pulled up the sheriff's website. "Do we go straight to Martinez? Or can we run it through Doug and Sam at the Country Store first?"

Winters shook his head. "Doug is useful, but he's a gossip. And the Vanes have spies everywhere. No, we keep it tight. Just us, and maybe your biker friend if you trust him."

Maya made a mental note. "Leo's in the loop. He's been prepping a communications workaround so we don't get intercepted. He said to check in this morning."

Winters looked at Chloe, then Maya. "Are you both up for this? It's going to be ugly. These people play hardball."

Maya's jaw set. "They tried to kill us," she said. "They made it personal."

Chloe echoed, softer but no less certain. "And they tried to trash the mountain. They get nothing."

Winters smiled again, this time with a hint of pride. "That's what I like to hear."

They hashed out the plan, hour by hour: at 10 a.m., Maya would draft the executive summary and supporting evidence, clean and simple. At noon, Winters would run it by a friend in the DA's office, who could prep the right warrants for Martinez. By two, Chloe would stage the photo evidence for maximum impact. And at three, if all went well, they'd call Martinez and set the meeting.

At 8:13, Maya's phone buzzed, the vibration rattling the coffee cup. She swiped the screen and read the message: "Landline ready. They can't monitor it. -Leo."

She smiled and slid the phone to Winters. "We've got our secure line."

He read the message, then nodded. "Then we move fast, and we move now."

Chloe stretched her arms, as if loosening for a fight. "If this was a movie," she said, "this would be the training montage."

Maya grinned, then got to work. The day had barely started, but the adrenaline and the hunger for justice were enough to keep her going through the next forty-eight hours.

Outside, the mountain glittered in the early sun, indifferent to the chaos below. But at the kitchen table, the first cracks of victory were starting to show.

At the Country Store, the morning was a theater of ritual. The smell of fresh-brewed coffee and pine disinfectant hit first, a combination that marked every major event in Cedar Mountain history. Doug, king of the hardware aisle and mountain mythos, was already sorting through a battered cardboard box labeled “COMMUNICATIONS—BAD” in marker. He plucked out walkie-talkies in various states of battery crisis, lining them up like failed recruits for a military inspection.

Behind the counter, Sam had unrolled a giant paper map of the village, pinning it at the corners with mugs and salt shakers. She circled names in red and blue Sharpie, occasionally pausing to check a dog-eared address book. Every so often, she’d pick up the store’s landline, her voice bright and innocent as she called “trusted” locals. “Hi, Beverly? Sam here. Could you stop by before noon? We’ve got a special delivery, but it’s a need-to-know.”

In the back room, a persistent, metallic clicking could be heard. Leo, hunched over a tangle of wire and rotary phone parts, was prepping what he’d described as “the cleanest secure line north of Vegas.” Every few minutes, he’d plug in a component, dial a number, and wait for the faint echo of a connection before muttering to himself and starting over.

The place was a comfort, even with the impending disaster. Maya and Chloe stepped through the front door, blinking against the sharp contrast of sunlight and the store’s dusty yellow bulbs. Both carried evidence binders—Maya’s loaded with chemical assays and neat tables, Chloe’s stuffed with storyboarded photos, some taped and annotated, others loose and dog-eared.

Doug looked up from his comm line culling and grunted. “You got it?”

Chloe held up the binder. “We’ve got everything. More, probably.”

He nodded, wiped his hands on his shirt, and waved them over. “Bring it here.”

They cleared a spot on the counter between a display of deer jerky and a stack of seed catalogues. Chloe opened with the video stills: Saffron Vane at the micro-kiln, Victor with his gold-painted drill bits, helpers in and out of frame carrying boxes to the pickup. Doug watched

with squinted eyes, face unmoved, but his fingers drummed a steady beat on the Formica.

Maya presented the chemical breakdowns. "There's no real ore. Every 'vein' is a composite—recycled electronic gold, melted and patted into rock with off-the-shelf adhesives. They staged the aging process with sodium thiosulfate and egg yolk. I ran the same reactions in my kitchen; it's identical."

Doug's frown deepened. "You tell anyone else?"

"Not yet," Maya said. "Mr. Winters is prepping the legal angle. We wanted to bring it here first."

He grunted again—approval, maybe—then paged through the printouts. "You got the sheriff lined up?"

Chloe nodded. "He's coming by at nine. Sam's working the phone tree, getting the right people here. We don't want it to leak before the big show."

Sam, listening with one ear, hung up the phone and slid over. "I've got Beverly, Frank, and both the Cartwrights. That's four on the Town Committee and two who can talk circles around the Vanes." She leaned over the counter, peering at the chemical reports. "Is that real?" she asked Maya, tapping a photo of the test tube lineup.

"Absolutely real. I saved a few sample vials in case anyone wants to double-check the results."

Sam whistled, then smiled, half-proud, half-relieved. "You know, I thought you'd do great things in geology, but I never figured on busting a ring of scammers before you were twenty."

Chloe grinned, "We're just trying to keep up with the legends."

Doug motioned for Leo, who appeared silently from the back, carrying a three-line telephone with a tangle of orange and blue wires soldered to a power strip. "Tested and scrubbed," Leo said. "No bugs, no trace, and it runs on a closed loop. Anyone on the mountain tries to listen in, they'll get the Weather Channel instead."

Doug set the phone down like a trophy. "We'll use this to call Martinez. When it's time."

Maya watched Sam flip open her planner, running through a checklist in her careful cursive. "Is the sheriff the real deal?" she asked, quiet. "Or is he just going to blow us off?"

Sam's smile faded. "He's an import, but he's not crooked. Maybe too by-the-book, but if you hand him proof, he'll act." She eyed the clock. "He should be here soon."

They spent the next fifteen minutes reviewing the evidence, re-checking details, trying to poke holes in their own story. Doug interrupted twice, pointing out places where the Vanes might try to spin the narrative: "They'll say the gold's real, just processed weird. They'll claim it's a 'modern anomaly.' You got a way to prove them wrong, cold?"

Maya nodded. "I ran isotope ratios. The gold traces to urban e-waste, not native ore. It's a signature that can't be faked."

Doug finally let himself smile. "Good. They won't see it coming."

At 9:01, the bell over the door chimed with a force that rattled the display of antler keychains. Sheriff Martinez entered, all boots and windbreaker, every inch of him radiating the skepticism of someone who had seen too many teenagers trying to outwit the system. He paused, scanning the crowd, then nodded to Doug and Sam.

"Morning," he said, then, to Maya and Chloe, "Heard you had something for me."

Maya didn't waste time. She set the executive summary on the counter, followed by a plastic baggie with one of the fake coins, then pointed to the supporting evidence binder. "It's all there. Financials, chain of custody, chemical analysis, and video. If you need more, we can get more."

Martinez picked up the baggie and held it up to the light. "Looks legit," he said, voice even, "but that's not enough for a search. You got the source of the gold?"

Maya walked him through the isotope tests, the chain of transfers, and the timing of the staged discoveries. She finished by showing the latest wire transfer, pointing out the destination account and the history of similar scams under the Vanes' previous LLCs.

Martinez's eyes lost a bit of their skepticism. "You did your homework." He flipped to a page near the end of the binder, then tapped a cell phone number written in ballpoint. "What's this?"

Chloe answered, "It's the number Saffron calls to confirm every wire transfer. I traced it to a burner, but Leo says it routes through a

satellite node. If you catch the call in progress, you can subpoena the connection and freeze the funds.”

Martinez looked at Leo, who shrugged. “Easy,” Leo said. “Just tell me when.”

The sheriff closed the binder. “I’ll need to bring in support. No way we’ll take them down before they try to bolt.” He shot a look at Doug. “You trust your people?”

Doug’s face didn’t change. “I trust my side of the street. But you’ll want to call in Cedar City and Panguitch. Just in case.”

Sam interjected, “We have half the Town Committee coming by at lunch. If you want to do a surprise reveal, they’ll back you up.”

Martinez nodded. “We’ll do it here, then. But I need a secure line to call my guys.”

Leo picked up the three-line phone and handed it over, the cord already plugged in. “This one. Line two is direct. Nobody listening but you.”

Martinez took the phone, dialed, and paced to the end of the counter. His voice was low but urgent, and he walked through the evidence just as Maya had. When he finished, he turned back to the group, the weight of the situation settling in.

“Okay,” he said. “We do this by the book. You two—” he pointed at Maya and Chloe “—keep your heads down, don’t talk to anyone until I say go. Leo, you’re on tech. Sam, you keep the Town Committee corralled until I call them in. Doug, you’re my point on the ground.”

Chloe, trying to hide her excitement, said, “Do we get walkie-talkies, or is that just for the movies?”

Martinez smiled, barely. “You get better.” He reached into his bag and handed each of them a small wireless receiver, the kind federal agents use for surveillance. “These are live when the light’s red. You’ll wear them at the reveal, but not before.”

Leo took his apart in ten seconds, nodded, and reassembled it. “These are good,” he said. “Military surplus. Nice.”

Sam lined up the receivers on the counter, one for each principal. “It’s like Christmas,” she joked.

Maya tucked hers into her vest pocket, feeling the reassuring weight. “What time do we meet?”

Martinez checked the clock. "They're doing their final show at four. We roll at three-thirty, be in place by three forty-five. If they smell the trap, they'll run, so be early, be quiet, and don't let on."

Chloe sketched a timeline in her notebook, adding her own comic commentary in the margins. "Operation Vane Drop," she wrote at the top.

Doug grinned. "That's not bad, for a city girl."

Chloe beamed, but then caught Maya's eye, a flash of worry underneath the performance. "You think they'll really run? Like, vanish overnight run?"

Maya nodded, serious. "They have to. It's all or nothing now."

Sam patted both their shoulders. "You girls did good. Whatever happens, you'll have saved the village a world of hurt."

Maya thought of the long winter, the mountain, and the web of stories that held the place together. For once, she didn't feel like an outsider.

At the counter, Sheriff Martinez finished his call, then turned to the group. "Let's go over it one more time. When we drop the net, everyone's got a part."

The store settled into a hush, the only sound the clatter of Leo testing the comms and the scratch of Sam's Sharpie on the map. Maya watched the light outside grow brighter, reflecting off the snow and into every corner of the room. This was it—the final run, the endgame.

