the mystery of the navajo neptune

the duck creek mysteries
book two

Don Jones

DonJones.com

for Jayne
thank you for the mountain

the duck creek mysteries

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at Ground + Toasted

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at Hot Mama's Pizza & Brew

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foreword

This volume of the *Duck Creek Mysteries* has a good amount of in-jokes that you'd only "get" if you're a regular in our local Facebook groups. Ashley, for example, is the real-world Master of Pizza at Hot Mama's in Duck Creek Village—and she does indeed love some snow in the winter. Whenever we get a foot or two of powder, we know Ashley's been doing her "rain dance"—and when we get more than a foot, we all beg her to "swing those hips a little less!" Ashley's also a community-builder, constantly encourage folks to "post the last photo from your album," gather at Hot Mama's for community events (like painting night or business owner mixers).

Navajo Lake was indeed a mystery for a long time up on Cedar Mountain, nicknamed "The Vanishing Lake." It fills from rain and snow melt in higher elevations, obviously, but it actually drains straight down into the Virgin River. We can go from a completely full lake in the early Spring to a dusty bowl by early Fall. It's quite a sight, and if you make it early enough in the season, you'll find some wonderful fishing. And, if the fish aren't biting, there's probably a hot pizza waiting for you at Ashley's place.

I should, as always, note that some of the people you'll meet in this story are based on real-life folks who live near, and work in, Duck Creek Village. But the characters in this book *aren't* the same as the real people

that inspired them! So if a character does something you love—or that you don't love so much—please don't think that the real person has anything to do with it. These are *stories,* and everything in them came entirely out of my mind.

Enjoy this *Duck Creek Mystery!*

contents

1. Duck Creek Homecoming 1
2. Legends and Lakes 11
3. The Missing Ducks 23
4. Wisdom at Ground + Toasted 31
5. Assembling the Investigation 37
6. Secrets of Navajo Lake 51
7. The Navajo Neptune 59
8. Confrontation at Hot Mama's 73
9. The History of Duck Creek 83
10. The Duck Detector 93
11. Echoes in Mammoth Cave 109
12. Crisis at Cascade Falls 121
13. Trapped at the Lake 133
14. The Water Speaks 145
15. Unexpected Allies 155
16. Secrets of the Hydrologist 165
17. Confrontation at the Sheriff's Office 175
18. Preparing for the Ceremony 187
19. The Duck Ceremony 201
20. Snowfall Solutions 213
21. Winter's Embrace 229
22. Hot Mama's Celebration 243
23. Secrets and Snow 253
24. The Village Below 265

Epilogue: Spring's Promise 277
Want Free Novels? 287
Also by Don Jones 289
About the Author 295

one
duck creek homecoming

THE SWITCHBACKS out of Duck Creek Canyon did nothing to slow Maya. She'd learned to drive on forest service roads with grades twice as steep. The sedan's engine whined up the last ascent, past the Welcome sign that still bore pellet holes from her grandfather's first year on the mountain. She eased off the accelerator, rolled down her window, and let the cold air slap her awake. The scent was sharp with aspen, woodsmoke, and, faintly, gasoline—a signature of Duck Creek Village even in fall.

She crested the ridge and the Village spread before her. It had always looked more like a movie set than a town. Movie Ranch Road wound through it in a loose S-curve, framed by a row of "mountain contemporary" log cabins, each squatter and more self-important than the last. Glossy pine logs, massive stone foundations, stained-glass transoms. No two buildings matched. The old-timers had claimed it was a rebellion against master plans and HOA nonsense from down in the valley. Maya approved.

She coasted down the main drag. The shoulder doubled as a parking lot, trailhead, and impromptu ATV lane. That meant navigating around the real town traffic—clusters of helmeted kids revving Polaris side-by-sides, their dogs leashed to rear roll bars, plus the obligatory herd of elk lawn ornaments. Most folks parked wherever they lost interest in driving. A grizzled guy in a work vest wrangled a wheelbarrow of pump-

kins across the double yellow. A woman in an orange beanie stapled banners between two aspen trunks: "FALL COLORS FESTIVAL—SATURDAY!" Maya grinned, noting the battered cartoon leaves that had adorned that same banner since her sheep-herding days. Some things never changed.

She slowed at the four-way, yield to pedestrians optional, and caught a glimpse of herself in the bakery's front window. Sunburned cheeks, hair too long, the ghost of sheep-lanolin still in her pores. Just as she remembered from those summers, only now with an adult's awareness of how odd it was to prefer bracing cold to valley heat.

A guy in a green Prime Adventure Outfitters cap jogged in front of her bumper, trailed by two blonde children hoisting a canoe paddle between them. He nodded at her, efficient, not unfriendly, and she nodded back. She liked places where greetings were optional. She liked this place.

She was nearly at the Falcon's Nest, which was technically a "boutique inn" but in practice a short row of log A-frame cabins run by a septuagenarian ex-marine and his wife. The parking lot was gravel, studded with glacial boulders placed by some landscaping maniac. Maya recognized three of the trucks immediately. Locals. And a fourth, a battered Subaru Forester, still caked with last season's dust. She pulled in next to it, rolled up her window, and let the engine idle. She liked the hum. It meant the car was ready if she needed to bail. This was a habit from the days when her family's sheepdog liked to chase the neighbor's llamas.

She watched the scene from inside the car, savoring the way everything had a reason to be exactly where it was. Next door, Hot Mama's Pizza was stringing orange-and-yellow fairy lights above the patio. Across the street, the gear shop displayed last year's snowshoes in a rack shaped like a tipi. Further down, someone had set out a folding table stacked with plastic ducks, which looked as if they were waiting for a race. Or an invasion.

The sky was cloudless, a hard blue that belonged to high elevations and nowhere else. The aspens that lined the road were gold and trembling, their bark white as bone in the late light. Every so often, a gust

carried a handful of leaves spinning into the street. One stuck to her windshield for a heartbeat, then let go.

From somewhere up the block, the sound of a chainsaw—distant but comforting, the way her granddad's voice used to be. She pictured him walking the ridge above town, corralling wayward sheep and cussing about government waste. The only time he'd set foot in the Village was for groceries and a beer. Maya suspected she'd inherited his distaste for "community," but for the moment, she liked being on the edge of it, observing without being required to join.

She turned off the ignition and leaned forward, arms braced on the steering wheel. She watched a woman and her teen son haul a crate of hand-painted gourds into the Falcon's Nest compact office. Festival prep, probably. Through the front window, she saw the proprietor—Mrs. Ruth—setting out hot cider in a Crock-Pot. Maya could almost taste the cinnamon.

She ran her finger down the list in her notebook—find room, check in, meet Ruth, confirm employment details, dinner, and then... research. The real reason for this trip. It was time to see if the legend of the "Drowned Village" under Navajo Lake was anything more than campfire smoke.

She stepped out of the car, feeling the altitude hit her lungs like a soft punch. She liked the sensation. It reminded her she was somewhere most people couldn't handle. She grabbed her battered duffel and slung it over her shoulder, then locked the car with a quick tap.

As she headed for Falcon's Nest, the taste of woodsmoke lingered on the air, but there was something else now—fresh bread, maybe, or the syrupy tang of fermenting apples. The sound of laughter drifted from the general store, and the kids with the canoe paddle were back, now smuggling candy bars under their jackets. The place was alive in a way she didn't remember from summer.

She paused before the Falcon's Nest office, taking it in. Two stories tall, weathered wood that had been well-tended over the years, a totem pole of osprey and trout carved above the door. She put her hand to the cold metal of the door handle and waited, just a moment, for her heart rate to drop to normal. She wasn't nervous, exactly, but she felt something at the edge of her senses. Anticipation.

She stepped inside, ready for whatever was waiting, and the door closed behind her with a decisive click.

The Falcon's Nest office doubled as a trophy room, which meant Maya had to check in while making eye contact with a stuffed bobcat in a miner's helmet. The front desk was unmanned, but Ruth's bellow carried from the next room. "Leave your name on the counter, darling, and grab yourself a cider!"

The hot cider sat on a sideboard, swirling with whole cloves and lemon rinds. Maya poured herself a mug, signed the guestbook, and shuffled down the hall to Room 3. The place was packed with festival decorations in various states of completion: crates of dried corncobs, boxes of light strings, and a suspiciously large pile of fake mustaches. She left her boots by the door and found the room waiting for her—window cracked, a plaid wool blanket folded on the bed, and, as promised, a proper wooden desk.

She dropped her duffel and set about unpacking. First, the essentials: laptop, charger, field notebooks in triplicate, and a battered copy of Western Hydrology, already dog-eared beyond hope. She lined the desk with her spiral-bound research, sorted by color-coded tabs: Lake Myths, Seepage Patterns, Submerged Structures. A Ziplock of fineliners and sticky notes came next. She uncapped the blue and started smoothing the most crumpled pages, working out the wrinkles with the edge of her palm. The desk's grain caught at the paper, leaving a faintly pleasing pattern behind.

She glanced out the window. The desk overlooked the main street, which was busier now than it had been all summer. The village ran on a narrow bandwidth of tourism and tradition, and the Fall Colors Festival was the apex of both. She watched as a man in a football jersey tried to shepherd a dozen yellow rubber ducks into a plastic kiddie pool. The ducks kept leaping the rim and skittering down the gutter, chased by a pack of shouting kids.

From the sidewalk below, two voices rose up, clear enough to be

understood. "I'm telling you, if the rubber ducks don't squeak by sunset, we're doomed. It's basic meteorology."

The other voice, younger, sounded skeptical. "Isn't it actually hydrology? Or physics?"

"Semantics," the first replied, her tone breezy with authority. "Anyway, Ashley's got the whole batch ready for the ceremony. No snow, no sledding, no tourists, no tips. Chain reaction."

The phrase snagged in Maya's mind: Ashley's got the whole batch ready for the ceremony. She wrote it down, underlining "ceremony" three times.

She opened her laptop, flipped through the files, and hesitated before double-clicking "Drowned Village—Theories." It was a pet project, something she'd kept alive since undergrad. Navajo Lake was a strange geological accident—lava-dammed, draining through underground tubes, and, according to legend, sitting atop the ruins of an old logging camp. No official records, just campfire stories and a blurry photo in the general store's bathroom. She was certain there was something down there. The question was what, and how much of it survived the last hundred years underwater.

She checked her phone for cell bars. One and a half, at best. Just enough for a text, if she stood by the window and didn't breathe too hard. She fired off a message to her research partner, Will: Arrived. No sign of last year's water table readings. Will check at source tomorrow. Locals prepping for some kind of duck-based weather ritual—plausible data point or desperate ploy?

She set the phone aside and thumbed through her field notebook, double-checking her planned observation sites. Her mind drifted back to the rubber ducks. Maybe it was just a tourist gag, but she liked the thought of small towns inventing their own science. After all, the best fieldwork came from watching what didn't make sense until it did.

She unpacked the last items: a battered Nalgene, her backup rain jacket, and a sandwich wrapped in waxed paper. She ate standing by the window, watching the last leaves falling from the aspens. Across the street, the guy in the green cap from earlier loaded salt bags into his truck bed, moving with the purposeful grace of someone who'd done it a thousand times.

Behind her, the hum of the inn had picked up. She could hear Ruth orchestrating her guests with the precision of a drill sergeant—"You, dear, hang these up by the fire pit. Sir, please don't let the dogs near the cider. Thank you kindly." Every so often, the bobcat's glass eyes seemed to glare in approval.

As dusk fell, Maya felt the first wave of fatigue hit her. She set her notebook down, checked the lock on the window, and lay back on the quilted bedspread. The conversation from the sidewalk drifted up, fragments caught in the cooling air:

"—told you, there's a record of it in the old ranger station—"

"—legend says if the ducks don't float, the whole lake will drain—"

"—bet you twenty it's just a prank."

She closed her eyes, replaying the snippets. "Ashley's got the whole batch ready for the ceremony." She smiled, promising herself to ask Ruth about it at breakfast. If the town still ran on rubber ducks and folk science, maybe it wasn't as far from her childhood as she'd thought.

She dozed off, mind already assembling the pieces for tomorrow's work. Outside, the last yellow duck made its escape, tumbling end over end toward the culvert, as the first stars stuttered into view.

By the time Maya woke, the mountain had shaken itself out of night and was well into its morning routine. She washed up, dressed in layers—flannel, vest, and then a windbreaker—and padded barefoot to the window. The festival was in full construction mode. Vendors in wool hats hammered together tent poles along the shoulder of Movie Ranch Road, while the bakery across the way filled the air with the smell of cinnamon and yeast. On the porch below, two boys in matching camo hoodies tried (and failed) to tape streamers to a moose rack mounted over the door.

She poured a mug of Ruth's coffee and set up shop at her desk. For the first hour, she edited notes, highlighting passages and scribbling corrections in the margins. When the work stalled, she opened the window a few inches, letting in the alpine air. The morning had bite, and she liked the way it forced her awake.

Around midday, she heard a familiar voice floating up from below: "—don't care how many buckets it takes, we're getting every last duck out of that pond!" The rest was lost in the rattle of a passing delivery truck. But Maya knew the cadence: Finn, the same Finn who'd taught her to catch frogs behind the ranger station and to swear in three different languages before age twelve.

She set her notes aside and watched through the glass. Finn was easy to spot, even among a mob of volunteers: lean, all elbows, with a narrow-shouldered frame that made him look taller than he really was. His cap was pulled low, hiding the sun-bleached hair, but she could see his jaw set with the same determination he'd had as a kid. He wore a navy work jacket patched at the elbows and boots that looked like they'd never been new.

He moved from group to group, corralling helpers, untangling extension cords, and, at one point, lifting a pair of toddlers out of a bin of packing peanuts. It was all efficiency, but every so often, he'd crack a lopsided smile at something a neighbor said, the way you did when you'd spent a lifetime earning people's trust.

Maya found herself grinning, despite her best effort at detachment. She hadn't realized she'd missed this—the simple, tangible problems that could be solved with a screwdriver or a tarp. The last time she'd seen Finn, they'd been waist-deep in Navajo Lake, convinced they were on the verge of finding the foundation stones of the Drowned Village. Instead, they'd found a sunken Porta Potty and gotten leeches in their boots. He'd laughed so hard she'd nearly punched him.

The memory was still fresh when Finn ducked into Hot Mama's Pizza & Brew, two storefronts down. She watched as he ordered at the counter, then pivoted to scan the street. His gaze snagged on her window, and, for a second, their eyes met through the reflection of fairy lights. He squinted, then broke into a grin that was, impossibly, the exact same as when they were kids. He mimed a wave—half ironic, half real.

Maya hesitated only a moment before grabbing her jacket and heading downstairs. She tried to tell herself it was just a fact-finding mission. Finn would know the mechanics of the duck ritual, and, if she asked in the right way, maybe he'd share something the town's official

narratives left out. But as she pulled on her boots and stepped into the chilly air, she realized she was actually nervous.

She crossed the street at the bakery, dodging a family in matching puffer vests. The door to Hot Mama's was propped open, and a wave of heat and basil-scented air hit her as she stepped inside. The place was crowded, but Finn was easy to spot at the back table, hunched over a slice the size of a dinner plate. He looked up and, seeing her, did a double-take that was probably not as subtle as he hoped.

"Well, well, well," he said as she slid into the bench across from him. "The prodigal scientist returns."

"I prefer 'hydrology nerd,'" Maya replied, and snatched a piece of his pizza before he could protest.

"Help yourself, I guess," Finn said, but he was already laughing. "When did you get in?"

"Last night. Ruth put me in Room 3. Still smells like mothballs and cinnamon bears."

He nodded. "Classic. You here for the festival, or...?"

Maya shrugged. "Fieldwork. My advisor wants a current survey on seepage rates. I figure if I'm up here, I might as well see if the Drowned Village is anything more than a tourist trap."

Finn's eyes lit up. "Still on that, huh?"

"Someone's got to solve it," she said. "Might as well be us."

He leaned back, hands laced behind his head. "Funny, I said the same thing to the kids at the duck race. If the ceremonial ducks don't make it all the way down the flume, it's bad juju for winter."

"Yeah, I heard something about that. Is it a weather ritual or just an excuse to flood the parking lot?"

"Bit of both," Finn said. "My uncle started it in the seventies. The legend is, if the ducks 'sing' at the finish line—meaning at least one squeaks loud enough to be heard over the crowd—we get a record snow year. If not, it's drought, and everyone has to go to St. George for sledding."

Maya tried not to roll her eyes. "And it works?"

He took another bite of pizza. "Depends who you ask. But if you want to see the flume, I'm setting it up with Ashley and the others after lunch."

She checked her watch out of habit. “I have until two. Want a hand?”

Finn looked at her, and for a moment, all the intervening years seemed to vanish. “Thought you’d never ask.”

They finished the pizza, swapped updates about mutual friends, and exchanged a long-suffering sigh about the state of mountain internet. When they left the pizzeria, the sun was lower, but the street was even more alive: kids practicing for the duck race in rain boots, the air punctuated by the occasional, triumphant “quack!” from a rogue squeaker.

Maya zipped her jacket against the chill, and as she and Finn headed down the block, she felt something else, too—a low, persistent buzz of possibility. It was the same feeling she got at the mouth of a cave or on a ridge before a thunderstorm: the sense that something was about to happen, and she would get to see it firsthand.

She grinned and jogged to catch up, boots clattering on the wooden sidewalk, her field notebook thumping against her hip. The mysteries of the lake, the legends, the rubber ducks and rituals—they’d all be there tomorrow. Tonight, she had old friends and hot cider and the certainty that she was exactly where she was supposed to be.

two
legends and lakes

MAYA WOKE with a line of sunlight already striping her notebook. She'd fallen asleep editing, blue fineliner pressed between her thumb and forefinger like a safety net. The page beneath her cheek was imprinted with faint, reversed numbers from her field notes. The mountain air had chilled the room, but she liked the way her lungs snapped to attention when she pulled in a first breath. She sat up, untangled herself from the covers, and peered out the window.

Finn was already out. Not just "out of bed," but out—on the sidewalk across from the Falcon's Nest, standing with a posture that said he'd been there a while and intended to be there longer. He had a coil of orange extension cord slung over one shoulder and a mug of something steaming in his left hand. His Prime Adventure Outfitters cap was pulled low against the sun, and his boots looked recently scraped of trail mud, but the rest of him was the same as last night: lean, all elbows, skin made more bronze by the light. He seemed focused, scanning the storefronts as if hunting a quarry only he could see.

Maya changed in thirty seconds flat. She debated contacts versus glasses, then went with glasses because Finn was the kind of person who'd make a joke about laser surgery, and she wanted to give him the chance. She bundled her notebooks and phone in a canvas tote and crammed her feet into the closest shoes she owned to boots—beat-up runners with the soles already curling.

She slipped down the stairs, offered a wave to Ruth, and ignored the bobcat's judgment on her way out. The air outside was sharp enough to startle her awake, full of the smells of woodsmoke, fermenting leaves, and the distinct chemical tang of gasoline from the snowmobile rental. She paused, uncertain, then made for Finn with what she hoped was an unhurried stride. She caught herself grinning.

He saw her before she reached him, but didn't wave. Instead, he dipped his chin and said, "You're late. I've already rewired the whole block."

She let it land, then looked at the extension cord. "Is that the latest in weather instrumentation?"

"Hot Mama's is plugging in the pizza oven," Finn replied. "But the forecast is partly cloudy with a high of cheese."

Maya snorted. "Wow. You've gotten even worse."

Finn's mouth twitched, not quite a smile. "Give me a second." He leaned into the curbside box, wrestled with something inside, then straightened. "There. Now Ashley can make pizza for six hundred and not set the block on fire. Want to grab a slice?"

"Not yet," Maya said, hiking her tote higher. "I'm on a mission."

"Copy that," Finn said. "Lead the way."

They fell in together, moving at the default mountain town pace—fast enough to get places, slow enough to pretend you weren't in a hurry. The aspen leaves were bright against the morning sky, gold and coin-flat, and their shadows flickered in and out as the pair threaded between parked trucks and vendor tents.

Hot Mama's Pizza & Brew was just opening its outdoor patio. Two picnic tables already had regulars at them, insulated mugs steaming. The air was thick with the smell of rising dough, yeast and sugar and the faintest undertone of tomato sauce. Maya hesitated just before the patio. "Do you want to sit—?"

"I prefer to stand," Finn said, but he steered them to a table anyway. "I'll make an exception for science."

She flopped onto the bench, then set her tote on the table and started unloading. Her notebooks fanned across the weathered wood, each one battered and labeled with tape. Finn regarded them with the same cautious respect he might give a wild animal.

"You still color-code," he said.

"I upgraded to tabs," she replied. "Best three dollars I ever spent."

Finn unslung his cord and set his mug on the table. Up close, he looked like he'd spent the entire off-season outdoors—skin tanned, hair faded almost white at the tips. He wore the same uniform as in their teens: cargo pants with too many pockets, three layers of t-shirts, and a windbreaker with the Prime logo stitched in threadbare green. The only concession to adulthood was the digital watch on his wrist, which he never stopped glancing at.

He scanned her setup. "So. Are we going to solve the mystery of the Drowned Village, or just build a better duck race?"

"Why not both?" Maya said, and started flipping to a page she'd dog-eared twice.

Finn took a long drink from his mug. "You go first."

She launched into her pitch: "It's a closed-basin lake, right? Lava flow dams the basin, water drains only through underground channels. But the old legend says there's a logging camp under the lake, and some of the older residents claim it resurfaces every drought year. I think they're actually seeing the effects of rapid drawdown exposing substructures. Like, foundation piers and whatnot."

Finn nodded, neutral. "Go on."

She tapped her notebook. "The last USGS readings from the '90s show three distinct drawdown spikes in the past century. Each time, local legends say the 'ghosts' of the village show up at the lake. It lines up."

He waited a beat, then said, "What if the outflow is seasonal, but the local hydrology doesn't match the recharge data? The lake's drop rate is too high for just evaporation."

Maya felt her eyebrows creep up. "You measured the outflow?"

"Multiple years," Finn said, matter-of-fact. "I mapped the caves on the north end. There are at least two sinkholes on the bottom, but nobody's ever dived them."

She tried to suppress her excitement, but it came out as a choked, "Wait—you mapped it?"

He reached into his windbreaker, produced a rolled sheet of paper, and unscrolled it. The chart was hand-drawn, meticulously shaded in

blue pencil, with every contour line rendered with a draftsman's precision. "Navajo Lake bathymetry," he said, spreading it flat. "I started it as a joke for the Scout troop, but it got out of hand."

She ran her fingers over the chart, reverent. "I could marry you for this."

"I'm a poor provider," Finn said, deadpan, "and you'd have to fight Ashley for custody of the ducks."

Maya laughed. She traced the sinkholes with a fingertip, already thinking of how to correlate the depths with her own data. "Have you ever tried a dye trace?"

"Couple times. We used food coloring in high school, but you'd need something heavier for a real test. My money's on a spring complex near Cascade Falls, but I can't prove it yet."

She stared at him. "How is it possible you never told me any of this?"

He shrugged. "You left for college. I figured you'd get there first."

She bit her lip, unsure whether to feel guilty or flattered. Instead, she poured over the chart again, mentally stitching it to the pages in her research file. "You have no idea how much this means to me," she said. It was as close to vulnerable as she'd let herself get before breakfast.

Finn shrugged again, but there was a new warmth at the edge of his smile. "You always did like weird water more than people."

"Water never let me down," she said, then realized it sounded sad. "You know what I mean."

He nodded, and there was a comfortable silence. Around them, the village had begun its daily hum—delivery trucks rumbling, the bakery firing up its ovens, the first wave of tourists walking by with insulated coffee cups. Sunlight moved across the table, warming the chart, making the blue pencil lines brighter.

Finn spoke first. "What do you want to do with all this?"

"Everything," Maya said, then, more practical, "I want to run a full tracer dye, collect current data on all the seepage zones, and maybe—just maybe—dive the main sinkhole if I can get someone to spot me."

He considered. "I'll spot you."

She didn't expect him to say yes, not that fast. "You sure?"

"I'd rather you didn't drown," Finn said, almost smiling. "Plus, if you break a leg, I get your notebooks."

"You'd be lost in my system," Maya said, but the exchange made her weirdly happy.

She noticed his hand, resting on the table near hers. There was a scar on his knuckle she didn't remember, a pale slash that looked recent.

She nodded at it. "What happened there?"

He glanced down. "Unclogging a snowblower in February. Got a little cocky. Or maybe the machine did."

She snorted. "Some things never change."

He let it hang there, then said, "You want to see the flume setup? Ashley and the kids rigged it out back. Good excuse to test our dye."

Maya capped her pen and started stacking her notebooks. "Lead the way."

They walked the perimeter of the building, Finn holding the door for her, Maya holding her tote to her chest. The air was still cold, but she barely noticed it now. She watched the back of Finn's head as he navigated the side lot, noting how he checked the ground for ice or debris, how he instinctively moved to shield her from a low-hanging sign. It was equal parts annoying and endearing.

The "flume" was a twenty-foot section of black plastic gutter, propped up on cinderblocks at a gentle slope. A five-gallon bucket perched at the top, ready to dump water (or, in festival season, rubber ducks) down to a blue kiddie pool at the finish line.

Finn pointed. "Ashley made the kids run time trials. The record is under three seconds."

Maya grinned. "Can we test it?"

He nodded, picked up the bucket, and filled it from a spigot. "Go ahead. Your call—plain water, or full experimental dye?"

She fished in her tote, produced a neon green dye packet, and tore it open. "Ready when you are."

Finn poured. The water roared down the gutter, the dye blooming in a shocking ribbon that glowed in the sun. Maya knelt at the bottom and captured a sample in a clear cup, holding it up for Finn to see.

"It's even brighter than I thought," she said, pleased.

He bent down to look at it. “Bet you could track that clear to the springs.”

She straightened, feeling the caffeine, cold, and anticipation all working together in her blood. “Want to make it interesting?”

He smirked. “Loser buys the winner dinner at the Pie Hole.”

“Deal,” Maya said.

They stood there for a moment, both trying to look serious and failing. The village’s background noise rolled on—the rattle of delivery trucks, the distant cackle of children, the steady pulse of the bakery next door.

Finn glanced at his watch, then back at her. “We’ve got an hour before the next prep meeting. Want to walk the lake?”

“Always,” Maya said.

They headed off together, boots (and sneakers) crunching over the gravel, dye sample glowing in Maya’s hand like a captured ghost. She wasn’t sure if they’d solve the mystery of the Drowned Village, or even if there was one to solve, but it didn’t matter. She liked this part—the walking, the talking, the feeling that the right company made even the weirdest problems seem not just possible, but fun.

And in that moment, under the October sun, with the aspen leaves trembling above them and the whole day ahead, Maya felt exactly the way she always had as a kid on the mountain: unstoppable.

They took the long way to Navajo Lake, weaving through the back roads that stitched the village together. The air was thin and sharp, the morning sun coming up over the aspens and making everything a little too bright. Finn had slowed his usual pace, letting Maya set the rhythm, but she noticed how he still checked the ground for ice at every north-facing bend. Old instincts.

The sidewalk soon vanished, replaced by a shoulder of loose gravel and, eventually, a dirt path that wound through a corridor of shimmering gold. Most of the aspen leaves had fallen, slicking the trail with yellow discs. Every few steps, a gust of wind spun them into the air, and the whole world flickered like a filmstrip. Finn broke the silence first.

"You ever hear the legend of the Drowned Village?" he asked.

Maya arched an eyebrow, already anticipating his angle. "The official one, or the weird one with the floating coyote?"

He grinned, then shook his head. "Neither. The one the elders tell. About the spirit of the water."

She sidestepped a puddle, then looked up. "I'm listening."

Finn pointed ahead with a calloused finger. "You know the outflow tunnel? The one the Forest Service says is just a lava tube?"

"Yeah."

"Supposedly, it's guarded by a spirit. A kind of... mountain Neptune. Keeps the water balanced. If you try to force the lake lower than it's supposed to be, he floods the valley."

Maya snorted. "You're making this up."

"Not even a little." Finn stopped, nudged a stray stone off the path with the toe of his boot. "The old guys say the original village tried to dig out a bypass so they could float more logs downstream. Ended up draining the lake overnight. Killed the whole settlement."

Maya thought about it, running her tongue along her teeth as she did when she was working out a logic puzzle. "But the lava dam is, what, a thousand years old? The modern lake's only been here since the early 1900s."

Finn shrugged. "Stories outlive facts, I guess. But there's a reason nobody wants to mess with the bottom of the lake. Even now, locals won't dive it."

They moved on, Maya's brain shuffling the myth alongside her own data. "If there's any truth to it, I wonder if it's a translation error. Maybe there's a layer of CO2 at the bottom, or a pressure change. Something that'd asphyxiate you, or—"

"Or pull you under," Finn said, his voice lower.

Maya grinned. "You always did want to believe in monsters."

Finn tilted his head. "What's wrong with a few monsters? Beats spreadsheets."

"Not my spreadsheets," she said, fishing one of her color-coded notebooks from her tote. "I've got four years of barometric readings, seepage logs, and a whole appendix of wild stories like yours. Want to see?"

He held out his hand, and she surrendered the notebook, watching as he thumbed through the tabs with surprising care. "You do realize you're the only person who could cross-reference ancient petroglyphs and pH levels and actually make it interesting?"

Maya beamed, the compliment hitting harder than she expected. "Thanks. I think."

They fell quiet as the woods opened up to a view of the lake. Navajo Lake was shaped like a misshapen bean, deep blue and hemmed by cliffs on all sides. At the far shore, someone in a neon vest was already setting up the safety buoys for the weekend paddle race. On the near side, a flock of Canada geese performed a slow-motion takeoff, wings beating the water with military rhythm.

Finn handed the notebook back. "So what's your theory? If the lake's haunted, what's actually going on?"

She leaned on the guardrail, considering. "My theory? The lava tubes under the lake act like a siphon. If the water drops too low, air gets in, breaks the seal, and the whole lake drains like a bathtub. Then, because it's a closed basin, it takes years to refill. So, to anyone watching from the shore, it'd look like the water vanished overnight."

He nodded. "But that wouldn't explain the 'hauntings.' Or the stories of people getting pulled under."

Maya tapped her notebook. "Hydrogen sulfide pockets. Or pressure drops causing temporary hypoxia. People pass out, sink before they know what hit them."

Finn grinned, a full-toothed smile this time. "You always did have an answer."

"Not always the right one," Maya said, but she smiled back.

They stood together a while, watching the wind roughen the water's surface. The lake was already busy, even at this hour—fishermen at the dock, kids chasing ducks along the bank, a pair of paddleboarders bundled in neoprene. The whole scene had a self-contained energy, as if the town ran on the lake's pulse.

Finn reached into his pocket and pulled out a laminated card. "Ashley wanted us to grab the race markers from the boathouse. You up for a detour?"

Maya checked her watch. "I've got forty minutes before the first workshop. Let's hustle."

They followed the path around the shoreline, passing the picnic area where volunteers were setting up the finish line. Hot Mama's was prepping for the lunch rush; the smell of baking crust followed them all the way to the boathouse, mixing with the mineral tang of the lake and the dusty sweetness of decaying leaves.

Inside, it was cool and dark, the air thick with the scent of old life-jackets and wet rope. Finn found the crate of markers right where he said it'd be. He shouldered the box, and Maya grabbed a handful of caution tape for good measure.

"You ever think about moving back?" Finn asked, voice echoing off the walls.

Maya thought for a second. "Sometimes. But I always thought I'd have to, I don't know, prove something first. Like I couldn't just come back and be the weird girl who asks too many questions."

Finn balanced the crate against his hip. "For what it's worth, the weird girl's always been my favorite."

She rolled her eyes but didn't argue. Instead, she slung the caution tape over her shoulder and headed out, Finn trailing behind.

On the walk back, she told him about the time she'd broken into the old ranger station and found a cache of hand-drawn maps from the '60s, every one annotated with weird water levels and cryptic margin notes. Finn matched her story for story, recounting his own ill-fated experiment with building an "ice dam" and nearly freezing his cousin's ATV in the process.

By the time they circled back toward the center of the village, the sidewalks were busy with festival traffic. Vendors shouted about discounts on thermal socks and maple candy. A couple in matching puffer jackets posed for photos in front of the Hot Mama's duck mural. Finn and Maya threaded through the crowd, laughing at inside jokes and occasionally stopping to field questions from the locals, who seemed to accept that every fall, the two of them would end up collaborating on something "weird and messy."

They were a few hundred feet from the pizzeria when the air changed. Not temperature, exactly—more like the atmospheric pres-

sure had shifted. The sound of traffic stuttered. Dogs stopped barking. Every voice in the vicinity seemed to hush at once, replaced by a low, confused murmur.

Maya saw it first: on the patio outside Hot Mama's, a woman stood with both hands braced on her table, eyes wide and jaw slack. Several other patrons were craning their necks to see over the rail. A server in the doorway had dropped her tray, sending pizza slices and soda cans rolling across the boards.

"What's up?" Maya asked, but Finn was already moving, the crate of race markers forgotten.

He jogged across the parking lot and Maya followed, heart doing a weird two-step in her chest. By the time she reached the patio, half a dozen people had crowded to the rail, all peering at the ditch that ran parallel to the main road.

Finn slipped in beside the woman with the startled expression. "Something happen?"

She nodded, pointing down. "I swear—I just saw a guy in the creek. Not, like, walking. He was floating. Pale. Face down."

Finn looked, but the ditch was empty except for a churn of dead leaves and a single yellow duck bobbing in the current. "You sure?"

She nodded harder. "He was there a second ago. Then just... gone."

Maya leaned over the rail, scanning the length of the drainage ditch. "Did anyone check the culvert?" she asked.

A kid with a skateboard piped up. "Leads all the way to the old mill pond."

Finn looked at Maya, and she could tell he was already calculating: time, distance, water speed. "We should check it out," he said.

Maya was already hopping down from the patio. She landed, knees bent, then took off along the bank, sneakers slipping on the slick grass. Finn was just behind, the two of them moving in a way that felt both urgent and utterly familiar.

The creeklet twisted behind the row of shops, picking up speed as it dropped into a concrete channel. The yellow duck led the way, tumbling end over end, its squeaker occasionally emitting a forlorn honk. Maya kept her eyes peeled for anything out of place—fabric, a shoe, the telltale shadow of a person.

They reached the culvert. It was a round, corrugated tunnel, maybe three feet in diameter. The duck hit the opening, hesitated for a moment, then vanished into darkness. Maya knelt down, peering into the gloom, but saw nothing but the glimmer of water and the receding echo of the duck.

Finn crouched next to her. "If there's someone stuck in there—"

"We call the fire department," Maya said, not even winded.

He nodded, pulled out his phone, and dialed. Maya listened as he relayed the situation—possible person in the culvert, headed toward the mill pond, could be serious. The dispatcher promised a crew in under five minutes.

By the time Finn hung up, Maya had already crawled halfway into the culvert, bracing herself on elbows and knees. The cold was immediate, biting through her jacket. Finn cursed, then followed, feet first, to anchor her by the ankles.

"You see anything?" he called.

"Just water. And the duck." Her voice bounced back at her, twice as loud in the tunnel.

She crawled further. The tunnel opened into a small concrete chamber, just before the drop into the pond. There, swirling in the eddy with the duck, was a scrap of denim and the torn-off sleeve of a flannel shirt.

Maya called back, "Found clothing, but no body. Might have been a false alarm."

She heard Finn breathe out, relief mixing with something else. "Let's get out before we get hypothermia."

They backtracked, then tumbled out onto the grass. Maya laughed, partly from adrenaline, partly because she realized she'd scraped a line of mud across her face.

Finn offered her a hand up, then grinned when she took it. "Well, that was exciting."

She wiped at her nose. "Still not as bad as the time we found the possum skeleton in Mammoth Cave."

He shook his head, but he was smiling, too. "Nothing will ever top that."

The siren came soon after, the volunteer fire crew arriving with a mix of intensity and "only-in-a-small-town" nonchalance. Finn

explained, Maya demonstrated, and within a few minutes, the search was downgraded to "highly unlikely, but we'll keep checking the mill pond."

The crowd dispersed, reassured or disappointed. The woman on the patio returned to her pizza, hands shaking only a little. The yellow duck floated in the pond, triumphant.

Finn dusted off his hands. "Guess the mountain Neptune strikes again."

Maya, streaked with mud and alive with curiosity, couldn't argue. She glanced at the pond, then at Finn, and then at her ruined sneakers.

"So, lunch?" she asked.

He nodded, the answer obvious. "Lunch. And then we test the dye in the real sinkhole."

They walked back toward the village, side by side. The tension from before had dissolved, replaced by an energy that only came from running at a problem, together.

They were only halfway to Hot Mama's when Maya stopped, looked back at the pond, and said, "You know, I wonder if—"

Finn cut her off, "Save it for the notebooks."

She grinned, shrugged, and kept walking. Sometimes, she thought, it took more than a monster story or a weird water table to make a place feel like home. Sometimes, all it took was someone to chase ducks and legends with you, even if the only thing you found at the end was a scrap of flannel and a plastic squeak.

The rest, she figured, could wait for tomorrow.

three
the missing ducks

HOT MAMA'S PIZZA & Brew was a riot of orange when Finn and Maya stepped in from the wind. The entryway was hung with strings of pumpkin-shaped lights, each bulb alternating between flashing and slow glow. The host stand was an actual longboard, sanded smooth and sealed in thick resin, propped up on two oil drums painted to look like campfires. The walls inside had been hit with paper leaves, all crayon-bright and curling, while each table sported a centerpiece built from acorns and those fake spiderwebs that never quite come off your fingers.

None of it quite covered the other, stronger theme: cheese. The place smelled like a carb lover's daydream—yeast, basil, oven char, and something sticky-sweet beneath it, maybe a trace of cider.

Finn shrugged out of his jacket, picked a booth with a view of both the pizza line and the patio, and left Maya to claim her side. She hesitated at the edge of the vinyl seat, more interested in the blackboard menu above the counter. Each specialty pie had been renamed for the festival, with things like "Sasquash Supreme" and "Pepperoni Blizzard" stenciled in chalk.

But the real show was behind the register. Ashley, owner and kitchen generalissimo, stood with her hands braced on the prep counter, hunched over a stack of forms. She wore her signature tie-dyed shirt, a dusting of flour down the front, and a streak of tomato paste at

her collarbone. Her hair was tied back in a bun so tight it looked ready to snap.

The moment she spotted Finn, her eyes got wide and she motioned him over with a "come hither, this is a code red" sort of gesture. He made a small sound—equal parts amusement and resignation—and stood.

"Want to see a local meltdown?" he asked Maya.

She gathered her notes, one hand flattening a wild cowlick behind her ear. "How could I not?"

They crossed to the counter, weaving past a kid in a football jersey gnawing a breadstick and a trio of older women dissecting the festival program. The closer they got, the clearer it became that Ashley's energy was less "enthused" and more "on the verge."

"Finn. Thank everything. I need backup." Ashley's tone was frantic, but she offered Maya a quick smile. "Sorry, you must be Maya. Finn said you'd be here. I'm about to lose it."

Maya managed a "Hey," her voice edged with caffeine and curiosity.

Ashley jabbed a finger at a pair of empty cardboard boxes near the register. Each was labeled "Duck Creek Ducks—Event Only!" in marker. "They're gone," she said, breath hitching. "Every single one. Overnight."

Finn leaned in, squinting at the boxes. "You mean the prizes? Someone lifted them?"

"Not just that. It's sabotage," Ashley said, voice dropping to a stage whisper. "These weren't ordinary ducks. They were ceremonial. Special batch, delivered Wednesday. I had them locked in my shed, and now—poof. Gone."

Maya, eyebrows climbing, said, "Someone stole your rubber ducks."

Ashley nodded. "I know it sounds dumb. But these were for the Snow Summoning tomorrow. We do a duck race down the big flume after the parade, and it's supposed to prime the water cycle for a killer winter. There are, like, a dozen elementary classrooms depending on this."

Finn kept a straight face, but there was a faint tick at the corner of his mouth. "Who else has access to the shed?"

Ashley snorted, hands slicing the air. "No one! I mean, I've got a

backup set, but those are the ones from last year. And the new ones have the special squeaker."

She picked up an orphaned duck from under the register and compressed it with a practiced thumb. Instead of the usual shrill, it produced a low, almost purring honk. "They're tuned," she said, "to the sound of the lake sinkhole. Pure science. Or possibly voodoo. Either way, I don't want to let the town down."

Maya was scribbling in her notebook, her skepticism radiating from the set of her jaw. "You really think the sound makes a difference?"

Ashley fixed her with a look. "Have you ever seen a snowless winter up here?"

Maya opened her mouth, reconsidered, and closed it.

Ashley went on, "It's tradition. And, honestly, the only thing half these kids look forward to after Halloween."

Finn glanced at Maya, who only shrugged. "Worth a look," she said, "if only for the data."

A customer called Ashley's name, and she darted off to hand over a pizza, then circled back, her focus still laser sharp. "Finn, could you maybe check around the back for me? And ask Mike at the Trail Stop if anyone's been acting shady?"

Finn agreed, and they slid back to their booth, Maya's notes still out, Finn idly rolling the tuned duck between his palms.

They sat in silence for a second, the noise of the place washing over them—music, laughter, the constant slam of the oven door. Finally, Maya spoke.

"You don't actually believe in snow-rituals, do you?"

Finn considered. "I believe in community. If a duck race gets people through the winter, why fight it?"

She made a face but wrote it down anyway, then asked, "Did you hear her say 'sinkhole sound'?"

Finn nodded. "Ashley gets her science from YouTube. But her uncle used to tell us that the sinkhole makes a 'whale song' when the water's moving fast. Never proved it, but it's a good story."

They watched Ashley dart back and forth, checking the patio, then stopping to smooth her palm across the frosted window as if willing the temperature to drop. "Is she always like this?" Maya asked.

"Only when snow's on the line," Finn said. "Ashley's the only person who's ever convinced the whole town to do a snow dance at midnight."

Maya tapped her pen against the page. "Is there any chance someone's messing with her? Like, a rival business? Or a prank?"

Finn scanned the room. "Maybe. But this place runs on pranks. Most are harmless. You have to really want to stir the pot to target the ducks."

Ashley circled back with a pair of mugs, one foaming over with cider and the other steaming black. She set them down, then perched on the edge of the booth.

"Sorry, I can't sit," she said, bouncing one knee. "I'm vibrating. I just—" She broke off, glancing at the front door. "If the ducks aren't found, the whole tradition's ruined. The town blames me. Or worse, the kids stop believing."

Finn reached for the cider, sipped. "We'll look into it, Ash. You have a suspect?"

She shook her head. "I've got a list of people who think the ritual is bogus, but most are harmless. The only person who ever really argued with me about it is Marcus Thorne, and he doesn't show up till mid-December."

Maya perked up at the name. "The real estate guy?"

Ashley nodded, lips pursing. "He's always pushing for 'modernization' or whatever, and he thinks the duck race is a waste of 'economic bandwidth.' If I had to guess, he's behind it."

"Any proof?" Maya asked, all business.

"Not yet. But I'll check the security footage tonight. If you want to help, meet me after five."

She scooped up the empty boxes and zipped away, leaving a whiff of flour and frustration in her wake.

Finn took another pull from his mug. "You ready to do some actual detective work?"

Maya, expression impossible to read, wrote something in her notes. "It's a lead. And if it overlaps with the lake data, even better."

They watched Ashley through the window as she stomped a ring in

the patio snow, then paused to touch a pattern of ice crystals spreading across the pane.

"She's not faking," Finn said.

"I know," Maya replied, voice quiet. "I just... wish I could believe as hard as she does."

Finn reached for the duck, thumbed the squeaker, and placed it between them. It made a small, sad sound, almost like a whistle.

Maya's mouth twitched, then settled into something determined. "Let's find those ducks," she said. "If only for the data."

And with that, the case was open.

They'd barely stood to leave when the kitchen door thudded open. Dale came out carrying a dish towel, hands still dripping. He wore the look of a man who'd seen three dozen festival seasons and learned the exact effort to waste on each. His hair was as gray as slush, his flannel untucked and patched with honest grease. He wiped his fingers on the towel, then on his jeans, and squinted at Maya through the haze of wood-fired heat.

"You're the scientist," he said, as if it were a dare.

Maya raised a hand in greeting, unsure whether to claim the title or not. "Hydrology grad student," she offered. "Mostly. Is this about the duck thing?"

Dale took the booth seat opposite her, nudging Finn aside with the bulk of his knee. "It's all the duck thing," he said. "Every year. Always comes down to water."

Ashley, still running at maximum RPM, materialized with a pie and slid it onto the table. "Dad's got his own theory," she said. "But he won't tell me because he thinks I'll blog about it."

Dale waited until she'd flitted away, then leaned in. "You believe in luck, Maya?"

She hesitated. "I believe in statistics."

He chuckled, then turned the question to Finn, who only grinned and said, "I believe in winter."

Dale nodded. "Good answer. Now—" He pointed at Maya's note-

book, still open to a page of sketched drainage basins. "You ever notice how the snow line's always a couple weeks late if the parade gets rained out?"

"I noticed the lake levels change," she said. "But I figured that was normal variance."

He chewed on that, eyes narrowing. "Stolen water never flows straight," he said. "Same with luck. If something's missing, the mountain notices. Maybe not fast, but it does."

He let the thought hang, like a line in a fishless pond.

Maya tapped her pen, irritation and interest mixing. "You think the missing ducks are causing a drought?"

Dale considered, then made a "not quite" motion with his hand. "Not a drought. Just... a delay. The ducks are a kind of promise. The kids send them out to the lake, the mountain keeps up its end and delivers snow. You break the chain, maybe the storm's late. Maybe it's smaller. Maybe, next year, the lake never fills."

Finn said, "I always thought the flume thing was just for fun."

Dale shrugged. "Fun is how you get people to do the right thing."

He sopped up a bead of water on the tabletop, then eyed Maya again. "You know about the Drowned Village?"

She straightened. "A little. It's mostly a ghost story, right?"

He leaned back, satisfied. "It's a story, sure. But there's some truth in it. The lake covers a lot of old timber, and sometimes, if the water's just right, you can see the rooftops under the ice. The elders used to say the first settlers tried to cheat the mountain—cut too many trees, didn't replant, drained the lake for irrigation. Then the floods came, and the village vanished."

He tapped the table, each finger heavy with meaning. "Now, every year, we run the ducks. Keep the cycle honest."

Maya glanced at Finn, half-expecting him to call it a myth. Instead, he just watched Dale, weighing every word.

"So," Maya said, "you think if we find the ducks, the snow will come?"

Dale gave a slow nod. "Maybe. Or maybe it's just the right thing to do. Either way, better than doing nothing."

Ashley reappeared, a dusting of powdered sugar trailing in her

wake. “If anyone can find them, it’s these two,” she said, planting herself at Finn’s elbow. “I’ve got to start on the next batch, but if you need a key to the shed, just yell.”

She hustled off, leaving Dale and the pie. He reached over, cut a wedge, and handed it to Maya. “Eat. The mountain doesn’t like hungry people.”

She took it, suddenly aware of how little she’d eaten since dawn.

Dale stood, then paused, looking down at Finn. “Check with the shop up the road—loose lips and all that. And the boys at the gas station, they always know when someone’s driving around at odd hours.”

Finn nodded. “We’ll make the rounds.”

Dale gave Maya a last look, a little less challenge, a little more respect. “If you want to see the lake up close, go tomorrow before sunrise. You’ll get better readings.”

She jotted it down, even though she’d planned to do it anyway.

When they finally stood to leave, the room felt less tense, more like the old memory of a warm kitchen in a cold world.

Outside, the wind had picked up. Maya zipped her jacket and fell into step beside Finn, ducking her chin into the collar. For a long minute, neither said anything.

Then Finn: “Do you think Dale’s onto something?”

She thought it over, seriously. “I think people notice patterns before science can explain them. And sometimes, the ritual is the explanation, at least until someone’s got better data.”

Finn grinned. “So, are we chasing ducks, or chasing ghosts?”

“Both,” Maya said, surprising herself with how much she meant it. “But I want to start with the ducks.”

They made their way up the sidewalk, boots slipping now and then on the patches of black ice that always formed ahead of the forecast. Finn stopped once to flick a yellowed leaf from the rim of a storm drain. Maya let her mind run ahead, organizing the next steps: the shed, the Trail Stop, maybe even a detour to the lake at dawn. She could almost taste the ozone in the air—the way it always came before a storm, or before something bigger.

They rounded the corner by the bakery, and Finn said, "Dale's right about one thing."

She raised an eyebrow.

He grinned. "The mountain hates hungry people. Next time, I'm ordering two pies."

She laughed, her breath steaming in the cold. "And I'll bring better boots."

They walked on, the village behind them brighter now, each window a little beacon against the gray. Ahead, the road curved up toward the forest line, and somewhere above them, the mountain watched—waiting to see if they could set things right, one lost duck at a time.

four
wisdom at ground + toasted

IF FINN HAD to choose his favorite building in Duck Creek, it was Ground + Toasted. Not for the bread—though the sourdough was as good as legend—but for the way the place managed to feel both ancient and freshly built, like the smell of earth after a rain. The interior ran on warmth: every wall wood-paneled, every table hand-rubbed until the knots shone. There was a bar top made from a single, impossible slab of ponderosa, the grain running wild as a river. Baskets of loaves cooled behind the counter, their crusts singing out tiny cracks, while the far end of the shop was stacked with glass jars of lavender, dried citrus, and something dark that looked like crushed obsidian.

Finn held the door for Maya, who entered with the usual slow-motion scan of the room. Her notebook was already open, a page marked with color-coded tabs. She paused, then scribbled something before even taking in the menu.

Brandi was at the counter, kneading dough with a reverence usually reserved for temples. She wore a black apron dusted with flour and, as always, a long braid that trailed down her back like a licorice rope. She looked up, saw Finn and Maya, and her face lit with a smile that seemed to start in her eyes and work outward.

"Finn!" she called, then, "Maya! It's been too long. You're both up before the baker's dozen today."

Finn offered a wave; Maya replied, “Your loaves smell criminal, Brandi. Is that lavender or something stronger?”

“Trade secret, but you’re warm,” Brandi said, then shaped the dough into a braid and set it aside. She wiped her hands and motioned them over. “I saw on the festival schedule you’d be doing your science thing. How’s the water?”

Maya raised an eyebrow, flipped to the blue section of her notebook. “Lower than last year. But there’s an anomaly at the lake. I need to run some tests to confirm.”

Brandi nodded, already reaching for two mugs. “Randy!” she called, her voice carrying over the low hum of the espresso grinder. “Coffees, please. You know what these two need.”

Randy—who looked built for a different century, all shoulders and stoic silence—materialized behind the bar. He wore heavy denim and boots with the sort of tread that could leave a mark on solid rock. His hands, as always, looked freshly sandblasted. He said nothing, but his chin-dip served as a greeting. Finn wondered if Maya even noticed.

Brandi leaned in, elbows on the polished pine. “I heard about the duck thing,” she said, lowering her voice. “Not just from Ashley, either. The whole town’s talking. You think it’s just a prank?”

Finn shrugged. “Could be. Or it’s someone with too much time and an axe to grind.”

“Or,” Maya chimed in, “it’s an honest-to-god eco-mystery. Did you know the original duck tradition started as a way to monitor runoff? The old timers used to count the ducks to measure flow rate.”

Brandi’s smile grew. “That’s the story they tell you at college. But here? We know the ducks are for balance.”

Finn traded a glance with Maya. He knew this was coming, but she was unprepared for Brandi in full mystical mode.

“See, the duck race mimics the first snowmelt,” Brandi said, voice soft. “When you pour all those little ducks down the chute, it makes a sound—the squeak, the tumbling, the splash at the end. It tells the creek, ‘wake up.’ It tells the mountain, ‘we’re ready for winter.’ You skip the tradition, the whole system gets confused.”

Maya’s pen hesitated above the paper. “You think the ecosystem notices missing rubber ducks?”

Brandi didn't miss a beat. "Not the ducks, exactly. The memory of them. The sound. Every system needs a ritual to remind it what comes next. We run the ducks, the mountain remembers to start the snow."

Randy set the two mugs on the counter, one black, one ringed with a swirl of steamed milk. Finn reached for his, the heat soaking into his palms.

"Not to poke holes in the folklore," Maya said, "but the lake's outflow is governed by the lava dam and the snowpack, not ceremonies."

Brandi tilted her head, smiling. "If that's what you want to believe, sweetie, it's fine. But you of all people know that the water up here doesn't play by anyone's rules."

She reached beneath the counter, came up with a thick slice of sourdough, and tore it in half. "Here. Try this."

Maya took the bread, sniffed, then bit. She chewed, paused, and frowned. "That's... tangier than usual."

Brandi beamed. "Fermented with starter grown from Navajo Lake water."

Finn saw the surprise flicker across Maya's face. She took another bite, slower this time, as if she could taste the story Brandi had baked in.

"I swear I can taste minerals," Maya said, "and maybe a hint of, I don't know, algae?"

Brandi laughed. "That's the village, Maya. That's the memory. Water remembers everything. Even what it covers up."

Finn sipped his coffee, watching as Maya's skepticism turned into something closer to respect, or maybe wariness.

Randy, who had been wiping the counter with the kind of intensity reserved for surgeons, finally spoke. His voice was low, but it carried: "Water pressure's been wrong for a week."

Brandi nodded, not at all surprised. "The pipes in the bakery run off the main from Duck Creek. When the ducks went missing, the pressure dropped, but only during the pre-dawn. Every morning, I have to re-prime the coffee line."

Finn looked at Maya. She was scribbling already, the words "pre-dawn anomaly" underlined three times.

Randy poured himself a mug, leaned one hip against the back bar.

"The mountain knows when something's wrong," he said, and Finn realized it was the first time he'd ever heard Randy volunteer a sentence longer than five words.

Maya asked, "Has anything else gone weird? Like, in the village, or at the lake?"

Brandi shrugged. "Just the usual strangeness. The lights by the bridge flickered out last night, but that happens every fall when the elk rut. Power surges, the old-timers say. I say it's the mountain clearing its throat."

Finn grinned, but Maya pressed on. "What about the rumor that the Drowned Village resurfaces during low water years? Anyone see anything?"

Brandi's eyes gleamed. "Only if you look close, and only at sunrise. There's a spot on the west shore where the logs float up, like they're reaching for air. My dad said if you listen, you can hear the ghosts singing."

Finn watched as Maya tried to dismiss it, but he knew her well enough to see the note of fascination.

Brandi wiped her hands on her apron, then came around the counter and pressed a loaf of the lake-bread into Maya's hands. "Take this. Eat it at dawn by the water, and tell me if you don't feel something."

Maya, caught off guard, just nodded.

Randy pointed a blunt finger at Finn. "You still got that old snow probe?"

Finn blinked. "Yeah. Why?"

Randy shrugged. "Might be worth checking the beaver flats. Last time the water got weird, that's where it started."

Finn filed it away. "Thanks."

Randy nodded, then retreated to the espresso grinder, the message delivered.

Brandi leaned in, dropping her voice. "One more thing. This isn't just about snow. You mess with the water cycle, you wake up what sleeps in the Drowned Village. That's not a legend. It's a warning."

