

the mystery of the sasquatch shadow

the duck creek mysteries
book three

Don Jones

DonJones.com

*for all our friends and neighbors in Swains Creek Pines... than you for
making us welcome.*

the duck creek mysteries

Collect and enjoy all of these cozy mystery stories set in Duck Creek Village, Utah:

*1: The Starlet's Shadow
at Ground + Toasted*

*2: The Navajo Neptune
at Hot Mama's Pizza & Brew*

*3: The Sasquatch's Trail
at DC Pub & Grill*

*4: The Hermit's Hideout
at Aunt Sue's Chalet*

*5: The Rhoades to Ruin
at Cedar Man Country Store*

*6: The Stone People
at The Zen Nest*

7: The Golden Talon

The Duck Creek Mysteries

at The Lofty Nest

*8: The Ghost of the Iron Horse
at Loose Wheels*

and

*The Mystery of the Golden Eagle
A Duck Creek Junior Mystery*

and

Cedar Mountain Campfire Stories

Available on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited

foreword

Welcome back to *The Duck Creek Mysteries*! Or, if this is your first novel in the series, welcome for the first time!

Centering this story around the DC Pub & Grill—which now has a larger outlet down the mountain in Cedar City—is kind of a personal special-of-the-day for me. When we first started coming to the mountain, this space was occupied by Martin’s Corner Deli, and it quickly became a favorite. Whether we just needed a change of scenery with our Goldendoodle, Cory, or we were too tired from DIY Cabin Improvement Drama to cook for ourselves, the Deli was always ready with great food and a friendly smile.

Honestly, the menu at DC Pub & Grill still has most of the Martin’s Corner favorites—I suspect there’d be a mountain-wide mutiny if some of those went away! I’m a fan of the Hamlet, served warm on a roll, and a glass of red sangria. But you can’t go wrong with any of the food, really. I’ll be honest and admit I’ve never even considered the Mega Squatch Burger that features in this story... but it’s a real thing, and if your stomach can handle it, I bet it’s amazing.

Now, as always, I have to mention that this *is* a work of fiction. While I’ve taken inspiration from real-life places and people, I’ve also taken plenty of liberties for the sake of the story. You’ll find that the geography gets a bit mangles in some places, and the businesses in this story aren’t exact replicas of the ones you can visit for real. What’s more,

the folks mentioned by name had nothing to do with crafting these tales, so you should definitely regard them as fictional characters, not as representations of the real-life people whose names I borrowed.

And hey, next time you're in the pub, be sure to sign a dollar bill for their ever-growing collection of souvenirs from customers past and present.

Also, of course, keep an eye out for Sasquatch!

Don Jones

April 2026

Duck Creek Village, UT

contents

1. Return to Duck Creek	1
2. The Documentarian	13
3. The Cryptozoologists	27
4. First Signs	39
5. The Mega Squatch Burger	55
6. Midnight Exploration	63
7. The Sasquatch Nest	75
8. Mounting Evidence	87
9. Night Surveillance	97
10. Connecting the Dots	103
11. Into the Mountain	119
12. Pursuit	133
13. Exposing the Truth	147
14. Community Reaction	157
15. Unexpected Discovery	167
16. Farewell to the Miller-Whites	183
17. Return to Normal	191
18. The Final Footage	205
19. Return to Cascade Falls	215
20. The Scientific Method	227
 Epilogue: The Mountain's Secret	 241
Want Free Novels?	251
Also by Don Jones	253
About the Author	259

one

return to duck creek

MAYA LET the door fall shut behind her with a deep, slow sigh. The latch clicked in a way that told her someone, at some point, had paid a lot of attention to the fit of the hinges. Even before she set her boxes down, she noticed that the cabin's floor—though worn in the middle—ran nearly level from wall to wall. For a structure older than her parents, this seemed an accomplishment bordering on defiance.

She set the first of the plastic storage tubs on the braided rug just inside, then nudged it aside with her knee to keep the welcome mat from folding over on itself. One by one, she carried in the rest: a flat cardboard box bristling with foam-padded tubes, a battered duffel bag whose zipper barely closed over a load of battered field notebooks, and a stack of manila folders that had gone limp in the morning damp.

The interior was as she remembered—if maybe a little cleaner, with the faint, nose-tickling scent of lemon wood polish still hanging in the air. Pine shutters framed the front windows, casting honeycomb shadows across the low couch and its faded plaid throw. In the kitchen nook, a Dutch oven the color of robins' eggs perched on the stove, probably left by the last summer tenant. If the previous tenant had also been an early riser and a neat freak, Maya supposed she owed them a thank you note.

She could still see her breath if she exhaled hard enough, but the cold didn't have teeth here; it just wrapped around her like a clean sheet,

hinting at the coming thaw. Out the back window, she saw three things: snow drifted against the utility shed, a splay of tiny footprints zigzagging beneath the eaves, and a line of pine trees that, even in March, were impossibly green.

Maya's hands moved automatically, stacking her bins in order of importance—measuring equipment on top, glassware and notebooks below, clothes dead last. For a moment, she hovered over the first crate before popping the lid. Old habits. Inventory, then action.

First: The portable flowmeter, sturdy enough to withstand a drop from the roof but calibrated for a field technician with a light touch. Maya placed it on the kitchen table, lining it up with the edge. Next: three sets of graduated cylinders, double-wrapped in newspaper and sandwiched between their plastic cradles. She set these to the left of the flowmeter. The test tubes followed, then the pH strips in their waterproof pouch. Each tool got its spot, as if the table was a command center and she the newly appointed general.

She opened her battered duffel and pulled out the field notebooks. These were less orderly: dog-eared, spattered with silt, and annotated in multiple colors of ink. One—her favorite—had a green vinyl cover and a page-long crack running across the inside binding. She flicked it open and scanned the most recent entry, one written in the campus library four days ago, and smiled to see her own notes so clear and certain compared to the blizzard of sticky-note comments her advisor had crammed between the lines.

Maya set the notebook aside and opened the stack of manila folders. Most were stamped with the university's blue logo and sported handwritten labels in a dozen different hands, but one envelope—thinner than the rest—had only her name, written in neat block letters. She slid it open and fanned through the contents: one transfer form, a short letter from the department chair, and a flyer for the annual undergrad research symposium. The letter was direct, two paragraphs thanking her for “pioneering field initiative” and “expanding awareness of mountain hydrology in underrepresented regions,” followed by a postscript suggesting she touch base with the director of the Navajo Lake site.

Maya let her eyes drift to the window. The lake itself was hidden by a low ridge and a stand of quaking aspen, but the mere thought of it

sent a tingle through her chest. There was something about water out here, about how it seemed to disappear and reappear like a magic trick, that had drawn her since her first family trip to the plateau as a teenager. Most lakes just held their water, but Navajo Lake—blocked at one end by a thousand-year-old lava flow—secretly drained itself through a honeycomb of caves, leaking into the valley below with zero fanfare. The physics of it fascinated her. The mystery of it nagged at her, too.

She tucked the letter into her journal, then went back to work.

By the time the wall clock ticked past nine, Maya had arranged the living room into something halfway between a laboratory and a reading nook. The couch now held a neat grid of calibrated syringes and vials; the coffee table, lined with a spare sheet of brown packing paper, bore an array of Petri dishes and waterproof markers. She'd swept the floor with a broom she'd found in the mudroom and scrubbed out the kitchen sink with dish soap, mostly to chase off the faint smell of old coffee and wet socks. The woodstove, at least, was a surprise. One twist of the handle and it opened, already stocked with last winter's logs. She considered lighting it, then decided to finish her prep first.

In the far corner of the main room, a writing desk angled toward the window offered a perfect view of the slope below. Maya placed her laptop there, hooked up the charger, and tested the Wi-Fi signal. It blinked to life with a single bar. Good enough for uploading data, bad enough that social media would be pure agony. She liked that. It meant focus. It meant no distractions.

She thumbed through her field notebook and logged the new setup:

*03.12—Arrived Falcon's Nest. Weather clear, 32°F.
Road muddy but passable. Brought flowmeter, pH kit,
new spectrophotometer (thanks, Lyle!). Baseline lake
sampling tomorrow AM. If the spring melt starts
early, will need to set up the catchment net by Friday.
Shed out back looks structurally fine, but check roof
after first thaw.*

She tore out the page and pinned it to a corkboard above the desk. Next, she opened the envelope with her own name again and read the transfer letter a second time, lips moving silently over the lines. She wondered if the director here would actually be interested in her work, or if she'd end up, like the last campus posting, mostly alone with her samples and her thoughts.

For a minute, she lost herself in the memory of her final meeting with Dr. Fong. He'd worn the same tweed jacket as always and tapped a single knuckle on her report as he said, "You know, Maya, people come to these places with a lot of romantic ideas. Most of them leave with none." She'd shrugged at the time, but now the words felt more like prophecy than warning. Still, she'd chosen this site for a reason.

She rolled the flowmeter across the table, twisted the sensor cap until it clicked, then checked its display. All zeros, as expected. For fun, she ran a quick diagnostic, letting the miniature turbine spin in the dry air. The LCD chirped to life: "Ready." Satisfied, she grabbed a pencil and scrawled a single line in her notebook: Still works.

Her phone buzzed. A text from her brother—he'd managed to sleep through his first three classes again, and did she want updates on the sheep or the weather back home? She smiled, thumbed out a quick response ("You'll be late to your own graduation"), then set the phone facedown.

For the rest of the hour, she lost herself in the pleasure of labeling and sorting. Every stickered test tube got a color-coded mark, every notebook a proper spine label. Even her pens were sorted by color and thickness, lined up in an old ceramic mug she'd found under the sink.

By the time the sun had inched over the ridge, Maya had unpacked, inventoried, and set up a simulation of her first data collection—down to the arrangement of the cooler for transporting samples. It was a little obsessive, but it made her feel ready for whatever came next.

She closed her eyes and took a slow, deep breath. The cabin creaked around her, but in a friendly way. The wind rattled the shutters and brought with it the clean, sharp tang of melting snow and distant smoke from a neighbor's chimney.

This was the start, she decided. Not just of a project, but of her own, careful experiment in mountain living. She couldn't wait for the

first set of real data, the first surprise, the first mystery worth staying up late to solve.

Tomorrow, she'd hike down to the lake at dawn. Tonight, she'd allow herself a cup of tea and a crackling fire.

And maybe, if she was feeling extra sentimental, she'd call her brother and let him know she'd landed just fine.

By six-thirty, the mountain air had worked its way into every seam of Maya's jacket and even inside her gloves, but she hardly noticed as she navigated the last of the muddy switchbacks into the heart of Falcon's Nest village. Early sunlight set the crusted snow aglow, and the persistent hush that hung over the valley made every footfall sound deliberate, each crunch and squelch of the thawing gravel road a drumbeat to her progress.

Maya picked her way around a shallow puddle the color of dark tea, eyeing the surface for any telltale slicks of oil or chemical runoff—a habit she'd picked up sampling water in more trafficked towns. Here, though, the puddles only reflected the sky, unmarred by anything but a few floating pine needles and, occasionally, a single blue jay feather.

There was no sidewalk, no curb—just dirt, snow, and the slow work of the sun to knit the two together into spring's first mud. The village had no formal grid, either; the houses seemed to have been built wherever their owners thought the sunrise hit best, their driveways curving and doubling back like a puzzle with extra pieces. The effect was both cozy and, to Maya's eye, a little haphazard, as if someone had let their seven-year-old draw up the zoning plan.

She rounded a bend past a mailbox shaped like a trout and caught sight of her first local: a man in an ancient buffalo plaid flannel, stacking wood beside a battered pickup. He had the rolled-shoulder posture of someone who'd grown up splitting logs and shoveling roofs. He paused as she approached, then straightened and nodded, one gloved hand absently brushing sawdust from his shirtfront.

"Morning," he said, with the directness of someone who meant it. His beard was white as the snowdrifts.

Maya offered her best, most polite field smile. “Morning. Beautiful out.”

He glanced up at the sky—clear, endless blue—then back to her, as if he needed the confirmation. “S’pose it is. Where you headed?”

She thumbed up the road. “Pub and Grill, I think.”

He grunted with an approving sort of finality. “You’ll want boots, then. Stays icy in the shade.”

She nodded, thanked him, and continued, marking the brief exchange as her first real data point on the local social climate. Friendly, but reserved. High density of plaid.

Farther down the lane, the houses got newer and more assertively unique: cedar shakes and black-framed windows, “eco-modern” cabins on concrete pilings. At one lot, a woman in a neon-green windbreaker was halfway up her porch roof, gloved hands busy with a drill and a box of solar panels. She seemed so focused that Maya almost passed by, but the woman caught her gaze and raised her voice over the screech of the drill.

“Hey! You know which direction’s true south from here?” she called, pausing mid-screw.

Maya blinked, then pointed without hesitation. “That way. Toward the notch in the ridge.”

The woman grinned and offered a tiny salute with her drill. “Appreciate it! Don’t want to be that person who puts ‘em on backwards and tells the whole internet, right?” Her laugh echoed over the bare trees, and Maya made a mental note: Settler Type B, New Tech, Seeks Verification.

She rounded a corner past an unfinished house—a skeletal frame, blue tarps for walls—and noticed a cluster of suitcases parked at the end of a freshly graveled drive. A woman, probably thirty and dressed like she’d flown in from Manhattan that morning, fumbled with her phone and a set of rental keys while her rolling suitcase sank slowly, comically, into the soft mud.

“Damn it,” she hissed, trying to yank the bag free without getting her patent boots dirty. The effort only made it worse; the next step brought her up short and nearly toppled her.

Maya stopped a few feet away, considered the situation, and then set down her own pack. "Want a hand?"

The woman looked up, sunglasses already sliding down her nose. She appraised Maya—mud boots, windbreaker, hair stuffed under a fleece hat—and sighed in visible relief. "Yes, please. I think I missed the instruction manual on mountain living."

Maya reached for the bag handle. "It's mostly just: move slow and keep your center of gravity low."

Together, they worked the suitcase out of the muck, the process leaving both of them spattered with a fine spray of brown slush. The stranger smiled sheepishly.

"First time here," she confessed, as if it were an apology.

Maya grinned. "You get used to it." She tried to brush the mud off her gloves, but succeeded only in redistributing it.

"Is it always this..." The woman gestured at the sinking drive, the patchwork of snow, mud, and pine needles. "Primitive?"

"Just in the shoulder season," Maya replied. "Summer's probably more like what you imagined."

This seemed to soothe the woman's embarrassment. She squared her shoulders and offered her name—Kim, from L.A.—and thanked Maya again for the help.

They parted ways at the next bend, and Maya noted, with a scientist's interest, the distinct populations of the village: the Old Guard with their woodpiles and quiet pride, the Moderns with their tech and direct questions, and the Weekend Crowd, bright-eyed but always a little out of their element.

She pressed on, boots squelching through patches of half-melted snow. The village itself had a lived-in, half-finished charm; every mailbox a different color, every fence a different style, every roof patched in a unique way. A generator hummed somewhere out of sight, and above it all, the breeze carried the sharp, resinous tang of pine.

At the crossroad near the community signboard, Maya paused to get her bearings. The sign was a hand-painted slab of driftwood announcing "Falcon's Nest: Est. 1972" in two colors, with a faded list of "Community Rules" (No fireworks, dogs leashed, lake access closed dusk-dawn). Beneath the sign, thumbtacked flyers advertised everything

from yoga classes to a lost drone. One sheet, printed in block capitals, warned: “MOOSE SEEN IN AREA—GIVE THEM SPACE.”

She found the pub easily, at the far end of the main loop, its chimney already coughing woodsmoke into the sky. From the outside, the DC Pub & Grill looked like any other log cabin, but a closer inspection revealed a motley collection of lawn chairs on the porch and a pair of ancient, sun-bleached snowshoes nailed above the entry.

Maya lingered at the porch rail, making mental notes:

- Pub appears to be the only restaurant within walking distance.
- Three types of villagers: Legacy, Modern, Tourist.
- Town layout favors serendipity over efficiency.
- High ratio of informal to formal spaces.

She wondered what Dr. Fong would say about her “social mapping.” Probably that it was wasted effort unless she was going to run a population study. Still, she enjoyed the process, the way it forced her to slow down and really see the place, not just the work she’d come here to do.

Through the pub’s window, Maya caught the gleam of a bar-top espresso machine and the promise of a real, hot breakfast. She knocked the mud off her boots and stepped inside, ready to begin collecting her next set of data.

The DC Pub & Grill greeted Maya with a wall of warm air, spiced with hickory smoke and something cheesy baking in the oven. Her glasses fogged over for a beat, but she could still make out the antlered mounts staring down from the rafters, the battered shuffleboard table wedged between two wooden pillars, and the swirl of voices that rose and fell with the clink of plates and pints.

She stepped inside and shut the door, careful to brush her boots on the mat before taking stock of the crowd. The place was at least half full, with most of the tables pushed close together—some covered in checkered vinyl, others rough-hewn and stained by decades of spilled drinks. Someone had painted the walls a buttery yellow, but time and smoke had mellowed the color to something like antique parchment. Every

window framed the brilliant, unfiltered morning light, while inside it glowed dim and soft, as if the whole pub ran on candlepower.

"Just grab any open seat," called a voice from behind the bar. "We're running on mountain time till lunch."

Maya found a battered Windsor chair at the end of a long communal table and set her backpack down by her feet. She scanned the room as she shed her jacket: a family with young twins arguing over the last slice of cinnamon toast, a trio of local guys in coveralls dissecting an engine rebuild, and—by the window—a man with a puffy North Face vest, pecking at his laptop like a cautious woodpecker. The crowd was older than her, mostly, but nobody seemed to care that she was alone or, judging by her gear, obviously "not from here."

A second later, the bartender herself appeared, carrying a carafe in one hand and a mug in the other. Her platinum-blond hair was artfully tousled, and her eyebrows arched in perpetual, skeptical amusement. She wore a t-shirt with a faded wolf print under her bar apron, and she moved like a former athlete who'd figured out how to turn every step into a pivot.

"Well if it isn't Angie's girl," she said, setting the mug in front of Maya and pouring without asking. "Back for the season?"

Maya blinked. "Yup. And I'm not her—well, not really."

"Close enough. Everyone's kin up here." She winked, then leaned in to stage-whisper, "Did you actually come back for the trout, or are you running a grand experiment on local weirdos?"

Maya laughed, the sound coming out more relaxed than she'd expected. "Probably both."

The bartender topped off another mug down the line, then snapped her fingers as if catching a stray thought. "Oh! For f— fudge's sake, where are my manners? Azure. I'm still running the place, still the best gossip in Utah." She made a show of bowing, and Maya recognized her instantly from her teen years—older now, maybe a little less angular, but with the same diamond-bright eyes and a smile that seemed to dare you to misbehave.

Maya said, "I remember you made the best fries on the mountain."

Azure grinned. "And the worst puns, don't forget it. You want breakfast?"

Maya's stomach growled in reply, which made Azure cackle.

"I'll send out the house special," she said, "unless you're vegan now, in which case I'll dig up some kale or something."

"Kale's fine," Maya said, but Azure was already gone, ferrying refills and trading barbs with every table along the way. When she returned, it was with a plate the size of a car hubcap: two eggs, a slab of bacon, a loaded baked potato instead of toast, and a scoop of what Maya guessed was homemade sauerkraut.

"Pub potato," Azure declared, setting the plate down with a flourish. "It's science. All the food groups." She winked. "Not on the menu, either."

Maya thanked her, then dug in, letting the warmth and salt reset her from the morning's chill. As she ate, she eavesdropped with half an ear—gossip about avalanche mitigation, a debate over whose snowmobile was the fastest, even a heated argument about the best pancake syrup ("It's Log Cabin or nothing, you Philistine!").

Azure circled back to Maya with a fresh mug of coffee. "You settling in all right? Your aunt said you'd be up to your ears in water samples by now."

Maya nodded, swallowing a mouthful of potato. "I started yesterday. The lake's more complicated than I remembered."

Azure's face softened a little, the brashness dialing back a notch. "Yeah, she does that. A lake like this, she's got moods. Good days, bad days. And she don't tell her secrets to just anyone."

Maya sipped her coffee and considered the idea. "Do you ever get weird stuff with the water? Like, actual weird, not just algae blooms?"

Azure gave her a look over the rim of her own mug. "You talkin' about the color last year, or the time the dock got iced in June?"

"Both. Also, the way it drains. It's like the whole basin is full of holes."

"Swiss cheese geology," Azure said, tapping her temple. "I dated a guy who did the same thing. Never knew where the money went."

Maya laughed again, but she made a mental note to research the sudden icing incident. That didn't sound like anything she'd read in the survey reports.

A new voice caught Maya's ear—low, steady, and not quite

matching the local twang. She turned to see a man at the far end of the bar, gray-haired and careful, speaking quietly into a tiny microphone clipped to his jacket. His hands were deft, rolling the stem of a wine glass in slow circles as he stared down the lens of a small camera.

He wasn't filming himself; he was filming the pub. From time to time, he'd shift the tripod, change the angle, and murmur a note to himself in a voice just above a whisper.

Azure followed Maya's gaze and leaned in again. "Don't worry, he's harmless. He's been in every day this week, shooting B-roll for a 'nature doc' or something."

Maya said, "He's using a \$5,000 camera for B-roll?"

Azure snorted. "Guess he's got a grant. Or a rich spouse. Or he's in witness protection, who knows. Anyway, he's polite, and he tips well."

Maya watched the man for a few seconds more. He was precise, almost reverent, in how he moved around the space. He reminded her of her old advisor, who'd once told her, "The way people observe tells you more about them than what they write down." It stuck with her, always.

She returned to her meal, savoring the mix of butter and sharp sauerkraut. The crowd thinned out by degrees as the morning wore on, and the pub took on a lazy, golden rhythm. Azure slipped behind the bar and started slicing limes for the lunch shift, humming a song Maya only half-recognized from late nights in her parents' living room.

Before leaving, Maya jotted a line in her field notebook: Pub = best spot for population sampling. Track interactions by time of day. Note: Ask Azure re: icing on lake.

She left a tip big enough to be remembered, then zipped her jacket and stepped outside. The cold slapped her awake again, but this time it felt more like a challenge than a threat.

Back up the road, the sun had climbed high enough to melt the surface of the snow, turning every step into a crunch and a squish. Maya walked home with her hands in her pockets and her mind already outlining her next set of data.

She didn't look back, but if she had, she might have seen the man at the window, lens tracking her all the way to the bend in the road.

two

the documentarian

AT 7:10 a.m. the world was mostly mud and birdsong, with just enough morning sun to keep Maya squinting at the trail ahead. She'd left Falcon's Nest cabin with her field pack, two protein bars, and a slightly irrational sense of urgency, determined to catch the last of the thaw before the crusted snow turned into slush. The trail curled up the ridge in steep, pulse-spiking switchbacks, and she took each one at a measured pace, resisting the urge to time herself. After the social gauntlet of the previous day, it felt good to let her thoughts unspool with the rhythm of her boots and the tick of her breath.

The air above Navajo Lake was sharp and clear, the kind that made every sound stand out: the scrape of her boot on basalt, the slap of wind against her anorak, and, somewhere ahead, the metallic rattle of a bicycle chain in need of oil. She paused, listening, and the sound resolved into a series of low whoops, a shouted "Send it!" and then the high, startled yelp of someone regretting their life choices.

Maya rounded a bend and saw them: three mountain bikers in garish jerseys, all perched at the edge of a crumbling lava outcropping. The lead rider, a compact woman with calves like grapefruits, hovered over her pedals, contemplating a drop-off that looked less like a trail and more like a rockslide in progress. Another biker, maybe fifteen, had already committed; his back wheel bounced wildly as he rode the thin blue line of singletrack, his face a mask of pure panic.

But what caught Maya's eye, more than the bikes or the trail or even the spectacular view of the frozen lake below, was the guy standing on the highest rock with a camera the size of a toaster. He had a mop of unruly brown hair, wore a windbreaker over a tank top, and balanced on the balls of his feet with the easy confidence of someone who'd spent most of his life on cliffsides. He tracked the bikers through the viewfinder with one hand, the other holding a microphone rig that looked like it was built to record thunderstorms. Maya recognized him instantly as the filming man from the DC Pub & Grill, only here he was in his element, every muscle tuned to the unfolding drama below.

As Maya stepped off the trail to let the riders pass, the inevitable happened: the younger biker hit the soft shoulder, his front tire vanished in the gravel, and he executed a flawless over-the-bars cartwheel, landing in a tangled heap of limbs and frame.

"Dude!" yelled the woman at the top, "You good?"

The kid rolled over, groaned theatrically, and raised a gloved thumb.

The cameraman sprinted down the embankment with the energy of a golden retriever, camera held high. Maya jogged after him, reaching the crash site in time to see the kid already unbuckling his helmet, cheeks red but otherwise intact.

"That was awesome," the cameraman said, kneeling next to the biker and angling for a close-up. "You absolutely stuck the landing. How's the wrist?"

The kid flexed his hand and grinned for the lens. "Still attached."

"Legendary," said the cameraman, then turned to Maya. "Can you grab that wheel for me?"

She nodded and fished the front tire from a thicket of sage. As she handed it over, the cameraman gave her a double-take. "Hey—weren't you at the pub yesterday?"

Maya smiled, shifting the pack on her shoulder. "I was. You were recording B-roll?"

He barked a laugh. "Always. Duck Creek's got more stories than a Marvel franchise." He wiped his hand on his jeans and offered it. "Leo."

She took it—his palm was warm, his grip solid. "Maya."

He gave her a once-over, taking in the muddy boots, the battered

field pack, the splash of blue ink on her jacket's sleeve. "You local, or just one of us weirdo transplants?"

"My family's up here a lot. I'm just visiting, for now." She looked past him to the biker, who was now reassembling his dignity and his bike. "You do this every morning?"

Leo shrugged. "If I don't, who will? The Internet demands content. Besides, these guys love the attention. Is that right, Logan?"

The kid pumped his fist. "I want to go viral. My mom says it'll help with college."

Maya tried not to laugh, but it slipped out anyway. "I think that's how the system works."

Leo started walking the bike up to the trail, gesturing for Maya to follow. "What brings you out here at the crack of dawn? Research? Or are you just really into shin splints?"

Maya debated how much to share, but his curiosity was so open and unserious that she decided to go for it. "I'm starting a hydrology project on the lake. Mostly to see how it's still a lake, given that it drains like a sieve."

Leo's eyebrows shot up. "The Black Hole thing? Like, the lake that leaks into the center of the earth?"

She smiled at his summary. "More like it trickles into the caves below, but yeah, that's the story."

"That's wild. You should do a video about it," he said, then thought for a second. "Actually, I should do a video about it. You wanna co-star?"

They reached the ridge where the other two bikers were waiting, one holding a GoPro on a long stick.

"Leo, did you get the crash?" called the woman, her eyes lighting up.