She looked around at her friends, her neighbors, and her unexpected partners in crime-fighting. It wasn't the ending she would have predicted, but for the first time in weeks, she liked where the story was headed.

At 10:23, the secure phone rang, and the group tensed as Doug answered.

"They're on their way," Doug said, gruff and a little proud.

Leo handed out the last receiver. "Now we're ready."

Maya tucked her binder under her arm, checked her phone, and nodded to Chloe. "Showtime," she said.

Chloe raised an eyebrow, struck a pose, and whispered, "Let's make it count."

And together, they stepped into the heart of the village, ready to see their story through to the end.

The back room of the Country Store, usually reserved for overstock and gossip, was now command central. Every surface was covered—one table with Sam’s oversized architectural plans of the Duck Creek Lodge, another with Maya’s impromptu chemistry lab, a third with open boxes of donut holes and a thermos labeled “NOT POISON.” The mood was all focus and friction, sharpened by the impending sense of now-or-never.

Sam stood at the head of the main table, her bun somehow more vertical than ever. She held a red Sharpie like a wand and, with each new idea, stabbed it at the blueprints, circling entry points, camera lines, or scribbling “BAD” and “OK” over suspiciously narrow corridors. “Remember,” she said, “nobody enters the main event hall without crossing at least two lines of sight. If the Vanes try to split up, they’ll hit one of Sheriff Martinez’s deputies at every exit.”

Doug, flannel sleeves rolled past the elbow, sat beside her with a legal pad and two-way radio. He alternated between marking who’d be in which room and testing the walkie with a bored “Check, check, over.” Every so often, he’d chime in with a tactical correction, like, “This door here sticks—always has—so if anyone’s running, they’ll get bottlenecked.”

Mr. Winters took over the end of the table with his own arsenal: not just legal pads, but a spreadsheet printout the size of a small rug and a laptop running a dizzying array of banking dashboards. He tapped a line of highlighter across the summary. “Here’s how we play it,” he said. “The moment the Vanes initiate a transfer, the system flags it, and I can freeze the wire within ninety seconds. It’s all timing.”

Chloe sprawled in the one armchair, still in her black “stage manager” sweater, knees drawn up, fielding calls on her phone and logging updates in a neon-pink journal. She double-checked the communication schedule and, without looking up, said, “Sam, if you want to run a dry run on the map, I can narrate.”

Sam nodded, and they walked through the plan: “Vanilla” guests entered through the lobby, Village Committee through the back, Leo would be in the tech booth near the A/V closet, and Maya—“You’ll be here,” Sam said, circling a spot in the front row.

Maya, for her part, manned the chemistry station: four glass vials, a stack of disposable pipettes, and two types of reagent strips. She held up a small gold sample and snapped the strip across it. “Color change in thirty seconds,” she said. “If they try to swap in a real artifact, I’ll know immediately.”

Doug eyed the gear. “Looks like overkill,” he said, but there was no bite in his voice.

“It is,” Maya said. “But I want to see their faces when it goes blue.”

Sheriff Martinez arrived with two deputies, both as big as refrigerators and twice as quiet. He laid out their game plan, circling the perimeter with his pen, then checked with Doug about backup. Satisfied, he turned to the group: “We keep it civil. If they run, we let them run—right into my guys. No heroes, no showboating.” He looked at Chloe, who saluted with mock gravity.

The room swelled with the hum of coordination: people comparing notes, radios chirping, Sam running a line of names on a yellow pad for the guest list. Doug checked the time, then the weather—snowstorm rolling in at five, which could make things complicated.

It was nearly noon when, without warning, the store’s bell gave a single, sharp ring. Everyone in the room stiffened, then went silent.

Leo, closest to the front, glided out and returned a moment later holding a gold-embossed envelope. He set it on the table and, with the kind of gravity usually reserved for bomb squads, slid it toward Maya. “Special delivery for you,” he said. “By hand. From Saffron Vane herself.”

The envelope gleamed with enough foil to trigger a migraine. Maya peeled it open, careful not to tear, and read aloud:

“Ms. Maya Orozco,

The Vanes cordially invite you to attend the Gold Discovery Gala as a respected scientific voice in our community. Your impartial perspective would lend legitimacy and gravitas to this historic evening.

Please RSVP by 2 p.m. Formal attire encouraged.

Yours in discovery,
Saffron and Victor Vane”

Chloe barked out a laugh. “They’re inviting you to crash their own party?”

Maya grinned, the kind of grin that was half adrenaline, half war paint. “I guess I’m the entertainment.”

Sam twirled the Sharpie. “You in?”

Maya held the invitation up for all to see. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Sheriff Martinez leaned back and crossed his arms, finally smiling. “Let’s bag some criminals.”

As the table erupted in high fives and final checks, Doug handed Maya a battered blue blazer (“Wear it for luck”), and Sam marked her seat on the blueprint with a star.

Outside, the sky darkened, promising a perfect dramatic backdrop for what Chloe was already calling “the Sting at Duck Creek.” Inside, the team settled in for the last run-through, the sense of belonging and anticipation so thick you could taste it.

Maya slipped the invitation into her pocket, squeezed Chloe’s hand, and thought about the mountain waiting outside, unchanged and, for once, on their side.

She looked at her friends, at the blueprints, at the weapons-grade chemistry kit on the table, and smiled.

“Let’s give them a show,” she said.

And the world, for the next twenty-four hours, was nothing but possibility.

eighteen

the reveal

THE DUCK CREEK LODGE had never looked so close to an actual ballroom. By late afternoon, every timber in the great hall was strung with fairy lights—twinkling gold that spun the snowy world outside into a distant rumor. The long tables, usually reserved for potlucks and bingo, had been draped in ivory linen and lined with crystal stemware and chargers that flashed like ice in the early light. In the entryway, a three-man string band warbled their way through a playlist heavy on Appalachian classics, and the smell of woodsmoke was nearly blotted out by whatever the caterers had brought in from Cedar City—something roasted, probably duck, plus the sharp, clean tang of spiced cider.

Chloe was the first to arrive. She'd borrowed a jumpsuit from Sam, which—while it technically counted as “business formal”—had all the practicality of pajamas and half the dignity. The rest of her outfit was thrifted from Maya's closet, plus a chunky necklace of unknown provenance. It didn't matter; in the end, she blended in perfectly with the crowd. The only real giveaways were the ink smudges on her fingers and the way she never stood still, orbiting the buffet table and making silent bets on which investor would get tipsy first.

Maya, in contrast, wore the battered blue blazer Doug had insisted on, over a white shirt with buttons so stiff they left little creases on her neck by the time she arrived. She'd paired it with plain black slacks and boots, a decision she instantly regretted as the other guests began

filtering in: locals dressed in a parade of summer wedding finery, and the outsiders in the kind of black dresses and Italian shoes that had never before been seen in Duck Creek, except maybe on a TV.

They met near the fake fireplace, both staring at the Vanes' display. The "discoveries" were arranged in velvet-lined glass cases, each one spotlighted like it was on a Sotheby's auction block: coins stacked in twos and threes, a couple of gold bars so cleanly rectangular they could have been cut that morning, even a "Spanish sword" with a filigree hilt and enough intentional tarnish to make a metalsmith sob.

Saffron Vane was already in place beside the case, a smile pasted on her face, her hair immovable and haloed by the spotlight. She worked the room with the grace of someone who'd trained for it—leaning in just close enough to listen, brushing invisible lint from a guest's sleeve, always directing the conversation back to the display.

Victor was nowhere to be seen. Chloe eyed the crowd and found him in a tight knot of men near the bar, all whiskey glasses and calculated laughter. Every so often, he'd sweep his arm to encompass the whole valley visible through the windows, as if to say: See? I've already conquered this place.

"Feels like the pilot for a reality show," Chloe whispered.

"Worse," Maya replied, scanning the crowd. "It's a finale. They want to lock it up tonight."

Chloe grinned, but it was tight. "You ready?"

Maya shrugged. "If we're not, it's too late now."

The clock above the bar ticked toward six, and a current of expectation ran through the room. The guests began to self-sort: the investors nearest the head table, the locals in clusters by the buffet, and the Village Committee in a single-file row, all with their backs ramrod straight and arms folded. The rest of the town drifted in, guided by Doug, who stood at the door and checked off names against a hand-written list.

Chloe found her place beside the small stage at the end of the room, just close enough to see the glow of the projector but far enough not to be in the direct line of fire. Maya settled at one of the front tables, notebook open but her pen tucked into the blazer's inner pocket. She watched as the Vanes made their entrance, Saffron gliding in first, Victor a few steps behind, both dressed in shades of blue so

perfectly matched they might have been grown from the same expensive fabric.

A hush fell as Victor took the stage, his microphone already hot. He flashed a perfect smile, and the string trio stopped mid-tune.

“Ladies and gentlemen, neighbors and friends,” he began, his voice smooth as the bourbon in his hand. “Thank you for joining us on this historic night. Tonight, we celebrate not just the spirit of adventure, but the community that has made this possible.”

A smattering of applause, polite but real. Victor bowed his head in mock humility, then launched into the pitch—how they’d discovered a “historic vein,” how the geological evidence was “irrefutable,” how the best experts in the state had confirmed the claim. Behind him, the projector screen lit up with a time-lapse of the dig: miners in reflective vests, wheelbarrows brimming with dirt, a drone shot swooping over the valley. Every few slides, a new artifact appeared, each one accompanied by a pop-up window with a “fun fact” about Spanish explorers or the gold standard.

Maya watched the crowd, not Victor. The investors leaned forward, lips parted. The locals whispered, but only a little, most of them caught in the spell. Saffron prowled the aisles, offering the occasional wink or knowing nod to anyone who made eye contact.

Chloe jotted in her journal, sketching the slide transitions as if to memorize them for later.

When Victor reached the part about “unlocking the mountain’s potential,” he signaled for Saffron to roll the video. A canned voice narrated the saga: “Centuries of rumor. Decades of failed attempts. But tonight, a dream realized.” The final shot lingered on a gold bar, so close you could see the fingerprints pressed into the finish.