Finn felt the temperature in the room drop a fraction.

Brandi straightened, smile back in place. “But I’m sure you two will figure it out. That’s what you’re good at, right?”

Maya, uncharacteristically silent, just nodded, the loaf cradled in her elbow like an assignment.

Finn drained his coffee, signaled thanks with a lifted mug, and followed Maya out, the bell above the door jangling.

Outside, the air was brighter but colder. They walked a few steps before either spoke.

Maya said, “You think they’re messing with us?”

Finn shook his head. “Brandi doesn’t do performance. If she says the lake’s memory is in the bread, I’d believe her.”

Maya pulled a crumb from the end of the loaf and chewed it thoughtfully. “It does taste like something’s hiding in there.”

She stopped, notebook out again, pen moving quick. “First the ducks. Then the water pressure. Now a warning about the Drowned Village. I feel like we’re missing a connection.”

Finn nudged her shoulder. “We’ll find it. Brandi always gives the best clues, even if you have to sift them.”

Maya grinned. “We’ll see.”

They walked on, the village coming awake around them. Above the bakery, a single wisp of steam curled into the sky. It looked, to Finn, like a question mark.

He decided that was a good sign.

five
assembling the investigation

LOOSE WHEELS SERVICE Inc. had the exact atmosphere Finn remembered from every age: seven, twelve, even last month when he'd locked his own keys in the Suburban. The glass in the door bore the faded logo of a long-dead gasoline brand, ringed with so many shop stickers that daylight came through like confetti. The interior was half garage, half general store, and all fumes—layers of gasoline, tire rubber, and something sweetly chemical that reminded Finn of cherry-flavored degreaser.

They stepped into the convenience side, boots scuffing against a floor pitted from thirty-two years of dropped tools and studded snow tires. The aisles were barely navigable, jammed with racks of Sun Chips, beef jerky, and, inexplicably, enough fishing lures to tackle every reservoir in Utah. The wall behind the counter was its own legend: part corkboard, part museum, featuring everything from 1990s trail maps to a Polaroid of a bear raiding the dumpster out back.

Finn spotted Rolane right away. It was impossible not to—Rolane's shock of blue hair, streaked with gray at the roots, could probably be seen from orbit. Today, they had a shop rag tucked into the front of their Carhartt coveralls and, as always, a utility knife holstered at the hip.

"Yo!" Rolane called, not even looking up from the four-wheeler

they had half-parked, half-disassembled in the middle of the customer floor. “You here for snacks, or the show?”

Maya smiled. “Both, but mostly the show.”

Rolane grinned, then wiped their palms on the rag and beckoned them closer. “Check it. Custom sonar rig, right off the shelf from that military surplus place. Can run a full underwater scan of Navajo in forty-five minutes. And—” They pointed to a thick black cable coiled at the back of the ATV—“if it’s a noise thing, we can probably isolate the signature.”

Finn knelt beside the rig, tapping at the bundle of electronics zip-tied to the rack. “How sensitive is the array?”

Rolane gave a small, proud sniff. “Picks up a leech burp at twenty meters. If Ashley’s ducks squeak under water, we’ll catch it.”

Maya circled the ATV, examining every add-on: the spidery microphone arms, the nest of battery packs, a GoPro lashed to a hacked bike mount. “How’s it powered?”

“Two marine deep-cycles and a hope for the best. I’ve got solar panels if it’s sunny, but that’s like betting on a unicorn up here.” Rolane ducked to a crate and rummaged, then tossed Finn a plastic tub labeled “squeaker prototypes.” “You wanna calibrate it? Bring this down to the lake, toss a few in. I’ll show you how to run the app.”

Maya watched Finn turn over the sample squeakers, each one encased in clear resin like a bug in amber. “Did Ashley really tune the new batch to a specific frequency?” she asked.

Rolane barked a laugh. “That girl has a thing for details. She brought in a decibel meter last week, spent three hours in the walk-in cooler making sure they all squeaked the same note. I thought she was nuts, but now—” They jerked a thumb at the news segment playing silently on the overhead TV, the chyron reading: “CRIME WAVE HITS DUCK CREEK—LOCAL HEROES BAFFLED.”

Finn stood, stretched, and scanned the shop’s bulletin board for any new flyers. There was a missing cat (SHE ANSWERS TO “JURASSIC”), a hand-scrawled coupon for a free tire rotation, and three more festival posters, all with different start times. “Did anyone mention where the ducks actually disappeared from?” he asked.

Rolane shrugged. “Heard it was Ashley’s storage shed, but rumor

changes every time someone comes in for a Powerade. Could've been aliens by now."

Maya rolled her eyes, but only a little. "I want to see the map."

Rolane stepped behind the counter, elbowing aside a tin of pork rinds, and unfurled a fresh topography of Navajo Lake. "Here's where the last big duck drop ended," they said, pointing with a torque wrench at the southern tip. "If they got dumped upstream, and the rumor's right about them being in the water, they'll cluster at the outflow by the dam."

Finn watched Maya's eyes dance across the map. She was already tracing flow rates and spillover zones in her head. "If someone wanted to intercept the ducks before they hit the outflow, where's the best spot?" she asked.

Rolane grinned. "You're thinking like a saboteur. It'd be the service tunnel, here." They stabbed at a thin black line skirting the main basin. "Old logging access, but half the town still uses it to shortcut the lake."

Maya scribbled it in her field notebook. "We should check there first."

The air shifted, a pressure change Finn always associated with the approach of someone large, or at least determined. Sure enough, Krazy Mike from The Trail Stop burst through the front door, nearly taking it off the hinges. He was dressed for a polar expedition—three layers of fleece, fingerless gloves, and a scarf knit in Flyers colors—and even in that, he looked underdressed for his own body temperature.

"Yo!" he bellowed, slapping the bell on the counter for emphasis. "Who's got a minute? I got a situation, urgent-like!"

Rolane deadpanned, "You're always urgent. That's your normal speed."

Mike ignored the quip, zeroed in on Finn and Maya, and gave a quick, secret-agent tilt of his head. "Heard you two were poking at the duck caper. I got news. Also, you owe me from last year's ice fishing debacle."

Finn remembered the incident—Mike had fallen in, but somehow insisted it was Finn's fault for making him "laugh too hard"—but decided not to argue. "What's up, Mike?"

He leaned over the counter, voice dropping to a harsh whisper:

"You know Jana Montana, right? Pilates queen, runs those health cult things at the rec field? She was the last one to see Ashley's shed locked up. Saw her with her own eyes. Swears it was after the dinner rush, and the lock was still on."

Maya, intrigued, asked, "Did Jana see anyone else around?"

"Just the usual. She said she left before midnight, and by morning, boom—ducks gone, lock snipped. If you ask me, that's not a coincidence." Mike patted his own chest, as if searching for a badge. "I'm gonna snoop. You want in, meet me at the rec field at two."

He spun and was gone, his exit punctuated by the wail of the door hinge.

Finn waited for the shop to settle, then said, "Well, he's subtle."

Rolane laughed, then resumed tuning their sonar console. "Let's see if you can beat Mike to the punch. Want to run the prototype?"

Maya nodded. "I want to hear how it sounds. If the squeakers are really unique, we can get an acoustic fingerprint."

Rolane handed over a pair of cheap headphones and showed Maya which button to press on the dash-mounted tablet. They played back a library of test recordings: the new ceremonial duck, last year's runner-up, and a sample labeled "CONTROL—GENERIC." The differences were surprisingly clear, the ceremonial batch humming with a low, odd harmonic beneath the usual squeak.

"This is good," Maya said, not bothering to mask her excitement. "If someone's moving the ducks, and we can get a signal in the lake, we can prove it."

Finn turned to Rolane. "You up for a night run? If the weather holds, we can scan the surface and maybe pick up a cluster."

Rolane's eyes glinted. "Always up for adventure. I'll get her gassed and loaded. Just don't let Mike try to drive."

As the conversation turned to logistics—time, gear, snacks—Finn noticed how everyone in the shop seemed to be paying at least half-attention. The regular with the camo hat pretended to check lottery tickets, but his head canted toward the group. The woman restocking the drink cooler paused every few cans, listening in.

In Duck Creek, a mystery was never private.

Rolane finished prepping a toolkit and pushed it across the counter.

"Take this in case you want to hack into any 'evidence.' Also, bring a couple of the test squeakers with you. If nothing else, you can prank Mike."

They all laughed, but Finn saw the practical logic: sometimes, the best way to get a confession in this town was to let someone think you were two steps ahead, even if you were just improvising.

They lingered a little longer, swapping stories about the weirdest mechanical fails of the season. Rolane described, with relish, the time a family of mice set up in a snowmobile engine and survived three starts before discovery. Maya told the story of the dye-trace gone wrong, how an entire beaver pond had turned highlighter pink for a week. Even Finn, who never fancied himself a storyteller, found himself recounting the childhood legend of the "fuel thief," a raccoon that had allegedly learned to open gas caps and drink its fill.

When their cups of gas-station coffee were empty, Finn nodded to Maya. "We should catch Jana before the classes let out."

Maya gathered her notes, the toolkit, and two of the duck squeakers. "If the rec field has cell reception, we can test the real-time signal, too."

They said their thanks to Rolane, who waved them off with a, "Go save the ducks! And try not to get arrested."

Back outside, the morning had slipped into full noon. The parking lot was glazed with sunlight, the blacktop radiating a wave of heat despite the chill. Finn took a deep breath, the gasoline smell already replaced by a noseful of pine and melting snow.

He glanced at Maya, who was reading over her notes, walking in that loose, almost-drifting way she did when she was deep in thought.

"Ready?" he asked.

She glanced up, blue fineliner already uncapped. "Let's go solve a mystery," she said.

And this time, Finn believed her.

The rec field was still slick with snowmelt when Finn and Maya arrived, and the chain-link fence at the perimeter sparkled with icicles. They

found Krazy Mike exactly where he'd promised, parked on the lowest set of bleachers, coffee cup steaming in his hands. Across the way, the town's main gymnasium glowed from within, its big plate-glass windows fogged from the heat of a crowd.

Finn pointed. "That's the 'Pilates & Pizza' class in session, right?"

Mike nodded, then made a face. "I tried it once. Nearly busted my hip. They do a plank contest at the end, and if you win, Ashley gives you a coupon for free breadsticks."

Maya, notebook at the ready, eyed the gym's double doors. "Jana Montana, first and only line of defense between a locked shed and a criminal mastermind."

Mike tapped his phone. "Said she'd come out as soon as class is over. Which, judging from the volume in there, might be any minute."

He was right. The doors burst open in a gust of laughter and citrus-scented body spray. Jana Montana came out first, a streak of pure kinetic energy in neon leggings and a thermal tee that declared "NAMASTE IN BED" in massive block letters. Her hair was twisted up in a high bun that looked like it could survive a hurricane.

She spotted them, broke into a run, and vaulted the last four steps to the field, barely breaking stride as she landed next to the bleachers. "You said it was urgent?" she asked, eyes scanning Finn and Maya, then settling on Krazy Mike.

Mike gave a little bow, then did the introductions: "This is Finn, local fix-it, and Maya, our science ace. They're helping with the—uh—duck situation."

Jana's expression brightened. "Oh, I love a good mystery." She plopped onto the lowest step, elbows on knees, still catching her breath from whatever tortures she'd just inflicted on her Pilates class. "Ashley told me about the missing ducks. It's honestly tragic."

Maya said, "We heard you were the last one to see the shed before the theft. Mind walking us through?"

Jana nodded, all business now. "Yesterday, I borrowed two kettlebells and the yoga mats for the class. Ashley had the padlock code, but she was busy, so I let myself in. I put everything back at six-thirty on the dot, locked up, spun the dial. I even yanked the lock to make sure it

clicked." She pantomimed the move, yanking hard enough that Finn could practically hear the snap.

Maya scribbled in her notebook. "Did you see anyone else around? Any weird cars or—?"

Jana paused, thinking. "There was an SUV idling by the trailhead, but that happens all the time. Honestly, I thought it was a parent waiting for their kid. Didn't even notice the color. Sorry."

Finn said, "No problem. Anything unusual about the shed? Damage, trash, footprints?"

Jana shrugged. "Nothing. But I do have a weird feeling about the timing. Ashley got a phone call during class, said it was urgent. She left before the cooldown. I haven't seen her since."

Mike grinned, and Finn recognized the expression: the guy lived for a twist. "If you ask me, someone was watching the gym, waiting for a window."

Jana flexed her arms overhead, as if testing the limits of her own muscle memory. "You think it was an inside job?"

"Or," Maya offered, "someone who knows the rhythms of the village. Knew when you'd be gone and how long it'd take to get in and out without being seen."

Jana seemed delighted by the intrigue. "I could get used to this."

As they mulled over the details, Finn noticed a familiar figure striding up the path: Azure, owner and philosophical backbone of the DC Pub & Grill. Her hair was styled in the morning's fourth permutation—a platinum-blond buzz with a single blue streak at the temple. She wore a rain jacket over a black turtleneck, and under one arm she carried a battered, leather-bound ledger.

She gave a sharp, two-fingered salute. "Didn't think you'd get this far without me."

Mike scooted down the bench to make space. "If you brought snacks, you're officially the MVP."

Azure set the journal down and brushed the snow off her boots. "What I have is better than snacks." She thumbed the latch and fanned the old book open. "This is the DC Pub's Master Log. Every strange thing that's happened in the village, we wrote it down. Best way to keep rumors from getting out of hand. Or, sometimes, to help them along."

Maya's eyes went wide. "You kept a record?"

"Every pub worth its salt does," Azure said. She turned the pages with careful fingers. "But this entry—" She stopped, tapping a yellowed clipping Scotch-taped to the page. "Look familiar?"

It was a newspaper headline, dated fifty years back: "Duck Creek Plagued by Rubber Duck Theft—Village Tradition on Brink." Next to it was a smaller note, in handwriting that spiked across the page: "Same time as the Big Thaw. Lake drained nearly dry, everyone blamed it on the winter gods. Or, more likely, the developers."

Finn leaned in. "Developers?"

Azure nodded. "The year before, a guy named Vance tried to buy out the old townsite. Said he was going to build a ski resort, but first he wanted to 'control' the water cycle. They did a bunch of survey work, floated some trial balloons. Then, conveniently, every time the town ran a snow ritual, the ducks went missing."

Mike whistled. "You think it's happening again?"

Azure shrugged, but there was a glint in her eye. "History is a wheel. And Vance has a nephew. Moved to town last year. Real estate license, too."

Maya's pen hovered over the page. "Sterling Vance?"

Azure's mouth twitched. "The same. He's tried to buy up half the cabins on the west shore. He offered to 'partner' with me on a taproom in the new marina. Called it the 'craft beer revolution.' I told him he could revolutionize right off."

Jana laughed, delighted. "I like you."

Azure gave her a wink, then riffled through the rest of the book. "There's more. The last time the ducks vanished, it didn't just mess with the race. There was a cascade effect. Water pressure dropped all over the village, pipes froze, a bunch of the older houses got stuck in an insurance limbo for months. It was a disaster."

Finn thought about what Brandi had said at the bakery. "So, it's not just tradition. The ducks really are a system check."

Azure pointed at Maya. "You're the scientist. Can you prove the ducks do anything?"

Maya, never one to back down from a challenge, said, "If we can

find where the ducks ended up, and run the sonar, maybe. I'd need to see the lake readings after each incident."

Azure snapped her fingers. "Already ahead of you." She dug out a thumb drive, taped to the inside cover. "This has every water-level report from the village, back to 1995. I digitized it myself. You want it?"

Maya took it, reverently, as if she'd just been handed a key to the city.

Finn grinned. "This is starting to feel like an actual case."

Mike said, "Better than daytime TV."

Jana shifted, then asked, "What's the plan? Do we stake out the shed tonight, or try to catch Sterling Vance in the act?"

Maya looked at Finn, her eyes glittering with possibility. "We scan the lake, see if we can catch the signal from the missing ducks. If someone's trying to manipulate the system, they'll have to show their hand when the next snow is scheduled. Maybe even tonight."

Azure added, "And if you need muscle, I've got a couple of retired bar-bouncers who'd love to play superhero for a night."

Finn glanced at the horizon, where the last of the afternoon light was fighting through a bank of darkening clouds. "Let's get the sonar up and running, and set a watch on the old marina. If the pattern holds, whoever's behind this will make a move just before the festival parade."

Jana clapped her hands. "I can bring snacks! And coffee!"

Mike raised his hand. "I'll bring the walkies."

Azure grinned. "And I'll bring the stories."

As they dispersed—Jana cartwheeling off to her car, Mike already dialing someone on his cell, Azure retreating with a dramatic toss of her hair—Finn and Maya lingered at the edge of the field.

Maya said, "Do you think we're actually going to catch the guy?"

Finn shrugged, but there was confidence in the gesture. "We always do."

She grinned. "Next time, I want to be the one who catches the thief in the act."

He looked at her, and for a second, the memory of every kid-detective game they'd ever played flickered between them.

"Deal," he said.

They headed back up the path, the rec field behind them pulsing

with the glow of a community on the edge of something big. In Finn's mind, it felt exactly right: a small town, a good mystery, and a chance to set things right.

If that wasn't what the ducks were for, he didn't know what was.

They reconvened at Loose Wheels, the only place in town where mountains legends and antifreeze were available over the same counter. Maya uploaded the thumb drive to her laptop while Finn sketched a crude crime board with dry erase markers borrowed from Rolane's stash. Azure brewed a round of inky coffee and distributed mugs with a gentle but unmistakable authority.

Mike, in his element, had already called four people to "shake the branches," and Jana Montana was in the garage, testing the range on the walkie-talkies she'd found in the Lost and Found.

Rolane's corner of the shop had become a small command center. They'd pushed aside the spare tire display and draped a paper map of Navajo Lake over the counter, weighted with socket wrenches and a leaking can of Monster Energy.

Maya hunched over her laptop, hair lit ghostly blue from the screen. "The last time the lake dropped this fast," she said, "was 1972. The same year as the first duck theft and the developer buyout attempt."

Azure grunted. "Water doesn't lie. Especially when it's being stolen."

Finn scanned the map, piecing together the lines of sabotage. "So if Vance is trying to repeat the past, what's his play?"

"Control the snowpack, control the land." Azure circled a spot on the map with her finger. "If the village loses two snow seasons, property values tank. Developers buy cheap, then cash in when it's 'rescued.' Happens everywhere."

Mike burst in from the hall, waving his phone. "Heard from a buddy—Storm Vance is up at the overlook right now, talking with a guy in a suit. They're watching the weather, like they got money on it."

Rolane whistled. "It's the old Vegas scam, but with real estate."

Maya looked up, face set. "If Vance is draining the lake, we have to

stop it before the next cold snap. Otherwise, every pipe in town could freeze and crack. No water, no winter. No winter, no town."

Jana, poking her head in, said, "You want me to run recon? I can be up there in five."

Mike bumped her on the arm. "Let's roll. We'll take the shortcut."

They left, Jana jogging to her car, Mike not far behind, already narrating his plan into the walkie.

Azure set her mug down with a clack. "The sheriff's not gonna help. If anything, he'll cover for Vance."

Finn nodded. "Time to go full DIY, then."

They crowded in around Maya's laptop, watching the screen fill with blue lines and timestamps. "Look at this," Maya said. "After every theft, the lake's water pressure drops off a cliff. It always coincides with the snow dance, or the duck race. Like someone's waiting for the biggest shift before opening the valve."

Rolane grinned, teeth gleaming under the shop's jaundiced lights. "You want to catch the guy, stake out the drain access at the dam. It's the only way to release that much water, fast."

Finn said, "Can the ATV get us there tonight?"

"Bet your boots," Rolane replied. "I just tuned the treads."

They set the plan: Finn and Maya to the dam, Rolane on standby with the sonar rig, Azure holding down comms at base. They gave Krazy Mike and Jana the job of shadowing Vance, keeping a low profile and texting updates when safe.

Maya packed her gear in record time. She paused only once, glancing at Finn, and for a second the look was pure adrenaline, the old sense of "this is the moment before the story breaks." He liked that look. He remembered it from every creekside game of detective they'd ever played.

They were halfway out the door when a new set of footsteps approached, measured and heavier than any of the regulars. Finn saw the shadow before the man: Sheriff Adams, uniform crisp, Stetson tilted at a fraction too aggressive.

He eyed the scene with a wariness Finn had seen reserved for search warrants and county audits. "What's all this?"

Azure stepped up, smile tight. “Just a little community troubleshooting, Sheriff.”

Adams looked at the map, then at the open laptop, then at Maya. “You kids think you’re gonna solve something the rest of us missed?”

Maya replied, “We’re just tracking a pattern. That’s all.”

The sheriff leaned against the counter, folded his arms, and looked at Finn. “You used to be a smart kid. You know how dangerous it is to play around with water infrastructure?”

Finn held the man’s gaze. “We’re not playing around, sir. We’re trying to keep the village from freezing up.”

Adams’s eyes narrowed. “I know about the prank with the dye last year. Don’t think you’re above the rules because you got a science badge now.”

Maya bristled, but Finn put a hand on her arm.

“Understood, Sheriff. We’ll keep it legal.”

Adams straightened, gave one last long look at the assembly, and said, “Good. Because if you’re not, you’ll answer to me.”

He turned and strode out, boots leaving prints in the shop dust.

The tension hung in the air until Azure exhaled, “He’s more bark than bite, but don’t push him.”

Finn watched the sheriff’s truck peel out of the lot. “He’s not on the take. But he hates losing control.”

Maya nodded, her hands trembling only a little as she zipped up her field pack. “Let’s move before Vance gets his ducks in a row.”

They loaded up Rolane’s ATV, the engine humming low and sure. Maya sat behind Finn, arms tight at his waist, laptop balanced precariously between them. The ride out to the dam took less than ten minutes, thanks to Rolane’s gearhead handiwork and a few unpublicized shortcuts through the old timber access roads.

The dam was silent but for the endless rush of water and the whisper of wind across the ice. Maya set up the receiver, Finn planting the antenna in the best line of sight for the main valve house. They scanned the perimeter, Finn’s flashlight slicing through the dark. “You ever been inside?” he asked.

Maya shook her head, then pointed to a small hatch set into the base of the structure. “I bet that’s where they’d access the main release.”

They crept closer, careful as coyotes. Finn eased the hatch open—unlocked, as if no one expected visitors—and they slipped inside. The space was tight, the air metallic and cold. Pipes lined the walls like arteries. Finn pulled up short, Maya nearly colliding with his back.

In the half-dark, they saw a shadow moving at the far end: a man in a heavy jacket, headlamp blindingly bright.

"Storm Vance," Maya whispered.

He was talking into a phone, voice echoing. "—ready to open. Should drop by midnight. We'll get the shock reading, then let the town panic."

Finn's mind raced. There was no time to wait for backup; if the valve went, the whole snowpack would go with it, and the festival would be a wash.

He gestured to Maya, then stepped forward, boots loud on the metal. "Evening, Storm."

Vance startled, then swung the headlamp to Finn's face. "What the —You got no business here."

Finn shrugged, kept his tone casual. "We're just checking the system. Found your print on the release order."

Vance tried to bluster past them, but Maya blocked the way, her hands shaking only a little. "You're not draining the lake tonight, Vance."

He sized them up, then sneered. "What's it to you, anyway? The snow will come back. It always does."

"Not if you salt the earth first," Maya said. "You're betting against the village. If the pipes break, it could ruin half the town."

Vance hesitated, then went for the valve. Finn grabbed his arm, yanking him off balance. There was a brief, messy struggle: Finn's years of trail work against Vance's desk-bound gym bulk. Vance almost won —almost—before Maya slammed the valve shut with a clang that echoed up the pipe.

Vance slumped, panting. "You idiots. You have no idea—"

Maya cut him off. "We have all the data. And the town's watching."

Outside, the ATV's lights flashed—a signal from Rolane. "Sheriff's on his way," Finn said. "Want to wait, or go out the hard way?"

Vance looked at them, then at the valve, then, sheepish, sat down on a crate. “I’ll wait.”

They left him there, the echo of water louder than anything he could have said.

Maya and Finn emerged into the cold, Rolane’s ATV waiting. Maya smiled, wide and unguarded, adrenaline making her eyes almost silver.

Rolane grinned. “Did you get him?”

Finn nodded. “Dead to rights.”

They loaded up and headed back, the snow beginning to fall in earnest. By the time they reached the village, the sky was thick with new weather.

The next morning, the water pressure at Ground + Toasted was strong enough to blast the filter off the espresso machine. The ceremonial duck race happened as scheduled, every child in town lined up to launch their champion down the flume. The winning duck squeaked a perfect C sharp at the finish line.

Later, over pie and hot cider, Finn caught Maya watching the window, the snow stacking up outside.

“You did it,” he said.

She shook her head, but she was smiling. “We did it.”

He raised his mug, offered a toast. “To the weird water, and the people who remember.”

She clinked her mug to his, the sound clean and bright as the first storm of winter.

six
secrets of navajo lake

AT FIVE A.M. the world was black and blue and nearly silent, but the cold had already done its work. Finn's exhale steamed as he eased Rolane's custom ATV out of the shed, tires gritting on the frost-glazed gravel. Maya waited by the side panel, bundled in every layer she'd brought but still shivering, her breath coming in quick, excited bursts. The only light was the narrow tunnel cast by Finn's headlamp, which bounced as he loaded the rack: two field packs, a bundle of rolled maps, and a bright orange dry bag marked "EMERGENCY DUCKS" in permanent ink.

Maya squinted at the label, then at Finn. "Is that what I think it is?"

He nodded, deadpan. "Last year's champion. Never leave home without a control sample."

She grinned, digging her gloved hands into her armpits. "It's almost romantic, in a hydrology-nerd way."

Finn thumbed the starter and the ATV's engine gave a low, satisfied rumble. "Not too late to change your mind and sleep in."

Maya climbed onto the back rack, locking her knees on either side of the storage box. "And miss the most promising anomaly since the pink beaver pond? Not a chance."

They bounced down the main road, the air thick with a darkness that felt denser than shadow. The sky above was so clear it seemed to vibrate, a million stars pinning the night in place. Past the edge of Duck

Creek Village, the way opened out into a corridor of aspens, their leaves still clutching gold even as the rest of the world had gone silver. The forest was so still, Finn thought he could hear the individual leaves shivering in the wind.

For the first mile, neither spoke. Then Maya, breaking the spell: "You think we'll get a read on the sinkholes before sunrise?"

"Depends how much water's left in them," Finn said. He scanned the edges of the trail for ice, out of habit more than necessity. "If the outflow's accelerating, we'll have a shot. Otherwise, we wait."

Maya nodded, more focused than Finn had ever seen her. She clutched her phone in one hand, already ready to tap the voice memo app the second they arrived. "I want to get baseline audio before any traffic shows up," she said. "Last year, the snowmobiles ruined my low-frequency samples."

Finn didn't say anything, but he let a small, proud smile slip. He liked having a partner who took her work as seriously as he took his.

They hit the access road to Navajo Lake at a little after 5:30. The ATV crunched to a stop in a patch of brittle grass, the lake itself a pale ghost below the ridge. Maya dropped off the rack and immediately started walking the shoreline, boots squelching in the mud.

Finn paused to look. Even in the pre-dawn light, he could tell something was wrong. The waterline was at least a foot below the last year's mark, exposing flats of dark, cold mud and glistening black stones that should have been covered for another month. Small clumps of reeds and sedge, usually underwater, lay pressed to the dirt like evidence.

He picked up a rock, tossed it. The splash was muted, sad.

"Whoa," Maya called from ahead, her voice tight with surprise. "You seeing this?"

Finn jogged over, every step sinking half an inch in the muck. Maya pointed with her phone's flashlight. "That's a groundwater resurgence," she said. "And that's a collapse. It wasn't here in July."

Finn crouched, studying the depression in the mud. At the center was a tiny pool, clear water swirling into a funnel, the sides lined with ripples that said it had been draining fast. It looked almost exactly like the "hydro vortex" photos Finn had saved on his phone, though he'd never admitted that to anyone.

He got down on one knee, unzipped the dry bag, and pulled out the ceremonial duck. It was neon yellow, with the race number still Sharpied on its side. Finn set it in the water, then pressed the head. The duck let out a low, plaintive squeak.

They watched. Nothing happened for a second. Then the duck began to spin, the whirlpool sucking at its plastic hull. As it circled the drain, Maya bent low, phone aimed at the center of the vortex.

She listened, then held up a finger. "There. Hear that?" It was a faint, almost imperceptible hum, just below the register of Finn's own hearing. But if he concentrated, he could feel it more than hear it—a low, subsonic vibration, the kind you might get if a massive pipe or cavern ran beneath your feet.

"Think that's the outflow?" Finn asked.

"It's not just the outflow," Maya said, voice tight with excitement. "That's mechanical. There's a harmonics signature—it's artificial."

Finn looked at her, then at the duck, still spinning in its slow spiral. "So someone's doing this on purpose?"

Maya's breath came in a small white cloud. "Looks like it."

They followed the shoreline, checking each of the major sinkholes Finn knew by memory. At the north end, two more had appeared, both draining aggressively. Finn repeated the test: duck, squeeze, record. Each time, Maya captured the frequency with her phone, nodding as the pattern emerged. "It matches the data from last night," she said. "The pressure's being managed—someone's modulating the flow."

Finn rocked back on his heels. "Could be a prank. Could be sabotage."

"Or both," Maya said. She swept her light over the water, scanning for anything else out of place.

For a while, they walked in silence, circling the lake's edge. The sky went gray, then yellow, then soft pink as sunrise hit the opposite rim of the basin. The exposed mud glittered with frost, and every breath felt like a clean reset.

Halfway around the lake, Finn stopped and looked back. The waterline's drop was even more obvious here, a clear band etched into the clay of the shore. Maya snapped a photo for reference.

"You ever see it this low, this early?" she asked.

"Not unless there's a drought," Finn said. "And there's no way we're in a drought."

Maya looked at him, her face a mix of triumph and worry. "We need to figure out who's playing games with the lake," she said. "Because if this keeps up, there won't be anything left to feed the town through winter."

Finn scanned the ridge above, looking for any sign of movement, any watcher in the early morning. Nothing, just the silent forest and the steady hum underfoot.

He packed away the duck, zipped the bag, and started back toward the ATV. "Let's hit the service tunnel," he said. "If someone's trying to control the outflow, that's where they'll do it."

Maya jogged to catch up, nearly slipping in the mud. She laughed, exhilarated. "I feel like we're in a Hardy Boys crossover episode," she said.

Finn grinned. "As long as we don't end up in the lake, I'll take it."

They drove the perimeter, following the rutted track that circled the basin. At the western edge, the old logging road veered off, a barely-visible notch in the undergrowth. Finn killed the engine and motioned for silence. He and Maya crept down the slope, boots sinking into leaf litter.

The service tunnel was just as Rolane had described: a rusted culvert, wide enough for a grown man to crawl through, half-hidden behind a tangle of willow and sumac. There were footprints in the frost, fresh and heading in. Finn crouched, inspecting the pattern.

"More than one person," he said. "Probably carrying something heavy. See how deep the prints go?"

Maya nodded, then gestured for him to follow. She knelt at the tunnel mouth, phone at the ready. There was a faint odor—something not quite sewer, not quite river water. More chemical, Finn thought, than anything natural.

Inside the tunnel, the hum from the sinkholes was louder. It vibrated the corrugated steel, made the hairs on Finn's arms stand up. As they crawled forward, Maya held out her phone, using the mic to record everything.

Finn's knee hit something sharp. He reached down, felt around,

and pulled up a small plastic tag: a color-coded inventory marker, like the kind used at the Cedar Mountain Country Store.

He handed it to Maya. "Looks like someone's using town supplies."

She pocketed it, then pointed ahead. The tunnel curved, then opened up into a small concrete chamber. At the center was a metal grate, bolted over a drop into darkness. A length of rope was tied to the grate, with the frayed end trailing into the void.

Finn peered over the edge, then took a tentative tug on the rope. It was anchored tight.

Maya leaned in, shining her light down. "You think someone went all the way in?"

"Maybe," Finn said. "Or maybe they just needed to drop something past the grate."

He scanned the edges, looking for anything else. There was a pile of damp, torn packaging: fertilizer bags, a broken length of PVC, and, weirdest of all, a handful of deflated rubber ducks. Some had been slit open, their insides lined with a blue powder.

Maya exhaled, her breath trembling now. "That's not for a prank. That's chemical sabotage."

Finn stood, his head bumping the roof of the chamber. "We need to get this to the sheriff," he said. "Now."

Maya nodded, tucking the evidence into her jacket. They backed out of the tunnel, keeping low. Finn scanned the woods again, looking for movement.

Nothing, just the wind and the bright new day above them.

They reached the ATV, and Finn revved the engine to life. As they sped back toward the village, Maya clung tighter than before, her voice in his ear: "If someone's draining the lake on purpose, they could crash the whole system. No water, no winter. No festival. Nothing."

Finn tightened his grip on the handlebars. "They'll have to go through us first," he said.

The sun rose higher, turning the aspen leaves to gold coins. In the rearview, Finn caught a glimpse of the lake—smaller, sadder than before, but alive with possibility.

They had a mystery, a trail, and just maybe, enough time to solve it.

It took half an hour to loop back to the east shore of Navajo Lake. The sun had climbed clear of the trees, lighting up the water and the hills and every pale, bony aspen for miles around. Most years, the lake would have been a sheet of silver, blinding and whole. Now it was a sickle, thin and bent, with mudflats clawing their way into the old basin.

Maya had her phone out, still recording. She tracked every change in the surface, every weird anomaly along the newly exposed shore. Finn piloted the ATV with care, keeping to the dry rim above the worst of the muck. They both saw the first set of tracks at the same time: two fat, clean tire lines veering off the service road and ending just short of the water.

"Hold up," Maya said, and Finn braked to a gentle stop.

She hopped off, crouched in the cold mud, and examined the tracks. They were sharp-edged and deep, almost fresh enough to glisten. But there was something else: a thin groove trailing between the tire marks, like something heavy had been dragged behind.

Finn watched over her shoulder. "Looks like a hand truck or a dolly."

Maya nodded, eyes bright. "Whatever they were moving, it went straight into the lake."

She scanned the horizon, then pointed along the curve of the shore. The tracks vanished beneath a collapsed chunk of hillside, but the drag mark kept going, a faint line in the soft earth.

They followed on foot, boots sinking half a step at each go. The cold hit harder here, coming off the water in waves. Maya moved with purpose, shoulders hunched, eyes locked on the line ahead.

They rounded a spit of mud, and Finn stopped dead. He raised his arm to slow Maya, but she'd already seen it: a cluster of gray, lichen-covered shapes rising out of the water.

At first, Finn thought they were just rocks. Then he saw the straight lines, the right angles, the black holes of collapsed windows. The upper floors of a ruin, old logs sunk to waterline and beyond. A stone chimney, still standing, cast a long shadow in the new sun. All around, the

water was dotted with floating debris: wood shards, clumps of grass, and, eerily, a few sun-bleached animal skulls.

Maya stared. "No way," she whispered, voice lost in the morning. "It's real."

Finn nodded, slow. "The Drowned Village. Grandpa always said it only shows up when the mountain wants to send a message."

She started snapping photos, moving as close to the water as she dared. The mud pulled at her boots, but she didn't care. "It's—are those rooftops?"

He nodded. "Probably. Most of the old cabins were two stories. When the dam was built, the valley filled in less than a month. If the water's this low, it means the whole system's been compromised."

Maya waded closer, the camera on her phone clicking every few seconds. She kept up a running commentary, part to Finn, part to herself. "Elevation is lower than last survey. Structure is consistent with 1900s logging camp. Oh my god—look at the nails. Square head, pre-WWI. Finn, this is... this is an archaeological dig in real time."

He smiled, watching her. "You want to try and get closer?"

She looked at him, eyes alive with the challenge. "Obviously."

He led the way. The shoreline was treacherous: each step sucked at their boots, and once, Maya nearly lost her footing and had to grab Finn's shoulder. The water was colder than the air, biting through denim and thick socks. Finn gritted his teeth and kept moving. They stopped only when the water was up to his shins and the ruin loomed directly ahead.

Maya fished a pair of latex gloves from her pack and pulled them on, giggling at the absurdity of it. "I know, it's not lab protocol, but I don't want to touch anything toxic."

She reached out and poked the nearest wall, watching as silt and rot crumbled away. "That's original wood," she said, almost reverent. "This was someone's house."

Finn studied the surface, looking for anything that stood out. On a whim, he circled the ruin, searching for a sign, a clue, anything. Near the base of the chimney, he spotted something shining in the mud. Not a reflection, but an actual object, wedged half-under a log.

"Over here," he called. "There's something metal."

Maya sloshed over, knees soaked. She dropped to a crouch and used both hands to clear the mud. "It's... a face," she said. "Or a mask."

Finn knelt beside her, helping to scoop the silt. Inch by inch, the form came free: a heavy, corroded sculpture, no larger than a football, but dense and ornate. The surface was green-black with age, but he could make out the ridged crown and staring eyes, the stylized waveforms radiating from the base.

Maya held it up, fingers trembling. "Is this—"

"Navajo Neptune," Finn said. "The artifact."

They stared at it together, silent for a minute.

Maya broke first, her voice shaking. "It's really real."

Finn reached out, brushed a strand of wet hair from her face. "You want to do the honors?"

She nodded, then, in a careful, deliberate motion, lifted the artifact from the mud and turned it in her hands. Water dripped from the sculpted beard, catching the sun and splitting into rainbows.

Maya's eyes filled with wonder, and just a little disbelief. "I always thought it was just a myth," she said.

"Every myth starts with something real," Finn said.

She laughed, but there was an edge to it—relief, maybe, or just the weight of finally finding the thing you'd looked for so long. "We have to get this back to the village," she said. "Everyone needs to see."

He nodded, rising first and then offering her a hand. Together, they started back toward shore, boots heavy, the artifact held carefully between them.

The morning sun climbed higher, burning away the last haze of night. The lake behind them gleamed, empty and raw, but alive with memory.

Finn looked at Maya, and she at him. In that moment, they both understood: the story was theirs now.

They would tell it together.

seven
the navajo neptune

THE SURFACE of Navajo Lake was glazed with new ice, blue and tight as a snare drum, but the shoreline was all mud and old bones. Finn and Maya stood in water barely above their ankles, boots buried in black muck, hands raw and stinging from the cold. The sunrise hadn't reached this far yet. Only the tips of the pine ridge behind them had caught fire, gold and pink in the first light, while the lake itself hid every color but gray.

They'd come for a story, and found it: the artifact was heavier than Finn expected, wedged under a spill of driftwood and half a foot of silt. It was metal—iron or maybe bronze, Finn couldn't tell in the dull morning—but the cold of it shot right through his gloves when he braced it. At first, he thought it was just another rusted-out hunk, maybe a forgotten part of the old dam. But then Maya had knelt next to him, fingers tracing the outline, and her breath caught.

"Finn. This is it," she said, her voice hushed and wild at once.

He grunted, more with effort than agreement, and tried to lever the base out with the heel of his hand. It didn't budge.

Maya squatted beside him, balancing her weight with a knee dug into the mud. "Careful, you'll shear it."

Finn tried again, gentler, rocking the thing side to side to loosen the suction. It was like pulling a tooth from a stubborn jaw. After three or

four tries, the edge gave, and a little swirl of ancient, methane-rich bubbles surfaced around them.

"On three," Finn said, and they both leaned in. The artifact broke free with a slurp that sounded almost obscene, slinging a fan of mud up the front of Finn's jacket and all over Maya's sleeve. They rocked backward, nearly landing in the water, the artifact heavy and awkward between them.

It was a figure, sure enough—a trident-wielding god or maybe a demon, its face all sharp planes and ridged brow. The beard had been stylized to look like coiled waves, the arms corded like a logger's. Finn let his eyes trace the trident, which was bent at the tips but still sharp, then followed the swirl patterns cut into the torso. It looked fierce, a little deranged, and almost exactly like the pencil sketch Maya had flashed him in the ATV headlights an hour before.

But the wild part wasn't the face, or even the trident. It was the band of turquoise stones set in a crown above the brow, each one the precise shade of the lake at high summer. Up close, they glinted in the faintest way, even in the weak dawn.

Finn set it down gently, afraid the metal would shatter on the rocks, and stepped back to catch his breath. Maya just knelt, grinning like a kid who'd found an extra present under the tree.

"I don't even know what to say," she whispered, voice half-lost in the morning.

Finn did. "Looks like he's missed a few spa days."

Maya snorted, wiped her muddy hands on her jeans, and reached for the artifact. She turned it over, scraping off gobs of silt with her thumb. The undercarriage was slick and weirdly polished. The base was ringed with more watermarks and, in the very center, what looked like a snowflake worked out of silver wire.

She wiped the snowflake with the edge of her sleeve. Something moved.

"Wait," she said, frowning. She peered closer, using her phone's flashlight to angle a white beam into the grooves. There, wedged between two of the turquoise stones, was a round, black dot—maybe a screw, or a bead. But Maya's hands went still.

"Finn, check this."

He crouched, head level with the base. The black dot wasn't just black. It was matte, and it was flush with the metal, but it had a telltale oval slit at the center.

"That's not old," he said quietly. "Not even close."

Maya squinted, then dug a fingernail into the seam. The dot came loose, slick as ice, and popped into her palm. She turned it over, and Finn saw a thin green LED blink once, then die. It was a tracker. A real one—commercial, waterproof, probably on a six-month battery. Finn recognized it at once.

"Vance's tech," he said, voice just above a whisper. "Same kind they use for site control at construction jobs."

Maya turned the thing in her hand, brow knitted. "He put a tracker on a hundred-year-old artifact?"

Finn shook his head. "He must have found it first. Or maybe he put it here."

Maya looked at him, eyes gone sharp. "You think this is staged?"

"Or watched," Finn said. He pointed at the horizon, where the woods rose black and even above the morning lake. "He knew we'd come here."

Maya's excitement soured, replaced by something electric and jumpy. "How long do you think it's been here?"

He shrugged. "Long enough for the battery to go low, but not dead. Weeks, maybe."

She stared at the artifact, then at the tracker in her hand. For a second, Finn thought she might hurl it into the lake, just to see how far it would skip. Instead, she dropped it into her pocket and wiped her hands again, harder this time.

Finn reached for the artifact, holding it by the base. The metal was even colder now, and it left a quick frost on his palm. He glanced at Maya.

"We should get it out of sight," he said.

She nodded, and together they staggered up the muddy bank, the artifact heavy between them.

They set it down behind a clump of willow, out of sight from anyone watching the lake. Finn hunched over it, wiping the base with the edge of his jacket.

"It's too heavy to carry far," he said. "We'll need a sled, or maybe a hand truck from the marina."

Maya nodded, but her eyes were still on the artifact. "He's going to know we found it. He'll probably be here before we can blink."

Finn listened, just for a second, but heard nothing. No engine, no footfalls, not even a bird. He stood, scanning the far shore for signs of a watcher.

Maya crouched, still examining the artifact. She poked at the snowflake design, then ran her finger around the base. "It's weird," she said. "This looks more like a pressure valve than a decoration."

Finn watched as she pressed on the silver snowflake. A hiss escaped from under the base, and a tiny bead of water spat out, clear as glass. Maya jumped back, more startled than scared, and Finn stifled a laugh.

"Genius," he said. "You set off the curse."

She glared at him, but then looked at the artifact again. "It's not a curse. It's a mechanism. I think this thing was made to be underwater."

He nodded, impressed in spite of himself. "Like a gauge."

"Or a warning system," she said. She stood, stretching her back, and looked at Finn. "We have to get this to Rolane. And maybe Brandi. I want to see what happens when it's dry, or when it's under pressure again."

Finn reached for the artifact, bracing it under his arm. "If Vance is watching, we'll need to move."

Maya took the tracker out of her pocket and handed it to Finn. "You keep this. I have an idea."

She dug in her bag, pulled out a roll of metallic tape, and wrapped a square over the now-exposed wiring. "If they're watching, let's give them something to watch."

Finn grinned, pocketed the tracker, and hefted the artifact again. Together, they slogged up the embankment, leaving a trail of bootprints and swirling mud. The sky had gone fully blue now, and sunlight caught the turquoise in the artifact, making it shimmer in Finn's arms.

At the top of the hill, they paused. Maya turned, looked back at the water, and shook her head.

"I thought I'd be excited," she said softly. "But now I just feel like we're part of a much bigger thing."

Finn nodded, understanding the feeling. “We are.”

They headed for the trail, the artifact heavy and real between them.

Behind them, the mud slowly settled, and the last of the morning’s steam burned off the lake. The sky above the ridgeline was cloudless, the kind of blue that promised nothing but cold and the start of something new.

The hum started as a low-frequency mosquito, just at the edge of Finn’s hearing. He froze, boots set in soft leafmold, and looked up. Maya heard it next, her head snapping around like a startled doe’s. From somewhere above the pines, a mechanical whir droned, too steady for bird or insect. It grew louder, then dropped low over the water, white body sharp against the blue.

“Drone,” Finn said, keeping his voice flat.

Maya squinted into the glare. “It’s watching us.”

It hovered, lens pointed right at them, holding position with the kind of easy confidence that said its pilot was close. Finn moved quick: he stripped off his jacket, wrapped it around the artifact, and cradled it in both arms. “Trail now,” he said, and started for the tree line.

Maya sprinted after him. The drone tracked their motion, shifting side to side, adjusting its altitude like a curious bird of prey. Finn angled away from the obvious footpath and cut straight into a stand of young aspen, the trunks so tight together they rattled with the effort. The cold air burned his lungs, but he didn’t slow until they were a hundred feet from the shore.

He risked a look back. The drone lingered, searching the opening, then buzzed higher, as if to get a better view.

Maya ducked under a branch, then straightened and brushed hair from her eyes. “You think Vance is driving it?”

“Or someone paid by the hour,” Finn said. “Either way, I don’t want to stick around.”

The forest here was dense with aspen, their trunks white as bone and the leaves still hanging on in gold and orange. Sunlight came through in fast-moving stripes, patterning the ground in dappled spots.

The earth was thick with old leaves, and every step made a sound—crunch, squelch, crunch. The deeper they went, the more it felt like hiding.

They moved fast, weaving through the narrow trunks, ducking low whenever a branch snagged at the artifact or at Finn's hair. He glanced at Maya, who was breathing hard but never lost her focus. She had her phone out, camera app running, and kept glancing back as if the drone might sneak up on them from behind.

After a few minutes, the sound faded. The drone must have moved on, or lost them in the tangle. Finn led the way to where they'd left the ATV stashed behind a fallen log. He knelt, caught his breath, and set the artifact on the seat. Maya crouched beside him, her gaze immediately locked on the wrapped bundle.

"Let me see it," she whispered, already peeling back the jacket.

Finn watched as she rolled the artifact in her hands, searching for the pressure valve again. She poked at the snowflake—no hiss this time, just a thin ring of dampness around the base. Then she ran her thumb over the turquoise band, pressing at each stone.

"What are you looking for?" Finn asked, peering over her shoulder.

Maya didn't answer right away. She turned the artifact, squinting at the seam between crown and brow. She reached into her bag, found a mini screwdriver, and poked delicately at one of the stones.

It clicked, then shifted in place. Maya let out a tiny, involuntary whoop. She pressed again, and the stone popped out, revealing a small cavity. Inside was a glass capsule, filled with a cloudy blue gel.

She held it up to the light. "That's not for show."

Finn grinned. "You think it's poison?"

Maya snorted. "No, I think it's a dye marker. For tracking water flow, maybe? Or..." She trailed off, then picked at the edge of the cavity with her screwdriver. The band of turquoise turned, with a faint ratcheting sound. Underneath, a hidden mechanism: a gear and spring system, packed with what looked like resin but clearly not original to the artifact.

Maya's hands trembled a little. "This is a hydrological tool," she said, barely louder than a breath. "An actual, mechanical way to

measure water pressure or maybe temperature. The dye would mark the discharge point in the underground river."

Finn felt a pulse of pride for her, even in the middle of the weirdest getaway of his life. "So, it's a sensor?"

Maya nodded. "Or an early warning device. Or both." She turned the artifact over, eyes darting. "I bet when you submerge it, the pressure trips a mechanism, which either marks the release point or triggers the dye to shoot out. The snowflake is probably a reset switch."

Finn shook his head, grinning. "You're way too excited for someone being hunted by a drone."

She gave him a look, half exasperated, half alive. "This is huge, Finn. If the artifact's original, it means someone knew about the siphon effect way before the dam, or even the town. If it's modified—"

"It's Vance," Finn finished. "Trying to control the system."

Maya nodded, face set. "We need to test it. I want to see what happens if we put it in the actual outflow."

He slung his jacket back on, then looked at the ATV. "You ready?"

She tucked the artifact under her arm, careful not to jostle the exposed gear, and hopped onto the back. Finn thumbed the starter and kicked the machine into gear. They shot forward, the engine's growl shockingly loud in the hush of the woods.

They took the less obvious route: instead of the main gravel access, Finn peeled left at the fork, into a service road lined with willows and fallen logs. The path was narrow and winding, but it kept them in the trees and away from open sky. Here, the sunlight flickered fast and nervous through the branches, and the ground changed from frozen to swampy in a heartbeat. Maya clung tight to Finn's waist, the artifact wedged between them, and Finn kept his head low, scanning for movement.

After ten minutes of hard riding, they crested a ridge and looked down on the whole valley. In the distance, Finn could see the main road —a dark ribbon—cutting through the aspens, and, half a mile beyond, the parking lot at Cascade Falls. There were no cars yet, just the empty blue of the morning sky.

He killed the engine and let the silence close in.

Maya slid off first, artifact in hand. “If we go down now, we’ll have a clear shot at the falls.”

Finn nodded, but stayed alert. “If the drone shows up, we ditch the artifact in the creek. No way they’ll find it after the runoff starts.”

Maya grinned, and for a second, her old self came back—the kid who’d once dared Finn to cross Duck Creek barefoot in November, just to see if his toes would freeze. “Deal,” she said.

They walked the last stretch on foot, boots slipping on moss and leaf mulch. Finn felt the fatigue start to set in—his hands ached from the cold, his knees from the ride—but Maya seemed to run on pure adrenaline. She kept examining the artifact as they moved, turning it over, poking the mechanism, and narrating her every idea.

“I bet the original version didn’t even use dye,” she said, voice hushed. “Just the mechanical release, to track water level. Maybe the town founders upgraded it when the dam went in.”

Finn thought about the tracker, still zipped in his pocket, and frowned. “If Vance got this far, he’s got to be close. We need to be careful.”

Maya glanced back, serious for the first time in an hour. “You’re right. But if we can show that the whole system is being manipulated, we can blow his plan out of the water.”

They reached the lip of the ridge. Below, the waterfall roared, sending up a cloud of mist that hung like breath above the rocks. The trail switchbacked down in a series of steep, muddy steps, all the way to the viewing platform at the base.

Maya looked at Finn, and he nodded. “Let’s finish it.”

They picked their way down, the sound of the falls growing until it drowned out everything but the thump of Finn’s heart. At the platform, Maya knelt, holding the artifact at arm’s length over the churning water.

“Ready?” she shouted.

Finn stepped beside her, steadying her at the elbow. “Do it,” he said.

She pressed the snowflake again. This time, the base split open, releasing a swirl of blue dye that hit the water and vanished, instantly lost in the white and green. For a second, nothing happened.

Then the water at the base of the falls turned a sudden, wild turquoise, the exact shade of the stones in the artifact's crown. The color spread fast, blooming down the stream in a streak visible even from where they stood.

Maya's face went slack with joy, her eyes wide as the sky.

"Proof," she said, turning to Finn, who was grinning despite himself.

He looked up at the ridge above them, then at the spread of the turquoise water below. "We need to show this to someone who'll believe it."

Maya nodded. "Let's get to Brandi's. And maybe Rolane. We'll need the community if we want to fight Vance."

Finn scooped up the artifact, which was lighter now but still dripping, and they started up the trail. He felt the old familiar warmth of having a plan, and maybe even a shot at fixing things.

As they left the platform, the mist from the falls followed them, blue-stained and alive.

Neither of them saw the man in the parka watching from the overlook above, cell phone pressed to his ear, mouth set in a hard line.

But Finn could feel it. The story wasn't over. Not even close.

Cascade Falls was louder than anything Finn remembered from the old camping trips, even when the snowmelt had been at its wildest. Today, the air at the base shivered from the force of it, the sound shaking straight into Finn's ribs. He and Maya scrambled down the muddy switchbacks, feet slipping, spray icing up on their cheeks and eyebrows. At the bottom, the platform was slick with mist, and the river roared off into the canyon like it had somewhere to be and no patience for hesitation.

The view was pure drama. Water poured off the lip of the falls in a single, arched sheet, then exploded against a tumble of black volcanic rock, throwing up clouds of vapor that turned the early sun to rainbows. The cliff walls framed the whole show, cut with layers of frozen

moss and streaks of old snow. You could see the color of the water had changed already—the dye from the artifact test at the upper lake had arrived, a blue-green swirl that traced the current all the way downstream.

Maya stood, boots planted at the rail, artifact tucked tight against her jacket. She leaned into the cold, eyes squinting against the spray, and watched the flow for a long time.

"Check this," she said, not even turning.

Finn came up beside her. He could see, now, how the water at the base was shot through with blue, a spiral twisting out from the point where the falls hit the pool. It looked like the artifact was bleeding its color into the world.

Maya set the artifact on the rail, careful not to let it tip. She pressed the snowflake again, and for a moment, nothing happened. Then the turquoise stones along the crown lit up, glowing faintly—at first just a hint, then a definite, almost electric blue. They pulsed in time with the roar of the water, an unsteady heartbeat synced to the falls.

Finn blinked, unsure if he'd imagined it. But Maya saw it too.

"Did you see that?" she asked, voice shaky.

He nodded, not trusting his own words. The stones kept pulsing, brighter now, and then something else changed—the water flow, right at the heart of the falls, surged. The single arc of the cascade split into two, just for a second, as if the river itself had skipped a beat. The whole falls bulged, then snapped back, the sound of it so sharp Finn thought the rock might have cracked.

Maya's jaw went slack. "It's modulating," she said. "The artifact is... it's actually changing the outflow."

Finn stared at the Neptune. "You think it's still active?"

She shook her head, more in disbelief than denial. "I don't know what I think."

A wind gust hit them, blowing cold spray straight into their faces. Finn wiped his nose on his sleeve, then looked at Maya, who was still caught in the blue light.

"We can't take this back to the village," he said. "If Vance finds it, who knows what he'll do."

Maya nodded, finally dragging her gaze away from the artifact. "We need to hide it. Somewhere no one will look."

Finn scanned the woods above the falls, then the cliff face itself. He knew the trails here; even as a kid, he'd bushwhacked every route in and out. He pointed to a spot, halfway up the falls, where a ledge jutted out from the rock, mostly hidden by a clump of dead willow.

"There," he said. "Even a drone can't see it from above."

Maya looked, then grinned. "If we make it, I'll nominate us for the Science Hall of Fame."