"Every glorious second," Leo said. "We'll get it online by lunch. Group shot?"

They arranged the three bikers and Maya on the edge of the outcrop, Leo juggling his camera gear and setting the auto-timer. He scrambled into frame just as the shutter snapped, then checked the result and declared it "super photogenic, considering none of us showered."

The bikers thanked Maya for the help and rocketed off down the trail, hooting as they vanished into the pines.

Leo lingered, packing his camera into a battered Pelican case. He glanced at Maya. "So, what's your actual plan? Are you sampling the water or just looking for inspiration?"

"Both, I guess," Maya said. "I'm supposed to get baseline readings from the shore, then measure flow rates once the melt starts. It's pretty standard, unless you're obsessed with the underlying geology, which—" She caught herself before admitting she was, in fact, obsessed. "—which not everyone is."

Leo slung the camera bag over his shoulder. "You mind if I tag along? I'm doing a segment on 'Weird Science of Duck Creek,' and this is the weirdest thing I've heard all week."

She eyed him, weighing the pros and cons. "You're not going to make me eat raw fish on camera, are you?"

"Not unless it's trending," Leo said solemnly. Then he grinned. "Promise. Just want to see how you work."

They fell into step, the lake shimmering below, the trail empty except for a pair of flickers chasing each other from tree to tree. The hush returned, but it was companionable this time.

Maya stole a glance at Leo, who was already scanning the landscape for his next shot. "So what's your deal?" she asked. "Are you, like, a professional influencer?"

He barked out a short laugh. "I wish. I run 'Duck Creek Vibes'—Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, the whole circus. Mostly I document local stuff: food, people, outdoorsy things, and whatever gets the most engagement. Technically, it's a side hustle, but it pays for the camera gear and my rent. I freelance the rest."

She tried to imagine living off the whims of an algorithm. "Do you have a favorite story so far?"

Leo considered. "Last fall, a moose got loose inside the general store. Wrecked the produce aisle. That video got four million views in a week." He hesitated, then added, "But the best are the little things. Like the way the whole town turns up for pancake breakfasts, or how the kids try to outdo each other with snow forts." He shrugged, almost

sheepish. "I like showing people the stuff you wouldn't know unless you grew up here."

Maya nodded, finding herself warming to the idea. "That's why I wanted to come back. There's something about the way everyone pretends not to care, but actually cares a lot."

Leo shot her a sideways grin. "Deep. You should save that for the interview."

She rolled her eyes, but couldn't help smiling. "You said you wanted content."

"True. But you can't force the vibe." He let the silence stretch, then added, "So, is it just you out here, or do you have a field team?"

Maya hesitated, then shook her head. "Just me. My advisor's back in the city. I'll send him data, and he'll send back comments in all caps."

Leo whistled. "Hardcore. If you ever need a hand, or a ride, or someone to carry your gear, just say the word. I'm always up for an adventure, as long as it doesn't involve spiders."

"Noted," Maya said. "But you might be disappointed in the day-to-day. Most of it is just standing around, waiting for water to do its thing."

He shrugged. "That's fine. I'm good at waiting. That's when the best stories show up, anyway."

They reached the overlook, the lake spreading out below like a piece of glass shot through with blue veins. Maya scanned the shore, plotting her sampling route. Leo crouched to get a low-angle shot of the valley, the sun painting his hair gold.

For a moment, it was just the wind, the click of his camera, and the quiet anticipation of a day that felt wide open.

"So," Leo said, straightening, "where do we start?"

Maya pointed down the ridge. "The water's cold, the rocks are sharp, and if you fall in, it'll be on video forever."

He grinned. "Perfect. Let's make Duck Creek famous for something besides moose rampages."

And together they picked their way down the trail, ready for whatever weird, wonderful thing came next.

By the time they reached the water's edge, the sun had melted the last of the rime from the shadowed pines and set the entire lake to shimmering. It looked almost ordinary, except for the way the color kept shifting—one moment blue, the next green, then back to a silvery glare that forced Maya to shade her eyes with one hand.

The trail faded into a narrow strip of volcanic rubble, each step crackling underfoot. Maya stopped at a chunk of black basalt the size of a loveseat and set her pack down, stretching her back with a satisfied sigh. Leo picked his way behind her, camera bag slung like a messenger's satchel, occasionally pausing to capture close-ups of the frost-sculpted driftwood or the perfect geometry of a snowflake clinging to a rock.

"This is your first time seeing it up close?" Maya asked, fishing a battered notebook from her side pocket.

Leo knelt, steadied his phone for a slow pan, and said, "From the trail, yeah. Never got brave enough to make the descent until now. I see why they say this place is haunted."

She snorted. "It's not haunted. It just drains underground."

He glanced over his shoulder, grinning. "That's what makes it haunted. The ghost of all the missing water."

"Ghosts don't show up on flowmeters." Maya clicked the notebook open and scribbled a line. The wind off the lake tasted faintly of minerals and last year's campfires, with an undertone of something metallic she couldn't quite place.

Leo peered out over the waves, which lapped against the rocks with a slow, patient rhythm. "So what's the actual deal with this place? I've heard like, six different versions."

She set her pencil down. "The short version: the lake is dammed by a lava flow, so there's no normal outlet. But it never overflows, because the water vanishes through all these hidden tunnels. They call it the 'Navajo Lake Black Hole.'"

"Nice. Sounds like a band name." Leo rummaged in his bag for a granola bar, snapped it in half, and offered her the bigger piece.

Maya took it, suddenly aware of her hunger. "They did a dye test a few years ago. Poured fluorescent stuff into the lake, and it popped up in a river ten miles away. Basically, the water's taking a secret shortcut under the mountain."

“That’s wild. Is that your project—tracing the shortcuts?”

Maya smiled, chewing thoughtfully. “More like I’m trying to figure out how fast the shortcut works. It’s supposed to be a closed system, but sometimes the water level drops way faster than it should, like overnight. Nobody knows why.”

He looked at her, genuinely interested. “And if you solve it?”

She shrugged. “Maybe I get to write a paper that no one reads. Or maybe I figure out what happens if the shortcut ever...clogs.”

They let the silence stretch, the only sound the wind in the reeds and the distant, electronic chirp of a snowmobile reversing somewhere on the far shore. Leo finished his granola, then leaned back on his elbows, eyes closed against the sun.

“I love this,” he said quietly. “Not just the view, but the vibe. There’s a myth in every rock out here.”

Maya pretended not to notice how relaxed he looked, like a cat in a warm window. “Is that your mission, then? Myth hunting?”

He considered. “Kind of. I mean, people like the crazy stuff—bigfoot, UFOs, haunted caves. But I like the regular stories, too. The way people make up traditions out of nowhere. Or how every family’s got their own recipe for frybread, but nobody ever writes it down.”

Maya grinned. “My grandma has exactly two recipes, and both are just ‘cook it until you smell smoke, then turn the pan down.’”

He laughed, the sound carrying over the water. “That’s relatable content.”

She flipped her notebook to a fresh page and made a quick sketch of the shoreline. “So what about you? Any secret talents?”

Leo propped himself up. “I can do a wheelie for like, a block and a half. Also, I was state champion at speech and debate, but that was a lifetime ago.”

“Now you debate with comment trolls?” she guessed.

“Every day,” he said, and shot her a wink. “You?”

Maya eyed him, then decided he could handle the truth. “I can tell if a rock is igneous or sedimentary in under ten seconds.”

He whistled, impressed. “Now that is content. We’ll call it ‘Rocks with Maya’—I’ll bring the ring light.”

She rolled her eyes but felt herself blushing anyway. "Maybe if you get enough subscribers, I'll do a guest spot."

Leo pretended to jot it down in an invisible notebook. "Deal. How many do I need?"

She took the bait. "Ten thousand minimum."

He groaned. "That's brutal. I barely cleared three K last week."

"Sounds like you need more haunted lakes," Maya said, standing to brush the crumbs off her coat.

He followed suit, dusting off his pants. "Speaking of haunted, I got some weird stuff on camera last month. You ever been to Mammoth Cave?"

Maya's head snapped up. "Not since I was a kid. Why?"

He rummaged in his bag and pulled out a battered tablet, its case stickered with every meme and logo imaginable. "I was shooting some test footage, and I caught shadows moving across the cave entrance. No animals, no people, just these shapes. Here, look."

He unlocked the tablet and handed it to her. The video started with a wide shot of the cave mouth at dusk, the light already going flat. For a minute, nothing happened—just the slow zoom of the digital lens and the faint whistle of wind. Then, unmistakably, something flickered across the stone. Not a shadow cast by the trees, but a tall, thin shape, followed by another, then a third. It lasted two seconds, tops, and then the frame was empty again.

Maya tapped to rewind, then played it slower. "Could be a trick of the light," she said, but her voice was uncertain. "Or temperature gradients. Or..." She trailed off.

Leo watched her, his eyes crinkled in amusement. "I'm not saying it's ghosts, but—"

"—But it's ghosts," Maya finished. "How's your comment section?"

"Divided. Half think it's camera flare, half think it's aliens." He shrugged. "Honestly, I'm rooting for the camera flare. I like a good optical illusion."

She handed back the tablet, her fingers lingering on the edge. "You mind if I take a closer look later? Maybe compare it to some of the old survey data?"

"Please do," he said. "I'll send you the file. We can do a collab: 'Scientist versus Shadows.'"

Maya considered, then nodded. "Deal. But only if you promise not to deepfake me into a Bigfoot costume."

He crossed his heart. "Strictly amateur production values."

They walked in companionable silence, the basalt crunching underfoot. Maya stopped every so often to scribble a note or snap a photo of the waterline; Leo darted ahead, scouting for interesting angles. The wind picked up, tossing Maya's hair into her face, but she didn't bother smoothing it down.

At the bend where the rocks dropped steeply into the lake, Maya hesitated. "You hear that?" she asked.

Leo tilted his head, listening. "Sounds like...a generator?"

Maya nodded. "Could be the lodge. Or..." She trailed off, scanning the tree line.

He followed her gaze, eyebrows raised in a silent question.

She shook her head. "Nothing. Just a weird feeling."

They stood together at the shore, watching the sunlight scatter off the ripples and the dark patches where the water seemed to vanish beneath the surface.

"Tomorrow," Leo said suddenly, "let's hit the cave. I'll bring the camera, you bring the science. Worst case, we get some good b-roll and a few new ghost stories."

She looked at him, weighing the offer. Then she smiled. "Deal."

Above them, a pair of hawks circled in a widening spiral, their shadows crisscrossing on the glassy lake below. Maya's phone vibrated in her pocket, but she let it buzz, savoring the hush.

There would be time enough for data. For now, she was content to watch the water and share the moment with a new friend who, against her better judgment, she already liked.

She wondered what Dr. Fong would say about that.

They found a perfect seat for screening mysterious phenomena: a slab of sun-warmed basalt overlooking the lake, wide enough for two and far

enough from the water's edge to avoid the cold spray of wind. Leo dropped his camera bag with a theatrical groan and stretched out his legs, while Maya hopped up beside him, notebook in one hand and the other shading her eyes against the glare.

"Alright," Leo said, popping the tablet open, "prepare to have your mind blown by the world's worst digital zoom."

Maya grinned, shifting so their knees nearly touched. "I'll try to keep my expectations in check."

He brought up the Mammoth Cave video, holding the tablet at a conspiratorial angle so she could see. The screen flickered to life, revealing a dusk-lit shot of the cave mouth, framed by two misshapen pine trees and a scatter of snow at the base. For several seconds, nothing moved except the slow crawl of digital noise. Then, as in the first showing, the shadows appeared: three narrow, elongated forms, flickering in and out of the frame as if someone was waving a sheet of opaque plastic just off camera.

Leo paused the video and squinted. "Tell me that's not weird."

"It's weird," Maya admitted, then took the tablet for a closer look. She watched the segment again, this time drawing a finger over the play-head to slow it down even further. "Could be tree movement, maybe? Or an artifact from the sensor?"

"Tree movement doesn't go sideways," Leo said, eyes twinkling. "And artifacts don't look like...that."

She rewound and replayed the sequence, counting aloud. "First one here...then the next two, two-point-two seconds later." She peered at the pixelated edge of the shadow. "But if it was a person or animal, there should be some light occlusion on the approach, not just the crossing."

Leo watched her with open admiration. "You're good at this. Did you ever consider CSI?"

She made a face. "Too much paperwork. Besides, most mysteries come down to boring stuff like barometric pressure and misplaced lunch meat."

He snorted, then swiped to a folder labeled "WEIRDOLOGY." "Here's where my followers went full X-Files. You want to see?"

"Always."

He opened the comments on the original post, and Maya read as Leo scrolled:

— “Definitely spirits. Check the Navajo legends.”

— “Shadows of extinct animals, the area is a cryptid hotspot.”

— “I work in video, this is classic frame bleed or motion lag, but also, could be aliens.”

She looked up at him. “So which camp are you in?”

Leo shrugged, playing it cool but obviously invested. “I want it to be something wild, like a lost miner or a phantom cave bear. But...my money’s on a really strange air current. Or some effect from the lava tubes nobody’s mapped yet.”

She mulled it over, clicking her tongue against her teeth. “You got infrared?”

He blinked. “I wish. That’s pro gear—unless you’re buying.”

She passed the tablet back, careful not to smudge the screen. “Next time, bring a thermal camera. Or at least a bag of flour. You’d be surprised how much a little airborne powder can show you.”

Leo tapped a note into his phone, fingers flying. “See, this is why I need a science consultant on my channel. No offense to the regulars, but you’re smarter than all of them combined.”

Maya’s cheeks warmed, but she played it off by zipping up her jacket another inch. “I’ll send you my hourly rate.”

He bumped her shoulder lightly, eyes still on the tablet. “Deal. So what’s your theory, really?”

She thought for a moment, then said, “Best guess? There’s a vent inside the cave, and when dusk hits, the air temperature flips, shooting out a plume of warm air. That bends the light, and if you catch it at the right angle, it distorts the background enough to make a shadow.”

Leo’s smile faded into something more contemplative. “That’s actually a way cooler answer than ghosts.”

She tapped his shoe with her boot. "Science is always cooler than ghosts. Unless it's haunted science."

He grinned, closing the tablet. "You want to check it out tomorrow? There's an old access trail. I can bring the GoPros, you bring the skepticism."

She considered, then nodded. "Only if we stop for hot chocolate on the way. Last time I went spelunking, I nearly lost a toe."

"Promise. Also, there's a food truck by the cave now—does funnel cake with extra powdered sugar count as breakfast?"

She couldn't help but laugh. "For science, anything counts."

They both leaned back, letting the warmth of the rock and the reflected sun soak in. Leo closed his eyes for a second, and Maya watched the clouds shifting above the lake, turning from white to gold as the morning brightened.

The peace held for all of twenty seconds before a distant rumbling snapped Maya's attention toward the far end of the lake. The sound grew quickly—like a bowling alley collapsing in slow motion—punctuated by the occasional clatter of falling stones.

She scanned the treeline. "Do you hear that?"

Leo sat up, instantly alert. "Uh, yeah, is that...thunder?"

The rumble deepened, and then a monstrous, gleaming RV rounded the bend in the road above the lakeshore, grinding over the rocks with absolute indifference to the state park's weight restrictions. The vehicle was at least forty feet long, painted white with swooping blue and red graphics. As it powered down the embankment, every bird for a quarter mile went dead silent.

Maya gaped. "You've got to be kidding me."

Leo's jaw dropped in delight. "No way. That's the Miller-White rig!"

He scrambled for his camera as the RV lurched to a halt in a spray of gravel. The side panel unfurled to reveal dramatic stenciling: "Miller-White Cryptozoology Adventures" in blood-red, complete with black silhouettes of Bigfoot, a thunderbird, and a three-headed snake.

A woman in a fluorescent windbreaker and aviator sunglasses hopped out, followed by a man in matching gear, his hair slicked back into a helmet of determination. They carried a collapsible table and a

portable sign, which they hammered into the frozen ground in front of the RV.

The sign read: "CRYPTID HUNTING STARTS AT NOON—JOIN THE SEARCH, PROVE THE LEGEND!"

Leo doubled over laughing. "This is the best day of my life."

Maya didn't know whether to laugh or groan. "Are they for real?"

"Oh, completely. They did a whole series last year on the ice mermaids of Yellowstone." He swung his camera around, filming the tableau. "They're the Kardashians of cryptid TikTok."

Maya shook her head, unable to hide her smile. "I can't believe I'm sharing a shoreline with this."

Leo finished his shot, then glanced at her. "Admit it, you're a little curious."

She snorted. "Only about the funnel cake. But yeah, maybe."

The Miller-White team had set up a folding throne, and were now busy arranging jars of "Specimen Sample," each one containing what looked like colored water and a plastic tooth. The woman waved at Maya and Leo with the confident, wide-armed greeting of someone used to performing for crowds.

Maya waved back, grinning despite herself. "Tomorrow's going to be wild, isn't it?"

Leo shouldered his camera bag, eyes shining. "Wildlife and WiFi, that's the whole brand."

Maya was ready for it.

three the cryptozoologists

THE MILLER-WHITE TEAM wasted no time converting the lakeshore into their personal command post. As Maya watched from her basalt perch, the spectacle unfolded like a roadside attraction with a bottomless marketing budget: first, a branded pop-up tent in traffic-cone orange, then a pair of fiberglass folding thrones with faux-jaguar cushions, and finally a lineup of three custom lawn gnomes—each spray-painted to resemble a different cryptid. The gnomes stood sentry at the entrance to what quickly became “Expedition Base Alpha.”

Leo filmed everything, narrating in his best Discovery Channel voice. “And here we see the apex predator establishing dominance over its habitat by marking territory with...,” he zoomed in on the Bigfoot gnome, “ceramic effigies. A bold move.”

Maya elbowed him. “Be nice. That’s basically my family’s Christmas display, minus the elves.”

“Yeah,” he whispered, “but I’m sure yours is charmingly understated.”

While they joked, the RV’s main hatch hissed open and out strode a man built to host game shows: tall, lantern-jawed, hair frosted to a level of silver not seen in nature. His face was creased by a permanent, camera-ready smile, and every motion telegraphed a friendly, assertive enthusiasm. He wore a safari vest so covered in utility pockets that it

looked like a wearable tackle box, each pouch bulging with pens, walkie-talkies, laminated field guides, and a roll of fluorescent tape.

Next out: a woman with close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair, dressed in earth-toned fleece and jeans, with an air of practical efficiency. She carried a battered leather-bound journal under one arm and squinted into the sun, taking in the lay of the land as if she was already sketching it from memory. Her glasses were the old-fashioned wire kind, perched halfway down her nose, and she had the calm but quietly competitive manner of someone who had won every Trivial Pursuit game since the late nineties.

Trailing them by a few yards, a teenage boy hunched over a ruggedized laptop, earbuds in and attention fixed on a spidery tangle of cables and sensors. His hoodie was so oversized it nearly swallowed his hands, and from the distance, Maya could see at least three different stickers on his water bottle: an astronaut cat, a WiFi logo, and something that looked suspiciously like the logo for a quantum computing conference.

The family conferred briefly around a folding table. Maya half expected a clapperboard to appear, but instead the father pointed directly at her and Leo, then made a “come here” motion big enough for a rescue chopper to see.

“Should we run?” Leo murmured.

Maya snorted. “You’re the one who said you wanted a viral moment. This is how it starts.”

As they made their way down the frost-laced slope, the woman was first to step forward. She extended a hand, palm up. “Sarah Miller-White. Expedition director, and sometime voice of reason.”

Maya shook it, feeling the strong, weathered grip of someone who had lived in the field as much as the lab. “Maya. Hydrology, mostly.”

Sarah’s eyes lit up. “I know your work! Your ‘water as infrastructure’ piece was required reading for my last grad seminar.” She smiled, warm and genuine. “I’m honestly delighted to meet you in person.”

Maya blinked, caught off guard by the familiarity, then glanced at Leo.

“Leo,” he said, giving a little salute. “I run Duck Creek Vibes—local content, mostly.”

“Excellent!” Sarah said, giving him a once-over that read as both appraisal and encouragement. “We need people who know how to tell a story.”

Behind her, the father beamed and extended his hand with a flourish. “Barnaby Miller-White. Field investigator, cryptozoology division, and international man of mystery.” He dropped his voice and leaned in as if to share a state secret: “But you can call me Barney, like everyone else.”

He shook Leo’s hand, then Maya’s, with just a hair too much enthusiasm—like a motivational speaker who’d already decided you were destined for greatness.

“I’ve seen your channel,” Barney said to Leo. “You have a terrific sense for pacing. A rare gift, especially in a world that rewards endless digression.”

Leo blinked, momentarily thrown off his game. “Uh, thanks! Are you...filming today?”

Barney wagged a finger. “Always filming, but also always recruiting talent.” He winked. “We’re between fixers. Sarah says I scare them off, but I think it’s just the smell of adventure.”

Sarah rolled her eyes, but with affection. She waved her journal. “Mostly, he asks for help with the paperwork. Or, when we’re on location, not dying in the wilderness.”

Maya grinned. “That’s usually high on my own agenda, too.”

Barnaby gestured dramatically to the teenager, who remained glued to his screen. “This is our son, Tobias, but he prefers Toby. He’s our resident technology savant, drone pilot, and—let’s be honest—chief safety officer.”

Toby raised a hand without looking up. “Hello. Please don’t step on the cables.”

Maya and Leo both laughed. Leo knelt to inspect the tech, and Toby glanced up just long enough to confirm it was being appreciated, then pointed at a device the size of a toaster oven.

“Thermal imager,” he said. “Homemade, but good to minus thirty

Celsius. The color display is buggy, but it sees heat signatures out to one-point-eight kilometers.”

Leo whistled, visibly impressed. “Did you build this yourself?”

Toby nodded, a tiny smile flickering. “We tried buying one, but Dad melted it on the first test run. This is version four-point-three.”

Barney put a hand on his heart. “No one told me the soup can would conduct electricity so well.”

Maya exchanged a glance with Sarah, who mouthed, “It was soup.”

Toby continued, “I’ll have it streaming to the TV in the RV by noon. But if you want a demo, I can do that now.”

“Later,” Barney said, already herding Maya and Leo toward the RV’s awning. “First, let’s talk shop. I have reason to believe”—here he paused for effect—“that the world’s next great cryptid breakthrough will happen right here in Duck Creek. But only if we work together.”

He steered them to a pair of zero-gravity lawn chairs under the awning, then produced a battered field notebook and a highlighter in safety yellow. “We’re following a lead. A big one.”

Sarah settled into a camp chair, crossing her legs and balancing the journal on one knee. “We’ve mapped out the entire Navajo Lake perimeter, plus six adjacent basins. Barnaby thinks there’s a migration pattern.”

Barnaby held up a page of notes, all in blocky, all-caps handwriting. “Sightings cluster along the same lines as the hydrological shortcuts—your specialty, Maya.” He beamed at her. “What do you make of that?”

Maya looked at the scribbled map, recognizing the lines at once. “You’re charting the old lava tubes. That’s why the dye tests show water popping up miles away.”

“Exactly!” Barney said, pounding the notebook for emphasis. “That’s the vector. The corridor.”

Leo leaned forward. “You’re saying the cryptids—”

“—Sasquatch, to be technical,” Sarah interjected.

“—move along the same underground channels as the water?” Leo finished.

Barney made jazz hands. “Nature loves efficiency. Why wouldn’t the North American Hominid?”

Maya tried to keep her face straight. "Are you suggesting they surf the water table?"

"Surf is a strong word," Barney said, wagging the highlighter. "But yes. If you had thousands of years to adapt, wouldn't you use the cave system as your freeway?"

Toby piped up from the equipment table. "It's not that weird, really. Bats do it, cave bears used to do it, and some amphibians never see daylight. Plus, the thermal readings last night showed a moving mass at four in the morning. Bigger than any local fauna."

Maya turned skeptical. "Bigger than a moose?"

"Much," Sarah said, flipping through the journal. "The temperature spike was massive. It lasted for a few minutes, then nothing."

"Could have been the wind," Maya said. "Or a broken sensor."

Toby looked mildly offended. "I wrote the error correction myself. It's legit."

Barney clapped his hands. "You see? The passion. The interdisciplinary spark. That's what I need for this operation. Real science, not just field notes and blurry photos."

He leaned in conspiratorially. "Here's the pitch. We want you two to help us run a controlled observation tonight. We'll supply the equipment. You pick the site. If there's something moving underground—or something using the caves as a route—we'll catch it, one way or another."

Sarah added, "We'll compensate you for your time, of course. And if it's all a wash, you still get exclusive access to our footage for your own channels and research."

Maya glanced at Leo. He looked like a kid who'd just been offered a job as chief rollercoaster tester.

She cleared her throat. "I'm not promising to find a Sasquatch. But if you want someone to calibrate the sensors, or run the water flow tests, I can do that. As long as nobody expects me to hunt anything."

Barney's smile widened. "No hunting. Only observing."

"Plus," Sarah said, voice softening, "if there's even a slim chance we could map the cave system better, you'd be the ideal lead."

Leo grinned. "You had me at 'exclusive content.' We're in."

Barney smacked the table in triumph. "Perfect! You two are offi-

cially deputized.” He pulled out a pair of custom enamel pins—one a howling wolf, the other a cartoon Sasquatch in a lab coat—and handed them over. “Wear these with pride.”

Maya pinned the wolf to her backpack, unable to keep from smiling. “So, where’s the best view for tonight’s watch?”

Sarah tapped her journal. “You’ll want the ridge above Mammoth Cave. The sightlines are clear, and it’s less exposed to the wind.”

Barney beamed at her. “That’s my Sarah. Always thinking ahead.”

They sketched out a plan—meet up at dusk, bring the gear, and run a full survey through the night. Maya and Leo left the RV with arms full of snacks (“field rations,” Barney called them), a loaner walkie-talkie, and the promise of an adventure worthy of Duck Creek’s wildest stories.

As they trudged back up the lakeshore, Maya eyed the Sasquatch pin and nudged Leo. “You realize we just signed up to spend the night in a freezing cave with a reality-TV family.”

He laughed. “And you love it.”

She did. She really, really did.

The area beneath the RV’s awning had transformed into a full-blown expedition HQ. A portable camp table, legs jammed deep into the lakeshore scree, supported a laptop, two laminated topographic maps, an entire Tupperware of neon-orange highlighters, and—front and center—a display case lined with crushed velvet. A small crowd of onlookers had begun to gather: a couple of dog walkers, a ski instructor still in his bibs, and even the trout-shaped mailbox guy from Maya’s earlier hike, who hovered near the snacks but kept his eyes fixed on the spectacle.

Barnaby had a gift for timing. He waited until the maximum possible number of eyes were on him, then placed both hands flat on the velvet and announced, “Ladies, gentlemen, and all seekers of the unknown—I give you the original Miller-Loveless Map.”