He stepped forward. “And now, ladies and gentlemen, I’m pleased to offer you this final investment opportunity. The chance to be a part of history—not as a bystander, but as a true pioneer. The next phase will define this region, and with your help—”

He let the last words hang, milking the anticipation. A hand went up—one of the investors, a woman in a blue sequined dress. “Will you be doing a full Q&A before the offer?”

Victor smiled, as if expecting the question. “Of course! We have

nothing to hide. In fact, we've invited several distinguished community members to offer their perspective. And to answer your questions directly."

He scanned the crowd, eyes landing on Maya. "Ms. Orozco, I believe you're with us tonight?"

Maya stood, not bothering to smile. "I am."

Victor's eyes held the crowd, then flicked to Saffron. "I understand you've reviewed some of our findings?"

Maya nodded. "I have."

A second hush. All eyes were on her now, including Chloe, whose jaw had gone tight.

"Would you care to address the assembly?" Victor asked, voice even but tight at the edge.

Maya looked at the screen, then at the display cases. "I'd appreciate the use of the projector," she said.

There was a small, almost imperceptible pause. Saffron moved to protest, but Victor beat her to it, hand extended as if granting a favor. "The stage is yours," he said.

Maya strode forward, notebook in hand, and plugged her laptop into the waiting HDMI cable. The projector flickered, a moment of digital confusion, then blinked to a new slide: a chemical breakdown chart, color-coded and annotated.

She cleared her throat. "For the last several weeks, I've been analyzing samples from the so-called 'Duck Creek Spanish vein.' I used independent protocols, and cross-checked the results with a third-party lab in Salt Lake."

The chart expanded, showing side-by-side results. "What I found is that every artifact, every 'coin' and 'gold bar' produced by the Vanes' operation, shares a unique chemical signature—one that doesn't match natural deposits in this region, or anywhere within a thousand miles."

Victor opened his mouth, but Maya continued. "Instead, the signature matches modern solvents and artificial aging compounds used in prop fabrication. These," she gestured to the display, "are not historic. They are manufactured, likely within the last six months."

A ripple went through the room. The Village Committee, up front, leaned forward as one.

Maya flicked to the next slide: a microscopic photo of a coin's edge, machine tool marks bright and clear.

She looked at Victor, who had gone utterly still.

"The coin you see here was manufactured using a lathe, not hand-hammered. The edges are uniform, and the stamped markings are inconsistent with historic samples. I've also included the reference data, if anyone would like to review."

She stepped back, letting the information settle.

Victor, to his credit, didn't flinch. "Ms. Orozco, I appreciate your diligence. But isn't it possible you've misinterpreted your findings? After all, none of us here are experts in—"

Maya cut him off. "That's why I sent the samples to the University of Utah. I have their report, if you'd like to see it."

She handed a packet to the nearest committee member, who began flipping through the pages with increasing speed.

Chloe, from her perch at the side, watched as Saffron Vane's smile drained away, replaced by something hard and calculating.

The next question came from the back—one of the locals, voice hesitant but clear. "What about the investor money? Where's it going, if not to development?"

Maya glanced at her notebook, then at Victor. "According to the wire records, the majority of investor deposits are routed through a shell company registered out of state, then moved to a series of offshore accounts. Less than ten percent has been spent on local labor or material."

A hush, then the sound of someone dropping a fork.

Victor's face was a study in slow, deliberate fury. "This is slander," he said. "A petty attempt to discredit an honest venture. We have legal counsel on retainer, and—"

Sheriff Martinez, who'd been standing near the bar with arms folded, cleared his throat. "We'll be looking at the evidence," he said, voice level. "All of it."

For the first time all night, Victor Vane didn't have a ready reply.

Maya packed up her slides, then offered a polite nod to the Village Committee. "If anyone has further questions, I'll be by the kitchen," she said.

Chloe, grinning now, trailed after her, already fielding a dozen whispered questions from the stunned crowd.

As they ducked behind the buffet, Maya let out a long breath and looked at Chloe. "You think they'll run?"

Chloe shrugged. "If I were them, I'd have a go-bag in the Range Rover already."

Maya snorted. "Maybe we should make sure they don't get the chance."

But even as they spoke, the room was changing: investors on their phones, locals conferring in low voices, and the committee passing the University report from hand to hand. The air was thick with the kind of anticipation that only happens just before something big breaks.

Chloe clinked her cider glass against Maya's. "To science," she said.

Maya grinned, her relief starting to catch up. "And to not dying in a ravine."

The string band, sensing the drama, started up a nervous waltz. Onstage, Victor and Saffron Vane huddled in rapid, panicked conference.

It was, Chloe decided, the best opening act she'd ever seen.

It was not often that a Duck Creek event saw so many people standing, but as Maya finished her first volley of slides, half the Village Committee was on its feet, and the rest of the crowd leaned so far forward that the air near the projector grew tense and electric.

Chloe had to suppress a grin. From her post at the side of the stage, she had the best seat in the house. The Vanes were doing everything short of hissing at each other: Victor's right hand clenched the lectern as if by force of habit, Saffron's knuckles whitening on her iPhone as she thumbed madly through unseen emails, probably searching for a lawyer or maybe just a better exit strategy.

Maya's voice, in contrast, never wavered. "Here," she said, clicking to the next slide, "is a spectrograph showing the actual composition of the gold bars you see in the display case." The graph was color-coded, the peaks and valleys annotated for the non-scientists in the room. "The

main element is brass. Not gold. The remainder is a lead alloy, chosen for density but not native to this region.”

She let the information linger, watched the investor in the sequined dress scribble something furious in her notebook.

The next slide: a close-up of a “Spanish” coin, magnified until the threads of Maya’s lab glove were visible around the rim. “You can see here,” she continued, “the lathe marks on the edge. Not only are they consistent with a modern CNC, but you can see a repeating flaw every 22 degrees, which lines up with a broken gear in the Vanes’ own workshop.”

Someone up front—a retired schoolteacher, by the looks of her—let out a low, scandalized whistle.

Chloe nudged the second laptop, queuing up the next exhibit. At the signal, Maya nodded, and Chloe launched the video: grainy night vision, but clear enough to show Victor and Saffron, in matching wind-breakers, digging in the snow. The timestamp was just last week. Saffron handed Victor a leather pouch, which he carefully wedged into a pre-dug crack in the hillside, then dusted over with a shovel.

The crowd inhaled as one organism.

“Wait for it,” Maya said, not without drama, and clicked forward in the video. Two hours later, the Vanes returned to the site, this time with the investor cohort and a video crew. Victor dug at the base of the same pine, “discovering” the pouch with a shout of staged surprise. He held it aloft, coins tumbling into the snow. The audience on the video cheered, but in the present, the real audience was silent, the only sound the faint whirl of the projector fan.

Victor tried a laugh, sharp and forced. “Well, I see you’ve got a career in filmmaking if science doesn’t pan out, Ms. Orozco. But surely you’re not accusing us of faking an entire—”

Maya let the video loop, this time zooming in on Saffron’s parka: the logo was a perfect match to the one she wore tonight. The timestamp flickered in the corner, damning and immutable.

A lawyerly man at the investor table raised his hand. “Excuse me, but are you alleging that every artifact recovered is a forgery?”

Maya said, “Not all. Some are real Spanish coins, sourced from eBay.” She flipped to a slide showing a side-by-side of the Vanes’

“prized” doubloon and its online auction twin, the identical corrosion patterns circled in red.

Saffron’s face, previously set to gracious hostess, now curdled. She turned, whispering to Victor with a speed and fury that suggested this was not Plan A, or even Plan C.

The murmurs spread, a wave of confusion and then, quickly, anger. Maya scanned the room and watched the body language morph: investors clutching phones, locals glaring at the Vanes, a few kids—probably from the high school—snickering at the back.

Victor tried again. “This is a misunderstanding. I can assure you, all investor funds are accounted for—”

But Maya, clinical to the end, said, “I’d like to show you one last thing.”

She flicked to the spreadsheet. “This is a forensic trace of the investment deposits.” The projection lit up with a flow chart, each dollar moving from the gala to a Nevada LLC, then onward to a series of shell companies and, finally, an offshore bank in the Caribbean.

She let that sit, then zoomed in on one wire transfer: an amount, a date, a recipient name that matched the passport photo in Victor’s own press kit.

“You will see,” Maya said, voice carrying, “that the money never stays here. Not in Duck Creek, not in Utah. Most of it is gone within 24 hours of deposit.”

The final slide was a polite list of every donor, the amount contributed, and the date it vanished from the local account.

The crowd was no longer silent. Questions broke out everywhere. A dozen people moved at once, as if suddenly late for a train. Even Doug, usually so still, was on his feet, arms crossed and jaw set. Sam, who had been working the side of the room with a legal pad, stood on tiptoe to get a better view, her face a study in vindication.

Maya closed the laptop and stepped off the stage. The silence followed her, as if the air itself was waiting for permission to process.

Chloe, heart hammering, watched as Saffron spun on her heel and hissed, “We need to leave. Now.”

Victor’s face was unreadable, but his hands trembled as he began

gathering the “artifacts,” shoving them into a duffel with none of the reverence from earlier in the evening.

But before they could slip away, Chloe plugged in the auxiliary cable to the house speakers and played the second video: a confessional, surreptitiously recorded on her own phone, of Victor ranting about “dumb rubes” and “money marks.” It was short, barely twenty seconds, but the words “easy haul” and “nobody checks a story once they’ve bought in” were crisp as a slap.

The effect was instant. Investors rose, voices overlapping with questions, accusations, threats. The Village Committee huddled, several pointing toward the door as if physically willing the Vanes out of town.

Saffron, trapped by the rising noise, started barking at the staff, “Shut down the AV, now!” but the caterer just shrugged, hands deep in a tray of amuse-bouches.

Victor, out of arguments, switched to the last defense of the con artist: attack the messenger. “This is a setup! A coordinated hit by jealous competitors! None of it is true—” But nobody heard him over the din.

Chloe felt a tap on her shoulder. Leo, dressed to the nines in a borrowed suit, grinned and nodded toward the entryway, where Sheriff Martinez and two deputies now blocked the only exit, arms folded and expressions blank. Chloe caught Maya’s eye across the chaos and gave a thumbs-up.

The scene was no longer one of polite chaos but of total fracture: every old score in the town rose to the surface, every suspicion and grudge now confirmed in the bright, unblinking light of evidence.