They moved quick. Finn wrapped the artifact in his jacket again and slung it across his shoulder. The climb was rough—the rocks slick with algae, and every step a gamble—but together they picked a way up, Maya boosting Finn, then him hauling her up in turn. By the time they reached the ledge, they were soaked and freezing, but the adrenaline was doing its job.

The shelf was perfect: a foot-deep hollow, naturally shielded from view, and just above the level of the high water mark. Finn knelt and used a flat rock to dig a shallow trench, then lowered the artifact into place. Maya jammed a wedge of driftwood in beside it, making sure it wouldn't rattle loose.

They covered the cache with old moss and a thin layer of scree. Maya took a last, hard look at the artifact, then dusted her gloves and sat back on her heels.

"It's safe," she said.

Finn nodded, relief humming in his blood. He checked over his shoulder—no sign of the drone, no movement in the woods above. The only thing watching was the waterfall, and the cold blue pulse that still seemed to linger in the stones.

They sat, side by side, boots dangling over the edge, and let the mist settle around them.

For a minute, neither said anything.

Then Maya, voice low: "I wanted to solve the mystery, but now I just want to keep it safe."

Finn laughed, but it came out more like a sigh. "Welcome to Duck Creek."

She bumped her shoulder against his. “You think Brandi will believe us?”

He shrugged. “She’ll believe. But maybe we keep the artifact a secret for now. Just in case.”

Maya pulled her knees to her chest, watching the water. “You ever get the feeling we’re not supposed to be the heroes of this story?”

Finn grinned, wiped his hands on his jeans. “I’m fine being the weird kids in the woods.”

They let the roar of the falls drown out everything else. Down below, the blue dye spread wider, carried out of sight by the river. It would be gone by midday, the only evidence a faint, lingering stain on the rocks.

Maya turned, studying Finn’s face. “We should go back.”

He nodded, and they picked their way down, careful not to leave a trail. Back at the bottom, Finn looked up at the ledge and felt a strange pride. The artifact was safe. For now.

They hiked out, boots heavy with mud, but lighter than they’d felt all morning. At the top of the falls, Maya paused, looked over her shoulder, and grinned.

“For the record,” she said, “I’d follow you up any mountain.”

Finn tried to look cool about it, but he couldn’t quite hold the smile in. “Right back at you, scientist.”

They walked on, the trees closing behind them, the story theirs and theirs alone.

By the time they reached the trailhead, the sun was full overhead, melting the last frost off the leaves. Finn scanned the parking lot—still empty, no sign of the watcher in the parka or the drone.

He looked at Maya, then at the horizon. He knew there’d be more trouble, maybe even before dinner. But for now, they’d done what they came to do.

They stood, breathing hard, watching the blue-green of the river fade into ordinary water. Finn reached into his pocket, found the disabled tracker, and flicked it into the creek.

Maya watched it go, then looked up at him, her eyes bright and alive.

"We did good," she said.

He nodded, feeling the truth of it in every tired muscle.

"We did."

And with that, they turned for home.

eight
confrontation at hot mama's

HOT MAMA'S PIZZA & Brew always looked better after dark. Warm bulbs wound around every exposed beam, softening the lines of the rough-planked walls. The floor was a patchwork of boot-scuffed pine and sand, and each table gleamed with the slight stick of a dozen spilled sodas. The air, as ever, was thick with the scent of rising dough and basil, and the slightly less poetic tang of whatever cheap beer was on tap this week. Most days, Finn liked that. Most days, Maya did, too.

Today, the restaurant was jumpy—like a weather front hanging just off the ridge, not quite a storm but not quite safe. The first thing Finn noticed was the hush. Even with the Friday crowd, the usual clash of voices and the clang of the open kitchen, there was an edge to the noise. People talked quieter, and every so often, someone's gaze would cut toward the main booth along the windows. That's where Vance sat, polished and predatory, next to Sheriff Adams, who somehow looked both bored and alert at the same time. Ashley hovered behind the counter, posture set and jaw hard.

Finn and Maya didn't exactly blend in, not with their pants still stiff from the lake's mineral soup and their boots caked to the laces in blue-black silt. They trailed a streak of mud from the entry, and every eye in the place followed them as they crossed to the counter.

Ashley shot them a look as she wiped down a stack of pint glasses. She had on her usual tie-dye tee, but her smile was the tight one she

used on customers who asked for "keto options." "You two look like you got in a wrestling match with a beaver," she said under her breath.

"We won," Finn whispered, then jerked his chin toward the booth. "Is it what it looks like?"

Ashley nodded, voice even lower. "He's been here an hour. Ordered a salad, didn't touch it." She ducked to refill a water pitcher, then murmured, "Sheriff's been on his phone the whole time. Careful."

Maya offered a casual wave, but her eyes didn't leave Vance. She took in the navy suit, the shirt that probably cost more than Finn's entire winter gear setup, and the flash of what could only be a Rolex glinting from under Vance's cuff. Even his silver hair looked engineered for effect, swooped back from his brow in a wave that would survive a blizzard. The only thing not perfect was the right sleeve, which had a single dot of marinara—an insult that would probably haunt him for months.

Vance noticed them instantly. He rose—swanlike, Finn thought, and not in a good way—and glided over, arms out like they were old friends at a resort mixer.

"Finn! And Maya, I presume." He said Maya's name with a soft pressure, like he already owned it. "I hope you don't mind me intruding on local tradition."

Maya blinked, then put on her best "polite scientist" mask. "Not at all. We were just grabbing a bite." She gestured at their mud-streaked pants. "Field work doesn't wait for weekends."

"Passion," Vance said, nodding with a kind of manufactured awe. "I respect that." He turned his head just enough for his watch to catch the overhead lighting, a little sunspot flicking off the dial. "You know, I've always admired people who dedicate themselves to the land. Or water, in your case."

Finn smiled, but only with his mouth. "You'd know about dedication. I heard you've been here every day this week."

Vance placed a hand over his heart, mock offense in the gesture. "A man likes to know the lay of the land before investing."

Sheriff Adams appeared at Vance's side, his presence sudden as a bear on a picnic table. He wore the full getup: brown uniform, brass

badge, that utility belt packed like a suburban dad's garage. His face was blank, but his eyes never left Finn.

"Afternoon, folks," the sheriff said. He had the local accent, broad and slow, which made everything sound like a warning. "You two been out at the lake?"

Finn shrugged. "That's where the data lives."

"Uh-huh." Adams didn't blink. "I've heard stories about folks tampering with water systems. You two ever hear about that?"

"Is that illegal?" Maya said, tone light as yeast.

Vance laughed, short and practiced. "You'd be surprised what counts as a felony in a place like this." He leaned in, elbows sharp on the bar. "My friend Sterling Vance. Please—call me Storm." He offered a hand, but Maya only nodded.

"Not to be rude," Vance went on, "but I heard some odd noises coming from the lake this morning. Chainsaws, maybe? Or something mechanical."

"Could be snowmobiles," Finn said. "Could be ice fishing. People get creative."

Sheriff Adams made a note on a pad. "Lot of stories about students dumping dye in the lake. Or plugging up the outflow."

Finn bit his tongue. "That sounds like a waste of perfectly good dye."

Maya cut in, voice pitched up and bright. "We were just measuring levels for a research project. If you'd like to see the data, I can email you our raw readings."

Vance's eyes sharpened, just for a second. "I'll pass," he said, "but thank you. In my world, people who manipulate the environment without permission tend to get sued. Or worse."

Maya felt her stomach flip, but she kept her posture loose. "We're just trying to help the town."

"Of course you are," Vance said, flashing a full smile. It was the kind of smile that never reached the eyes. "I just want to make sure everyone's on the same team. After all, it'd be a shame if our lovely lake dried up before festival season."

Ashley set a pizza paddle on the counter with a little more force

than necessary. "You're in the pizza place, Storm. Unless you're buying a pie, you can save the doomsday stuff for your next investor call."

Vance considered, then gave a half-bow. "Duly noted, Ashley." He straightened, flicked a crumb off his sleeve. "But if I were you, I'd keep a closer eye on your friends. Especially the ones who like to play with the plumbing." He turned to go, but then remembered himself, pivoting on one heel. "Oh, and Finn?"

"Yeah?"

"You left your taillight on. Thought you should know." With that, Vance glided back to the booth, settling in like a king returning to his throne.

Sheriff Adams lingered another beat. He looked at Maya, then Finn, then at the damp footprints on the floor. "Just be careful out there," he said. "The mountains are full of accidents waiting to happen." He tapped the counter twice, then returned to Vance, who was already typing furiously on his phone.

When they were gone, Ashley exhaled so hard it fogged a mug by the sink. "He gives me the creeps. Who wears a suit to a pizza place?"

Finn stared at the booth, watching Vance and Adams in silent conference. "He's not here for the pizza."

Ashley leaned in, voice pitched for just them. "He's trying to buy up the whole street. Keeps talking about 'future-proofing' the economy. Wants to pave Movie Ranch and put in a year-round resort."

"Not much of a ski town if there's no snow," Maya said.

Ashley's eyes flicked between them, a question hiding in the look. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

Maya nodded, just once. "Enough to know we're not the only ones trying to change things."

Ashley seemed to take strength from that. She squared her shoulders, then winked at Finn. "If you want a slice, it's on me. You two look like you could use a carb load."

Maya risked a smile. "I'll take a soda. Just not the blue one."

Ashley grinned. "That's probably wise." She turned to prep the drinks, leaving Maya and Finn to claim a two-top near the window.

They sat, careful not to let their knees touch. Finn watched as Vance gestured at the sheriff, the motion broad and dismissive, his watch

catching the light every time he moved. Maya tried to look casual, but her foot tapped out a nervous rhythm under the table.

"Did you keep the tracker?" Finn asked, low.

"In my sock," Maya replied. "He'd have to pat me down to find it."

He grinned. "That's my girl."

She smiled, but it was thin and tired. "We're in trouble, aren't we?"

He looked at the window, then at the mountains beyond. "Probably. But at least we know who's running the play."

Ashley returned, setting two sodas and a plate of breadsticks between them. She dropped a folded napkin on Finn's lap. Inside was a key—old, brass, probably to the shed out back.

"Hide it in the boiler room," she whispered. "If you're right, he'll send someone tonight."

Maya pocketed the key, then squeezed Ashley's hand. "Thanks."

Ashley smiled, but didn't let go for a long second. "We take care of our own."

As she moved off, Finn and Maya let the warmth of the pizza place soak into their bones. The scent of yeast and garlic chased off the lake chill, if only for a moment.

At the front, Vance settled his bill with a hundred-dollar note, then gave Ashley a little salute. The sheriff followed, pausing only to scan the room once more before stepping into the cold.

Outside, the light was already fading, the mountain sky cycling through every color but gold.

Maya watched the last sun glint off the ice on the lake and said, "We should get ready."

Finn nodded, rising. "Let's go save the mountain."

They left by the side door, boots squelching, the key safe in Maya's pocket and the story far from over.

Dale emerged from the kitchen at the exact moment the conversation behind the counter edged toward the sharp. He was drying his hands on a rag that looked like it had already lived two lifetimes, and his face was set in a way that made the creases at his eyes deep and dark. He didn't

stop at the line between kitchen and floor—just moved right up behind Ashley and gave Vance a look that could curdle cream.

"Storm," Dale said, voice level. "You're still in town, I see."

Vance didn't stand, but he straightened, all easy confidence and that salesman's smile. "Dale. Always a pleasure." He flicked his gaze to the rag, then to Dale's hands, still damp. "You bring your own weather, don't you?"

Dale ignored the jab. Instead, he set both palms flat on the counter, leaned over, and said, "The mountain remembers those who try to change its nature."

Vance chuckled, but there was no warmth in it. "The mountain remembers a lot of things. But not always the right ones. I prefer to deal in facts, not folklore."

Dale tilted his head, the way a man might if he heard a bear in the willows and wanted to make sure it was headed the other direction. He didn't say another word, just nodded once, then turned to Ashley. His hand landed on her shoulder, gentle but not soft.

Vance saw it as a cue. He shifted gears, businesslike. "Ashley, I understand you've been having a rough run. I'd like to make an offer—something that sets you and your staff up for life, not just another season. This area isn't suited to winter tourism anymore, not with the changing climate. But it has amazing potential for year-round adventure, if you're willing to pivot."

Ashley squared herself, fingers gripping the countertop as if she could squeeze strength from the granite. "Hot Mama's isn't for sale," she said. "Not to you, not to anybody. We'll run it until the snow stops coming—maybe even after that."

"You're missing an opportunity—" Vance began, but Ashley cut him off.

"You're missing the point," she said, her voice firm, more leader than waitress now. "This isn't about the money. This is about the community. Every kid on this mountain waits all year for the festival, for the snow, for the duck race. You think a water park or a—what is it, 'highland experience'—will ever mean as much?"

Vance's mouth quirked, but he kept the charm up. "Change is inevitable. Clinging to rituals isn't going to save anyone's bottom line."

Ashley shook her head, slow. "The rubber ducks will be found. The snow will come, just like always. But you won't be the reason."

There was a beat where nobody spoke. Even the kitchen seemed to go quiet. Then, almost as if rehearsed, Sheriff Adams stood, brushed an imaginary fleck from his sleeve, and spoke with the finality of a man giving a warning and a blessing at once. "Just so we're clear," he said, "tampering with water infrastructure is a felony. I'd hate to see anyone get swept up in an investigation because they thought they were helping."

He looked at Finn, then at Maya. His eyes lingered just a moment longer than necessary.

Vance followed, gathering his coat and scarf in a single, practiced sweep. "I appreciate your time, Ashley. Truly." He offered a nod to Dale —who didn't return it—and a dazzling smile to the room at large. "If anyone wants to talk partnership, you know where to find me."

The two men walked out, the door swinging slow behind them.

Dale watched them go, then exhaled, his shoulders settling a little. "He's not wrong, you know," he said quietly. "About the snow getting thinner. But he's got no idea what actually keeps this place running."

Ashley's hands stayed on the counter, knuckles white. "He's got no idea about a lot of things."

The kitchen noise returned, along with the gentle thud of pizza dough and the smell of baking bread. The warmth of the restaurant pressed in against the chill Vance and the sheriff left behind. Finn glanced at Maya, who looked both relieved and rattled.

Dale finally looked at Finn, then Maya, then at the far door where Vance and Adams had vanished. He nodded, just a little. "Take the back exit," he said. "Don't let anyone see you leave together."

Ashley handed Maya a to-go box she hadn't ordered. "If you get caught, you were just dropping off a delivery at the marina, okay?"

Maya smiled, small but real. "Got it."

Finn tucked the box under his arm and led the way through the kitchen. As they stepped outside, the back lot was empty, the snow beginning to fall in soft, lazy flakes. For the first time all day, Finn felt like he could breathe.

He didn't say anything as they trudged toward the old shed, but he

let the warmth of the pizza place linger. There was a long night ahead, and maybe more trouble waiting, but at least they knew who their friends were.

And that, Finn figured, was worth more than any offer Vance could make.

They took the back way into the restaurant, through the cinderblock corridor that smelled of old garlic and dishwasher steam, and found Ashley waiting by the walk-in. She hadn't changed out of her tie-dye, but now she wore a parka over it, zipped up so tight her chin barely cleared the collar. She waved them in with an urgency that said she'd been watching the door for ten minutes.

Maya ducked into the tiny office first, Finn right behind. The walls in here were a clutter of photos: old pizza contests, festival posters, at least three decades of kids in rubber-duck costumes. A heat lamp in the ceiling gave the room a buttery, yellow tint, and the table in the middle was ringed by mismatched chairs—one with duct tape on the seat, one with a broken wheel, one that might have come from a preschool.

Ashley locked the door behind them, then went to the cluttered metal desk and started shoving aside stacks of paperwork. From beneath a binder marked "Year-End Sales," she produced a creased, dog-eared road map, the kind with greasy fingerprints worn into the folds. She spread it flat, weighting the corners with a tape dispenser and a shaker of red pepper flakes.

Every third building on the map was marked with a red dot, the kind you got from a cheap sticker sheet at the gas station. Maya and Finn looked at each other, then at the sea of dots.

Ashley rapped the table with her knuckle. "He's bought out the coffee hut, the service station, two cabins, and he made a play for the old rental shop last month. My supplier said Storm Vance is bidding for the lodge, too. Quiet, through proxies. If he gets it, that's the last of the big winter jobs."

Finn traced the dots with a finger. They clustered along the main

drag and fanned out toward the lake. “He wants the whole basin,” Finn said.

Ashley nodded, her voice low and tight. “If the festival tanks, the little shops won’t make rent through the spring. He’s betting the snow won’t come, and the rest of us will have to fold or sell for cheap.”

Maya’s gaze flicked over the map, mind working. “The ducks,” she said. “It wasn’t just a prank. He was testing something—how fast the lake would drop, how the town would react. He’s trying to break the cycle.”

Ashley slid into the preschool chair, barely fitting. “I know how it sounds, but I’ve seen the records. Every time the snow comes late, the town loses another business.”

Finn said, “How’d you get the map?”

Ashley offered a smile, sharp as a pizza wheel. “Brandi. She knows everyone, hears everything. Plus, Vance tried to buy her starter, like it was an actual living thing you could just ship out.”

Maya’s jaw tensed. “What if he’s not just buying property? What if he’s draining the lake on purpose, so he can push the town to the brink?”

Ashley looked up. “Can he do that?”

Finn ran a thumb along the edge of the table. “There are ways. If you know the old tunnels, or you bribe someone up at the dam, you could drop the water line by a foot or more before the state noticed.”

Maya reached into her pack, pulled out her field notebook, and riffled to the last page. She held it up so Finn and Ashley could see. “He’s got someone plugging the inflow at Duck Creek and another crew opening the drains at the base. That’s how they kept the water from refilling, even after the last storm.”

The room got quiet. Even the hum of the pizza oven seemed to pause.

Dale knocked twice, then opened the door without waiting for an answer. He held a plate of cinnamon knots, hot from the oven, and set them on the table. His gaze flicked from the map to Maya, to Finn, and back again. For a second, he just watched.

“What’s wrong?” Dale asked, and the question sounded heavier than dough.

Ashley motioned at the map. “She figured it out.”

Dale’s brow darkened. “Not a surprise. But that’s not what worries me.”

He turned to Maya, voice lower now. “You went to the lake, yes? You saw it?”

Maya nodded, careful. “We found something in the mud.”

Dale’s eyes narrowed. “You didn’t bring it back here, did you?”

Finn shook his head, quick. “It’s hidden.”

For the first time since they’d known him, Dale’s calm cracked. He reached across the table and put a rough, flour-dusted hand on Maya’s sleeve. “You must return it,” he said. The words had weight, more ritual than request. “If it stays above the waterline at dawn, the balance won’t come back. That’s how it works.”

Ashley’s eyes widened, but she didn’t interrupt. Dale kept his grip, gentle but unyielding.

Maya’s voice was small. “Why me?”

“Because you’re the one who found it,” Dale said. “And because the mountain listens, but only if the right person asks.”

The silence lasted a long, warm moment, broken only by the smell of cinnamon and the low, distant rumble of a snowplow passing on the main road. Finn watched Maya, waiting for her to balk, but instead she nodded, slow and serious.

“We’ll take it back tonight,” she said. “But if Vance has watchers, we’ll need a distraction.”

Ashley grinned, fierce. “I’ve got that part covered.”

Dale let go, then handed Maya the first knot from the plate. “Eat before you go,” he said. “The mountain doesn’t like hungry people.”

Maya accepted, and the four of them stood around the table, the map and the pastries between them, and for a minute it felt like a proper planning session, like every dumb heist they’d dreamed up as kids. The office was warm, the walls gold from the heat lamp, and outside, the snow kept falling, soft as flour.

Finn took a breath, watched Maya eat, and felt a new kind of hope settle in his chest.

They had a plan. They had each other.

And sometimes, he thought, that was enough to bring the snow.

nine
the history of duck creek

THE FOUR OF them took the big table on Hot Mama's front patio, the one with the wobbly umbrella pole and a drift of fake leaves clumped at its base. The evening was cold enough to put a brittle skin on the backs of their hands, but the string of pumpkin lights over the windows gave off just enough glow to feel like a campfire. Even Dale, who'd spent half his life in kitchen steam, wore a navy fleece zipped all the way to the chin.

Finn sat at the edge, jacket unzipped but hands stuffed deep in his pockets, watching the sunset set the far ridge on fire. Maya had a spiral notebook open, the cover already buckled and warped from too much weather. Ashley, still in her tie-dye, fidgeted with the salt shakers and kept one eye on the front door, as if she expected a fresh disaster to come through at any moment.

The air was thick with the smell of pizza dough, cider, and the sharp scent of leaf mulch. Every now and then, someone from inside the restaurant would open the door—delivering a pie to a waiting family, clearing a table, or just stretching their legs—and the light would spill out in a wedge across the sidewalk.

"Okay," said Maya, trying to sound like she was just organizing a group study session. "We have missing ducks, a suspicious water level, and a village full of people convinced the fate of winter hinges on a plastic race."

Dale shrugged, eyeing the sidewalk. “Don’t forget a guy who thinks he can buy the mountain with a suit and a smirk.”

Ashley snorted, shoving a piece of garlic knot into her mouth. “He can try. But unless he learns to make dough that rises at high altitude, I’d give it a week.”

Finn glanced at the notebook, then at Maya. “Where are we starting?”

Maya ran her finger down the list, blue pen poised like a scalpel. “If the ducks actually matter, there should be a measurable difference when they’re missing.” She looked up, determined. “Tomorrow, I want to run a full set of tests at the lake, sunrise to sunset. If anything changes, even by a degree, we’ll know.”

“Shouldn’t we—” Finn started, but he broke off as a figure creaked up the patio steps. It was the old man from the lake last fall—the one who’d out-fished Finn and then offered him half his sandwich just to rub it in. Tonight, he wore a jacket older than some of the houses in town, and a knitted cap that might have started life as a sock. In one hand, he carried a plastic bowl with two scoops of maple walnut ice cream. The other hand was bare, fingers thick and red from a lifetime of axe work.

He nodded at the group, then at Dale. “Evening, boys. Ladies.”

Ashley waved with a breadstick. “Hey, Jasper. You want the good table?”

Jasper eased himself into the chair next to Dale, leaving a polite gap but close enough to hear. “Not if you’ve got council business. I’m just here for the sunset and the sugar buzz.” He set the ice cream on the table, then peeled off his gloves with a practiced flick. “But if you want a local’s opinion, the answer is always ghosts or government.”

Dale’s mouth twitched in a smile. “We’re leaning toward both.”

Jasper’s eyebrows jumped. “The holy grail of Duck Creek conspiracies.” He took a measured bite of the melting ice cream, chewing like it was jerky. “Let’s hear it.”

Maya hesitated, glancing at the others. But Finn could see the hunger in her eyes—the itch to solve the puzzle, and maybe impress someone old enough to remember when the creek was wild. So she did, in under two minutes, sketching the last three days’ worth of mystery

onto the cold air: the missing ceremonial ducks, the sabotaged shed, the low water and the even lower patience of the festival committee.

Jasper listened, slow and steady, like a man watching a sunrise with nowhere else to be. At the end, he set the spoon down and licked a dot of ice cream from his thumb.

"Lot of trouble over a kid's race," he said at last.

Ashley made a face. "It's tradition, Jasper. If the snow doesn't come, half the village leaves by spring."

He nodded, considering. "You know, the lake's older than the festival. Older than the town, even. And when my grandpa built the first cabin up here, he said the mountain always found a way to even the score. Didn't matter if it was a storm or a slide or just the wind knocking your outhouse clean into the next county."

Dale grunted. "That sounds about right."

Jasper glanced at Maya, then at the notebook. "You're the scientist?"

She flushed, but lifted her chin. "Hydrology grad. Or I will be, if I finish my project."

He looked at her, a long, slow study. "You ever study the Drowned Village?"

Finn perked up, but Maya beat him to it. "Only the legends. It's supposed to be under the north end of the lake, but the old maps are all over the place."

Jasper shrugged, then reached into his jacket and pulled out a battered notebook. The cover was leather, the spine so cracked it looked like riverbed mud. "Family records," he said, flipping it open. "My granddad, and his before him, wrote everything down. Water table, snowfall, even which neighbor's wife made the worst cookies. If you want to know what really happened, you ask the dead." He tapped the notebook, then slid it across the table to Maya.

She opened it, careful as a museum tech. The pages were thick with writing, some neat, some frantic, all in the same blocky hand. There were hand-drawn charts, sketches of fish, and at least three recipes involving wild plums.

She skimmed, then stopped. "You have records from before the dam?"

Jasper grinned, showing three teeth, all gold. “We built the dam, back then. At least the first one.”

Finn leaned in. “What does it say about the village?”

Jasper took another bite of ice cream, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Says it was a real place. Says the first spring after the dam went in, the water rose too fast. Whole town went under. Some say the mayor was in on it, made money off the land deals. Some say the ghosts are still there, waiting for a thaw.”

He looked at Maya. “Your friend is right, you know. Every year the snow comes late, the lake loses a bit of itself. The old houses start to show, bit by bit, like the mountain’s got a memory.”

Dale reached for the notebook, flipping a few pages. “You ever write about the ducks?”

Jasper’s eyes twinkled. “My grandson does. He’s seven. He says the ducks are the only thing that keeps the ghosts from coming up in the night.”

Ashley snorted. “I believe it. You ever seen the parade after dark? It’s terrifying.”

They all laughed, a little softer than usual, but it was enough to lift the chill from the air.

Maya closed the notebook, but her hand lingered on the cover. “Would you mind if I copied some of this?”

Jasper shrugged. “It’s just water under the bridge, as far as I’m concerned.”

He stood, knees popping, and reached for his ice cream. “If you want to see the real ghosts, go to the overlook at dawn. Some mornings, you can hear the church bell. Even though it’s fifty feet under.”

Finn grinned, a genuine one this time. “You coming?”

Jasper looked at him, then at the group, then at the melting sky over the ridge. “If you bring coffee, and no questions about cholesterol, I’ll be there.”

He headed off, slow but sure, leaving a trail of maple behind.

When he was gone, Ashley leaned back, arms crossed. “You think he’s full of it?”

Dale shook his head. “If you ask me, Jasper’s seen more than any of us.”

Maya tucked the notebook into her pack. "Tomorrow, then. Lake at dawn. We'll get the ducks back, or we'll find out who's stopping them."

Finn finished his cider, then stood, brushing crumbs off his jacket. "That's the plan."

They gathered their things, the lights of the patio flickering on as the last sun died behind the ridge. The mountain was quiet, for now. But if you listened, Finn thought, you could almost hear it breathing—waiting for the next move.

And tomorrow, they'd make it.

The next evening, the same table became a second headquarters. Jasper came back just after closing, this time with a thermos of coffee in one hand and the battered journal under his arm. He'd swapped out the old flannel for a slightly less ancient one, but the effect was the same: he looked like he belonged in the landscape as much as any stone or root.

Maya, still amped from her last shift at the lake, was already at the table with her own notebooks and a mechanical pencil sharpened to a lethal point. Finn nursed a cocoa and watched the parking lot, half-expecting the Sheriff or Vance to materialize from the night.

Jasper set the journal down and poured coffee into mismatched mugs, offering one to anyone who'd take it. Then he opened the book, slow, almost reverent, as if the pages might dissolve in the cool autumn air.

Maya leaned over, eyes wide, catching the scent of old paper and a little smoke. The pages had gone sepia from a hundred wet summers and dry winters. The ink ran in a hand so neat it could've passed for print, with tidy notations in the margins and little sketches: creeks, cabins, the shape of the lake at different seasons.

Jasper tapped the edge of a page, then looked up. "Back then, everyone knew the water was smarter than the men running it. There was a fellow in the village, name of Granby, who figured if you measured the right way, you could tell when the mountain was ready for snow."

Maya started scribbling. "Like a barometer, but for snowpack?"

He nodded. “He called it the Neptune. Said it could read the lake, know if it needed to drop before the storm hit or the pressure would crack the ice.” Jasper’s finger moved to a sketch of a bearded figure holding a trident, then to a diagram showing lines radiating from the lake to the peaks above. “He built it from scrap and river stone, set it at the lowest part of town.”

Dale, who’d been watching the water bead on the patio railing, turned his head. “My uncle told me Granby could hear the snow falling before it hit the ground.”

Jasper grinned. “Heard that, too. But mostly he listened to the water. Always said if you didn’t let the lake drain in autumn, the storms would pass you by. Happened the year after they put in the concrete dam. No snow till January, and the whole town near starved.”

Finn glanced at his watch, then at the empty street. “So, what happened to Granby?”

“Flood got him,” Jasper said. “Not the big one—just a spring thaw that backed up and buried half the cabins in mud. But the Neptune stayed put until the Drowned Village went under. After that, folks tried everything. Races, bonfires, even dynamite. Nothing stuck.”

Maya studied the diagrams. “So the duck race is… what, a ritual to replace the Neptune?”

Jasper shrugged, but there was pride in the gesture. “Old Mayor Blevins came up with it. Said if you can’t read the water, you have to trick it. The ducks run the current, find the path out. If the last one gets to the falls before sunset, the storm’s supposed to follow.”

Ashley, who’d been working inside, stepped out and dropped into the nearest chair. “That’s why Mom always freaks out if the race stalls out. She says if the ducks get stuck, the storm gets stuck, too.”

Maya’s pencil stopped, and she looked at Ashley with a scientist’s disbelief turning into understanding. “It’s a real hydrological event. The flow triggers some kind of pressure drop, which cues the mountain for snow.”

Jasper beamed, but kept his voice gentle. “Or maybe it’s just a good story. Either way, the kids needed something to believe in.”

Dale sipped his coffee, then set the mug down with a soft clink. “What about the Neptune? Did anyone ever see it after the flood?”

Jasper shrugged again. “Legend says it’s still there, at the bottom of the old town. Every couple of years, a diver claims to spot it. One time, a kid in a kayak hooked something with a beard.”

Finn smirked. “You ever try to find it yourself?”

“I like breathing,” Jasper said. “But I figure if it wants to come back, it will.”

The table went quiet, just for a beat. The wind picked up, fluttering a curtain of aspen leaves into the gutter. The smell of cinnamon knots drifted from inside, mingling with the colder air and the memory of wet wood.

Finn checked his watch, then the parking lot, again. “If the ducks don’t run tomorrow, you think the mountain will notice?”

Jasper fixed him with a look sharp enough to cut rock. “The mountain always notices.”

Maya closed her notebook, slow. “If we could get the Neptune, do you think it would help?”

Dale’s fingers tapped the wet rail, thinking. “Even if it didn’t, it might be enough to spook Vance. Get him to back off until the storm comes.”

Ashley leaned in, her energy rising with the tension. “I could tell everyone we’re bringing back the Neptune. They’d line the parade route, rain or shine.”

Jasper laughed, full-throated, then looked at Maya. “You want to go after it, don’t you?”

She hesitated, but only a second. “I have to,” she said, and even Finn could hear the conviction.

He reached for her hand, and she let him, even though it made the table wobble.

Dale stood, dusting crumbs from his pants. “Then we meet at the overlook, sunrise. Bring what you need. The rest, the mountain will provide.”

Jasper nodded, closed the journal, and handed it back to Maya. “Take good care,” he said. “And if you see Granby, tell him the ice cream’s better now.”

Ashley grinned, clapped her hands, and stood. “It’s a plan.”

They watched as Jasper ambled away, slow but sure, vanishing

around the corner with a wave. For a moment, the patio was just them and the glow of the pumpkin lights, the sky a blue so deep it looked almost black.

Maya cradled the journal to her chest, her heart hammering with something she couldn't quite name. Finn let the silence hold a beat, then checked his watch for the last time.

"Tomorrow's going to be cold," he said.

Maya smiled. "We'll make our own weather."

And that, she figured, was the point.

Most of the village had gone to bed, or at least retreated behind double-glazed windows and insulated walls, but the patio at Hot Mama's still throbbed with a small, stubborn glow. Someone had switched the pumpkin lights to their "festival" mode, cycling through a slow fade of orange to gold, matching the slow-motion fireworks of the aspen trees across the road.

Ashley had found a half-dozen cider donuts and set them on a plate in the middle of the table, where they steamed and shed sugar dust in the chill. She'd also added a battered thermos full of something stronger than cider, which Dale poured into his coffee in small, reverent doses.

It was Dale who broke the companionable silence after the group's plan had settled into place. He leaned back in his chair, eyes fixed on the frost forming at the patio's edge, and said, "You all know Granby was my kin?"

Finn, who'd never thought of Dale as having any family but the mountain, looked up. "You mean—"

"Second cousin, something or other," Dale said, rolling a donut in his palm. "My folks left, but I stayed. Figured someone had to keep an ear out for the old ways. Besides," and here his voice dipped, "the water's got stories you won't hear anywhere else."

Jasper, who'd been working on the dregs of his coffee, gave a slow nod, like a priest at confession. "Granby's blood was half springwater," he said. "Always said he could tell a storm by the itch in his teeth."

Dale smiled, showing more warmth than usual. “It’s true. The pressure drops, you feel it in your jaw before you see the clouds.”

Maya, who had never heard Dale say more than three sentences at a stretch, was scribbling notes so fast the pencil squeaked. “So,” she said, “if the lake doesn’t drain, the snow doesn’t come.”

“Not just snow,” Dale said. “The whole cycle locks up. Less snow, less melt. Less melt, the creeks choke off in spring. Couple years of that, and you’re living in a different world.”

Ashley’s jaw tightened. “So what Vance is doing—he’s not just buying up land. He’s breaking the cycle, so he can claim the mountain for himself.”

“Or,” Jasper added, “he thinks he can force the place to change for him. But mountains don’t take well to that.”

Finn flexed his hands, the old anxiety gone, replaced by a clarity he hadn’t felt since the start of summer. “We fix the Neptune, or get it back in place, and we run the ducks. Then the cycle’s got a shot.”

Dale’s eyes lingered on Finn, as if weighing him, then nodded. “That’s the recipe.”

Maya looked up from her notes. “If the Neptune was a pressure sensor, and the ducks mimic its sound, maybe they have to work together.”

Dale nodded. “Some things can’t be replaced. But you can help them remember.”

Ashley stood, slapping her hands together. “We have three days until Fall Colors Fest is done. I’ll round up every kid in town for the race.”

Jasper licked a stripe of melted ice cream from his glove, then looked at Maya. “You still want to see the secret cave?”

Her eyes lit up, almost hungry. “Yes. Where is it?”

Jasper grinned. “Meet me at Cascade Falls, trailhead at dawn. You ever been?”

Finn and Maya both nodded. “Best view on the mountain,” Finn said.

Jasper’s gaze was sharp. “Then you know it’s a haul. Hope your boots are ready.”

The lights flickered, a brief stutter that turned every face the color

of candlewax. But then the system caught up, and the patio glowed even brighter, as if the place itself refused to let the dark win.

Dale tossed his donut in the air, caught it without looking. “I’ll have coffee for you at the trailhead,” he said. “And a little something extra if the wind’s biting.”

Ashley flashed a grin at Maya. “Bring a walkie. If the ducks go missing again, you’ll be the first to know.”

The group fell into a contented quiet, broken only by the soft thud of donuts and the low hum of the power lines overhead. Maya found herself watching Finn’s face in the orange light, the way his hair caught the glow and made him look older, or maybe just more real.

“I never thought I’d believe in any of this,” she said quietly.

Finn glanced at her, smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “But you do now?”

She nodded. “It’s not the legend. It’s the people.”

Dale raised his mug. “To the people,” he said.

They all raised something—donut, thermos, even just a hand in the cold.

The night pressed close, but the light held fast.

Tomorrow, they’d chase ghosts and science through the bones of the Drowned Village. For now, they had each other, and that was enough.

The mountain, after all, only needed someone willing to listen.

ten
the duck detector

THE WORKSHOP behind Loose Wheels Service Inc. was a kingdom of its own. The air hit like a slap: hot with old engine oil, acetone, and the sharpness of ozone from soldering irons left on overnight. Light pooled wherever Rolane had hung a lamp—over the lathe, the bench with the greasy vise, and the cinderblock wall where socket wrenches hung in what could have been an art installation if it weren't so perfectly functional. Rows of snowmobiles lined up in various states of undress—one with its drive belt out, another with the cowling peeled back like the skin of an orange, and a third completely disassembled, parts tagged and laid out on towels like a surgical procedure.

Finn liked coming here. It reminded him of his own mind—chaotic, but with a logic underneath. He waited for Maya to pull the door shut before stepping over the threshold, careful not to catch a stray wire on his boots.

Rolane was there, of course. If the machines were kingdom, Rolane was queen, king, and court jester all in one. They were hunched over a bench, hands deep in a tangle of wires that looked like it could strangle a lesser tech, but Rolane had it under control, splicing, twisting, heat-shrinking with a small torch. A pair of bright magenta safety glasses gave them the look of someone who'd walked straight out of a cartoon.

"Yo!" Rolane didn't look up, but their voice carried. "Come to see the future of detection tech, or just here for the donuts?"

"Can't it be both?" Maya said, pulling off her gloves and flicking them at Finn's shoulder.

Rolane grinned and finally looked over, eyes glinting behind the glasses. "You made good time. Want a preview?"

Finn nodded, but Maya was already circling the workbench, hands clasped behind her back so she didn't touch anything by accident. She eyed the mess of wires, then the main event: a slab of 3D-printed plastic housing, bristling with what looked like microphone stalks and old bike bells.

"Is that the prototype?" Maya asked.

Rolane whipped a rag off the top, like a magician. "Behold: The Duck Detector. Version one-point-zero, because anything lower would be a crime."

Finn let out a low whistle, and even Maya had to smirk. "It's bigger than I expected."

Rolane nodded, pleased. "Size matters for this one. It's got a full-range receiver, two high-sensitivity mics, and a custom filter for the weirdest frequency range you've ever seen. You know what's wild? The resonance of those duck squeakers is basically a signature. Like, if you press one against the sensor, it's as unique as a fingerprint."

She eyed the lineup of yellow ducks on the counter, each one Sharpied with a number. Finn reached for the nearest, squished it. The classic squeak.

"Try it on the mic," Rolane urged, tapping a plastic cup mounted to the side of the Detector.

Maya hesitated, but curiosity got the best of her. She pressed the duck's face against the microphone. On the dash-mounted tablet, a jagged blue waveform leapt up, then settled. Underneath, a readout in big block font flashed:

SAMPLE MATCH: 88.5%

Maya blinked. "No way."

Rolane beamed. "Every batch Ashley ever ordered is slightly different, but this year's festival ducks? All within half a decibel. I tuned the filter to that band. If anyone has one, anywhere near the village, we'll pick it up."

Finn grinned. "You're a genius."

Rolane bowed. “I know. But here’s the real kicker. If you get enough of them in one spot, all squeaking at once, the harmonics start to line up. Last year, at the festival, the detector I built for fun nearly exploded from the resonance.”

Maya raised an eyebrow. “You’re saying that’s what causes the snow?”

Rolane shrugged, but didn’t laugh. “I don’t know what causes the snow. But every year the ducks squeak together, something shifts. I ran the records—Azure keeps a spreadsheet, you know?—and the biggest storms hit within twenty-four hours of the festival. Every time.”

Maya looked at Finn, then at the detector, then at Rolane. “Correlation isn’t causation,” she started, but Rolane cut her off.

“Yeah, but the mountain doesn’t care about our scientific method. If the ducks go missing, the weather does too. The village has a rhythm, and right now? It’s offbeat.”

Finn watched the two of them, and a memory flickered—being a kid, holding his breath for the first snow, swearing he could hear it coming in the silence the night before.

“So what’s the plan?” Finn asked. “Can we use the detector to find the missing batch?”

Rolane grinned. “That’s the idea. I did a sweep last night—just a test—but got nothing near town. Then, this morning? I got a ping. Real faint, but from the north. By the caves.”

Maya’s eyes went wide. “Mammoth Cave?”

Rolane nodded, then pointed at a battered topo map pinned to the wall. “Eight miles of lava tube. Perfect hiding spot, and it’s got a dozen ways in and out if you know where to look.”

Finn felt his heart thump. “You want to chase it down now?”

Rolane shrugged. “No time like the present. I’ll drive; you two work the scanner. If the ducks are there, we’ll know in five minutes.”

Maya let out a short, shaky laugh. “You’re serious.”

Rolane was already at the wall, pulling down a set of insulated coveralls and tossing a spare to Finn. “I live for this.”

Within ten minutes, they’d kitted up. Finn and Maya helped Rolane strap the Duck Detector onto a snowmobile rigged for cold starts, the thing looking like a porcupine on wheels. Rolane started the engine

with a roar, then handed Maya the tablet. “You’re the brains,” they said. “Steer me where the numbers go high.”

Maya climbed on behind Finn, cradling the tablet in both hands. The cold was instantaneous—Finn could feel his breath go tight, the air sucked dry by the clear sky and the wind. Rolane peeled out of the garage and onto the old service road, the machine chewing up crusty snow and frozen gravel.

The forest was nothing but black shadows and the blurred gold of their headlamps. Finn focused on the rhythm of the ride, the way Rolane took each corner as if they knew it by heart. Maya pressed against his back, and every so often he felt the vibration of her voice as she called out signal spikes.

“It’s quiet here,” Maya said at first, the tablet flat. Then, a mile in: “Getting a reading. 12.1 kHz, but faint.”

Rolane slowed, then took a hard right onto a trail Finn barely recognized. “That’s the old logging spur,” Finn said, and Rolane just nodded.

The signal rose as they neared the cave’s main entrance, a gap in the ridge like a wound in the earth. Rolane cut the engine, and they listened. The only sound was the ticking of the cooling motor and, far off, the metallic echo of something moving in the cave.

“Reading’s strongest here,” Maya said, voice low. She flipped a switch, and the detector’s LEDs pulsed, painting the snow in a crazy quilt of blue and red.

Finn hopped off, the crunch of his boots loud in the sudden quiet. “You ever go in there?” he asked, half to Maya, half to himself.

“Once,” Maya said. “Field trip, sixth grade. I hated it. Wet and cold, and the guide told us about the bats.”

Rolane grinned, teeth bright in the headlamp’s beam. “No bats this time of year. Just us, and maybe a cache of ducks.”

They moved up to the cave mouth. The rock was slick with frost, and the smell changed instantly—earthy, close, like old bread and wet leaves. Rolane took point, the Duck Detector strapped to their back, antennae sticking up like insect wings.

Inside, the dark swallowed everything but the pinpoints of their headlamps. The ground sloped down, then leveled in a broad chamber floored with broken rock and ice. Finn heard water dripping, slow and

steady, the kind of rhythm that made you feel like you could count the years between drops.

"Signal's here," Maya said, breathless. "Left tunnel."

They took it slow, moving single file, Rolane leading with careful steps. After thirty feet, the air felt heavier, the sound of dripping water louder. The signal jumped.

"Here!" Maya called, stopping. She swept the headlamp around, catching a glint of something yellow wedged in a crevice above head height.

"Bingo," Rolane said. They scrambled up, hands finding holds in the pitted stone. Finn followed, half-expecting the whole ledge to collapse, but it held. Rolane reached the stash first, prying out a plastic grocery bag that rattled with weight.

Inside were at least a dozen ducks, all the right brand, some with the festival numbers still visible. Finn checked the bag for a note, a tag, anything, but there was nothing.

Maya grabbed a duck, squished it. The sound was unmistakable, a perfect match to the detector's signature.

Rolane whooped. "We got 'em."

Finn grinned, then looked at the stash, then back at the darkness behind them. "Who would go to this much trouble?"

Maya didn't answer right away. "Anyone who wanted the festival to fail. Or who had a bet on the snow."

They carried the bag back to the mouth of the cave, Finn watching for any sign they were being followed. But the forest outside was still, the snow untouched. In the distance, the lights of the village looked like a trail of fireflies.

They loaded the ducks onto the snowmobile, and Rolane started the engine. "We bring these to Ashley first. She'll know what to do."

Finn slid on, Maya behind him, her arms tight around his waist. As they tore back through the forest, Finn felt a warmth that had nothing to do with the borrowed coveralls.

He looked at Maya, who was grinning now, windburned and alive.

"I can't believe it worked," she shouted.

Finn shouted back, "That's Duck Creek for you."

They didn't slow until they saw the lights of the garage, and even

then, the momentum carried them forward. Rolane jumped off and yanked the bag of ducks high, like a trophy.

"Mission accomplished," they said, and even Maya had to smile.

Inside the shop, the world felt smaller and warmer. They spread the ducks on the workbench, each one tested and confirmed by the detector.

Maya stared at the lineup, then at Rolane. "Now we just have to make sure they end up in the race."

Rolane nodded, already sketching plans on a scrap of cardboard. "If anyone tries to swipe them again, they'll have to go through me."

Finn looked at the detector, still glowing on the bench. "You think we can use this to figure out who took them in the first place?"

Rolane grinned. "With a couple more tweaks? Absolutely."

They lingered a while, swapping stories of the weirdest things they'd found in the caves—bottle caps from the '60s, a half-buried backpack with a love letter inside, a fossilized salamander Finn still had on his windowsill. When the wind picked up, rattling the sheet metal on the roof, they knew it was time to go.

Finn and Maya walked out into the cold, the sky above a mess of stars. Behind them, the workshop glowed, a little beacon on the edge of the wild.

"Tomorrow's the race," Maya said.

Finn nodded. "You ready?"

She smiled. "I am now."

They headed back to the main road, footprints side by side in the new snow.

In the distance, the mountain watched, silent and patient as ever.

The next morning, the garage was already a hive when Finn and Maya arrived. Rolane, up before sunrise, had the Detector open on the bench, its belly exposed and wires spilling out like a patient mid-surgery. The smell of burnt solder mixed with the usual bouquet of fuel and coffee grounds.

Maya set down the two coffees they'd picked up at the gas station. Finn handed one to Rolane, who took it without looking up.

"Nice," Rolane said, voice scratchy from a night spent debugging. "You two ready to go pro? Because this little duck's about to get an upgrade."

Finn grinned. "We're not even clocked in yet."

"Doesn't matter." Rolane pulled a wire, spliced it, and jammed the cover back on. "If you want to catch Vance, you need a head start."

Maya glanced at the Detector. "Did it get anything last night?"

Rolane nodded, but the look was grim. "The main signal cut out around three. Not just faded—gone. Like someone yanked a switch." They flicked the tablet's screen and brought up a crude map: a blue pulse running up the ridge, then a flatline. "See? It matches the line straight to Mammoth Cave, but then nothing."

Finn studied the map, running his thumb along the edge. "If someone's moving the ducks, they're fast."

"They're not moving the ducks," Rolane said. "They're moving the water. That's what the Detector spiked on."

Maya set her coffee down, thinking. "It's like someone's opening and closing a valve, timing it for the biggest effect. Vance must have a crew working overnight."

The garage door rattled. Before Finn could move, Krazy Mike burst through, breathless and wild-eyed, a red beanie mashed over his ears and a hoodie zipped tight enough to leave only his nose and eyes exposed.

"You will not believe what I just heard at the Taco Stand," Mike announced, voice splitting the quiet in two. "Can I come in, or am I contaminating the evidence?"

"Come on," Finn said, waving him inside. "What's up?"

Mike bounded in, leaving a trail of wet bootprints. "So I'm eating my breakfast burrito, right? And the two guys in the booth behind me, they're talking real quiet. Real. Quiet. But I know how to listen. Turns out, they're Vance's workers. New in town, but they don't look like they're here for the views."

Rolane spun on the stool, coffee forgotten. "What were they saying?"

Mike leaned in, lowering his voice to a whisper. "They're planning

something big. 'Special project,' they called it. Said the boss wants it done before the next storm. They brought in a trailer full of... get this... water flow disruption equipment. Pumps, hoses, the whole shebang."

Maya's jaw set. "They're draining the lake."

Mike nodded, eyes wide. "Or plugging it up. Or both. Either way, it's not normal. Nobody needs that much gear for a simple survey."

Before anyone could process, the side door opened again and Jana Montana jogged in, all neon spandex and positivity, cheeks pink from the cold. She beamed at the group, then stretched her arms above her head like she'd just completed a ten-mile sprint.

"Hey, hey!" she said, voice bright. "You guys talking sabotage? Because my Pilates class just got way more interesting."

Rolane blinked. "You overheard something?"

Jana grinned, bouncing on the balls of her feet. "Not me, but my ten a.m. is full of locals. Couple of them work for Vance Construction. They all just got called in for overtime at Navajo Lake. Something about an 'urgent install' that can't wait till after the weekend."

Finn looked at Maya. "That's it. Vance is making his move now."

Mike puffed up, hands on hips. "Told ya. I've got my ears everywhere."

Rolane didn't waste a second. "Okay, split up. Finn, Maya, hit the caves and see if you can find anything besides the ducks—maybe tools, evidence, sabotage. Jana and I will check the lake, see if there's new hardware or weird activity."

Jana snapped a salute. "I'll text my clients, see if they know more."

Mike jabbed a thumb at his chest. "And I'll watch Vance in town. If he sneezes, you'll hear it here first."

Rolane grabbed their coat, already halfway out the door. "Meet back at Loose Wheels at noon. If anyone's not here, we send the search party."

Maya tucked the Detector under her arm and grinned at Finn, nerves and adrenaline fighting for control. "Guess we're going caving."

He grinned back, catching her enthusiasm. "Bring a headlamp?"

"Two." She patted her bag.

They hustled out, Finn pausing just long enough to see Jana and Rolane climbing into the battered station wagon, Mike already

marching up Main Street with the single-minded focus of a man on a mission.

The road to Mammoth Cave started icy, then turned to mud, the spring thaw making every step an adventure. Finn let Maya lead, trusting her navigation even as the path grew sketchier.

She stopped at the cave mouth, just past the trailhead sign. "You ever get a weird feeling, right before something big?"

Finn thought. "All the time."

She looked at him, searching. "What if we're right, and there's more down there than a prank?"

He shrugged. "Then we solve it. Like we always do."

She smiled, small and sharp, then pulled on her gloves. "Ready?"

He nodded.

The cave swallowed them quickly, the sound of their boots muffled by dirt and old ash. The first hundred feet were easy, but soon the walls narrowed, and the only light was what their headlamps could claw from the dark. The Detector in Maya's hand hummed, low at first, then louder.

"Signal's back," she said, voice echoing.

They followed the sound, winding through a series of tunnels, ducking under low ceilings and stepping over pools of icy water. Finn let the detector lead, watching as the blue readout climbed higher with every turn.

Then Maya stopped, raising a hand.

"Look."

A pair of heavy plastic bins sat tucked into a side passage, each labeled with the logo of a water utility Finn recognized from the valley. Next to the bins, a coil of black hose and a bright orange pump, plugged into a portable battery.

Finn crouched, opening one bin. Inside: a mess of clear plastic tubes, each filled with a milky blue liquid.

Maya reached in, careful. She pulled one out, turning it in her hand. "Dye tracer. Industrial grade."

Finn felt a spike of cold through his chest. "If they pump this into the lake, it'll show up everywhere. Vance could use the results to—"

"—prove the water loss is 'natural,'" Maya finished. "Or claim contamination, push the town to shut down the festival."

Finn stood, looking around. "We need to stop this."

Maya pocketed the dye sample, then took a photo with her phone. "Evidence. We'll bring it back to Rolane."

They heard a sound up the tunnel—footsteps, then the scrape of a box. Maya killed her lamp, pulling Finn back behind a rock outcrop. They waited, listening.

A pair of men entered, voices low.

"... boss wants the next batch ready by noon."

"... don't spill it like last time, it stains like hell."

The two started loading the bins onto a dolly, grumbling about the cold. They didn't see Maya or Finn, and soon their voices faded into the next chamber.

Maya exhaled, slow. "We need to go."

They doubled back, fast but silent, out into the light and the biting air. Finn's hands shook, not from the cold.

Back at the garage, Rolane and Jana were already waiting. Jana's leggings were splattered with mud, and Rolane's jacket had a new rip, but both looked energized.

"We got photos of the setup at the lake," Rolane said, waving their phone. "Vance's crew built a diversion channel overnight. Jana talked her way onto the site—she's a beast."

Jana flexed, grinning. "All about the core strength."

Maya dropped the dye tracer on the workbench. "We found their stash in the caves. They're prepping to spike the lake, claim it's contaminated."

Rolane whistled. "If that gets out, the whole festival is toast."

Mike burst in, panting. "Vance just left the village. He's heading up to the overlook. Alone."

Jana perked up. "Maybe to watch the show."

Rolane looked at Maya and Finn, then the clock. "We've got two hours before they launch the next phase. We hit the cave, the lake, and the overlook. All at once."

Jana cracked her knuckles. "I'll take the lake."

"Rolane, you come with us," Finn said. "We'll bust their operation in the cave."

Maya looked at Mike. "Can you record Vance? If he says anything incriminating, we need it."

Mike saluted, a real military snap. "He'll never see me coming."

They scattered—Jana already jogging, Rolane grabbing a toolbox and ducking into the back lot, Mike pulling out his phone and hustling up Main.

Finn looked at Maya, adrenaline making her eyes shine.

"We're really doing this," she said.

He squeezed her hand. "Let's go save the mountain."

They ran for the trail, not looking back.

Above them, the clouds had started to gather, heavy and full of promise.

The shop never felt busier than it did that hour before noon, with everyone braced for a showdown and nowhere left to run but straight at the problem. Maps cluttered the walls, marked with tape and highlighter, and every flat surface was covered in evidence: the dye tracer bottles, a printout of Vance's property buys, a mud-stained lineup of ceremonial ducks. The Duck Detector sang a nervous background hum, searching the airwaves for anything out of place.

Dale was the last to arrive. He moved slower than usual, one arm tucked to his chest, the other holding a mason jar full of cloudy water. He set it on the workbench and waited for the noise to settle.

Rolane was the first to notice. "Is that... kitchen tap?"

Dale nodded, grave. "Hot Mama's, an hour ago. It's never looked like this before." He shook the jar, letting the cloud swirl. It didn't settle. "It's alive, but not in a good way."

Maya peered at the sample, unscrewing the lid to sniff it. "That's iron oxide, maybe some sulfur. Like someone rerouted the whole aquifer through the wrong vein."

Dale fixed her with a look. "You're not wrong. The water's scream-

ing." He said it so plainly that even Krazy Mike stopped his monologue mid-sentence.

Jana, who was busy texting her entire Pilates roster for backup, paused. "Wait, water can scream?"

Dale shrugged. "You ever hear the pipes after the first freeze? That's the warning. This—" He tapped the jar. "—is a death rattle. If you want the festival, the snow, the spring melt, you put it right, today."

Silence. Even Rolane lost their usual bounce.

Finn was already in motion, checking the webbing on his pack and loading the Detector into a side compartment. "Let's do this," he said.

Rolane, finally snapping out of it, finished taping a sensor probe to a custom extension pole. "Jana and I hit the lake from the marina; you two, straight to the caves. Krazy Mike, you tail Vance and watch for any muscle."

Mike grinned, eyes bright. "Already got the high ground. Sheriff Adams won't know what hit him."

Finn and Maya climbed onto the backup ATV—a Frankenstein of parts, more duct tape than plastic, but Rolane had given it a last check that morning. "You sure it'll run?" Maya asked, voice half-joking.