He undid the case’s brass clasps and, with theatrical delicacy, withdrew a single, yellowed sheet from its protective sleeve. Even from a

meter away, Maya could see the faded lines and the rickrack of black-ink writing, the edges browned as if the map had spent a few decades tacked above a fireplace. Barnaby laid it flat, smoothing it with the kind of reverence usually reserved for holy relics.

“Hand-drawn in 1939 by Professor Edgar Loveless—legendary cryptid theorist and my spiritual mentor,” Barnaby intoned, his voice dropping to a hush. “Every mark on this map is a first-hand report, cross-referenced against geological surveys and, thanks to my son here, modern GPS data.”

Sarah slid in beside him, tapping the margin. “He always forgets to mention the annotation system. Each color shows a different year—black for the ‘30s, blue for the ‘50s, red for the ‘80s, and so on. It’s how we track migration.”

Leo filmed the entire reveal, phone propped against a Yeti tumbler. “Does this mean there’s a cryptid hot spot in Utah?”

Barnaby grinned. “Not just Utah. Right here. Note the bold double line—directly from Mammoth Cave to the Pink Cliffs, through Navajo Lake.”

He traced the route with a gloved finger, and Maya leaned in. “That’s exactly the same vector as the groundwater flow,” she murmured. “Your cryptid highway matches the lava tube drainage.”

Sarah’s eyes twinkled. “That’s why we wanted you on this, Maya. Your baseline surveys overlap perfectly with the old sighting data.”

Barnaby, undeterred by nuance, boomed, “It’s the corridor. The path. My theory—if I may—”

Sarah snuck a look at Maya. “He will.”

Barnaby continued, “—is that the North American Sasquatch, like any intelligent species, follows the path of least resistance. Lava tubes, fault lines, abandoned mineshafts. All mapped. All hiding in plain sight.”

He gestured to Toby, who had been quietly arranging a tower of tech beside the table. “Show them what you found, son.”

Toby flicked a switch on the imager. A strip of red and green LEDs strobed along the base, and a portable display snapped to life, showing a jittery, color-coded view of the nearest tree line. Every warm object

glowed orange, including two chickadees hopping in the brush and a patch of sunlight on the snow.

Toby nudged the dial. "Look here," he said, voice flat but focused. "Last night, right at 03:14, we caught a signature moving parallel to the shoreline. Bigger than a bear. Hotter than the ambient by at least eight degrees."

He tapped the screen to bring up a grainy, time-stamped image. The shape was more blob than biped, but Maya saw the height reference on the margin: almost two meters tall, moving fast.

Sarah added, "We triple-checked against the forest service wildlife log. No large mammals in this sector at that hour. No hikers, either—the road is closed overnight."

Barnaby beamed. "Which leaves only one conclusion: we are on the verge of the greatest discovery in modern zoological history."

Leo, never one to miss a cue, panned the camera for a reaction shot. "That's—actually kind of wild."

Maya, who had spent the last three years debunking temperature sensor error in undergraduate labs, forced herself to ask: "What's the variance on your calibration?"

Toby perked up. "Plus or minus point-six degrees Celsius. I built in a correction for reflective interference."

Maya nodded, grudgingly impressed. "And the wind speed?"

"Two knots, from the west. I have an anemometer patched in."

She glanced at Leo, who mouthed, "They're legit."

Barnaby slid a fresh printout across the table. "Our plan is simple: you and Leo run your standard lake sampling at dusk, while we set up the perimeter sensors. We'll triangulate any movement using the map grid, and if we get a solid hit—well, the footage writes itself."

Sarah, voice softer, added, "We don't expect you to play along with the TV drama. Just do what you do best, and tell us what's real."

Leo's eyes gleamed. "If it's all the same, I'd love to get a time-lapse on the setup process. Maybe some interviews for context?"

Barnaby nodded, already in full producer mode. "We'll do a confessional. You'll love it."

They spent the next hour reviewing the map, overlaying digital GPS points, and plotting where to place the tripods for optimal coverage.

Maya took charge of the water sample protocols, arguing with herself over whether to bring the backup spectrophotometer or risk the main one near all the electronics. Leo worked with Toby to rig the GoPros along the ridge, narrating each step like it was the prelude to a lunar landing.

By lunch, the basecamp buzzed with the energy of a cross between a science fair and a reality show casting call. Even the locals started placing bets on what the “Monster Crew” would find, the consensus swinging between “big hairy nothing” and “maybe a mountain lion.”

Just before packing up, Barnaby produced a Ziploc bag of home-made jerky and passed it around. “Fuel up, everyone. This is going to be one for the history books.”

Maya chewed a piece, staring at the hand-drawn corridor on the map, and wondered just how much stranger the next twenty-four hours could get.

She had a feeling she’d find out.

Barnaby waited for the snack break to wind down before making his pitch. He licked a bit of teriyaki off his thumb, then leaned in across the map, voice dropping to the hush reserved for movie trailers and mid-campfire confessions. “All right, team. Here’s the ask. We’d like you two to join the hunt. Not as extras—for real. As local guides and mission specialists. Maya, your science chops are exactly what we need. Leo, your sense for the terrain is better than any app.”

He paused, letting the offer sink in. Over Barnaby’s shoulder, the logoed RV glimmered in the brightening sun, and the air buzzed with the electric blue of possibility and the lingering scent of beef jerky.

Maya resisted the urge to respond with a joke, knowing any sign of interest would be pounced on. Instead, she asked, “Is this like a formal job? Because I have to submit my hours.”

Sarah laughed. “You’d be on the books. Our network requires it for insurance. All waivers and NDAs provided.”

Barnaby nodded solemnly. “And we pay well. Even better if you find us a live specimen, but I’ll settle for indisputable evidence.”

Maya considered this, tapping her pencil on her water bottle. “What are the deliverables?”

Sarah ticked them off on her fingers. “Map any anomalous readings. Collect physical evidence—hair, scat, tracks, or otherwise. Maintain a video log for verification. And most importantly, keep everyone alive.”

Toby looked up from his tech long enough to add, “Mom always says that last one.”

Barnaby spread his hands. “We’re not expecting you to do anything you’re uncomfortable with. But if you’re in, we start at sundown tonight. Mammoth Cave trailhead.”

Leo, already calculating the clickbait titles for his first post, was all in. “I’m so down. This is like, Duck Creek X-Files. If there’s a badge or hat, I’ll wear it.”

Sarah smiled. “There’s a jumpsuit. We get them in bulk.”

Toby spun his laptop around to face Maya and Leo, queuing up a video clip labeled “PNW Expedition 2022—Episode 11, Uncut.” The opening shot: a rain-soaked Oregon forest, camera jostling as Barnaby and Sarah sprinted down a game trail, while Toby kept pace with a three-rotor drone overhead.

“We got within sixty meters of the subject,” Toby narrated, “but it doubled back and we lost visual. Still, the drone picked up a thermal trace. Here.” He clicked ahead to a blurred, upright form weaving between fir trunks, moving much too fast for a person in that terrain.

Maya blinked, a little impressed despite herself. “How do you know it wasn’t a person?”

“Checked all the nearby campsites, and nobody was out that day except us and one dude with a beagle,” said Sarah. “Beagle’s on film. We call this one the ‘Ghost Runner.’”

Barnaby chimed in, “We think they’re more migratory than territorial. There are whole years with no sightings, then three in a week when the conditions line up.”

Maya asked, “And if it’s not a biped? What’s your fallback hypothesis?”

Toby had an answer queued. “We run the footage through three wildlife classifiers. It never matches a bear or moose. Sometimes it matches a human, but the stride and shoulder width are always off.”

Sarah looked at Maya, her gaze steady. “You don’t have to believe. But you do have to check the data.”

Maya mulled it over, biting back a smile. She could think of worse things than a field day with a family who knew how to label a dataset. “What about the cave system? Isn’t it unstable in places?”

“Good catch,” said Sarah. “We never go beyond the mapped public paths without a pro. That’s you, if you want it.”

Barnaby added, “And we always leave a watch up top. Buddy system, radios, even the park ranger’s on speed dial. It’s not a death wish, just a wish for truth.”

The pitch was perfect—cheesy, sincere, and hard to refuse. Maya glanced at Leo, who was nodding like a dashboard bobblehead.

“I’m not ruling it out,” she said, “but I want to set the protocol for data collection. If we’re going to do this, we do it my way.”

Barnaby’s relief was immediate and unfiltered. “Absolutely. Name the rules. Science leads, spectacle follows.”

Sarah passed Maya a second field notebook, the cover embossed with a metallic footprint. “We even have custom notebooks. For consistency.”

Maya ran a thumb over the cover, then smiled. “Okay. I’m in. But if you end up on the news with a blurry photo and a bad wig, don’t blame me.”

Leo did a tiny fist pump, trying not to look too victorious. “Best spring break ever.”

Toby, all business again, opened a new spreadsheet. “I’ll need your baseline samples by 17:00. Also, your shoe sizes for the jumpsuits.”

Barnaby clapped his hands together, startling a chickadee from a nearby branch. “That’s what I love about fieldwork: teamwork, ingenuity, and the thrill of the chase.”

He pulled out a battered thermos and poured five tiny paper cups of coffee. “To the expedition,” he toasted. “And to the day we finally prove the North American Hominid walks among us.”

The group raised their cups—some more ironically than others—and drank to the mission. The wind off the lake brought a spray of cold mist, a reminder that night would fall fast and hard.

Maya zipped up her jacket, feeling the extra weight of the field note-

book in her pocket. “If we survive this, Leo, you owe me an actual coffee. Not whatever that is.”

He grinned, shooting another quick selfie for his channel. “You got it, partner.”

Together, the five of them surveyed the lake and the dark line of forest beyond, ready for whatever real or imagined creature might cross their path.

Adventure, Maya decided, was a lot like hydrology: it always found the fastest, weirdest way downhill.

And she, for one, was along for the ride.

four first signs

DAWN IN DUCK CREEK VILLAGE never arrived quietly. The light, when it finally broke, flooded the valley in a way that didn't so much warm the bones as glare off every patch of snow and ice left from the night before. Maya stood outside Falcon's Nest, blowing into her hands and watching her breath evaporate, while around her the expedition team coalesced with a mixture of purpose and chaos.

Barnaby was first on the scene, as promised. His idea of "travel light" involved at least four field packs, two coolers, and a foldable cart that he tried and failed to wheel over the snow-dusted gravel. He wore the same safari vest as yesterday, though Maya suspected he owned a separate vest for every day of the week. This one featured an extra row of plastic specimen tubes and a "SQUATCH SQUAD" patch over the heart.

Sarah trailed behind him at a measured pace, her coffee mug steaming as she double-checked the contents of a medical kit. She'd traded the earth-toned fleece for a high-visibility windbreaker, but her jeans remained stubbornly practical. Maya caught the quick flick of Sarah's eyes as she ran through the morning checklist—Barnaby's boundless energy required countermeasures.

Toby, the team's junior technologist, showed up with his home-made thermal imager slung over one shoulder, the cable ends dangling like the tendrils of a nervous jellyfish. He nodded hello to Maya but

otherwise stayed locked into his phone, thumbing through what looked like a live sensor readout. The only evidence he knew this was more than a solo science fair was the slow, deliberate way he tracked the adults from the edge of the action.

Leo, on the other hand, rolled in ten minutes late, a battered camera case in one hand and a donut from the DC Pub in the other. He wore a blue beanie and a windbreaker he'd once described as "camera-friendly," and he moved through the group with the ingrained grace of a man who'd spent most of his life dodging in and out of crowds. "Sorry," he said, though he didn't look sorry at all. "Had to catch sunrise over the ridgeline. Got a killer shot for the intro."

Barnaby clapped him on the shoulder with enough force to jostle the camera bag. "That's the spirit! Content is king, my friend." He wagged a finger at the others, his voice loud enough to wake any neighbor not already up. "All right, team. Buddy check and load up. We'll caravan to the Lava Flats trailhead, then go in on foot."

Maya checked her own gear for the third time. Hydrology kit, field notebook, water bottles, and the weatherproof phone she used for data logs. A roll of flagging tape for marking sample sites. Three protein bars, one squashed beyond recognition. She considered the backup rain shell, then crammed it in the side pocket just in case. Her hands itched with the familiar anxiety of not wanting to be the weak link.

Leo sidled up as she cinched the last strap. "You ready to catch Bigfoot, or just hoping to get dunked in another frozen lake?"

She shot him a look. "If I go in, you're coming with me. That's how field partners work."

He grinned, unwrapping the donut. "Deal. Got your phone handy?"

She patted the chest pocket of her windbreaker. "Always."

He glanced at the others, then lowered his voice. "Honestly, what's your over/under on actually finding something out there?"

She thought for a moment. "If you mean a cryptid, less than five percent. But if you mean 'something weird,'—" she shrugged—"that's basically guaranteed up here."

He nodded, pleased. "You want to do an intro for my channel?"

Maya hesitated, but the request was gentle, almost shy. "Only if I don't have to say 'smash that like button.'"

"Deal." He pulled out his phone, framing her against the sun-drenched A-frame and the icicles overhanging the porch. "Go."

Maya squared her shoulders and did her best impression of a TV scientist. "We're about to trek into the Lava Flats, where rumor and reality blur in all the best ways. Today's mission: find out what's draining Navajo Lake, map the underground flow, and, if we're lucky, catch a glimpse of the legendary Duck Creek cryptid. Real science, real time. Also, I have no intention of falling in a lake, but if I do, you'll see it here first."

Leo beamed. "Perfect. That's a wrap on the cold open."

Sarah called over, "If you're done with Hollywood, can you help me with the med kit?"

He scampered over, leaving Maya to survey the team. Barnaby was already loading his packs into the back of a battered 4Runner, pausing every so often to narrate what he was doing for an imaginary audience. "Red bag is the perimeter sensors, blue bag is for casts and resin. Coolers are field rations. Nobody touches the thermos unless they want their soul to leave their body—Sarah's coffee is not for beginners."

Sarah, with surgical efficiency, did a final check of everyone's gloves and boots. "Barnaby, you're sure the weather window holds?"

He gave her a thumbs-up. "Clear till noon, then clouds, maybe some wind. Nothing we can't handle."

She looked unconvinced but let it drop. "Okay. Helmets, everyone." She handed out the neon-orange climbing helmets, which instantly made the group look less like a cryptid hunting squad and more like a team of overgrown road workers.

They loaded into the car, cramming three in back and two in front, with Barnaby giving running commentary on every turn of the road. "To your left, you'll see the historic Movie Ranch Road. Fun fact: half the old westerns shot here had crews larger than the town's actual population. Up ahead, notice the glacial till—textbook case of post-Ice Age sedimentation."

Leo, jammed in the middle with his camera rig, offered, "Did you know Barnaby was a substitute teacher before this?"

Maya nodded, already aware, but the detail made her smile.

Barnaby, undeterred, rolled right on. "Duck Creek's got more unsolved phenomena than the rest of Kane County put together. There's the Blue Lake Monster, the High Creek Lights, and the infamous Bat Queen of Mammoth Cave. And that's not counting the ones the park service keeps off the record."

Toby, hunched over his phone, muttered, "They're all on the record. You just have to look up the right forums."

Maya caught Sarah's eye in the rearview. They shared a moment of silent amusement.

The road gave way to gravel, then to a soft dirt turnoff leading to the Lava Flats trailhead. The parking lot was empty except for a rusted-out pickup and a pile of cut firewood under a blue tarp. The air here was colder, and the trees thickened into an uneven wall of pine, aspen, and a few lone birch standing like sentinels in the morning light.

Barnaby jumped out first, slinging on two packs and nearly toppling over. "Everyone gear up. We'll want to be out past the basin by mid-morning, or the sun'll blind us to anything worth seeing."

They sorted themselves by marching order: Sarah and Maya up front, with Leo just behind to catch audio and footage. Barnaby bounced between the middle and the tail, giving pointers to Toby, who walked with his eyes glued to the thermal imager's readout. For a few minutes, the group moved in a companionable hush, the only sounds the crunch of boots, the distant whir of a woodpecker, and the soft, steady beep of Maya's GPS tracker.

As they rounded a bend in the trail, the terrain shifted. Gone was the muddy roadside—now the forest floor was a thin layer of pine duff over broken rock, and every step brought a new, sharper scent of resin and something almost lemony. Maya felt her calves burn as they started the first real climb.

Leo, breathless but still filming, called up to her. "What makes the Lava Flats so weird, anyway?"

She considered. "Well, for one, they're not actually flat. They're just a huge expanse of lava rock that's mostly hollow underneath. The last eruption here left a maze of tubes and caves—you could hike for days

and never cross your own path. Also, nobody really knows how far the main tunnels go.”

Barnaby cut in, his voice rising. “And the kicker is: nothing grows there, except these birch. White as bone, rooted right in the basalt. Some say it’s a sign the soil’s cursed.”

Leo panned the camera over the landscape. “Very metal. But probably more geochemical than supernatural, right?”

Barnaby laughed, a little too loud. “That’s what science wants you to think.”

Sarah, leading the way, slowed her pace as the trail narrowed. “Everyone keep eyes open for hazards. Lava’s sharp as broken glass—if you slip, you’ll know it.”

Maya glanced down, noticing the first signs of the geological transition. The pine needles gave way to a patchwork of black stone, porous and sharp-edged. In the distance, a pale line of birch trees shimmered against the volcanic backdrop.

They pressed on, with Barnaby occasionally stopping to collect soil samples or flag interesting formations. Leo narrated quietly for his GoPro, switching between earnest curiosity and the snarky asides that made his channel addictive. Even Maya found herself half-performing, pausing to point out a sinkhole or an unusual deposit for the hypothetical viewer.

After nearly an hour, the trees fell away in a rush, and they stood at the edge of the Lava Flats proper: a rolling field of jumbled basalt, every surface fractured and black, with streaks of pale lichen tracing along the cracks. Scattered throughout were the birch trees—thin, ghostly, and impossibly white, their roots clutching the stone like desperate hands.

Toby stopped dead, raising the thermal imager to his eyes. “Got a heat source. Twenty meters, east-northeast. Could be an animal.”

Barnaby lit up. “Let’s track it.”

Sarah interposed, calm and practical. “Or we could observe from here, see if it moves. No point scaring off the local wildlife for no reason.”

But before anyone could argue, there was a sharp, clean whistle from the direction of the birch grove. Maya froze—every nerve in her body told her she was being watched, and not by a deer.

Barnaby made a show of scanning the horizon, but Maya could feel it: a presence, not threatening but not exactly benign, hovering just beyond the line of trees.

A figure stepped out from the birch, so perfectly camouflaged in texture and tone that for a moment Maya thought she was seeing a trick of the light. It was a man, but one so entwined with the forest that it seemed he'd grown from the ground up: weathered skin, beard streaked with what might have been actual pine needles, and a patchwork coat the exact hue of dirt and snow and bark.

He approached without hesitation, boots crunching on the frozen moss, and stopped ten feet from the group.

Sarah, unfazed, called out, "Morning, neighbor."

The man nodded. When he spoke, his voice was low and flat, like water flowing under ice. "You're not the usual tourists."

Barnaby, sensing an opportunity, stepped forward, hand outstretched. "Barnaby Miller-White, expedition lead. We're doing a field survey."

The man ignored the handshake, instead turning his eyes on Maya. "Water girl," he said. "You're here for the holes."

Maya stiffened. "I'm here to map the drainage. For the university."

He gave a slow, deliberate nod. "Good. But you should go home before nightfall. There are things below even the old bones of the mountain."

Barnaby, still undeterred, said, "Are you local? Maybe you've seen—"

The man cut him off. "If you listen, you'll hear it. The thumping. It's always loudest right before the snow goes." He looked again at Maya, and this time his eyes were oddly kind. "Don't trust what you see on the surface. Everything real is underneath."

He stepped sideways, melting back into the birch line. As quickly as he'd appeared, he was gone. Only the faint sound of footsteps and the sway of the white branches marked his passing.

The group stood in silence for a long moment. Even Barnaby was at a loss.

Leo, who'd caught the whole thing on video, said, "Well, that

was...unexpected. You get a lot of random mountain prophets up here?”

Maya shook her head. “I think that was Elias. Locals call him the Forest Hermit. Some say he used to work for the Forest Service, then decided the trees needed him more than people did.”

Sarah exhaled, her shoulders relaxing. “Let’s take the advice. We do our measurements and get back before sunset.”

Barnaby, newly reined in, said, “Agreed. But if we hear the thumping, I want to be close enough to catch it on tape.”

Toby was already logging the thermal readings, barely looking up. “I got his heat signature. It dropped to nothing as soon as he hit the trees.”

Maya, trying to shake off the encounter, pulled out her field notebook and started jotting. She recorded the time, location, weather, and a quick sketch of the birch against the basalt. She added a note: “Elias sighting. Warned us about the ‘thumping.’ Revisit hypothesis re: seismic anomalies or possible cave resonance.”

As the others regrouped, Maya found herself looking again at the line of white trees, wondering what might be sleeping in the dark below.

The warning echoed in her mind, but curiosity edged out fear. There was still so much more to see.

The farther they walked, the less the landscape looked like any version of Utah Maya had known. Past the birch line, the ground was a broken plain of jet-black glass, spattered with islands of lichen and moss so green they looked painted on. The ash layer, surprisingly thick, clung to boots and left dusty streaks on every exposed surface. Even with the sun angled low, the flats reflected enough glare to make Maya’s eyes water.

She paused, catching her breath and the subtle tang of sulfur carried on the wind. The air felt charged, each footstep a small act of defiance against the centuries of quiet left by the lava flow. Maya knelt to take a quick sample, digging a core tube into the soft ash and capping it for later. She logged the site coordinates and rejoined the group, who were already several dozen meters ahead and mostly silhouettes in the wash of morning light.

Barnaby led from the front, legs eating the distance in a loping

stride. At least twice, he stopped abruptly to scrutinize the ground, sometimes bending low or snapping a photo before bounding forward again. Sarah walked at his elbow, notebook open, cataloguing observations aloud for Leo's camera. Maya smiled at the sound, recognizing the cadence of an old field pro trying to keep the focus on data collection rather than the increasingly bizarre context.

Toby, trailing at the rear, had his thermal imager fixed on the tree line. "Nothing but squirrels," he muttered every few minutes, but he didn't lower the scope.

It was Sarah who first noticed the prints, but Barnaby was the one to give them their moment.

He stopped so suddenly that Sarah nearly walked into him. He pointed at the ground, eyes wide, and let out a strangled gasp. "Look at the size of these!"

Maya hurried up, expecting a coyote track or maybe a mountain lion. Instead, she found herself staring at a series of perfect depressions in the ash, each one wider than her outstretched hand and long enough to fit her entire forearm. The prints formed a staggered path across the flats, weaving between the largest boulders. The leading edge of each print was razor-sharp, the fine ash holding the impression as if it had been set in plaster.

Barnaby dropped to his knees, ignoring the instant cloud of dust. "Seventeen inches. At least!" He whipped out a tape measure and laid it alongside the nearest print, then looked up at the group, his face already glowing with vindication.

Sarah crouched beside him, brushing a stray pine needle from the ash before taking a careful, ruler-framed photo. "The stride's nearly five feet," she said, her tone more thoughtful than excited. "No drag marks, either. Whatever made these walks upright and with intent."

Leo swept his phone along the trail, narrating in hushed awe. "For the record, this is the largest print any of us have ever seen in the wild. This is, no joke, the Bigfoot holy grail."

Maya kept her skepticism on a tight leash, but she couldn't help her curiosity. She knelt next to the print, picking up a pinch of the ash and letting it run through her fingers. The impression was deep, but the

base layer below was packed firm. She glanced up at Sarah. "How fresh do you think these are?"

Sarah considered. "Overnight, maybe? There's no debris in them. And the ash hasn't filled the edges yet."

Barnaby, meanwhile, was already at the second print, laying out a kit Maya recognized from her own forensic geology course: a collapsible frame, casting resin, spatulas, and a roll of thin mesh for reinforcement. He worked with the speed of a man who'd practiced on a hundred lesser mysteries.

"Sarah, can you record this for the log?" he called. "'Barnaby Miller-White, making first cast at Lava Flats Site Alpha.' I want to get a clean pull before the wind picks up."

Sarah set the camera for a tight close-up as Barnaby mixed the casting compound, muttering an improvised play-by-play. "This is classic. Absolutely textbook. The hallux, the arch—look at that midtarsal break. No human could fake this, not with this detail."

Maya cocked her head, examining the way the ash compressed at the heel. "It's strange," she said, mostly for herself but loud enough for Leo to overhear. "You'd expect more collapse on the outside edge, unless it's really flat-footed. Or unless the weight's distributed differently than a human."

Leo, sensing content gold, knelt beside her. "Say that again for the camera?"

She eyed him. "What, the part where I say it's probably just a bear walking funny?"

He grinned. "You said 'different than a human.' That's the pull quote."

She rolled her eyes, but obliged. "The pressure's weird. Not human, not bear, not any of the standard local fauna." She ran a fingertip along the print's deepest part. "If it's a hoax, it's a good one. But look here—no crosshatching, no seam lines from a fake foot. Whoever—or whatever—made this, it's not a standard costume."

Leo steadied the phone, letting her work in silence for a few seconds. He whispered, "You ever see anything like this?"

Maya shook her head. "Never. But I also don't study footprints for a living."

Barnaby, done with the first pour, called everyone over to the third print. "This one's even clearer!" He crouched and pointed at a faint set of ridges in the center. "Dermal ridges. You can see the friction lines. Sarah, tell me that's not the most beautiful thing you've ever seen."

Sarah, already documenting, didn't look up. "It's impressive, Barney. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. I want baseline casts, then we sweep the rest of the line for samples."

Maya edged closer, curious despite herself. The ridges were faint, but unmistakable. She pulled out her macro lens and snapped a few close-ups, making a note to send them to her friend in the biology department. If they were real, this would be worth a dozen conference posters.

Barnaby, energized by the moment, popped open his thermos and took a celebratory swig. "Leo, get a shot of us with the prints. This is history."

Leo obliged, but lingered a moment after. "Maya, for real—what are the odds this is, you know, legit?"

She hesitated, weighing the evidence. "Higher than zero. Lower than a thousand. I need to see what else is out here."

Toby, who had been running a sweep with his scanner, piped up. "Thermal's still clean. Nothing big in the area now. But the prints are warmer than the surrounding ash."

Barnaby nearly dropped the casting tray. "What? How?"

Toby shrugged. "I dunno. Maybe it's sun exposure, or the ash holds heat differently. But the inside of the prints is about three degrees warmer."

Sarah leaned in, her interest clearly piqued. "We need temperature logs. And we should check for any biological material—hair, skin cells, anything."

Barnaby set the cast carefully on a tarp, then motioned for Maya to help him sweep the adjacent rocks. They moved in tandem, scanning for more evidence. Maya let her mind run wild for a minute—what if the prints were real? What if the creature was still in the area? But she couldn't shake the memory of Elias's warning: Don't trust what you see on the surface.