Even the string band, caught between sets, abandoned their instruments and watched the drama unfold.

Saffron Vane, boxed in by the buffet, glared at Maya. “You think you’re clever? You just tanked your whole community.”

But Maya just shrugged. “At least it’s honest now.”

Victor tried for one last Hail Mary, waving the duffel overhead. “If you let this stand,” he shouted, “you doom this village to obscurity. No one will ever invest here again!”

Sam, never one to let a dramatic moment go, called out from the side, “We were doing fine before you showed up, thanks.”

Laughter rippled through the crowd, sharp and sudden.

Chloe basked in the moment, watching as the Vanes, suddenly very small, cowered behind their pile of fake treasure.

And then, as if on cue, the sheriff's voice cut through the noise. "Can I have everyone's attention, please?"

The crowd stilled, and every eye turned.

"Victor and Saffron Vane," he said, "you're wanted for questioning in connection with fraud, wire fraud, and manufacturing of false artifacts. Please stay where you are."

Victor blanched. Saffron nearly dropped her phone.

Chloe watched as the deputies closed in, moving with the careful, deliberate choreography of people who knew exactly what they were doing. It was perfect.

The crowd, emboldened, began to cheer—not the wild kind, but a slow, building wave that started with the committee and bled outward. Doug, for his part, simply nodded at Maya and Chloe as if to say: you did good.

Maya exhaled, her hands finally starting to shake now that it was over. Chloe joined her, both of them ducking away from the stage as the crowd surged forward to watch the Vanes be escorted from their own event.

The sense of relief was so strong it made Chloe lightheaded.

"Want to get some air?" Maya said.

Chloe nodded. They slipped out the side door, stepping onto the deck where the cold bit harder than ever, but where the stars—finally—were visible above the fairy lights.

For a long minute, neither spoke. The sound from inside was muffled now, just the hum of people discovering, all at once, that they'd been freed from a very old, very stupid story.

Chloe turned, smiling in the dark. "That went better than expected."

Maya grinned, teeth chattering. "You think they'll give us a trophy?"

Chloe leaned on the rail, watching the last bits of light fade from the sky. "We can make one. From whatever's left of the Vanes' eBay coins."

The door banged open. Leo stepped out, hands shoved in his

pockets, suit rumpled but face triumphant. “Hey,” he said, “Sheriff’s buying everyone cider. You want to see?”

Maya and Chloe exchanged a look, then nodded.

As they turned to go back inside, Chloe looked up at the mountain—still cold, still quiet, but somehow more itself than ever.

The final act was coming, but for now, this was enough. The truth was out, the game was won, and the future was theirs to write.

The last time Duck Creek had seen law enforcement in the lodge, it was for a lost child and an incident involving a wedding cake and a snowmobile. Tonight, it was different: Sheriff Martinez and two deputies entered with the deliberate calm of men who had done this before and were in no particular hurry to escalate. They wore the same blue windbreakers as always, but their presence snapped the chaos into a new, nervous focus.

Victor Vane, already boxed in by the Village Committee and a phalanx of angry investors, straightened his spine and tried to put on his most dignified face. Saffron, for her part, didn’t bother with dignity. She was already clutching her laptop, knuckles white on the edge of the table, typing with a speed that suggested she believed in at least five seconds of plausible deniability.

The sheriff held up a thick sheaf of paper—some of it real, some a prop, but all of it legal enough for the occasion. “Victor and Saffron Vane, you are under arrest for fraud, falsifying historical artifacts, and operating an investment scam across state lines.”

If Victor had been hoping for a last-minute miracle, he was out of luck. The deputies moved in. Saffron screeched—an actual, primal screech—snatched the laptop, and made a break for the kitchen. Victor, either in desperation or on reflex, went for the dramatic: he swept the nearest display table with his arm, sending a waterfall of glass and coins and “historical” swords tumbling to the hardwood.

It happened so fast the guests barely had time to get out of the way. The glass cases shattered, coins pinged in every direction, and the centerpiece—one of the faked gold bars—hit the floor with a thud and

split neatly in half, revealing the dull, chalky interior underneath. If anyone still doubted, the evidence now glimmered on the floor, fake and broken and totally exposed.

Saffron didn't get far. A deputy caught her at the kitchen doors, the laptop clattering to the linoleum. She made one last, desperate effort to stomp it, but he blocked the move and snapped on the cuffs. The second deputy corralled Victor at the base of the stage, even as the latter tried to rally the crowd one last time: "This is a setup! You're all being played by these jealous—" but no one was listening. If anything, the crowd was more interested in photographing the wreckage than hearing another word.

The investors, already halfway to mutiny, began snapping photos, muttering about lawsuits and class action, their confidence in the Vanes evaporated. The Village Committee, so recently divided, now moved as one: a wall of satisfaction as the deputies hustled the Vanes to the center of the room for processing.

Chloe watched it unfold from her post by the window, her phone raised but not recording—she wanted to see it unfiltered, the way you remember something in the bones instead of in pixels. She saw Maya across the room, mouth set in a thin line, eyes tracking every detail: the gold bar split on the floor, the cords trailing from the broken display, the look on Saffron's face when she realized the password lock on her laptop was no match for the sheriff's tech guy.

Leo lingered behind the sheriff, not quite gloating but definitely pleased with the outcome. He caught Maya's eye and gave a two-fingered salute.

The whole arrest took less than a minute. The noise, the drama, the final punctuation as the sheriff snapped the cuffs closed—all of it registered to Chloe as both more and less real than she'd imagined. She looked around at the room: the investors, suddenly shy, staring at their shoes; the Village Committee, passing Maya's printouts like a sacred text; even the string band, picking their way through the broken glass to gather their battered instruments.

Sheriff Martinez waited until the room was fully watching. "We will be collecting statements," he said, "but for now, please stay clear of the evidence and do not disturb the scene."

He had to say it twice before the guests got the message. The deputies guided the Vanes out through the main entrance, Saffron muttering threats under her breath, Victor scowling at everyone and no one.

As the doors closed behind them, the whole room seemed to exhale.

For a moment, it was silent. Then, all at once, the noise came rushing back: laughter, nervous at first, then genuine; the scraping of chairs as people began to stand and regroup; the slow, delighted tearing open of a new future for Duck Creek.

Maya found Chloe by the window. She had a small cut on her cheek—probably from a flying coin—and was dabbing it with the corner of her sleeve. “Worth it?” Chloe asked.

“Absolutely,” Maya said. “You?”

Chloe grinned, teeth bright in the overhead light. “I think we just rewrote the story.”

Doug appeared, bearing two mugs of spiced cider. “Ladies,” he said, “not to be corny, but the whole place owes you.” He handed the cider to Maya, then nodded at Chloe. “Not every day you see justice in real time.”

Sam joined them, already compiling a new phone tree for the inevitable post-mortem. “We should do a debrief,” she said, “before the rumors get out of hand. Maybe tomorrow morning at the store?”

Chloe glanced at Maya, who nodded.

Leo, ever the opportunist, sidled up with a battered GoPro. “If you want to do a reaction video,” he said, “the lighting is perfect in the foyer.”

Maya snorted, “Maybe later.”

As the crowd thinned, the staff began sweeping up the glass and collecting the debris. The faked coins clinked into the trash can, a sound that Chloe found perversely satisfying.

Outside, the night was colder, the stars sharper. The mountain stood exactly as it had before, but now it felt different: less haunted, less in thrall to old, rotten stories.

Chloe and Maya walked out together, past the wreckage and the last of the guests. At the porch, they stopped, listening to the quiet.

Chloe looked up. “So what happens now?”

Maya sipped her cider, considering. "I think we sleep for a week. Then we figure out what's next."

Chloe leaned against the rail, letting her gaze settle on the woods beyond the lights. "We could try something easier next time. Like proving the existence of Bigfoot."

Maya laughed, sharp and delighted. "Compared to this, Bigfoot's an open book."

For a while, they just watched the world, letting the cold seep in and the adrenaline bleed away. The lodge behind them was still alive with voices, but out here, it was just them and the hush of a mountain finally at rest.

Chloe spoke first, quiet and a little awed. "We did it, didn't we?"

Maya nodded, voice gentle. "Yeah. We really did."

They stood there until the last of the guests trickled away, until the staff turned off the porch lights, and until even the ghosts of old stories had given up and gone to bed.

It was, all things considered, a perfect ending.

nineteen

the flight

THE LIGHTS in the Duck Creek Lodge were still flickering when Saffron Vane yanked Victor by the sleeve through the banquet kitchen, past a lineup of startled busboys, and out the staff exit into the raw cold. The plan—such as it was—relied on two things: the distraction of the gala and the fact that no one in this godforsaken mountain had ever driven a proper BMW X5 in sport mode. Both assumptions, Victor was proud to note, had so far proven correct.

The SUV waited where he'd left it, engine running, headlights dimmed. Saffron tossed the duffel into the back seat, not bothering with the trunk. She had a battered laptop under one arm, a clutch bulging with paperwork in the other. "Don't drop it," she hissed as Victor threw his own go-bag atop her makeup kit. "The hard drives are in the side pocket."

Victor grinned, hands steady on the wheel. "If you'd just breathe, princess—"

"We're on a timer!" Saffron snapped. She slid into the passenger seat, phone already in hand, thumb flicking between the wire transfer app and her second phone's browser. "Sixty percent cleared. We just need twenty more minutes."

Victor gunned it, the gravel in the staff lot pinging off the undercarriage. He killed the headlights as soon as they hit the unpaved road, shifting into low gear and steering the beast between the lodge and the

outbuildings. “Relax. I mapped out every forest road from here to Cedar City. By the time they realize we’re gone, we’ll be over the pass.”

Saffron pressed the phone to her ear, voice low and rapid-fire. “Yes. Initiate transfer set two. All. Yes, all. I’ll call when the last batch is ready—no, I don’t care about the fee, just move it!”

The road pitched them sideways, snow ruts deeper than Victor remembered. He kept it fast but just short of reckless, weaving around the scattering of rental Subarus clogging the lower lot. If the sheriff had any sense, he’d be searching the lodge for evidence right now, not staking out the back forty.