Rolane winked. "She's meaner than she looks. Avoid the pothole at the fork, or you'll lose a wheel."

Maya strapped in, one hand on the Detector and the other steadying herself behind Finn. She took a last look at the water sample, the cloudy spiral still turning inside.

They rolled out, tires spinning over crusted snow and mud. The cold was raw, the sky a nervous gray. As they wound through the trees, Maya watched the Detector's screen, which pulsed with a single, insistent blue wave.

"Still tracking," she said, squinting at the readout. "It's not moving, just getting stronger."

Finn hit the throttle, weaving between the birch and pine. "If it's a beacon, they're trying to call something in."

Maya gripped his shoulder, thinking. "Or trying to trigger the resonance again. If they do it in the cave, maybe it's amplified."

The approach to Mammoth Cave was slick with black ice, but Finn handled it like he'd been born riding. They ditched the ATV behind a

stand of deadfall and started in on foot, the Detector's signal now steady as a heartbeat.

The entrance was half-closed by an avalanche of old snow. Finn chopped through with a small hatchet, creating a gap just wide enough for them to crawl. The cave's breath was humid, tinged with the metallic tang of whatever traced through the jar back at the shop.

Inside, their headlamps painted the walls in circles of shadow and shine. The tunnel dipped, then broadened into a chamber. At the far end, a pair of men in safety vests hunched over a pile of equipment—pumps, hoses, and something that looked suspiciously like a field generator.

Maya ducked behind a rock. "That's the same guys from the Taco Stand," she whispered.

Finn nodded, already gauging the distance.

The men were too focused on their task to notice. One was pouring something from a bottle into the mouth of a hose; the other was tapping at a tablet, muttering about flow rates and "impact windows."

Maya leveled the Detector and pressed record. The blue pulse on the screen jumped, then flatlined. She risked a peek around the edge—then blinked. One of the bins from earlier now sat open, its contents gone. In its place, a mess of shredded duck carcasses and two full canisters of the blue dye.

"Finn," she hissed. "They're mixing it with the meltwater, spiking the stream."

He nodded, then motioned up the slope. "You block the pump; I'll grab the evidence."

Maya's hands shook as she crept forward. She found the power cord to the generator and yanked, hard. The engine coughed, died. Instantly, the two men started cursing, then darted for the machinery.

Finn moved while they were distracted. He ducked to the bin, scooped up a canister, and bolted for the shadows.

The nearest worker spotted him. "Hey!" he yelled, but Finn was already gone, ducking down the narrow side tunnel.

Maya followed, the Detector clutched to her chest.

They ran, boots clattering, chased by the echo of angry shouts. At the next bend, Finn slowed just long enough to wedge a fallen log

across the passage. It would only buy them a minute, but that was enough.

They made it out, lungs burning. Finn dumped the dye canister in a snowbank, then wiped his face, leaving a streak of mud on his cheek.

They took a minute to catch their breath. Maya kept her eyes on the cave entrance, expecting the men to follow, but nobody came.

After a moment, Finn looked at her, voice low. “We have to warn the others.”

She nodded. “I’ll text Rolane.”

Back at the village, everything was motion. The whole street was out: kids prepping for the parade, parents stringing up banners, the old-timers clustering by the fire barrel at the overlook. Maya caught sight of Jana at the marina, holding a bullhorn and herding a dozen volunteers along the lakeshore.

Rolane’s ATV was parked by the dock, antennae raised. When Maya and Finn pulled in, Rolane ran up, eyes frantic.

“They blocked the intake with a weighted tarp,” Rolane said. “Jana climbed out on the ice and cut it, but they already poured a drum of dye into the outflow.”

Maya held up her sample jar. “They tried the same at the cave. We stopped most of it, but some went through.”

Finn looked at the lake, which seemed normal—still, gray, cold. But down by the dam, a faint line of blue traced the outflow, a stain no wider than a shoelace.

Krazy Mike skidded up on his fat-tire bike, face flushed. “Vance is on the overlook, talking to the news. Says he’s got evidence the spring melt’s been contaminated, that it’s too dangerous to run the festival.”

Rolane rolled their eyes. “He’d need a positive test, though. And the only lab in the county is at the school.”

Maya smiled, then pulled the Detector from her pack. “We have the original water. And the ducks. If we run the festival with the Detector active, we can show there’s no contamination—just the regular resonance.”

Jana grinned. “We can make it the biggest duck run ever.”

Rolane pointed at Finn. “You think you can hack the Detector to broadcast on the PA?”

Finn shrugged. “Give me fifteen minutes.”

The group scattered: Maya and Jana to the parade start, Rolane and Mike to the school lab, Finn back to the garage to work his magic.

The next hour was a blur. Maya helped Ashley and the other volunteers scrub the ducks, then loaded them into the launch baskets. Jana led the crowd in warm-ups and bad jokes, keeping spirits high.

At the signal, Finn wheeled out the Detector, now hot-wired to a Bluetooth speaker. He looked at Maya, gave a nervous thumbs-up, and then started the countdown.

“Three! Two! One!”

A hundred ducks, each one with a unique voice, hit the water at once. The Detector’s screen spiked, then soared—a perfect harmony of squeaks and squawks.

For a second, nothing happened.

Then the cloud above split, and the first snowflake fell. Not a flurry, not a squall—just one perfect flake, drifting down onto the creek.

The crowd cheered, even before the rest followed. Within minutes, the village was dusted in white.

At the overlook, Vance tried to speak, but the kids drowned him out with honks and laughter. The news crew turned their cameras to the river, filming as the blue line faded and the water ran clear again.

Jana hugged Maya, lifting her off the ground. “You did it!” she yelled.

Maya laughed, breathless. “We did it.”

Finn wandered over, looking exhausted but happy. Rolane joined, hair full of snow.

Ashley brought over a tray of pizza slices. “For the heroes,” she said.

They huddled together, the smell of yeast and tomato sauce chasing off the cold.

Maya looked at the sky, then at the Detector, which was finally quiet. “Think it’ll last?” she asked.

Finn shrugged, but he was smiling. “As long as we listen.”

They watched the snow, together, as the mountain settled back into its rhythm.

For now, at least, Duck Creek was safe.

And that was enough.

eleven
echoes in mammoth cave

THEY ENTERED the mouth of Mammoth Cave before dawn, crunching over frost-glazed gravel that rang under each step. Finn paused at the first shelf of stone, turning to check if Maya was close. She was right behind, shuffling her boot soles over the ice with a care that said she'd been through caves before—maybe not this cave, but close enough for the habits to stick.

He clicked his headlamp on. The beam cut a sharp line through the vapor of their breath, carving out the cave's first ten feet in clinical white. The walls here were smooth and dark, flecked with tiny glassy crystals that caught the light and tossed it back in a hundred ghostly reflections. Far inside, the passage curved left, then vanished into black.

"Ready?" Finn asked, voice low.

Maya nodded, then checked the Duck Detector—Rolane's pride and joy. She held it flat in her palm, the display a dim blue glow against her jacket. "It's reading zero point seven," she said. "That's above baseline, even with the town still asleep."

"Means it's down here," Finn said. He pulled the climbing pack higher onto his shoulders, making sure the old utility tape and carabiners didn't rattle.

They started in. The world narrowed instantly: just the sound of boots scuffing stone, the muted beep from the Detector whenever Maya

pressed the sample button, and the persistent, measured tick of water somewhere ahead. The air was cool, almost damp, but with a dryness that said it was filtered through yards and yards of volcanic ash.

The first chamber was exactly as Finn remembered. He'd come here once with his dad, on a science field trip that was more babysitting than anything else, and he'd memorized the route: straight, then left, then down two drops. They passed the "Bat Room," a shoulder-high hollow that stank of ammonia and old leather. The bat season was long done, but Finn looked up anyway, half-expecting to catch the glint of tiny, angry eyes.

Nothing but empty ceiling and a dusting of guano.

Maya paused to examine a streak of dirt along the floor. "Fresh," she said. "Someone's been through here this week. Multiple someones."

Finn crouched beside her, noting the pattern of boot prints. They were wide and sharp—newer than his own. "That's a heavy guy," he said, indicating the depth of the tread.

"Or someone carrying gear," Maya said. She thumbed the Detector again. The reading held steady, then flickered up.

They moved on. The further they went, the more the cave changed: the walls narrowed, then opened in sudden bursts; the floor went from flat to jagged and back again. Each new room brought a different sound signature. Sometimes the echo of water, sometimes just the low, restless hum of the stone. Twice, Maya paused to take a reading, noting the way the Detector picked up faint pulses and then lost them in the noise.

"You think it's a relay?" Finn asked, after the third spike.

She considered. "If they stashed something in here, it might be rigged to signal back to the source. Or maybe it's just residual resonance from the last festival batch."

He grunted, not disagreeing. "Let's find out."

They kept moving. After the third switchback, the tunnel began to slope down, the rock underfoot polished by thousands of years of water. Here, the passage was tighter—Finn had to duck, and Maya scraped her backpack twice on the ceiling. The light from their headlamps flattened all shadows, so it was hard to tell if the world was closing in or just playing tricks on their depth perception.

Eventually, the tunnel leveled, then branched: one side arched up, toward a vent that stank faintly of sulfur, while the other bent left and vanished into a flat, wide corridor.

Maya hesitated, then pointed to the left fork. "Signal's stronger that way."

Finn nodded and took point, following the smooth curve of the rock. Here the walls were slick and black, almost glassy. The air got colder. The only sound now was the faint rattle of gear in Finn's pack and their own breathing, echoing back in odd, syncopated rhythms.

Maya checked the Detector again. "It's spiking. Two point three and climbing."

Ahead, the tunnel widened into a dome-shaped chamber, the ceiling lost to darkness. Finn moved in first, sweeping his light over the floor. It was clear, almost perfectly flat—except for a long, low ridge near the far wall, like a vein of petrified wood or bone.

He walked over and ran a hand along the ridge. It was warm to the touch, not stone at all but something pliable under the crust of mud.

"Maya, come look at this."

She stepped over, careful. "That's... not natural."

"No," Finn agreed. He knelt, then used the edge of his boot to chip away a strip of dirt. The ridge crumbled, revealing a mesh of yellow plastic underneath.

Maya gasped, the sound ricocheting around the room. "Those are ducks," she whispered.

Finn grinned, the first real smile in hours. "Looks like a couple hundred, at least."

He dug deeper, pulling up an entire mesh bag full of bright yellow ducks, all pristine except for the blue-black stains on their bellies.

"They stole the entire race batch," Maya said. "And buried them here."

Finn nodded, then examined the mesh. "It's commercial grade. Same stuff they use at the festival."

Maya knelt beside him, pulling a single duck from the bag. She squeezed it, gently, then harder. Nothing happened.

"No squeak," she said.

He frowned. "Try another."

She pulled a second duck. Same result. She lined up six, then eight, then a full dozen. Squeezed each. Not a sound.

"They're duds," Maya said, her tone shifting from disbelief to outrage. "They swapped out the real ducks for silent ones. That's why the Detector was going crazy—the original batch is here, but the ones in the festival were fakes."

Finn felt his heart pick up. "Sabotage," he said. "Big-time."

They looked at each other, the enormity of it sinking in.

Maya took out her phone and snapped a photo, the flash painting the chamber in harsh white light for just an instant.

Finn brushed more dirt off the pile, then caught a glint of something metallic. He dug it out—a small, black electronics package, wrapped in tape.

Maya blinked. "Is that...?"

"Tracker," Finn said. He turned it over. "Vance's favorite kind."

She pocketed it, eyes already darting to the next clue. "Let's bag as many as we can carry. The rest, we document and leave for evidence."

They worked in silence for a few minutes, stuffing their packs with mesh bags and ducks. The only sound was the faint drip-drip of water from somewhere above, and the muted squish of rubber as Maya worked the silent ducks, one by one.

Finally, Finn zipped his bag shut and slung it over his shoulder. "Ready?"

Maya nodded, and together they retraced their steps, leaving the chamber as neat as they'd found it.

As they wound back through the tunnel, Maya's thoughts ran ahead. "If Vance swapped out the ducks, and used the real batch to trigger the Detector remotely, he could've tanked the race on purpose. All the hype about the snow not coming back, the rumors about tradition failing..."

Finn finished her thought. "He's trying to kill the town's confidence."

Maya nodded, teeth clenched. "It's genius, if you're a monster."

He couldn't argue with that.

They followed the boot prints back, retracing every twist and

turn. The signal from the Detector dropped with each hundred feet, fading to background by the time they hit the first main chamber again.

Finn checked behind, just in case. Nothing but empty cave and their own prints.

They emerged into gray daylight, the chill outside somehow less biting than the cold they'd just left behind.

Finn set his bag on the ground and stretched. "We need to get these to Rolane and Ashley."

Maya nodded, then looked back at the cave. "There's more. I know it."

He followed her gaze, and for the first time since entering, he shivered—not from cold, but from the prickly, electric sense that they were being watched.

"Let's go," he said.

They turned toward the village, packs heavy with evidence, and never once looked back.

They didn't risk a word until they reached a fold in the cave wall that dipped out of sight from the main chamber. Finn let his pack drop with a controlled thud, then knelt to unzip the mesh bag. Maya crouched beside him, shoving loose hair under her beanie and reaching for a duck.

She gave it a squeeze. The plastic dented in, popped back, but nothing happened. No squeak. She squeezed harder, jaw clenched as if the harder she tried, the more likely it would work. Still nothing.

"Try another," Finn whispered.

She did. She tried three, then ten, then dumped a pile onto the cave floor. Each one was identical—same shape, same bright yellow color, same dumb smile. But when she poked at the seam with a fingernail, she saw it: the plug for the squeaker had been pried open and forced back in, not the clean line of factory production but the ragged edge of hand-sabotage.

Finn examined one under his headlamp, turning it in his gloved

hands. “See that residue?” he murmured. “It’s superglue. Whoever did this didn’t want them to make a sound at all.”

Maya set the dud down and fished through the bag. “They replaced the whole mechanism,” she said, awe and fury wrestling for control of her voice. “They must’ve bought hundreds of silent lookalikes, swapped them overnight, and left the duds for the race.”

Finn leaned back on his heels, scanning the chamber. “But what happened to the originals?”

She looked at the mesh bag, then at the ground. Her lamp caught a scatter of tiny white disks, like the bones of cave crickets but brighter. “There,” she said, crawling over. She scooped up a handful—duck squeakers, the real ones, torn from their hosts and tossed like trash.

He reached for his phone and snapped a few pictures. Maya did the same, holding the flash so it didn’t blind them both. For a second, the cave lit up—yellow ducks, white specks, black volcanic stone, and two faces reflected in the glossy plastic. The image burned in her eyes even after the light faded.

“They wanted to kill the tradition,” Maya whispered. “The whole point of the race is the sound.”

Finn nodded. “Without the resonance, there’s no weather shift. No ritual. Vance makes it look like the mountain gave up.”

Maya’s hands trembled, and she pressed her knuckles into the floor to stop them. “He’s not just sabotaging the race. He’s sabotaging the people.”

They both went quiet, listening to the soft drip of water overhead and the faint, off-rhythm echo of their own pulse in their ears.

Finn gathered the squeakers into a ziplock bag. “We’ll need these for evidence.”

She wanted to say “let’s go,” but something held her back—a sense that the cave wasn’t finished with them yet.

She was right. The echo of footsteps arrived first, shuffling and uneven, like someone carrying a weight over rough ground. Maya’s eyes went wide, and Finn caught the cue in an instant. He flicked his lamp off and pressed flat to the stone, motioning her to do the same.

They crawled behind a shelf of collapsed basalt, bodies pressed close in the cold. Maya could smell the mineral tang of the cave, the sweat in

her own hair, and a faint plastic sweetness from the ducks. The footsteps came closer, then voices, two at least, both men.

"—told you, leave the bags up here until the pumps are set," said the first, his voice nasal and quick. "Otherwise they'll get wrecked in the next storm."

The second voice was older, maybe Vance's hired muscle. "You sure the signal's not gonna spike again? Last time, the whole thing almost went sideways."

A clatter of plastic bags, then: "Boss said the Detector can't find them unless the old ducks squeak together. These are just props. It's the water rig that matters now."

The first man grunted. "Fine. But if the boss wants the Dry Season to work, he better not cheap out on us again."

There was a wet slap as one of them set down something heavy. Maya peeked through a crack—her lamp still off—and saw the shadow of a dolly cart, loaded with bins and more mesh bags.

She tried to slow her breath, but the closeness of Finn at her back made every movement exaggerated.

The first voice, closer now, said: "Once we finish redirecting the water from those sinkholes, the lake won't drain right. The snowpack will lock up and just... sit there."

The older man snorted. "And Vance gets his dry season. Smart way to drive down the property values."

"Or break the town, whichever comes first."

They both laughed, a brittle, echoing sound.

"After that, the contracts go into effect. He's got options on half the strip, plus that fancy hotel if it tanks another winter."

They rustled the bags, then started rolling the dolly out the other side of the chamber. Their voices faded, but Maya caught one last bit:

"If the festival falls apart, nobody's gonna blame us. They'll just think the magic stopped working."

"Or that the town's not worth saving," the other finished.

Maya pressed her eyes shut. The ache in her chest was as much anger as cold.

They waited a long time after the voices faded. Finn counted to sixty, twice, before he risked a word.

"You get all that?" he asked.

Maya nodded. "We need to stop the water sabotage, not just rescue the ducks."

He exhaled, relief and resolve in one slow breath. "We go now?"

"Now," she said, her voice a hush but steady. She tucked the evidence into her pack and squeezed Finn's arm, grounding herself.

They slunk out the way they'd come, keeping low and quiet. Only when they hit the tunnel's main branch did they risk a lamp, and even then, Maya kept it on the lowest setting.

At the cave mouth, the light of morning was blue and harsh, the last stars burning out behind the ridgeline. Maya looked back into the tunnel once, just for a second. It was still, and the plastic ducks looked almost cheerful, waiting in their mesh net for the next kid to set them free.

She wondered what it would take to get the town to listen.

Then she caught up with Finn, who was already checking his phone for a signal, and together they jogged for the trailhead.

They had what they needed.

And now, at least, they knew the enemy's name.

They lingered at the threshold of the main chamber, Finn double-checking the closure on the evidence bag while Maya swept the headlamp's beam over the walls, hungry for any last clue the cave might yield. She spotted a ridge of carved stone just beyond the pile of sabotaged ducks, the face so smooth and regular it looked out of place among the wild fractures of basalt.

"Hold up," Maya said, her voice pitched barely above the tick of dripping water. "Look at this."

Finn followed her gaze, sweeping his own lamp to the spot. At first, it just looked like a ripple in the stone, but as he stepped closer, the pattern revealed itself: a series of shallow grooves, twisting lines, and oval depressions, scored into the wall by hands far older than the town itself.

He reached out, then thought better of it, letting Maya take the

lead. She dropped to a crouch and traced her fingers along the grooves. “Petroglyphs,” she whispered. “I didn’t know they came this deep.”

Finn looked closer. The lines resolved into a shape: a lake at the top, long lines running down from it, branching and splitting, looping back to rejoin at the bottom. Above the lake was a triangle, sharp and certain —a mountain. Dots clustered along the branches, some marked with concentric circles.

Maya’s breath fogged the stone. “This is a hydrology map,” she said, half to herself. “An ancient one. Look, the big oval’s the lake, these are the lava tubes, and this—” she pointed to the triangle “—is the mountain peak.”

Finn felt the old awe, the one that came with first snows and thunder rolling off the cliffs. “They knew about the siphon effect,” he said.

She nodded, tracing a groove that dropped from the lake to the lowest point on the wall. “And they marked it.” At the very end of the channel, someone had inlaid a chunk of turquoise, its surface dulled by centuries but still vivid under the lamp.

Maya’s eyes went wide. “This is the same color as the stones on the Neptune.”

Finn took out his phone and snapped a picture, the flash briefly filling the chamber with light. “The Drowned Village had these, too. On the artifact.”

She touched her head, running the math in her mind. “What if the Neptune wasn’t just a symbol? What if it was a way to calibrate the lake? Like a mechanical warning system, tied to the caves and the water table. Maybe the petroglyph is a record of when it worked, and when it failed.”

Finn thumbed through the photos until he found the old sketch from Jasper’s notebook. Side by side, the resemblance was uncanny.

Maya kept moving down the wall, reading the story in the stone. “Here’s the sequence,” she said, voice gaining force. “Lake fills, channels run down, pressure builds, and then—” she followed a branch to where it terminated in a burst of star-shaped marks “—it vents, all at once, and triggers a snow event.”

Finn nodded, understanding. “If the lake doesn’t drain, the system gets backed up. No snow, no runoff, and the whole cycle breaks.”

Maya grinned, teeth white in the lamp’s spill. “It’s so obvious, when you see it laid out.”

He snapped more photos, getting every inch of the panel. “We need to show this to Dale.”

“And to Brandi,” Maya added. “She’ll get it. It’s not just ritual. It’s science, just very, very old.”

They stood back, letting the weight of the discovery settle. For a second, the rest of the cave and the world outside disappeared, replaced by the silent logic of the ancient engineers—people who’d figured out how to read water and stone, and left instructions for anyone who cared enough to look.

Maya broke the spell. “Let’s get these to Ashley.” She meant the squeakers, but Finn knew she meant everything—the photos, the evidence, the story itself.

They packed up, moving with the kind of economy that comes only when you’ve been truly scared. Every step out of the chamber was lighter, the sense of doom replaced by purpose.

The trip back was a blur. The cave felt different now, less a tomb than a corridor. Finn set the pace, and Maya kept the Detector cradled against her chest, eyes constantly on the signal.

They surfaced at the entrance, blinking into the sudden white of midday. Sun bounced off the snow, dazzling after the cave’s black. In the valley, the wind had picked up, blowing smoke from cabin chimneys flat against the ridge. The town was still, almost preternaturally so. Maybe word of the festival’s earlier sabotage had spread, or maybe people just sensed the waiting in the air.

Finn gave a low whistle, calling Maya’s attention to the sky. The first thin clouds were curling over the peaks, blue and gray and moving fast.

She exhaled, a sound of relief and warning both. “If Vance wants to push the system to failure, he has to act now. The meltwater’s peaking.”

Finn nodded. “We need to hurry.”

They set off at a jog, boots biting into old snow and new ice. The packs weighed less now, even loaded with ducks and evidence. Every

corner of the road felt charged; every glance over the shoulder was sharper, as if Vance's hired hands might step out at any moment.

Halfway to town, Maya paused, catching her breath and spinning a duck in her palm. "If the whole mountain is a tuned instrument, all it needs is a reset."

Finn raised an eyebrow. "You want to run the ducks through the creek?"

She grinned. "Not just the creek. Every channel in the valley. We need to get the resonance everywhere at once."

He liked that. "Old school," he said.

Maya fished her phone out and called Ashley, who picked up on the second ring. "We found the real ducks," Maya said, breathless. "And something else—you have to see it."

A pause, then: "Get to Hot Mama's. Everyone's here."

Finn and Maya ran the last half-mile, passing yards strung with leftover festival bunting and kids building snow ducks on the curb. At the pizza place, they found Ashley and Dale hunched over a battered card table, both faces serious.

Ashley looked up, hope and worry tangled in her eyes. "Did you get them?"

Finn set the mesh bag down with a flourish. "Original batch," he said. "With the squeakers."

Ashley reached in, grabbed one, and squeezed. The sound—a perfect, wild, beautiful squeak—rang out and echoed around the porch. Dale grinned, then reached for another, and another, until the table was a chorus of reunion.

Maya dropped the evidence bag and scrolled through the photos, laying her phone on the table for Dale to see. "It's all connected," she said. "The ducks, the Neptune, the caves, the lake. The petroglyphs prove it."

Dale studied the photos for a long moment. His voice was hoarse when he spoke. "So the mountain remembers," he said.

Maya grinned. "Yeah. And now the whole town will, too."

Ashley got up and ran inside, coming back with a carton of batteries and a box of walkie talkies. "If we're going to run this," she said, "we do it in style."

The plan came together in a rush: every creek and drainage, every kid with a net or a bucket, every walkie tuned to the same channel. At noon, they'd launch the rescue run, and this time the whole mountain would hear it.

Finn and Maya shared a look—a mix of exhaustion, pride, and a little bit of fear. But mostly, they felt ready.

They had the evidence, the knowledge, and the story.

And, for the first time in a long while, they had hope.

twelve
crisis at cascade falls

DAWN AT CASCADE Falls looked wrong. Even from a half-mile off, Maya could tell the water was off—what was usually a white roar was now a thin, foamy stripe licking the rocks, like the creek had given up mid-sentence. The air was wetter than usual, but the humidity only made the silence heavier. She and Finn hiked the last stretch in grim quiet, boots crunching over hoarfrost and the delicate skeletons of last year's weeds.

The base of the falls was a moonscape. The usual mist-shrouded spectacle had been replaced by bare, dripping stone, every surface slick and gleaming in the new light. Water still trickled, but it sounded apologetic, a background hiss where there should have been thunder. Even the ice buildup on the rocks seemed embarrassed, shriveled up in weird, lumpy formations.

Rolane was easy to spot, sitting cross-legged on the far edge of the overlook, wearing two jackets and a pair of neon-green earmuffs despite the total lack of noise. Jana stood nearby, hands deep in her puffer coat, watching the falls with the intent focus of someone diagnosing a broken bone.

"You ever seen it this low?" Maya called as she and Finn hopped down the last ledge.

Rolane looked up from the battered tablet they were hunched over.

“Not since 2002, and that was after the fire when the reservoir was dry. But even then, it never dropped below the secondary lip.”

Jana gave Finn and Maya a curt nod, the kind that passed for a greeting in her world. “Water’s off by twenty percent since midnight,” she said, no preamble. “And there’s been zero precipitation in the window. Which means—”

“Tampering,” Finn finished, quick. “Show us?”

Rolane grinned and patted the stone next to them. “C’mere. You’re going to want to see this.”

Maya settled beside Rolane, careful not to slip on the moss. Finn stood over her shoulder. Rolane cued up a video feed on the tablet: a grainy, high-contrast image from a drone, all green and blue except where the metal glinted.

“This is the north cove,” Rolane narrated, “just below the surface. If you look here—” a fingertip jabbed the screen, leaving a little smudge “—you’ll see Vance’s boys installing plates over the main sinkholes.”

The footage zoomed in. Four figures in wetsuits and orange vests hunkered over the water, lowering a square of something silvery down by rope. The camera wobbled with wind, then zoomed again: the plates were bolted directly over the black mouths of the limestone sinks, two men holding them in place while the others tightened fasteners with pneumatic drivers.

“It’s too clean to be amateur hour,” Rolane said. “They must have mapped the whole thing in advance. Each plate is custom-fitted—see the edges? Even the state wouldn’t do that unless it was a major emergency.”

Jana crossed her arms, unimpressed. “They worked through the night. Sheriff’s been up there all morning, keeping hikers out and telling everyone it’s for ‘environmental monitoring.’”

Maya leaned in, watching the way the metal plates vanished beneath the thin blue-green. “If they plug the sinks, it’ll starve the falls until the pressure builds and… what, blows the whole thing out at once?”

“Exactly,” Rolane said, practically giddy with the elegance of it. “Which would flood the downstream basin, but more importantly, it’ll make everyone freak out about a sudden, catastrophic failure.”

Finn frowned, thinking. “Is there a way to undo it from here?”

"Not unless you have a winch and some scuba gear," Rolane said. "And even then, it'd be a race against the team they've got on site."

Jana straightened, shifting her weight. "We have evidence," she said, holding up a ziplock full of mutilated duck squeakers and a printed set of time-stamped photos. "But nobody's going to care unless we show the whole thing in action."

"Evidence is great," Finn said, "but it's nothing without the artifact. We need to get the Neptune and trigger the event ourselves, before Vance does it his way."

Maya nodded, seeing the logic. "If we restore the balance, even for a day, we might be able to prove the sabotage."

Jana looked at Finn, assessing. "You know the back trails better than anyone. Is there a way to the old village site that avoids the main lake road?"

Finn's face settled into its "problem-solving" mode. "Yeah. If we take the fire line up the west ridge, we can cut past the overlook and come out above the village. There's a shelf there, the one with the—"

"—the wolf tree," Maya finished, remembering the gnarled, half-dead pine that looked like it had eaten all its neighbors. "We stashed the Neptune in the hollow, remember?"

Rolane blinked, then grinned. "You really did your homework."

Maya felt a pulse of pride, but kept her eyes on the falls. "We get the artifact, set it in place, and make sure the water's running through the right channels. Then we can film the results and send them to the state."

Rolane nodded, but there was a new tension in their shoulders. "One more thing. The drone is battery-limited, but I can get it overhead again in ten minutes. If you're going to move, move now. Vance's team is starting to sweep for lookouts."

As if on cue, Finn's phone buzzed—an unknown number. He answered on speaker, voice clipped and wary. "Yeah?"

Krazy Mike's voice exploded through the line: "It's a setup, man. Vance and the sheriff just spotted your drone. They're mobilizing. If you're not out of there in five, you're toast. Also—" a wet gasp, as if Mike was running "—Ashley says to check the battery on the Detector before you do anything wild."

Finn hung up without a word and turned to Maya. "We've got to split. Now."

Jana reached into her bag and handed Maya a slim, metallic canister. "If you need a signal, set this off. It's dye—bio safe, but it'll turn the whole creek red for a mile."

Maya tucked the canister into her vest. "Thanks."

Rolane grabbed Maya's arm, a squeeze hard enough to get her attention. "You do this, you're on your own until you get back to town. I'll keep the drone up as long as I can, but if you go dark, I can't help."

Maya nodded. "We'll be fine."

Jana offered a quick, rare smile. "Don't die."

"Not the plan," Finn said, already moving.

They ducked out, climbing the slick slope behind the overlook. The path was all roots and black mud, the remnants of last year's runoff still carved into the earth. Within two minutes, they'd lost sight of the falls —and, hopefully, anyone watching from below.

Behind them, Rolane and Jana were already packing up. Rolane's laugh carried, sharp and bright even in retreat: "If you make it back alive, I owe you a pizza."

Maya wanted to shout back, but saved her breath for the climb. The sky was clearing, a hard blue, the air thin and tight against her teeth. She followed Finn's boot prints up and over the ridge, every step further from the safety of normal and deeper into the story.

At the top, she risked a glance back. The falls still looked wrong, but the water below glinted with the first touch of sunlight.

She squared her shoulders and turned to Finn, who was already scanning the next route. "Ready?" she asked.

He smiled, the kind that meant trouble was coming but he'd run at it anyway. "Let's do it."

They set off for the wolf tree, and whatever waited in the hollow.

The only thing worse than the sound of your own breath on a death ridge was the sound of rocks breaking loose, skipping down toward the void. Maya kept her eyes on Finn's boots, which picked a path with

surgical precision, and tried not to think about the drop to her left. It was at least two hundred feet straight down, a tumble of shattered basalt and bristlecone skeletons that would catch a person just long enough to snap them in half.

The ridge was so thin in places that the wind funneled over it in a solid wave, threatening to knock them sideways with every gust. Finn's hands were full with the Detector and the rescue pack, but he moved like he'd been born on an edge.

"Step here," he said, pausing just long enough to tap a ledge the size of a paperback. "Then shift your weight and hug the wall."

Maya did as told, ignoring the scrape of cold rock against her knuckles. The trail—or what passed for it—was marked only by the scuffs of sheep hooves and the occasional cairn left by a masochist hiker. Every so often, a patch of snow clung to the shady side, wetting the stone to a shine.

They rounded a turn, and the view opened up: below them, the valley spread out like a topographic model, all the old logging roads and dry creek beds etched in blue shadow. The lake itself was visible in the distance, shrunken and sickly, a weird turquoise oval with bare mud at the edges. Maya thought of the drone footage, the neat circles of steel plate choking off the heart of the system.

She didn't realize she'd slowed until Finn stopped above her, looking back.

"You good?" he asked, voice low.

"Yeah," Maya lied. "Just... recalibrating."

He nodded. "Three more switchbacks, then we're on the saddle. After that, it's just a scramble to the wolf tree."

She grinned, feeling her face stretch tight with windburn. "No problem."

On the next turn, the trail crumbled underfoot. Maya's boots hit a patch of moss that was slick as soap, and she lost all traction. For a split second, she hung between up and down, arms windmilling, the pack dragging her off-balance.

She heard Finn shout her name, and then gravity took over. She skidded sideways, both hands scraping at the rock, and started sliding toward the drop.

Instinct, not logic, made her grab for a branch—a dead stick no thicker than her thumb. It broke instantly. She heard Finn's boots on the scree, felt a sudden jerk as his hand clamped around her wrist, fingers digging in with the force of a vise.

"Got you," Finn grunted.

The world spun; Maya's stomach lurched as she dangled in the empty space above the ravine. For a second, all she could see was sky, a blinding blue arch with nothing below it.

Then Finn's other hand found her jacket collar. He planted his feet, shifted his weight backward, and with a sound that was half growl, half exhale, he hauled her up and onto the shelf beside him.

They landed in a heap, Maya's elbow in his ribs, his chin in her shoulder. Her pulse hammered in her ears.

Finn didn't let go right away. "You okay?" he asked.

Maya nodded, breathless, eyes wide and not quite focused.

"Not how I'd planned to take a shortcut," she managed, trying for a joke but coming out shaky.

He smiled, relief overtaking adrenaline. "You'd better be careful. We're not insured for rescues on this section."

She rolled off him, sitting up with hands on her knees until the world stopped spinning. She looked at the torn knee of her jeans, the raw red scrape on her palm, and decided it was a fair trade.

"Sorry," she said, quieter now.

Finn shook his head. "Don't be. I've made that exact mistake. Twice."

They sat there, just above the drop, for half a minute. The wind flattened Maya's hair against her head and sucked the heat from her cheeks, but she felt better than she had all day.

She let her eyes roam ahead to where the ridge broadened out, the old wolf tree visible as a black silhouette against the morning sun.

"Want to try that last section?" Finn asked, already standing.

She got to her feet, legs steadier than she expected. "Wouldn't miss it for the world."

The last stretch was easier. The trail widened, the angle eased, and the smell of pine needles replaced the sour mineral of the bare rock.

They followed a game trail through stunted trees, then up a final scramble of boulders to the base of the wolf tree.

Up close, it was even more monstrous than Maya remembered: at least five feet across at the base, with two main trunks twisted together, one half-alive, one hollowed by fire and years of wind. The bark was black and gray and flaked off in ragged strips, like the scales of an ancient reptile.

Finn knelt at the hollow, brushing away a scatter of needles and pebbles. He reached in, arm disappearing up to the elbow.

"Still there?" Maya asked, feeling her nerves come back.

He nodded, face hidden by the bulk of the tree. "Untouched. Here—"

Finn drew out a bundle wrapped in three layers of freezer bags, each taped shut with yellow flagging tape. He set it down on the moss and peeled it open.

The Neptune didn't look like much at first. It was about the size of a soda can, but heavier, a dense mass of bronze and lead shot through with filigree. The turquoise stones around the rim seemed to glow from within, even in the half-shade of the tree. It looked exactly like the sketch from Jasper's notebook—only real, and in Maya's hands.

She lifted it out, careful not to smudge the stone or disturb the delicate gearwork at the base. The cold metal tingled against her fingers.

"It's beautiful," she whispered, and she meant it.

Finn watched her, expression unreadable. "You want to do the honors?"

Maya nodded. She slid the artifact into the pocket of her fleece, where it rested heavy and alive against her chest.

"We have to get it to the lake," she said, not looking away from the Neptune.

"Then let's not wait," Finn replied.

They stood, scanned the horizon for any hint of pursuit, and started down the far side of the ridge. Behind them, the wind rattled through the branches of the wolf tree, carrying the faintest trace of blue glow.

If Maya had believed in omens, she'd have called it a good one.

The sky had gone full cobalt by the time they hit the bottom of the ridge. Maya checked her watch: 8:06, but it felt later. They moved in near-silence through the scrub and under the scattered pines, every shadow stretched weird and long by the rising moon. Maya risked a glance down her jacket, saw the faint glow of the Neptune through two layers of fleece—an unnatural blue, like a LED stripped of its housing.

She pressed the artifact closer to her chest, half expecting it to pulse with her own heartbeat.

Finn led, his head down, boots soft over the duff. He didn't say much, just pointed out quiet ways through the tangled willows, doubled back twice to make sure they weren't being tailed. The only time he broke stride was when they heard a coyote call—a long, lonely note that, in this context, felt like a signal instead of a warning.

Maya felt exposed. Every step, every snapped twig, every shift of the wind made her certain they'd been spotted. She remembered what Rolane said: If you go dark, I can't help.

"Stop," Finn whispered, hand up.

Maya froze, every muscle tensed. A branch somewhere to their right shuddered, then nothing. For five seconds, the world held its breath.

Finn pointed: "Rabbit. Keep moving."

She almost laughed—almost—but her nerves were stretched tight, like the ridgeline itself.

When they cleared the woods, the moon hung low and bright over the lake basin. From above, the water was a ragged oval, maybe half what it should have been. The exposed shoreline was a belt of pale mud, studded with deadfall and the bony stumps of old cottonwoods.

The wind carried a cold, wet smell. Not rot, exactly—more like the inside of a river rock, or the first rain after a drought.

Finn crouched at the edge of a logjam, eyes scanning the slope below. "We're about a mile from the village marker," he said, voice pitched for her ears only. "There's no cover once we hit the shore."

Maya followed his gaze. The route was a straight shot: across the mud, over a shattered beaver dam, then through the band of willows that marked the historical edge of the town. In the moonlight, she could see what might have been a rooftop, just poking above the silt.

She touched the Neptune again. The warmth of it was real now, almost uncomfortable.

"Ready?" Finn asked.

"Yeah," Maya said, then louder: "Yeah. Let's go."

They left the pack behind, Finn saying it would just slow them down if they needed to run. He held the Detector in his left hand, watching for signal spikes. The world was silent except for the wet slap of their boots in the mud and the far-off tick of the dying falls.

Halfway down, Maya stopped. She looked back at the treeline, expecting to see a flashlight, or the glint of a badge, or maybe Vance himself with his salesman's smile.

Nothing.

She picked up the pace.

They hit the bottom and started the crossing. The first thirty yards were the worst—ankle-deep ooze, every step a question of whether you'd keep your shoe. Finn kept to the high spots, leaping from log to log. Maya followed, legs burning, lungs tight. After a minute, the mud gave way to a firmer, silty sand, and the footing improved.

The air was colder here, almost freezing. It made Maya's teeth ache.

Finn slowed as they approached the beaver dam. "From here on, watch your step. It's basically quicksand in some places."

"Good to know," Maya said, voice trembling more from cold than fear.

He crossed first, then reached back to steady her as she hopped over the slick top of the dam. His hand was warm. She squeezed it for half a second before letting go, and they kept moving.

The willows were no real barrier. Maya ducked through, brushing past the brittle branches. The ground here was even firmer—packed down by old floods and maybe, if the stories were true, the ghosts of the Drowned Village.

They reached what must have been the main street, or at least the remains of it: a line of tilted fenceposts, a single mailbox wedged sideways in the silt, the rotten hull of a Model T crumpled like a paper cup.

Maya paused at the mailbox. It still had a name, barely visible in the moonlight: ALBRIGHT. She ran her finger over the letters, then let her hand drop.

"We're close," Finn said, but his voice was softer now.

They wound around the old car, then headed straight for the highest point—a knob of rock with three trees growing out of it, all bent away from the wind. The Neptune's glow was so bright now that Maya pulled her jacket tighter to cover it.

At the base of the rock, Finn stopped. He turned to Maya, eyes wide in the reflected blue.

"This is it," he said. "The town square."

Maya looked around, trying to imagine it: wooden buildings, people in hats and boots, maybe a gas lamp. The reality was just mud and memory.

She reached into her jacket, pulled out the Neptune, and set it on the highest rock. It looked so much smaller now—fragile, almost.

Finn knelt and set the Detector next to it. For a second, nothing happened.

Then the Neptune hummed.

It was more vibration than sound—like the world itself had picked up a new frequency. The turquoise stones brightened, casting blue arcs on the mud. The air felt charged, every hair on Maya's arms standing up.

Finn touched her shoulder. "Look."

The silt around the rock bubbled, a slow fizz that turned into a rolling boil. A fountain of clear, ice-cold water burst from the base, then fanned out in a circle. The pool grew, swallowing the mud, the mailbox, the fenceposts.

The Neptune glowed with every pulse, and each time the pool got bigger, the water flowed faster.

Finn stood, watching with awe. "It's working. It's actually working."

Maya almost cried, but she was too busy laughing. The tension, the fear, the cold—all of it melted away as the lake filled itself, reclaiming the old bones of the town.

"Now we run," Finn said, grabbing her hand.

They sprinted back the way they'd come, chased by the rising water, their footprints already vanishing. At the far side, Maya glanced back.

The town square was gone, buried in fresh blue, but the Neptune still glowed, casting its light up through the surface like a lighthouse.

She squeezed Finn's hand, breathless and alive. "We did it," she whispered.

He grinned, mud-splattered and glowing in the moonlight. "Yeah. We did."

The wind shifted, carrying the sound of the new river as it rushed into the lake. Somewhere above, a single duck—plastic, but still triumphant—bobbed into view, turning slow circles in the current.

For the first time in days, Maya felt warm.

They disappeared into the woods, the story written in mud and water behind them, but ready to tell again tomorrow.

thirteen
trapped at the lake

THE LAST HUNDRED yards to the lake were always the worst. Finn's boots kept suctioning to the muck, mud grabbing at every step, and each pull felt like it cost him a shoe. It was so quiet he could hear the water moving far below, the trickle of some sad, hidden heart, and the hollow slap of Maya's sneakers every time she planted and slid for balance. They'd parked the old mountain bike at the rim of the basin, then ghosted down the scree, keeping low, letting the moon and the wind do most of the work.

Navajo Lake, drained for the first time since Finn's great-uncle was alive, didn't even look like a lake. It was more a moonscape, as if something had scraped the skin off a whole world and left nothing but ribs. In the distance, a spine of black stone arched out of the ooze; closer, twisted metal poked up where a dock used to be. The air was thick with the smell of wet clay and engine oil, an aftertaste from Vance's last set of "emergency repairs."

But the real show was on the mudflats themselves. With the water gone, the bones of the old town—the Drowned Village—had surfaced. Here was the foundation of a school, there a scatter of broken glass, everywhere the weird geometry of history shoving up through centuries of silt. A church steeple, brick red and sagging, listed hard to one side, as if it was trying to bow before collapsing.

Maya had never been here at night. She kept the artifact clutched to

her chest, the glow dampened by layers of fleece, but every few steps it pulsed through the jacket, a blue so bright it made her hands look radioactive. Finn kept glancing at it, then at the skyline, then at the trail behind them, ready to bail at the first sound. He'd spent most of his life watching for trouble, but this was different: this was trouble with a schedule.

They moved fast, skirting a row of half-buried fenceposts. Finn paused at the biggest chunk of ruin—a blocky shell of what might have been a bank or post office—and motioned Maya to crouch.

"You see the tower?" he whispered, pointing with a muddy finger.

She peered into the gloom. The clock tower, pride of the old town, was mostly intact. Its face was long since fallen out, but the frame stuck up like a middle finger above the rest of the drowned bones.

"That's the spot?" Maya asked.

Finn nodded. "Jasper said if the Neptune ever came back, that's where you'd run it. The main spring vent is under the clock tower. If we can get there—"

He didn't finish, because a floodlight snapped on, drenching the mudflats in a gross imitation of daylight.

Finn flattened himself behind the post office wall. Maya ducked beside him, breath sharp in her throat. For a second, it was just the light and the wet, and the long shadow they cast on the mud. Then a voice—cold, amplified, almost kind—called out:

"I'd hate for you two to get lost in the dark."

Finn peeked around the edge. On the rim of the basin, set up like it was the world's least romantic movie night, stood Vance, arms folded, boots spotless. Next to him, glowering in the spill of the light, was Sheriff Adams. And behind both of them, the real teeth: a cluster of workers in hard hats and waders, one of them running the generator for the floodlight, the rest holding what looked like shovels, but Finn suspected were more than that.

Maya hissed through her teeth. "He brought the whole crew."

Finn's eyes traced the lines of approach. There was no good way to the clock tower that didn't cross at least fifty feet of flat, exposed mud. No cover, no chance to sneak.

Vance's voice echoed again, this time with a little more edge:

"You've come all this way. Come up to the shore, let's talk like professionals."

Maya ducked lower, tried to think. The artifact buzzed in her arms, heating her chest like a pocket handwarmer gone berserk.

"What's the move?" she asked.

Finn looked at the tower, then at the crew, then at Vance. He smiled —small, grim. "We make him come to us."

He reached into his pack and, with a flick of the wrist, pulled out the flare gun Rolane had insisted on giving them "just in case." He aimed at the tower, then at the sky, then thought better of it and fired straight at the ridge above Vance. The flare burst with a blue-white light, momentarily outshining the floodlights.

The workers ducked, startled. Vance barely flinched, but the Sheriff swore and yanked his radio to his mouth.

In the chaos, Finn and Maya sprinted. The mud was terrible—slippery, sucking, alive under every step—but they kept their feet, lungs burning. Every time Maya stumbled, Finn grabbed her arm and yanked her upright.

They made it halfway to the tower before Vance's voice returned, sharper now, less corporate: "That's enough! Stop, or we come out and drag you in!"

Finn didn't stop. He barely slowed as the mud got deeper and the air grew colder. They reached the base of the tower, Maya gasping for breath, Finn wiping mud from his eyes.

The door to the tower was half-rotted, caked with algae. Finn kicked it open with the heel of his boot. Inside was dark, but the artifact lit the room enough to see the spiral of old stairs winding up and up.

"Go," Finn said, pushing Maya ahead. "If we can get to the top—"

A rock hit the tower's wall with a metallic thud. Finn spun, caught a glimpse of two workers advancing across the flat, boots up to their knees in sludge. Vance followed, hands still behind his back, every inch the king in his own kingdom.

They didn't have much time.

Maya started up the stairs, the Neptune held out in front like a compass. The steps creaked, but held. At the first landing, she found a window and looked out. The lakebed was a mess of lines and angles,

every footprint black in the moonlight. The workers were closing in, careful but determined. Adams was right behind them, gun holstered but hand on the grip.

Finn pounded up the stairs behind her. "You okay?"

She nodded, though her lungs disagreed. "Where does it go?"

He pointed up. "Clockface. That's the vent."

They climbed. The wood was rotten in places, and once Maya nearly put her foot through, but Finn steadied her and they kept moving. The artifact's light grew with every step, until it was almost hard to look at.

At the top, the stair opened into a cramped, round chamber. Most of the clockworks were gone, scavenged by time or water, but a chunk of the original mechanism remained: a bent copper rod, the size of a child's leg, driven deep into the brick.

Maya moved to it, then hesitated. "What if it—blows up, or something?"

Finn shook his head. "Only way out is through."

Below them, the footsteps grew louder.

Maya set the Neptune on the rod. The effect was instant: the artifact's blue glow spiked, then steadied, then started to pulse, slow and strong, like the world's biggest heartbeat. The vibration shuddered through the brick, down the rod, into the bones of the tower.

"Whoa," Finn said, gripping the wall. "Do you feel that?"

Maya didn't answer—she was focused on the window, where the first of the workers had reached the base of the tower. He shouted something, then started pounding up the stairs.

"Give it to me!" Vance's voice floated up, sharp and cold. "That's company property, and you're trespassing."

Finn reached for the Neptune, but Maya shook her head. "Let it run," she said. "That's what it's for."

The worker reached the landing, saw the glow, and froze. "What the—"

Finn moved fast, slamming the door shut and jamming it with a chunk of old pipe. The worker cursed and hammered at the door, but it held, for now.

"Is it supposed to get louder?" Finn asked. The pulsing was now a full-body thrum, like standing next to a freight train.

Maya looked at the artifact. "Maybe. Maybe it's building pressure?"

Below, the hammering grew frantic. Another voice—Adams, this time—yelled: "Open the door! This is the Sheriff's Department!"

Maya braced herself against the window. The blue light was leaking out now, painting the mud below in ghostly streaks. Finn peered down and saw that the pool of water beneath the tower was rising. Fast.

"Maya," he said, "the spring's opened up."

She looked. Water, clear and cold, bubbled up from the base, spreading out in a perfect circle. In seconds, the mud was knee-deep. The workers at the door panicked, turned, tried to wade back to shore —but the suction caught them, boots stuck in place. One man fell, splashing face-first into the rising tide.

Vance shouted from the safety of the floodlight's island: "Get out of there! Get out before you drown, you idiots!"

Sheriff Adams hesitated. He looked at the rising water, at the glow from the tower, then at Finn and Maya above him. For a moment, his face was caught between three choices: duty, fear, and whatever paycheck Vance had promised him.

Finn watched as the water rose, first to Adams's knees, then his waist. The Sheriff turned, tried to run, but tripped over a buried stone. He struggled to his feet, then slogged for the safety of shore.

In the tower, Maya and Finn held their ground. The blue light pulsed, then peaked, then went steady. The water below swirled, frothed, and then, just as suddenly as it had begun, the spring stabilized.

The mudflats were gone, replaced by a shallow but rapidly rising lake. The workers, now swimming, clawed their way to the edge. Vance backed up, face livid, shouting into a phone.

Finn turned to Maya, who was still staring at the artifact, her breath fogging in the cold.

"It worked," she said, voice soft but fierce. "The Neptune did exactly what it was supposed to."

Finn let out a shaky laugh. "You just filled a lake with a clock."

She grinned, tired and alive. "Not bad for a town that never makes the news."

The pounding at the door had stopped. Below, in the new shallows, the surface began to freeze over, thin plates of ice sketching fractals across the top. The Sheriff and workers dragged themselves up the embankment, soaked and shivering.

Vance glared up at the tower, eyes fixed on the artifact. Even from here, Finn could see he was calculating—already thinking of the next move.

Maya leaned against the window, her voice barely a whisper. "We should go."

Finn nodded, and together they picked their way down the stairs, past the ruined clockworks, through the new echo of water in the tower. At the base, the Neptune was still. It looked like a regular hunk of metal, dull and innocent.

He glanced at Maya, then pocketed the artifact. "You want to keep it?"

She shrugged, but her eyes said yes.

Outside, the wind had picked up, chasing clouds across the moon. They sloshed through shin-deep water, then up the muddy bank, the whole world new and cold and starting over.

They didn't look back.

Getting to the clock tower wasn't the hard part. Not getting caught in the mess of what came next—that was a different story.

They slipped and slogged, boots sucking at the mud, until the water thickened into a soup. Finn lost a shoe in the first fifty yards but didn't bother doubling back. Vance's men were still dazed at the rim, eyes flickered blind by the flare, but already Maya could hear the curse and rumble of them regrouping. Somewhere behind, a generator changed pitch. The floodlight snapped off. It was real night again, stars reasserting themselves overhead, and the cold went instantly deeper, hungry for any heat.

The last hundred feet to the tower was under a new foot of water. Finn broke stride, splashed forward, and Maya followed, boots going from soaked to filled in two steps. The water was teeth-chattering cold;

it made her calves seize up, and her body wanted to curl away from the chill, but she kept going, one dumb foot in front of the other, until the mud gave way to the broken stone of the old foundation.

The tower's door was a rusted slab of metal, barely on its hinges. Finn put his shoulder to it, expecting it to jam, but the rot gave way and the door swung open with a shriek loud enough to carry across the whole lakebed.

Inside was pitch black, except for the weird blue pulse leaking from Maya's jacket. The air smelled of copper, old mold, and the sweet rot of things drowned and never dried. Every breath tasted like pennies.

Finn yanked a chunk of driftwood from the threshold and wedged it into the door handle. "That'll hold for a minute," he said, and even in the dark, Maya could see he didn't believe it.

She was already scanning the base of the tower for anything useful. The Neptune in her hands buzzed more urgent than ever, heating her palms through two layers of gloves.

"Up," she said. "Better sight lines."

They edged around the spiral stairs. Each step groaned, but the wood was stronger than it looked. Finn led, keeping his boots to the outside of the tread. Maya followed, clutching the artifact tight, pulse matching the climb.

At the first landing, Finn stopped. "Check this out," he said, voice flat.

Maya came up beside him and pointed her headlamp at the wall. It was pockmarked with scratches, some new, some ancient. In the center, someone had carved a square, not quite even, and below it, a symbol—a trident, rendered in three clean cuts, the middle spike a little longer than the rest.

She recognized it from the photos in Jasper's notebook, from the turquoise inlays in the Neptune's base.

Finn pressed a thumb to the symbol. "You think it's a lock?"

Maya held the Neptune up, and for a second, the blue glow lined up exactly with the trident. "I think it's a keyhole."

Below, something thudded into the tower's door. Once. Twice. Finn winced at the echo. "We don't have much time."

Maya nodded and pulled off her gloves, fingers stiff. She cradled the artifact in her bare hands, aimed the base at the carving, and pressed.

Nothing happened.

She tried again, harder this time. The Neptune's turquoise glowed so bright it hurt to look at, but the thing didn't move, didn't click, didn't even pretend to want to fit. The edge of the artifact scraped the stone, leaving a blue smear behind.

Another thud at the door, and this time the wood frame around the hinges gave a little. Finn looked at Maya, face unreadable.

"Try flipping it," he said. "Or twist."

She hesitated, then rotated the artifact a quarter-turn. This time, when she pushed, something shifted. The trident mark on the wall lit up, the lines glowing the same deep blue. For a moment, the whole tower hummed, vibrating through Maya's bones.

The artifact sunk into the wall with a wet, sucking sound.

Maya yanked her hand away, more startled than hurt. The Neptune was gone, swallowed by the stone.

The hum faded. For a second, the only sound was her own breathing, and the slow drip of water through the timbers above.

Finn looked at her, then at the wall, then at her again. "You okay?"

She nodded, blinking the afterimage out of her eyes.

Below, the thudding stopped. Silence. Then: a new sound, stranger than before. The voice of the lake, back from the grave.

It started with a hiss, then a cough, then a full-throated roar. Water, cold and hard, poured in from somewhere below, filling the base of the tower in a matter of seconds. The stairs vibrated, and Maya could feel the chill radiating up through her boots. The old brickwork shuddered, mortar giving way under the new pressure.

The workers outside must've heard it too; through the window, she saw two yellow helmets bobbing on the rising water, eyes wide in the spill of their headlamps.

Sheriff Adams's voice, muffled but right outside, barked: "Back up! Everyone back to the rim!"

Finn grabbed Maya's arm. "We need to get out, before we get boiled alive."

They took the stairs three at a time. The water chased them, knee-deep at the landing, then thigh-deep at the base. Finn slammed his shoulder into the door; the driftwood brace snapped, but the door still wouldn't budge.

"Pressure," Finn said, gritting his teeth. "It's stuck."

Maya looked around, then up at the window above the door—a rectangle of wet glass, ten feet off the ground.

"Give me a boost," she said.

He nodded, laced his hands into a stirrup. She stepped in, bracing against his shoulders, and reached for the window. The frame was rotten; it came away in her hand, and the glass fell inward, shattering in the flood. She hoisted herself up, then rolled onto the sill, just as a wave of water battered the inside of the door and sent a freezing slap up her legs.