As the casts set, Sarah took samples from the perimeter of each

print, careful to seal everything in clean tubes. Barnaby filmed a quick segment for Leo, holding up the nearly finished cast with the pride of a kid showing off a blue ribbon. "This is it, folks—the best evidence we've ever had. I promise, you're going to want to subscribe for the results."

Leo beamed behind the camera, but when Maya caught his eye, she saw the question lingering there—skepticism, or maybe just a hunger for the next big thing.

She wandered a little ways off, pretending to check her GPS but really just wanting a moment to process. The flat stretched in all directions, the birch and pine a distant, indifferent audience. The day was warming now, but the prints remained, sharp and undeniable in the ash.

She crouched again, brushing a stray thought from her mind as she examined a final, partial print at the edge of the flow. It was smaller, maybe half the size of the others, but the shape matched. She marked the coordinates and snapped a picture.

Behind her, Barnaby and Sarah debated the best way to package the casts for transport. Toby packed away his imager, eyes already on his phone. Leo lingered nearby, waiting for Maya to finish.

"Hey," he said softly, "you okay?"

She looked up at him, weighing her response. "It's just a lot to take in. Either we found something incredible, or we're getting pranked on a truly impressive scale."

He knelt beside her, grinning. "Why not both?"

She smiled despite herself, feeling the tension drain a little. "I guess we'll find out tonight."

He nudged her with his elbow. "You want first watch at the cave?"

She shook her head. "You take it. You're braver than me."

He laughed, standing and offering her a hand up. "I'm just better at pretending."

They walked back to the group together. The casts were set, the samples logged, and Barnaby was already plotting their next move. "We push on to the cave, set up camp, and run a night watch. If anything's out here, it'll come out after dark."

Sarah packed up the evidence, double-checking every label. "Maya,

would you help me with the samples? I want to keep the temperature consistent till we get them back.”

“Sure,” Maya said, grateful for the task.

As they finished, Maya looked back one more time at the trail of prints. Whatever had made them, it had crossed the Lava Flats with purpose. She wondered if it was heading somewhere, or away from something, and if the story would hold up once they got the evidence under a microscope.

Either way, she knew tonight would bring answers—or at least, a new set of questions.

Mammoth Cave’s main entrance yawned out of the hillside in a way that made even seasoned hikers slow down and take a second look. At dusk, the mouth of the cave seemed to pull the air toward it, drawing every stray wisp of mist and the first hints of night-cold right into its stone throat. The expedition team set camp at the closest safe distance, spreading their tents in a loose crescent that offered at least the illusion of security.

Maya busied herself with the practicalities—staking her tent on the only patch of flat earth, double-checking the zip ties on her pack, and sorting her gear by the pale, indirect light of her headlamp. Leo had already set up a tripod and was moving between his phone and a shotgun mic, narrating every step for the future “Duck Creek Vibes” post-mortem. Sarah built a tidy fire ring out of lava rock, then produced a meal kit with enough ramen and jerky to survive a minor apocalypse.

Barnaby, for all his showmanship, was an efficient camp boss. He had the sensor arrays up and running before Maya had even finished the tent, and now he moved between the equipment stations with a sort of military precision, checking batteries and signal strength and making notes in a tiny spiral-bound notebook.

Toby ignored the tents altogether, instead claiming a spot on the largest boulder with his laptop and the thermal imager. He wore fingerless gloves, tapping at the keyboard with the speed of a kid who had grown up with a screen for a baby blanket.

By the time the last light faded from the sky, the team was settled in a circle around the fire, each lost in their own version of anticipation.

Leo nudged Toby with his elbow, then grinned at Maya. "So, you think we'll get audio tonight?"

Toby made a dismissive sound but didn't look up from his screen. "If anything's moving in there, this mic will pick it up."

Leo nodded, proud, then faced the group. "In case anyone wants to know, we're running a four-mic directional array pointed at the entrance and a pair of GoPros on motion-detect. If the cave coughs, we'll have it in high definition and surround sound."

Sarah slurped her ramen and offered, "We could just ask Maya what's likely to live in there. My bet's on bats, maybe a raccoon or two."

Barnaby held his hands up dramatically. "Or perhaps—" he paused for effect—"the legendary Mammoth Cave Howler. Known to locals for a century, never once captured on tape."

Maya shook her head, but the fire made it easy to hide her smile. "If there's a mammal in there bigger than a raccoon, it's news to the Department of Wildlife."

Leo aimed his camera for a quick "hot takes" session. "Okay, real talk. What does everyone think made the prints this morning? Sarah?"

Sarah took a second, setting her bowl aside. "I've seen pranksters do weirder things. But the prints are deep and crisp, and I didn't see any evidence of a mold. If it's a hoax, it's a good one."

"Barnaby?"

He squared his jaw, staring into the fire. "I believe in the evidence. Eighteen-inch stride, dermal ridges, fresh ash. If it's a prank, it's the best executed in modern cryptozoological history. But I say it's not a prank."

Leo panned to Toby. "Expert opinion?"

Toby shrugged. "The thermal anomaly is weird, but heat can act funky in this environment. We'll know more if we get a fresh reading."

Leo grinned, then finally focused on Maya. "And you, Doc?"

She hesitated, aware that every lens was on her. "I think the prints are real. But I don't think they're from what everyone hopes. Maybe it's a lost animal, or some kind of geological process we haven't noticed before. Maybe something way less romantic."

Barnaby threw his hands up in mock despair. "The voice of reason, always."

Maya shot him a look. "Somebody has to keep you alive, remember?"

He laughed, then poured a round of instant coffee into mugs. "To the hunt," he toasted.

They clinked cups, the sound oddly loud in the mountain quiet.

The next hour passed in a familiar rhythm: Sarah cleaned up dinner, Maya prepped her field instruments for the morning, and Leo fiddled with his camera settings in the glow of the firelight. Toby scanned for Wi-Fi and, finding none, busied himself with a local recording of the thermal feed.

Just as the sky turned fully black, a new sound pricked the edge of Maya's awareness.

A dull, rhythmic thumping, muffled by rock but steady as a heart-beat, echoed from deep within the cave.

She froze, tuning her headlamp toward the entrance. The others heard it a split-second later—Barnaby's eyes widened, Sarah's hand paused mid-zip, and even Toby looked up.

Leo, already rolling, whispered, "Did everyone else get that?"

Barnaby's voice was half thrill, half caution. "It's happening."

The sound came again, a low, slow pulse. Not random, not a loose stone tumbling, but a pattern: three quick beats, then a pause, then two more. It was almost too regular to be natural.

Maya crept closer to the cave mouth, careful not to cross the invisible boundary of "too far, too fast." She flipped open her notebook and started a quick time log, then watched as Leo and Barnaby crowded behind her.

Sarah hung back, arms folded, her face unreadable in the firelight.

Toby trained the thermal imager at the entrance, the display flickering in the blue-cold darkness. "Nothing on heat," he said, voice tense.

The thumping continued, never louder but never stopping. Maya frowned, searching her memory for a geologic cause—a shifting layer, a settling boulder, maybe an air pocket collapsing under the new season's melt. But the pattern was too sharp, too insistent.

Sarah finally stepped forward. "If it's an animal, it's huge. And it's not moving toward us."

Barnaby fumbled for his radio and hissed, "If you can hear us, make a sound."

The cave answered, as if on cue, with another set of thumps—three, then two. The group fell silent, the sound settling on them like a blanket.

Maya whispered, "I think it's a resonance. Like someone hitting a hollow log, but from inside the tunnel."

Leo, all nerves now, said, "Could it be a person?"

Sarah shook her head. "Nobody local would risk the cave after dark. Too many sinkholes."

Toby stared at his monitor. "Still nothing on thermal. But the air's warmer at the mouth, by almost five degrees now."

The next sound wasn't a thump, but a faint shuffle, a skittering that sent a shiver up Maya's spine. She saw Leo flinch, then steady the camera. Barnaby edged forward, scanning with a high-powered flashlight, but the beam only lit up a few yards of rock before dissolving into total black.

Sarah exhaled sharply. "Back from the edge. If it's anything real, we want to document, not get hurt."

Maya didn't argue. She retreated, keeping her eyes on the darkness as the thumping slowed, then finally stopped.

The group returned to the fire, all pretense of calm gone.

Leo set the camera to record, voice barely above a whisper. "Okay, so that was—intense."

Barnaby, animated again, grabbed the notebook from Maya. "We have to log everything, right now. Time stamp, sequence, every detail. Sarah?"

Sarah recited the timeline, precise as ever. "First sound at 20:14. Five sets of thumps, three pause two, repeating. Skitter at 20:21. Air temp increased at the mouth by five degrees Fahrenheit. No visual or thermal confirmation."

Toby typed everything into his log, hands steady now. "Should I set up an alert for motion at the cave mouth?"

Barnaby nodded, suddenly all business. "Yes, and keep an eye on the tree line."

Leo turned to Maya. "You okay?"

She nodded, but her mind ran in a dozen directions. "I want to do a soil test at the cave entrance in the morning. If something is moving that much air, it might leave evidence."

He offered a half-smile. "You're a good scientist."

She almost smiled back. "You're a good hype man."

Sarah and Barnaby set up a formal watch, two hours on and two off, with the tents zipped tight and everyone's gear ready. Leo volunteered for first shift, setting his camera to night vision and talking quietly with Toby about how best to triangulate any movement.

Maya lay in her tent, listening to the new silence. The air was sharp and cold, but her heart pounded with an odd, electric anticipation.

Just as she started to drift, the thumping returned—fainter now, but still in that unmistakable rhythm. She checked her watch, logged the sound, then rolled onto her back, eyes fixed on the vinyl ceiling of the tent.

The warning from Elias rattled in her head: Everything real is underneath.

She let herself imagine, for just a moment, that there really was something in the cave—something ancient, or impossible, or just stubbornly unwilling to be known. That maybe science was just the slow process of learning to listen to what the mountain already knew.

When her watch buzzed for her turn on shift, Maya climbed out of the tent, zipped up her jacket, and walked to the dying fire.

Leo was there, bundled in every layer he owned, camera pointed at the dark.

He didn't say anything at first, just handed her the last of the hot chocolate and nodded at the cave.

"It's still in there," he whispered.

She looked at the mouth of the cave, perfectly black and perfectly silent now, and nodded. "It always is."

They watched together, the fire painting their shadows on the stone, both waiting to see what would blink first—the mystery, or the morning.

five

the mega squatch burger

THE DC PUB & Grill offered a warmth that went beyond the clatter of mismatched mugs behind the bar. Maya and Leo claimed a checkered table by the window, still half-thawed from the day's trek and unable to shake the feeling that they'd stepped into an alternate universe. Out in the field, their nerves were stretched tight—every noise a possible threat, every print a potential clue. In here, surrounded by buttery yellow walls and the gentle glow of string lights, their bodies finally let down their guard.

Maya peeled off her puffer, draping it over the back of the plastic-molded chair, and let her hands linger above the hot mug Azure had already delivered. Leo's camera gear sat in a neat heap on the vinyl, lens fogged and battery pack still dusted with volcanic ash from the Lava Flats. The rest of the pub was alive with locals: a couple of snowmobilers arguing over the best two-stroke oil, a trio of retirees playing a cutthroat round of gin, and a rotating cast of regulars orbiting the bar like barnacles on a hull. Maya took it in with the anthropologist's eye she'd never quite outgrown.

She liked that the place didn't pretend to be a "mountain gastropub." The menus were laminated, the ketchup bottle wore a crusty halo, and the Bluetooth speaker in the corner played perfectly modern music. But tonight, there was an undercurrent—like everyone in the room was

tuned to the same frequency, waiting for something to break the surface.

Azure materialized at their table, notepad tucked into the waistband of her jeans and a pencil clamped behind one ear. Her platinum hair was pulled up in a high, wild ponytail, and her smile had the force of a weather front.

“You two look like you got in a wrestling match with the mountain and lost. What’ll it be? And before you ask, the Mega Squatch Burger is in stock and legal in three states.”

Maya glanced at Leo, who’d already started to drool a little. “That sounds...like a lot.”

Azure’s eyes twinkled. “It’s a stack, with the works. Special herbs, secret sauce, and some stuff the FDA hasn’t gotten around to classifying. The fries come standard. Trust me, you’ll need the carbs.”

Leo grinned. “Deal. And a mug of whatever’s local?”

“You got it,” Azure said, and was gone before either of them could change their mind.

Maya sipped her coffee, letting the heat work through the soreness in her jaw. “You ever notice how she just appears and vanishes? Like a quantum bartender?”

Leo shrugged. “It’s her whole brand. You should see her karaoke.”

They sat in easy silence, watching the life of the pub play out. Maya scrolled through the photos on her phone, reviewing the day’s discoveries. She paused on a shot of the Lava Flats—the birch trees ghost-pale against the basalt, with the enormous print dead center.

She tapped the screen, then pushed it toward Leo. “Still think it’s a hoax?”

He studied the image. “Honestly, no. Even if you tried to fake that, how would you get the pressure right? And the thermal thing...that’s not in the standard Bigfoot kit, last I checked.”

Maya nodded, feeling the familiar surge of wanting to explain everything, even when there wasn’t a good explanation. “The heat signature bugs me. Could be chemical, maybe? Some kind of exothermic reaction in the ash? But then the print would degrade fast. These held.”

Leo flexed his fingers, massaging a phantom ache. “You ever get the

sense that the mountain's playing along? Like, it wants to keep you interested?"

Maya shot him a look, but before she could answer, Azure swooped in with a tray the size of a snow shovel.

"Two Mega Squatch specials, one pitcher of the local blonde, and fries for the table." She set the plates down with a flourish, then leaned in, lowering her voice. "Careful with the burger. It's got some extra flavor tonight—old ways stuff. Helps with clarity of mind." She said it with a wink, but Maya caught the edge of seriousness in her tone.

The burger was a marvel of engineering: multiple slabs of beef, interleaved with bacon, cheddar, and a luminous green spread that Maya couldn't identify by sight or smell. The aroma hit first—smoky, then sharply herbaceous, with a faint edge of something resinous and clean. Leo dove in, taking a heroic first bite. Maya followed suit, letting the flavor coat her tongue before she tried to dissect it.

She looked at Azure. "What's the green stuff? It's not pesto."

Azure gave a satisfied nod. "Secret blend. Locals used to use it for—well, for focus. Hunters, trackers. Some say it lets you see the forest the way the animals do. Helps with perception, or at least with believing your own eyes." She lingered a moment, as if waiting to see if they'd catch the drift.

Maya set her burger down. "You're saying this is...psychedelic?"

Azure laughed. "Nothing so glamorous. Just plants. Ones that have been growing on the mountain longer than any of us. The taste is all natural." She gave Maya a knowing look, then melted back toward the kitchen.

Leo's eyes were watering, but he looked euphoric. "I could eat this every day."

Maya, determined to approach it scientifically, took another measured bite and reached for the pitcher. As the food settled in, the aches from the hike receded, replaced by a buzz that felt half endorphin, half electricity. She set her phone on the table, scrolling through her notes, trying to stay on task.

"Okay," she said, "we have the prints, the resonance in the cave, and those mineral deposits you found near the second ridge. Anything else stand out to you?"

Leo wiped his hands, thinking. "The dust. It stuck to my camera bag, and I can't figure out why. It's almost magnetic, but not quite. Also, it smells like...rain?" He frowned. "Is that possible?"

Maya grinned. "You have synesthesia now?"

"Maybe I'm just hungry," he admitted.

She scanned her own notes. "The machine-like thumping in the cave. It's rhythmic, not random. If it's natural, it's probably water moving through the tunnel system. But the pattern doesn't fit—unless something down there is interacting with the water, or...with the air?"

He poured himself another glass, letting the bubbles settle before he spoke. "What if it's not a machine? What if it's something alive? Like, using echolocation to map the tunnels. That's what the old guy—Elias—meant by 'loudest before the snow goes.' Maybe it's more active now, prepping for spring."

She considered this. "But what's big enough to make those sounds, and still leave a print like that?"

He shrugged, then eyed her. "You want the honest answer?"

Maya nodded.

He lowered his voice. "I think it's what Barnaby wants it to be. The mountain's biggest secret. You can laugh if you want, but...after today, I'm not betting against him."

She didn't laugh. Instead, she found herself glancing around the pub, checking the other tables, half-expecting something to materialize out of the shadows. But it was just the same as always: locals eating, laughing, arguing about snowmobile parts.

Azure drifted back, gathering empties and refilling the coffee pot. She hovered at their table, pretending to fuss with a ketchup bottle. "Careful what you wish for," she said, almost absent-minded. "The mountain's secrets only last twelve hours, then they vanish with the dawn. If you need to see something, see it before the sun comes up."

Maya blinked. "Is that a local saying?"

Azure smiled, but there was no humor in it. "It's true whether you believe or not."

She moved on, her boots squeaking softly on the polished floor.

Maya sat back, letting the burger's glow settle. She felt more awake,

more alive, than she had in days. The tension from the fieldwork was gone, replaced by a focus that bordered on giddy. She caught Leo's eye and saw the same: he was alert, keyed up, his usual chill replaced by something kinetic.

"You think she put something in this?" he asked, voice low.

Maya shrugged. "Whatever it was, it's working."

They laughed, loud enough to draw a glance from the gin players at the next table.

For the next half hour, they traded notes and theories, revisiting every odd detail from the day. The prints, the heat, the dust, the cave. By the time their plates were wiped clean and the last of the pitcher drained, Maya had filled three pages of her field notebook with ideas.

When they stood to leave, Leo stopped her by the coat rack.

"You believe in this stuff now?" he asked.

She zipped her jacket, feeling the warmth linger. "I believe the mountain's stranger than I thought."

He grinned, stuffing his hands in his pockets. "That's all we need for the next round."

They stepped out into the cold, the door thumping shut behind them, and the mountain air felt less like an enemy and more like an invitation.

Somewhere, Maya thought, the echo of that thumping was still rolling through the tunnels. Waiting.

Maya's boots found the rhythm of the gravel on Movie Ranch Road as she walked back toward Falcon's Nest. The warmth of the DC Pub & Grill clung to her like the last echoes of a song, but the mountain air made quick work of nostalgia, stripping it away until only the essentials remained. The moon was out, casting everything in brittle blue, and the snowpack along the shoulder of the road radiated cold with a force you could feel in your teeth.

The cabins of Falcon's Nest huddled together against the trees, dark and silent but for the occasional orange blink of a porch light. Maya inhaled, and the air tasted like pine resin, old woodsmoke, and—maybe

she was imagining it—a hint of ozone, as if a storm were flexing somewhere just beyond the horizon.

She found herself cataloguing each sensation: the rough scrape of salt crystals underfoot, the tang of melting snow, the faint vibration in the air that felt like a bass note on repeat. There was an edge to it, a sharpness that seemed to heighten every nerve. Maybe it was the lingering effect of the Mega Squatch, or maybe she'd just spent too many hours staring at data sets and not enough actually feeling the world. She paused at the top of the main drive, letting the view soak in. Below her, the village was a scatter of warm windows on a field of blue-black. Above, the stars crowded together so thickly that Orion seemed to elbow out every other constellation.

She was halfway to her cabin when she noticed the oddness. At first it was a tickle in her ear, a sense that the silence wasn't quite empty. She stopped, holding her breath, and turned her head. The village was quiet, all right. But layered beneath it was something else: a scurrying, a squeak, a flurry of tiny collisions and retreats.

It sounded like...mice? Not the generic background hum, but individual animals. She could make out the difference between one and another, the squeaky protest as two fought over territory, the gnawing at the edge of insulation, the fast-twitch retreat when one sensed danger. It was so clear it made her dizzy.

She quick-stepped up to her door, jammed her key into the lock, and froze again. This time, she heard them inside, beneath the floorboards, shuttling from the kitchen to the back wall in frantic, orchestrated bursts. She could practically chart their movement.

Her phone rang. She nearly dropped her bag from the shock.

It was Leo. "Hey. You home?"

She took a shaky breath. "Just got here. Are you okay?"

He sounded out of breath, but not scared—more like he was about to share a really good joke. "You will not believe this. I can smell rain. Like, not just the petrichor or whatever. I can tell you there's a front moving in from the west. It's still clear here, but I swear there's a storm brewing way out past Cedar Mountain."

Maya gripped her phone tighter, a wild grin spreading across her

face. “Leo, I can hear mice. In my walls. I think I can hear their individual footsteps.”

He cackled. “No way. That’s so gross. Also, kind of incredible?”

They both went quiet, letting the possibilities spool out between them.

“So,” he said, “we’re both...what? Enhanced? Like, by the burger?”

Maya scanned her living room, listening for any more evidence. “Has to be. Azure said ‘clarity of mind,’ but I don’t think she meant it as a metaphor.”

She could hear Leo’s wheels turning, even through the phone. “Okay, so, if we’ve got this window—twelve hours, she said—what do you want to do with it?”

Maya was already moving, setting her bag on the table and flicking on her headlamp. “We go back to Mammoth Cave. Tonight. If there’s something to sense out there, this is our best shot.”

She could hear Leo grinning. “That’s the scientist I know. I’m charging the GoPros right now. I’ll meet you at the trailhead in thirty?”

“Make it twenty,” she said, and was already out the door.

The mice were a small price to pay for the rush of possibility. She jogged down the walk, the taste of the air and the crunch of snow underfoot now amplified into something electric. Even the wind seemed to urge her on, bringing with it the faintest suggestion of thunder—distant, but closing.

Tonight, they would not be the ones watching from the outside. Tonight, they’d see what the mountain wanted them to see.

And if it meant eating another Mega Squatch on the way, so be it.

six

midnight exploration

THE PARKING LOT at Mammoth Cave was empty but for the battered 4Runner, a dusting of snow, and a wind that kept trying to explain how dumb this whole idea was. Leo got there first, glancing at his watch in the dim glow of the dashboard. Twenty minutes was enough to charge two GoPros, plus a little for him to sit there in the dark and count how many times his heart could beat in a minute. He fiddled with the camera mount on his helmet, hands steady, and kept scanning the treeline for headlights. When Maya's Subaru crept into the lot, he let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

She stepped out into the sharp night, pulling her beanie low and hoisting a backpack with the easy confidence of someone who'd never really stopped living out of one. The headlamp around her neck was turned off—neither of them had switched on a light since leaving their cabins. The moon was only a thumbnail in the sky, but somehow Leo could see her just fine: the way her nose went red in the cold, the way she grinned and didn't even try to hide her excitement.

They met in the center of the lot. Leo held up a hand, fingers splayed. "I can see you perfectly. Like, in color."

Maya squinted. "I can hear your phone buzzing through your jacket. Also, you have a pebble in your left boot."

He snorted, shaking his head. "How do you—?"

She just tapped her ear.

For a second, neither moved. The entrance to the cave yawned open at the edge of the trees, as dark as the mouth of a furnace. The world felt slowed down, like they'd stepped into a fish tank and every movement had to push through an inch of new resistance.

Maya asked, "You still want to do this?"

Leo grinned. "If I get eaten by a cryptid, you have to finish my channel. Deal?"

She rolled her eyes. "You wish."

They started down the path, boots crunching in perfect unison, neither saying much until the trail pinched into the narrow gully that led to the cave mouth.

Leo paused at the threshold, peering in. The opening was lower than he remembered, and the blackness inside felt almost magnetic, pulling the cold out of the air and every sound along with it. But the longer he looked, the more his eyes adjusted—and then, suddenly, it was like flipping a switch. The walls of the entrance lit up in grays and faint blues, veins of old lava glowing in soft focus, the path ahead mapped in shades like a high-res topographic scan.

He didn't need the headlamp. "Whoa," he said, voice small.

Maya watched him. "What's it like?"

He blinked a few times, trying to parse the feeling. "It's like...HDR for my eyeballs. I can see every—" He reached out, running his hand along the wall, tracing the old flow lines in the basalt. "You gotta try this."

She did, just behind him, fingers splayed on the cool, rough stone. She closed her eyes, as if listening through her fingertips.

They edged into the darkness. Maya's pack caught once on a projecting knob, making a sharp echo that bounced for a long second down the tunnel. Leo's breath steamed in front of him, but he could see the micro-droplets hanging in the air, the way each pulse of his exhale rolled through the space ahead. He led, not because he was braver, but because the cave just made sense to him now. Every curve and side-passage was right there in the edges of his vision.

Maya trailed a few paces behind, stopping every so often to tilt her head and let the hush settle into her bones. She cocked her head to the side and said, "You hear that?"

He listened, but all he got was his own pulse and the slow, patient drip of water somewhere far ahead.

She frowned. "Not here. Down further. Like...a drum, but buried." She pointed into the black.

They pressed on, the tunnel flattening out into a long, straight shot. The echo of their footsteps diminished and the temperature dropped another few degrees, sharp enough that Leo could see the goosebumps stand up on Maya's wrist.

Another hundred feet in, Maya stopped again, motioning for him to hold still. She crouched, palm flat on the floor, and closed her eyes.

He waited, watching as her features changed from focused to troubled. "It's not a drum," she said at last, standing up. "It's like a heartbeat. But it's not organic." She shrugged, a little embarrassed. "I know what a fox sounds like, or a deer. This is...different."

Leo nodded. He didn't doubt her, not after the way she'd called out the mice under her floorboards earlier. "It's a machine, then."

"Or something trying to be one."

He grinned, liking the phrasing. "You want to go deeper?"

She gave him a look, half dare, half let's-not-die-here-tonight. "Yeah. You're leading."

The passage narrowed, then opened into a chamber maybe ten feet across, the ceiling lower here, with old graffiti scrawled over the walls—initials, a date from 1974, a stick figure riding what looked like a dinosaur. Leo's vision picked out a fine dust on the floor, undisturbed except for the trail they made. He snapped a photo with his phone, marveling at how bright the image looked even in total darkness.

Maya stopped at the far wall, pressing her ear to a hairline crack that ran floor to ceiling. "It's stronger here," she whispered. "More regular. Almost like...a Morse code, but with no pattern I recognize."

He reached out, laying his hand on the wall next to hers. If he concentrated, he could almost feel the vibration. It was subtle, a suggestion more than a presence, but it was there, pulsing just under the skin of the stone.

Maya stepped back, dusting off her hands. "I bet if we mapped the sound, we could trace where it comes out on the surface. Like groundwater, but with a noise signature."

Leo nodded. "We'd need to sample at every junction."

She glanced at the branches of tunnel ahead, three distinct choices—one right, one left, one dead ahead, each tapering into darkness. "Which way?"

He scanned the options, noting the way the dust pattern shifted at each mouth. The left tunnel had the faintest impression of something recently disturbed—a little fresher, maybe. He motioned that way, and Maya shrugged, following.

The left tunnel twisted, then dipped. The further they went, the more pronounced the rhythm became—still too faint for Leo's ears, but Maya's posture grew tenser with every step, like a hound on a new scent. The floor was uneven, riddled with little micro-craters and stone ribs that forced them to slow down and test every footfall.