Saffron slammed the phone down, lips drawn so tight they looked colorless. “I told you we should have staged a distraction. A real one.” She glared at Victor, then at the trees as if the pines themselves might tattle. “What if they’re already calling the highway patrol?”

Victor snorted, amused at her lack of faith. “If they do, it’ll take them half an hour to get a response team past the plows. You can’t chase what you can’t catch.”

He guided them past the glow of the last streetlight, then hung a right onto a fire access road. The SUV bucked and slewed, but the all-wheel drive held, and soon they were flying through a tunnel of snow-laden branches, the world outside reduced to the mad whip of shadows and white.

Behind them, the lodge glimmered like a soap bubble. The sound of laughter, of clinking glasses and the low rumble of a crowd, faded to nothing.

“Seventy percent,” Saffron muttered, eyes glued to her phone. “God, come on, you piece of—” She thumbed the refresh, nearly sobbing in relief as the bar ticked up another sliver. “If we lose cell signal, it’s over.”

Victor took a curve too fast and the rear end slewed wide, pelting the side windows with mud and ice. He brought it back with a flick of the wrists. “It’s never over,” he said, all bright confidence. “They need proof. They need to find the money, find us. We just keep moving until the last wire clears.”

Saffron stared at him, not blinking. “Just don’t get clever, okay? No scenic routes, no heroics. Straight shot to the freeway.”

Victor smiled, a wide and predatory thing. “You want to bet I can beat the state troopers to the overpass?”

Saffron buried her face in her hands. “Please just drive.”

The SUV chewed up the next mile in a spray of slush, the only sign of life the headlamps occasionally glancing off the backs of skittish deer. They passed no other cars, no other evidence of pursuit. But even with the radio off, Victor could hear the story playing out behind them: the sheriff, the stunned investors, the vultures from the Village Committee picking at the evidence. Let them fight over the scraps, Victor thought. He and Saffron would be halfway to Las Vegas before sunrise.

For a minute, the world was just the hum of the heater and the steady climb of the cell signal bars. Then Saffron spoke, voice flat: “We should dump the car at the trailhead and hike to the highway. If they ping the license—”

“They won’t,” Victor said. “I swapped the plates at the rental lot. This thing’s invisible for another twenty-four hours.”

Saffron eyed him with new respect. “You actually thought ahead?”

He winked. “You’re not the only one who knows how to plan an exit.”

Saffron checked the phone again. “Eighty percent. Come on, come on.” Her leg jiggled, heel bouncing off the glove box. “When we’re done, I want you to delete every account. Every old contact. We go straight to new names, new phones.”

Victor nodded, not taking his eyes off the dark, rutted road. “Agreed.”

The dashboard clock clicked over to seven. Victor thumbed the navigation screen—old habit—and watched as the little blue triangle curved along the unmarked dirt line, headed for the logging road that would bring them around the main drag. The shortcut he’d found was a brute: a winding, unmaintained track that doubled back on itself so many times it was almost comical. But it spit out less than a mile from the state highway, well past the speed traps and, with luck, any local heat.

“We’re almost there,” he said, lowering his voice for drama. “Just past the switchback, we cut left and—”

Saffron shushed him, both hands white-knuckled on the phone. "Ninety percent. Please—just hurry."

Victor obliged. He floored it, the engine snarling as the SUV catapulted over a ridge, headlights briefly painting the whole woods in stark relief. The road narrowed, overhung by ancient birch, then dropped them into a sudden dip and the first glint of the open meadow beyond.

He felt it in his chest: the old thrill, the clean, dangerous rush of a story at its climax. Just one good run, and they'd be gone.

Back at the lodge, the ballroom had divided itself neatly into chaos and calculation. On the chaos side: investors with faces red from shock, the Village Committee hissing at each other, and a handful of locals enjoying the show from the buffet. On the calculation side, Maya watched the commotion from the landing, eyes sharp and bright in the spill of hallway light.

She counted heads, then checked her mental list. It took a second to register the missing pieces. "Chloe," she hissed, "where are the Vanes?"

Chloe, standing a few feet away, scanned the room and whistled low. "I don't see them. Not even by the bar."

Maya felt the adrenaline refocus. "They're running."

Sheriff Martinez was still at the stage, collecting evidence bags and herding witnesses. Maya moved fast, pushing through a knot of gossiping guests and sidestepping a knocked-over champagne glass.

"Sheriff?" she called. "The Vanes are gone. Out the back."

Martinez's face, already tense, snapped to full alert. "You sure?"

"They left everything," Maya said. "Even the laptops. But they had a car. It's probably on a service road by now."

He didn't question her. Martinez raised a finger to his radio and keyed in a burst of orders: "Units One and Two, check all vehicles in the lower lots. Post blockades at Highway 14 and all westbound junctions. All units: Be advised, suspects are in a dark BMW X5, likely heading for the interstate."

Maya was already pulling her own phone, thumbing up the topo map she'd downloaded two days earlier. "They won't take the main

road,” she said, almost to herself. “Too risky, especially with patrols up. But if Victor’s even half as clever as he thinks—” She traced a finger along the snarl of logging roads behind the village. “Chloe, look.”

Chloe peered over her shoulder. “That old fire road?”

Maya nodded. “It’s the only way to cut around the main drag and get past the state patrol. And it dumps you almost at the Meadow Creek pass.”

Chloe’s eyes sparkled with the thrill of the chase. “You want to go after them?”

Maya grinned. “Why not? We know the land better than they do.”

She relayed her theory to Martinez, who nodded, radioed the update, and then pointed to his deputies. “You two, with me. The rest—check every exit and keep the press off our backs.”

The sheriff turned to Maya. “Can you lead us there?”

“I can get you ahead of them,” Maya said, “if you trust my sense of direction.”

Martinez hesitated a fraction of a second, then nodded. “Let’s move.”

They hustled through the kitchen, boots clapping against the tile. Maya stole a glance through the window and caught the taillights of the BMW as it slipped into the trees, nothing but a red ghost in the deepening night.

She clenched her jaw and whispered, “You’re not getting away.”

Out in the parking lot, the air bit hard, the chill nearly cutting through Maya’s fleece. She saw the sheriff’s SUV parked askew near the staff entrance, motor idling. Martinez handed her a radio. “You call the turns. We’ll follow.”

Chloe slid in next to her, helmet already on, grinning like she was about to star in a demolition derby.

“Ready for action?” Chloe whispered.

Maya nodded, buckling her seat belt tight. “Let’s go mountain style.”

The SUV’s tires crunched over the ice-crusting drive, swinging wide to avoid the mess of cars left by the event. As they peeled out toward the main road, Maya turned in her seat, caught the briefest shimmer of the Vanes’ SUV lights snaking through the woods below.

She grinned, adrenaline high and bright, and radioed in the first coordinates.

"Ten minutes," Maya said. "We'll have them boxed in before they hit the creek."

Chloe whooped, slapping the dash for luck.

The night swallowed them, the hunt was on, and for the first time all day, Maya felt the world snap into perfect, propulsive focus.

The BMW rocketed along the forest track, Victor's knuckles bone-white against the wheel. The shortcut was holding—barely. If anything, the road was rougher than he'd guessed, every rut and washboard sending tremors up his arms. Saffron cursed as her phone slipped from her grip, the wire transfer dashboard now only at ninety-three percent.

"You said this would be smooth," she hissed.

"It's a logging road," Victor said, ducking a low-hanging branch. "It's not for tourists."

Saffron fumbled for the dash handle, eyes glued to the shifting signal bars. "If we lose reception, the money's stuck in escrow."

Victor gritted his teeth, then, softer: "We're almost through. There's a cell tower at the pass."

But even as he said it, a flash of doubt crossed his mind. If Martinez got smart, he'd know about this road too. There was a reason Victor had chosen this job, this town, this mark—but the locals weren't always as slow as he'd planned.

The headlights splashed over a fallen log, forcing him to brake hard and swerve onto the embankment. The SUV shuddered, then took the bump like a champ, landing with a spine-rattling bounce. Saffron shrieked, clutching the laptop so tight the screen cracked.

Victor checked the rearview. Nothing. No headlights, no sirens. Just the slow darkness creeping up behind them.

He laughed, wild and triumphant. "Told you. We're home free."

Saffron shot him a look. "Don't say that. Not until we're on the highway."

He made the last turn, tires skidding on the loose gravel. The

open meadow unfurled ahead, just as the GPS had promised, and beyond it, the faint orange glow of the state highway's sodium lamps.

"Last leg," Victor said, voice pure adrenaline. "We're done."

But as the BMW hit the straightaway, Saffron's phone buzzed, an alert popping up. The transfer had frozen at ninety-seven percent.

She stared in horror. "It stopped. The bank put a freeze on the account!"

Victor slowed, scanning the meadow for hazards. "What do you mean, froze?"

Saffron tapped the screen, frantic. "It's in review. 'Pending verification of sender identity.' The money's stuck!"

He cursed, slamming the wheel. "We're so close. Just keep driving, it'll work."

But Saffron was already on the line, punching in the bank's number, switching to her "VIP voice" and hissing threats at a faceless call center agent.

Behind them, the woods spat out another pair of headlights, blue and white and much, much closer than Victor had hoped.

He floored it, the SUV surging across the meadow, Saffron screaming into her phone, and the world narrowed to a single, break-neck charge toward the only hope of freedom left.

In the distance, the lights of Duck Creek twinkled, unaware or maybe just unimpressed.

But for Victor and Saffron Vane, it was the longest mile in the world.

Up the trail, Maya's phone pinged with the sheriff's message: "Visual on target. Two minutes out."

She grinned, watching the BMW's tail lights bob and weave ahead, then radioed Chloe, who was already kitted up with helmet and headlamp.

"Get the ATVs," Maya said. "We'll cut them off at the far end."

Chloe let out a noise halfway between a laugh and a war cry.

In five minutes, they'd be waiting at the choke point, blocking the only way out.

Maya checked her pack, making sure the first aid kit and tow cable were ready.

"Chloe?"

"Yeah?"

Maya smiled, bright and sharp. "Let's go get them."

The snow was deep, the night was colder than it had any right to be, but Maya had never felt more alive.

As they peeled off the road, headlights slicing the darkness, Chloe whooped again, arms raised like a rodeo champion. "I love a good finale!" she yelled.