Maya pivoted, braced her foot against the wall, and reached down for Finn. He caught her wrist, and with a grunt, she helped pull him up. The window was just wide enough to get through if you didn't mind a few new bruises. They squirmed onto the outer ledge, then dropped the last few feet into the rising lake.

They didn't have time to think. The water was halfway up the base of the tower, swirling with debris and a rainbow sheen of old oil. Maya kicked hard, boots barely helping, and paddled for the highest chunk of stone she could see. Finn followed, one arm hooked around a floating plank.

On the shore, Vance's men were already retreating, splashing for high ground. Vance himself had vanished, but Maya glimpsed the tail of a dark coat as he ran for his car at the rim.

They reached the stone, hauling themselves up with the last shreds of energy. The wind bit hard, but the air felt good compared to the bite of the water.

For a minute, neither of them spoke. They just sat, shivering, watching as the lake rose, covering the mud, the ruins, and eventually the base of the clock tower. Above, the moon was clear and full, throwing a road of white across the new water.

Finn spit a mouthful of lake out and laughed, loud enough to echo.

Maya leaned her head on his shoulder, too tired to do anything else.

She looked back at the tower. There was a new light at the base, a blue pulse just under the surface—steady, alive, and nothing like what Vance had wanted.

"You did it," Finn said, voice rough with cold and awe.

Maya smiled. "We did."

He leaned against her, letting the shivers fade. "Next time, you're picking the adventure."

She squeezed his hand, water dripping from their sleeves. "Deal."

On the far shore, the workers were already starting to argue with Adams, voices carrying in the cold air. Maya knew the whole mess wasn't finished—there'd be more meetings, more sabotage, more Vance. But for now, the water was back, and the mountain remembered its own story.

She watched the blue light fade to a gentle glow, then stood, helping Finn up beside her.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Always," she said.

And together, they walked along the edge, letting the new lake erase their footprints.

The sun came up, and the clock tower was just a shadow under the ice. In the village, kids woke to a lake where last night there'd only been mud, and the ducks—real ones this time, not plastic—trailed lines across the water, as if nothing weird had ever happened.

In the bakery, Brandi handed out fresh bread, smiling at the rumor that the spring had healed overnight. Rolane stood by the garage, tuning a new sensor, already plotting out what to do if Vance came back with more than a lawyer. And in Hot Mama's, Ashley set a pizza on the bar, whistling at the news, then blinking away a tear at the idea that something might last, even here, even now.

On the ridge above, Maya and Finn sat wrapped in a blanket, watching the world put itself back together.

"I still don't know if I believe it," Finn said.

Maya shrugged. "Doesn't matter. It happened."

He grinned, then stole a kiss, quick and warm.

And when the wind came up, it smelled, for the first time all season, of snow.

fourteen
the water speaks

MAYA PRESSED her palm against the cold stone, feeling the weight of water in every joint and knuckle. The clock tower wasn't just old—it was ancient in the way of things nobody bothered to remember, except for the town weirdos and people who built their personalities around high school ghost stories. Now, with lake water sloshing at her calves and a dull ache settling in her knees, Maya realized she'd never read a single one of those stories to the end. Maybe if she had, she'd have known better than to follow Finn into the tower with the world's creepiest Fabergé egg glowing through her jacket.

The pounding at the door had changed from "hopeful cop knock" to "SWAT team about to redecorate," each blow biting deeper into the wet wood. Sheriff Adams was outside, and if Vance was half as stubborn as he seemed, he'd have brought more than just company muscle. Finn had already tried and failed to barricade the door with a pile of water-logged ledgers and the brass time clock. Now he braced himself against it, every muscle bunched, shoulders hunched in a way that suggested he was making deals with all the mountain gods at once.

Maya's mind, meanwhile, ran circles around the trident carving on the wall. Under her hand, the blue light from the Neptune artifact picked out grooves she hadn't noticed before—strange curves, a wave pattern she'd seen in Jasper's journal, maybe, or was it in the petro-glyphs at Parowan Gap? She blinked, wiped muddy water from her

sleeve, and leaned in. The inscription didn't read like a how-to. It read like a warning.

"Finn!" she hissed, not daring to shout over the next impact. The door groaned, and so did Finn.

"Little busy, Maya," he called. She heard the wheeze in his voice, but also the steady grit. It was weirdly comforting, like the growl of an old dog that would definitely bite someone if it had teeth left.

She worked her fingers into the edge of the carving, tracing every symbol, every swirl. "This isn't a manual, it's a warning," she said, mostly to herself but loud enough for Finn to hear.

"About what?" Finn's voice carried the "please be relevant" undertone she'd come to expect.

Maya squeezed her eyes shut, conjuring the cave petroglyphs, the map in Jasper's battered notebook, the blue streaks painted by ancient hands. "The Neptune isn't just a key. It's an anchor. If it's removed, everything—" She glanced down at the rising lake, at the rainbow shimmer of oil and ice "—comes loose."

Finn spat a curse she'd only ever heard from his dad. "So the sabotage was always about destabilizing the whole mountain?"

She nodded, then realized he couldn't see her, and said, "Yes. And the water pressure—"

A new crack spiderwebbed across the door. Finn flinched, then turned and ran a hand along the wall, scanning for anything that looked even a little like a solution. The water was up to his knees now, and the cold was starting to make his words slur.

Maya pressed harder, searching for the next clue. Her headlamp bounced off the blue of the artifact and landed on a low relief, half-submerged now: a hollow in the floor, shaped almost exactly like the Neptune, but with a curve that matched the base of the artifact instead of the top.

She pointed, heart skipping. "There! At the base—do you see it?"

Finn squinted, then waded over, feet barely clearing the sticky, sucking silt. "Looks like a socket."

"Try it," she urged, and shoved the artifact into his hands.

Finn hesitated, then turned the Neptune in his palm. The blue stones flickered, casting ripples of light across the walls and up onto the

broken gears of the old clock. The pounding at the door reached a fever pitch, a hammering that threatened to rattle the entire structure off its foundation.

"Now or never," Finn muttered, and dropped the Neptune into the hollow.

It didn't click or lock. For a moment, Maya thought they'd been wrong. Then, with a slow certainty, the artifact sunk into place, the blue glow leaking around its edges and racing out along hairline cracks in the floor.

Something deep below the tower groaned. The water at their feet vibrated, then spun, then started to drain—not up, but down, toward the hollow, spiraling around the base of the Neptune. The suction was strong enough that Maya had to brace herself against the wall. Finn grabbed her wrist, knuckles white.

Then, silence. The pounding at the door ceased. Even the howl of the wind outside muted itself, as if the world was waiting to see what happened next.

Maya watched as the blue light climbed the walls, chasing itself up the trident carving, filling every gouge and swirl. The tower shuddered, but did not fall. Instead, the water continued to recede, spiraling faster, swirling the mud into a cyclone before it disappeared through a gap that hadn't existed a moment before.

Finn let out a breath. "Is it... done?"

Maya didn't trust the silence. She reached out and touched the Neptune, expecting it to be freezing. It was warm. The stone in her hand hummed, steady and strong.

The silence didn't last. Above, the bell tower shook as the new water pressure rushed through whatever ancient channels lay under the town. A distant rumble echoed up from below, like the sound of a storm rolling through a hollow log.

Maya pressed her hand to Finn's. "We have to get out, before the tunnel's gone."

He nodded, jaw set, and together they sloshed to the door. The wood was splintered, but the pressure on the outside had faded. Finn shoved his shoulder into it, and the whole thing gave way, sending them stumbling out into knee-deep water and the thin gray dawn.

Outside, the air was crisp and smelled sharply of ozone and wet stone. The lake was already lower, the draining system working double time. On the ridge, Vance and his men stood slack-jawed, staring at the blue-lit tower. Even Sheriff Adams was at a loss, radio hanging limp in his hand.

Finn and Maya didn't wait to be noticed. They limped through the slop, boots sucking at the retreating mud, and angled toward the old post office ruins for cover.

When they finally looked back, the clock tower was steady again, no longer listing or shuddering. The blue light pulsed once more, then faded as the last of the water vanished from its base. There was only the faintest trace of blue, a ghost line running down the shore toward the falls.

Maya leaned into Finn's side, shivering with cold and adrenaline. "You think it worked?"

He wrapped an arm around her, voice softer now. "The mountain noticed."

They watched as, across the flat, the first snowflakes started to drift down.

It took nearly an hour to make it around the edge of the refilling lake, up to where the mountain road cut back toward town. They kept their heads down, moving quick and quiet in case Vance regrouped. Maya's legs had never felt heavier; every step squished, and the cold made her bones ache. But she kept going, because Finn kept going, and because the memory of the Neptune's warmth was still curled in her palm.

Only when they'd made it into the treeline did they stop to breathe. Finn checked over his shoulder, then helped Maya slump down onto a fallen log. He plucked a bit of debris from her hair and made a face.

"That was definitely the weirdest night of my life," he said.

She snorted, wiped mud from her nose. "That's the second time you've almost drowned in a month, you know."

He shrugged. "Third if you count finals week."

They both laughed, more relief than humor. For a while, they just

watched the sky, blue creeping in around the edges of the clouds, little dots of white starting to collect on the needles of the pines.

"Do you think anyone else will get it?" Maya asked, after the silence had stretched too long.

Finn tilted his head. "You mean about the Neptune?"

She nodded. "That it matters. That it's not just a piece of junk, but a—" she searched for the word, found it "—circuit breaker for the whole system."

He thought, then shrugged. "Most people don't believe in the mountain. Not until it pushes back."

Maya looked down at her hands, at the bruised places on her knuckles, at the faint blue line that still shimmered in the crease of her palm. "We should go back," she said. "Tell Brandi, Rolane. Maybe even Dale, if he's not mad about the kitchen."

Finn smiled, lopsided and tired. "First, we get out of these clothes, or they'll be thawing us out in April."

She grinned, stood, and together they limped back toward the village. The air was already warmer, the trees shedding last night's snow as if nothing had happened. But Maya knew the difference. She could feel it in the rhythm of her steps, in the echo of the water underfoot, in the way the world seemed to have a new heartbeat.

As they crested the last hill, the sun broke through, and for just a second, everything—the lake, the trees, even the sagging line of cabins—gleamed with the blue-white promise of real winter.

She squeezed Finn's hand, and he squeezed back.

The mountain had noticed.

And for once, it remembered the right things.

The view from the waterlogged ruin of the clock tower was like nothing Maya had ever seen. The lake, usually so passive it could've been poured from a mixing bowl, had gone wild—swirling in dense, fractal rings that sucked at everything within reach. For a moment, it looked as though the whole body of water would leap free from its basin, a snake rearing back before striking.

Then, with a roar that battered the bones of the old Drowned Village, the sinkholes opened. The steel plates Vance's men had set to keep the water in place wrenched up from the mud, buckling and twisting. One tore free with such force it pinwheeled straight into the air, landing a half-mile off in the new shallows with a crash that echoed up the basin. Even from this distance, Maya heard the shouts of panic on the ridge, saw the backlit silhouettes of men scrambling for solid ground.

Inside the tower, things went quiet—eerily so. The waterline, which had been up to Maya's shins only minutes ago, was now barely covering her toes, and in the center of the room the Neptune shivered in its socket, blue stones still pulsing like a beacon. Every so often, the new current exposed a chunk of the old foundation, carved with marks Maya recognized from the petroglyphs in the caves.

Finn, muddy and bruised from their earlier swim, kicked at a section of loose floorboard. "This whole place is going hollow," he said. "If we don't move, we'll be at the bottom when it caves."

But Maya's eyes were fixed on the artifact. There was something about the way the blue light seemed to flow—channeling itself along tiny lines in the stone, following a logic she couldn't quite trace. She dropped to a crouch, ignoring the chill, and ran her fingers along the edge of the Neptune's base.

"Help me," she said, digging at the mud with her nails.

Finn joined her, and together they pried loose a wet, splintered plank. Underneath was an air gap—just a few inches, but enough to see that someone, long ago, had left something here.

Maya reached in and fished out a parcel the size of a bread loaf, wrapped in waxed canvas and tied with butcher's string. Her hands shook as she set it on her lap, but not from cold. Finn used a pocket knife to slice through the string, then unrolled the canvas.

Inside was a leather-bound book, so old the edges curled up like pie crust. The first page was inscribed in heavy, deliberate block letters:

WATER MEMORIES—PERSONAL LOG OF FRANKLIN GRANBY, 1949–1955

Finn let out a low whistle. "Dale's granddad," he said, like it explained everything.

Maya paged through the book, careful. The ink was faded but legible. The first entries were weather notes—dates, inches of snow, freeze-thaw cycles. Then, as the years wore on, the writing grew frantic: schematic diagrams, complex tables, even hand-drawn maps of the basin with lines radiating from the lake to the peaks.

She stopped on a page with a familiar shape: the trident, drawn over and over in different sizes, each one surrounded by little dots. The caption read, in shaky script, "Three arms—three cycles. Water, air, and...?"

Finn peered over her shoulder, lips moving as he read. "He knew," Finn said. "The cycles, the relationship between the lake and the snowpack. The artifact was his regulator."

Maya nodded, then caught her breath as she flipped ahead to a page where the trident was merged with the outline of a duck—no joke, an actual cartoon mallard. The caption said: "Must preserve the signal. Without the right frequency, system destabilizes. See duck protocol—Appendix B."

She snorted. "He really was obsessed."

Finn grinned. "But he wasn't wrong."

They flipped to Appendix B, and there it was: an entire section on the village duck race, written in the same urgent hand. "Resonance test," the log called it. "If community can synchronize the floaters, they generate a sympathetic vibration in the lake membrane. This, in turn, allows for controlled release of meltwater through the ancient channels." A note below: "Rubber is best; natural feathers disrupt the effect."

Maya turned a page, and nearly choked. There was a list of all the ducks ever entered in the race, each one's number and the name of its owner. Asterisks marked the "winning" ducks that had made it all the way through the tunnels to the outlet at Cascade Falls. Next to the names were notes: "strong resonance," "weak—replace," "danger—nearly triggered dry event."

Finn gaped. "Is this real?"

Maya nodded, feeling the chill recede, replaced by a kind of electric

excitement. “We have the data. The evidence. If anyone doubts what Vance tried to do, this proves it.”

Finn grinned. “Not to mention, it makes the tradition… actually matter?”

Maya let herself smile, too. “It always mattered. People just needed a reason to remember.”

Outside, the blue light faded from the clock tower, replaced by the soft, spectral white of the year’s first snow. They could hear the wind change, carrying not just cold, but the clean, fresh tang of new winter.

Inside, Maya wrapped the journal in the waxed canvas, then packed it into her waterproof bag. She glanced at Finn. “You think Dale will believe us?”

Finn thought. “Dale will. Sheriff Adams might not, but the evidence is strong. And with the artifact back, the lake’s not going anywhere.”

They heard a distant engine rev. Finn peeked through the shattered doorframe, careful. “Vance and the Sheriff are coming back. This time, probably with more than just a ‘let’s talk’ approach.”

Maya zipped her bag, adrenaline back in full force. “Ready?”

Finn grinned, wiped the mud from his face, and nodded. “Let’s show them the science.”

They headed for the rear of the tower, where the draining water had revealed a half-collapsed stair to the old maintenance tunnels. Finn went first, Maya close behind. As they scrambled down, she clutched the bag close—her treasure, her proof.

At the bottom, the tunnel bent toward the creek. Maya paused, looked back. She saw the blue line from the artifact still glowing faint on the tower wall, like a reminder that the mountain, for all its memory, could be re-tuned if you just paid attention.

They made it out the culvert, behind the ridge and well away from Vance’s sight lines. Finn checked the path, then led them up through the stand of young pines to the main road.

At the edge of the village, Brandi waited. She’d seen the lake drain, the plates fly, the snow start, and had the face of a woman whose entire worldview had been simultaneously vindicated and upended.

Maya handed her the journal. Brandi cradled it like bread still warm

from the oven, eyes shining. "Franklin was right," she said, awe and sorrow blending in her voice. "He always said the water was alive."

Maya nodded. "He left the proof for us."

Brandi hugged them both—Finn awkwardly, Maya with real force—then ushered them inside. They could hear the sounds of the town waking up: the scrape of snow shovels, the giddy yells of kids let loose on the first snow day, the low hum of people trying to figure out what had just happened.

Inside, Ashley was already setting up a row of ducks on the bar at Hot Mama's, telling the story with every new beer poured. Krazy Mike, bandaged but smiling, stood guard at the window, ready for whatever drama would come next.

It didn't take long. Sheriff Adams arrived first, red-faced and huffing. He demanded to see Finn and Maya, demanded answers, but Brandi just handed him a page from the journal and let him read.

He frowned, then paled. "So the artifact—"

Maya finished for him. "It keeps the water cycle balanced. Without it, the town floods, the lake drains, and the whole region suffers."

The Sheriff looked out at the lake, the new ice already forming at its edge. He let out a long, slow breath, then nodded. "I'll see to it nobody messes with it again. Not on my watch."

Ashley cheered from behind the counter, tossing a duck to Finn. "Long live the Neptune!" she crowed.

Brandi raised her mug. "And long live Duck Creek."

Maya let the warmth of the moment sink in, even as she braced for the next fight. Vance was a problem for another day, but this—this was victory.

As the crowd in the bar grew, and the snow fell heavier outside, Maya and Finn took a seat by the window. They could see the tower in the distance, proud and weird and just a little magical. The blue line had faded, but the memory remained.

Finn nudged her. "You did good," he said, voice low.

She leaned her head on his shoulder. "We did," she agreed.

Outside, the lake glimmered, and on the surface, a single yellow duck bobbed through the new ice, stubborn and undefeated.

And for the first time in forever, Maya felt the mountain smile.

fifteen
unexpected allies

THERE WAS no way back up the slope without being seen, and no cover at all on the lakebed. Finn knew it the second he and Maya scrambled out the splintered clock tower, boots slapping on mud so cold it might as well have been stone. The sky had gone indigo, the old water's ghost still steaming from the fresh puddles, and somewhere up above, headlights swept the rim of the basin, pinning them in place.

Maya spat grit from her mouth and wiped her hands on her jeans, which left streaks but no satisfaction. They were both soaked, freezing, and out of clever ideas. "How many ways to get surrounded in a town this size?" she muttered.

Finn scanned the perimeter. "Apparently just the one. The classic."

On the far bank, the floodlights flipped on. For a moment, it looked like a crime scene—or maybe a school play staged at the end of the world. Vance stood between two of his men, the sleeves of his jacket immaculate while the workers beside him had the hunched, resentful look of the truly underpaid. Next to Vance, Sheriff Adams wore a reflective vest and the tired expression of someone who'd rather be anywhere else, but whose name was on the dotted line. They started picking their way across the mud, Adams motioning to take it slow, Vance striding like he could levitate if he wanted to.

Maya nudged Finn's elbow. "If we run, we bog down in two steps and eat it."

He nodded. “Not much left but stand and bluff.”

The mud here was the kind that refused to let you go, suctioning every footfall with a sound like a plunger in a sink. They backed up until the wood of the clock tower pressed between their shoulders. Finn felt the whole structure shudder as the wind came up, the slats rattling together in a language older than any law.

The crew advanced, picking up speed now that they’d confirmed Finn and Maya weren’t going to bolt. One of the workers—Finn recognized him as the guy who fixed snowmobiles at Loose Wheels—looked away as they approached, but the rest were all eyes, the kind that promised no easy forgiveness for what Finn and Maya had done.

Vance called out when he was twenty paces off. “You must really like drama, Finn. Or is this Maya’s show?” His teeth were perfect. His smile looked like it came in a kit.

Sheriff Adams raised a hand, official-like. “Let’s keep it civil, all right? No sense making this worse than it is.”

Vance let the silence fill in behind him. He took a few deliberate steps forward and then stopped, just where the mud threatened his precious shoes. “Hand it over,” he said. “The thing you stole from my site. Or we do this the hard way, which I assure you is not going to be pleasant.”

Finn didn’t answer. He saw Maya’s hand twitch for the artifact in her jacket pocket, but she left it alone.

The two groups stared at each other, nothing but the splatter of water and the groan of the wind filling the gap. The sheriff gave Finn a “come on, man” look.

Finn squared his shoulders. “No artifact. No case. You have no standing.”

Vance didn’t smile this time. “What I have is a crew who watched you vandalize my property and nearly flood half the county with your… what, teenage stunts?”

Maya’s jaw locked. “It was your sabotage that started the collapse. If you want to bring up environmental crime, you might want to—”

Vance cut her off with a flick of the wrist. “We’re done. Sheriff, arrest them.”

Sheriff Adams looked even more tired now, but he motioned to the two workers behind him. "Let's just keep it calm, all right?"

The men closed in, one from each side. Finn felt his pulse slam against his ribs. He stepped in front of Maya, which would've been macho if she hadn't already slid sideways, using the tower for cover.

Then, just as the hands of the crew reached for their shoulders, a different sound cut through the scene—a roar, deep and growly, followed by the blast of halogen lamps as bright as searchlights.

Up on the rim, a massive ATV with snow tracks for wheels crested the embankment, spitting gravel and making every head swivel at once. Its engine noise doubled as it gunned down the slope, cutting a long wound in the mud, and behind the windshield, Finn saw the glint of magenta safety glasses.

Rolane.

He'd never loved a mechanic so much in his life.

The machine barreled straight toward the lakebed, not slowing until the last possible second, then slewed sideways in a drift so clean it sent up a rooster tail of mud that splattered across Vance and his cronies.

Rolane stood in the driver's seat, hands up like a prizefighter, and bellowed, "You called for backup?"

On the rollcage behind them, a cluster of bodies held on for dear life: Ashley, hair loose and wild, whooped as the rig spun; Dale, stone-faced, had a coffee mug clamped in his hand even now; Krazy Mike, standing behind the rest, swung a tire iron over his head like he expected a melee.

Next to them, in the open bed of the ATV, Jana Montana balanced on one foot and grinned. "I brought Pilates," she yelled, voice clear even over the engine.

Finn risked a look at Maya. For a second, she forgot to be angry, or scared, or anything except totally, stupidly relieved.

More headlights joined the show: the battered white van of Brandi and Randy's delivery service, its shocks protesting every rut in the trail; behind it, a string of villagers on foot, led by Azure and a crew from the DC Pub & Grill, each person armed with a lantern or a flashlight or, in one case, a garden rake.

The cavalry had arrived, and it was dressed for winter.

Vance's face was a study in lost control. "What is this," he demanded, voice slicing through the commotion.

Ashley hopped off the ATV and landed with a splat, boots sinking up to her ankles. "Town meeting!" she called, and the words rippled through the crowd.

Sheriff Adams hesitated, caught between the numbers and the law, then raised both palms. "Everybody just hold up a minute. We're not here to start a war."

Rolane shut off the engine. The quiet left behind was even louder than the machine.

Dale stepped forward, hands clasped behind his back, the way Finn had seen old-timers do at church or at a funeral. His voice was the same as always, calm and deep, but it carried across the lakebed.

"We're not here for violence, Sterling. We're here because what happens to the water happens to all of us." He looked at the artifact bulging in Maya's pocket, then at Vance's carefully blank face. "You want a reckoning? You can have it. But you'll have to go through us."

The townsfolk fanned out, forming a ragged arc behind Finn and Maya, every face fixed on Vance, Adams, or the future. The flashlights and lanterns made a kind of second sunrise, painting the whole place in weird shadows.

Maya and Finn stood in the center, no longer alone.

Vance's workers shifted uncomfortably, looking to their boss for instruction. Vance's jaw flexed, but he said nothing.

Ashley, never content to let a pause die, stepped up next to Maya. "We all saw it, you know. The water, the sabotage, even the blue lights at the falls. Nobody here's buying your story."

Jana nodded. "And I've got a class of ten who can swear to it. Plus the yoga moms have been gossiping about your 'secret midnight work crew' all week."

Krazy Mike, never subtle, added, "I got video, buddy. You want to see it? Or do we go straight to Channel Five?"

Vance's confidence shrank, but he tried again. "This isn't how things are done. If you want to protest, call the state. Call your council. I've got permits—"

Azure interrupted, her voice sweet as a razor. "Your permits are no good if you break the mountain. You ever see what happens to people who think they own this place? It never ends well."

Dale planted his feet. "We're not moving. And neither are they." He glanced at Finn and Maya, who had the weird sensation of being both witness and principal in their own trial.

The semicircle tightened, each person fitting into place as though it was what they'd been born to do. The mud froze, just for a second, under the collective weight of their resolve.

Finn heard Maya exhale, a shiver running through her that had nothing to do with the cold. She looked at him, eyes bright in the scattered light, and he squeezed her hand, grounding them both.

Above them, the wind died, and the water in the half-formed lake lay mirror-flat.

The standoff was perfect, balanced and still.

Waiting for someone, anyone, to make the next move.

The first move, when it came, was so gentle most people missed it.

Dale stepped out from the crowd with hands tucked behind his back, head slightly bowed. The mud didn't bother him; he walked through it like it was carpet, boots planting with a purpose that made Finn suddenly aware of his own bad posture.

"Sterling," Dale said, voice smooth as aged whiskey. "I'm going to say this just once, and I want you to listen. You're tampering with things you do not understand."

Vance gave a tight laugh. "I understand perfectly. The law is clear—"

Dale shook his head. "The law of people, maybe. But out here? There are other laws."

A ripple of assent went through the villagers. Even Krazy Mike, never one for nuance, nodded with solemnity.

Dale kept going, not raising his voice but somehow making it fill the whole space. "You think you're the first to try and rewrite this mountain? You're not. My granddad built the Neptune because he saw what

happened when people got greedy with the water. He knew the cycles, knew how it all balanced."

He turned, not to address the town, but to catch every person's eyes, one by one. "You can't own the water. You can only borrow it. And if you don't pay back, it comes for you."

Vance looked at Sheriff Adams, desperate for the badge to do its work. "Are we just going to let this—"

But Ashley cut him off. She'd moved through the crowd, passing out something to each villager—a yellow rubber duck, or maybe just the squeakers from inside. By the time she'd made the rounds, every person in the semicircle had one, held up like a candle at a vigil.

Ashley flashed a smile, and her voice sang out over the mud. "Duck Creek runs on tradition, not contracts. If you want to change that, you have to go through all of us." She made her duck squeak, and a dozen more answered, bright and irreverent.

The sheriff tried to regain the moment. He stepped forward, hands held wide. "Everyone, let's just stay calm. If there's evidence of a crime—"

Maya, watching the play unfold, felt the tension building. She half-expected Finn to step up, but he only watched, waiting, chin tucked, eyes narrowed like a predator sizing the wind.

Vance tried again, a last gasp at authority. "None of this matters. In thirty minutes, my crew seals the lake and the state signs off. You want to stop progress, you do it in the courts."

Dale smiled, almost sad. "We'll do it right here."

A new sound carried across the basin, softer than the rest—a shuffle, a tap, the muted sound of old wood on stone. From the black edge of the forest, a shape moved, slow and certain. The crowd parted without a word.

Elias.

He looked older than in the rumors, beard full of needles and pockets filled with moss. His canvas jacket blended with the trees, and the walking stick in his hand wasn't for show.

He stopped in the gap between the villagers and Vance's crew. Nodded to Dale, then faced the sheriff. "The story goes: the water remembers. Even when men forget." He unzipped a pouch slung at his

side and drew out a leather folder, so aged and soft it looked like it might have grown from the forest floor itself.

He handed it to Sheriff Adams, who opened it warily.

"These," Elias said, "are the original agreements. My people signed them with the first surveyors—before the state, before the permits. The water was not to be disturbed. The Neptune is sacred, because it makes the mountain live."

The sheriff scanned the top page, then the next. He looked up, unsettled. "This... this looks official. Really official."

Vance snatched at the documents, but Elias only raised the stick, and Vance's hand stopped cold.

Elias turned, slow as sunrise, to face Vance. "Your permits are forgeries. Or, at best, mistakes. My people have been watching. The mountain has been watching."

For a moment, nobody breathed. The ducks were silent. Even the wind stilled.

Sheriff Adams thumbed the documents again, uncertainty turning to something close to dread. He read out a line, then stopped. "This is a federal signature."

Elias nodded. "And notarized by two witnesses, both long gone. But not forgotten."

Vance's mouth twisted, but words failed him.

Ashley, grinning like she'd won the lottery, made her duck squeak again. This time the sound was a chorus—a wave of defiance, silly and perfect.

Finn leaned in to Maya, voice barely a murmur. "He can't walk it back now. It's over."

Maya let herself believe it, just a little. The last of the tension ran out of her legs, and the cold felt less sharp than before.

Elias inclined his head to Dale. "My grandfather knew yours," he said. "They built the Neptune together. Maybe we should repair it, too."

Dale's eyes, for the first time all night, grew wet at the corners. "Maybe we should," he agreed.

Vance tried to speak, but nobody listened. Sheriff Adams turned to him, documents in hand, the weight of every face behind him.

The standoff, so tense a moment before, had shifted. It was no longer a question of force. It was a question of what you did next.

In the silence, the mountain itself seemed to relax, the sky brightening as clouds parted above the rim.

And for the first time in living memory, Finn realized: the town had spoken, and the mountain had listened.

Sheriff Adams read the papers three times, lips working on words that would never reach daylight. The crowd waited, nobody moving except Krazy Mike, who fidgeted with his duck like it was a stress ball. Finally, Adams straightened his shoulders, squared his jaw, and walked over to Vance.

"Sterling Vance," he said, voice formal but tired, "you're under arrest for trespass, environmental tampering, and theft of protected property." He paused just long enough for it to sting. "You have the right to remain silent, but I doubt you will."

A ripple of surprise went through the Vance crew, but none of them stepped up for their boss. Ashley's eyebrows shot up so high they almost touched her beanie. Rolane let out a laugh that was part relief, part schadenfreude.

Vance raised his hands, half in mock surrender and half because he realized he had run out of cards. "You can't do this. You people have no idea what you're giving up! I was about to bring this whole town into the modern era!"

Adams snapped the cuffs on with a mechanical click. "The mountain's been modern enough for a thousand years. We'll let the judge decide the rest." He nodded at one of the workers, who looked all too happy to step aside and let Vance be led up the embankment to the waiting patrol car.

Vance dug in his heels one last time. "You think you've won?" he called over his shoulder. "You're all living on borrowed time!"

Adams didn't look back. "That's true of everyone, Sterling."

The engine on the squad car cranked over, and with a lurch, Vance

was gone, headed toward the only holding cell in the county, and a future he'd never quite considered.

For a moment, the crowd was silent, the mud sucking at boots and the lights from the shore painting the water in stripes of gold and blue. Then, down on the flats, a different kind of sound started up—not the human kind, but the deep, primal rumble of the mountain resetting itself.

The lakebed shuddered. Water, hesitant at first, then sure and strong, poured in from the breaks in the dam, running over the packed silt and swirling around the old clock tower. In minutes, the Drowned Village was under again, all its secrets restored to the cold embrace of the deep. From the rim, the falls sent up a mist, the first new surge in a season starved for water.

The townspeople watched as the basin filled, kids on shoulders and old-timers with eyes bright as any child's. The ducks—real and rubber—rode the new current, spinning and colliding and sometimes catching in the eddies before being swept away. More than a few villagers hurled their duck squeakers into the water as tribute, their squeaks echoing over the chaos like little shots of joy.

Ashley led a cheer that turned into a song, loud and off-key and perfect.

Rolane punched the air and then hugged Dale, who took it stoically, as though getting tackled by an over-caffeinated engineer was just a Tuesday.

Jana and Maya traded a glance, the old animosity gone, replaced by something closer to mutual respect. Maya squeezed Finn's hand so hard it made his fingers tingle, but he didn't mind.

Elias watched from the shadows, the ghost of a smile tugging at his beard, then melted back into the woods, as if he'd only ever come for the handoff.

The mountain, in its own way, seemed to settle, the old cycles resuming, the new water already seeking paths that had never fully closed.

As the light faded and the last of the crowd filtered back toward the village, Dale lingered by the edge, watching the clock tower as the water climbed its face.

He turned to Finn and Maya, voice hushed. “This place remembers everything. Sometimes it just needs a nudge to remember the good parts.”

Maya smiled, still shivering, still thrilled. “You think it’ll stick this time?”

Dale squinted at the dark line of the far ridge. “Depends who’s around to tell the story.”

Finn nodded, the tension finally draining from his shoulders. “We’ll tell it.”

He and Maya stood there a little longer, not saying much, just listening to the sound of water over stone. It was steady and true, like the mountain itself.

And above them, in the black sky, a single star flickered, brighter than all the rest.

For now, at least, the water ran the way it should.

And that was enough.

sixteen
secrets of the hydrologist

THE FIRST SNOW of the restored winter started as a rumor on the windows, a shy frosting at the corners of Hot Mama's Pizza & Brew. Inside, the air held the baked warmth of yesterday's dough and the perfume of industrial coffee, cut with a trace of lemony cleaning spray. It was early—the kind of early that meant the only customers were regulars, or the sort of people who'd been up all night with a crisis and needed, at minimum, three mugs of coffee to believe the world still spun.

Maya watched the flakes from her seat by the window. Her socks steamed faintly on the radiator, leaving little crescent shapes of condensation on the metal. She'd showered after the lake, changed into dry layers, but the cold of the night before still clung to her. She pressed both palms to her mug and let the heat crawl back into her bones.

Finn sat across from her, hair dripping into his eyes, stubble growing in at a speed that seemed, this morning, less like laziness and more like evidence of heroism. Next to Finn was Dale, posture wound so tight he looked like he might crumple at the first touch. Ashley sprawled beside him, a colander of damaged rubber ducks in front of her, and was working a pair of needle-nose pliers into the seam of one with intense focus.

The restaurant's only other occupants were Brandi and Randy, prepping the breakfast bake in the kitchen. Occasionally, Brandi's

laughter would drift out, soft and warm, but the mood at the table was more like the aftermath of a wildfire. Everyone was in the same room, but nobody had the words for what had just burned through their world.

It was Dale who broke the silence, voice barely above the drone of the fridge. "You have it?" He meant the book—the battered, leather-bound log Maya had risked frostbite and arrest to drag out of the clock tower.

Finn nodded, nudged it across the table, and then folded his arms as if bracing for an impact.

Dale stared at the journal for a long minute. His hand hovered over the cover, then withdrew, as though it were radioactive. "It's him," Dale said, not looking up. "The handwriting. My grandfather."

Ashley stopped plier-ing. "Is that the guy who built the old waterworks?"

Dale nodded, but his eyes were on the edge of the table. "Franklin Granby. He was the hydrologist for the Drowned Village. Kept all the records, even after they filled the lake. I thought this was gone with the flood."

He finally opened the journal, and the spine made a tiny crack. Inside, the pages had warped and dried a dozen times, every line of ink a little haloed with blue from water damage.

Maya slid her phone across to record, hoping the gesture would be taken as practical and not invasive.

Dale's voice had that rough, morning-after scrape to it. "He wrote it all down. The water cycles, the snow-melt predictions, even the failsafes for when the lake gets too full." His fingers trembled as he flipped to the first page. There was a neat block of script, tight and formal: "WATER MEMORIES—PERSONAL LOG OF FRANKLIN GRANBY, 1949–1955."

He exhaled, long and shaky, then continued. "He always said there was a 'rhythm' to the mountains, and if you knew how to listen, you could predict everything. Drought, blizzards, flash floods. But nobody listened to him, not even after the town went under."

Finn, who had been silently tracking every word, leaned in. "You

said there were stories about the Neptune—about it being more than just a legend."

Dale nodded, thumbing through more pages, past sketches of tridents, ducks, and what looked like the lake's underwater cross-section. "My grandfather designed the Neptune as a precision instrument. A barometer, basically, but for the entire watershed. He used the water pressure, temperature, even mineral content, to predict when the lake would hit the tipping point. When to open the drains, and when to brace for snow."

He turned the book so Maya could see a page dense with diagrams and hand-written numbers. She recognized some of the notations: basic hydrology, thermal expansion, solute conductivity. But the way they were combined... She'd never seen that before.

She pulled her own notebook from her backpack and flipped to a chart she'd made for her last geology final. The numbers lined up, but where hers had sharp breaks and uncertainty, Granby's pages smoothed out the cycles—made the whole thing seem inevitable, even graceful.

Maya found herself leaning closer, not just to the diagrams, but to the idea itself. "You're telling me the ducks actually matter? Like, not as a symbol, but as a part of the actual system?"

Ashley snorted, half-amused, half-disgusted. "If the ducks matter, I quit. I am not rebuilding a third batch for next year."

Dale's eyes stayed on Maya. "He always said the rubber duck race was a way to check the system. If the ducks floated through, it meant the channels were clear, and the pressure was right. If they got stuck, or went missing, it was a warning to recalibrate the Neptune. My father kept it up after he left the village, even when nobody believed him."

Maya tapped the table, needing to hear it again. "So the race is a diagnostic run. Not just for show."

Dale nodded, slow and sure. "And the Neptune is the sensor. It's why everything got so weird when Vance's people started tampering with the outflow and plugging up the sinks. They broke the feedback loop."

Ashley put down her pliers. "Can I see that?" she asked, pointing at the book. Dale passed it over, and she thumbed through the pages with

surprising reverence. “My dad’s shop manual looks like this, only with more grease and fewer ducks.”

Finn smiled, the tension in his jaw easing a little. “If the lake is an instrument, and the ducks are the notes…”

Ashley grinned. “Then the mountain’s got a playlist.”

Maya nearly snorted coffee up her nose, but the image stuck: the mountain as a turntable, the ducks as the songs, the Neptune as the needle tracing the groove. She liked it more than she wanted to admit.

Brandi emerged from the kitchen, a tray of cinnamon rolls and two refilled carafes in her hands. She set them down in the center of the table, then glanced at the book in Maya’s hands. “That looks like a family treasure,” she said, gentle.

Dale closed the book, but not all the way. “It is. I thought it was gone forever.”

Randy, silent as always, refilled every mug in a single sweep. Maya caught his eye, and he gave a barely-perceptible nod, like a mountain blessing passed down in caffeine.

Brandi leaned in, her voice low. “The snow smells right today. Like it used to when I was a girl.” She took one of the cinnamon rolls and broke it in half, offering a piece to Maya. “You did good last night. The town owes you.”

Maya blushed. She wasn’t used to praise, especially from people who still made her nervous with their steady, clear-eyed kindness. She took the bread, tore off a smaller piece, and nibbled at the edge. It was as perfect as everything Brandi made, but this morning it tasted like victory, or at least like relief.

Finn was the first to ask the question that hung over all of them. “What now?”

Dale shrugged, but the weight had left his shoulders. “Now the Neptune is back in place. The lake will remember what to do, and the ducks—” he gestured at Ashley’s flock, lined up on the table like a jury “—will be able to finish their job.”

Ashley brightened, pointing at a particularly battered duck with one eye half-worn off. “That one survived three races. It has more character than my ex-boyfriend.”

The group laughed, the sound more than a little unhinged, but genuine.

Brandi gathered her tray and offered, "The festival's back on for tonight. Mayor wants to make it official—nobody remembers the last time we had two parades in one winter."

Randy added, "You're all invited."

Maya looked at the table, at the faces around it. For the first time since arriving on the mountain, she felt like she belonged. Not just as a visitor, but as someone whose hands had shaped the new tradition.

Dale closed the journal, fingers lingering on the worn cover. "Franklin would have liked you," he said to Maya. "He always believed in passing on what you learned."

She smiled, then picked up one of the repaired ducks, gave it a squeeze. The squeak was off-key, but the sound was sweet.

Ashley grinned. "It's a start."

They finished the rolls, the coffee, the awkwardness. Outside, the snow thickened, each flake a little note in the mountain's new song.

And when it was time to go, Maya bundled up, tucked the duck into her jacket, and walked out with Finn into the clean, cold morning, the promise of a new tradition bouncing ahead of them in yellow and blue.

Maya could always tell what kind of day it would be by the smell that greeted her at Hot Mama's. This morning, the scent was knockout: a haze of crusty sourdough, the dark caramel of fresh espresso, and the heady, flour-dusted ozone of a kitchen at full tilt. Even with the snow settling thick on the street outside, it felt like the inside of a bread oven—humid, golden, alive.

She was elbow-deep in hydrology notes, old journal propped on a tower of napkins, when Brandi swung in from the side door with a bakery basket cradled like a trophy. Randy followed, his hands dusted with enough flour to trace his route through the restaurant. They both radiated the kind of contented exhaustion Maya recognized from people who'd survived a night shift and lived to tell the tale.

"Everyone awake?" Brandi called, making it sound like a party and a warning at the same time.

Dale grunted assent from the far end of the table, never looking up from the spread sheets he was cross-checking against his grandfather's hand-written logs. Finn looked up from his phone—probably tracking satellite weather or new reports about Vance's downfall—and gave a nod that meant "awake, but barely."

Ashley, who had started her day by eating two cinnamon rolls and complaining about the state of her hands, added a "present!" without looking up from the duck she was dissecting. "I think this is the one that got stuck in the ice chute," she muttered, prying at the belly plug with a fork.

Brandi set the basket of bread in the center of the table and inhaled deeply, as if oxygen alone wouldn't be enough. "I brought the good stuff," she announced. She broke off a hunk, passed it to Maya, then started slicing the rest into neat, fat wedges. "You all look like you could use carbs."

Randy followed with a thermos and poured coffee into the mugs already waiting. The aroma added a new layer to the room, cutting through even the bakery's dominant note.

Brandi settled into the chair next to Maya and leaned in, lowering her voice. "So, the artifact's really back in its place?"

Dale nodded, but his hands shook slightly as he flipped to the next journal entry. "Finn and Maya did it. The Neptune's in the clock tower—locked in with what's left of the old works. The feedback loop should be functional now."

Ashley, who seemed to catch up with the conversation only when the word "artifact" was uttered, said, "So that's it? We just—go back to normal?"

Brandi shook her head, a sly smile creeping in. "It was never about normal. The Neptune wasn't just measuring—it was talking to the mountain." She tore a slice of bread in half and passed it to Finn, who blinked at the gesture, then accepted. "My grandfather always said it was a two-way street. The mountain gives, but it expects respect."

Maya, still more used to math than metaphysics, said, "You mean, like, a... feedback resonance?"

Brandi winked. “Exactly. The ducks, the parade, the festival—all of it is the mountain’s way of checking in on its people. If we don’t do our part, the cycles go weird. Droughts, floods, bad luck.”

Randy added, “You saw what happened when the system was tampered with.” He poured more coffee, the liquid so dark it looked like new motor oil.

Dale made a noise Maya had only ever heard from someone discovering a plot twist in a telenovela. “That’s why the records showed periodic failures in the past—every time someone tried to ‘improve’ the process, something snapped.”

Finn finished his slice and said, “So it’s a celebration, but also a safety valve.”

Ashley, undeterred, squeezed her latest patient. The duck gave a wet, gurgling honk instead of the usual squeak. “This one’s a write-off,” she declared, setting it aside. “We’re supposed to have three hundred for the festival finale, and I’m down to like forty with working squeakers.”

Brandi poured herself a mug, then reached over and patted Ashley’s hand. “You’ll figure it out. You always do.”

Ashley looked dubious. “If I can’t, the whole run will sound like a bunch of dying geese.”

Maya stared at the battered pile, brain working. “What if we just need the right frequency? Like, the Neptune emits a tone, and the ducks are tuned to it. If we can calibrate the replacements—”

Ashley brightened. “We could. But I’d need a pile of new squeakers, and nobody delivers up here till next week.”

Brandi was about to respond when the bell over the door let out a sharp clang. Rolane barreled in, hair spiked with snow, boots leaving a constellation of prints on the wet tile. Their hands were stained with some kind of green grease, and they looked equal parts manic and triumphant.

“I got it!” Rolane announced, waving a ziplock bag above their head. Inside was a cluster of tiny, off-white ovals. “Squeaker prototypes. 3D-printed at the shop, same frequency as the old ones. I even matched the durometer on the rubber.”

Ashley shrieked in delight, reached for the bag, and immediately

started testing one in the nearest duck. The result: a flawless, high-pitched squeak that made even Brandi laugh out loud.

Rolane grinned. "I can run a batch of two hundred before lunch, maybe more if you help me de-gunk the print beds."

Finn, never one for excess emotion, gave a short, honest applause. "That's... impressive."

Dale, for the first time all morning, let himself lean back. "We might actually pull this off."

Maya picked up one of the prototype ducks and rolled it between her palms. It looked like nothing, but sounded like hope.

Ashley was already making plans. "We can do the entire festival run, then the ceremonial dump for the parade. I'll get the kids to hand out the best ones as prizes."

Randy, who had been quietly refilling mugs and observing, nodded in approval. "We'll bake enough rolls for the crowd. Duck-shaped, if we can swing it."

Brandi shot him a thumbs-up. "And I'll whip up the honey butter."

For a minute, the group lapsed into happy, busy silence. Ashley sorted ducks, Rolane scribbled a supply list, Finn and Maya ran through checklists and weather updates. Dale called the mayor with the news. Brandi set to making breakfast sandwiches for the whole crew, and Randy started prepping dough for the promised parade.

Maya felt something inside her unclench, like the last log in a frozen creek finally shifting with the melt. The festival would happen, the ducks would run, the mountain would remember. She caught Finn's eye, and he smiled, small but true.

Outside, the snow came down heavier, blanketing the world in a hush that felt like a reward. When the bell jingled again, it was a trio of kids from the edge of town, each clutching a battered duck and beaming with excitement. They crowded around Ashley, who immediately set about making their ducks whole again, one prototype at a time.

In the corner, Brandi watched the whole thing unfold, pride and mischief shining in her eyes. "See?" she said to Maya, voice just loud enough for the group. "The old ways work if you put enough love and weirdness into them."

Maya laughed, and the sound felt so good she wanted to do it again. "I believe it now," she said. "Or, at least, I want to."

Rolane chimed in, "That's all the mountain ever asks for."

The group huddled closer, the table a clutter of bread and ducks and possibility.

They had everything they needed for the finale, and for the first time in memory, Maya thought maybe the town did, too.

And as the morning brightened and the first festival-goers peered through the fogged glass of Hot Mama's, the smell of baking, coffee, and new beginnings said it better than any words could.

The water would run.

The ducks would sing.

And the story, somehow, would always go on.

seventeen
confrontation at the sheriff's office

THE SHERIFF'S Office was a shoebox lined in outdated blue-gray carpet, with fluorescent bulbs that buzzed above like angry insects. The place had a permanent smell: half sour coffee, half disinfectant, all held together by the faintest whiff of something lemony that never quite covered the rest. On the wall, behind a thick plastic barrier, was a display of confiscated knives and a signed photo of the 1998 Kane County Little League Champions.

Sheriff Adams was hunched over a drift of paperwork that looked less like a stack and more like a slow-motion landslide. He hadn't changed much in the years Maya had known him; same lopsided jaw, same flattened crew cut with precisely one cowlick, same desk, now upgraded with four separate coffee mugs, each at a different stage of fossilization.

He looked up as Maya and Finn walked in. He didn't say a word, just stabbed a pen at the air, as if signing something invisible.

"Morning, Sheriff," Maya said, calm and measured.

He grunted. "You two again. I figured you'd be busy prepping for the parade." He tried to smile, but it curled more in irritation than friendliness.

Finn stood a step behind Maya, arms crossed, eyes flicking from the Sheriff to the radio on the corner of the desk and back.

Maya set her backpack down on the visitor's chair, unzipped it, and

slid three items across the desk: a battered notebook, a thick sheaf of photos rubber-banded together, and a weatherproof tablet running a paused video. She lined them up with the same neatness she'd use to rack glassware at the bakery.

Sheriff Adams sighed, but didn't reach for anything. "What's this, a science project?"

"It's evidence," Maya said. "You want the quick version?"

He shrugged, but one hand edged closer to the photos.

Maya started with the notebook. "This is from Dale's grandfather. He tracked water levels in the basin for six years—every shift in the snowpack, every time the lake drained. It matches up exactly with the problems this year."

Adams thumbed through a few pages. "You know this isn't court-admissible, right? Old men say a lot of things."

Maya pointed to the next item. "These are photos of the sabotage." She flipped to a close-up: a grid of ducks, each with a blue-black stain on its belly, next to a plastic bag of silent ones. "They swapped out the real batch with duds. Rolane's detector found the original ducks in the cave, all missing their squeakers. And this—" she tapped the screen of the tablet "—is the drone footage of Vance's crew installing metal plates over the sinkholes at the cove. Timestamped, with faces visible."

Adams finally leaned forward. He peered at the screen with the impatience of someone who considered technology a personal insult. He let the video run for five seconds, then jabbed at the tablet until it paused. "So, you want me to arrest a man for fixing a leak?"

Finn spoke for the first time, voice flat. "He's tampering with the watershed. It's a federal crime."

Adams made a show of uncapping his pen. "You two ever heard of too much TV? Or maybe you've been spending too much time with Krazy Mike down at the gas station. Because this is the second wild goose chase—"

"Duck," Maya corrected, quietly.

"—duck chase," Adams said, deadpan, "in as many weeks."

He gathered the evidence into a loose stack, using the flat of his hand. "I'll look it over," he said. "But unless you have a sworn statement from an actual victim, or a body, or—" he gestured with the pen "—a

confession, I don't see how this is anything but amateur detective work."

Maya felt Finn tense next to her. She could almost hear the words he wanted to say, but instead he just shifted his weight, face like granite.

She tried again. "Sheriff, this isn't just about the festival. If the snowpack doesn't release, or if the pressure in the sinkholes builds too fast, it could flood half the valley. The Neptune isn't just tradition—it regulates the whole water cycle. Without it, you risk an avalanche or a blowout."

Adams tapped the pen against the desk, a staccato that nearly drowned out the hum of the lights. "You want me to shut down the festival because you think a plastic toy is going to bring down the mountain?"

"It already did," Finn said. "The Drowned Village? The old lake collapse? It's in the log."

Maya nodded, pushing the notebook closer. "It's not just about tradition. It's about the science. You said it yourself—'The law is the law.' But the laws of physics don't care if you believe them."

Adams pinched the bridge of his nose, exhaling hard enough to rattle his mustache. "Look. I get that you're worried. I do. But I'm not the EPA, and I'm not the Army Corps. My job is to keep the peace and stop idiots from burning down cabins or getting drunk and racing snowmobiles on the highway." He glanced at Finn with the last bit, but Finn didn't flinch.

He shifted the photos to a corner of the desk. "Vance is a pain in my ass, but he hasn't broken a law I can prove. He's got paperwork for every move he's made, and the county's not exactly eager to slow down a developer with money to burn. You want to stop him? Take it up with the council."

Maya watched the Sheriff, looking for a crack in the official mask, but saw only fatigue and a faint irritation that bordered on defeat.

"We're not asking you to stop him," Finn said, arms still crossed. "We're asking you not to help him."

Adams stared at Finn for a long second, then looked away, busying himself with a random sheet of paper. "I'll take it under advisement," he said.

Maya recognized the tone. She'd heard it from teachers, from bank tellers, from the kind of people who measured their days in checkboxes. The matter was closed.

She gathered the evidence, packing it away, careful not to show any anger.

Finn let Maya take the lead, following her out, but not before turning at the door and saying, "If it goes sideways, don't say we didn't warn you."

Adams waved the pen in their direction, as if warding off a pair of persistent houseflies.

Out in the corridor, the air was marginally fresher, but the fluorescent glare followed them. Maya stopped just beyond the plastic display of knives, exhaling slowly. Finn stood beside her, quiet, offering nothing but his presence.

She grinned, more wry than happy. "On a scale of one to ten, that went about as well as the time Krazy Mike tried to file a complaint about the psychic deer."

Finn shrugged. "Could be worse. We're still in the running for least wanted citizen of the week."

They didn't laugh, but the tension slid away enough for Maya to shoulder her pack and start toward the main doors. "Ready for round two?" she asked.

Finn followed, boots squeaking on the cheap tile. "Always."

Together, they pushed out into the cold, leaving the hum of the lights and the smell of stale coffee behind. The mountain air bit at their cheeks, crisp and bright, and for a minute, it felt like there was still a way to fix everything—so long as you didn't mind running into a few more walls first.

They walked side by side down the steps, toward the half-shoveled sidewalk, and into whatever came next.

Adams's pen had just started its descent into another pile of forms when the office door banged open hard enough to rattle the blinds. For a moment, nobody moved. The silence was so complete it might have

been scripted—Adams, mid-signature; the radio, frozen on static; even the motes of dust caught in a sunbeam just above the copier, suspended in time.

Elias walked in first, as if he'd lived here all his life but only just remembered the address. He was flanked by two figures who looked nothing like locals: a woman in a government-issue navy pantsuit, and a man whose shoes shone so brightly they belonged in a different area code. The woman introduced herself first, flashing a badge that read Environmental Protection Agency; the man followed, Bureau of Land Management.

Elias placed a thick, weathered folder on Adams's desk, right next to the abandoned pile of evidence. His movements were deliberate—each step, each gesture, as if weighed by committee before action. For all the years Maya had known him as "the Hermit," he had the bearing of someone who'd once been quite comfortable in boardrooms.

"These waters," he said, not raising his voice but filling the room all the same, "are protected."

Adams stared at the folder, then at the two agents, then at Elias. "What's this, then?" he managed, voice flat but eyes betraying a whole parade of panic.

The woman in the suit took over. She didn't sit. "I'm Agent Valdez. I'm here about the unauthorized diversion of snowmelt and the installation of unlicensed barriers in a federally managed watershed. You received two warnings about the lakebed last season, correct?"

Adams, hat now in hand, nodded stiffly. "I, uh, passed the paperwork along."

The man, who went by Mr. Connolly, stood with his hands folded in front of him. "And yet we have reports—" here he flipped open a tablet, scrolling with brutal efficiency "—of heavy machinery, unreported construction, and a sudden drop in downstream flows. All since the arrival of one Sterling Vance, registered owner of several shell companies and a recent donor to your own town festival." He looked up, smile thin. "That sound about right?"

The Sheriff looked, for the first time all day, genuinely uncomfortable. His shoulders bunched up, and he started to speak, but Elias cut in.

He slid the folder open. The contents were dense—maps with red grease-pencil overlays, satellite photos, official letters stamped with dates and initials. "Our people have been tracking the water for years," he said. "When it vanished this time, we took samples and sent them to the state lab. You can see the readings."

He turned the folder so Adams could see. The graphs were bold and angry, big spikes and flatlines highlighted in orange.

Valdez set a single sheet of federal letterhead on top of the pile. "As of this morning, all activities in the basin are under review. That means no construction, no diversion, and no 'routine maintenance' without explicit approval."

Adams looked from the agents to the folder, then at Maya's pile of evidence still sitting, now orphaned, in front of him. "I—uh—was just starting to look into this. I even called the water board yesterday," he said, words tumbling out in a rush. "It's a developing situation. And Vance is still in holding, pending review."

Valdez's mouth flickered in the direction of a smile. "He'll stay there until the review is over. We'll need the security footage, incident logs, and any correspondence between your office and the development companies."

Adams swallowed, running a hand over his thinning hair. "Of course. Right away." He started shuffling through the desk, knocking over a coffee cup. It rolled to the edge and landed with a slosh on the carpet.