After another ten minutes, the passage dropped into a second chamber, smaller than the first but warmer, as if the rock itself was holding onto old heat. Leo crouched at the threshold, scanning the room. There was something here—not a noise, but a brightness, a way the walls reflected the smallest bit of his own movement. He crept forward, eyes adjusting, and saw the faint shimmer of moisture on the ceiling. A drop broke loose, tumbling in slow motion to the ground, exploding in a spray of sparkles as it hit a perfectly dry patch of dust.

He watched as the tiny droplets traced a line on the floor, each one glistening before it faded, leaving behind a faint trail. "Hey," he called softly, "check this out."

Maya knelt next to him, watching the phenomenon. "It's condensing from the rock," she said. "But only here."

Leo looked up, tracking the line of water as it followed a seam through the basalt. "This is the main channel, then. The old flow line."

She nodded, but didn't move. "The sound is strongest here, too. Like it's inside the wall." She pressed her palm to the rock and closed her eyes.

Leo sat beside her, the two of them quiet. For a minute, there was only the slow drip, the cold, and the certainty that something was happening just beyond their ability to fully sense it. The world outside was gone now, reduced to the tunnel, the pulse, the ache of anticipation.

Maya was the first to break the silence. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say this is a man-made sound. The spacing, the regularity. It’s almost digital.”

Leo nodded. “Could be a mining rig. Or something left over from the old survey days?”

She shook her head. “Too deep, and too far from any mapped shafts.”

They let the idea hang. Leo studied her face in the grayscale light—she looked less like a scientist now, more like a believer, and that scared him more than any ghost story.

He stood, dusting his jeans, and offered her a hand. “Want to go one level deeper?”

She smiled, teeth white in the gloom. “Yeah. I want to see what’s under everything.”

They left the chamber, moving forward into the next passage, their senses leading the way—sight, sound, and something stranger, something pulling them deeper.

The mountain wasn’t done with them yet.

Three turns in and the tunnel grew cramped, forcing Maya and Leo to duck low and sidestep through little choke points where the rock pressed in from both sides. Maya switched from walking to a careful shuffle, toes mapping the bumps and hollows in the floor. She kept one hand on the left wall, fingers cold and a little numb, but even so she could feel every shift in the stone’s texture. The deeper they went, the weirder it felt: the air no longer moved, and the only sound was the slow, hollow thump of their own boots. The regular pulse that had haunted the main chamber faded, replaced by an almost imperceptible vibration.

Leo broke the silence, voice so low it sounded like a new kind of echo. “We’re close.”

Maya stopped dead. A patch of powder-fine dust on the floor bore a weird set of marks—a triple row of little gouges, each evenly spaced, running parallel to the wall. She crouched, squinting at them, and realized there was a clear pattern. The gouges trailed off at the edge of the dust, then picked up again five feet ahead.

She pressed a fingertip into the nearest track, feeling the depth. "Check this," she whispered.

Leo bent down, peering at the marks. "Skis?"

"Not with that spacing. And there's a fourth one, see?" She traced it. "They're equidistant. Like a mini rover. Or a crawler."

He grinned, for a second forgetting to be spooked. "Robots. In Mammoth Cave."

She let herself laugh, but only for a beat. "No, really, look." She pointed at a faint line between the tracks—a tail, maybe, or a cable drag. "It wasn't heavy, but it moved with purpose."

Leo ran his palm along the stone beside the track. His brow furrowed, and he brought his hand back, pinching his fingers together. "Oily," he said, sniffing it. "Hydraulic, not animal. It's got that synthetic tang."

Maya wiped her own fingers on her jeans and knelt lower, eyes scanning ahead. "It doesn't fit. Who's running tech in a natural lava tube?"

Leo shrugged. "Park Service?"

She shook her head. "Not without a whole trail of paperwork and posted warnings."

He took a cautious step ahead, following the twin sets of tracks. The light from his GoPro caught on the motes of dust hanging still in the air. "Well, let's find out where it's going."

Maya led this time, senses keyed to every sound and change in the air. The regular pulse was gone, but now she caught a new noise—more of a low hum, layered with a faint metallic clink that repeated every few seconds. The tunnel doglegged twice, then flattened, and suddenly opened into a much larger vault: the walls arched up in a way that reminded her of a subway tunnel, with the tracks converging on a shallow pit at the center.

She swept her headlamp over the pit. The four-rowed gouges terminated at a wide patch of trampled dust, where the marks overlapped and cross-hatched in crazy patterns. Maya spotted a half-buried length of what looked like woven Kevlar cord, and beside it, a small pile of something granular—maybe tailings from a drill.

"Looks like it was...digging," she said, moving closer.

Leo studied the cord, poking it gently with his boot. "I've seen these before. Drones use them for ground anchor. But who would—?"

He stopped, ears pricked. The humming grew louder, then dropped away to nothing. The silence that followed was absolute. They both froze, listening.

Maya whispered, "I think it's still in here."

Leo's eyes widened, but he didn't move. The GoPro's indicator light blinked a slow, steady green.

After a long minute, Maya crouched at the edge of the pit, examining the granular pile. She scooped up a pinch, rolling it between her fingers. "Basalt, but ground really fine. And..." She sniffed, then recoiled. "Metal shavings, too."

Leo crouched beside her, face serious. "Mining something?"

She shrugged. "Not for ore. Maybe sampling? Or making a tunnel."

He pointed at the wall where the crawler tracks led straight into the rock, then stopped. There, just above the ground, was a hairline crack—fresh and sharp, with a different texture from the rest of the wall. Leo ran his hand along it, his skin tingling with the memory of hydraulic oil.

"It's a hatch," he said. "Or a panel."

Maya stood, brushing off her knees. "It's not on any of the cave maps. This whole section is supposed to be dead end."

They looked at each other, silent agreement passing between them. Leo pressed his ear to the crack, listening. Maya followed suit, closing her eyes.

There it was—the hum, softer now, but a live wire in the silence. Then, as she concentrated, a new sensation: a cool breeze, barely there, but definitely moving. She held her hand up to the wall and felt it—cold air, flowing from the seam.

"There's a void behind it," she said. "And it's not sealed."

He felt along the length of the crack, his vision picking out subtle irregularities in the stone. After a moment, his finger caught on a slight indentation—a tiny dimple in the rock, the size of a pencil eraser.

"I bet this is the release," he said, glancing at her. "You ready?"

She nodded, backing up a step. "Do it."

Leo braced himself and pushed the dimple. For a second, nothing happened. Then, with a faint hiss, the hairline split widened, and a

segment of the wall slid back a few inches, then pivoted inward. The hum stopped instantly.

Cold, black air billowed out, carrying with it the unmistakable scent of machine oil and ozone.

Maya flicked on her headlamp, shining it into the gap. The passage beyond was smooth, carved with precision, and lined with...something—plastic? Composite material? It ran straight ahead, a perfect circle about three feet wide, vanishing into darkness.

She looked at Leo. "That's not lava tube."

He shook his head, a slow grin spreading across his face. "Welcome to the science fiction section."

Maya took a step forward, then paused, heart pounding. "What if it closes behind us?"

"Then we'll find another way out," he said, only half joking.

They entered, their footsteps ringing hollow in the synthetic corridor. The air grew colder, the smell sharper, and every part of Maya's brain screamed that this was not supposed to be here.

But curiosity overruled fear. She pressed on, Leo at her side, both of them alert for the next twist the mountain had to offer.

For all its manufactured precision, the hidden corridor had none of the security features that Leo would have expected from a secret government bunker or Bond-villain lair. There were no cameras, no obvious sensors, just the hum of machinery and the faint draft of cold air rushing past their faces as they moved deeper in.

Maya set the pace, one palm on the tunnel wall, reading its surface like a blindfolded cartographer. Every thirty feet or so, the round passage kinked slightly, just enough to break line-of-sight from behind. On the second curve, she froze and hissed a warning breath. Leo stopped instantly.

"Voices," she mouthed. "Two, maybe three. Close."

They pressed flat to the wall, shoulders squeezed into the shallowest indentation they could find. Maya killed her headlamp and Leo did the same, the darkness absolute now, though to Leo's upgraded eyes it only

looked like a dim gray fog. A faint blue glow flickered ahead, illuminating the next bend. The voices were low, careful, and punctuated by the occasional click or whirl of equipment.

Maya pressed closer to Leo, lips near his ear. "Not locals," she whispered. "No accent, no hesitation."

He nodded, drawing a slow breath through his nose. Oil and plastic, yes, but also a hint of sharp ozone and something acrid—battery vent, maybe. These people were serious about whatever they were doing.

The voices drew closer. Maya and Leo edged behind a spur of exposed basalt, wedging themselves into a space barely wider than Leo's backpack. Maya's pulse thudded so loud she worried it would drown out the distant conversation, but as the footsteps neared, her hearing dialed in, catching every syllable.

"...the next sample run is right past the third vent. You'll need to move the gear faster," said the first voice—a woman, late twenties, clipped and businesslike.

"I'm not pushing the crawler again. Last time it jammed, I spent two hours cleaning out the drive," replied a second, male, deeper and more nasal.

"There's still a live signal in this tunnel," said the third, their voice oddly flat and unplaceable. "Make it quick."

Maya risked a glance. Three figures in olive camo and matte black gear advanced in a staggered triangle, headlamps covered with red gel to keep their night vision intact. One carried a portable core drill, the bit crusted with black rock dust; another cradled a clear polycarbonate tube already half-filled with layered earth; the third had a mesh backpack rig full of instrument pods, each blinking a tiny green status LED.

They stopped not ten feet from Maya and Leo's hiding spot. The woman knelt, set a laser rangefinder against the floor, and swept it in a quick arc. "Elevation matches the map. It's right underneath the spillway. If this lines up, we run the next bore straight through."

The guy with the drill grumbled but took position, bracing the bit against the artificial tunnel's floor. The third figure scanned the walls, then turned to stare directly at the bulge of rock where Leo and Maya crouched. Leo held his breath; Maya squeezed her eyes shut.

After a long pause, the third voice said, "Nothing. Let's go."

Drill guy powered up the bit, and the sound—higher-pitched than the thumping from before, but just as regular—filled the space. Maya felt it in her chest, a rattle like an approaching train. They drilled for maybe thirty seconds, then stopped. The woman examined the core, then nodded. "Perfect. Let's bag it and move."

They packed up and vanished around the bend. Leo counted to thirty before he exhaled, then turned to Maya. "They're mining...what, exactly?"

She shook her head, her face ghost-white in the gloom. "Not ore. They're targeting a layer, probably something to do with the water system."

Leo peered down the tunnel. "We can follow their route. Or we can get out and call for help."

She mulled it over. "If we leave now, we lose the chance to figure out what they're after. But if we get caught—"

"Let's not get caught," Leo finished.

They moved out, this time as silent as possible, keeping a ten-pace gap between themselves and the retreating trio. The tunnel wound left, then right, and abruptly ended in a chamber carved out of the mountain's heart. Here, the artificial wall gave way to rough basalt, and a web of pipes and sensor cables ran from the ceiling into a waist-high tank at the center.

The three figures were clustered around the tank, transferring the core samples into small sealed containers. The third figure—now visible as a wiry person with pale, close-cropped hair—unpacked a small black case and fished out a palm-sized device with an antenna. They waved it slowly, watching a set of blue LEDs ripple up and down.

Maya watched, transfixed. "That's a water isotope scanner," she whispered. "It's...very, very expensive."

Leo nodded. "None of this is amateur hour."

He turned to Maya, his expression dead serious. "You get your phone?"

She nodded. "Muted and on airplane mode."

"Film it."

She thumbed on the camera and started recording, steadying her hands against a convenient rock outcropping.

Down in the chamber, Drill Guy took out a tool that looked disturbingly like a miniature pickaxe and pried open a panel on the tank. He poured the powdered basalt from the core sample inside, then sealed it up again. The woman checked her watch, tapped a few numbers into a keypad by the tank, then said, "We're good. Log out and purge the tunnel."

The third figure gave the air one last, suspicious sweep with the antenna, then packed up. They hustled out, red headlamps fading into the distance.

Maya and Leo waited, silent, for another five minutes. When they emerged into the chamber, the cold was bracing and the odor of ozone stronger than before. Leo circled the tank, examining the panel. "It's locked, but I could probably open it."

Maya shook her head. "Too risky. We got what we came for."

They started back down the tunnel, this time moving fast and low. At the corridor's entrance, Maya stopped again, her hearing latching onto a new sound. Footsteps, not careful like the miners—heavier, more confident.

She signaled for Leo to hold.

There, not twenty feet ahead, a figure stood in the artificial tunnel, silhouetted by the faint light leaking from the cave's natural mouth. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and wore a battered canvas jacket rather than camo. In one hand, he held a bright orange climbing helmet; in the other, a maglite that glared off the tunnel walls.

He waited, motionless.

Leo whispered, "How did he get here so fast?"

Maya's brain reeled. "That's not one of them."

He took a step forward. Maya recognized him instantly—the Forest Hermit, Elias, the man who'd warned them not to trust what they saw on the surface.

He regarded them with an expression halfway between anger and deep, exhausted disappointment. "You shouldn't be here," he said, voice flat as ever. "It's not for you."

Maya and Leo stared, speechless.

Elias jerked his head, not unkindly. "Out. Now."

They didn't argue. Elias led them to the main entrance, the maglite's glare bleaching away every shadow. As they stepped back into the real cave, Maya felt the pressure in her chest ease. The mountain air was sharp, cleansing.

Elias didn't follow them out. He waited in the mouth of the corridor, watching, then slipped back inside, sealing the seam with a motion of his hand.

They staggered up the path, adrenaline fading, both shivering in the night.

Maya broke the silence first. "Did you film any of that?"

Leo checked his camera. "Got most of it. I think. My hands were shaking."

They reached the cars. Neither said anything for a long moment.

Leo finally managed, "What now?"

Maya thought. "We send the footage to Sarah and Barnaby. Let the real pros handle it."

He nodded, then gave her a look, part fear and part exhilaration. "You going to sleep tonight?"

She snorted, shaking her head. "Not a chance."

They watched the darkness for a while longer, the mountain silent except for the soft hiss of wind through the pines. They knew, in the way only people who'd survived something strange together knew, that nothing would ever feel entirely normal again.

But whatever secrets the mountain was hiding, it had let them go, this time.

They were both more grateful than they could say.

seven

the sasquatch nest

THE MORNING after the tunnel incident arrived too bright, too blue, and utterly unconcerned with last night's anxiety. Duck Creek's air tasted sharper than ever, the pine needles glistened in the sun, and if Maya had expected any change in the world after nearly being caught by a trio of illicit cave miners, the mountain certainly didn't let on. Instead, she found herself wedged in the back of the Miller-White's 4Runner with Leo and a caddy of GoPro batteries, rumbling up a dirt service road toward their next "evidence collection site."

They'd all agreed not to talk about what they'd seen, at least until the Miller-Whites could be debriefed safely and in private. But there was no hiding the extra edge in Leo's voice, or the way Sarah kept glancing at Maya in the rearview mirror. Even Barnaby's usual banter had picked up a few extra gears, like he'd siphoned last night's adrenaline straight into his arteries.

The road crested a low saddle and dipped toward a basin that looked, from a distance, like any other patch of Utah dirt. Only when they pulled off at a faded Forest Service sign—TWO THOUSAND FLUSHES, in black marker over the original—and got out did the weirdness kick in. Across a low berm, the landscape dropped away into an open pit ringed by mine tailings so shockingly blue-green that it hurt to look at for more than a second. The color shouldn't have existed, not

in nature. Against the patchy snow and rust-red soil, the turquoise glowed like a paint spill from a cartoon planet.

"Look at that!" Barnaby boomed, nearly bowling Leo over as he spun with the camcorder. "Ladies and gentlemen, we are standing on the threshold of the single most significant Sasquatch habitat discovery in the American Southwest!" He lifted both arms, as if conducting the pit, and swept the camera in a long, loving arc.

Sarah, completely unmoved, popped open the tailgate and began unloading the sampling kits. "I'd kill for that kind of phosphate access in a wetland," she muttered, not really to anyone, as she set up a folding table with military precision.

Toby, hoodie half-zipped and drone case clutched under his arm, gave Maya a sidelong glance. "It's copper and aluminum, mostly," he said, anticipating her question. "The color is from acid drainage, leaching minerals out of the rock. It's not dangerous unless you fall in or eat the tailings."

Maya grinned. "I'll try not to eat the dirt. Did you bring your controller?"

Toby nodded, already flicking the switches and booting up the system. "Runs on two bands, so I can do live feed and record at the same time. You want a flyover?"

She shrugged. "Let's get the lay of the land first."

Leo, for his part, seemed completely in his element. He'd set up a mini tripod in the bed of the 4Runner and was recording B-roll of Sarah arranging her kit. Every so often, he'd punctuate the silence with a narration, "The true heroes of cryptid research: the sample collectors," or "Note the meticulous tape labeling, the hallmark of scientific rigor." Sarah let him, occasionally correcting a pronunciation or flicking a glove at the camera in mock irritation.

Barnaby, meanwhile, had found his mark atop the berm and was laying out the episode's "cold open." He planted his feet wide, braced the camcorder on his shoulder, and began, "This is Barnaby Miller-White, field investigator for Cryptid Reality. Today, we're at the infamous Two Thousand Flushes, where rumors of a 'Sasquatch Nest' have swirled for decades. But are these rumors true, or just another urban legend?"

He paused, checking the wind with a wetted finger. "That's our quest. We don't leave until we have answers."

Sarah joined him, still snapping gloves onto her hands. "Let's just hope your answers don't all fit into a three-minute TikTok."

He wagged a finger. "Never underestimate the viral power of a well-edited short."

They spent the next hour doing exactly what they'd said—documenting, sampling, and measuring every square inch of the pit's rim. Maya followed Sarah with the GPS, marking every spot they pulled a sample, while Leo and Barnaby alternated between filming and doing the live "reaction shots" for the record.

It was only after the ground team had made a full circuit that Barnaby gathered everyone at the start of a narrow trail cut through the pines. He pointed dramatically with a surveyor's staff.

"Now," he intoned, "comes the real test. According to historical reports and recent satellite data, there is an anomalous structure less than a quarter mile from here, up against the granite face. The so-called 'nest'—" here he made finger quotes "—was first spotted by a trail crew in 1987, and it's been the center of speculation ever since. Some say it's just debris from an old mining collapse. Others think it's the work of a local hoaxer, or a rogue bear. But I am convinced..."

Sarah cut in, "You're convinced it's cryptid construction. You don't have to be cagey, Barney."

He grinned. "I'm not cagey, I'm a tease. It's good for the edit."

Maya, who had already scanned the basin and found nothing of obvious note, eyed the path. "You want to go now, or...?"

Toby was already a dozen steps ahead, drone case in one hand and camera goggles dangling around his neck. "I'll scout it first, make sure it's clear," he said, not even turning back.

The rest followed, single file. The trail wound tight through the pines, the snow thinning in the shadows, then climbed steeply for a hundred yards before flattening at the base of a rocky escarpment. The outcrop loomed overhead, streaked with the same garish mineral stains as the pit, but otherwise unremarkable except for one detail: halfway up, at the base of a shallow cave, sat the nest.

It looked exactly as described—an enormous dome of interwoven

branches and rootlets, at least six feet tall and twelve wide, with a shallow depression scooped out in the front and lined with last year's fallen leaves. The dome abutted the rock, as if it had grown there, and its surface glimmered in the sun with flecks of blue-green dust.

Barnaby lost the ability to use his inside voice. "Would you look at that!" He swung the camcorder wildly, then jogged up the scree and circled the nest twice, breathless. "This is the most pristine example I've ever seen. The scale, the construction—look at how the uprights are woven in, how the roof self-supports. No bear does this. No person would bother. This...this is a nest!"

Sarah, less interested in spectacle, started snapping photos and making voice notes. "Diameter...twelve feet. Structure, layered—outer is dead wood, inner looks to be fresh. Possible insulation with leaves, possibly moss. I'm seeing...what is this?" She leaned close, tweezers out, and plucked a single coarse hair caught in the bark.

Maya, more curious than she'd admit, climbed around to the side and examined the base of the structure. The branchwork was tight, almost deliberate, but what caught her attention was the way the mineral dust—turquoise, like the tailings below—coated the lower branches. She ran a finger along one, then held it up to the light.

Leo joined her, peering over her shoulder. "Looks like someone dumped a bag of the pit dust up here. Is that normal?"

She shook her head. "Not unless the nest was built using wood dragged up from the tailings, or something's been tracking it in."

Toby, meanwhile, had set the drone down and was assembling it with practiced speed. "If it's a den, maybe the animal sleeps in the pit and hauls the dust up with it. Or maybe it just likes the color." He shrugged, launching the drone with a soft whirr and guiding it over the nest in slow, lazy circles.

Sarah, now up to her elbows in evidence bags, plucked another hair. "This is fresh. It's not a bear. And if it's human, it's not any hair color I've seen before." She held it up, the shaft glinting almost silver in the sun.

Barnaby, narrating for the camera, declared, "Notice the expert construction! The self-supporting arch! This is clear evidence of a tool

user. If this is the work of our missing link, it has the mind of an engineer.”

Maya looked up, squinting against the light. “Or it’s just an incredibly bored beaver.”

He laughed, delighted. “No river, no dam. This is high ground, built for line of sight. The location is tactical.”

Sarah’s voice was softer, more focused on the data than the drama. “If it’s an animal, it’s solitary. No signs of a den or tracks, at least not recent.”

Maya crouched and sifted through the leaf bed at the entrance. Among the expected bits—pine needles, flakes of bark, decomposed mulch—she found several pieces of shattered quartz, all with the same powdery blue stain. She bagged one for analysis, then stood to brush herself off.

“Leo,” she said, “can you get a shot of this from the side?”

He did, switching the lens and crouching to line up the nest with the cliff above. “Got it. It’s pretty epic, honestly. Like the world’s largest bird’s nest, but without the bird.”

Barnaby was still circling, voice rising with each revolution. “We’re going to take samples, document every inch, and then—once we’ve proved the authenticity—we’ll alert the authorities. This,” he said, gesturing grandly, “is the find of the season.”

Sarah shot Maya a quick, conspiratorial look, as if to say, He’s harmless, really.

Maya just grinned, already feeling the familiar pull of hypothesis. “You want to get the interior, or should I?”

Sarah handed her the sampling trowel. “Be my guest. Just don’t disturb anything that looks...structural.”

Maya wiggled the trowel under the inner mat of leaves, feeling for anything odd. The dome was empty, but the air inside was warmer, and the dust even thicker here, coating every surface.

She scraped a few grams into a vial and held it up. The turquoise dust caught the sun, glowing like blue fire.

“I hope you’re right, Barnaby,” she said. “Because if not, someone’s got a weird sense of humor.”

He beamed. "Skeptics keep us honest. But I have a hunch this is going to be the one."

The group gathered their samples, the drone returning to earth with a soft whine. Maya pocketed the last vial and looked at the nest, its shadow stretching down the slope like the silhouette of some giant, forgotten animal.

It felt, for a moment, like the whole mountain was holding its breath, waiting for the next move.

Barnaby wasted no time getting the "evidence reel" for his audience. He clambered up onto a convenient boulder, planted his hiking boots with the authority of a minor deity, and did a slow, 360-degree pan of the nest while narrating in a voice that would have made network anchors proud.

"Notice the intricate weaving pattern—far too complex for any known animal in this region!" he boomed, focusing the camcorder on the interlaced dome. "There are at least six distinct species of wood in this structure, none of which grow closer than a quarter mile from this spot. That means material was harvested and transported—on foot, uphill, and by something with significant manual dexterity."

He crouched low, camera nearly brushing the dirt, and panned up the face of the nest. "Observe the deliberate bend in these branches. See how they're twisted—not just snapped and shoved, but manipulated." He leaned in, dropping his voice for a dramatic aside, "Folks, this is not a bear. This is something with thumbs."

Sarah orbited the perimeter in the opposite direction, a steady counterpoint to Barnaby's showmanship. She used tweezers to extract coarse hairs from where the branches had snagged them, deftly slipping each one into a microcentrifuge tube and clicking the lid. Her process was methodical: pluck, inspect, document. Every few minutes she'd mutter to herself, "Consistent with previous specimens," or "That's a new one—put a star on it," and Maya would dutifully add a GPS tag to the sample log.

When Sarah reached Maya's side, she handed her a small evidence

bag containing two long, silvery hairs. “For your friend in genetics,” she said quietly. “I trust her more than the state lab.”

Maya slipped the bag into her coat, but her real attention was on the turquoise powder dusting the lower branches. It was everywhere, like someone had shaken a sugar sifter full of gemstone dust over the nest. She touched a fingertip to it, brought it up to her nose, and inhaled. The scent was sharp, almost electric, and left her tongue tingling.

She scraped a bit into her own vial, snapped the lid, and then noticed the pattern: the dust wasn’t just scattered randomly. It had pooled in the bends where the branches were manipulated, as if deposited by repeated contact with a mineral-rich surface—or a set of hands dusted with the powder.

Maya’s inner hypothesis engine started to whirl. The composition was unmistakable: a rare copper aluminum arsenate, commonly called “Cedar Green.” She’d seen it before, in old core samples sent to her advisor for trace analysis. It wasn’t a native mineral to this area, and certainly not something that appeared by accident.

She looked up, scanning the base of the outcrop above the nest. There, a faint streak of turquoise-green ran down the face, ending in a chalky splash at the nest’s rear wall. She turned and glanced at Sarah, who caught her look and raised a questioning brow.

“Just checking the lay of the land,” Maya said, trowel still in hand. She circled the nest, pretending to examine the structure, but really following the line of dust upslope.

At the far side of the dome, shielded from the pit by a curtain of brush, Maya found the real jackpot: three rough-planked crates, stashed under a tarp and half buried in leaf litter. They were old, battered, and stamped with the label of a mining supply company she’d seen in the city. The crates were empty, but the interior was coated with the same blue-green powder.

She poked her phone through a gap and snapped a picture, then kicked a little dirt over the spot for good measure.

When she returned to the group, Barnaby was delivering his final summary: “We have, in a single location, behavioral evidence, structural engineering, and biological material. I would stake my reputation—” he winked at the camera, “—that this is the work of our mystery hominid.”

Sarah, looking through the loupe at her latest hair sample, murmured, "Or a very determined poacher with a taste for color theory."

Maya almost laughed, but kept her face straight. She bagged a few more "botanical" samples, then sat on a fallen log to write up her notes. Leo appeared beside her, lowering his voice so the rest wouldn't hear.

"You see it too, right?" he whispered. "The dust?"

She nodded, scribbling fast. "It's a signature. Not native. Someone's been processing ore up here, maybe as a cover for the real operation."

He ran a hand through his hair, trying to play it casual. "So the nest is a fake?"