And Maya, not usually given to theatrics, yelled back: "Let's make it epic."

The mountain, for once, seemed to approve.

For all her bravado, Chloe had never actually driven an ATV at night, let alone in a high-speed chase across icy forest roads. She grinned anyway, because if there was ever a time to audition for the part of Heroic Girl Friday, this was it.

Outside the lodge, the mountain's cold bit at her ears and set the snow-dust to dancing, but Chloe was already halfway into a borrowed helmet—fluorescent orange with a sticker of a cartoon sheep on the back. She fastened the chinstrap, sucked in a breath, and struck a dramatic pose for Maya, who did not look up from the battered map she was taping to the handlebars of her own ride.

Maya, in contrast to Chloe's Broadway energy, had a grim set to her jaw and a checklist approach to the emergency. She checked the tire tread, rechecked the fuel, then squinted at the terrain map with all the skepticism of a scientist confronted with a pseudoscientific "ghost detector." Even her helmet was dull—just matte black, no sheep, no flair.

Doug and two of the locals had already revved up their UTV, the headlights throwing wild shadows across the snowbank where Sam was

giving last-minute instructions. Chloe listened in, catching the essentials: “Stay in pairs. Do not, under any circumstances, try to block the Vanes with your body. If you get a visual, call it in immediately—don’t be a hero. And watch for ice; the whole north slope is basically a Slip ’N Slide right now.”

Chloe straddled her ATV, feet barely brushing the ground. She rolled the throttle with a nervous thrill and watched Maya load up a backpack with first aid, emergency blankets, and—because it was Maya—at least three different ways to collect a water sample. “You ready?” Chloe called.

Maya nodded, eyes focused. “They’re probably at the south trail-head already. If we cut across Old Mailbox Road, we can intercept at the firebreak.”

Chloe made a face. “Mailbox Road? That’s the one with the haunted turn, right?”

Maya almost smiled. “If you believe the stories.”

“I choose to believe in drama,” Chloe said, revving the engine for effect.

Sam waved them forward, and with a roar, the four-vehicle convoy ripped away from the lodge, headlights jittering through the dark like a stampede of mutant fireflies. The first mile was almost fun: packed snow, gentle grade, Chloe getting the feel for the ATV’s squirrely rear end. She let herself lean into the speed, the cold pulling tears from her eyes, the mountain air alive with the chemical thrill of two-stroke exhaust and distant pine.

Behind her, Doug’s UTV hung close, radio antenna bobbing, while ahead, Maya’s taillight was a fixed, unwavering beacon. The gap between them and the Vanes would be closing—the BMW was fast on the straight, but here the curves and ruts punished every inch of city-slicker overconfidence.

They took the first fork hard, Chloe’s handlebars twitching in her grip. Maya pointed left, toward the black snarl of Mailbox Road, and Chloe followed, trusting. The new track was rough, frozen mud and hunks of old corduroy, a mile of violence in every yard. She kept her weight low and copied Maya’s every move, which was basically the art of not dying.

They reached a break in the trees, and there, for just a second, Chloe saw the Vanes' taillights—a flicker of red, already sliding around the next bend. She radioed in, voice barely a squeak over the engine: "Visual, visual! They're just ahead, maybe four hundred yards."

The reply crackled from Doug's UTV: "Copy that. We're closing the gap."

Maya slowed at the next curve, waiting for Chloe to pull alongside. "The shortcut they're on? It gets worse from here."

Chloe panted, helmet fogged. "How much worse?"

Maya didn't answer, just shot her a glance that said: Bad enough.

They hammered on, deeper into the woods. With every turn, the trees pressed closer, the path narrowing until it felt like they were threading a frozen artery. Somewhere, a branch snapped, and Chloe's heart jumped before she realized it was just Maya breaking trail.

The radio chirped with updates—Martinez's voice calm but urgent, counting down intersections, coordinating other searchers. Chloe loved the feeling, the sense of playing at law enforcement, the air thick with possibility and action.

Then, at the next fork, Maya slammed the brakes and gestured to the ground. Chloe pulled up alongside her, peering at the churned snow.

Tire tracks. Deep ones, the kind left by something way heavier than an ATV. The edges were raw and fresh, the centerline a trail of frozen mud.

Maya squatted, gloved finger tracing the ruts. "They went off the main road here."

Chloe followed the marks with her eyes. "Isn't that the shortcut to Meadow Creek?"

Maya nodded, worry blooming in her expression. "That route's terrible after yesterday's thaw. If they hit the flats at speed—"

Chloe finished the thought. "They'll be up to the axles in mud."

Maya snapped a photo of the tracks, radioed it in, then looked at Chloe with something like pride. "Nice catch."

Chloe beamed, then braced as Maya powered her ATV onto the narrow side path, the machine chattering and bouncing over the mess.

Chloe followed, no time to fear the unknown, her every sense tuned to the chase.

They emerged from the treeline just in time to see, far ahead, the glint of the BMW's taillights as it zigzagged through the first patch of open meadow. It moved less like a car and more like a wounded animal, fishtailing, slowing as the wheels started to sink.

Chloe whooped, unable to contain it. "They're bogged!"

Maya grinned, gunning the engine. "Let's go say hello."

Behind them, the UTV convoy swung onto the shortcut, headlights painting the forest floor in wild, leaping shadows. The air was sharp with the smell of mud, wet pine, and gasoline, and every inch of Chloe's skin buzzed with the certainty that they were about to witness something legendary.

Up ahead, the BMW slewed, wheels spinning, the whole chassis rocking side to side as Victor tried to muscle it through the morass. But the more he gunned it, the deeper it sank, until the front grill vanished in the goop and the back end reared up like a beached whale.

Chloe stopped at the edge of the meadow, mouth open in honest admiration. "That's the best stuck I've ever seen," she said.

Maya didn't gloat, just kicked her ATV into idle and radioed the update. "Visual on target. They're not going anywhere."

From the UTV behind, Doug whistled. "Souped themselves," he said. "Told you no city car would last ten minutes on this track."

Chloe pulled off her helmet, letting the cold slap her awake. "So... now what?"

Maya shrugged. "We wait for the sheriff. And maybe, just maybe, we enjoy the view."

They watched as Victor climbed out of the driver's seat, boots sucked instantly into the mud. Saffron followed, wailing as she tried to salvage her rolling suitcase, which had already tipped and disgorged its contents—designer shoes, at least three laptops, and what looked like a solid gold coffee mug.

Chloe started to laugh, the kind that could turn into hiccups if she didn't stop. "Are we allowed to take photos?"

Maya snorted. "Take evidence."

They waited, the whole search party in a semicircle at the edge of

the meadow, engines idling, lights trained on the slow-motion car wreck of the Vanes' defeat.

Chloe looked over at Maya, who for the first time in hours, looked totally relaxed.

"Good call," Maya said, nudging Chloe's arm.

Chloe tried a salute. "I always follow the story."

And as the sirens approached, and the flashlights of the deputies began to bob through the dark, Chloe felt, for the first time, like she had earned a starring role.

The mountain, she thought, always gave the best curtain calls.

Victor had always believed that the real test of a person was how they handled the inevitable disaster. He'd talked himself into and out of disaster a hundred times—maybe a thousand—and each time, it had only confirmed his theory: confidence was more powerful than luck, and improvisation could cure any blunder. But now, as the BMW's undercarriage rattled and scraped along the rutted trail, and the headlights bobbed wild over a tundra of frozen puddles and blown snow, he could feel the universe aligning against him.

Saffron's nails had left a crescent of gouges in the faux-wood trim. "You said it was a mile. That was two miles ago."

Victor ignored her, gunning the engine and swerving around a pothole big enough to eat a lesser car. "It's just another switchback. Then the clearing, then we're home free."

The windshield shuddered as a branch, heavy with ice, smacked across the glass. Saffron let out a noise that was somewhere between a shriek and a full-body dry heave. She'd long since abandoned the phone—no bars for the last five minutes—and now clutched the laptop case like it was a child. With every bump, her earrings swung wildly, the gold catching in her scarf and yanking at her earlobes. "If we total this car, it's coming out of your cut," she spat.

Victor laughed, the sound brittle. "If we total it, we sue the rental company for faulty snow tires. I've done it before."

She slammed the laptop to her chest. "We should have gone on foot."

Victor took the next bend at full throttle, the SUV bouncing sideways, traction control alarms howling. "You want to explain to me how you'd get from here to the highway in four-inch heels and a five-thousand-dollar parka?" he said, all teeth.

Saffron scowled, not dignifying that with a response.

Then, ahead, the trail flattened. The tree line fell away, and the headlights snapped open onto the broad, snowy stretch of meadow Victor had been aiming for. It looked harmless: just a run of crusted snow, a hundred yards wide, with another ribbon of forest on the far side. The nav said the highway was barely a quarter mile past that.

"See?" Victor said, giddy with relief. "We're through—"

The front wheels hit the meadow and, in a fraction of a second, the world changed. The snow cover buckled, and a wave of brown slop fountained up over the hood. The SUV lurched, dropped, and shuddered so hard Victor bit his tongue. He floored the accelerator, but the only result was the sound of high, furious revving and a rooster-tail of mud that painted the windows top to bottom.

"Are you kidding me?" Saffron wailed.

Victor tried the reverse, then forward, then rock-and-pivot. The tires spun, caught, then spun again, each time digging deeper. He could feel the mud sucking at the undercarriage, the chassis settling into the earth like a coffin.

He banged the dash with the heel of his hand, as if violence might jolt the car loose. "It's just a bog. We've got four-wheel drive!"

Saffron stared at him like he'd grown a second head. "It's a luxury crossover, not a tank. We're not getting out of this."

He killed the engine. The silence that followed was total, save for the quiet slop of mud oozing around the doors. The interior smelled of hot plastic and Saffron's anxiety perfume.

"Get out," she commanded. "We're walking."

Victor hesitated, then complied. He swung the door wide, only to have it yanked from his grip by the suction of the mud. His boot hit the ground and, with a wet shlorp, he sank to mid-calf. He tried to yank free, only to topple forward, hands splatting into the ooze. Saffron's

door opened with less ceremony, but her first step left her marooned on the running board, her shoes already ruined.