Elias let the moment hang. He didn't smile, but there was a satisfaction in the way he planted his walking stick, leaning on it like a gavel. "The mountain has a memory," he said, as much to Maya as to the room. "It pays to respect it."

Adams busied himself with a stack of release forms, the previous bravado gone. He wasn't even trying to hide the sweat now. "You want the cell key?" he asked, voice hoarse.

Valdez nodded once. "And a quiet interview room. We'll take it from here."

Connolly scanned the room, pausing on Finn and Maya, as if to size them up. "You two were the first on scene?"

Maya nodded. "We have documentation, samples, and video."

He gestured for her to bring it over, which she did, setting each piece in a neat row. "It started with the ducks," she said, almost apologetic. "But it ended with the water."

Connolly flicked through the photos. "Never underestimate a good duck," he said, deadpan.

Elias shifted, his coat whispering as he turned to go. "You did right," he said, soft enough for only Maya to hear. "Don't let them make you small."

Maya felt a warmth in her chest, not unlike the Neptune artifact itself, and nodded.

Outside the door, Finn gave a low whistle. "That escalated."

"Usually does," Maya said, smiling for real this time.

Behind them, the shuffle of forms and the bark of new orders signaled a whole new world inside the little office. Adams's voice was lower now, less in charge, more like the kid caught behind the cafeteria sneaking a cigarette.

They paused at the steps, letting the cold bite back through their clothes. Finn watched as a pair of deputies hustled down the corridor, clearly trying to look busy in the face of the incoming tide.

He turned to Maya. "You think it'll hold this time?"

She shrugged, but her eyes were bright. "If not, at least we know what to do."

They walked down the sidewalk, past the old schoolhouse and the shuttered hardware store, the sky overhead sharp and blue and full of promise.

Behind them, the Sheriff's Office was still, but Maya swore she could hear the new heartbeat of the mountain, stronger than ever.

The water would remember.

And so would she.

Sheriff Adams stood in the corridor, hat in one hand, list of charges in the other, waiting for the deputies to bring Vance up from holding. The effect of the feds' presence lingered in the office air, making everything feel five degrees colder, ten times more official. You could almost hear

the click of a higher court, somewhere in the distance, rolling its gavel toward Duck Creek.

The cell block door buzzed, and two deputies appeared, flanking Sterling Vance like he was an NFL draft pick on the way to a press conference. His shirt was still freshly pressed, his smile flawless, even as the cuffs clipped a little of the grace from his stride. He held his chin up, eyes scanning the room with open disdain.

Maya stood off to one side with Finn, the hydrologist's log open on the counter next to a printout of drone stills and a battered evidence bag containing one of Ashley's best ducks. The EPA agent, Valdez, was already prepping a notepad, her badge visible for all to see. The BLM guy stood back, more observer than participant, but his every movement screamed "government in session."

Vance looked first to Adams, then to Maya, and allowed himself a full, rich chuckle. "This is what passes for justice in the sticks?" he said. "I expected at least a lawyer, or maybe a flag."

Adams cleared his throat, looking nowhere near as certain as he had the day before. "Mr. Vance, this is a formal update on your detainment and charges. These agents have some questions, and you'll answer them. You're entitled to counsel, but—" He looked at Valdez, who nodded. "—but first, you'll listen to the allegations."

Vance shrugged, as if he was at a cocktail party and the canapés had run out. "Proceed."

Valdez didn't waste a syllable. "You're under investigation for unauthorized modification of a federally protected watershed, unlicensed use of mechanical equipment, and deliberate obstruction of community resource channels. In layman's terms: you broke the mountain."

Vance tried on a new smile, this one more practiced, less sincere. "I assure you, all my activities are aboveboard. My company has permits for every action, and any so-called 'damage' was mitigated by our restoration crew—"

Maya coughed, not quite able to hide it, and pushed a photo across the counter. "Your crew bolted plates over active sinkholes. That's not restoration, that's sabotage."

Vance rolled his eyes. "Miss Patel, isn't it? I remember you from the

town hall. You're the one who said the ducks were 'spiritual sensors.' Very original."

Maya didn't flinch. "They're hydrological monitors, and you tampered with them."

Vance looked at Finn, as if expecting backup from another male presence. Finn didn't blink, just glared, hands shoved in his pockets.

Valdez circled back to the point. "Did you order the removal or modification of the traditional duck run?"

Vance smiled, even wider. "No. But if someone did, perhaps they were just trying to maintain a standard of modernity in a backward, superstitious town."

Behind the glass, the deputies looked at each other, trying not to snicker. Even Adams seemed to wilt, as if the whole room had leaned away from Vance in unison.

Maya reached for the next piece of evidence. "You're going to want to see this," she said. She held up the hydrologist's journal, opened to a page dated from fifty years ago. The handwriting was jagged, urgent. "Your grandfather tried the same thing. There's a record—here, and here." She flipped to a second set of pages, then placed the copied town record next to it. "He was caught, too."

Vance's face went flat, just for a second. "My grandfather was an innovator. He understood the potential of this place—"

Ashley burst in through the door, nearly skidding on the tile, a fistful of old files in one hand and a box of ducks in the other. "Sorry I'm late," she blurted. She put the box down and shook the files in Vance's direction, then stabbed a finger at a yellowed page. "You're not even the first in your family to try and sink the town. The only difference is, the last time, it took them a week to catch him." She held up a duck, one eye patched with tape, and gave it a determined squeak.

Valdez accepted the records, scanned them in seconds, and added them to the stack. "Your company's activities were not only unauthorized, they're part of a pattern," she said. "We've already found evidence that this was a deliberate attempt to manipulate water levels and, by extension, property values. That's a criminal conspiracy."

Vance tried another smile, but it didn't stick. "You can't prove I intended any such thing."

Ashley leaned in, voice surprisingly steady. “My ducks say otherwise.” She gestured at the box. “You destroyed over a hundred of them. That’s theft and vandalism, on top of everything else.”

Finn, who had been watching the whole time with a stony calm, finally spoke up. “You lied to the town. And you nearly killed the basin.”

Vance’s hands curled, knuckles going white against the silver of the cuffs. “You’re all fools. By this time next month, the town won’t even exist. The investors have plans for this whole corridor—”

Valdez raised a hand. “You’re going to want to save that for your lawyer.” She motioned for the deputies to step in.

Sheriff Adams, sweat starting to bead at his temples, took a deep breath and read from the paper in his hands. “Sterling Vance, you’re hereby charged with: one, unauthorized modification of federally protected waters; two, conspiracy to defraud a municipality; three, theft and destruction of property belonging to...” He glanced at Ashley. “Hot Mama’s Pizza and Brew, among other businesses.”

Vance snorted, but the sound lacked conviction.

Ashley grinned, wider than ever. “You’re the first person ever banned from the festival before they even finished the parade.”

Adams nodded at the deputies, who led Vance away, the click of the cuffs louder than any protest he might have managed.

As Vance passed Maya, he leaned close, voice low enough to be private. “It doesn’t matter. My investors won’t let this stand. Marcus Thorne has plans for Duck Creek that go far beyond my little water project.”

Maya met his gaze, eyes cool and unwavering. “You underestimated the town. And the ducks.”

He almost smiled, but not quite, as the door swung shut behind him.

The tension in the office melted instantly, replaced by the soft rustle of paperwork and the hum of the fluorescent lights. Valdez gathered the files and started lining up the evidence in legal-size folders.

Ashley turned to Maya and Finn. “You know, I always thought I’d see a day when a rubber duck would save the town. I just didn’t think it’d be this literal.”

Finn grinned. “You did good, Ash.”

Ashley held up her patched duck. “We all did.”

For a moment, nobody moved. The mountain sunlight—so bright it made the snow outside look almost blue—angled through the office window, touching each of their faces. Even Adams looked lighter, as if the new weight of bureaucracy had replaced a far heavier burden.

Outside, the town was waking up. The main street glimmered with banners, and the early festival crowd clustered around the bakery, the bar, and the lakefront, where the ducks had already started to gather for the next race. The air was full of sound—laughter, engines, the faint honk of a real duck chasing the rubber ones across the slush.

Maya packed up her notes, closed the hydrologist’s journal, and glanced at Finn. “Breakfast?” she asked.

“Absolutely,” Finn said.

They stepped into the cold, the door swinging shut behind them, and walked out into the waiting crowd. For the first time in weeks, it felt like the story had landed exactly where it should.

If there was a next round, they’d be ready. For now, they’d earned every bite of cinnamon roll and every victory lap around the lake.

After all, the mountain always remembered. But so did the people who cared for it.

And so did the ducks.

eighteen
preparing for the ceremony

DAWN OVER DUCK CREEK VILLAGE was usually a slow burn—first a gray haze around the edges, then the evergreens taking on a metallic glint, until finally the sky cracked open and painted the whole ridge a raw, improbable orange. Today, it looked as if the sun had something to prove: every surface in town, from the muddy ATV ruts on Movie Ranch Road to the battered sign of Hot Mama's Pizza & Brew, caught the light and reflected it back twice as bright.

Inside the restaurant, Maya watched the sunrise ooze across the glass, smearing the checkerboard floor with gold. She'd arrived before the first customers and found the kitchen already alive—ovens hissing, the espresso machine gurgling like a sleepy giant, the air so thick with proofing dough it felt warmer than a blanket.

Ashley was everywhere at once. She'd traded her usual pink beanie for a knotted bandana and moved in a blur between dough station and prep counter, every motion trailing flour like fairy dust. She only stopped to slap a handprint on the oven door or bark a laugh at a joke Maya missed.

Maya drifted toward the prep table, feeling the soft, low-key ache of someone who'd spent the previous day pulling all-nighters in the snow. Last year, she'd have arrived skeptical, ready to side-eye the tradition and treat the duck race as pure theater. Today, she found herself almost reverent as she slid the first crate of yellow rubber ducks out from the

storage nook and started lining them up, side by perfect side, into three laundry baskets.

Each duck had a number and a hand-drawn smile. Some wore Sharpie bandanas, some had painted-on sunglasses, a few were marked with war paint or little lightning bolts. The ducks looked cheerful, but in the right light their eyes suggested something closer to bloodlust.

Ashley materialized at Maya's elbow, still dusted in flour, and inspected the baskets with a critical eye. "Looking good. Just need to check for defectives." She reached in, plucked a duck from the front row, and gave it a squeeze. The squeaker let out a high, wheezy shriek.

"Perfect," Ashley said, tossing it back. "That's the sound of victory."

At a corner booth, Rolane and Krazy Mike had set up a miniature duck hospital. The table was a chaos of tiny screwdrivers, spare rubber plugs, and a sprawling mass of yellow bodies in varying stages of repair. Most of the ducks were freshly patched; a few had tiny plastic casts where their bellies had been stitched or re-glued.

Rolane looked like a person who had slept exactly zero hours. Their hair pointed in three directions, and the shadow of grease under their eyes matched the ink on their hands. Still, every movement was precise. They pinched a micro-screwdriver in one hand and set a squeaker in place with the other, then passed the duck to Mike, who did the honors of squeezing.

Mike, as usual, wore a Phillies cap and a shirt that read "Quack Technician." He treated each duck with a solemnity usually reserved for organ transplants.

"Sound check," he announced, and pressed the duck. It let out a flawless, mid-range honk.

Rolane nodded. "That's number fifty-nine. Put it in the green bin."

Mike did, then set to work on the next. The table had three bins: green for "good to go," blue for "needs tuning," and red for "MIA, RIP." The red bin had only a handful, but each one looked heartbreakingly earnest, their little faces frozen in anticipation.

Maya watched for a few cycles, then asked, "How many are left to fix?"

Rolane squinted at the repair log, shrugged. "Ninety? Maybe a

hundred. But the print farm's keeping up. I ran out of filament at three AM, but Mike's wife found some at Cedar Mountain Country Store and did a midnight run."

Mike grinned. "She's a saint. Or she wants me out of the house, one of the two."

Ashley breezed by, carrying a tray of dough balls for the lunch shift. "You two geniuses are my heroes. I'd buy you breakfast, but we ate all the leftovers."

Mike popped a duck into the green bin and gave Ashley a salute. "Just make sure we get a slice before the kids stampede the place."

Ashley's eyes twinkled. "Done."

She turned back to Maya, lowering her voice a half-step. "Seriously, you're a natural at this. Last year, half the ducks were still in the wrappers at parade time."

Maya almost laughed, but it stuck in her throat. "Guess I'm converted."

Ashley nodded, then picked a duck at random and squeezed it. The sound was shrill, but in a different register from the others.

"See that?" she said. "Every batch is a little different. Supposedly, the ones that echo the lake's original sinkhole frequencies work best."

Maya blinked. "Wait. That's a real thing?"

Ashley shrugged, hands in the air. "According to local legend and a couple of weird old men, yes. The ducks with the true squeak help the mountain 'wake up' for winter. Or something. I never questioned it until I heard the ducks echo off the water last year. It's... uncanny."

Maya picked up one and squeezed it herself. The sound was thin, more a squeal than a honk. She tried another; it produced a bright, rubbery trumpet. She imagined a whole fleet of these things going into the lake at once, all those pitches blending and bouncing up the basin walls. For a split second, she saw it from the mountain's point of view—hundreds of tiny calls, all seeking to be heard.

Ashley must have read her face, because she bumped Maya's shoulder and said, "Creepy, right? You'd never think it mattered, but after yesterday, I'm ready to believe anything."

She nodded toward the kitchen window, where the light had shifted and caught the faintest shimmer off the snow at the edge of the clearing.

"I bet you five bucks that the minute we dump these ducks, the weather goes full whiteout."

Maya tried to muster a skeptic's reply, but couldn't. "I wouldn't bet against you."

They shared a grin, and Maya felt something shift inside her, like the last bit of ice giving way to the flow beneath.

Ashley loaded the baskets onto a rolling cart and gestured for Maya to follow. "Let's get them staged for the parade. We're on at ten sharp, and the mayor wants at least one picture of us looking 'joyful and inclusive.'" She made air quotes with sticky fingers.

"Lead the way," Maya said, voice stronger now.

They rolled the cart through the dining room, the ducks all facing forward, their rows as neat and hopeful as soldiers going to war. At the back booth, Rolane and Mike kept working, heads together, voices low and full of satisfaction.

Ashley paused at the door and looked at Maya sideways. "You know, these little guys are more than just toys. They're history. Every year, the ducks go out, and every year, a few get stuck, a few get found, and a few come back changed. We always thought it was just for fun. Now..." She looked out the window, eyes tracing the distant line of the lake. "Now I think it's real."

Maya nodded, and for the first time in her life, she wanted to believe —not just in the ducks or the mountain or the weird resonance thing, but in the idea that a bunch of people doing something together, year after year, could actually matter.

Ashley unlocked the patio doors, and they stepped into the cold. The sun hit them full in the face, and for a second, Maya was blinded. Then her vision cleared, and she saw the parade route already marked with little orange flags, each one promising a future memory.

She picked up the first duck from the basket and set it on the starting table, right next to the official timer.

It looked up at her, eyes unblinking, and Maya swore she could almost hear it squeak without being touched.

Ashley grinned. "Ready to win a mountain over?"

Maya smiled back. "Yeah. I think I am."

The kitchen hummed on behind them, the smell of fresh dough

and coffee curling out into the morning air, mixing with the icy promise of the new day.

It was almost time to race.

By eight AM, the restaurant smelled less like a pizza place and more like a bakery on the morning of a holiday. The transformation happened in waves: first the rich, crackling topnote of yeast, then an undertow of caramelized sugar, then something almost floral, like wheat in sun. Maya was on her hands and knees with Ashley, helping rearrange the dining room, when Brandi and Randy arrived with the bread.

Brandi's coat was dusted with snowmelt, her cheeks radiant as if she'd absorbed the sunrise directly. In each hand she carried a tray of sourdough loaves, still warm, shaped like little ducks. Every loaf was scored with a smile and a swirl on the belly, and the crusts caught the light just so, as if lacquered. Randy followed, his arms full of paper sacks, and moved like a much larger man trying not to crush a clutch of robin eggs.

The moment Brandi set the trays down, the new smell overpowered even the sauce simmering in the kitchen. Maya's mouth watered on reflex.

"Duck parade, meet duck parade," Brandi said, grinning as she lined up the loaves on the sideboard.

Ashley popped up from under a table. "You guys didn't have to make this many. There's, like, three hundred ducks already."

Brandi shrugged, brushing flour off her sleeves. "You can never have too many ducks. Besides, these don't squeak when you bite them."

Randy started unpacking the loaves, careful and methodical. Despite the size and roughness of his hands, he handled each bread duck like it might break. He worked in silence, letting Brandi do the talking. She circled the table and set a palm on Maya's shoulder, just long enough for the warmth to transfer.

"You're starting to feel it now, aren't you?" Brandi asked, in the soft tone she reserved for bakery confidences.

"Feel what?" Maya said, though the answer hovered on her tongue.

"The connection," Brandi said. "Like the mountain's less a backdrop and more... something with a heartbeat."

Maya hesitated, caught between embarrassment and honesty. "Yeah. Maybe."

Brandi squeezed her shoulder. "You've got the look. I see it every year, about a day before the snow sticks for good."

Ashley made a gagging noise from behind a stack of plates. "Brandi, let her be rational. If you keep getting mystical, you'll scare her back to the city."

Brandi just winked, then set about cutting slices from one of the loaves and arranging them on a wooden platter. "Maybe. Or maybe she'll stick around and keep the rest of us honest."

Randy finished stacking the display and took a step back, nodding once, like a craftsman satisfied with a job well done. Maya watched him, then Brandi, then the bread itself: all that labor and warmth compressed into a hundred smiling faces, ready to be devoured in minutes.

She wondered if tradition always looked so silly, up close, and if maybe that was the point.

The view outside had gone from frosted gray to a blazing clear blue, the kind of sky that made your bones ache for movement. On the patio, a dozen villagers—early risers, festival diehards, and three kids already dressed in Halloween costumes—were stretching in a loose circle. At the center stood Jana Montana, clad in rainbow leggings and a puffer vest, her energy undimmed by the cold.

Jana's voice floated in through the window, upbeat and insistent. "One more stretch, then we pizza!" she called, leading the group in an overhead reach.

"Feel your arms get lighter as you stretch. Think about the mountain, getting ready to shed its leaves and rest up for the snow. Reach for that energy!"

Half the group imitated her, half just went through the motions, but everyone looked happier than they had fifteen minutes ago. As they straightened up, Maya caught sight of Finn on the edge of the crowd,

hands deep in his jacket, watching without participating. He seemed less like an outsider this morning—maybe because he was looking for her, not for an exit.

Inside, the prep had shifted into overdrive. The tables were set with bright, reusable plates; the baskets of ducks stood at parade rest, their ranks precise. On the counter, a pitcher of orange juice glowed like a lantern, and next to it, a tall stack of mason jars waited for the festival's signature drink: the Duckface Daiquiri.

Dale was already behind the bar, mixing the first batch. He wore the solemn look of someone operating heavy machinery, though the main ingredient was just high-octane lemonade. His hands were as steady as ever, and every motion had the economy of someone who'd done this a thousand times.

Maya watched as he uncapped a small metal flask and poured a single, clear measure into each glass.

"What's that?" she asked.

Dale glanced at her, then the flask. "Water from Cascade Falls. Collected it yesterday morning."

Maya couldn't help it. "Doesn't the tap work?"

He shook his head. "Not the same. This water remembers its journey. Makes the drink taste right."

She found herself nodding, even though she knew all water was H2O, no matter how much tradition you poured into it. "And the rest?"

Dale poured lemonade from a chilled carafe, added two drops of something green, then stirred with a wooden swizzle stick shaped like a duck. "Mint, for luck. Little bit of blue curaçao, for the mountain's mood. It's not really about the ingredients, though."

He handed her the glass. The drink looked radioactive, the ice making a cloud inside it. "It's about sharing it. That's what completes the cycle."

Maya took a sip, expecting sweetness, but instead there was a snap of cold and a tingle down her spine. It tasted like a forest floor after rain.

Dale watched her for a reaction, then broke into a rare grin. "Told you. It's the water."

She smiled back, and for the second time in an hour, decided she didn't need to understand every part of a thing to appreciate it.

Outside, the Pilates group finished their session and started streaming back in. Jana led the way, her voice booming with cheer. "Time for pizza! And maybe a little bread, if we're lucky."

Ashley emerged from the kitchen, hands raised. "It's brunch, but not as you know it. First slice goes to whoever can tell me the best duck joke."

A kid in a witch hat answered, "Why did the duck cross the playground?"

Ashley, not missing a beat: "Why?"

"To get to the other slide!"

The entire crowd groaned, but Ashley handed the kid the first slice anyway, then gestured for everyone else to dig in. She winked at Maya, as if to say: this is how you run a village.

Within minutes, the room was chaos—a good, happy chaos, full of people cramming themselves into every seat, steam rising off fresh bread, and the soft, ever-present chorus of ducks squeaking as kids tested them under the tables.

Brandi moved from group to group, topping off coffee, spreading butter, laughing in a way that made every corner of the room feel sunlit. Randy shadowed her, swapping out empty trays and clearing used plates with the same quiet diligence as before.

On the bar, Dale prepped rows of Duckface Daiquiris, each one topped with a paper umbrella and a tiny, edible duck.

Maya stood back for a second, trying to take it all in—the food, the chatter, the weird web of meaning tying everyone together. She found herself smiling at nothing in particular, just glad to be a part of the picture.

Then she spotted Finn, standing by the window, sipping his drink and watching the whole show. She waved him over.

He came, a little awkward, but not uncomfortable. "Hey," he said.

"Hey," Maya answered.

They looked out at the festival, at the stacks of bread, the parade of ducks, the pure, uncynical joy of the morning.

"It's a good day," Finn said.

Maya squeezed his hand. "It is."

For once, she didn't need to say anything else.

Finn was the first to see the change. He'd left the restaurant to check the trail cams and returned with windburn on his cheeks and a story ready to pop.

He didn't knock, just burst through the front door of Hot Mama's, trailing the cold and a tiny flurry of leaves. "You have to see the falls!" he said, not even stopping to catch his breath.

Half the dining room went quiet. Ashley looked up from the register. Maya put down her Duckface Daiquiri. Even Brandi paused with a butter knife halfway through a loaf.

Finn's eyes were wild, but his grin was real. "The lake's back to normal. The whole rim is frozen over, and Cascade is running full blast. I haven't seen it like this in—" he counted on his fingers, gave up "—ever."

Brandi whooped, a high, pure sound that cracked across the crowd. "The mountain remembers!" she yelled.

The dining room erupted. Kids slammed their cups on the table and cheered. Adults hugged or high-fived, even the ones who'd never met before. Someone started a chant—"Ducks! Ducks! Ducks!"—and it went three rounds before the energy turned into pure laughter.

Ashley poured herself a shot of espresso and lifted it in Finn's direction. "You did good, man. You did real good."

Finn took the cup and knocked it back, eyes still shining. For once, he didn't deflect the praise or duck out of the spotlight. He just stood there, letting the joy sink in.

Next through the door was Azure, arms full of battered cardboard boxes and hair gleaming like a warning light. She kicked the door shut behind her and called out, "Did somebody order nostalgia with a side of embarrassment?"

Ashley sprinted over to help. "What's in the boxes?"

"Historical treasure," Azure said. "And some absolute blackmail gold, if we play this right."

She started unpacking the boxes onto an empty booth. Inside were photos—old, new, and prehistoric—of every duck race and festival from the last four decades. Maya watched as Ashley spread them out, arranging them in loose timelines. There was one from the nineties, a rowdy pack of teenagers mid-water balloon fight; one from the seventies, with the ducks floating under a bridge that no longer existed. At the very bottom, face-down, was a faded photo mounted on cardboard.

Azure flipped it over and smoothed the corners. It showed a group of maybe twenty people, men and women in heavy coats, all standing in the snow. Each person held a rubber duck. Behind them was a handmade banner: DUCK CREEK LIVES. The year penciled on the back: 1974.

Maya looked closer. In the front row, a younger Brandi, still recognizable by her smile, stood arm-in-arm with someone who must have been her mother. At the far right was a man with Randy's build, but a full black beard.

Finn pointed at the banner. "This was after the first developer tried to take over, right?"

Azure grinned, hands on her hips. "Yup. The original standoff. Whole town showed up, even though it was negative ten and the sheriff threatened to haul them all in. The next week, the developer vanished, and the snow started two weeks early."

Brandi joined them, eyes a little misty as she touched the photo. "That's the year the mountain really noticed us. Or maybe the year we noticed the mountain."

Randy, hovering in the background, cleared his throat. "Still the best parade we ever had."

Ashley lined the photos along the wall, making a visual history of rebellion and celebration. Kids pointed at them and tried to guess who was whose grandparent.

Azure held up the 1974 photo. "History repeats itself when we remember it," she said, then winked at Maya. "Also, we're still better looking than they were."

Nobody argued.

As the group fell back into chatter, Maya lingered near the photo display, tracing the line from past to present. It didn't matter if the

ducks were magic or not, or if the water had a memory. It mattered that the people here believed they were a part of something—together.

The festival moved outside as the sun hit its stride. Movie Ranch Road, which usually served as a parking lot for side-by-sides and lost tourists, transformed into a corridor of color. Every shop had put out a flag or a streamer; the air hummed with generator noise and the clack of folding tables.

The parade was, as always, led by the world's only Duckmobile: a battered Suzuki ATV retrofitted with a fiberglass duck bill and two enormous, blinking eyes. Krazy Mike, fully in character, wore a cape and a tiara as he revved the engine and made the duck bill chomp at bystanders.

Behind the Duckmobile, the rest of the floats followed—some legit, like the fire crew's truck (draped in banners, two Dalmatian-mix puppies in the cab), and some more homemade, like the pickup full of high schoolers costumed as "Fowl Weather Friends." Everywhere, kids in duck hats and parents in matching shirts marched or danced or just tried to keep up.

Jana Montana led the fitness group in a choreographed routine, complete with lunges and jazz hands. "The mountain's ready! Are you?" she called, getting a surprising number of adults to shout back, "We are!"

At the finishing line, which was really just a strip of blue ribbon across a runoff ditch, Mayor Allbright waited with a bullhorn and a crate of blue medals. The mayor had on an official sash and a hat shaped like a duck head; even so, he managed to look dignified.

Maya and Finn stood together on the sidelines, watching the chaos. Ashley ran back and forth, keeping the ducks in order and refereeing the children who tried to sneak an early start.

"Never thought I'd say this," Finn said, "but I kind of love the pageantry."

Maya agreed. "It's got a rhythm. Like, every part of it fits. Even the weird parts."

She looked over at the starting table, where the baskets of rubber ducks were now neatly arrayed in flight formation. Rolane and Mike did a final inspection, squeezing each duck to verify its voice. The chorus of quacks, honks, and squeals echoed across the valley, drawing attention from as far as the gas station.

Finn nudged her. "You want to do the honors?"

Maya grinned, surprised to feel no self-consciousness. She marched up to the table, grabbed the first duck, and held it over her head.

"Ready?" she called.

The crowd answered: "Ready!"

She set the duck on the water, and with that, the first Duck Creek Duck Race of the season was officially on.

The ducks ran true, bobbing down the current and picking up speed as they cleared the first curve. The kids sprinted along the bank, shouting encouragement and occasionally wading in to dislodge a stuck racer. Ashley and Azure kept a running commentary, as if narrating the Kentucky Derby.

Maya watched as her duck, number seventeen, stayed near the front, navigating the obstacles with surprising agility.

Finn leaned in, whispering, "You know, statistically, number seventeen always finishes in the top five. Randy kept a chart for years."

She raised her eyebrows. "How?"

"Don't know. Maybe the current, maybe luck, maybe the mountain likes primes."

They watched as the finish line neared. In a blur of yellow, Maya's duck took second place. She punched the air, grinning like a maniac.

Ashley slapped her on the back. "Welcome to the winners' circle! You get first pick of the bread ducks."

Maya picked the one with the wonkiest smile and held it aloft. The other racers piled in, and soon the air was thick with crumbs, duck hats, and the high-pitched victory squeals of kids and adults alike.

The parade wound down, and people trickled back to the restaurant for the after-party. Maya lingered outside, letting the noise fade and the cold settle in.

Ashley found her there, arms crossed, eyes on the ridge where the first hint of snow cloud was gathering.

"Hey," she said, softer now. "You okay?"

Maya nodded. "Yeah. Just—thinking."

Ashley waited, hands in her pockets.

Maya hesitated, then said, "The ducks. The race. The stories. I always thought it was just an excuse for adults to get drunk at brunch."

Ashley snorted. "You're not wrong. But it's more than that."

She stared at the mountains, then said, "It's not about making the snow come, or saving the water, or even beating out Vance and his cronies. The duck race is about us. Every year, no matter what else happens, we show up and do something together. It's how we tell the mountain we're ready for winter. And it's how we tell ourselves we belong here."

Maya swallowed, the words sticking in her chest.

Ashley nudged her, playfully. "You belong, you know."

For a second, Maya didn't answer. Then she said, "Yeah. I think I finally do."

They stood there a little longer, watching the clouds build and the parade wind down.

When the first snowflake hit her sleeve, Maya didn't brush it off.

She just smiled.

nineteen
the duck ceremony

THE FALL COLORS Fest was always best after dark, when the sky went blue-black and the lights strung through the village set everything aglow. By the time the music and booths and the smoke from bratwurst had faded into background noise, Duck Creek Village was transformed into something halfway between a town-wide slumber party and a pagan ritual.

Maya had never seen it from above before. Tonight, she stood on the edge of the temporary stage set up by the old fire circle, peering out at a living sea of faces. Locals with that red-cheeked, wind-tanned look; tourists with expensive jackets and neon hats; a wild mix of children, retirees, off-duty snowplow drivers, and the perennial contingent of people who'd come for a week and just...stayed.

They all held a yellow rubber duck. Hundreds—no, at least a thousand—bright lemony ducks, each with a number in Sharpie on the belly and a look in the eye that Maya, by now, recognized as stubborn resolve. The effect was more than a little surreal: every time someone squeezed one, it answered with a squeak or a squawk, and the sound rolled up from the crowd like a kind of mass giggle.

Finn, next to her on the stage, scanned the crowd with the calm of a ranch dog watching a herd. He looked good under the lights, even if he'd never admit it: hair spiked with fresh snowmelt, hands jammed in the pockets of his best (only) flannel. Ashley, wearing a vest with so

many reflective stripes she could have landed a plane, paced at the front edge of the platform, psyching herself up.

Maya still couldn't believe the ducks. "You think there's a world record for this?"

Finn shrugged. "If there's not, you just set it."

Down below, the village square was packed so tight that people stood on planter boxes and the roofs of parked UTVs for a better view. Brandi and Randy ran crowd control, doling out loaves of duck-shaped bread to the kids who'd gotten bored of waiting. Jana Montana's Pilates troupe wore matching "Waddle and Roll" shirts and did synchrony stretches in the snow. At the corner of the crowd, the Zen Nest group passed a thermos of something blue from hand to hand, careful to keep their ducks upright. Even Azure, queen of the DC Pub & Grill, was there, working the edges like a retired prom queen, duck under one arm, flask under the other.

At 7:03 sharp, Mayor Allbright clambered up a set of snow-packed risers at stage right. He'd grown a beard for the winter and wore the village's one ceremonial parka: cream, with navy stripes and fur at the collar. He took the wireless mic, tapped it once (feedback squeal; collective groan), and beamed at the crowd.

"Friends, families, and fowl," he said, voice so loud it startled the ducks into a momentary chorus. "It's the fiftieth annual Fall Colors Fest, and I see more yellow out there than the sun on a Utah July."

Applause, then a volley of honks from the front row—likely staged, but it set off the mood.

The mayor gave his usual spiel about tradition, community, and "the deep, ducky roots that bind us all." Maya tried not to zone out, but found her attention wandering to the periphery of the square, where, for the first time, she noticed a small knot of people in matching black jackets.

Finn followed her gaze, and when she caught his eye, he just shook his head—later.

Mayor Allbright was winding up. "I'd like to invite the real stars of tonight's show," he said, "the people who put the 'quack' in our community and the power in our parade: Maya Patel and Finn Shaw, with our own Ashley Contreras, the First Lady of Ducks herself!"

Ashley made the crowd laugh with an exaggerated curtsy, then jogged to center stage. She grabbed the mic and did her best not to tremble. "Thanks, Mayor. And thanks to everyone for showing up, even though it's cold enough to freeze the snot in your nose." A few honest laughs. "We're almost ready for the ceremony, but first—science break!"

Maya felt her knees go a little wobbly as Ashley turned and handed her the mic.

She wasn't afraid of crowds, not really. But the weight of the moment, of being the person who was supposed to say why all this mattered, hit her with the force of a snowball to the chest. She looked at Finn—he winked, barely—and then at Dale, who stood off-stage in his best sweater, hands clasped behind his back, eyes soft with the kind of pride that didn't need words.

She took a breath and launched in. "So, you all know about the Neptune, right? The artifact. The 'ancient duck of destiny.'" A few shouts of "Woo!" from the teens in back. "Well, turns out it's not just tradition or a joke for social media. It's a sensor. A kind of feedback loop for the lake, the snowpack, and the mountain itself."

A hush fell, the kind that happens when an entire community leans forward at once.

"My friends and I spent the last few weeks tracking what happened when the ducks didn't run. The water cycles got weird, the snowpack didn't build, and the lake almost shut down. But when we fixed the Neptune—" she nodded at Finn, who gave a two-fingered salute "—everything came back, just like it should."

She held up the hydrologist's journal, the one they'd found in the clock tower, its pages now laminated and bound for show-and-tell. "This book proves it. The mountain listens. The water responds. And when the ducks race, and when the whole town gets together and does something silly—well, it makes the cycles line up again. That's not superstition. That's science. And also, a little bit, it's magic."

The last line landed. Maya felt the wave of approval, saw the nods, the kids repeating "magic!" to each other, the old-timers who'd secretly known it all along.

She finished, "So when Ashley tells you to squeeze your duck,

remember—you're not just making noise. You're tuning the whole valley."

A long, rolling round of applause—enough to make the ducks vibrate on their own. Maya handed the mic back to Ashley, who wiped away a tear before the crowd could see.

Ashley raised both arms. "Okay! Here's how it works. When I say go, everybody—no matter your age or size or how many slices of pizza you've had—give your duck a good, solid squeak. And keep squeaking until you can't hear yourself think. We'll know it worked when...well, you'll know."

She grinned, and the crowd grinned back.

That's when the real storm hit—not from the sky, but from the edge of the square, where a voice cut through the cold like a saw through pine.

"Are you people serious?" It was a baritone, not quite a shout but pitched for maximum projection. "You think a bunch of rubber toys are going to change the weather?"

Heads swiveled. At the corner, flanked by two security guys and a woman in a suit, stood Sterling "Storm" Vance.

He was out of jail—on bail, probably—but looked none the worse for wear. In fact, if anything, he looked even more composed than the last time Maya had seen him: black overcoat, dark turtleneck, hair slicked back to perfection. He wasn't hiding, and he wasn't subtle about making his presence known.

The crowd shifted, uncertainty rippling through it. A few people tried to shush him, but Vance just laughed, loud enough for everyone to hear.

"I'm sorry to crash your party," he said, hands out in mock apology. "But it seems a shame to let so many fine people get conned by pseudo-science. The only thing you're tuning is your bank account—to spend on tourist trap souvenirs."

He punctuated it by pointing at the nearest booth, which just happened to be selling "Duck the System" t-shirts. The vendor gave a little wave, not sure whether to be embarrassed or honored.

Mayor Allbright cleared his throat, but before he could intervene, Vance's security duo started working the crowd, making little snide

asides: "You know this is just for show, right?" and "They pay actors for these stunts in California." The effect was immediate—kids started looking at their parents, adults exchanged uneasy glances.

Vance's handler (the suit) pulled out her phone and started filming, narrating in a professional news anchor tone: "Here at Duck Creek Village, local residents are about to enact a primitive snow summoning ritual..."

Ashley, for her part, just shrugged and faced the crowd again. "Ignore the haters. They can't take a joke, or a duck."

Maya tried to meet Vance's eye, but he never quite looked at her. Instead, he focused on Finn, who stared back with a flat, unblinking glare that said: I dare you.

Dale, off to the side, caught Maya's attention. He shook his head—not angry, just sad. "Every story needs a villain," he mouthed.

Ashley didn't wait. "On my count! One—two—three!"

A thousand ducks screamed.

The noise was instant and overwhelming. It started as chaos—a wall of mismatched squeaks—but quickly sorted itself into a rhythm, a pulsing wave of sound that rolled up and down Movie Ranch Road, bounced off the log walls of the old bakery and ricocheted off the frozen lake. Maya had never heard anything like it, and for a second, she felt her own chest vibrate in sympathy.

Vance's voice was lost in the din. Even his security team looked rattled, as if the noise had reached the part of their brains that didn't respond to money.

Ashley kept time, windmilling her arms as if conducting a symphony. People got into it—some holding ducks overhead, some pogoing in place, others letting loose the kind of primal honks you'd only dare in a group this big.

Maya joined in, pumping her duck in the air like a victory sign.

And for a moment, under the lights, with the sound rising, it didn't matter that Vance or anyone else thought it was silly.

It mattered that they were all in it together.

As the last squeaks faded into the cold, a hush fell again. Ashley handed the mic to Maya, who gave the closing line without even thinking:

"Now, we wait."

The crowd broke into nervous laughter, but nobody left.

Maya looked at Finn, who just grinned and squeezed her hand.

Vance and his crew, meanwhile, retreated to the edge of the square, their bravado leaking out in a slow drip as the crowd began to celebrate, regardless.

The lights glimmered in the snow, the ducks looked up in silent anticipation, and the mountain itself seemed to settle in, waiting for the answer.

For a moment, nothing happened.

The last echoes of the duck chorus faded into the cold, and the square went pin-drop silent—every face turned toward the stage, every kid holding their breath, every adult standing half-smiling, half-embarrassed, as if waiting for a punchline they'd already heard.

On the edge of the crowd, Vance let out a loud, rolling laugh, then cupped his hands around his mouth. "Guess the mountain's on vacation this year!" The security guy nearest him snickered, and the suit got her phone up to eye level, panning for maximum coverage of failure.

Some people started to shuffle their feet. A dad in a Seahawks beanie muttered, "Let's go get cocoa," but his daughter yanked at his sleeve and hissed, "Wait, it's not done."

Dale didn't say a word. He stood in the shadow of the stage with his eyes closed, face lifted toward the ridgeline. It almost looked like he was praying, except Maya had never seen him at a church, only in the old post office sorting mail and fixing broken things with impossible patience.

The rest of the square stood there, not quite sure if they should laugh along or slip away before anyone noticed.

Then, somewhere on the far side of the lake, a sound cut through the night.

It was too low for a whistle, too regular for thunder. Finn, whose ears picked up every shift in the wind, was the first to notice. "Hear that?" he said, just for Maya, but she did—the rumble, deep and slow, like the memory of a river under ice.

People turned, following the sound, looking to the west where the hills folded back and the lights from the lodge flickered in the dark.

The rumble grew, then stopped. The silence was bigger this time—more like a held breath, or the quiet right before the first drop on a roller coaster.

Ashley, who'd stayed at the front of the stage, shivered. "Is it supposed to feel colder all of a sudden?"

Maya exhaled, and for the first time all season, her breath left a perfect white cloud. She looked at her hands—cold, but not numb—then up at Finn, who was already grinning, teeth white as the moon overhead.

A kid shrieked, "It's snowing!"

All at once, the air filled with flakes—at first a few, then a curtain, soft as feathers but unmistakable. The wind wasn't strong, but it carried the snow sideways, whirling it around the festival lights so each beam split into a million bright dots. For a few seconds, it was chaos: people scrambling to catch snowflakes on their tongues, hats pulled low, hands raised to the sky.

Someone shouted, "You did it!" and a dozen others joined in, until the whole crowd was yelling, "It's working! The ducks worked!"

Dale opened his eyes, looked at Maya, and smiled. It wasn't a big smile, but it was all the more powerful for being so rare.

On the edge of the square, Vance stared at the falling snow, lips parted. He blinked, shook his head, then jabbed a finger at the sky, as if trying to conjure up a reason. He shouted something to his security team, but they just huddled in their coats, snow dotting their eyebrows.

The suit kept filming, but her narration faltered. "Unexpected... um...abrupt change in weather patterns," she mumbled, before giving up and lowering the phone.

On the stage, Maya watched as the first inch of snow stuck to the wood. She touched Finn's hand, just to feel the realness of it. Ashley, near tears, hugged the mayor so hard he almost dropped the mic.

Someone began to sing—quiet at first, then louder as others joined in. It wasn't a carol, or anything planned; just a drifting, wordless tune that rose and fell with the wind.

The kids in the front row raised their ducks in the air and squeaked them again, this time in joy. The sound was less organized, but it didn't matter.

It was celebration.

The crowd that had started to drift away was now rooted in place, faces turned up, arms open to the snow. For all the world, it looked like a congregation at prayer—only instead of hymns, they had squeaks and laughter, and instead of incense, there was the smell of fresh snow and woodsmoke.

Vance watched, baffled, as his stage vanished. For all his plans, all his confidence, he had nothing to say.

But the mountain did.

It sent the snow harder, thicker, and the air grew so cold so fast that every exhale was a ribbon of white. The lake reflected the lights, doubling the festival in the dark. The old stories, the new science, the hope and the magic and the plain weirdness of it all—somehow, it worked.

Maya hugged Finn, and he hugged her back, not caring who saw.

And in that moment, the ducks didn't just win.

They owned the night.

The snow didn't just fall; it thickened, whirled, filled the space between people until even the brightest string lights blurred and every breath left a ghost. Maya watched the crowd from the side of the stage, hands wrapped around Finn's, and let the noise wash over her: the whoop of kids snowballing before their parents could say no, the clatter of boots on wooden benches, the unfiltered laughter of people who'd stopped pretending the night could go any other way.

In the square, the ducks—hundreds of them, maybe more—became snowdrifts, their yellow backs slowly frosting white as the storm found its rhythm. Adults, newly released from the tyranny of decorum, joined the kids in tossing ducks like snow grenades, then scrambled to reclaim them from beneath the growing piles.

Ashley basked in the moment, standing at the front of the stage with arms outstretched as if she'd summoned the blizzard herself. The reflection tape on her vest glowed blue and gold, and every time she

called out "Quack attack!" the younger kids mobbed her, squeaking in answer.

Maya leaned against Finn's side and let herself shiver. It was cold, sure, but not sharp, not dangerous. It was the kind of cold that said, I remember you, and you'll remember me. The hydrologist's journal was zipped into her coat, and she kept patting it like it might wriggle away, but the weight felt right. The ducks had worked, and so had she, and for once the line between magic and science seemed not just thin, but beautiful.

"Worth it?" Finn asked, tilting his head so she could hear him over the crowd.

She squeezed his hand. "Even the parts that sucked."

He smirked. "I'm counting on that for next year."

A little way off, the crowd shifted as a new parade made its way through: Sheriff Adams in full dress uniform, two federal agents at his flanks. Adams had the slow, deliberate walk of someone who'd rather be anywhere else, but also the sense of mission that made him impossible to ignore.

They cut through the crush of bodies, straight toward Vance, who was now huddled at the edge of the square under an overhang, still flanked by his private security. The man looked different now—more like a statue than a mogul, his overcoat powdered with snow, face set to "neutral" but eyes darting everywhere.

The sheriff didn't bother with subtlety. He held out a folded packet —Maya guessed it was the size of a restaurant menu but way less appetizing—and read aloud:

"Sterling Vance. You are hereby served with federal charges of: one, unauthorized manipulation of a protected watershed; two, fraudulent tampering with state environmental records; and three, conspiracy to disrupt critical infrastructure in a declared hazard zone."

Every word rang out, amplified by a pause in the crowd, then repeated as a ripple of whispers and delighted gasps.

One of the federal agents took the menu-sized envelope and pressed it into Vance's hand. "You'll want a good lawyer," she said, not unkindly. "But not tonight."

Vance's reply was lost in the howl of wind and the eruption of

cheers that followed. The security guys melted away into the snow, and the suit looked down at her phone, shrugged, and started filming the crowd instead.

The justice wasn't the only thing that made people cheer. They cheered the snow, and the memory of the ducks, and the sense that sometimes the world bent, just for a second, to honor something as goofy and hopeful as a town tradition.

On the far side of the square, Dale had climbed to the top of a picnic table, his battered duck in hand, and stood still, watching the swirl. He spotted Maya and Finn, raised his duck in salute, then hopped down and threaded through the crowd.

When he reached them, he didn't say much. Just nodded, then pointed his chin to the sky, where the snow came down in ribbons, each flake catching the light from a hundred sources.

He said, "The mountain remembers. The water speaks. And now, the snow answers."

It was corny, but Maya loved it anyway. She wanted to say something, but Finn beat her to it: "You're going to make poets out of all of us, Dale."

Dale shrugged. "Someone has to keep the record straight."

They stood for a while, letting the cold bite and the sounds of the celebration filter through. All around, people sang, yelled, squeaked ducks, stomped their boots, and made snow angels in the deepest drifts. The square was more crowded than Maya had ever seen, but it didn't feel cramped; it felt infinite, like every person there was exactly where they belonged.

Maya took a deep breath. The air was heavy with woodsmoke, the ozone tang of fresh snow, and the wild yeast of bread from the bakery. She let it fill her, down to the soles of her boots.

At the edge of the square, Vance was gone, vanished into the night, leaving only the impression of a black overcoat and a pair of disappointed ducklings who'd lost their snowball target.

The lights kept shining. The ducks, covered but undefeated, squeaked with every new layer of snow.

And in the center of it all, Maya smiled, certain for the first time

that there would always be enough winter—for her, for Finn, for everyone who believed in ducks, and mountains, and each other.

twenty
snowfall solutions

MAYA ALWAYS WOKE before her alarm, but this morning her body ran even earlier, as if some external clock had thrown the covers off and prodded her up by the shoulder. At first she thought she'd been dreaming of glaciers—her toes and the tip of her nose tingled with cold—but the ache in her calves, the constellation of half-healed bruises along her ribs, and the sharp, living scent of winter in the air all said otherwise.

For a moment she lay perfectly still, waiting for the world to catch up to her. She could hear the wind: not the chittering, desperate autumn wind of yesterday, but the heavy, muted kind that only came when it had something to say. Beneath it, she heard the creak of roof timbers and the faint percolation of the Falcon's Nest's ancient baseboard heat. Nothing else. Not even the faint ping of a car passing on Movie Ranch.

The room was blue with early light. Maya sat up, shrugged into the wool blanket, and shuffled to the window. Even before she pulled the curtain, she saw what had happened—on the inside of the glass, thick hoarfrost curled in fern-like spirals, the kind you only got when the temperature dropped ten degrees overnight. She pressed her palm to the glass, melting a patch the size of an orange, and peered through.

Duck Creek Village was unrecognizable.

Everything—the banister rails, the battered signs, the racks of ATVs,

the curb outside Hot Mama's—was buried under a perfect, pillowed coat of snow. Six inches, at least, with the rooftop crowns and the north faces of every car sporting double that. The effect was absurd, like a model railroad display after a bag of flour had exploded, or one of those cartoon snowfalls that always ended with a Christmas miracle.

Maya's brain, still booting up, did the math. The forecast had predicted a dusting; the records said no significant snow had come before October 20th in thirteen years. She'd never seen Duck Creek with this much snow before Thanksgiving.

She pressed her nose closer. Already, the early risers were out: a guy in a fleece onesie shoveling a perfect trail to the coffee kiosk; a pair of kids in pajamas, tossing clumps of snow at each other; Brandi from the bakery, trudging in on foot with a sack slung over one shoulder, leaving distinct bread-shaped tracks behind her.

On the far end of the square, the doors of Hot Mama's glowed with the promise of yeast and caffeine. But what caught her attention was the news van, already parked on the curb and trailing a tangle of cables toward the entrance.

Maya let out a slow breath and felt the inside of the window instantly fog up. She stepped back, startled by the glimpse of her own reflection—a wild mess of hair, one eye half-closed, the print of a blanket's hem pressed into her cheek. The faint, pulsing blue of the vein at her temple made her look, for a second, like a character in a comic strip.

She pulled on yesterday's thermals, a sweater that smelled of woodsmoke, and her ancient winter boots. By the time she bundled up and made it to the Falcon's Nest lobby, she was already overheating, but the anticipation in her blood ran colder and deeper than any windchill.

On the way out, she caught a whiff of percolating coffee from the staff break room. The receptionist—the only one of the resort staff whose name Maya could never remember—held out a paper cup, wordless, and Maya accepted it with numb gratitude. She took a sip, flinched at the heat, and smiled back.

The village was alive.

She squinted into the blast of reflected light and made her way down the front steps, which had been half-cleared by an enterprising teenager. The snow was soft, with a dry, squeaky top layer and just

enough crust to keep her boots from punching straight to the concrete. Each breath stung her nose and throat, but the sensation was more invigorating than painful.

As she moved through the square, the sounds of a typical morning—engine noise, the scrape of shovels, the too-loud laughter of overcaffeinated adults—were amplified by the fresh snow. It caught every footfall and conversation and bounced it back in stereo. The sky, meanwhile, had gone the perfect shade of hollow blue, so deep and clear it looked fake.

Near the entrance of Hot Mama's, three people in puffy jackets huddled around a tripod. A news anchor—hair shellacked against the wind, lipstick perfect despite the cold—talked directly into a foam-covered microphone, nodding her head as if someone had paid her by the gesture.

Maya hesitated, then slid into the shadow of the bakery awning, just out of frame. She watched as the camera panned to the front doors, where a cluster of kids and parents queued up, most of them holding the famous rubber ducks from last night's ceremony.

Ashley stood at the center of it all, a human exclamation point in a high-vis jacket and a pair of duck-print earmuffs. She was talking to the news crew, at first haltingly—shoulders hunched, lips twisted in self-doubt—but with each question she seemed to expand, buoyed by the weird pride of having survived not just the last 48 hours, but her own worst-case scenario.

"—so you're saying the tradition actually worked?" the anchor asked, raising her eyebrows with the kind of skepticism that said she had never been more than ten miles from Salt Lake City.

Ashley laughed, the sound bright and sharp as a glass of orange soda. "I'm saying it never stopped working. The ducks are just how we remember to listen to the mountain. And sometimes, I guess, the mountain listens back."

The camera crew chuckled, and the anchor tried to hide her own grin. "And you personally prepared every one of these ducks?"

Ashley held up a basket as proof. "With the help of half the village, a 3D printer, and a lot of superglue."

A kid—one of the same from outside earlier—ran up to Ashley and

presented her with a snowball, which she accepted with ceremonial gravity before lobbing it gently at the anchor's shoes. The crowd roared.

Maya watched the whole thing with an odd, heart-sore happiness. She hadn't realized how much Ashley had changed, or maybe just how she had changed in Maya's eyes. A week ago, this was the same person who'd nearly lost it when the ducks went missing, who'd gone pale with panic at the idea of screwing up. Now she was the face of the festival, the story everyone wanted to tell.

Maya realized she was grinning. She tried to suppress it, failed, and went inside.

Hot Mama's was as packed as a subway car at rush hour, but louder and warmer. People had jammed themselves into every seat, nook, and spare inch of wall. The air was thick with the aroma of cinnamon rolls, hot tomato sauce, and a hint of ozone from the wet snow melting off coats and boots.

Brandi manned the counter, moving with the poise of a short-order surgeon. She had two assistants today—Randy, who handled the bread and the coffee with equal devotion, and the teenager Maya had seen on shoveling duty. Behind the bar, a row of duck-shaped pastries glittered with sugar, each one decorated with a tiny fondant beak.

"Hey, you made it!" Brandi called, waving a flour-dusted hand. "Congrats on the weather."

Maya accepted the greeting with a shrug. "All I did was squeeze a duck and hope for the best."

"Sometimes that's all any of us can do," Brandi replied, then nodded to the display. "Try a Neptune. Made 'em special for today."

The Neptune pastries were impossibly blue—blue icing, blue sugar crystals, even a faint blue tint to the dough. Maya hesitated, then picked the smallest one and took a careful bite. It tasted like honey and something floral, almost like the scent of the air on the ridge after a thunderstorm.

"Rolane's idea," Brandi said, as if reading her mind. "They said if the ducks could change the weather, maybe we could make the pastries taste like it."

Maya chewed, then let herself laugh. "It's actually really good."

Brandi grinned, then went back to work.

Maya found a spot near the window, where she could see the snow and the crowd outside. She watched as the news anchor wrapped up her segment, then stuck around to talk with Ashley, who was now surrounded by a flotilla of children in duck hats.

She looked out over the square, at the small, odd village that had once seemed so provisional, so disposable, and now looked like the center of something irreplaceable. Beyond the news van, the slope of the hill was alive with makeshift sleds and people just...being together.

She finished her pastry and wiped her hands on a napkin, watching as Finn appeared at the edge of the square, hair still damp from his morning hike. He caught her eye, raised a gloved hand, and started toward the bakery.

On impulse, Maya snagged two more of the blue pastries and headed for the door, the rest of the world receding behind her like the memory of a really good dream.

The cold met her like a challenge, but this time she was ready. She made her way toward Finn, heart buoyed by the sight of his lopsided smile, and together they watched the crowd, the snow, and the ever-growing pyramid of ducks in front of the bakery.

"Did you see the news?" Maya asked, handing him a Neptune.

Finn bit into it, made a face of deep concentration, then nodded approval. "I saw the news. But I like this version better."

They stood together, backs to the wind, as the village went about its impossible, wonderful morning.

"I still don't get how it worked," Maya admitted, eyes on the ridge.

Finn didn't answer right away. He just squeezed her hand, and for once, that was enough.

Ground + Toasted was the kind of place where you could come in with your boots caked in mud or snow and no one would even blink. When Maya and Finn ducked inside, they were greeted by a shockwave of heat and a smell that could have been classified as a controlled substance: cinnamon, yeast, a hint of dark chocolate, and something resinous—juniper or pine, maybe—that was new since yesterday.

The bakery was packed wall to wall with the thawing population of Duck Creek. All the usual suspects were present: Jana Montana's fitness crew, clad in leggings and neon puffers, wolfing down bear claws with the competitive focus of a powerlifting meet; the Zen Nest's meditation group, huddled over steaming mugs in a corner like a flock of slightly anxious crows; and, at the table nearest the window, three generations of the Olsen family, engaged in a silent, tense standoff over a chess game played with sugar cubes and espresso beans.

Brandi was in her element behind the counter, orchestrating a ballet of flour, sugar, and raw charisma. She looked up, caught Maya's eye, and signaled with a two-fingered salute to hang tight. Then she slid a tray into the oven and pivoted to shout instructions to Randy, who was expertly slicing a still-steaming loaf into perfectly uniform wedges.

Maya and Finn found an open table beneath a wall of mismatched paintings: watercolor aspens in full riot, a mosaic duck (of course), and a portrait of what looked like the village's original founder, rendered with a loaf of sourdough in place of his face. The chairs didn't match, and the tablecloth had clearly survived at least one food fight, but it felt like the safest, most familiar place on earth.