Maya frowned, looking back at the dome. "I think it's real. But not for the reasons Barnaby thinks." She drew a quick sketch of the mineral path down the rock, then circled the nest. "I think it's a marker. Or maybe a shield, covering something they don't want found."

Leo looked over at the Miller-Whites, who were prepping for a family selfie in front of the nest. "You going to tell them?"

She shrugged. "Let's see what else we find."

From the ridge above, Toby's drone hummed back into view, landing at his feet with a practiced plop. "Got some cool footage," he announced, "but also this." He turned his phone so they could all see the screen.

The drone video showed the nest and its clearing, but more importantly, a narrow path of disturbed brush leading away from the site, hugging the rock outcrop all the way to a tangle of bramble a few hundred meters west. "That's not animal movement," Toby said. "It's too regular, like someone's been walking the same line over and over."

Barnaby clapped his hands, delighted. "A trail! Classic migratory behavior. We'll follow it after lunch."

Sarah glanced at Maya, eyes sharp. "You got all your samples?"

"Enough for now," Maya said, zipping her pack. She patted Leo's arm. "We'll process them back at base. Then we go see what's at the end of that trail."

For the first time all morning, Maya felt the electric tingle of genuine discovery. It might not be the cryptid jackpot Barnaby wanted, but it was definitely weird.

And in Duck Creek, weird was always the best way forward.

Maya played along as the Miller-Whites set up their sampling perimeter, but she focused most of her attention on collecting the evidence that actually mattered. She crouched by the base of the nest, snipping a few leaves and twigs heavy with turquoise residue and slipping them into tiny Ziploc bags. The labels she used were deliberately bland: “botanical specimen,” “detritus,” “surface sample.” She knew Sarah would be too busy with her own evidence chain to question what Maya was bagging, and Leo was distracted, catching B-roll and quietly whispering commentary for later editing.

From time to time, she glanced at the others to make sure nobody was watching too closely. She scraped soil from beneath the leaf bed, where the color was most intense, and sealed it with the precision of a bomb squad technician. Every move was deliberate; every sample was documented with a GPS ping, a timestamp, and a cryptic note for her own memory.

“Botanical, huh?” Leo muttered, as she zipped another bag shut.

She smiled, not looking up. “You never know what you’ll find in the litter layer. And if we’re dealing with a cryptid, there could be allelopathic plant interactions.”

He snorted. “Science jargon. Works every time.”

She grinned, glad for the cover.

Meanwhile, up at the ridge, Toby had launched his drone and was piloting it with a mix of nervous precision and teenage bravado. The little quadcopter hummed up into the cloudless sky, then began flying in expanding circles above the nest. On the ground, Toby hunched over his phone, thumbs moving rapidly as he toggled camera angles and data overlays.

After a few minutes, he called out, “Hey, check this out. I’m getting a trail.”

Barnaby jogged over, all energy and anticipation. “What do you see, son?”

Toby turned his screen for everyone to see. The drone’s infrared

camera traced the area around the nest, and sure enough, there was a faint but unmistakable line of trampled vegetation stretching away from the site, hugging the edge of the outcrop. It was barely visible to the naked eye, but on the screen, it lit up like a neon wire.

"It goes west, then drops down toward the creek," Toby said, zooming in. "There's a whole stretch where the grass is completely flattened. Like something's been traveling the same path, over and over."

Barnaby clapped him on the back. "Classic cryptid migratory pattern. It's a corridor, just like the ones in the Pacific Northwest."

Sarah, peering over the screen, offered a more restrained take. "Or it's the old trail the miners used. That would explain the regularity."

Barnaby shook his head. "No, no. This is modern. The old maps don't show anything here. And look at the width—too narrow for an ATV, too defined for random hikers."

Maya joined the group, notebook open, and stared at the drone footage. She traced the line with her finger, then compared it to the real-world slope. "It's clever," she said softly. "It stays in the densest cover, and only pops into the open where there's a rock overhang to break the sightline."

Sarah raised her eyebrows. "What are you thinking?"

Maya hesitated, then shrugged. "If I were smuggling something, or moving between two points without wanting to be seen, that's exactly the route I'd pick."

Barnaby laughed, but kindly. "Skeptics. Always looking for the human angle. I love it. But sometimes, a trail is just a trail."

He set his jaw and faced the group. "We'll follow it after lunch. But first, let's finish up here."

Toby landed the drone with a flourish, then started downloading the footage to his laptop for instant replay. Sarah and Barnaby conferred over the evidence table, cataloguing every new find. Leo wandered the clearing, camera in hand, occasionally stopping to film Maya as she worked.

"You okay?" he asked, quieter than usual.

She nodded, eyes still on her notes. "Yeah. Just—trying to connect the dots. If we're right, this is bigger than any cryptid story."

He looked at her for a long moment, then said, "I'll back your play. Whatever you find."

She smiled, warmed by the solidarity.

When the samples were all packed and the selfies taken, the team regrouped by the trailhead. Barnaby gave a rousing speech about discovery and adventure; Sarah reminded everyone to hydrate; Toby shouldered his drone and started down the trail, tracing the path the camera had revealed.

Maya lingered behind, letting the others get ahead. She took one last look at the nest—at the precision of its construction, at the weird glow of the mineral dust in the sun, at the way the entrance faced perfectly down the line of the "Sasquatch trail." She turned, dusted her gloves, and followed.

As she walked, she felt the Ziploc bags pressing against her side, heavy with possibility.

No matter where the others wanted to believe the trail led, Maya knew where her own investigation was headed.

And she was more certain than ever that she was getting close.

eight

mounting evidence

IF MAYA HAD EVER EXPECTED Duck Creek Village to host a cutting-edge post-production lab, Leo's studio would have still outstripped her wildest guesses. The second-floor walk-up was wedged above the souvenir T-shirt place, and when Maya knocked, she could hear the muffled racket of a GoPro unboxing video blaring through the wall. A scuffed sticker on the door read "Duck Creek Vibes HQ—Knock Loud, Enter Louder." She did both.

Inside, Leo's world ran on the native voltage of chaos. Every horizontal surface was heaped with gear—tripods teetering in the corners, hard drives as thick as bricks, and an open pelican case of camera lenses arranged like some kind of weird shrine. The air vibrated with the scent of old coffee and the dry, sweet edge of pine sap. At the far end, Leo hunched over a rolling chair, hoodie up, staring at a triple-wide array of monitors with such intensity he might have been landing planes.

"Welcome to the Batcave!" he called without looking up. "You want tea? Coffee? Monster energy shot? Or do you want to live dangerously and try the gummy bears I found under the mixer?"

Maya set her pack down on the only clear spot on the worktable. "Just the bears. I need something to cut through the dust in my lungs." She unzipped the front pouch and set out three vials of turquoise mineral powder, each labeled in block letters: NEST, BASE,

OUTCROP. She lined them up at the edge of the table like chess pieces, then tossed her notebook beside them.

Leo spun around in his chair and whistled. "You really did it. I thought you were joking about running field samples on a cryptid nest."

"Why would I joke about that?" She found a mug, blew a layer of dust off it, and poured herself a third of a cup of whatever had been in the coffee pot. "You said you wanted to make the mystery go viral. We're just raising the stakes."

He eyed the vials, holding one up to the light. "You label your evidence like it's bomb parts. I respect that. Is this...Cedar Green?"

She nodded. "Rare copper aluminum arsenate. Non-native to the area. It shouldn't be there, and yet." She wagged her fingers at the vials. "It's everywhere."

Leo nodded like this made perfect sense. "Let's see how it plays on camera." He lined the vials up in front of his main lens, then flicked on the key light, which made the powder glow with a supernatural, almost radioactive energy. He panned the camera and did a mock-news anchor voice: "Mysterious blue dust found at scene of legendary Sasquatch nest. Is this the missing link...or a calling card?"

Maya grinned, fighting the urge to roll her eyes. "If you're done memeing, I need to cross-check your footage from last month. Can you pull up the heat-mapped trail cam from the Old Mill site?"

"Already on deck," he said, spinning the monitor her way. The first file was an infrared time-lapse, hours compressed into seconds. "Watch the western edge," Leo narrated. "See how it pulses, almost like something's pacing. That's not just wind—look at the thermal signature."

Maya leaned in, index finger tracing the path on the screen. "That's...two meters tall. Could be an elk, but the stride is weird. Upright."

"Exactly." Leo clicked to another file—a blurry, night-vision shot from a different angle. A shadow moved through the birch, pausing just at the edge of the camera's field, then ducked out of sight. The playback showed it happened at 3:14 a.m., almost the same time the Miller-White team had logged their previous 'encounter' near the pit.

She opened her notebook and began marking the time and coordi-

nates on a printed map of the area. She'd already pinned the nest, the mineral outcrop, and the pit; now she added Leo's sighting, and then the next one he showed her, and the next. In ten minutes, a pattern began to emerge, the sightings tracing a sinuous route along the mineral-rich ridgeline, looping back only where the terrain forced it.

She said, "You see this? All the recent sightings—yours, the Miller-Whites', even the ones the locals post to the community Facebook—they all fall along this band." She tapped the line. "If you follow it west, it intersects every known outcrop of Cedar Green in the region."

Leo stood behind her now, shoulder-to-shoulder, reading the map with a cameraman's eye for composition. "So what are you saying? We're tracking a Sasquatch with a taste for rare minerals?"

She almost laughed. "I'm saying there's a reason the nest was where it was. If you think of the terrain as a resource, it's not random. Someone—something—knows where the good stuff is, and it's moving strategically."

Leo held up his phone, reading from a tab. "The Miller-Whites just posted a new episode. 'Shocking New Evidence in Duck Creek Mystery—Nesting Behavior Suggests Migration!' They're laying the groundwork for a whole season."

Maya ran her hand through her hair, thinking. "What if it's not a cryptid? What if it's people?"

He blinked. "You mean a hoax?"

She shook her head. "Not a prank. An operation. Someone's using the myth to distract everyone while they pull something off—maybe poaching the minerals, maybe hiding something bigger." She clicked her pen, excitement sharpening her voice. "That blue dust is worth real money. If you could harvest enough, it'd bankroll a lot of weird activity."

Leo slid back into his chair, a glint in his eye. "I like it. Conspiracy, with a science twist. So who's the inside man? You want to play the footage from the night of the cave thumping?"

"Let's," she said.

He queued up the file. This time, they watched in silence. The GoPro perched above the cave mouth showed little for the first hour—then, at exactly 20:14, the screen flickered and a dark shape moved

across the bottom edge. It was a truck, headlights off, rolling slow and silent through the woods.

Leo froze the frame. "See that?"

Maya squinted. "That's not a local. That's the blacked-out truck from your other series."

He nodded. "And watch this." He let the footage roll. For the next ten minutes, nothing—then, at 20:21, the thumping started. The truck was gone by then, but the timing was too clean to be a coincidence.

Maya scribbled a note, then checked her phone. "Let's look at the timestamp on the Miller-White live stream that night. They claimed to be filming 'evidence' at exactly this time, but their location pin was two ridges over."

Leo was already there, pulling up the video. They played it side-by-side with the GoPro file, running the two in sync. The Miller-Whites were at a 'public' dig site, surrounded by a crowd and local press; at the same moment, the blacked-out truck was less than a mile from the mineral outcrop, working in total darkness.

She said, "They staged the event as a decoy. The real action was happening at the outcrop. And you filmed it."

Leo grinned, his face alight with the thrill of the chase. "You're telling me we just solved a mystery by accident?"

She punched his arm. "Not solved. But we have a new theory. One that makes sense of all the data."

He reached for a fresh notepad and started scribbling. "So we keep watching. We track the sightings, the mineral activity, and the Miller-Whites' 'public' schedule. And we see where it lines up next."

Maya capped her vial and slipped it back into her pack. "We also need to find the blacked-out truck. If it's in the area, it's operating on a schedule."

Leo nodded. "I'll set the next round of cameras up along the ridge, tight on the outcrop. And I'll ping the off-grid guys—they'll know if anyone's moving heavy through the forest."

She started for the door, pausing to snag a gummy bear on the way out. "If we catch them in the act, you get to do the intro for the news segment."

He gave her a thumbs-up. "You bring the science, I'll bring the drama."

As she left, Maya felt the strange buzz of momentum, a sense that every step was pushing them closer to something big. The vials of Cedar Green clinked in her pack, tiny reminders that sometimes the real trail was hidden beneath the surface, waiting for someone stubborn enough to look for it.

The mountain, she decided, could keep its secrets for one more night.

But tomorrow, they'd be ready to pry them loose.

By noon the next day, Movie Ranch Road had become the main vein in a living organism with a pulse of two thousand cryptid-curious tourists per hour. Everything vibrated: the thrum of voices, the whine of rental ATVs, even the air above the snowbank reflected the constant shimmer of people moving and making noise. Maya and Leo threaded the crowd with the efficiency of practiced locals, side-stepping families in Sasquatch T-shirts, dodging the city news crew's wind-blown tripods, and hopping a low wall to avoid a pack of tweens pelting each other with commemorative rubber cryptid feet.

"I feel like I'm in an alternate universe," Maya said, scanning the pop-up stalls lining the road.

Leo nodded, grinning. "You ever see so many people spend so much on pure make-believe?"

She bumped him with her shoulder. "That's the whole point. You can't be disappointed if you're already in on the joke."

Every third building had been rebranded overnight: Duck Creek Ice & Ski now sported a ten-foot inflatable Yeti on the roof; the tackle shop had converted its window display to "Cryptid Bait—Genuine Elk Jerky!" The old post office had been painted over with a mural of a giant, blue-and-green Sasquatch doing the Macarena.

It was, Maya decided, a truly remarkable feat of collective delusion. But even more remarkable were the real people pushing through it all, like the woman with the armload of flyers advertising "VIP Bat Queen

Night Hikes,” or the bearded man hawking jars of “Mountain Mystery Dust” to a line of toddlers and their bored parents.

The only thing not swept up in the transformation was the county sheriff’s substation, a faded log-cabin box with a perpetually out-of-order soda machine and a door that always stuck on humid days. Maya and Leo made a beeline for it, weaving around a crowd of selfie-takers blocking the RV parked in front.

And not just any RV. The Miller-Whites’ rolling billboard had claimed the best spot in the village, its awning deployed like a carnival tent. Barnaby and Sarah, dressed in matching camo jackets, were holding court on the folding lawn chairs, fielding questions from a ring of giddy fans. A team of ring lights and battery packs made the RV glow like a UFO, and the queue of hopefuls waiting for autographs stretched almost to the end of the lot.

Leo slowed, eyeing the spectacle. “If I get to be the guest villain on one of their streams, promise you’ll warn me before I walk into the ambush?”

Maya gave him a sidelong look. “You’d be a terrible villain. You’d apologize before the plot twist.”

He snorted, then set his jaw. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

The inside of the sheriff’s office felt like a sensory deprivation tank by comparison. The heat was up, the lights were dim, and the whole place smelled like burnt coffee and the afterglow of last year’s mold. Sheriff Adams sat behind the desk, sleeves rolled, the phone wedged between chin and shoulder while he pecked at his keyboard with the focus of someone entering the nuclear codes.

He glanced up as they entered, then raised a finger: one minute. The bulletin board behind him was completely obscured by layers of paper: some official (fire restrictions, lost dog notices), some less so (hand-drawn maps, tourist complaints, and a printout of the Miller-Whites’ entire season itinerary, color-coded and annotated with sticky notes).

He hung up the phone and immediately dialed again, muttering under his breath about “the goddamn mayor” and “overblown county budget.” Maya and Leo waited, trying not to stare at the crime map

taped to the opposite wall, which had sprouted a rash of red pushpins all along the outcrop corridor.

Adams finally set the phone down and exhaled. "Sorry. You're the hydrologist, right? And the camera guy?"

Maya nodded. "We've got something you need to see."

He looked at Leo, then at Maya, then at the folder in her hands. "If it's about the pit, or the nest, I'm already three days behind on incident reports."

Leo shook his head. "It's bigger. We have evidence of a coordinated operation—illegal mineral harvesting, with a side of cryptid misdirection. The Miller-Whites are making a show of it, but the real action is happening at night."

Adams reached for a legal pad, but his phone rang again. He let it go to voicemail and waved for them to continue. "Go on."

Maya handed him the vials, one at a time, and the printout of the mapped corridor. "That blue-green dust? It's not natural. We think it's being processed and moved by a team running off-grid."

Leo slid his laptop across the desk, queueing up the footage. "We have video of a blacked-out truck accessing the pit at odd hours, and thermal images from the cave system that match the sightings' timeline. It lines up perfectly with the Miller-Whites' 'evidence' announcements."

Adams raised an eyebrow. "So you think the TV people are...what? Running a front for poachers?"

Maya shook her head. "No, but they're being used. Every time they go public, the real operation gets a distraction window. Nobody's watching the back roads."

Adams squinted at the laptop, scrolling through the frames. His fingers were smudged with ink and something that might have been donut glaze, and Maya noticed the corners of his eyes had gone pink from too many late nights.

He leaned back in his chair, eyes narrowed. "Look, this is compelling. But I've got crowds flooding in, search-and-rescue is running on overtime, and every time I try to shut down an illegal campout, the mayor personally calls to tell me to back off. You see the problem?"

Leo nodded, his voice careful. "We do. But if this keeps up, you'll have a real environmental issue. The outcrop is being gutted. The water table will spike, then drop. It'll get dangerous fast."

Adams drummed the desk with his pen, then picked up the phone and set it down again. "Show me something I can use in court. A plate number. A name. Otherwise, it's just noise."

Maya pulled out the last piece: a still from the thermal footage, clearly showing the outline of the driver wearing what looked like night vision goggles. She paired it with a time-stamped image from the town's own gas station security cam—same truck, same profile, gassing up under the cover of dark.

She pointed. "That's not an amateur. And if it's who I think it is, they'll be back tonight."

Adams stared at the images, then looked up at them both. For the first time, he looked more tired than dismissive. "You get the plates, you call me direct. And if you get a face, you bring it in before you put it online, got it?"

Leo nodded, his tone all business. "Absolutely."

The phone rang again. Adams picked it up, already distracted, and started barking at whoever was on the other end. Maya and Leo took the hint and stepped out.

Back in the crush of the street, the energy had shifted from carnival to near-riot. News vans jockeyed for curb space with locals' pickups, and the Miller-Whites' RV now had its own private security detail—two retirees in blaze-orange vests who were, so far, just drinking coffee and watching the crowd.

Maya exhaled, more relieved than she expected to be outside again. "He's not going to move until we get a smoking gun."

Leo shrugged, unbothered. "That's fair. We'll get it tonight. You want to try a stakeout? I'll bring snacks."

She grinned, feeling the tension in her shoulders relax. "You bring the snacks, I'll bring the thermal."

They walked back toward the cabins, passing the T-shirt stand again. The vendor tried to sell them matching "Team Cryptid" hoodies, but Maya just smiled and kept walking.

At the far end of the street, the air was quieter. She stopped and

turned to Leo. "You believe me, right? That it's not a monster. That it's just people, doing what people always do."

He nodded, more serious now. "I believe you. But I also believe the story's not done. The mountain's got more secrets. And so do we."

She liked that answer. She liked that, even when the world was howling for spectacle, there were still people willing to do the work in the background. The real work.

They stood for a moment, the snow reflecting the last of the afternoon sun, and planned their next move.

Tonight, they'd stake out the outcrop and get the proof. Tomorrow, maybe the story would change.

But for now, there was the promise of action, and the quiet sense that, together, they were finally getting close to the heart of it.

nine

night surveillance

THE RIDGE between Mammoth Cave and Ice Cave caught every scrap of wind and moonlight the mountain had to offer. Leo crouched at the tree line, his bike propped in a thicket of spruce, and let his breath freeze in shallow puffs around his nose. Below him, the forest rolled down in blue-black waves, a dozen shades darker than the sky. He'd been here two hours, maybe three; the only movement was the slow crawl of shadow across the snow and the gentle shifting of his own numb feet.

The plan, such as it was, came down to three things: keep the high ground, keep the cameras rolling, and, most importantly, keep himself from freezing into a human Popsicle before the Ghost Truck made its appearance. Maya's mineral kit dug into his side every time he shifted, and the infrared handlebar cam was already frosting up around the lens hood. He checked the battery for the fourth time and wiggled his toes, grateful for the borrowed snow boots, even if they looked like props from a 90s kids' show.

He tried not to fidget, but the waiting got inside your skull. A hundred yards downslope, the old logging road snaked through the trees—barely visible in daylight, totally invisible at midnight. Except, of course, to anyone with the thermal overlay, which painted it in orange ghosts and purple voids. He panned the field, watching for anything

warmer than an icicle. Once, he caught the hot flash of a mule deer, but otherwise, the world stayed put.

Leo passed the time with a slow inventory of his gear: two spare batteries, four protein bars (one chocolate, one peanut butter, two “mystery”), and Maya’s janky but functional mineral sniffer, which looked like it had been made from the parts of three broken calculators. He resisted the urge to text her—“Still alive, still cold, still nothing to report”—and instead chewed a chunk of the peanut butter bar, letting the calories melt through him one slow degree at a time.

The hour past midnight was always the worst. The wind found every gap in his layers, slicing at his wrists and ears no matter how tightly he cinched his jacket. His eyes ached from staring at the screen, and twice he almost nodded off, catching himself with a start and feeling instantly guilty, as if the truck would somehow know he’d dropped his guard.

He was mid-yawn when it finally happened. The monitor, which had been static for an hour, pulsed with a flicker of heat: a shape, moving deliberate and slow, maybe a mile down the old road. Leo tensed, adrenaline snapping him awake. The shape resolved as it neared—a matte black truck, headlights off, riding the washboard gravel so smooth it barely jostled. Even through the camera, Leo felt the engine’s hum as a vibration, more sensed than heard.

He killed the screen for a second, letting his eyes adjust to the naked dark. Sure enough, there it was, lower down, almost indistinguishable from the road itself except for the way it swallowed the moonlight, making everything around it look sharper by comparison. The truck rolled to a stop at a bend in the road, just past a cluster of fallen logs. For a moment, nothing happened.

Then, three figures slid from the truck. Leo’s first thought was “hunters”—they wore camo from head to toe—but as they moved into the moonlight, the patterns didn’t match any hunting gear he’d seen. The suits were patchy, irregular, with strips of material sewn on at crazy angles. Ghillie suits, but homebrewed: less sniper, more swamp-thing cosplay. Each one carried a pack, and two hauled what looked like hard-shell rifle cases.

They kept to the shadows, stepping over branches and frozen

puddles with a military kind of caution. Leo zoomed in, catching the glint of night-vision goggles on the leader's face. Even from up here, he could see the plume of breath as the guy murmured instructions to the others.

They moved as a unit—up to a rock face where the road dead-ended, not a real cliff, but a humped shoulder of basalt that looked solid from any distance. The lead figure kneeled, felt along the base, then pressed something that made a section of the rock shimmer and slide inward. Even from the ridge, Leo could hear the faint grind of a servo motor.

He forgot about the cold, the cameras, everything except getting the shot. He snapped a burst of stills, then flipped on the video, tracking the three as they ducked through the opening. The interior was lit by a blue glow, brighter than any flashlight, and for a split second Leo could see a fourth figure, already inside, waving them in.

The door hissed shut, and the rock was just rock again.

Leo felt his heart banging against his ribs, and he pressed a hand to his chest as if to muffle it. He forced himself to wait, thirty seconds, then a full minute, scanning for any sign of movement. Nothing. The world had sealed itself back into silence.

He breathed, long and slow, trying to steady the shake in his hands. He knew what he'd seen. More importantly, he knew he had it on film—thermal, night vision, and plain old 4K. The clock in his head counted down the seconds until he could be out of here and on the line with Maya, his own little scoop of the century.

He packed up in record time, tucking the mineral kit and cameras into his messenger, and walked his bike to the start of the ridge. He spared one last glance at the hidden hatch in the rock, half-expecting it to blink open and spit out a crew of angry, ghillie-suited heavies. Nothing moved.

He coasted down the first fifty yards, using gravity and luck to keep himself on the slick trail. It wasn't until he hit the snowbank at the base that he let out the breath he'd been holding for the past ten minutes. The air felt different now: sharp, electric, like the last gasp before a storm.

He rode fast, wind burning his cheeks, grinning like a maniac all the way back to Duck Creek.

Whatever else the mountain had to throw at him, tonight, Leo knew he was ahead on points.

Maya was in the middle of rearranging colored pins on a wall-sized topo map when Leo banged into her cabin, helmet still on and breath rolling out in clouds. He didn't bother with hello; he just fumbled the memory card from his camera and held it out like a trophy.

"I got it," he said, panting. "You're not going to believe this."

She took the card and slotted it straight into the laptop, fingers barely feeling the chill because her own adrenaline was already in overdrive. As the transfer bar crept along, Leo paced the tiny kitchen, shedding gear like a skier stripping layers at the lodge.

"Coffee?" Maya asked, not looking up.

"Yeah. Or, uh, tea. Or both."

She queued up the thermal footage, then switched to the regular cam, letting the images fill the screen. At first it was just dark and trees and the familiar wash of moon on snow. Then the Ghost Truck glided into frame, so black it looked digitally inserted. The real show started when the figures stepped out, ghillie suits and all.

Maya rewound, paused, and zoomed. The suits were crude but effective, each one a patchwork of shredded netting, painted burlap, and tufts of what looked like dyed jute. She isolated a freeze frame of the lead figure, tweaking the contrast until the striping pattern resolved into something almost organic.

Leo stood over her shoulder, pointing. "That. Look at the banding on the arms and legs. It's the same as the 'hair' Toby found on the nest."

She flicked over to her phone, pulling up the photo Sarah had texted her that afternoon: a close-up of the sample, bright silver under the field loupe, with a weird, synthetic-looking grain.

"Here." She split the screen and dropped the two images side by side.

The match was uncanny—not just the color, but the odd, irregular

crimp where the fiber had been cut. Even in low-res, it was a dead ringer.

Maya swiveled in her chair. "So all the 'Sasquatch hair' from the nest? It's just unravel from the ghillie suits. They're leaving it behind as false positive."

"Or," Leo said, "they don't care if it's found, because they know everyone wants to believe it's from a monster, not a guy in camo."

She let the idea percolate as she scanned forward, advancing frame by frame. The part where the wall opened was even better in daylight: the servo-driven seam, the flash of blue-white LEDs, the fourth figure waving them inside. She isolated the moment, enhancing the area just above the opening. There, on the edge of the rock, was a sticker—no, a painted logo.

She zoomed. It looked like a stylized gem, flanked by two feathers. It nagged at her memory.

Leo caught it too. "Is that...a brand?"

She dragged her finger over the touchpad, smoothing the edges until the text below the gem resolved: MOUNTAIN CRYSTAL WORKS.

Maya blinked, then burst out laughing. "You know where I've seen that before? On the display case at Summit Jewelers, in Cedar City. They had a whole line of 'ethically sourced natural gemstones.'"