She shrieked as Victor, attempting to circle the car, lost his balance and face-planted into a puddle of slush.

"I can't believe you," she screamed. "You are such—" Her foot slipped, and she nearly followed him, but caught herself on the doorframe.

"Just—grab the bags," Victor sputtered, spitting out mud. "We can make the tree line."

Saffron gave him a look that could have curdled engine oil. She scooped up the laptop, then her purse, then with a groan, tried to hoist her rolling suitcase from the back seat. It was instantly apparent this was a lost cause: the bag dropped, the wheels stuck, and with every tug, the whole thing became heavier, as if it were pulling up the entire meadow behind it.

She gave up on the bag, instead clutching the laptop and her phone to her chest. "Leave it," she snapped.

Victor circled around, dragging his own feet free of the mud with a sucking, gloppy sound. He managed to retrieve one small duffel from the trunk, but in the effort, managed to rip the zipper open. Its contents—a sheaf of paperwork, two burner phones, a change of shirt—splattered into the muck. He tried to grab the documents, but most floated away, sodden and ruined.

He swore, then, desperate, grabbed a handful of the files and tucked them into his jacket. The paper was so wet it bled blue ink through the lining.

"Come on," he called, but Saffron was already half-wading, half-crawling toward the edge of the meadow.

Every step was a struggle. The surface crust was nothing, giving way to cold, sticky, viscous muck that grabbed at ankles and knees. Saffron's shoes, patent leather and wholly unsuited to mountain life, lasted three yards before one vanished, never to be seen again. She cursed, limping, and soldiered on in one stockinged foot.

Victor tried to keep pace, but between the weight of the mud and the drag of the bag, it was like moving through pudding. He gave up after a dozen yards, tossing the duffel and focusing on his own escape.

Behind them, the BMW sagged lower and lower, until the headlights were nearly level with the surface. Its engine ticked and groaned in the night, abandoned and alone.

Saffron reached the first patch of solid ground and collapsed onto it, breathing like a stranded swimmer. She looked back at Victor, then down at her own legs, caked to the knees in freezing sludge. "This is your fault," she hissed. "All of it."

Victor said nothing. He was beyond argument, past panic, just numb and cold and embarrassed in a way he'd never felt before.

He fell down next to her, wiping the mud from his face with the least disgusting corner of his sleeve.

"Do you think," Saffron said, voice quivering with both fury and the cold, "do you think we can still make the highway?"

Victor shook his head. "We'll have to skirt the edge. Too slow to cross the rest."

She started to sob, the kind that was mostly rage. "All my work, everything—gone in a mudhole."

Victor almost tried to comfort her, then thought better of it.

Together, they staggered to their feet and began the long, humiliating slog around the perimeter, every step a reminder of how quickly the world could turn from charade to tragedy. The laptop, slick with mud, slipped from Saffron's hands and landed in a puddle. She stared at it, then at the sky, and screamed—a long, unbroken note of pure frustration.

The night, for a moment, was silent again.

Then, from the darkness at the edge of the meadow, came the unmistakable crunch of tires, the white beams of half a dozen search vehicles lighting the scene like a football field. The Vanes froze, deer in the headlights, nowhere to run and less to lose.

Victor tried to straighten his ruined jacket, then, for the first time in his life, had no words at all.

The mountain was not interested in improvisation.

It took less than two minutes for the search party to reach the edge of the meadow. The headlights from their ATVs and UTVs lit up the mudfield like a pop-up gallery, every rutted trench and glop of soup on display. The Vanes, caked and shivering, clung to the bank like shipwreck survivors, the remains of their luxury attire hanging off them in sad, slumping layers.

Chloe hopped off her ATV and yanked off her helmet, hair springing loose in a static halo. She peered into the mess and let out a low whistle. "Didn't we rescue three spring breakers from this exact mud pit last March?"

Maya, standing beside her, nodded, arms crossed. "The infamous Duck Creek Soup. Grandpa always said it would eat a moose if you gave it a chance."

Doug grunted, parking his UTV with a triumphant wheelie. "Soup's thicker this year. Fills in fast when the snow melts."

Chloe tried not to laugh, but the sight of the Vanes—Saffron clutching a ruined laptop, Victor unrecognizable under a mask of mud—was too much. "Do we...do we just leave them out there?"

Maya shrugged. "I think the sheriff wants to make a point."

As if on cue, Sheriff Martinez and his deputies advanced to the meadow's edge, flashlights trained on the Vanes. Martinez called out, voice echoing across the field: "Victor and Saffron Vane, remain where you are. For your own safety and ours, do not attempt to move."

Victor, as if determined to do the wrong thing, tried to scramble up the last slope of mud, only to lose his grip and slide backwards, arms windmilling. He landed flat on his back, and for a moment just lay there, staring at the sky, the fight gone out of him.

Saffron made a show of clutching her laptop to her chest, the screen blinking weakly. "You have no idea who we are," she screeched, the words half-choked with tears and ice water. "You people are going to pay—"

Martinez ignored her, keeping his tone measured. "You are under arrest for fraud, conspiracy to commit fraud, and obstruction. Stay put, and we'll extract you without injury."

Saffron tried to stand, but the mud pulled her down, soaking her

parka and streaking the designer print into something that looked more animal than fashion. She made a grab for the floating document folder, managing only to tip it, spilling the paperwork into the muck. Some of the pages, already sodden, dissolved on contact. Others floated on the surface for a moment, the neat columns of dollar signs and names slowly blurring into blue puddles.

Chloe stepped forward, camera out, and snapped a photo. “For the scrapbook,” she said, grinning.

The locals gathered on the edge, most of them leaning on their own ATVs, some arms folded, others openly recording with their phones. There was no jeering, only the quiet, satisfied look of people who’d seen too many city-folk scams and were glad, for once, to see justice served with a side of humility.

Maya nudged Chloe. “You think they’ll ever try a small town again?”

Chloe considered. “Maybe. But they’ll have to invent a better exit strategy first.”

Martinez called to his deputies, who had brought out a small emergency rescue sled and a length of rope. One of the locals—Sam, naturally—volunteered to help, her boots already half-vanished in the slush. They made a slow, careful approach, spreading their weight as they inched toward the Vanes.

Victor tried one last lunge for freedom, but his shoes were sucked off by the mire. He flailed, then fell, and the only thing he achieved was to splash both himself and Saffron with another layer of brown.

The deputies reached them, cuffed them, and then—with practiced efficiency—hailed them up onto the sled. It was less a rescue than a parade: the Vanes, sodden and cowed, being pulled through the snow like reluctant parade floats.

As they were loaded into the waiting sheriff’s SUV, Saffron stared back at the meadow, eyes wide and wet. Chloe almost felt sorry for her, until she remembered the night in the kitchen, the rehearsed con, the way Saffron had dismissed the entire village as “rubies.” The sympathy vanished.

Sheriff Martinez, cleaning off his boots, turned to Maya. “Thank

you. If you hadn't predicted their route, they might've made it to the next county."

Maya shrugged, but Chloe cut in: "She's being modest. If it wasn't for her, they'd be halfway to the border and probably scamming a new set of victims by next week."

Martinez tipped his hat. "You two ever think about a career in law enforcement?"

Chloe winked. "Only if we get to ride ATVs every day."

They watched as the deputies zipped the Vanes into space blankets, then drove off toward the main road. The siren whooped twice, then faded into the distance.

Doug walked up, hands in his flannel pockets, grinning. "Best night all season," he said. "And we didn't even have to bring in the Search and Rescue dogs."

Chloe held up her phone, panning across the field. "It's better than any reality show."

Maya, quiet for once, just watched the horizon as the dawn's first hint of blue cut the darkness. She looked at Chloe and smiled. "You know what's funny?" she said. "If they'd just asked for help, we'd have given it. The right way."

Chloe nodded, a rare sober look on her face. "Yeah. But then we wouldn't have had a story."

They watched as the lights faded, the meadow settling back into stillness. The abandoned BMW, sunk to the windows in mud, sat like a warning for the next would-be genius. The Vanes' luggage was scattered in a rough halo, every shoe and scarf and piece of junk glimmering under the search lights—a gallery of failure, perfectly curated.

Maya turned away, bumping Chloe's shoulder. "Let's go home. My hands are freezing."

Chloe grinned, flipping the sheep helmet back on. "Race you to the lodge?"

Maya snorted, then gunned her ATV and roared off without waiting for a reply.

Chloe followed, the laughter bouncing back through the trees as the mountain, finally, was quiet again.

At the edge of the field, the last ray of the sheriff's headlights glimmered on the soup, and in the middle of it all, the ruined car gleamed like a shipwreck.

Somewhere, the ghosts of old stories smiled.

And that, Chloe thought, was the perfect ending.

epilogue

THE PORCH of the Cedar Mountain Country Store ran wide as a stage, with half the village in theory able to fit if anyone felt like cramming themselves in among the crates, bins, and weathered rocking chairs. In late September, the air up on Duck Creek had a snap to it, not quite cold but not warm either, a reminder to anyone who'd been here more than a week that winter didn't politely knock before entering. The afternoon sun angled low and gold, the kind that turned every dust mote and resin fleck into something rare and precious. For the first time in a while, the place felt like a real porch—safe, a little noisy, and in no hurry to close for the night.

Doug stood by the railing, arms folded tight across his chest, the sleeves of his work shirt still rolled and showing a half-dozen new scratches that would probably heal by Christmas. Next to him, Leo sat cross-legged atop the porch freezer, his usual kinetic bounce subdued by the cold can of orange soda balanced on his knee. Chloe and Maya had claimed the twin rocking chairs closest to the entry, and Chloe, never content to simply sit, rocked herself with a rhythm that was equal parts nervous energy and showmanship. Sam sat on the steps, knees tucked to her chin, a mug of something steamy clasped between her palms.

“So,” Chloe said, her voice pitched for audience, “does this mean Duck Creek is officially boring again? Or is someone else going to start a pyramid scheme before breakfast?”

The porch boards creaked as Doug shifted, the sound as familiar as breathing. “Boring’s the default,” he said. “Don’t trust anyone who tells you otherwise.”

Maya grinned, drawing her own knees up under her chin, hands locked tight around a bottle of root beer. “I saw on the news,” she said, “that the Vanes were part of a ring. Three states, and they’re only now finding all the fake artifacts. They even mentioned us by name.”