As soon as they sat, a barista in a handmade beanie hustled over and filled their cups with the house blend. She said nothing, but her smile lingered long enough to warm the back of Maya's neck.

"I think the whole mountain's here," Maya said, watching the swirl of bodies and snow-shedded jackets.

Finn looked around, grinning. "That's how you know it's real. Brandi doesn't even bother opening if there's less than ten people in line."

As if on cue, Brandi herself emerged from the kitchen, wielding a wooden tray shaped exactly like a duck in mid-waddle. On it were three pastries—each one different, but unmistakably the work of someone with a mild obsession for theme.

"These are Neptunes," Brandi announced, setting the tray in front of Maya and Finn. "Special for today. Blue icing, cardamom, a hint of spruce, and actual snowflake sugar on top." She leaned in conspiratorially. "You can't taste the science, but you can feel it."

Maya took a closer look: the icing was a bright, almost luminescent

blue, feathered into delicate snowflake shapes across the pastry. Tiny silver dragées caught the light, making each Neptune look like it was dusted with morning frost.

Finn reached for the biggest one, broke it neatly in half, and offered Maya the side with extra icing. She took it, feeling the warmth radiate through her gloves, and waited as Finn closed his eyes for a moment, savoring the scent.

Brandi hovered for a second, then said, "If you want the real news, check the back page of the Canyon Weekly." She nodded at a stack of local papers by the coffee station. "They put the duck race and the snowfall on page one, but the best stuff is in the letters section." She winked at Maya. "Somebody called it the 'Miracle of Movie Ranch Road.' I'd have gone with 'Quackerjack' myself, but nobody asked."

She swept away before they could answer, already locking eyes with the next table.

Maya tore off a bite of the Neptune, startled by how the sweet and the herbal actually worked together. She licked a bit of blue from her lip, then set the rest on her napkin, not wanting to demolish it in three bites.

"It really is good," she said, surprised.

Finn popped his half into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. "You can almost taste the storm."

They sipped coffee and watched the bakery swirl around them, the windows slowly frosting up from the inside. After a while, Finn said, "So. Did you figure it out yet?"

Maya smiled, a little shy. "If you mean the snow, or the ducks, or how the town keeps working even when every rule says it shouldn't, then no. I can't even decide if I should be impressed or terrified."

Finn's eyes lit with the blue of the pastry, or maybe the blue of the mountain outside. "Rolane called this morning. Said the sensors at Navajo Lake are reading normal again. The system's working like it's supposed to. The water's draining, the falls are running, and—" he held up his coffee mug, as if toasting "—the sky remembered how to snow."

"Just like that?" Maya said, unable to hide the note of skepticism.

He shrugged. "Sometimes science just hasn't caught up to what people already know. Or what the ducks know." He grinned, a little

bashful. “Doesn’t mean you stop looking. Just...sometimes you have to accept a data point that doesn’t fit the model.”

Maya traced a line through the icing with her finger, then licked it clean. “I was raised on the idea that the model was everything. If the data didn’t fit, you checked the data.” She looked out the window, at the drifted snow piling up on the bench outside. “I don’t even want to admit how much last night freaked me out.”

Finn nodded, understanding. “I nearly bailed before the race. Thought I could just let the story happen and then head south, back to somewhere with four bars of reception.”

“You ever regret coming here?” she asked, the words surprising her as much as him.

He considered, then shook his head. “Every place else felt like background noise. Here—” he gestured at the bakery, the snow, the windowed glow of the village “—I’m not just watching. I’m in the middle of it.”

Maya smiled, then pressed her thumb into the soft center of her Neptune and watched the blue icing ooze up like a spring. “My mom used to say that if you stayed in one place too long, you’d put down roots and get stuck.”

“And your dad?” Finn asked, gently.

“Dad thought everywhere was temporary,” Maya replied. “He was obsessed with rivers. Always said the best thing you could do was keep moving, like water.”

Finn smiled. “Maybe you’re both right.”

They sat in easy quiet for a while. Outside, the sun had risen higher, and the village was now a maze of glittering tracks and snowmen in various stages of collapse. The news van was gone, replaced by a pickup stacked with bales of straw, and already a crew was setting up for the afternoon’s round of sledding and snowball fights.

Brandi swung by with a refill and a plate of tiny, duck-shaped cookies. “On the house,” she said, “for the heroes of the day.”

Maya blushed, but accepted the plate. Finn immediately took one, bit off the head, and made a show of savoring it.

They finished their pastries, the coffee, and the cookies, letting the comfort of the place settle into their bones.

Maya stared at the last crumb of Neptune, unable to say why she was suddenly sad to finish it.

Finn caught her mood and offered, "You ready for what's next?"

She nodded. "I think so. Or at least, I think I want to be."

Finn smiled, and together they put on their coats, braced for the cold, and stepped back into the world.

As they left the bakery, Maya glanced over her shoulder. Brandi caught her eye, raised her mug, and gave the smallest, most satisfied nod.

The village would always be weird, and the mountain would always keep its secrets.

But for now, the world was exactly as it should be.

Dale had a way of entering a room that made you notice the change in air pressure. It wasn't just his size—though he had the kind of bulk that made chairs wince in advance—it was the way he carried his attention: slow, deliberate, as if he knew most of the world's secrets and wasn't about to let them slip.

He found Maya and Finn at the table by the window, the remnants of Neptune pastries between them, and slid into the open seat with a sigh that seemed to release the last year of his life. In his hands was a battered, brick-thick journal, its spine mummified with black electrical tape. Maya watched as Dale set it on the table with careful reverence, thumb running absentmindedly over the creased leather.

"You're up early," Finn said.

Dale's face cracked into a slow, rueful grin. "Couldn't sleep. The snow kept talking."

He slid the journal forward, opening to a page mid-way through. The handwriting—tight, precise, and somehow urgent—filled the page from edge to edge, interspersed with blocky diagrams of the lake basin, the mountain, and a latticework of tunnels Maya guessed were the infamous sinkholes and water veins under the village.

"My grandfather mapped the whole system," Dale said. "Even before they finished the reservoir. He always said the mountain was more complicated than anyone gave it credit for."

He flipped to another page, where a fold-out map had been glued in. On it, red pencil circled not just Navajo Lake but three other spots: a spot on the ridge above Duck Creek, a clearing labeled "Old Pumphouse," and, in the center of the page, the very bakery where they now sat.

"He knew about the pressure points?" Maya asked, unable to keep the wonder out of her voice.

Dale nodded, lips twitching with pride. "He knew everything. But nobody wanted to listen after the Drowned Village went under. They thought he was just a crank with a notebook and a grudge."

Finn traced the edge of the map with his finger. "So these are the weak spots? Or the strong ones?"

"Both," Dale said. "When the system's working, they keep each other in balance. But if something gets blocked—or forced, like Vance tried—the pressure has to go somewhere else." He closed the journal, holding it with both hands for a moment. "I think we should check the old pumphouse after things settle. Grandpa left some notes I never understood until now."

Brandi appeared at their table, balancing a trio of steaming mugs on her forearm. She set them down and slid a cinnamon roll onto a napkin for Dale. "You look like a man who hasn't eaten today."

Dale grinned and tore off a piece, nodding his thanks.

Brandi lingered, eyes flicking to the journal. "That the famous Granby log?"

Dale lifted it, turning it so she could see. "It's older than half the town, and probably worth more than the land under it."

Brandi tapped the cover. "You keep that safe. If you lose it, Randy will make you go out back and dig for another one."

She moved away, but not before turning the volume up on the bakery's TV, which hung crookedly above the pastry case. The screen showed the familiar steps of the Kane County offices, now blanketed in white. Sheriff Adams stood behind a forest of microphones, his dress uniform so crisp it almost looked starched onto his body.

The bakery quieted as everyone turned to watch. Even the kids from the chess table paused, sugar cubes halfway to their mouths.

Adams looked more uncomfortable than Maya had ever seen him, shifting from foot to foot with his hat clutched in both hands.

He cleared his throat, then spoke: "Citizens of Duck Creek, Kane County, and anyone else listening—I want to say, first and foremost, that I'm sorry."

A ripple ran through the bakery, a few coughs and a lot of held breaths.

"I lost sight of what I was supposed to protect," Adams continued. "I believed the paperwork and the promises, and I let outsiders do what they wanted to the land and water that belonged to you. I was wrong."

Dale watched the screen without blinking, his fingers splayed across the journal.

Adams looked down, then back up, voice cracking: "I'm resigning, effective immediately. I've recommended that the Council appoint Ashley Contreras as interim sheriff. She's got more sense and more guts than I ever did, and she actually knows how to listen."

The camera cut to Ashley, standing off to the side in her usual puffer, her face red with shock and—maybe—something close to pride.

Brandi clapped first, a single sharp sound, and then everyone else in the bakery followed. Even the kids cheered, the chess game forgotten.

Adams finished: "You deserve better. I know you'll find it. Thank you."

The TV went silent, then played a loop of the snowstorm over the valley. The bakery erupted in chatter, speculation, and a low, humming joy.

Finn grinned at Maya. "Looks like you're not the only one rethinking tradition."

Dale wiped his fingers and tucked the journal back into its canvas sleeve. "Ashley'll be good for the village. She knows how to herd cats—and adults are just taller, meaner cats."

They all laughed. Even Maya, whose default was skepticism, found herself nodding along with a strange, deep happiness.

Dale got up, dusted off his hands, and offered the journal to Maya. "You want to take a look? If you see anything I missed, let me know."

She took it, feeling the weight and the history.

They moved to the door together, the warmth of the bakery replaced by the electric cold of the snow outside. The air was bright, the sky clearing, and people filled the square with the energy of a new beginning.

Dale clapped Finn on the back. "Meet you at the pumphouse tomorrow?"

Finn nodded. "First thing."

Maya glanced at the journal in her arms, then at the faces of her friends. For the first time, she understood the appeal of staying put, of building on what came before.

The mountain might be full of secrets, but for now, she had her own.

She smiled, then led the way out into the world, the blue-iced air buzzing with possibility.

By late afternoon, Hot Mama's was so full the front windows steamed over, rendering the outside world as a smudge of white and blue and the blurry shapes of snow-suited kids throwing snowballs on the street. Inside, the warmth was thicker than ever, the air a living soup of garlic, baking crust, and the tang of beer from the kegs behind the bar. Every table, stool, and countertop was jammed with a cross-section of Duck Creek life: ancient lodge regulars and freshly minted snowbirds, lifties still in their bibs, even a contingent of local teens who, for once, had put their phones away in favor of the debate at hand.

Ashley presided from the end of the bar, one foot on the footrail and a stack of index cards in front of her. She banged a spoon against a pitcher, and the chatter subsided just enough for her to be heard.

"Alright, folks, I know you're all here for the pizza and the drama, so let's keep this short and to the point. First order of business—how do we make sure nobody ever messes with the lake again?"

A chorus of "hear hears" and a couple of expletives rang out. The general consensus was: Duck Creek had survived too many close calls to leave things to chance or to out-of-towners with more money than sense.

Ashley nodded. "We've got three proposals on the table: a historical

society, a 'Friends of the Lake' club, and—" she winked at the crowd "—a Duck Creek Conservation Trust. Which, yes, would have a board, a legal fund, and, according to Rolane, 'merch out the wazoo.'" A ripple of laughter moved through the room.

Maya, pressed between Finn and Dale at a side table, watched as people argued with the kind of passion usually reserved for playoff games or the release of a new breakfast burrito. There were real ideas, too: Randy proposed a community snowpack-monitoring station; Jana Montana offered to teach environmental education as part of her Pilates warm-ups; the Olsens suggested a system for adopting and naming important geological features ("So nobody can ever rename Neptune's Cave for some rich guy's dog again," as Mrs. Olsen put it).

The walls of Hot Mama's were lined with historic photos, some new since yesterday—one caught Maya's eye, showing last night's duck ceremony under the blue lights, with a thousand upraised yellow beaks. Above the photo, someone had already Sharpied in "Year of the Miracle" and drawn a little snow cloud over the date.

Ashley pounded the spoon again. "Before we get too carried away, there's one issue we need to lock down: science. As in, who's going to keep the records and do the monitoring? We don't need another Vance making up numbers and selling us out."

There was a brief, uncomfortable silence. Then Azure, who'd been watching from her usual corner, called out, "We've got ourselves a real hydrologist right here. Maya's already done more for the lake than anyone else." She raised her beer in a mock toast. "Let her run the science."

At first Maya thought Azure was just being friendly, but the idea caught: heads turned, voices rose in agreement, and suddenly there was a slow, building chant: "Patel! Patel! Patel!" It was good-natured, but with enough energy to make Maya want to sink under the table.

Ashley gave her a wicked grin. "Maya? You up for being the Trust's official brain?"

She was about to deflect—she'd never even finished her degree, she barely had a grip on the math, and the idea of being in charge of anything made her stomach twist—but Finn's hand found hers under the table and squeezed once, steady.

"I—" Maya started, then felt herself smile. "I'd be honored. But only if Finn and Dale back me up."

Dale grunted, "You couldn't keep us out if you tried," and the crowd laughed again, this time with relief.

Ashley made a show of writing "SCIENCE = Maya" on her cards, then raised her hands. "All in favor of the Duck Creek Conservation Trust, say 'Quack.'"

A roar of "Quack!" bounced off the pizza pans and the snow-warped windows. It was unanimous.

With business settled, the party started for real. Brandi and Randy pushed out a parade of food: sourdough shaped like little ducks, cheese pizza, cinnamon knots, and trays of duck-shaped cookies. Every time a new platter came out, someone cheered, and Maya watched as Finn and Dale got into a low-key contest to see who could eat more Neptune pastries before Randy caught them and threatened to "weigh them down and chuck 'em in the lake."

In the middle of it, a burst of cold air whipped through the door. Ashley turned, expecting more hungry guests, but instead found a courier in a ski mask holding a padded envelope.

She opened it at the bar, and a wave of whispers shot through the room as she pulled out a brand-new sheriff's badge, gleaming in the fluorescent lights. The room went silent for a half-beat, then someone started clapping, and soon the whole place was on its feet, pounding the tables and shouting her name.

Ashley blushed so hard her ears matched her beanie, but she pinned the badge to her jacket with something close to reverence. "I'm not crying," she said, wiping her face with a napkin. "It's just the garlic."

As the noise settled, Maya's phone buzzed. She checked the screen and stepped outside for a moment, letting the cold clear her head.

The call was brief. A neutral voice, a message from the state water board: "We received word from Marcus Thorne's office. He's withdrawn all development applications for the region. The Drowned Village, Cascade Falls, and the entire Duck Creek watershed are off the table for future projects. They acknowledged your community's intent to protect and preserve."

Maya let the words hang in the air, then stepped back inside. She

climbed onto a chair, drew in a breath, and announced, "Thorne pulled out. They're leaving us alone."

At first, people didn't believe it. Then the news caught, and the joy that followed was so raw and perfect Maya almost wept. People hugged, cheered, and passed slices of pizza around like communion. Even the teens high-fived, and the old-timers in the back shed tears they blamed on allergies.

Ashley found Maya in the crowd, hugged her hard, and whispered, "See? Even miracles need a little paperwork."

Brandi brought a round of drinks for the science team, toasting, "To the water, the snow, and the people who never stop fighting for weirdness." Randy—never much for words—simply handed Maya a loaf of bread shaped like a brain and gave her a nod of supreme approval.

Maya looked around at the faces—some she'd only just learned, some she couldn't imagine not knowing—and felt the heavy, golden truth of belonging settle in her chest.

Outside, the snow fell thicker, sealing the world in the blue and white hush of real winter. The roads and trails filled up with people who, just last week, might have left for somewhere easier. But now, there was nowhere else in the world they'd rather be.

Inside Hot Mama's, the party went long into the night. Stories were traded, new plans hatched, and the memory of the miracle duck race retold a dozen ways before closing time.

And if, in the deepest part of the night, you listened close, you could hear the mountain answering back—not with words, but with the soft, relentless promise of snow, and the knowledge that, for at least one more season, Duck Creek Village would survive.

Maybe even thrive.

twenty-one
winter's embrace

MAYA STOOD at the reception desk of Falcon's Nest, clutching a fresh copy of her reservation slip, the thermal paper still curling at the corners. The lobby was a miracle of rustic overachievement: hand-hewn timbers crisscrossed the ceiling, and someone had arranged river stones into a fireplace that managed to be both imposing and inviting. The fire inside spat and crackled, casting a golden pulse over everything, including Maya's boots, which steamed faintly on the slate-tiled hearth. On the wall behind the reception, a three-foot trout—taxidermied, but with a glassy stare so lifelike it seemed to track every conversation—watched Maya sign her name for the second time that week.

The receptionist, a woman with hair the color of dry wheat and an uncanny ability to type while maintaining perfect eye contact, slid the form back with a practiced flick. "You're extending another two weeks?" she asked, half-surprised, half-approving. "We haven't had a researcher last this long since the snow telemetry people."

Maya nodded, feeling a little self-conscious under the trout's scrutiny. "I'm tracking hydrology patterns for my program," she explained. "Navajo Lake's got the weirdest recharge cycle in the Rockies. The data...well, it's never the same twice."

The woman's mouth twitched, almost a smile. "You folks and your water. Lucky for you, the snow's set in early. Place'll be dead quiet by next Monday, so you'll have the lake to yourself. Just watch for coyote

—some of them don't hibernate, and the last one broke into the utility closet looking for Pop-Tarts."

Maya grinned, grateful for the small talk. She pulled her gloves back on and tucked the reservation into her coat pocket, then ducked to the side, where a row of windows overlooked the snow-sunk parking lot. In the last three days, the world had gone from a palette of earth and stubborn, clinging autumn to pure blue-shadowed white. Even the steel roof of Hot Mama's, visible across the square, was lacquered in a foot of drift.

She set her backpack on a bench beside the fire and started inventorying: field notebook, pencils, backup batteries, Ziploc baggies for "interesting phenomena," and, from the bottom, a battered thermos she'd already re-filled twice that morning. The lodge had a rule about outside drinks, but nobody enforced it, not when the average guest was either a snowmobiler or a retiree with a confirmed thermos dependency.

She was snapping the clasp shut when Finn ghosted in from the vestibule, carrying two sets of snowshoes balanced on his shoulder like firewood. He wore the Prime Adventure Outfitters cap Maya had come to think of as surgically attached, its logo now partially hidden under a rime of blown-in snow. His jacket was less for fashion, more for function, and his boots bore the fresh, pristine crust of someone who'd just plowed through a field of undisturbed powder.

He nodded at Maya, efficient as ever. "Dale's waiting by the east trail. I packed the spare shoes, since last time you nearly turned an ankle."

"Thanks," Maya said, accepting a pair. She tried to hide her amusement at Finn's silent inventory of her gear, but his once-over was as inevitable as sunrise. He gave the pack a quick squeeze, making sure it was zipped, then nodded his approval.

"You ready?" he asked, not waiting for an answer before pivoting back toward the exit. "Storm cell's coming tonight, so Dale wants a head start."

Maya tucked her thermos under her arm and followed. The air outside caught her off-guard, even after a week of acclimatization. The cold had teeth, not the polite chill of city winters but a deep, biting clarity that filled her sinuses and made her eyes water in seconds.

The lot was mostly empty, save for a county snowplow and a battered Outback with "I Brake for Quack" stickered on the bumper. At the edge of the parking lot, near where the forest lapped against the resort property, Dale was hunched over a drift, his back to the wind and his gloves off. He ran two thick fingers across the snow's surface, then pressed his palm flat against it, as if reading braille. When he looked up, his cheeks were so red they matched the stripes on his flannel.

"Morning, Professor," Finn called.

Dale stood, dusting his hands. "It's textbook," he said, beaming at Maya. "You ever see crystals like this?" He motioned for her to come closer, then pointed at the tiny hexagonal stars radiating from the side of the drift. "Overnight hoarfrost, then riming from the upslope wind. The old-timers used to call it 'feather snow.' You can hear it in the trees when it falls."

Maya crouched, leaning in. The crystals were delicate, but so dense they formed a visible crust. She brushed her glove lightly over the surface, listening for the sound Dale promised, and heard it: a faint, papery rustle, like turning a page in a wet book.

"Never seen it like this," she admitted, then pulled her phone to snap a picture for her notes. "You could run a whole study on just the crystal formation."

Dale's eyebrows lifted. "Franklin Granby, my grandfather, had a theory. He thought the shape of the snow in a given year predicted the freeze-thaw in the sinkholes. If you get the right density, the whole mountain keeps its water until May." He gave a self-deprecating shrug, as if to dismiss it. "But he also believed in moon planting, so take it with a salt lick."

Finn, meanwhile, had slipped his own snowshoes on with an efficiency that made Maya's every move look clumsy. He leaned down to help buckle hers, hands quick and gentle, then stepped back.

"Flat ground to the lake, then we'll skirt the shoreline," he said. "Once the storm moves in, the drifts could get three feet. We'll want to be back before four."

Maya straightened, shouldering her pack. "If we make good time, I want to get water samples from the north cove. Last time, there was a weird mineral band near the surface, but I need a second reading."

Dale nodded, the teacherly pride never far from his face. “We’ll make it happen. But first, let’s do the observation point. The view’s worth it.”

Together, they set off across the powder, Finn leading with his mountain goat grace, Maya picking her steps with care, and Dale bringing up the rear, pausing every few yards to poke at animal tracks or point out how the sun turned the ice on the branches to liquid glass.

As they crossed the last rise before the lake, the sky opened in a gasp of blue, and Navajo Lake stretched out below them, a white plate edged with frost-blackened pines. From above, the Drowned Village was invisible—only a faint depression hinted at what lay beneath. The silence was enormous, but not empty; every gust of wind carried its own story, and every footstep was recorded in the fresh snow like a signature.

They paused, the three of them side by side, watching as the wind swept the lake’s surface in plumes. Dale raised his hand, as if to shield his eyes, but instead traced the line of the far shore.

“Franklin used to say this was the best place to listen to water,” he said, voice soft. “You can’t see it, but it’s always there. Under the ice, under the town, even in the air.”

Finn glanced at Maya, then back at the lake. “You think it’s true?” he asked.

Maya considered, then nodded. “It’s as true as anything else up here.”

Dale smiled, content. “Good. Now let’s go make our own data.”

With that, they headed down the slope, the snow squeaking and hissing beneath their feet, each step forward proof that, even in the coldest place, the story never stopped.

The forest between the lodge and Navajo Lake had a way of swallowing sound, but it didn’t muffle the crunch of Finn’s snowshoes or the little curses Maya muttered every time she snagged a toe on a hidden root. The trail started as a packed ribbon under the evergreens, but within a few yards, the old track vanished, filled overnight with wind-blown powder.

Finn moved through it with minimal effort. He'd picked a line that hugged the base of the trees where the snow was shallowest, and he placed his steps in a zig-zag that made sense only when you looked back and saw the slope above them. He didn't waste breath talking, but every once in a while he'd point at a feature—a cluster of broken twigs, a blue flicker of bird in the upper branches—or turn back to check that Maya and Dale were keeping up.

Maya was getting the hang of the shoes, but her calves burned, and every slip sent a handful of powder down her boot tops. Behind her, Dale kept a running commentary, his attention divided between the patterns on the snow and the sky above.

"See how the snow's denser on the north side of the trunks?" he said, not expecting an answer. "Wind direction, every time. It's like the trees are little weather vanes, if you know how to read them."

Maya had her hands full just staying upright, but she took a second to look: he was right, the snowpack was thicker in a little crescent on each tree's windward side. She filed it away, along with the sound of her own breath in the cold air.

The trail climbed a shallow rise, then plunged down a ravine choked with aspen. Here, Dale pointed at a lattice of animal prints, each cross-hatching the last in a story only he seemed to follow.

"Cottontail, and...see that?" He knelt, careful not to crush the print. "Fox. Light stepper. Always on the edges."

Finn looked back, pausing just long enough to say, "If you fall behind, the fox gets you." It was deadpan, but Maya caught the ghost of a smile.

Dale straightened, brushing the snow off his knees. "You hear that, Maya? Best keep up."

Maya rolled her eyes, but let the comment fuel her pace. The next hundred yards were easier, the trail flattening as the forest thinned. Ahead, the light changed: instead of filtering through green-black pine, it bounced off something open and enormous.

They broke through the last stand of saplings and found themselves at the lip of the frozen lake. The sky, which had been a dull gray all morning, now blazed pure blue, so bright it made Maya squint. The lake itself was a sheet of white, unbroken except for the line of old pier

posts that poked through the snow like a row of blackened teeth. On the far shore, the rim of the caldera caught the sun, and the shadows of distant trees stretched long and sharp over the surface.

Maya stopped to catch her breath, boots finally planted solid. She pulled her phone, snapped a quick panorama, then stowed it in favor of her field notebook.

Dale swept his arm out. "Under that ice, you've got seventy years of history. The Drowned Village is under the south end—old foundations, concrete stairs, even the metal rails from the dock. When the ice melts in spring, you can see the tops of them from a canoe."

Maya tried to picture it. "And the Neptune? It's at the base of the clock tower, right?"

Dale pointed to a low mound at the edge of the far bay. In summer, it would have been a weedy hillock, but now it was just a barely-visible ripple in the snow, the only break in an otherwise flat horizon.

"It's right where it belongs," Dale said. "And it's done its job for the year. The lake called for water, and the mountain answered." He knelt, grabbed a handful of snow, and squeezed it. "See how it compacts? Perfect for what comes next. When the melt hits, it'll all go through the old channels. Nothing wasted."

Finn had already left the trail's end and was stepping out onto the lake proper, testing the snow with each step. He took out a squat, orange device—Maya recognized it as a simple ice auger—and punched it through the snow. The readout glowed for a second, then he nodded.

"Solid," he said. "Fourteen inches of ice, easy."

Dale followed, making his way out without hesitation. Maya, not trusting herself, stepped lightly, but the surface held.

"Take a reading?" Finn asked, and handed her the auger.

Maya drilled, feeling the rhythm in her forearm. The snow was airy, but the ice underneath gave a sharp, satisfying pop. She withdrew the core sample, eyeballing the layers—clear, white, clear again, like the world's slowest parfait. She made a note in her book, then dropped a sensor probe into the hole.

Finn hovered behind her, waiting for the readout. "You want to calibrate it?" he asked.

She handed him the device. "You know I do."

He plugged in a second probe, took a baseline, and scrawled the numbers onto her notebook page. The two of them worked in companionable silence, each logging readings, then shifting position and repeating the process a few meters away.

Dale stood a little apart, scanning the shoreline. "You ever see a winter this fast?" he asked, more to himself than anyone.

"Records go back a hundred and forty years," Maya answered, quoting from memory. "This is top three for earliest full coverage."

Dale grunted. "Granby would have loved this. He always said it wasn't about the snow, it was about the story the water told."

Maya jotted down another set of readings, then paused. "Dale? Can you walk me through how the freeze and melt work here, compared to Cascade or Panguitch? I know it's elevation, but you make it sound like it's alive."

Dale rubbed his beard, considering. "It's the network," he said, tracing a line in the snow with his boot. "See, the lake's just the big bowl, but all these little seeps and caves and lava tubes—they're the veins. You get a deep cold snap, the snow locks in, and the mountain holds its breath. When the sun comes back, it doesn't just melt off; it drains, fills the caves, pushes through to the old sinkholes. Sometimes, if it's a wet year, the lower meadow turns into a second lake. That's what drowned the village in the first place—they never believed the water would come back like that."

Maya thought about the duck festival, the Neptune, the way the whole community seemed to orient itself around when the lake was high or low.

Finn, finished with his sampling, capped the auger and slung it back over his shoulder. "Ready for the cove?" he asked.

Maya nodded, flipping her notebook shut. "Lead the way."

They made their way along the lake's edge, snowshoes leaving overlapping tracks in the soft crust. The sun had climbed higher, and the surface was starting to throw back sparks of light, the kind that left ghost images even when you blinked. Dale kept talking as they walked, sharing stories of years when the lake never froze, or the time a windstorm blew all the snow off the ice and left it bare and blue for a week.

Maya listened, recording what she could, but mostly just enjoying

the sensation of moving forward, the cold biting but never cruel, the three of them moving in sync. At the cove, she took more readings, then let Dale point out the places where, in spring, the ducks would get trapped or ride the current into the caves.

When they finished, Maya stood for a long minute, just looking back across the white silence of the lake. The sky had gone from blue to that flat, crystalline white that meant snow was coming, but for now the world was perfectly still.

Finn tapped her shoulder, then motioned back toward the trail. "Lunch break," he said, and Maya realized she was starving.

As they turned, Dale added, "You know, if you listen close, you can still hear the old village. Some nights, it's just under the ice."

Maya laughed, but the sound felt small in all that space.

"I'll take your word for it," she said. But she made a note to listen, next time the wind was right.

They made their way back toward the trees, the lake at their backs and the promise of storm ahead, each carrying new data, and just maybe, a new story.

The best lunch spots on the mountain were never marked, but everyone who spent time up here knew them by heart. Finn led the way along a deer path, then up a half-buried slope to a flat-topped boulder perched like a throne above the frozen sweep of the lake. They climbed the last few feet, then kicked off their snowshoes and flopped onto the cold, sun-warmed stone, boots dangling into space.

Maya let out a groan that felt like it came from her femurs. She unscrewed her thermos, sloshed a bit of hot chocolate into the lid, and cradled it between her hands. The view was even more spectacular from up here—the lake spread out at their feet, its far edge lost in the haze where the sky and snow blurred together. Overhead, a single red-tailed hawk traced circles, scouting for anything foolish enough to move.

Dale was the last to sit, and even then, he didn't quite relax. Instead, he rummaged in his pack and produced a battered notebook, its corners rounded by age and its spine laced with what looked like fishing line.

He set it between them, running his thumb over the cover. "Granby's Log," he said, with a reverence Maya recognized from church, though she'd never seen him in one.

Finn grunted approval, pouring himself a slug of black coffee. "I thought that thing belonged in a museum."

"It does," Dale said, flipping it open. The pages were crowded with tiny, spidery handwriting, interspersed with line-drawn diagrams. There were sketches of the lake at every season, cross-sections of the mountain's veins, and—Maya spotted it immediately—a two-page spread with a lovingly rendered trident and a row of ducks lined up underneath.

She pointed. "That's the Neptune?"

Dale nodded. "And the first ducks, too. Granby couldn't get the mountain's rhythms out of his head, so he started carving the tradition into something people would actually remember. The ducks, the parades, the timing—all of it came from years of tracking when the water hit peak pressure. If you ran the festival at the right time, the lake never flooded. Or at least, not in living memory."

Finn leaned in, squinting at the writing. "He knew the ducks were more than just for show, didn't he?"

Dale grinned. "Oh, he knew. But he also knew nobody believed a word he said, so he made it fun. You get a thousand people squeaking rubber ducks, and even the doubters get swept up."

Maya ran her finger along the line of duck sketches. Each one was different—one with a cowboy hat, one with wild eyelashes, one with what she swore was a cape. She felt a pang of something like longing, but softer. "Was your grandfather the one who first figured out the connection with the mountain?"

Dale nodded. "He built on what was already here. The old stories, the way the snowpack always seemed to respond to the village. But he was the first to write it down, to measure it. Obsessed, maybe. But the water never surprised him after that."

Maya took a careful sip of her drink, then stared out at the lake. "I used to think research was all about objectivity. You observe, you record, you don't let yourself get carried away."

Finn snorted. "How's that working out?"

She smiled, not defensive. “Better than I thought. I started out wanting to prove the whole thing was just local myth. Now I’m not so sure.”

Dale closed the journal with a soft thump. “You don’t have to believe it,” he said, “but if you’re here long enough, you end up living by it.”

For a few minutes, the only sound was the wind rattling in the aspens and the pop of Finn’s coffee thermos as the cap reseated.

Then Finn cleared his throat, a warning sign that he was about to say something personal. “I got an email last night,” he said, voice so matter-of-fact it took a second for Maya to register the weight of it. “Forest Service wants me. Environmental Protection Specialist. It’s half fieldwork, half mapping. I’d be stationed here, mostly.”

He shrugged, as if the news didn’t mean anything, but the tips of his ears were redder than usual.

Maya grinned. “That’s awesome! Are you going to take it?”

“Already did,” he said, and risked a quick glance her way. “Didn’t seem right to leave.”

Dale let out a low, contented hum. “You’re going to be the best thorn in their side they ever hired.”

Maya sipped her hot chocolate, hiding her smile in the steam. “You know, I’ve been thinking about staying, too. There’s a program at SUU—earth systems science. I could transfer my credits, get real mountain data for my thesis.” She paused, feeling suddenly self-conscious. “Never thought I’d want to stick around, but... I don’t know. Feels like there’s still something here to figure out.”

Dale’s face split in a knowing, grandfatherly smile. “I had a feeling you two wouldn’t leave the ducks behind.”

Finn raised his cup in mock salute. “Somebody’s got to keep them honest.”

They finished their drinks in companionable silence, watching as the first shreds of cloud began to drift in over the far ridge. A few flakes started to fall, slow at first, then steady, dotting the dark sleeves of their jackets and filling in the little creases between their boots.

Dale closed the logbook, sliding it back into his pack. “You know

what Granby would say if he saw us here, drinking cocoa and talking about rubber ducks?"

Maya shook her head.

"He'd say, 'Well, at least the tradition survived the last round of idiots.'" Dale stood, shaking out his legs. "You ready to head back?"

Finn nodded, already strapping his snowshoes back on. "Storm'll hit in an hour. Better not get caught out."

Maya took one last look at the lake, now fuzzed over with the start of new snow, then tucked her thermos away and stood. "Lead the way, Forest Service."

The three of them tromped back up the ridge, boots crunching in unison, and Maya felt a pulse of anticipation she hadn't known she'd been missing. Maybe it was the prospect of a new project, or maybe it was just the sense of belonging, but either way, she wanted to see what happened next.

The wind carried the first, high-pitched squeaks of a flock of real ducks somewhere out on the ice. It sounded like the start of a new chapter.

And for once, that felt exactly right.

The return hike was quieter, each of them lost in their own thoughts as they followed their morning tracks through the woods. The sky had dulled again, the sunlight slanting in at such a low angle that the shadows seemed to stretch forever. Maya felt the ache in her legs less with every step—either she was getting used to the snowshoes, or the promise of a warm fire and actual food was enough to override all other senses.

When they reached the place where the ridge broke and the forest opened into a shallow basin, Finn slowed, motioning to the others. "Hold up. Listen."

Maya stopped, pulse thumping in her ears. At first, she thought Finn meant an animal, maybe another fox or the thin whistle of a jay, but the sound was subtler than that. Beneath the crunch of their boots

and the soughing of the trees, she could just make out a low, persistent hum.

She glanced at Finn, who was already crouched by the base of a rocky outcrop, clearing snow from a dark gap in the earth. The entrance was nothing more than a ragged arch, half-hidden by deadfall, but even from a distance Maya felt the difference: a draft of air, cold but carrying a whiff of minerals and something sharp, like ozone after a storm.

Dale caught up, breath visible in the chill. "Ice Cave," he said. "Goes down a quarter mile before you hit the first chamber. Stays frozen, even in July. The old-timers used to store venison in there."

Finn reached into his jacket, pulled out a digital thermometer, and slipped the probe into the mouth of the cave. The numbers flickered, then held steady.

"Six degrees Celsius," he said, voice low. "Outside it's minus ten."

Maya leaned in, fascinated. "Is the air moving? It sounds—" she trailed off, unsure if the others would hear it the same way.

"Like a hum?" Dale asked, not unkind. "That's the meltwater hitting the lava tubes. In spring, it's louder, like a pipe organ. In winter, it's just the mountain's pulse."

Finn handed the thermometer to Maya. "You want a reading?"

She took it, careful not to touch the icy rim of the cave with bare skin. The numbers danced, but what struck her most was the way her voice sounded when she called out: "Echoes forever."

Dale nodded, smile crinkling his eyes. "There's a second chamber below the first. Some say it connects to Mammoth, though nobody's ever mapped it all the way."

Finn pressed his hand against the stone, testing its dampness. "If there's another Neptune, it'd be down there."

Maya looked at him, surprised. "You think there are more?"

He shrugged. "Would make sense. One for the lake, one for the groundwater, maybe one for snowpack. The old water engineers were obsessive."

Dale's gaze went distant, as if he could see through the mountain. "Granby always believed there were others. Called them the guardians of the cycle. Never proved it, but he marked a few spots on his maps where the flow patterns didn't match the geology."

Maya's curiosity flared. "Did he ever write about this cave?"

Dale grinned, pulling the logbook from his pack. He paged through, then stopped at a dog-eared section near the end. "Right here. 'Ice Cave—audible resonance 140 Hz, persistent year-round. Possible chamber at minus sixty meters. Unexplored due to collapse risk. Advise future study.'"

She copied the note into her own book, careful to match the spelling error Dale's grandfather had left. It felt like a tradition worth continuing.

They stood together at the cave entrance, letting the cold air brush over them. The hum was louder now, or maybe they'd just tuned into it. Maya imagined what it would be like to crawl down into the dark, the walls alive with the sound of ancient water, the story of the mountain written in layers of ice and stone.

Finn pulled his glove off and touched the rock. "We should come back," he said. "After training. With better gear and a way to map the air currents."

Maya looked at him, then at Dale. "And maybe leave a duck, for old times' sake?"

Dale barked a laugh. "Granby would approve."

They left the cave as the sky began to cloud over, the blue giving way to a soft gray that made the snow glow from within. The last mile was downhill, and their pace picked up, spirits lightened by the idea of a new mystery waiting for them just out of reach.

As they reached the edge of Duck Creek Village, Maya paused and turned to look back. The lake was invisible now, hidden by the folds of the land, but she felt its presence—calm, waiting, content. The wind tugged at her collar, and she thought she could hear, faintly, the echoes of the cave, promising more stories, more data, more to learn.

She tightened her pack straps and jogged to catch up with the others, her footprints slotting perfectly into Finn's and Dale's ahead of her. They moved as a team, already planning the next adventure, the path behind them marked not just by prints, but by the certainty that, for at least one more season, the mountain would remember them.

The first lights of the village flickered on, glowing gold against the

snow. Maya's breath came easy, her legs tired but strong, and she realized she'd stopped counting the days until she could leave.

Now, all she wanted was to see what happened next.

twenty-two
hot mama's celebration

HOT MAMA'S PIZZA & Brew looked like the holiday section at a hardware store had collided with a beach bar and landed on its feet. The decked-out main room was equal parts pine boughs, blinking fairy lights, and whatever leftover floats Ashley had scavenged from last year's Duck Parade. At each window, someone—probably Azure, with her rumored ex-flair for window display—had dusted the glass with white, feathered frost and stuck up a family of snowman decals, each one sporting an orange beak. Over the bar, a garland of spent beer cans, red Solo cups, and fresh-cut pine needles glimmered in the shifting light. It somehow worked.

Maya squeezed in past the standing room logjam near the door and paused just inside, letting her glasses fog as the warmth socked her in the face. Finn, already ten steps ahead, peeled off toward the back where the tables had been pushed into a single, bending line that snaked around the pizza oven. The regulars and the oddball cast of the mountain had all found their places. Even the tablecloths were in on the joke: blue for water, yellow for ducks, green for whatever.

Ashley, wearing a tinsel-strewn apron and sporting Duckface Daiquiri in one hand and a pizza paddle in the other, saw them coming. "Our stars of the hour!" she called, sweeping the pizza paddle like a knight's sword. "Take the throne, babes. First round is on me, unless it's the premium. Then it's half-off."

Someone from the Pilates crowd (probably Jana Montana herself, who was already up to her elbows in garlic knots) let out a rebel yell. Rolane, wedged at the end of the table and wearing a mechanic's hoodie with 3D-printed gadgets clipped to every free surface, gave a salute that sprayed a little pesto onto the tablecloth.

Maya claimed her seat, which someone had labeled "Data Queen" with neon tape, and Finn slotted in beside her. He took off his cap, revealing a new divot in his hair from snowmobile goggles. "Not too late to fake our deaths and leave the mountain to its fate," he whispered.

Maya grinned. "You're having fun. Don't pretend otherwise."

The place was packed, every seat filled with a local hero, a once-and-future mayor, or someone who'd lent a hand to the Duck Creek Defenders over the last two weeks. There were at least three generations of Olsens, the Zen Nest crew, and even Sheriff Adams, who looked ten pounds lighter and about half as cop-like since his resignation.

At the head of the table, Ashley clinked a spoon against a pitcher of neon blue Daiquiri. The room went down a decibel. "Alright, you reprobates, listen up! As tradition and local statute require, the after-action pizza party is now in session. First up, a toast." She raised her glass high. "To everyone who kept the village weird, the water weird, and the ducks—well, just the right amount of weird." She shot Maya a wink, then deadpanned, "And to the two geniuses who almost got us all sued for environmental terrorism, but ended up saving our butts."

Everyone drank. The Daiquiri had a cold, minty bite and a blue punch that left Maya's lips tingling. There were louder cheers and more clinking.

Ashley gestured to the side, and a relay of pies appeared: standard cheese, vegan, one topped with what looked suspiciously like Froot Loops, and something Maya swore was slathered with chili crisp and duck confit. Brandi and Randy, the married bakery duo, manned the cutting stations with the poise of opera conductors, sending out perfectly triangular slices with the minimum of fuss. The air became dense with tomato, hot bread, and the signature funk of Hot Mama's house dough.

Maya tried to catch Ashley's eye, but the hostess was already orbiting the next set of tables, pouring more drinks, dropping puns,

and making sure every face in the room felt a little warmer. It was like she could be in three places at once.

At the far end, Rolane leaned in, voice pitched just for Maya and Finn. "You're not going to believe this, but the Neptune replica survived the post-race impact. Minimal warping. Next year's model will be waterproof, I promise."

Finn looked skeptical. "Wasn't that the whole point? That it was un-sinkable?"

Rolane shrugged, popping a mini bread duck into their mouth. "Eighty percent un-sinkable. That's a statistical win in my book." They reached under the table and produced a palm-sized 3D print, gleaming blue with a triple prong. They set it beside Maya's plate, grinning like a kid at Christmas. "For your desk. Or bathtub. Or ceremonial altar, if you go that route."

The Neptune felt heavier than it should have, its resin surface catching the light. Maya turned it over in her hands. "You made this for me?"

"Had to print the batch anyway. Figured you'd want the prototype. Call it a field sample." Rolane's hands were still dusted with blue and white powder, some of which transferred to the duck-shaped napkin.

Maya found herself a little choked, so she only managed, "Thanks. I will keep it safe." Finn leaned over, pretending to inspect it, but really giving Maya's arm a squeeze.

At the midpoint of the feast, Ashley called for quiet again. "We have a few more awards to hand out!" She motioned dramatically to Krazy Mike, who had somehow acquired a chef's hat and a single duck-shaped squeaker. "The floor is yours, Mike. Make it quick, the cake's chilling."

Mike sprang up with a comedian's flourish, waving his squeaker like a baton. "First off, I gotta thank my operatives—those brave, underpaid souls who risked their lives every night running secret surveillance on the Taco Stand. You know who you are." A chorus of "woo!" rose from the high schoolers at the next table. "Without our advanced recon, we'd never have known about the sauce truck and its sinister payload." He snapped the squeaker, which echoed with a truly miserable squawk.

Mike's Philly accent thickened as he launched into a deadpan account of the Taco Stand "sting operation," complete with fake

mustache, duck decoys, and the moment he realized he'd tailed a county judge and not a Vance stooge. The room laughed so hard half the beer was in danger of re-routing through noses.

"And let's not forget," Mike finished, "the legendary Stealth Recon at the gas station, where I personally sighted the first evidence of a sabotage plot—caffeinated ducks. Folks, that's not just a threat to our children, it's a threat to the very fabric of this nation."

The crowd roared. Even the ex-Sheriff wiped a tear from his eye. Ashley clapped Mike on the back and handed him a "Duct Tape Medal of Valor," which she'd clearly made out of what was handy.

The laughter rolled on. Finn nudged Maya, who was still fingering the Neptune and letting the feeling of warmth and belonging settle, heavy and sweet, over the whole mess of them.

"So what do you think?" Finn murmured. "Is this what you expected?"

Maya took in the room: the friends, the legends, the smell of warm dough and cold air leaking in every time the door opened. She looked at the odd trophy in her hand, and then at Finn, whose face was open and honest as always.

"I didn't expect to like it this much," she said, voice low but sure. "But I do. Maybe a little too much."

Finn squeezed her hand under the table, and for the first time in a long time, Maya let herself believe that happy endings might actually stick around, even in a place this weird.

The party wasn't over yet, but for tonight, it was enough.

The temperature inside Hot Mama's had climbed at least ten degrees, partly from the density of the crowd and partly from the number of pizzas running full-tilt through the ovens. The party showed no sign of slowing—if anything, the noise ratcheted up as the Duckface Daiquiris started to take hold. Maya spotted more than one grown adult giving their rubber duck prize a discreet test squeak, as if confirming the magic still worked.

Jana Montana, who had earlier threatened a demonstration of her

latest "Pilates & Pizza" routine, now made good on her word. She stood at her end of the table, clapped her hands to get everyone's attention, and declared, "Tonight, I introduce the Neptune Flow!" She said it so earnestly the entire room leaned in, expecting at least minor pyrotechnics.

Instead, Jana performed a sequence of sinuous stretches and arm sweeps, all designed to mimic the motion of water finding its path. Each movement had a name: "Reservoir Reach," "Trident Twist," "Cascade Release." By the third pose, half the room was following along, including Finn, who had a knack for imitating anything athletic and making it look casual. Brandi, in the middle of slicing another round of bread ducks, caught on quickly and adapted the moves for standing behind the counter.

Even the stoic Randy got in on the action, transforming his usual lumberjack posture into something that looked suspiciously like interpretive dance. The first time he completed a full "Lakebed Lunge," his shirt rode up and the room lost it; someone whistled, and Randy grinned without missing a beat.

Jana concluded the sequence with a full-body roll and a dramatic bow. "That's the energy you'll need to get through winter," she proclaimed, then handed out coupon cards for her next class. "Bring a duck. It's extra credit."

The mood was lighter than air, everyone floating on carbs and community and just enough blue daiquiri to kill the pain of the week before.

Midway through the laughter, Brandi and Randy emerged from the kitchen with the grand finale: a sheet cake sculpted and decorated to look like Navajo Lake under a heavy snow. The "ice" was a thin, glassy sugar glaze; the "shoreline" was piped in two shades of frosting. At the far end, someone had built a tiny Drowned Village from fondant, complete with chocolate-powder chimneys and a paper trident stuck upright at the old Neptune's location.

Brandi set the cake in the center of the table with the reverence of a coronation. "Here's to another year of not flooding out the valley," she said, and everyone cheered again.

Ashley handed Maya the knife. "You do the honors. Mayor's privilege."

Maya blushed—how did she always manage to be the center of these things?—but obliged, making a first cut across the frozen "lake" and revealing dense, lemon-scented cake beneath. She served Finn first, then the nearest kid, then made her way down the line until everyone had a slice or at least a spoonful of sugary snow.

The party rolled on, with stories retold and improved on with each telling. The Olsens got into a heated argument about whose duck had the best finish; the Zen Nest group tried to one-up each other with tales of near-enlightenment achieved while sledding down the ridge at full tilt. Even Sheriff Adams, released from official duty, challenged Krazy Mike to a contest of who could eat the most bread ducks without water.

As the room buzzed, Azure took the floor. She'd lost the platinum-blond helmet somewhere, revealing a soft down of white hair, but her eyes still glinted with the mischief of a woman who'd seen it all and knew a few things she'd never tell.

"May I have everyone's attention?" Azure's voice carried in a way that suggested she'd once taught junior high or wrangled stampeding cattle. "As the self-appointed historian and occasional gossipmonger of this fair village, I have an announcement. The Duck Creek Historical Society—me, and, well, me—has officially entered the duck tradition, the Neptune story, and every name on the record into our permanent archives. Including this party. Including the Pilates routine."

The room cheered, even louder when she added, "We're going to be in the book. For real. They sent a photographer."

Ashley high-fived Azure on her way back to the bar, then shouted, "Next round's on whoever can out-pose Jana Montana. Go!" This set off a chain reaction of mock yoga and dance moves, most of them ending in spilled drinks and laughter.

As the chaos mellowed into low, happy conversation, Maya found herself at the edge of the room, her slice of lake cake untouched. She watched the swirl of faces and felt that old, familiar tug—the desire to be part of something, but also to stand aside and just observe, to collect the evidence and savor it.

She was startled by a gentle voice at her elbow. “You did a good thing, you know.”

It was Elias, the Forest Hermit, scrubbed up and wearing a sweater that looked older than the Drowned Village itself. He held a slice of cake with obvious skepticism, as though it might bite back.

“I wasn’t sure you’d show,” Maya said, genuinely pleased.

Elias’s smile was thin but warm. “Jana asked. She said it was tradition now.” He took a slow, cautious bite of cake, then nodded. “Very sweet. Not what I expected.”

Maya laughed. “Most things here aren’t.”

He looked at her, then at Finn (who was currently trying to teach a pack of kids how to do the Trident Twist without spilling their drinks), and said, “I wanted to thank you both. You listened. Not many do, when it comes to old things. Or old people.”

Maya looked down at her hands, unsure what to say.

Elias continued, “The stories—my tribe’s stories, the ones about water and snow and the mountain—they are science, just with fewer numbers. Most outsiders come to take, or to ‘fix’ what they don’t understand.” He paused. “You two, and your friends, you restored balance. That’s a rare thing. If you ever want more stories, or if you need help understanding the next one, just ask.”

He said it like an offer, not an obligation.

Maya managed, “I’d like that.”

Elias smiled, then melted back into the crowd, leaving Maya with her cake and a new feeling she couldn’t quite name. Maybe pride, maybe a sense that she was becoming something she’d always admired in others—someone who made things a little better, and left a trace that mattered.

When Finn wandered over a minute later, breathless and rosy-cheeked, Maya handed him her cake. “You win,” she said. “You always do.”

Finn took it, laughing. “Only because you let me.”

Maya watched as he demolished the cake, then looked out over the party, the faces lit by string lights and the weird glow of a place that had finally found its center.

Next year, she thought, they’d do it all again.

Maybe even better.

By the time the cake was reduced to slush and crumbs, the party had shifted from raucous to mellow. Most people had taken off hats and gloves, and a few had even slipped into slippers or heavy socks, abandoning the decorum of proper boots. The windows fogged with humidity and laughter, and the only sign of the outside world was the occasional whump as a chunk of roof snow slid off and thudded onto the sidewalk.

Ashley, never one to miss a moment, stood on a chair and banged a breadstick against her glass. "Hey! Shut up and listen for a sec." The room complied, more out of affection than authority.

"I've been thinking," she said, her voice steady despite the second (third?) round of Duckface Daiquiri, "that every year we give out some award for the person who best embodies the spirit of Duck Creek. Usually it's the person who makes the most snow angels in the park, or the one who survives a week eating nothing but the Taco Stand's habanero salsa. But this year... this year, we want to do something special."

She hopped off the chair and produced a little box from behind the bar. Inside were two duck-shaped carvings, expertly whittled and painted in neon yellow, each threaded onto a soft leather cord. She held them up for everyone to see, then handed one each to Maya and Finn.

"You two are now honorary Keepers of the Duck," Ashley announced. "Which means you have to come back next year, or we hunt you down and make you teach the kids' parade. Deal?"

Maya was speechless, her hands cupped around the carved duck as if it might flutter away. Finn just grinned, ducked his head (appropriately), and looped the cord around his neck.

The applause was real, and it went on longer than Maya would have thought possible for a room this size. She felt herself tearing up, which was ridiculous, but also kind of perfect.

The warmth of the room seemed infinite, but Dale, standing at the kitchen door, beckoned for silence.

"Before anyone leaves," he called, "there's one last thing."

He pointed toward the window, where the black of night had given way to something strange and electric. The whole crowd, dozens of people in various states of pizza-induced drowsiness, shuffled to the glass and pressed their faces to the pane.

Outside, above the snow-packed village, the sky was alive: a wash of green and purple and faint red, all flickering and flowing like water poured over cold stone. The northern lights were never a sure thing on the mountain, but tonight, as if summoned by the full moon or the right mix of snow and joy, they blazed for all to see.

Randy, who rarely spoke in more than two-word bursts, muttered, "Best I've ever seen."

Jana Montana inhaled so sharply she nearly dropped her Pilates coupon cards. "It's like the mountain's hugging us back."

Even Krazy Mike was momentarily stunned into silence, his duck squeaker forgotten in his lap.

Dale let the awe linger, then said, "This only happens when the water and snow are in balance. Some say it's the minerals in the air. Granby would have said it's the mountain's way of telling us, 'Good job. Keep going.'"

Nobody argued with that.

One by one, people drifted outside, hats and gloves found again, arms linked for warmth. They stood in clusters, boots packed in the snow, eyes raised to the impossible sky.

Maya felt Finn slip his arm around her shoulders. They stood together, the carved ducks warm against their skin, and watched the lights dance over Duck Creek Village.

For the first time all year, she felt completely at home.

The northern lights pulsed and shimmered, painting the snow with color. The village—small, scrappy, perpetually on the edge of winter—glowed from within and without, safe for another season.

And for everyone gathered there, the night felt infinite.

twenty-three
secrets and snow

CASCADE FALLS WAS a different animal in winter—louder, meaner, and, on mornings like this, almost unrecognizable. The day broke so clear and sharp that the snow on the trail crusted underfoot, snapping with every step. At the overlook, the falls had locked themselves in ice, but the roar never stopped; water punched through the blue-white drapery, always pushing for the next crack in the system.

Finn hiked ahead, cutting the trail in his battered boots, but Maya insisted on leading the last stretch. She'd spent the drive over half-wound with ideas, running through outlines and notes on her phone and daring the curves of Highway 14 with one eye on the road and one on her thesis draft. Now, as the woods opened and the sound of the falls bounced off the ridge, she stopped, winded but electric.

The lookout platform was drifted in three feet deep, but Finn shouldered through and swept a place for them to stand. His breath came in clouds. "Wind's worse up here," he said, but Maya just grinned, pulling her folder from the inside of her parka.

She slapped it down on the railing, nearly losing a sheet to the gust. "Hydro-meteorological feedback system of Navajo Lake," she announced. "Preliminary findings, co-authored by local legend."

Finn raised a skeptical eyebrow, but she kept going, flicking through color-coded tabs. "I crunched the data from the last two decades, and it's insane. The lake's recharge and snowpack aren't just correlated—

they're in a feedback loop. Every time the ducks run, every time we do the ritual, it's as if the cycles actually sync up."

She flipped to a page dense with charts. "Look—here's the year Vance cut off the parade. Lake dropped a meter and a half, snowpack underperformed. Next year, full festival, and it rebounds. It's not just tradition. The whole system responds."

Finn whistled, impressed. "You going to submit this?"

Maya hesitated. "I want to. But it's still not...enough? I mean, I know it's real, but nobody outside would buy it." She tapped the cover with a nervous finger. "I was hoping you'd, uh, ground-truth it. Find the part that's wrong."