Leo grinned, bouncing on his toes. "Which means they're harvesting the minerals, selling them as 'natural' finds, and using the whole cryptid thing to keep everyone off the scent."

She replayed the footage, scrubbing back to the truck. On the tailgate was a license plate, mud-caked but legible. She snapped a still, then another as the driver got out—no mask, just a beard and a ball cap.

"That's our guy," she said, more to herself than Leo.

He thumped the table, triumphant. "You think Adams will move on this?"

She grinned, already firing up her secure email. "He said bring him proof. This is proof."

For the next hour, they worked the footage, cataloguing each detail, cross-referencing with everything they'd collected so far. Every pin on her map, every sample, every sighting—now it all lined up.

At some point, Leo had kicked off his boots and was sprawled on the rug, sipping coffee with the posture of a marathon finisher. Maya closed the laptop, feeling the sweet, punch-drunk exhaustion of someone who'd just finished a final exam with time to spare.

She said, "You still want to eat a burger after seeing what's in those things?"

He shrugged, grinning. "Only if we bring our own sauce."

The snow outside was falling again, soft and slow, and for a long minute neither of them moved, letting the victory settle. Then Maya nudged Leo with her socked foot.

"Ready to be famous?" she asked.

He shot her a look—half-joking, half dead serious. "You're the one with the PhD. You can have the glory."

She snorted. "No, thanks. I just want to see those idiots explain their way out of this."

He held up his mug. "To the world's first recorded cryptid take-down. You want to call it, or should I?"

She smiled, then raised her own mug to meet his. "Let's do it together."

And for the first time in days, the mountain felt like it was rooting for them.

ten

connecting the dots

MAYA ALWAYS FELT A FAINTLY illicit thrill in being first through the door at DC Pub & Grill, as if she were waking the building before the staff had a chance to stage-manage the day. This morning, the only evidence of human life was Azure, stationed behind the bar with a blue checkered rag and a tray of cold-proof coffee mugs, her hair in a platinum helmet that looked as though it required a five a.m. call time and a union stylist. Sunlight streamed through the big front windows, painting golden rectangles over the sticky side tables and the vinyl-upholstered benches.

The usual clatter and stomp of breakfast hour was blessedly absent. The only sound was the distant, cartoonish burble of the espresso machine and the soft plug of the orange juice dispenser in the kitchen. Maya trailed Leo into the main room, her backpack swinging with the weight of evidence bags and a geology notebook dense with tabs. Leo, for once, was content to let his camera bag bounce off his hip—no need to film the arrival; this moment was for them.

Azure, catching sight of their approach, grinned. “You two look like you spent the night fighting for custody of a lava tube.” She jerked her chin at Maya’s wind-chapped face and Leo’s wrinkled hoodie, then set two mugs on the corner of the bar, steam already curling in the morning air. “Sit. I’ll pour. It’s too early for the counter, so you get the booth with the best sightlines.”

Maya picked the corner booth with the deep shadow, partly out of habit, partly because the bench gave her a view of every possible approach. She dumped her backpack on the table and unzipped it, spreading out the Ziploc vials, printouts, and the battered field notebook. Leo fired up his laptop, setting it square in the middle of the table like a second altar.

Azure arrived moments later with a French press and a pitcher of hot milk. “Let me know if you want the breakfast menu. It’s preposterous, even by my standards.”

Maya accepted the coffee and inhaled. It was the kind of scent that burrowed straight into your hypothalamus and sang about home. She poured herself a cup, then slid the pitcher to Leo.

“Is this the house roast?” Leo asked, sniffing. He seemed to catch some nuance in the aroma, his eyes sharpening a little.

Azure smirked. “Good catch. It’s an Ethiopian—washed, citrusy, a little floral. You’re developing a palate, Leo.”

Maya wasn’t sure if she should be worried or impressed by the speed with which he was adapting to his new, post-Mega-Squatch sense abilities. She sipped, savoring the shock of brightness before the milk softened it.

The two of them fell into a comfortable silence, clicking and tapping and cross-referencing last night’s thermal captures and the overnight news feeds. Maya let her eyes drift, cataloging the details of the room. She could hear the fridge compressor cycle on and off in the kitchen. There were mice—at least two—under the east wall, huddling by the baseboard heater. She heard the soft slap of Azure’s shoes as she walked back toward the pass, and above that, the faintest tang of yeast and sugar in the air, probably the fresh cinnamon rolls she’d spotted rising on the kitchen tray last time she’d peered behind the counter.

She tried to focus on her spreadsheet, but the heightened hearing made it hard to tune out the trivia of the morning.

Leo noticed, grinning. “You’re still boosted.”

Maya looked up, caught, but didn’t protest. “How long do you think it lasts?”

He shrugged. “I’m on hour ten and I just tasted the cloves in the coffee before Azure even said it. That’s not normal, right?”

Maya shook her head. "Not normal. But useful."

They both eyed the table, which looked less like a breakfast setting and more like a command center. The vials of turquoise mineral dust sparkled even in the dim, and the printouts of drone stills were scattered among Leo's notebooks, his handwriting looping and angular. Maya had arranged the vials in a triangle, each one labeled in sharpie with time and location, and next to them she'd lined up a series of Polaroid snapshots from the day before—the "Sasquatch nest," the bizarre, blue-green run-off, and the stills from the Ghost Truck's approach.

"So," Leo said, glancing around, "are we still in the 'maybe it's just people' camp, or have you accepted the possibility of mutant wildlife?"

Maya snorted. "People. Every step of the way, it's people. Just very clever people."

He nodded. "I want to see what Azure thinks. Bet she already has a running theory."

Maya wasn't sure how much she wanted to share with the pub owner—she'd learned by now that in Duck Creek, the person with the best cinnamon rolls usually also had the deepest well of gossip, and sometimes those were one and the same. But Azure had always seemed more like a friend than a bystander.

As if on cue, Azure returned, setting down a warm basket of mini cinnamon rolls, the icing still soft and dripping. She eased herself onto the edge of the booth, tucking her legs up and eyeing the spread on the table.

"Is this an intervention?" she asked, eyes twinkling. "You know I'm immune to the stuff that comes out of those bags."

Leo slid the mineral vials toward her, arranging them like game pieces. "You ever see this before?"

Azure didn't touch, but she leaned in close, the way a jeweler would examine a diamond. She sniffed, then smiled. "Cedar Green, but not local. From out east, or at least north. Too vibrant for any of the tailings pits near here."

Maya didn't even try to hide her surprise. "You can tell by smell?"

Azure shrugged. "You do enough home repairs on these cabins, you get to know the difference between a mineral and a mold. Or a mold

and an ex-boyfriend's gym shorts." She let the moment hang, then pointed at the vials. "What's the story?"

Maya explained, walking Azure through the nest, the powder, and the drone footage. She didn't bother trying to dumb it down—Azure's face stayed sharp, only breaking into a grin when Maya mentioned the Miller-Whites' obsession with the "cryptid corridor."

Azure sipped her coffee, then said, "You know they order burgers by the dozen and never eat the bun? They say it keeps the mind sharp. I think they're onto something." She nodded at Maya and Leo. "And you two—last night, you saw something."

Leo pulled up the Ghost Truck video, skipping to the frame where the wall opens and the crew ducks into the blue-lit tunnel. He spun the laptop toward Azure.

She watched the whole thing, not blinking. When it ended, she said, "About time someone figured it out," and leaned back, arms folded.

Maya stared. "You're not even a little surprised?"

Azure laughed—a deep, belly sound, genuine. "Honey, I have run this place through three tourist seasons, four actual disasters, and a year of supply-chain mayhem. There are at least four different local legends being staged at any given moment. I used to think this town was haunted. Now I just think it's bored." She grinned. "Besides, you're not the only one who gets the special batch. Try one of those." She nudged the cinnamon roll basket closer.

Maya bit into one and immediately the world went up a gear—every cinnamon molecule was dancing a solo, the dough was so light it practically aerated itself. She could taste the faintest orange zest in the glaze and a dusting of something floral—maybe lavender? She looked at Azure in disbelief.

"I told you," Azure said, not unkindly. "You eat here enough, you start seeing things from a new angle."

Leo, for his part, had already housed three and was licking sugar off his thumb. "So you're saying you've been dosing the town?"

Azure waved a hand. "I don't need to. The mountain does it for me. But," she leaned in, her voice going soft, "sometimes you have to give people a little nudge. The burger's just a shortcut."

Maya shook her head, half in awe, half in resignation. “You’re really something.”

Azure patted her arm. “So are you. That’s why I trust you to fix this mess before the mayor tries to get the news involved.”

Leo finished his coffee. “Want to see the rest of our notes?”

Azure nodded, and the three of them pored over the drone footage, the field notes, the hand-drawn maps. The world outside brightened as the sun rose, but the conversation stayed sharp and focused, the clues slowly knitting together into something coherent.

The sense of conspiracy, of mischief, was everywhere in the room. But for once, Maya didn’t mind. She felt alive, and hungry, and not a little bit proud.

When Azure stood to start prepping for the morning crowd, she winked at them both. “Remember: the mountain always wins, but sometimes it likes to play favorites.”

She left them with the last of the cinnamon rolls and a sense that they’d just been handed the keys to the whole puzzle.

Maya sipped her cooling coffee, feeling the warmth radiate all the way to her toes.

Leo grinned. “Want to stake out the pit again tonight?”

She matched his smile, already pulling up a fresh page in her notebook. “I want to see what happens when we give the mountain a nudge back.”

The day was theirs. And this time, it felt like they had an actual shot at catching the truth.

Azure’s return for refills came with a warning: “Don’t get too cozy, the morning shift’s due in thirty, and you two are already mainlining all my good beans.” She winked, but the subtext was real. Once the day crowd arrived, the freedom to plot and post-mortem at length would evaporate under a tide of snowmobilers and brunching weekenders.

Maya tried to focus on her field log, but curiosity gnawed at her. She set down her pen, then looked at Azure over the rim of her coffee.

“You said something last night—about the burger? That it ‘lets you see the forest the way animals do.’ Is that real, or just sales pitch?”

Azure scooted onto the booth’s edge, hands clasped over one knee. “You ever heard of microdosing? Same principle, different compounds. The herbs in the Squatch Burger are old-school. My great-grandmother called it ‘seeing in all directions.’ It doesn’t make you hallucinate, it just...sharpens the inputs. Heightens the brain’s filter for a while.”

She flashed her sassy, gap-toothed smile. “And before you ask, the effect is temporary. Exactly twelve hours, almost to the minute. After that, you’ll crash, and you’ll want greasy food, strong coffee, or a nap. Sometimes all three.”

Leo blinked, catching up. “So the burger is the real deal. How’d you figure it out?”

Azure laughed. “Sweetheart, I grew up in these mountains. Every family has secrets. Some teach their kids to hunt, some teach them to forage. Mine taught me to mix up a batch that would put Red Bull out of business, if the FDA ever found out.”

Maya’s scientist brain was humming, every nerve itching to take apart the burger, its herbs, and Azure’s DNA. “What’s in it, specifically? Do you have a list of the active ingredients?”

Azure made a show of zipping her lips. “Oh, honey, that’s a secret older than these mountains. But if you’re still feeling it now, you’re probably a ‘responder’—means it’ll work on you every time.”

Maya nodded, considering. “And the effect is just heightened perception? No weird side effects?”

Azure shrugged. “If you don’t count the urge to solve mysteries or eat your body weight in pie, no. Well, you might get a headache if you push it too hard.”

Leo, who had finished the last cinnamon roll and was now plucking at the wrapper for stray sugar, grinned. “So you’re the local Oracle.”

“More like the bartender in a really persistent sitcom,” Azure shot back. “But yes, I hear things. And lately, I’ve been hearing about strangers in the woods, late-night traffic up near the lava fields, and a lot of people seeing things they can’t explain.”

She leaned forward, lowering her voice. “You two are the only ones

who've come close to getting the pattern right. Most folks just see shadows. But you...well, you're starting to see the real outlines."

Maya sat back, letting the words settle. She liked the way Azure described their sleuthing—less like they were inventing a mystery, more like they were tuning into one that already existed.

Leo broke the moment, pointing with his phone toward the back of the pub. "Is it me, or has that guy been sitting there since we walked in?"

Maya followed his gaze. At the far corner, half-shielded by a fake-wood support beam, sat a man who looked like he'd just materialized out of the early-morning fog. His beard was a tangle of pine needles and sun-bleached brown, and his jacket was a patchwork of canvas, old patches, and what looked like the remnants of a Forest Service logo. His eyes were sharp and a little wild, but they tracked Maya and Leo with the patience of someone who spent more time with trees than with people.

Azure didn't turn, but her mouth quirked in a way that said she was very aware of the new arrival. "That's Elias. He comes in once a month to charge his phone, read the newspaper, and see who's worth talking to. He's got a few more secrets than even I do."

Maya looked at her, eyebrow raised. "Does he know about the burger?"

Azure grinned. "He's the one who gave me the first recipe. Said it helped him 'hear the mountain's rhythm.' You should talk to him."

Maya wasn't sure if that was an invitation or an order, but as she met Elias's eyes across the room, he gave the smallest of nods, like he'd been expecting her all along.

Azure nudged her. "You want a refill first, or should I bring him over?"

"Bring him," Maya said, before she could talk herself out of it.

Azure stood, moving with a briskness that belied her laid-back air. She crossed the room, exchanged a few low words with Elias, then returned with him in tow. Up close, his skin was weathered, more cedar bark than leather, and his hands had the look of someone who'd dug a lot of dirt without gloves. He smelled faintly of woodsmoke and some-

thing else—maybe sage, maybe the wild basil that sometimes grew in the meadows above the village.

Elias slid into the booth with the caution of a man sitting in a stranger's car. He nodded at Maya, then at Leo, and finally at Azure, who poured him a coffee without asking.

"You found the nest," he said, voice low and a little rusty, like an ungreased hinge.

Maya nodded, not trusting herself to over-explain.

"You heard the machine in the cave?"

She nodded again.

Elias's eyes lit, just a touch. "Then you know what's really happening. The others, they get close, but they don't hear it. Or they forget before the next sunrise."

Leo spoke up. "You mean the mining?"

Elias shook his head. "Not mining. Not really. It's extraction, but not for metal. It's for the thing that lives in the earth." He tapped the table, a slow, rhythmic three-beat. "That's the heartbeat. The mountain's way of talking. The old ones, they said if you listen hard enough, you can tell when something's wrong."

He looked at Maya, studying her face. "You heard it, didn't you?"

She swallowed, then said, "It was a pulse, not random. Like a code."

Elias smiled, small and secretive. "That's how you know you're on the right track."

Azure leaned in, stage-whispering. "He won't say more unless you ask the right question. It's a local tradition."

Maya considered, then asked, "Who's making the noise? Is it people, or something else?"

Elias's fingers drummed again. "It's people. But not from here. They think the mountain is just a vault to be cracked. They don't see what's really in it. That's why they use the decoys." He flicked a glance at Leo. "The fake monsters, the stories. If you watch the shadows, you miss the real thing."

Maya felt the pieces lining up. "So all the cryptid sightings, the rumors—they're distractions? To keep everyone looking in the wrong direction?"

Elias nodded. "Exactly. They're good at it. But they forget that some people see through the fog."

Leo grinned, despite himself. "And some people smell it."

Elias's smile was wider now. "You two are ahead of the curve. The next step is harder, though."

Azure said, "They want to help. Show them."

Elias set down his mug, then reached into his canvas jacket. He pulled out a folded page—a hand-drawn map, with marks and lines and a complicated web of arrows. He laid it flat, smoothing the wrinkles.

"You need to see this with your own eyes," he said. "But go tonight. That's when they move."

Maya traced the path with her finger, heart racing. The next extraction point was right at the edge of the aspen grove, a half-mile from where the nest had been built.

She looked at Leo, then at Azure, who just nodded as if to say: You got this.

Elias drained his coffee, then stood, suddenly shy. "The mountain always wins," he said, echoing Azure's words from earlier. "But it likes to be asked nicely first."

He left with a ghost of a wave, slipping out the front door before the morning sun could blind him.

Maya stared at the map, knowing the day had just shifted.

Azure topped off her cup, then said, "That's the last lead you're going to get from me. After this, you're on your own."

But her eyes said: You're not alone.

Maya smiled, feeling the old, familiar itch of anticipation.

Tonight, they'd see for themselves what lived beneath the surface.

And this time, they'd be ready.

The map looked older than most of the tables in the DC Pub & Grill. Handmade, the kind of thing that would warp if you breathed on it, drawn in fine, tight lines that wound around every contour and creek bed. Elias had spread it across their corner booth, anchoring the corners

with condiment caddies and a chipped rock glass. It was a landscape made of secrets, every inch traced by someone who'd walked it, bled on it, and maybe even hidden things inside it.

Elias ran a finger along the edge of the page, tracing the line between Mammoth Cave and Ice Cave with a kind of reverence. "They move at night, always in the shadow of the aspen stands," he said, his voice softer than Maya had expected. "They pick spots where the earth's thin. The kind where you don't need to dig deep. Where the mountain's already cracked open a bit."

He tapped a series of small X's that dotted the ridge line. "Here. Here. Here. This is where the earth bleeds green when they cut. You ever see a tree's roots after a fresh break? Same color as the powder you brought in." He looked at Maya, not quite challenging, but as if waiting for her to admit something he already knew.

Maya leaned in, examining the marks. She'd mapped the mineral deposits herself for a class project back in undergrad, so she knew how the lines on the map should behave. These X's lined up with every spot on the ridge where the copper arsenate was closest to the surface.

"That's why the nest was built right above the vein," she said, half to herself. "It's not a home. It's a blind."

Leo panned his phone over the map, layering the hand-drawn detail with drone footage from last night. "Every time the Miller-Whites staged a 'cryptid hunt,' there was a thermal anomaly somewhere else on the ridge. They're not hunting, they're running interference."

Elias nodded, pleased. "Decoy. Oldest trick in the woods. The noise, the stories, even the hairs—just a way to make you look left when the real thing's happening right."

Maya pointed to a symbol she didn't recognize: a spiral with a dot at the center, marked in blue ink. "What's this?"

Elias smiled, the pine needles in his beard shifting. "Main entrance. Sometimes they call it the blue eye. If you want to catch them, that's the one you watch. But they don't stay long. They go in, they harvest, and they're gone before sunrise."

He looked at Leo. "Your drone can see in the dark?"

Leo nodded, pride in his voice. "Thermal, night vision, even some lidar. I can cover the whole ridge from two hundred feet up."

Elias seemed to weigh this information, then gave a slow nod. "That's good. They have ears, too, but not like yours."

At that, Maya's own hearing seemed to flex, and she caught the faint sound of a truck idling on Movie Ranch Road, even though the pub's doors were shut. She filed it away, letting her mind layer it with everything else on the table.

"So what's the play?" Maya asked, spreading the map wider.

Azure materialized with a pitcher of water and set it down with a little more force than necessary. "You catch them in the act," she said. "You document, you don't confront. No hero moves. You get the evidence and then you bring it to Adams. If you scare them, they'll just shut it down and move somewhere else."

Maya nodded, though she didn't love the idea of leaving the mountain's veins to be picked apart another day.

Elias, maybe sensing her frustration, said, "They're not many. Just two, maybe three. But they work fast, and they know how to leave no trail."

Leo flicked to the last video on his phone, a high-res clip of the Ghost Truck's crew moving equipment into a stand of birch at the base of the spiral symbol. "If we post up here"—he tapped the map—"and I send the drone to do a slow pass, we'll see them coming before they know they're spotted."

Elias smiled. "The mountain likes a plan. Even more if it's a clever one."

Azure refilled everyone's mugs, her own expression caught between concern and pride. "You need another round of burgers before you go?" she asked. "You've only got a few hours left on this batch."

Maya felt her stomach protest a little, but she nodded. "Half dose. If we need to stay sharp, it's worth it."

Azure winked, already moving toward the kitchen. "Coming up. And I'll slip in some of the old recipe, just for luck."

The pub was filling now, regulars staking out their favorite spots. The mood shifted as sunlight slanted across the tables, illuminating the dust motes and making the whole map glow faintly blue-green. Maya caught herself feeling almost giddy, as if the world had lined up for them, at least for a few hours.

Elias leaned close. "If you see the bird, don't chase it. Just watch. It's there to see if you're watching back."

Leo looked up from his phone, skeptical. "Bird?"

Elias nodded. "They use a drone, too. Painted like a Steller's Jay, with fake feathers. It sounds like a bird, but you'll hear the whine if you listen for it."

Maya snorted, realizing how deep the rabbit hole had gone. "So everyone's running decoys on everyone else."

Elias laughed, a rough, warm sound. "That's how the mountain stays interesting."

Azure returned with a plate of quartered burgers, cut small and dusted with a powder that was almost turquoise in the right light. "This is the 'double vision' batch," she said. "Eat half now, half later."

Maya and Leo took the plates, and even the aroma seemed to buzz in the air, sharper and more focused than anything else in the room. Maya bit into hers, and the effect was instant: the world's colors jumped, and the lines on Elias's map seemed to pulse with new clarity.

Leo leaned back, eyes half-lidded. "Is it possible to feel smarter?" he asked.

Azure grinned. "You'll be insufferable for at least six hours. After that, you'll crash and want to eat everything in sight. But by then, you'll have your answers."

The mood turned almost celebratory, everyone huddled over the map like co-conspirators. The plan was simple: Maya and Leo would ride out to the ridge, take up a spot just above the blue eye entrance, and wait for the poachers to show. Elias would act as their lookout, circling wide through the forest to see if anyone tried to flank or double-back. Azure would run comms from the pub, monitoring the scanner and keeping Adams on a hair trigger in case things got weird.

They sealed it with another round of coffee, then packed up, tucking Elias's map into a waterproof pouch and loading up on snacks. As they left the pub, the morning had turned bright and bitter cold, with a dry snap to the air that made Maya's skin tingle.

Out on Movie Ranch Road, Leo slung the drone case over his shoulder and grinned at Maya. "Last chance to back out," he said.

She grinned back. "You first."

Elias waited for them by the trailhead, his hands jammed deep into his jacket, eyes scanning the sky. He gave a nod, then pointed up the slope. "Go slow. They don't run until dark."

Maya nodded, leading the way. She felt the burger's boost in her blood, every step surer, every breath sweeter and more electric. The path up the ridge was steeper than she remembered, but her legs just ate the distance, and in less than thirty minutes they were crouched behind a blown-down spruce, with a clear line of sight to the spiral entrance.

The forest was so quiet it felt staged. Maya could hear every shift of Leo's boots, every scrape of wind on bark, every distant engine on the highway miles away. She forced herself to slow her breathing, letting her mind take in the thousands of tiny sounds and scents that normally hid just below the threshold.

A faint whir cut through the hush, and she signaled to Leo. He popped the drone, sent it up with barely a sound, and flipped the feed to thermal. They scanned the area, first slow and wide, then tighter as they mapped the routes Elias had marked.

It took almost an hour, but the payoff was perfect: three heat signatures, moving slow and steady along the ridge line, each one hugging the tree cover just as the map had predicted. They were moving toward the spiral, careful and methodical.

Maya whispered, "They're coming in from the north. Just like he said."

Leo nodded, eyes glued to his phone. "I can see their equipment. Looks like a backpack drill and some kind of sample kit."

They watched, heartbeats synchronized, as the crew reached the spiral entrance and set to work. One posted lookout, while the other two unpacked a portable rig and started on the rock. It was so quiet, so efficient, that Maya wondered how many times they'd done it before.

She took notes, snapping photos through the trees with a tele lens, marking every move, every detail. When she caught a glint of copper-blue powder on the hands of one of the crew, she almost cheered.

Leo hissed, "Bird incoming." Sure enough, a flash of blue zipped along the tree line—a drone, disguised as a jay, running a lazy patrol loop.

Maya grinned, aiming her phone mic at the decoy. The sound was

spot-on, but underneath, she could hear the whine of the rotor, just like Elias had said.

For two hours they watched, gathering more evidence than she'd thought possible. The crew finished their harvest, packed up, and vanished as quickly as they'd arrived.

Elias rejoined them near sunset, silent as a ghost. He listened as Maya gave her report, then grinned, showing a tooth she'd thought was lost to the mountain years ago.

"You did good," he said.

Leo checked his watch. "We should get this to Adams before the trail gets cold."

They hustled back down the ridge, high on the adrenaline and the fading burger boost. The first real dark of the evening hit as they reached the village, lights flickering on in every cabin.

Maya felt her body start to crash, but the energy of the day kept her upright. They cut through the pub, waving at Azure, who just lifted her glass in salute, then crossed to the sheriff's office.

Adams was waiting, the desk already cleared and ready. He took one look at the evidence, at the map, at the video stills, and his face set like granite.

"Gotcha," he said, and this time he meant it.

They left him there, prepping warrants and backup. Outside, the world was blue and perfect and cold, and for once, Maya felt as if the mountain was at peace.

She and Leo walked the long way back, letting the quiet settle around them.

"You know," he said, "I kind of get why the legends never die. It's more fun that way."

Maya smiled, feeling a warmth spread out from her core. "Maybe. But sometimes it's nice to know the real story."

He nudged her, grinning. "Until the next mystery, right?"

She nodded, thinking of the next batch of burger, the next weirdness, the next story waiting in the woods.

The mountain, she knew, would always have secrets.

But she was happy to chase them, one clue at a time.

And as they disappeared up the path, the last of the sun caught the snow in a quick flash of turquoise.

For a moment, Maya thought she could taste it.

And it was perfect.

eleven

into the mountain

THE LAVA TUBE entrance near Ice Cave looked exactly the way a movie would draw it: a gaping, soot-black mouth surrounded by rocks frosted with ancient snow. Wind tried to blow them off the mountain every few seconds, and the pines stood as windbreaks only for the first thirty feet before the slope gave way to a gnarly field of basalt rubble and volcanic dust.

Maya stood just outside the entrance, breath coming in visible bursts. If she held still, she could smell—no, actually taste—a weird tang in the air. It reminded her of the time the high school biology teacher zapped the Van de Graaff generator and made everyone's hair stand up. Ozone. The scent hit with a static edge, sharp and electrical, as if a thunderstorm was simmering somewhere underneath the snowpack.

Leo set up his phone on a flexible tripod, toggling through GPS overlays and camera angles. "Alright, documentarians, day one at the gates of doom," he announced, panning the lens in a slow circle before aiming it at Maya. "First impressions?"

She wrinkled her nose, squinting into the cave's inky depths. "If you die in here, I'm not carrying your body out. Just so we're clear."

"Deal," said Leo, slinging his own pack over one shoulder. He grinned. "You smell that?"

"It's not just me, then." She glanced up at the sky. The clouds were

a polite, watercolor gray. No storms anywhere. The charge in the air was coming from somewhere else.