“Not by our actual names,” Chloe corrected. She leaned forward and waved her soda for punctuation, bracelets jangling like a call to prayer. “The ‘Duck Creek Two’ is officially a hashtag. And yes, you’re the cool one in the comments.”

Leo took a slow sip and shot Maya a thumbs-up. “You’re a meme, basically.”

Sam, half-hidden by her giant cardigan, gave a small laugh. “It’s probably the first time Duck Creek’s ever trended for something other than snowmobile accidents or wildlife attacks.”

Doug snorted, but Maya could tell he was pleased in his Doug-way, which meant showing less emotion than most people used for brushing their teeth. “You did good,” he said. “All of you. Bunch of city kids with more guts than common sense.”

Chloe, delighted, bowed low in her rocker, nearly tipping herself forward. “That’s what all the best stories are about.”

The air was rich with pine sap, a little dust, and the lingering tang of oil from the ATVs that had passed by a few minutes earlier. Every so often, a breeze would ruffle the faded flag above the entry, and a handful of leaves would flutter down like confetti.

Maya let the conversation drift. For a long time, she just watched the way the sunlight struck the far ridge, the color rippling across the gold and rust of early fall. The world seemed bigger and smaller at the same time—like the porch was the last safe harbor before the wild, and everyone on it was in on the secret.

Doug glanced at Leo. “So, you going back to the city, or did this place win you over for good?”

Leo grinned, peeling the label from his can. “The WiFi sucks, but the stories are better here. Plus, someone’s got to keep an eye on these

two.” He jerked a thumb at Maya and Chloe. “You never know when they’ll stage a second act.”

Sam piped up. “Second acts are overrated. You just need a good afterparty.”

Chloe made a dramatic gasp. “Oh, it’s not an afterparty—it’s the epilogue. That’s where the secret moral is revealed.”

She turned to Maya, her face suddenly serious, even if her hands still toyed with the bracelet. “Honestly, what’s the moral?”

Maya took her time, the cold bottle pressed to her lips. “People see what they want to see. Even when the truth is just as interesting.” She shrugged, a little embarrassed. “And also that local legends are usually weirder and more real than you’d expect.”

Doug nodded, gruffly approving. “That, or never trust a stranger in a designer parka.”

Everyone laughed, including Sam, who nearly lost her grip on the mug.

For a while, they watched the late sunlight play across the porch, the beams crawling higher as the world tipped toward dusk. The mountain across the valley glowed, every crag and ledge standing sharp and clear, as if inviting them to find the next mystery.

Chloe leaned back and spread her arms wide, nearly hitting Maya in the nose. “I just want to say, on record, that no matter how many documentaries they make about this, nothing will ever be as good as the way it happened here.”

Maya nodded, eyes following the slant of light. “Agreed.”

Doug finally allowed himself a smile. “Just don’t make a mess of the porch.”

Leo chugged the last of his soda, crushed the can, and tossed it neatly into a bin by the door. “No promises,” he said, “but I’ll try.”

A silence settled, not awkward but easy, the kind that only comes after surviving something together.

“Hey, Maya?” Chloe said, quieter this time.

“Yeah?”

“Does the light on the mountain ever look like... I don’t know, real gold to you?”

Maya didn’t answer at first. She let her gaze linger on the distant

blaze of the peaks, a shimmer so vivid it made the legend seem plausible, even now. “Sometimes,” she said. “But mostly it just looks like home.”

The sun dipped behind the ridge, leaving the porch in sudden shadow. Maya rocked forward and stood, stretching the stiffness from her legs. “We should probably get inside before the bugs find us.”

“Or the next disaster,” Chloe added, but she stood, too, and took the last swig of her soda.

One by one, they moved from the porch—Doug last, lingering by the railing, as if making sure the world outside was still exactly the way he left it.

The store lights flicked on behind the frosted glass, sending a warm glow out into the dusk. From inside, they could hear Sam’s laugh, bright and unfiltered, and the faint clatter of someone moving boxes in the stockroom.

For the first time in a long time, it felt like the mountain was content. The world would keep spinning, the leaves would keep falling, and if you were lucky, you’d get to spend the golden hour with friends and maybe—just maybe—a little homegrown gold.

Inside the Country Store, the lights hummed soft and yellow, pooling in uneven patches across the grooved linoleum and casting the aisles in a perpetual half-twilight. Chloe and Maya ducked around the counter, both arms loaded with the borrowed relics of the last few weeks. There was the massive industrial flashlight, its lens scuffed but the button worn to a shine by Maya’s thumb; the battered compass with a needle that spun only for Chloe; and the length of blue-and-gold cord, which had saved Maya’s life once and still carried a faint scent of wild sage.

Leo appeared behind the register, arms crossed in his signature way, face unreadable. He nodded once, as if he’d expected this moment, and took the flashlight with both hands, cradling it like it was made of porcelain. Chloe set the compass down with a little flourish, spinning the lid shut. Leo caught it before it stopped, his palm closing over it silently. The rope went last—Maya unwound it from her wrist, the fibers catching on her sleeve, and handed it over.

Leo didn't speak, just gathered the objects and slipped through the swinging door to the back. For a long minute, Maya and Chloe stood in the hush, listening to the far-off hum of the walk-in fridge and the subtle clatter of someone organizing nails on the hardware aisle.

"He doesn't even ask how they worked out for us," Chloe said, fake-offended.

"Maybe he knows," Maya replied. "Or maybe he's afraid we broke them."

"Unbreakable," Chloe said, and gave the empty counter a fond pat.

A minute later, Leo returned, hands empty, the faintest hint of dust on his pants. He stopped in front of Maya, eyed her like he was about to give a lecture, then just smiled—a tiny, sharp thing, gone in a flash.

"You have questions," he said, voice softer than she'd heard it before.

Chloe piped up before Maya could reply. "Is this where you reveal we've been ghost-hunting all along? Or that the tools only work for chosen ones, and now we're cursed forever?"

Leo ignored the joke, looking at Maya. "You saw it, right? The way the beam showed the old Spanish markings under the paint? Or the way the compass needle spun even when there was no metal around?"

Maya nodded. She had a dozen rationalizations queued up: phosphorescent paint, magnetic fields, parallax. She'd tried them all, and none quite fit. "And the rope," she said, not bothering to mask her awe. "It held even when the anchor broke. It shouldn't have. I don't get it."

Doug's voice boomed from the tool aisle: "Weather's turning tonight. If you got plans, make 'em quick before the plow buries the lot."

Maya started to follow, but Sam caught her by the sleeve. "You really want to know?" Sam asked, voice a half-whisper.

Maya nodded. "I think so."

Sam leaned in, eyes crinkling. "The old-timers say every so often, the mountain wants to help. Not all at once, not for everyone, but just enough to keep things running. The tools—" she glanced at the door Leo had vanished through—"they're just a way for the mountain to lend a hand. If you need it, and if you're willing to pay the favor forward."

Chloe, eavesdropping, beamed. "So we're not cursed. We're deputized."

"Something like that," Sam said, and winked.

Maya took a slow breath. "That's...not really science."

"Nope," Sam agreed, "but it's nice, isn't it?"

Doug called from the other room, "If you're done with the story hour, I need hands on the propane delivery."

Chloe gave a dramatic sigh. "And thus, our magical journey ends in minimum wage labor."

Maya followed her, feeling both more and less certain about the world. Maybe not everything needed to be dissected or proved. Some things, she thought, just wanted to be witnessed.

She turned, just for a second, to look at the shadowed door behind the counter, and saw, or maybe just imagined, the faintest flicker of blue-and-gold light before it settled into darkness again.

Later, as the sun edged toward the horizon and painted the whole valley in a wash of burnished copper, the crew reassembled on the porch, snacks and cold sodas in hand. The air had the smell of dried pine needles and wood smoke, a reminder that the world, even in victory, still expected you to prep for frost.

Sam arrived late, clutching a printout and waving it overhead like a victory pennant. "Guess what I just got in my inbox?"

Chloe made a trumpet sound, then said, "Acceptance letter from the Phony Artifact Hall of Fame?"

Sam grinned. "Close. It's from the university team—they finished the preliminary scan of the site. It's not just Spanish, it's possibly the earliest astronomical observation post in the region."

Doug's eyebrows rose. "They said that?"

"In so many words. There's a whole array of sight lines, and the carbon dating on the post fragments puts it way earlier than any mining. The way they wrote it," Sam said, reading, "it's 'a time capsule of frontier knowledge, more valuable than any presumed treasure.'"

Maya smiled, the words settling into a warm, full place inside her

chest. She looked at Chloe, who for once was quiet, just rolling the edge of her can along her thigh and staring at the distant hills.

"Are they going to keep it safe?" Maya asked, meaning more than just the pit and the posts.

Doug answered before Sam could. "University's making it a research preserve. Locked to treasure hunters, open for real study. You saved it for everyone."

Chloe perked up, playing her part again. "So, wait. The real gold was the nerd friends we made along the way?"

Leo, who'd said almost nothing all evening, finally put down his phone and cleared his throat. The quiet was so complete that even the breeze seemed to hush for him.

"There's a story," Leo said, "from before the first prospectors, about how mountains choose their friends. The old-timers said, if you walk the same path enough, and if you mean well, the mountain lets you in on its secrets. But if you dig for the wrong reasons—if you're greedy or reckless—it just shows you more rock."

He sipped his soda, eyes on the sky. "They said, once every few generations, someone gets a peek at what's really under the surface. And then it's up to them whether to share it or keep it safe. Sometimes, the mountain makes that choice for you."

Nobody moved. The porch seemed suspended, everyone caught between the glow of sunset and the hush of the old story.

Maya looked at Chloe, who met her eyes and grinned. "Guess we passed the test."

Doug nodded, satisfied. Sam beamed, and even Leo let his smile last a little longer than usual.

As the last light hit the far side of the valley, the whole mountain went gold, just for a minute, and everyone on the porch watched without saying a word.

When the sun finally set, they lingered in the afterglow, knowing that whatever came next, Duck Creek would keep spinning, and there would always be another story waiting.

This one, Maya thought, would do just fine for now.

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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.