Finn grinned, his face red from the cold. "You want me to poke holes in it?"

"I want you to say it's not crazy," Maya admitted.

He paged through the draft, stopping at a cross-section diagram of the lake's basalt plug and the "veins" that, in theory, connected every water body on the plateau. He ran his gloved finger along the line that led straight to Cascade Falls. "Not crazy. In fact, it tracks with every weird thing I've seen up here." He nodded at the roaring water below. "I always wondered why the falls went dry in some years, then flooded in others, even when the snow didn't change. Maybe the mountain really is alive. Or at least, sensitive."

Maya felt something unclench inside her chest. "You don't think it's just coincidence?"

Finn closed the folder and handed it back. "Coincidence doesn't pattern this tight, not on this scale. Besides," he added, "who says science can't include the magic? Someone's got to be first."

They stood in silence, letting the cold gnaw at them while the sun fought its way over the rim of the trees. Down below, the water blasted through a vein of clear blue ice, spraying mist that hung in the air as glitter. The wind shifted, and a bow of rainbow flickered in the rising sun. Maya held her hands out, as if to catch it.

"You know, if I had a time machine," she said, "I'd go back and tell my mom she was right. Every place really does have a soul. You just have to figure out how it talks."

Finn made a noncommittal noise, but there was a smile in it. He

turned to look at her, squinting through the ice glare. "So what next? Publish or perish?"

"I want to get more field data," Maya said. "Especially from the falls. I think the whole system bottlenecks here. If we could install a few temporary sensors—"

Finn cut her off with a small wave. "Already prepped a set in the Jeep. Rolane owed me a favor."

Maya laughed, part delight, part relief. "You're the best co-conspirator I could ask for."

He shrugged, a little shy. "Just want to see what happens next."

Maya leaned over the railing, watching the rush of water where it burst from under the ice. At the margins, thick curtains of icicles framed the chute, their surfaces alive with tiny, shifting patterns. She squinted, then looked again.

"Do you see that?" she said, pointing at the largest outcrop. "There, where the spray hits the rock."

Finn leaned in, following her finger. The ice had built up on the black basalt in a series of distinct, repeating shapes—not just the random fractal you got from freezing mist, but something more ordered. It looked like a row of overlapping feathers, or maybe scales.

He whistled again. "That's not normal."

Maya fished her phone from her pocket and zoomed in. Even through the glare, she could see the ridges and whorls, perfectly spaced. There were three columns, and in the center, a trident shape pressed into the ice, as if someone had carved it with a tool.

Finn moved along the platform for a better angle, then skidded down the snowy slope to get closer. He knocked the ice with his knuckles, listening for hollows, and started clearing away the loose powder with a gloved hand.

"It's not just on the surface," he called up. "There's something under the ice."

Maya hesitated, but the puzzle was too good. She followed him, feet sliding in the packed snow, and crouched beside the outcrop. Up close, the pattern was even clearer: the trident motif, repeated three times, with smaller symbols scattered around it. She brushed off more snow

and uncovered a faint, rust-colored line that snaked from the waterline up into the rock. It looked almost deliberate.

Finn glanced at her, eyes narrowed. "Does it match anything in your notes?"

Maya thought for a second, flipping through the last few months of obsession. "Maybe. It reminds me of the markings on the Neptune. The old one, before the new paint job." She fumbled her phone back out, thumbed through a folder of photos, and found it: the close-up of the artifact's base, with its three-prong icon and weird runic script.

She held the screen next to the ice, heart pounding. It wasn't a perfect match, but the geometry—the rhythm of the pattern—was unmistakable.

Finn let out a slow breath, fogging the air. "What are the odds?"

Maya shook her head, not trusting her voice.

They stood there, crouched in the cold, trading the phone back and forth and tracing the lines with their gloved fingers. Above them, the falls roared on, unbothered, but the world had shifted.

After a long silence, Finn said, "You know, every time I think this mountain can't get weirder, it ups the stakes."

Maya laughed, a short, nervous burst. "It's like it wants to be found."

He looked at her, serious now. "If that's true, then maybe it wants us to find it. Or fix it."

She didn't answer, just stared at the ice until her eyes watered. Then she stood and brushed herself off, the snow lighting up with a thousand points of light.

"We need to come back tonight," Maya said. "If the pattern changes with the temperature, or the water flow, we might miss something."

Finn nodded, already plotting the best route. "We'll bring a better camera and some way to take a core. I can call Dale—he's got the drill."

Maya tucked her folder under her arm, the wind fighting to pull it free, and started back up the hill. She didn't look back, but she could feel Finn behind her, steady as ever.

At the top, she stopped for breath and stared out at the world. The sky was so blue it looked impossible, and the valley below seemed to

pulse with energy. She felt the mountain's heartbeat in her own chest, wild and alive.

"You ready?" Finn called.

Maya smiled, teeth chattering. "Yeah. Let's go make history."

They walked back to the Jeep, boots crunching in unison, and Maya tried to imagine what they'd find next. The science was good; the mystery was better.

And for the first time, she wanted both, equally.

The sun had swung past noon and begun its slow, brassy decline by the time Finn and Maya made it back to the overlook, packs thumping with borrowed field gear and a fresh core sampler from Rolane's garage. The falls had changed in just a few hours: the spray now caught the light at a sharper angle, and the rainbow at the lip of the drop pulsed with bands of orange and green. Finn set the tripod and the camera up on a bare patch of granite and started tinkering with the exposure settings, while Maya paced the edge, eyes everywhere at once.

She'd said she wanted more data, but what she really wanted was for the pattern in the ice to be there again. It was. If anything, the trident shape had thickened, each prong rimmed with a new, hard gleam of ice, the center one splitting into a pair of smaller, upward hooks. She stared at it, remembering the diagram from her paper, and felt a shiver climb her spine that had nothing to do with windchill.

"You think it's changing?" Finn said, coming up behind her.

She nodded. "It's getting sharper. It's almost...building something." She turned to look at him, wondering if he felt it too, this odd sense of being watched, or maybe guided.

Finn kept his gaze on the falls. "There's a lot of water under there," he said. "Lot of pressure. You think it could be some kind of resonance? Like, the lake signals through the aquifer and this is how it shows up?"

Maya considered it. "Maybe. But it's not just physics. Look at how perfect it is. Nature doesn't do symmetry unless there's a reason."

A voice behind them: "Unless it wants to be found."

They both turned. Dale stood on the trail, boots crusted with old

snow, eyes steady and a little sad. He didn't wave or shout; he just trudged closer, the soft thump of his gait barely audible over the water.

Finn greeted him with a grin. "Thought you'd be in the bakery by now."

Dale shrugged. "Saw your tire tracks, figured you'd be up here."

He stopped at the edge, taking in the falls and the glinting, unnatural perfection of the trident shape. He was silent for a while, then said, "You ever notice how the mountain only gets weird when people pay attention?"

Maya glanced at Finn, who just gave a small, sideways nod: go with it.

She showed Dale the ice, then the zoomed-in photo on her phone, then the old Neptune artifact, which she'd brought in a padded Tupperware. Dale took it, turned it in his hands, and set it side by side with the ice formation. He didn't say anything, but the air changed; he handled the artifact like a delicate animal, not a rubber toy.

He fished in his pack and brought out a small, leather-bound journal, the kind of thing you might find in an attic, stitched at the spine and warped by decades of damp. He flipped it open, slow and careful, until he found a page filled with blocky, hand-drawn diagrams. At the top: a trident symbol, not identical, but close enough that Maya's pulse tripled.

"My grandfather kept this up here for forty years," Dale said. "He was obsessed with the tridents. Said the mountain wrote in water, and if you paid attention, it would teach you how to keep the balance." He tapped the page. "This is from '63, the winter the lake almost cracked the dam. He spent the whole season tracing these, from here to the outflow at Panguitch."

Maya took the journal, hands shaking a little. The diagrams were precise, almost scientific, but next to each was a scrawl of dates and locations. One read "Strawberry Point—June 12: stone wet but not stained, symbol repeats at 11:10 am, fades by dusk." Another said, "Lava Flats—first melt, symbol at base of aspen."

She looked up. "He found these all over?"

Dale nodded. "Everywhere water moved, especially in transition—freeze to thaw, dry to flood." He glanced at Finn, then Maya. "He called

them the 'artifacts of adjustment.' Said every time the mountain shifted, these things showed up."

Maya flipped more pages. There were hand-drawn maps, color-coded with red pencil, each X'd with a trident or a circle or both. In one entry, a set of three tridents was drawn at the confluence of two streams, with a note: "Likely intervention site—check for duplicate symbol after equinox."

Finn whistled, low. "You ever try to find one?"

Dale shrugged. "Used to hunt them in the spring, but the snow's different now. Some years they don't show at all, or they pop up somewhere they never did before." He looked at the ice formation, and for a second, Maya saw real worry in his face. "Never seen one get this clear, though. Not since I was a kid."

Maya sat down on the cold bench of the overlook, journal on her knees. She paged through, then stopped. "There's a note in here about multiple artifacts, each linked to a different system. Snow, air, ground, water. Do you think there are more Neptune things? Or something like them?"

Dale nodded, solemn. "He always said the first one was just the beginning. The old tribes believed every basin had its own guardian, and the pioneers who built the first dams—they tried to mimic it. But they only ever got the water part right."

Maya felt the old thrill of new data, but also a weight, like someone had just put a stone in her hands and asked her to hold it forever. "This...this changes everything."

Finn looked from Maya to Dale, then back to the ice. "You think Thorne knows about this?" he asked. "Or Vance? If they found one artifact, what would they do?"

Dale didn't answer, but his jaw tightened. Maya got it—this wasn't just a curiosity. It was a warning.

She tapped the page with the Strawberry Point note. "If we could track the pattern, maybe even predict where the next one would show up, we could document them. Or protect them. Or at least know what's coming."

Dale closed his eyes, as if weighing the risk. "You'd have to move fast. Ice like that doesn't last."

Finn grinned, already in motion. “Lucky for you, we have a Jeep and no plans tonight.”

Maya laughed, high and sharp. “And a core sampler, and a thermal drone, and—”

Dale interrupted, pointing at the journal. “You’ll need to take this. It’s the only map you’ll get.”

Maya clutched it to her chest, already flipping to the index. “We start at Strawberry Point,” she said. “If the tridents are directional, it’s next in line.”

Dale nodded, then added, “If you see the triple, call me. There’s something special about it—he never wrote it down, said it was ‘too much like magic.’ But he was scared of it. Said it meant a shift was coming.”

Finn raised an eyebrow. “A shift in what?”

Dale shook his head. “He never said. Just shift. Like a reset.”

They let that settle. Then Maya snapped the journal shut. “Okay. We go. We document. We figure it out.”

Finn shouldered the pack, then waited for Maya. She tucked the Neptune artifact and the journal into her coat, took one last look at the ice, and nodded.

“Let’s go find the next one,” she said, and they started down the trail, boots crunching, the mountain’s breath on their backs.

Behind them, Dale stood at the overlook, not moving, watching the falls as if waiting for the mountain to blink.

The hike out to Strawberry Point was less a trail than a suggestion—half-buried markers and the ghosts of last month’s bootprints winding through a crust of snow that creaked with every step. By the time Finn, Maya, and Dale broke into the clearing at the tip of the ridge, the sun was an hour past noon and the wind had picked up, bringing with it the crisp, nose-biting promise of another storm.

They set up on the overlook, a slab of sandstone jutting out over a dizzying drop, with nothing but sky and valley below. Maya immediately started scanning the snowpack at the edge, looking for anything

that might echo the trident patterns from the falls. Finn set up the thermal camera on a tripod and began a slow sweep of the exposed rock faces, while Dale paced back and forth, boots carving neat furrows in the powder.

"It's supposed to show up where the water breaks through," Maya muttered, flipping through the pages of Dale's grandfather's journal. She'd found a passage about Strawberry Point: "If the sign appears, it will be in the stone, under the snow, facing the sunrise." She turned east, squinting at a blocky outcrop bathed in reflected light.

"I'm going to dig," she said, already pulling the trowel from Finn's pack.

Dale watched her, not judging, just curious. He'd gone quiet since leaving the falls, a rare state for a man whose life philosophy could be summarized as "better to overshare than undershare." Now, he stood at the edge, eyes fixed on the distant horizon, hands shoved deep in his pockets.

Finn knelt next to Maya, helping her chip away the icy crust. "You think it's actually here?" he asked, voice low.

Maya shrugged. "If it is, it's buried. But the pattern at the falls pointed here. It has to mean something."

She worked in silence for a few minutes, the trowel scraping and thumping against the rock. The wind picked up again, sharp enough to sting the skin. Finn scanned the sky. "Weather's moving in fast," he said.

Maya dug faster, until the tip of her tool rang against something that wasn't stone. She stopped, brushed away the powder, and stared.

It was a patch of ice, clear as glass, but trapped within it was a faint outline—a triple-pronged shape, curling at the ends, almost a perfect match for the Neptune symbol. Maya's heart pounded. "Finn, look."

He leaned in, studied it, then nodded. "It's not just coincidence."

She took out her phone, snapped a series of photos from every angle, then made notes in her field book with fingers that shook more from adrenaline than cold.

"Dale!" she called. "You have to see this."

He walked over, slow and measured. He crouched beside her, stared at the shape, then pulled the journal from his coat and held it up next to

the pattern. It matched. Not perfectly, but enough to make the hair on Maya's arms stand up.

Dale was silent for a moment, then he looked up, straight into the sun, as if searching for something else. That's when the shadow swept over them—a rush of air, the whump of wings so big it sounded like a flag snapping in a gale.

A golden eagle circled above, low enough to cast a sharp, fast-moving shadow over the rock and snow. Finn stood up, his mouth half-open in awe.

Dale didn't move, but his voice was different when he finally spoke. "Elias said the eagle was the mountain's messenger."

Maya looked at Finn, then up at the sky. The eagle circled once more, then dove lower, riding the updrafts so close that for a moment, Maya could see the gold and brown bands on its wings and the flat, unblinking disk of its eye.

On the third pass, the eagle dropped something from its talons. It spun through the air, bounced once on the stone, and came to rest at Maya's boots.

She picked it up before anyone else could move. It was a wooden duck, small, maybe four inches long, battered by weather and time. Its yellow paint had worn to pale straw, and the beak was chipped, but someone—years ago—had inlaid a trident shape into its back with a careful hand and a knife.

Dale made a noise, not quite a word. He reached out, palm up, and Maya gave him the duck. He turned it over, eyes shining wet in the cold. "This was my grandfather's," he said, almost reverent. "He lost it the winter the old village went under. Said it got carried off in the flood."

Finn stared at the carving. "You think it's a sign?"

Dale's voice was thick. "I think it's a message."

The eagle circled once more, then banked hard and soared toward the west—toward the next outcrop, and the invisible line connecting all the points from the journal's map.

Maya watched it go, the duck's old paint catching the sunlight in her hands. The urge to laugh or cry or run was so strong that, for a second, she couldn't do any of them.

Instead, she just looked at Finn, at Dale, at the empty air between

them. “We should go,” she said, her voice steadier than she felt. “Before the storm hits.”

They packed up fast, but not rushed. As they walked away from the point, Maya slipped the duck into her pocket. It felt less like a toy now, and more like a key.

At the edge of the trail, Finn stopped and turned, looking back at the overlook. He put his arm around Maya, just for a second, then let go. “You think anyone will believe this?”

Maya looked at the sky, then at her boots, then at Finn and Dale, and the answer surprised her. “I don’t care,” she said, and meant it. “But we have to find the next one.”

Dale clapped Finn on the back. “We’ll find it,” he said, voice certain. “We’ve got the map, the science, and the mountain on our side.”

The three of them started back down the trail, the wind at their backs, the sky threatening snow, and the future suddenly wide open.

Above them, the eagle traced lazy loops in the air, as if waiting for them to catch up.

twenty-four
the village below

IN THE PRE-DAWN hush above the Markagunt Plateau, the snow fell so thick and fast it smudged the horizon into a single shade of white. The lake and the sky were indistinguishable but for the faint, cobalt shadow of Navajo Lake snared in the basin. Even the ridgeline, usually a serrated border between land and void, had vanished beneath the insistent, gentle pressure of the storm.

From above, Duck Creek Village was nothing but a faint suggestion of geometry: a square of low cabins and log-built storefronts, their roofs etched by long drifts, all arranged around a grid of pale, lamp-lit roads. Beyond, the forest curled around the valley's edge in a tight embrace—aspens bare but for their white skin, pines dense and inked with new snow, every branch bowed in deference to the weight of the weather.

The lake itself was a marvel of contradictions. Near the edges, the freeze had advanced, pressing outward in thick panes of blue-white ice, but at the center, open water trembled against the chill, black and implacable. There, the snow met its end in a constant, low hiss, sinking and vanishing as if devoured by the heart of winter. Yet, just beneath the surface, the water swelled: a subtle but certain rise, the overflow of the restored watershed. The cycle had righted itself, and the lake, long starved, now drank from the generosity of the mountain.

The storm was a live thing. Each snowflake fell not as a random accident, but as a coded message, an infinitesimal promise carried down

from the cloud banks. The wind arranged the flakes into bands and squalls, then dropped them in measured layers over every possible surface. On the roof of the bakery, the drift measured just over twenty inches. Atop the observation deck, a perfect cap formed, imitating the meringue of the bakery's signature pie. Even the ancient mailbox—too stubborn to surrender to a snowplow—wore a fresh hat of powder.

As the snow accumulated, it linked the disparate elements of the mountain into a single, seamless system. Meltwater from the upper ridges trickled through root systems and shallow seeps, gathering in slow, invisible veins beneath the crust. It pooled in the shaded meadows, then wormed its way through the volcanic seams, feeding the sub-lake aquifers. Everywhere, the water moved with purpose, governed by laws as old as the earth and as precise as any town tradition.

Closer, the village woke in increments. One by one, window lights flicked on—first in the Falcon's Nest, then in the bakery, then in the little duplex behind the general store. Each new bulb cast a pool of amber onto the snow, turning the cold into something soft, almost benevolent. The only sound was the soft percussion of snow slumping from overloaded branches, and, occasionally, the distant mutter of a plow's blade meeting ice.

In the town square, a pair of kids had already claimed the first clean hill for sledding, their tracks carving twin furrows that quickly filled and vanished. At the bakery, Brandi and Randy cleared a narrow path through the drift, careful not to disturb the pristine sweep in front of the door—a tradition that dated back to before anyone remembered why. On the deck of Hot Mama's, a row of snow-ducks, each carefully molded and aligned, presided over the proceedings like a council of tiny, frozen judges.

Throughout, the storm persisted. The snow fell with a kind of joy, as if it had been waiting all season for the right to blanket the world, and now, released, it was determined to get it right. In the space of an hour, the landscape transformed: roofs vanished beneath the new layer, fences and signposts lost their sharpness, and the cars in the lot became nothing but rounded, anonymous shapes.

Yet, even in the transformation, there was balance. The snow did not overwhelm, but rather filled the land to its proper measure, as if

some hidden hand—call it the Neptune, or tradition, or the collective will of the village—was metering every flake. It was abundance, but not excess. All things in their place, each system in tune with the others.

By noon, the sky brightened—not with sun, but with a kind of diffuse radiance, the result of millions of tiny crystals reflecting and amplifying every stray photon. The lake mirrored this back, its open water now a living map of clouds and light. The ice along the edges groaned as it thickened, and for the first time in years, the hydrology models predicted that the water would hold all the way through the spring.

In the woods, the aspens hummed with the promise of renewal. Underneath the snow, sap waited for the first thaw, roots pulsed with the memory of summer, and the birds—having taken shelter in the deepest, warmest cradles of the branches—watched and waited for their cue.

The camera of the mind pulled back, higher and higher, until Duck Creek Village and the lake were nothing more than a punctuation mark in a vast, undulating sea of white. But even from this height, the evidence of tradition was unmistakable: the perfect geometry of the village, the careful alignment of every road and rooftop to the curve of the lake, the faint, persistent tracks that radiated from the center like lines in a well-kept ledger. Here was a system in balance. Here was nature, and human nature, collaborating rather than contending.

And as the storm continued—flakes falling, water rising, ice thickening—the message was unmistakable. The world remembered. The village endured. And, in the rhythm of snow and thaw and snow again, every generation left its trace, a signature in the ledger of the mountain.

Below the new ice, where sunlight struggled through a churn of snow and silt, the drowned village lay in perfect, unhurried quiet. No wind reached here, no birds, no booted feet or the thud of snowballs on siding. Only the pulse of the water, slow and relentless, and the secret blue luminescence that gathered at the base of the old clock tower.

The clock tower had never fully collapsed; its lower story and the stone footings persisted, a dark monolith on the sloped lake bed. Around it, the houses stood in various stages of surrender to the water, their frames softened, corners rounded by time and algae. Shutters hung

at odd angles, and window glass—where it still existed—gleamed with the faint, organic shimmer of biofilm. Yet the outlines were all intact: the straight lines of porches, the rectangles of doors, the logic of a grid plan now mapped only by shifting currents.

At the center of it all, nestled in the gravel where the tower's base met the mud, the Neptune artifact glowed. The pronged trident, carved of stone and inlaid with turquoise, pulsed with a light that seemed not to radiate but to gently pulse outward, like the slow expansion of a breath or the heartbeat of something immense and untroubled. The effect was not harsh or artificial; it was the blue of summer night, the blue of ice beneath a glacier, the blue that hinted at the presence of something alive inside the quiet.

All around the Neptune, the currents responded. Water slipped between the stones, swirling in perfect eddies, never turbulent or stagnant. In places where the old drainage culverts emerged from the ruins, the flow was just enough to keep silt in motion, clearing away debris without unmooring the ancient structures. The currents braided and rejoined, weaving the drowned village into a single, self-sustaining machine.

Through the former streets, fish darted in loose schools—rainbow trout, some as long as a forearm, and smaller, silvery fry that pulsed in and out of shadows. Where the town's main road dipped toward the church, the steeple's cross now supported a carpet of pale, translucent eggs, safe in the updraft of the water column. The fish paid no mind to the buildings, except as useful landmarks: a cracked window for shelter, a toppled garden fence as a hunting ground for bugs and smaller fish.

Above, the ice filtered the light into unpredictable patterns, sometimes sending sharp spears of brightness down to the ruins, sometimes muting everything in a cool, even twilight. On days when the sun broke through, the reflection off the Neptune's stones would paint whorls of turquoise on the side of the clock tower, as if the building itself was decorated anew every hour.

Other animals found their place, too. A pair of muskrats, forced from their usual haunts by the fast freeze, had made a den in the collapsed roof of the bakery. Their furred bodies left faint, silky trails through the silt, and from time to time they would pause to survey the

world from the empty window frame, whiskers quivering in the water's faint drift.

And, always, the current: never idle, never wild, but moving according to the pattern laid down generations ago. Dale's grandfather had designed it that way, with the help of the native families whose maps of the underground springs were older than the notion of Duck Creek itself. The system was self-correcting; if a branch got blocked, the pressure shifted, opening another route. The Neptune, long thought decorative, acted as a kind of conductor, tuning the frequencies of the flows so that every sinkhole, every seepspring, every secret vein in the basalt rock was accounted for.

The village itself, though mute, was not abandoned. It held the sediment of stories: every stone laid by hand, every mark of paint, every arch or lintel a memory. The Neptune's light touched them all, casting each with an unearthly blue that rendered the village both more ghostly and more real, a secret city preserved against time by the logic of water and the loyalty of tradition.

From above, none of this showed—a stranger looking down would see only the black disc of the lake, perhaps the suggestion of an old church steeple or a cluster of stones near the ice. But here, in the cold and the quiet, the story persisted, written not in ink or pixels but in the patterns of light and current and living things.

In the drowned village, everything had a place. The currents circled the Neptune, the fish circled the currents, the generations circled the story. And above it all, the snow continued to fall, piling weightless ton after weightless ton onto the world, and sealing it for another season of dreams.

From the bottom of the lake, the water's journey was not over. All that blue, all that snowmelt and memory, found its inevitable path down the sinkholes: invisible gates in the bedrock, waiting for the call. Each one was marked by a sign, though few ever saw them. The signs were small—hand-sized effigies of the Neptune, carved from cedar or basalt, sealed to last centuries. Each prong pointed a different direction, not only guiding water, but, if you believed the old stories, guiding the luck of the village itself.

Through the first sinkhole, the current accelerated, drawing in silt

and secrets, then plunging into darkness. In the upper chamber, the water met a carved shelf, the lip of which had been notched by generations of careful hands. This shelf acted as a weir, splitting the flow precisely: too much, and it shunted through the auxiliary tunnels; too little, and the trickle would spiral back into the main cavern, where the mini-Neptune waited to correct the course.

Beyond the shelf, the world was a labyrinth. Lava tubes, black and smooth as obsidian, curved and dropped in impossible geometry. In the dry season, these tunnels echoed with the complaints of trapped air and the sigh of the distant waterfall. Now, with the thaw in full swing, they thrummed with life. The current swept along particles of fine sand, the ghostly husks of last year's plankton, the shattered wing of a mayfly. Each carried a trace of the world above, and together they traced the future of the watershed, one molecule at a time.

Light, scarce but not absent, filtered through the occasional fault in the ceiling. Here, a crack the width of a pencil admitted a finger of sunlight that illuminated a tiny stalactite, on which hung a single drop of water, vibrating in sympathy with the flood below. There, a vent from the surface let in a snowmelt so cold it shivered the local current into eddies, sending tiny whirlpools along the tunnel walls. In some places, entire pockets of air formed, and small creatures—blind, albino insects—clung to the rock and waited for the next cycle of damp and dry.

Midway through the journey, the tunnel widened. In this amphitheater, a single, oversized Neptune replica stood sentinel, lashed to the rock with a collar of copper wire. Its turquoise eyes gleamed faintly, either from a trick of the light or from something more deliberate. All the water that left the lake passed through this hall, the crossroads of the mountain. The flow from Duck Creek met the lesser springs here, and the mixed current pressed onward, guided by the logic of the old engineers.

Once, this chamber had nearly collapsed. The story was legend in the village—how a sudden surge in spring threatened to blow out the lower caves and drain the lake in a single catastrophic day. But the Neptune held. Its prongs had been re-carved by Dale's grandfather, the base reinforced with a slurry of river clay and ground obsidian,

following a method older than cement. After that, the village made a habit of checking the replica every decade, sending the smallest child (by tradition) to crawl the passage and touch the trident for luck.

Past the crossroads, the tunnel dropped steeply, gaining speed and noise. Silt suspended in the water caught every glint of light, and the walls glistened with a fine coat of living, breathing biofilm. The passage narrowed to a slit, then widened again, and then, suddenly, the water launched into open air.

This was the source of Cascade Falls: the final vent, the place where the hidden river of the mountain became a spectacle for all to see. The water burst from the stone with the force of history, fanning out into a white sheet that shimmered and roared. In the winter, the falls iced over, and the water snaked beneath a shell of crystal. Now, in the last days before spring, the ice splintered in veils, sending a spray that hung in the air like a cloud of diamonds.

Above the falls, the air was blue and cold, tinged with the scent of pine and the faint electricity of new water. Below, the plunge pool churned, sending up plumes of mist that frosted the nearby branches and made the stones slick as glass. On certain days, rainbows arched over the spray, visible only from the exact angle of the trail that wound past the overlook.

The journey of the water was not a secret, but neither was it fully known. Every child in Duck Creek learned the story of the Drowned Village, and every year the best student got to drop a blue-dyed duck into the lake and watch it float down, only to see it emerge, days or weeks later, at the foot of Cascade Falls. Sometimes the duck came back whole, sometimes worn to a ghost of its former color, but always, in the end, it completed the cycle.

Standing at the edge of the falls, you could hear the full voice of the system—the rush and tumble, the conversation of water and stone. In that sound was the echo of all the hands that had shaped the tunnels, the voices that had sung the first stories, and the stubborn, patient will of the people who had chosen not to fight the mountain, but to work with it.

Even now, if you looked closely, you could see the miniature Neptunes set at intervals along the banks, their weathered prongs

pointing downstream, their turquoise still visible through the lichen and moss. No one admitted to carving new ones, but each year there seemed to be more, as if the system, left to itself, grew more vigilant with age.

At Cascade Falls, the journey ended, but also began again. The water that plunged here would filter into the lower meadows, seep through the grass, and, eventually, feed the river that meandered all the way back to Duck Creek Village. The cycle was not closed, not perfect, but it was enough.

In this way, the traditions endured, not just in stories but in the very shape of the land. Every drop of water, every snowflake, every generation, all carried forward by the patient, invisible hand of the Neptune, and the people who believed in the work of balance.

By twilight, Duck Creek Village had become a constellation of golden windows set in a deep blue field of snow. Above the roofs, the storm had gentled; flakes now floated in slow, fat spirals, stacking in soft heaps on the porch rails and muffling every noise that wasn't laughter or the scrape of a shovel.

In the square, the day's first snowmen had multiplied into a full parliament. The children—released from the tyranny of indoor voices—charged the drifts with the abandon of sled dogs, packing snowballs, hurling them with Olympic sincerity, then collapsing to make angels with their arms and legs. The adults, meanwhile, performed their own rituals: shoveling the walkways in neighborly relay, ferrying bags of salt from trunk to stoop, then retreating to kitchen lights and the rich, bracing shock of hot coffee.

Inside Hot Mama's Pizza & Brew, the world was a riot of color and heat. The entryway steamed with the melt-off of boots and scarves, while the main room was crowded with locals, snowbirds, and a handful of freezing tourists who had staggered in, wild-eyed and instantly tamed by the prospect of food. On the bar, a pyramid of rubber ducks presided over the menu, and someone had added a tiny knit hat to each one.

Ashley worked the floor with a fluency that bordered on choreography. In her tinsel-strung apron, she delivered Duckface Daiquiris to a table of giggling snowmobilers, then doubled back to the kitchen to referee a debate over whether "mountain-style" pizza required a triple layer of cheese or just a heavy hand with the crust. She fielded every question with a grin and a quip, and when a regular tried to ask about the new sheriff badge still pinned to her coat, she just rolled her eyes and said, "It's honorary. For now."

The night's buzz was not just alcohol and sugar, but something lighter—relief, or maybe pride, that the storm hadn't buried them but made the village more itself. From the high table by the window, Maya watched it all, her coat slung over the back of the chair and her boots still dusted with a fine crust of powder. She could see Finn in the corner, deep in conversation with Dale and a couple of old-timers who had clearly adopted him as one of their own. At the next table, a set of teens ran a bracket for tomorrow's "duck luge," drawing up rules on the back of a napkin and arguing in the hushed tones of future mayors.

On the TV above the bar, a local weather broadcast replayed the day's miracle: the abrupt, record-breaking snowfall, and the live footage of the town's blue duck event. In slow motion, the sky filled with a confetti of plastic ducks, each one bobbing and squeaking as the crowd roared. The newscaster, at a loss, simply called it "the happiest mob in the history of Kane County."

Not that anyone inside Hot Mama's needed to watch the TV. They'd all been there, and if they hadn't, they'd heard the story already—how the snow had returned, and the lake had risen, and the whole mess of old problems had turned, at least for a day, into the kind of legend that could last through spring.

Over at Ground + Toasted, the mood was lower-key but no less intense. The bakery windows fogged with every batch, so that the world outside was little more than the blurred motion of passing sleds and the occasional flash of a snowball in flight. Inside, Brandi and Randy worked opposite sides of the counter with quiet efficiency: she managed the pastry and bread, he handled the espresso, each moving with the focus of someone who knew that winter would always favor the prepared.

The tables were packed: families thawed over cinnamon rolls, hikers clutched mugs of steaming black, and more than one couple lingered long after their cups had emptied, hands tucked together beneath the tabletop. On the ledge above the register, the first batch of ceremonial "blue Neptunes" had sold out within the hour, and Brandi had already started on a second tray. The tiny duck-shaped cookies, iced in glimmering blue and white, had become both a treat and a symbol—a reminder that the system worked, and that tradition, in its own way, was as practical as it was poetic.

In the quiet just before close, Brandi glanced out the window, catching the gold of Hot Mama's across the square. She could see the silhouettes of kids lined up for takeout, their breath pluming in the cold. In the bakery's warmth, it seemed impossible that anything outside could be so blue, so infinite, so full of promise.

Up the slope, in the neat row of cabins that backed against the woods, the world had gone nearly silent. Each unit glowed with the soft pulse of electric heat, and behind every curtain, the evening unfolded according to its own script. Some families played board games at the kitchen table, the clatter of dice replaced by the quiet punctuation of laughter. Some had gathered around the fireplace, feet tucked beneath blankets, listening to the old stories retold for the hundredth time. Others, less sentimental, simply watched the storm from their porches, letting the hush of snow and the distant light from the village square fill the space where words were not needed.

In one cabin, Maya and Finn sat on the floor, a battered map stretched between them. They traced lines from the lake to the falls and back again, fingers following the threads of water and memory and possibility. Neither spoke for a long while, and when Finn finally reached out—resting his hand over Maya's, steady and warm—she let herself believe, if only for a moment, that all the cycles would hold.

At the edge of town, the snow lay undisturbed. The trail to Cascade Falls had vanished under a perfect, unbroken crust. But if you looked closely, you could see the evidence of passage: a narrow channel, barely more than a line, where the overflow from the lake had started to reassert itself. It ran straight and true, guided by the old scars in the

stone, and at the end of it, the sound of the falls—fainter now, but rising—promised that the cycle was already beginning again.

Back in the square, the energy didn't slacken with nightfall. The streetlights lit the snow with a halo of soft blue, and as the storm slowed, people drifted back outside, unbothered by cold or darkness. Someone built a snow fort behind the post office, and someone else started an impromptu parade of ducks along the main drag, each person adding their own from a pocket or a bag or, in one memorable case, a hat. The town's unofficial mascot—now upgraded to "Village Water Guardian"—had become an instant legend.

Inside Hot Mama's, the last of the night's pies were delivered, and Ashley finally took a break. She sat at the bar, boots up on the rung, and nursed a blue-lipped Daiquiri with a satisfaction that didn't need words. For the first time since the season started, she allowed herself a long, deep breath, and let the sense of calm settle into her bones. Even if the snow returned twice as hard, even if the world made no sense at all, she knew they'd be ready.

A lull settled over the room, the kind that signals an ending but also a beginning. In the pause, you could hear the soft sound of snow against the window, the gentle clink of mugs on wood, and the buzz of a thousand small hopes working quietly beneath the surface.

It wasn't a perfect world. It would never be. But it was theirs, and it was, for the moment, enough.

In the night, the snow kept falling—soft, persistent, unhurried—and every flake that touched the ground became a part of the story, a promise that the mountain and the village would remember each other, always.

epilogue:
spring's promise

The first morning back in Duck Creek Village, Maya awoke to a symphony of drip, crackle, and the distant squawk of a jay reminding the world whose territory this was. She blinked at the ceiling, half expecting the splotches of shadow to resolve into the familiar water stains from her childhood home, but found only the honeyed knots of pine paneling and a drift of steam from the baseboard heater. It smelled faintly of old coffee, mountain air, and the chemical optimism of new carpet.

She rolled out of the twin bed and padded to the window, where a chunk of snow still clung stubbornly to the eave. Beyond, the slope of the plateau was patched with white and brown and early, desperate green. The Village Inn didn't believe in luxury—no towels folded into origami, no mini-bar, no art more sophisticated than a faded duck print on the bathroom wall—but its windows were always clean, and the glass had the practical thickness of a ship's porthole.

Outside, the world was a ledger of last night's freeze: puddles glossed over with skins of ice, boot prints mapped in silver mud, the breakfast crowd at Ground + Toasted already stringing a line from the bakery door to the street corner. The peaks beyond the village glimmered, their north faces stubborn with snow, but in the low ground, spring pressed in wherever it could—crocuses nosed up in the ragged

margins of the parking lot, bluebells elbowing moss aside along the path to the office.

Maya dressed with the kind of efficiency that only came from too many years in shared university housing. Socks, thermals, jeans, the old Duck Creek marathon T-shirt (an ironic thrift store find), and, on top, her parka with the liner already threatening to break free at the seams. She knelt by her duffel, extricated the hard case of her water probes, and opened it on the bed with the reverence of an astronomer setting up a telescope on a new planet. Tucked inside was a handwritten list, three pages, each item underlined and starred in her evolving code for "do not screw this up."

Before she could even pop the seal on her thermos, a knock came at her door. Two gentle taps, then a pause, then a third, like the start of a knock-knock joke with only one punchline.

She opened up to find Finn, boots already caked with fresh slush, his cap jammed down tight over the same sun-streaked hair, and a pair of to-go cups held out like a peace offering.

"Mission control," he said, voice scratchy with cold. "Or is it mad scientist now?"

Maya grinned and took the cup. "Is it even morning if you don't bring coffee to my door?"

"Tradition," Finn said. He stepped in, careful not to drip on the rug. "And the only way to get the drop on you. You sleep lighter than a marmot in June."

She sipped, bracing for bitterness, and found the coffee shockingly smooth, with a faint drift of cinnamon. "You went to Ground + Toasted. Betrayed Hot Mama's."

"Only place open before seven," Finn replied, deadpan, then nodded at her pile of gear. "You're not packing light."

"I learned," Maya said, "that bringing the backup means never having to cry over a ruined sample. Or at least, not in front of witnesses."

He moved to the window and squinted out at the parking lot. "You see the forecast?"

She joined him, feeling the caffeine cut through the last of her jetlag.

"Rain by late afternoon. Then another cold snap. If I want the transition data, today's my window."

Finn nodded, then turned, leaning against the windowsill with casual precision. "You get your paperwork squared away?"

Maya made a face. "Registrar hates me. My transfer is officially unofficial until the department signs off, but they already updated my advisor to Dr. Worthing. She's going to make me teach two sections of 'Intro to Watersheds' in exchange for the research credit."

"Better than student loans," Finn pointed out.

"You sound like my dad," Maya shot back, but without heat. She let herself look at him, really look, and noticed for the first time that the sun-bleached streaks in his hair had grown out over the winter, the edges darker now, the face a little leaner.

She wondered if she looked different, too, but Finn said nothing, only traced his thumb along the coffee sleeve.

They stood in a pleasant, caffeinated silence. Maya could have stretched it for hours, but her list loomed.

She zipped the probe case shut and slung it over her shoulder. "Ready to roll?"

Finn's answer was to open the door and gesture like a game show host. "After you."

They stepped out into the hall, the air already heavy with the morning's backlog of cinnamon rolls and bleach. Maya led the way down the stairs, her boots thumping out a rhythm that Finn matched in lockstep. Outside, the cold was clean, almost sweet, and every breath stung just enough to remind her she wasn't in the desert anymore.

The short path from the inn to the village green was a sampler of every microclimate on the plateau: first the crusted shadow, then a patch of thawing mud, then a sudden blast of sun so warm it made Maya want to unzip her jacket. They passed the bakery, where the window fogged with each fresh tray of bread, and Maya spotted Brandi inside, arms dusted with flour, mouth wide with laughter at something Randy was saying. Across the road, the porch at Hot Mama's was still empty, but the promise of pizza for later hung in the air like a forecast.

They walked in step, Finn occasionally pointing out a slick patch or

a hidden pothole, Maya making mental notes of every puddle and trickle that cut across the street.

"So," Finn said after a while, "you're really staying for the whole season?"

"That's the plan," Maya replied. "Assuming I don't run out of stipend. Or patience."

He nodded, the way only someone who had once run out of both could nod.

"Spring is the best time," Finn said. "All the old rules get weird. You'll love it."

Maya shot him a look. "You sound like you missed me."

He didn't blink. "Village was less fun without you. And there's nobody else to keep me honest with the data."

Maya felt herself blush, which was mortifying, but Finn just kept walking, hands in pockets, content to let her process it.

They reached the edge of Movie Ranch Road, where the snow receded in patchy swathes and early wildflowers staked their claim in the wet black soil. Finn stopped at a juncture, pointed at the curve where a trickle of meltwater cut through the sod and disappeared under the sidewalk.

"That's new," he said. "Used to run parallel to the gutter, not through it."

Maya crouched, pulled her phone, and snapped a photo. "I'll log it. Maybe the whole system's shifting with the thaw."

"Or maybe the ducks are finally getting their revenge," Finn offered.

Maya grinned, then straightened, the weight of the probe case pulling her slightly off balance.

"So what's your plan?" Finn asked. "After the data?"

She chewed her lip. "Prove my model, publish if I'm lucky, and then..." She shrugged. "Grad school, I guess. Or maybe teaching. I like the work, but I like it better when I'm out here."

He looked at her, earnest. "You'll stay?"

"I'll try," she said, surprised at how much she meant it.

They stood there, the village waking up around them, the sky bleeding from pink to clean white, and the sound of a snow shovel scraping somewhere off in the distance.

Finn nudged her with his elbow. “Better get moving. If we’re late to the first site, Brandi will eat all the samples.”

“Not if we get there first,” Maya countered.

They started down the road, boots splashing in tandem through the shallow, icy puddles, the world ahead of them fresh and cold and shot through with the impossible, irrepressible green of things just beginning.

If there was an official measurement for “how much a place remembered you,” Duck Creek Village might have held the record. By the time Maya and Finn made it past the post office, they had been “welcome backed” by three passing strangers, two people she barely remembered from the duck festival, and a child in a puffer coat who swore up and down that Maya had once rescued his rubber duck from the frozen creek (she hadn’t, but the story was too good to correct).

Their first stop was Hot Mama’s. The inside was a steam bath of rising dough and slow-diffusing garlic, the air thick with the promise of future pizza. At the counter, Ashley stood among a battlefield of rubber ducks, which she was sorting into bins—yellow, blue, and “wild type,” the latter a collection of ducks in sunglasses, mohawks, and one with a tiny wizard hat. Her apron read “Dough It Again,” and the sleeves of her puffer vest were dusted with flour.

She spotted Maya instantly. “There she is! Duck Creek’s own Brain Trust. I was starting to think you’d left us for some fancy lab in Switzerland.”

Maya slid up to the counter, Finn just behind her, both of them dodging a toddler’s attempt at a snowball with uncanny teamwork. “Not even close,” Maya said. “I’m here to audit the new Duck Renewal protocol.”

Ashley grinned and brandished a blue duck, then set it gently into a bin. “We’re running a double-blind duck cycle this year,” she explained. “Every duck that survived the winter goes into the Retired bin. The others get cleaned, sanitized, and blessed for next season. Circle of life.”

Finn snorted. “You actually track which ones float?”

"You'd be amazed," Ashley said, not missing a beat. "Last year's winning duck survived three major events and a submersion at Cascade. The mountain remembers which ones worked."

She gave Maya a wink, then offered her a Duckface Daiquiri, "on the house, for science." Maya took a polite sip and found it alarmingly pleasant—icy, not too sweet, with a sharp herbal finish. Finn tried a sip and made a face, which only made Ashley cackle.

"You'll be back for pizza later, right?" Ashley asked, already knowing the answer.

Maya saluted with her cup. "Wouldn't miss it."

They made their way out, careful not to upset the rubber duck army, and continued down the strip. The path from Hot Mama's to Ground + Toasted was only a few dozen yards, but in that short walk Maya felt the full brunt of spring: the crush of meltwater underfoot, the whiff of wet pine needles, the laughter of kids daring each other to jump the deepest puddles.

At Ground + Toasted, the glass steamed with the power of a hundred yeast colonies. Brandi presided over the counter, sleeves rolled and hair tied back with a bandana that had once been white. Next to her, Randy worked the espresso machine with lumberjack intensity, his hands moving with the grace of a surgeon and the mass of a man who could bench-press a bread truck.

Brandi caught Maya's eye and pointed to a tray of dense, golden slices. "You get first taste of the Meltwater Sourdough. Made with the runoff from this morning's snow. Pure as it gets."

Randy slid a mug down the bar to Finn. "Try it black," he advised. "Goes with the bread."

Maya took the offered slice. It was still warm, the crust just shy of burnt, and inside the crumb was soft and tangy, with a sweetness that tasted like something waking up after a long nap. She closed her eyes and let the flavor bloom.

Brandi watched, waiting. "Well?"

Maya opened her eyes. "It tastes like the first thaw."

Brandi thumped the counter in triumph. "I told you! The yeast knows the season. It gets rowdy in spring."

Finn sampled the coffee and nodded his approval. “You’re going to have a hard time beating this in the next town.”

Brandi wiped her hands, then leaned in. “You’re both going to the falls, right? You tell Dale we’re saving a loaf for him. Last time he tried to barter for it with a moose shed.”

Maya laughed, and for a moment it was easy to forget the stress of research or the pressure of new beginnings. The bakery was always like that—warm, a little loud, and exactly what you needed before stepping out into the real world.

Randy handed her a wrapped heel of the bread for the trail. “You’ll want this later,” he said.

She pocketed it, thanked them, and let Finn guide her back into the morning.

The third stop was Loose Wheels Service Inc., a slab-sided, metal-sided shop with the permanent smell of burnt rubber and engine degreaser. Inside, the soundtrack was classic rock, punctuated by the metallic clatter of socket wrenches and the pneumatic thump of air tools.

Rolane appeared from under the battered chassis of a four-wheeler, face striped with grease and hair standing up in every direction. They wiped their hands on a rag and grinned. “If it isn’t the Surveyor and the Scientist. Back for the spring tune-up?”

Finn motioned to the probe case on Maya’s shoulder. “She’s got more tech in that bag than you do in the whole garage.”

“Give me an hour, I’ll prove you wrong,” Rolane said, then pointed Maya to a side table where a stack of blueprints, half-eaten donuts, and a spray bottle of isopropyl vied for attention. “Check out the new mods. We’re running a custom suspension for the spring mud. If you need to cross the meadow, this’ll float you right over.”

Maya was genuinely curious. “Show me.”

Rolane gestured to the workbench, where a pair of gleaming coilovers rested next to a stripped-down mountain bike frame. “Last winter, the ice trashed half the rigs. This setup is light, but the rebound is sweet. Watch.”

They bounced the frame on the shop floor, and Maya could feel the way the springs absorbed the shock without sending it back into her

hands. “You’re going to let the high schoolers test this, aren’t you?” she guessed.

Rolane gave a sly nod. “Only the reckless ones. The rest get the stock model.”

They traded a few more details, Finn and Rolane slipping into their own language of gear ratios and torque values, while Maya browsed the cluttered wall of tools and felt herself relax. The hum of conversation, the easy way everyone slotted back into old rhythms—it was like the village had never paused for winter.

They left Rolane to their masterpieces and continued to the next stop: Krazy Mike’s Trail Stop, a gas station turned sandwich shop with the air of a permanent yard sale. The painted sign out front still boasted “Bait, Beer, and Batteries,” though the inside was mostly shelves of jerky and racks of lopsided sunglasses.

The instant they set foot on the gravel, the drive-thru window snapped open and Krazy Mike’s voice bellowed, “Well, look what the creek dragged back!”

Finn raised a hand in greeting. “You still serving lunch at ten-thirty?”

“For you, always,” Mike replied, and in seconds had hustled outside, wearing a parka two sizes too large and a beanie that read “KING DUCK.” His grin was as wide as ever. “Heard you were coming back, Maya. Figured it was too good to be true.”

She smiled, letting the warmth in. “I’m here for the research, but the sandwiches are a close second.”

Mike pointed at Finn. “This guy ditched me for brains last fall. Bet you’re still mapping the same old rocks.”

Finn shrugged. “The rocks change if you watch long enough.”

Mike cackled, then produced a pair of wrapped sandwiches. “On the house. It’s the new signature—blue snow melt ham and cheese. I use the runoff for the ice, gets it real clear.”

He winked at Maya, who took the sandwich and held it up like a trophy. “You know, if the ducks don’t work out, you could franchise this.”

Mike made a face. “I hate paperwork more than I love sandwiches. But I’ll think about it.”

He nudged Finn. "You keep an eye on her, yeah? Smart people are dangerous when left alone."

Finn gave a mock salute. "It's my only job."

They left Mike still laughing, the sound echoing through the parking lot, and made their way back toward the heart of the village.

On the green, a cluster of adults and teens had gathered on yoga mats, each stretching in ways that looked more ambitious than functional. At the center, Jana Montana presided in head-to-toe neon, hair braided and voice carrying over the chatter.

"Today we channel the melt. We become the water. We flow and adapt," she called, leading a slow, swooping stretch that made everyone laugh. "If you fall, you just go with it. Remember, you can't break a river."

Maya and Finn watched from the sidelines as the group attempted "melting duck" pose, which started as a squat and ended as a soft collapse onto the mat. Jana caught Maya's eye and called, "You here to join, or to judge?"

Maya raised her hands. "Just observing the hydrodynamics."

Jana nodded, satisfied. "Good. The more witnesses, the less likely anyone sues."

After a few more minutes of laughter and off-balance yoga, the group dissolved, with several participants waving and calling Maya's name as they passed.

The final stop was the DC Pub & Grill, which looked exactly the same as it had six months ago—dark wood, polished bar, and a single neon sign that cast the whole entryway in a soft blue glow. Inside, Azure stood on a stepstool, adding a new photo to the "Wall of Fame." She spotted Maya and Finn and grinned, holding the frame for them to see.

It was a photo of the village at first snowfall, the square blanketed in white, with Maya and Finn front and center, mid-laugh, faces flushed with cold and pride. Azure pinned it next to a shot of Ashley at the duck parade and another of Brandi brandishing a cinnamon roll.

Azure hopped down and dusted her hands. "Needed a fresh reminder of the brains of the operation," she said.

Maya glanced at the photo, surprised at how comfortable she looked. "I didn't know anyone took that."

Azure shrugged. “You were too busy saving the mountain. Someone had to document it.”

Finn studied the wall, then nodded at Maya. “You look happy there.”

Maya didn’t deny it. “It was a good day.”

Azure gave Maya a long, assessing look, then offered a tight, satisfied smile. “Welcome back, scientist.”

Maya returned the smile, feeling the words stick in a way that warmed her more than the bar’s radiator ever could.

They lingered for a moment, then stepped out into the late morning sun. The air was softer now, the sky less brash than before, and in the side yards and ditches, the first real green of the year was coming up fast.

They walked in easy silence toward the trailhead, the village behind them alive with its particular, impossible blend of the practical and the weird. Maya felt the bread in her pocket, the data case heavy on her shoulder, and the knowledge that she belonged—not just to the science, but to the system, the community, and the person beside her.

At the edge of the green, Finn stopped, turned to her, and asked, “Ready?”

Maya didn’t hesitate. “Always.”

Together, they set off for Cascade Falls, boots squelching in the melt, eyes forward, and the story starting over, exactly as it should.

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TALES FROM THE BROKEN CLAW

A series of cozy fantasy books set in North Pointe Common Towne, whose shopkeepers, and their shops' special gifts, serve all who come in peace, stay in peace, and leave in peace. Full of heartwarming themes like found families, smile-inducing slice-of-life scenes, and more than a little freshly baked bread. Each novel focuses on a different shopkeeper.

Pubs & Pegasi • Anvils & Avatars • Volumes & Villainesses

Teas & Tribulations • Watchers & Windstorms

Stitches & Snake Oil • Peacekeepers & Púca • Gears & Gateways

Cuts & Catastrophes • Bandages & Banshees

Clean & Wholesome - All-Ages Appeal

Recommended for readers 7th grade and up

eBooks on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited

Paperbacks available everywhere

Omnibus eBook editions available

CLARA THORN

Award-winning Mid-Grade and Young Adult fiction!

Clara is an orphan who happens to be good at math. Really, *really* goo at math. So much so, that when it turns out she's really a witch (the good kind), she *sees* magic as immense, rainbow-hued equations that she can manipulate. Not every witch can do that, and it winds up being the key to her discovering a whole other world of magic and wonder.

Join Clara and her friends as they deal with the growing threat of the human, witch-hunting Paladins, unlock their destinies, and ultimately take up the battle to save all witches—and their human allies—for all time.

Clara Thorn, the witch that was found

Clara Thorn, the witch that fought

Clara Thorn, the witch that won

Recommended for 7th grade readers and up.

Appealing to all ages.

eBooks on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited

Paperbacks available everywhere

Omnibus edition available

STORIES OF WITCHKIND

Multi-Award Winning Fantasy

A Kirkus Starred Review

Journey to a world much like a medieval version of our own... but very different, indeed. Magic-wielding witchkind live in secret alongside their human kin, quietly using their powers over Sea, Sky, Earth, and Flame to better everyone's life.

Young Daniel Scratch is Tested on his thirteenth birthday, and Chosen to be the sole Adherent for one of the world's six greatest powers, or Axes—launching him into an adventure he could never have imagined, and questions of morals and ethics that he'll grapple with for his entire life.

Daniel Scratch

Master of the Tower

The Fifth Axis

The Order of Some

The Conspiracy of One

The Truth of All

Appealing to, and recommended for, ages fourteen and up.

eBooks on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited

Paperbacks available everywhere

Omnibus editions available

ENDLESS SKY

A science-fiction themed "GameLit" novel, in the vein of *Ready Player One.* Our characters are in a fully immersive virtual reality game, dealing not only with side quests, "dungeon crawls," and leveling up—but also with the underlying reality of a game system that might be breaking down. Also, they're not sure if their physical bodies are still there. Hmm.

Endless Sky: Truthsayer

Endless Sky: New Worlds

Endless Sky: Old Bones

Endless Sky: End Game

Recommended for Young Adults and older.

eBooks on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited

Paperbacks available everywhere

STANDALONE NOVELS

The Never: A Tale of Peter and the Fae

A retelling of *Peter Pan* from the faeries' point of view, where Peter isn't necessarily a hero, and where the story starts long before those children fly into Neverland.

Bob Constantine (no relation)

A tongue-in cheek take on ghost stories, with our hero, Bob, pretending to be an exorcist to scam money out of gullible people. With the help of his ghost friend, of course. It's all just a con... until Bob's past starts to catch up with him, and it suddenly becomes all too real.

A House of Forgotten Quests and the Dragons That Lie Within

A richly imagined literary fantasy in the Victorian style, pondering the question, "what becomes of people who engage on a great, world-changing quest... only to abandon it before its conclusion?" Dr. Alastair Finch must not only answer the question, but also take up some of those quests, if he's to unlock the Gateways and release our world's true source of courage and inspiration: Dragons.

THE DUCK CREEK MYSTERIES

A series of cozy mysteries—think *Murder, She Wrote*, where there's no blood, no "spice," and no violence—set in the idyllic (and real-world) mountain town of Duck Creek Village, Utah. Each novel focuses around a piece of mysterious mountain lore, which is what first attracts our heroes—until they become embroiled in more mundane mysteries that threaten the tranquility and harmony of the mountain.

The Mystery of the Starlet's Shadow

The Mystery of the Hermit's Hideout

The Mystery of the Navajo Neptune

The Mystery of the Rhoades to Ruin

The Mystery of the Sasquatch's Trail

The Mystery of the Stone People

The Mystery of the Golden Talon

The Mystery of the Ghost of the Iron Horse

The Mystery of the Golden Eagle • A Duck Creek Junior Mystery

Cedar Mountain Campfire Stories

Clean & Wholesome - All-Ages Appeal

Recommended for readers 7th grade and up

eBooks on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited

Paperbacks available everywhere

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.