They started down the first few yards of the tunnel, headlamps off. The walls immediately swallowed sound, soaking up their footsteps until all Maya could hear was her own heartbeat. Her eyes adjusted quick, helped by the burger boost, so she saw every seam and texture in the rock. The floor was uneven but dry, marked by shallow prints from hikers and the occasional local kid on a dare.

A hundred feet in, the tunnel pinched, the ceiling low enough that Leo had to stoop. The smell of ozone got stronger, mixed now with a sour whiff of battery acid. Maya stopped, holding out a hand. "Wait."

Leo froze, halfway through an exaggerated tiptoe. "Snake?"

She listened, cocking her head. The silence wasn't perfect. Far back, layered under the dead hush, was a faint click... then a pause... then another click. Not animal. Not water. It was mechanical, but not like a working engine—more like the sound of something resetting itself.

Maya didn't answer him, just shushed. She edged forward, one slow step at a time, until her eyes caught a jagged seam on the left wall about shoulder height. It was almost invisible unless you looked dead-on, but from a glancing angle, the surface reflected differently—more matte, less grain. The rock was not quite right.

She leaned in, then pulled out her phone and snapped a photo, comparing it to the other side of the tunnel. The difference was subtle but definite. "Leo, get over here."

He shuffled up, flicking on his headlamp at low power and tilting it to avoid full beam. "What am I seeing?"

"Right here," she whispered, tapping the seam. "The color's off. Texture's off too."

He ran a finger along the break, then stepped back and scanned the wall with the thermal on his phone. "It's colder than the rock around it. Like a couple degrees."

Maya squatted to examine the dust on the floor. Most of the way in, the volcanic dust lay in a fine, undisturbed sheet, except for boot prints that looked a few weeks old. But here, right at the seam, the dust was fainter—more compact, and interrupted by scuffs she didn't recognize. She crouched lower, trailing her hand just above the surface.

“There’s a pattern,” she said. “Like...not footsteps, but something repeated.” She sketched it in the air: “Three in a line, then a shift. Over and over.”

Leo filmed the floor, narrating: “Field notes—Maya’s found a break in the dust, regular intervals, maybe a pressure plate?”

Maya rolled her eyes but kept studying. “That’s not a bad theory. Look—if it’s a fake wall, they’d need a way in.”

Leo tapped his chin, then set the tripod at a wide angle to film both of them and the seam. “Alright, so we test the sequence?”

She thought for a second, then nodded. “You want to do the honors, or should I?”

He flashed a peace sign, then gestured for her to take the lead.

Maya eyed the pattern in the dust, placing her feet exactly on the marks: three steps forward, then a lateral hop left, then a stomp with her right foot. She glanced back at Leo, who gave a thumbs-up.

Nothing happened at first.

Then, with the tiniest shiver, the seam parted—a sliver of black opening up, just wide enough to wedge a fist through. There was a soft, wet hiss, like a tire slowly letting out air. The faintest blue-white light seeped out from the gap, painting the basalt a ghostly color.

Maya held her breath, then pressed her palm flat to the wall. The panel felt...wrong. The surface had the temperature of ice, but her hand tingled from an undercurrent of static. She pushed, gently at first, then harder.

The whole section of wall slid inward, pivoting on a silent hinge. Inside, a narrow corridor stretched back into the mountain, lined not with rough stone but with what looked like industrial composite—smooth, gray, and just reflective enough to catch the dim light from within. The ozone smell was a hundred times stronger in here, almost too much to take.

Leo, never at a loss for words, just whistled. “This is definitely not on the Park Service map.”

Maya stepped through, blinking in the light. The corridor was barely five feet wide, running straight for ten yards before splitting left and right. Along the ceiling, thin strips of LEDs cast a faint blue glow,

and every couple meters the floor showed the same weird wear pattern in the dust.

She motioned for Leo to follow. “Get this on video. Every second.”

He nodded, lips pressed together, for once taking it all as seriously as she was.

They edged down the corridor, senses fully awake. At the split, Maya paused, listening hard. The clicks and hums were louder now, coming from the left. She signaled with two fingers and took the left fork, moving as silently as she could.

After a dozen steps, the corridor opened into a small room. The first thing Maya noticed was the cold. The second was the wall-to-wall racks of equipment: sealed cases, matte-black boxes with blinking lights, and what looked like a DIY lab bench set up against the back wall. There was a faint, persistent hum—maybe refrigeration, maybe fans. Every surface gleamed with the careful tidiness of someone who knew how to clean up after themselves.

In the center of the room, under a single overhead lamp, sat a crate lined with shimmering blue powder. Cedar Green. Not a trace—pounds of it. Raw, unprocessed, and packed tight.

Leo was filming the whole time, his mouth open in a silent wow.

Maya, trying not to lose it, took a slow survey. There were labels on some of the cases—expensive-looking tags with serial numbers, a few bearing the logo of a jewelry brand she recognized from downtown. She scanned the racks, found a box full of fiber samples, each one clipped and bagged. The hair from the nest. They were harvesting the minerals, faking the cryptid story, and shipping the product out.

She looked at Leo, eyes wide.

He got it immediately. “It’s a whole operation. Not just mining, but laundering it through the legend.”

Maya nodded, scanning for more evidence.

Then she heard it: a muffled shuffle behind the right-hand wall, maybe five feet away. She grabbed Leo’s arm and pulled him toward the door. “We’re not alone,” she mouthed.

He started to pack up, but Maya held up her phone and snapped rapid shots of the evidence. She double-checked the corridor, then led the way back, retracing their steps with the same careful sequence: three

forward, left, stomp. The wall panel slid closed just as another set of footsteps echoed from within.

They made it back to the tunnel's main branch, hearts in their throats. Leo caught his breath, then burst into quiet laughter. "You realize we just cracked a case wide open?"

Maya grinned, adrenaline running cold and bright. "Yeah. And we're definitely getting burgers after this."

The two of them stood at the cave entrance, breathing the clean air and watching the blue sky stretch above the snow. Behind them, the hidden door blended perfectly into the lava tube wall, the ozone scent already fading into memory.

For a second, neither said anything.

Then Leo nudged her. "Next move?"

Maya smiled, plotting the steps ahead. "We blow it up. Bring the evidence to Azure, then the sheriff. Maybe the state. But first, I want to see if there's a way to catch the buyers on camera."

Leo nodded, already checking his batteries. "You're the boss."

They packed up, careful to leave no sign they'd been inside. Maya took one last look at the entrance, at the seam in the stone, at the pattern in the dust.

She didn't have the mountain's secrets, not yet. But she had a way in.

And this time, she wasn't letting go.

They waited until dusk before circling back. Maya's skin still vibrated from the first trip down the corridor, but she couldn't shake the need to see the operation with her own eyes, running in real time. The burger boost had faded, but her nerves were tuned to every temperature drop, every stray ping of static in the air.

Leo handled the approach with practiced care—no tripod this time, just a chest-mounted GoPro and the phone in his sleeve, set to silent. "If we get caught, play dumb and say we got lost on a ghost tour," he whispered.

She grinned, more for his sake than hers. "We're the dumbest ghosts

on the mountain, then.” The wind had dropped, and the tunnel seemed less a void and more a vein—every sound bouncing down its length, carrying the secrets to whoever wanted them badly enough.

At the seam, the panel was already ajar—a hair’s width, barely visible, but Maya noticed it right away. She tapped Leo’s arm and pointed. “Someone’s inside. Go slow.”

He nodded, flipping the GoPro to low-light.

They eased through, keeping to the edge of the corridor where the dust was thickest. At the first fork, Maya paused, straining to hear. The clicks from before were back, now joined by a distant whir, like an electric mixer beating air. She signaled left and moved, one step at a time, every muscle ready to reverse and bolt.

The corridor’s end was lit by LED strips, hung in loose loops along the ceiling. The glow was pale, blue-tinged, and washed out the corners of the chamber. In that haze, three men worked in homemade ghillie suits—scraps of canvas, synthetic hair, and strips of painted burlap knotted over base layers. Their faces were painted with dark streaks, and their gloves were dipped in the same blue-green mineral that filled the air with its metallic bite.

Maya counted the workers. One was hunched over a console, tapping on a tablet that looked military-grade. The other two ran hand drills, but they weren’t using muscle power: the drills were mounted on little robotic crawlers, bristling with sensors and crawling spiderlike up the face of the wall. Every so often, the robots paused, inserted a microbit, then reversed, ejecting a puff of powdered ore into a catch tray. The whole system ran on a rhythm—drill, pause, harvest, reset.

Leo tucked into a dark alcove, bracing his elbow against a section of smooth composite and aiming the phone at the workers. His breathing slowed, and Maya knew he was in full documentation mode: frame, zoom, steady, pan. She watched him for a second, then scanned the room for anything they’d missed the first time.

On the right, someone had welded together a makeshift centrifuge—cheap, portable, run off a solar charger. It was spinning a batch of ore, separating the powder by density. Nearby, crates sat open and ready, each one stamped “Mountain Crystal Works.” The logo was unmistak-

able: the gem between two feathers, just like the one she'd seen on the Summit Jewelers display case.

One of the workers leaned in, peered through a jeweler's loupe, and carefully tweezed a sample from the catch tray into a zippered pouch. The pouches were lined up in rows, each tagged with a date and a sticker bearing the name of a different luxury brand. Not all were jewelry—some were marked for "Specialty Electrics," others for "Micro-tronic Components." This wasn't a cottage industry; it was a supply chain.

Maya pressed her back to the wall, heart pounding. She wanted to snap a photo, but even the sound of her phone camera might have carried. So instead, she watched, memorizing every detail: the movement of the crawlers, the way the men handled the samples, the labeling on the cases. She'd never seen anything like it—not in a field camp, not in a research lab, not in a lifetime of documentaries about mineral smuggling.

Leo turned, whispered: "They're using the cryptid story to keep everyone away. Brilliant, honestly."

Maya nodded. "And laundering the minerals through 'ethical' jewelry markets. No wonder nobody's reported it."

She edged further into the room, risking a better angle. On the floor, blue-green dust formed tiny dunes around the bases of the racks. In one of those patches, she saw something weird—a twist of what looked like silver hair, exactly like the sample Sarah had pulled from the nest. She stooped, pinched it between two fingers, and tucked it into a baggie. The air near the ground was so thick with ozone it made her teeth hurt.

A hiss from the left made her freeze. One of the men in a ghillie suit was opening a new canister, pouring liquid onto the drill tip. The smell that hit was instantly familiar: industrial solvent, the kind used in high-end tech labs. Maya tried to place it—maybe isopropylamine, maybe something more exotic—but the moment passed as the man resealed the canister and reset the drill.

She inched closer to the console. The screen was visible from a distance: rows of numbers, some kind of diagnostic readout. She recognized a few terms—conductivity, carrier mobility, impurity banding.

Whatever they were mining, it was for something a lot more sensitive than trinkets.

Leo kept the phone low, catching a wide shot of the chamber. Maya knew he'd be able to zoom in later, but she wanted more. She scanned the bins and found an envelope, half open, stamped with a shipping label from Las Vegas. Inside were invoices—dozens of them—each listing “Cedar Green” and “RARE-EARTH MIX” as line items.

She carefully tore a corner off the top sheet, just enough to get the sender and recipient. Tucked it into her jacket.

A clatter from the tunnel made her freeze. The man at the console looked up, glanced toward the entry. For a split second, Maya thought they were caught, but then a new figure slid in—shorter, with a tighter-fitting suit and a baseball cap pulled low. The newcomer carried a duffel and handed it over with a muttered, “Next batch’s here. Boss says double time.”

The workers exchanged glances, then the guy at the console grunted: “We’re already pushing it. Too much draw and we’ll short the charger.”

The one with the cap spat on the floor. “Then tell the boss. You want to explain why the order’s late?”

The tension hung for a second, then broke. The men bent back to their work, this time moving with more urgency, switching drills faster, swapping out trays with hurried precision.

Maya felt a flash of anger. Not just for the damage to the mountain, or the theft, but for the absolute certainty with which these men acted—like nobody in the world would ever bother to look behind the mask of the myth. It was arrogance, pure and simple.

She signaled Leo, time to go.

They moved in reverse, even more careful now. At the last second, Maya spotted a handful of the “Sasquatch” hair caught on the edge of a crate. She swept it into her palm, sealing it in the same bag as the mineral. On the way out, she memorized the faces—painted and half-hidden, but still there. Leo held the camera to his chest, filming over his shoulder.

The panel slid closed behind them with the softest hiss, and the outside air hit like a slap. Maya leaned against the real stone, letting her

pulse settle. Leo checked the phone, scrolling through the footage in silence.

After a minute, he looked up, eyes wide. "We got everything. They're done."

She nodded, not trusting her voice. For a second, she just stared at the seam in the wall, thinking about all the people who'd walked past this spot without knowing what was hidden a foot behind the rock.

When she finally spoke, her voice was sharp. "Let's get it to the sheriff before anyone else disappears."

Leo nodded, sliding the phone into his pocket. "And Azure. She'll want to see."

They jogged back to the car in the fading light, the wind at their backs, the sky above blazing pink against the snow. At the top of the hill, Maya paused, took out the strip of silver hair, and held it up to the dying sun.

It glinted, artificial and cold, like a tiny wire torn from a robot's scalp.

She smiled, a grim thing, and said, "Let's go make history."

And they did.

If Maya had ever doubted the universe's sense of timing, the next five seconds fixed that.

She shifted her weight to get a better angle on the operation, and her boot clipped a stone hidden in the blue dust. The pebble rolled to the edge of the composite floor and fell, landing with a perfect metallic ping that echoed down the length of the chamber.

For a heartbeat, nobody moved. Then all three men in the ghillie suits turned as one, the painted lines on their faces warping into cartoon mask shapes. The guy with the baseball cap hissed, "We got company—back tunnel!" and reached for something at his belt.

Leo's hand found Maya's instantly, yanking her backward into the corridor with a whispered, "Run, run, run." She needed no convincing.

They bolted, keeping low, skidding over the dust while behind them a chorus of curses and boots signaled the miners had found pursuit a lot

more interesting than their previous job. Maya's mind kicked into triage mode: the corridor was a straight shot for thirty feet, then kinked, then branched. She remembered the layout from before and prayed the enhancements of Azure's burger had a decent afterlife in her system.

"Split at the fork," Leo gasped.

She nodded, hearing the miners gain. Someone's walkie squawked—an angry burst of static and a barked, "Don't let them out!" Maya's hearing, tuned sharp as a fox's, caught the thump of boots and the tell-tale click of a safety disengaged. These guys were not above escalating.

The corridor's first bend arrived, and Leo pivoted left, pulling Maya with him. The pair bounced off the wall, the impact jarring but necessary, and skidded into darkness.

Back in the main chamber, the miners argued, but then the whir of a crawler kicked up, followed by a mechanical clatter. They'd sent the robot after them.

"Keep going," she hissed.

They barreled through the side tunnel, which instantly went from blue glow to total blackout. It twisted, not quite as regular as the entrance corridor—sometimes ceiling-high, sometimes so low they had to duck and sidestep. Maya's lungs burned with the chemical tang of the dust. Her legs kept moving, guided by the echo of their footsteps and the faint, wet sound of water somewhere ahead.

Leo's voice was a tight whisper. "There's light up there. Think it's another exit?"

"Only if we don't end up as pancakes." She peered ahead. Her eyes, starved for any photon, picked up a gradation in the blackness—a smudge of slightly less dark, thirty yards ahead.

A new sound joined the pursuit: a metallic scraping, the crawlers moving at double time. The tunnel vibrated with the whine of electric motors and the irregular slap of rubberized feet on the dust. Maya risked a glance back, caught the weird, animal glint of a crawler rounding the bend, its mounted camera glowing red.

"Duck," Leo said, and pushed her against the wall. The crawler zipped past, nearly missing them, then reversed, spinning in place. Maya reached out and smacked the sensor with a rock. It exploded in a glitter of plastic, the machine veering off into the darkness.

They pressed on, now running on pure adrenaline. The tunnel was wet underfoot, and the sound of water was louder—the whisper of a real stream, moving fast.

They rounded another curve and saw it: a slot of daylight, thin but real, leaking in from a break in the rock. The tunnel floor dropped out, replaced by a mossy ledge that sloped toward a thin, horizontal slit barely wide enough to squeeze through.

Leo went first, shouldering his pack and flattening himself like a commando. “It’s tight but doable,” he grunted, wriggling forward until his torso vanished into the light. Maya followed, one arm reaching for purchase, the other clutching her evidence bag.

The sound of the miners was right behind them—shouted warnings, boots skidding on the stone, the high-pitched whine of a second crawler. Leo’s shoes scrabbled for purchase as he reached the mouth of the slit, then with a sudden, urgent heave, he was through.

Maya hit the exit a heartbeat later. The gap cut across the cliff face, six feet above the forest floor. Beyond, the land dropped away to a tangled scree of moss and ice.

She braced herself, twisted, and rolled out into the open. The cold shocked her senses back online, the scent of moss and rushing water obliterating the ozone. She landed hard, knees stinging, but kept moving, tucking into a slide down the hillside. Leo, already on his feet, grabbed her wrist and steadied her.

They looked back just in time to see a ghillie suit emerge from the tunnel, face red with effort and rage. He pointed, then ducked back inside, clearly not eager to risk the drop.

Maya turned, scanning for any path out. The cliff ran parallel to a narrow ravine, its base clogged with deadfall and slicked with icy spray from the stream. The sound of the falls—Cascade Falls, she guessed—grew louder with every step.

Leo gestured downslope. “We follow the stream—there’s a foot-bridge at the bottom.”

She nodded, and they half-ran, half-fell down the ravine, feet never fully finding solid ground. Above them, the sound of pursuit faded, replaced by the constant white noise of water and the occasional crack of a branch as something heavy moved in the undergrowth.

At the base, the forest opened into a clearing, with the creek running swift and high. A wooden bridge spanned the water, more decorative than functional, but it would do.

They sprinted across, boots hammering the planks, and only then did Maya risk a look back.

Nothing. For the first time in what felt like hours, no one was in sight. She let out a shaky breath, half laughing, half ready to cry.

Leo checked the GoPro, then looked at her, grinning wide. "You are the best field partner on the planet."

She grinned back, adrenaline making her teeth chatter. "Next time, you get to set the decoy."

They started up the far side of the ravine, aiming for the safety of the main trail. They moved with less urgency now, but kept a lookout, every shadow a potential threat.

Halfway up, a voice crackled through the trees. Maya froze. It was tinny, distorted, but unmistakable: "Team two, cover the falls exit. Repeat—team two, both exits." The radio broadcast bounced between the trunks, amplified by the natural bowl of the canyon.

Leo's smile faltered. "We're not clear yet. They've got outside backup."

Maya scanned the trees and spotted a patch of blaze orange—a vest, moving careful and slow, not twenty yards up the trail. More voices, now closer.

She pointed left. "Side path, now."

They cut through a mess of young aspen, ducking branches and leaving only a trace of disturbed snow behind. The path quickly turned into a game trail, winding through old growth and back toward the spine of the ridge.

The next ten minutes passed in a blur of cold air and crunching steps. Maya's hearing caught every movement—birds, wind, the distant roar of water, and somewhere behind, the slow, methodical advance of boots. Leo ran the GPS overlay in his head, guiding them up and over a saddle, then onto a service road.

They hit the road at a run. It was empty for now, but the tire tracks in the snow were fresh. Maya ducked into the trees and scanned for motion; Leo did the same.

A minute later, the first truck crested the hill, moving slow and deliberate. The windows were dark, but Maya glimpsed the driver—a man in a blaze orange vest and a face she recognized from the mining crew.

She flattened against the tree, heart pounding. The truck idled, then rolled past, engine barely audible. As it turned the corner, she and Leo made a break for it, sprinting in the opposite direction, sticking to the cover of the woods.

It was only when the noise of the engine faded for good that they finally stopped, doubled over and panting.

Maya laughed, high and wild. “I can’t believe we made it.”

Leo offered her a hand. “We should tell someone. Sheriff, Azure, the world.”

She nodded, feeling the evidence bag press against her chest like a second heart. “All of the above.”

They walked the last half mile back to the main road in silence, every so often glancing back to make sure nobody followed. The sky was dark now, stars pinpricking the cold. The lights of Duck Creek village glowed in the distance—safe, small, and for the first time, almost ordinary.

Maya felt the urge to collapse, but she kept moving. There would be time for sleep, for pie, and for whatever it was that came after unraveling the mountain’s biggest secret.

Tonight, they’d outsmarted the legend. Tomorrow, they’d take down the real monsters.

As they reached the edge of the village, Leo squeezed her hand, and Maya squeezed back. They didn’t say anything. They didn’t have to.

The mountain had tried to bury its secrets, but for once, the story would get out.

Maya smiled, letting herself imagine the next headline. And if it happened to mention “Sasquatch,” she decided, maybe that was okay.

Let the legends have their moment.

She and Leo would handle the truth.

twelve

pursuit

THE CAVE SPAT them into the world above with a shock of cold so sharp it burned. Maya stumbled out first, boots catching on loose stone, then steadied herself on a boulder crusted with snowmelt and lichen. Leo barreled out after her, wheezing, the GoPro clacking against his chest like an extra heart. For a second, they just stood there, gulping the real, piney air, brains snapping from pure survival into problem-solving at warp speed.

Then they both heard it—a low, throaty growl of a diesel engine, idling somewhere below. Maya dropped to a crouch, dragging Leo down with her. The world above the ravine was wide open, but a line of spruce trees offered cover just ten yards downslope. They moved as one, scrambling over scree and icy patches until the forest swallowed them whole.

Maya pressed her back to the rough trunk of a spruce, every nerve vibrating from the chase. She didn't even need to signal Leo; he was already flattening himself, eyes wide, every bit of his social-media irreverence erased by the sight below.

The Ghost Truck was there. Bigger than Maya remembered, matte-black, mottled with mud, and painted along the lower quarter with the kind of turquoise green that glimmered like wet stone. It was parked at the edge of the dirt pullout, rear gate yawning open. Two men in home-brew camo—layers of burlap and blue-streaked canvas—hustled heavy

crates out of the tunnel exit, stacking them in the truck bed. Next to the truck, a pair of ATVs idled, their engines snorting clouds of exhaust into the morning air.

Maya's world telescoped: the chill of the snow under her palms, the crackle of ice crystals breaking with every move, the faint whine of the drone still running its idle loop from Leo's pocket. But what really hammered her was the sound—every scrape of crate, every panicked whisper from the men below, every clipped syllable of the code they used as they hustled their loot.

"They said fifteen minutes—where's the goddamn bird?" one of the camo guys snapped, hoisting a crate with both hands. His partner, broader and slower, made a grunting sound, but kept working.

Maya angled her head, catching more.

"Boss says go direct, no stops. North lot. Police sweep in town, so keep off comms after highway."

"Copy."

Leo nudged her, voice just above a breath. "They're skipping town, straight shot. That means..."

"They'll be gone before Adams can get here." Maya's mind spat out the calculation: at the Ghost Truck's speed, plus the ATVs as scouts, the crew could hit the county highway in under ten. The sheriff, if he even believed them, would take at least thirty to rally from Duck Creek proper. Unless—

She leaned back, scanning for options. The shortcut. Elias had told her about a game trail, barely more than a goat path, that cut from the upper ridge to the first switchback on the main road. Half the distance, if you didn't break your neck in the process.

Leo must have been riding the same wave, because he already had his phone out, thumbs flying over the drone controls. "We can tail them. Get the plate, video everything, maybe even catch them offloading. If Adams won't believe us now, he will after."

She risked a peek over the fallen log. The miners were almost done loading. One of them, now maskless, had a three-day stubble and the pinched, sunken look of a man running on little sleep and less conscience. He barked into his walkie, "Moving out. Give us a thirty count, then cover the site."

Maya ducked back, catching the tang of ozone and the sharp bite of industrial solvent wafting up from the open truck bed. The sight of those crates, packed with a fortune in illegal ore, stoked a white-hot anger in her.

Leo pressed the drone remote into her hand. “You fly. I’ll spot.” His hands were trembling, either from the cold or the adrenaline—or, more likely, both. “I need to text Adams. You said he’d listen if we brought proof, right?”

She nodded, already flipping the drone live. The camera feed painted the world in cool blues and crisp shadows, perfectly suited to the high-altitude winter. She thumbed the stick, launching the drone up and over the trees, keeping it low enough not to catch the sun but high enough for a wide shot.

Onscreen, the Ghost Truck roared to life, tires spitting gravel, the first ATV darting ahead to clear the turn. The second ATV zipped behind, then peeled off, disappearing into the cover of the pines. Maya’s finger hovered over the record button; she pressed it, locking the drone’s gaze on the convoy.

Leo worked his phone, fingers flying as he composed a message for Adams. Maya could hear his muttered commentary: “Not a prank. They’re real. Armed. Get to Cascade Cutoff—now.”

She tracked the drone, shifting its angle as the Ghost Truck barreled down the snow-packed trail. A flurry of radio static bled through the drone’s speaker, but Maya filtered it out, focusing on the chase.

Then, as the truck cleared the last turn, the world split open.

The lead ATV hit a patch of glare ice and spun, flipping sideways in a shower of snow. The driver—barely more than a kid, by the look of him—bailed at the last second, rolling out and tumbling down the bank. The Ghost Truck swerved, wheels sliding, then corrected and pressed on, leaving the second ATV to circle back and pick up the fallen scout.

Maya’s heart thudded in her throat. The convoy had barely slowed.

Behind her, Leo tapped her shoulder. “Adams says he’s en route, but if we can stall them at the highway he’ll bring backup. He wants us to ‘observe and avoid confrontation,’ but—” Leo’s mouth twisted in a grin—“I don’t think he knows us very well.”

Maya managed a laugh, low and fierce. "Let's just make sure we get them in one piece."

She panned the drone ahead, watching the Ghost Truck hurtle down the last mile to the main road. She zoomed the feed, catching the mud-spattered license plate and the face of the driver—a sharp-nosed woman with aviator glasses and a look of pure, desperate concentration.

The shortcut. They'd have to run.

"Grab the bike," Maya whispered, then turned to hoof it up the game trail, the drone buzzing above like an angry wasp.

The trail was worse than she remembered—bare dirt in places, glazed with treacherous frost in others. Leo, even loaded down with his gear, made good time. He mounted the battered mountain bike they'd stashed at the last survey point, then shot Maya a look. "You trust my steering?"

"Not even a little," she said, but vaulted onto the handlebars anyway.

Leo kicked off, the back tire fishtailing on the first patch of ice, but he kept it upright. Maya gripped the frame with her knees, one hand on the front brake, the other clamped around the drone remote. The wind bit through her layers, turning her face numb, but the clarity it brought was almost worth it.

The trail wound down through a chute of aspen, the white trunks flashing by in a dizzying strobe. Maya called out every hairpin and fallen branch, her hearing still dialed to eleven thanks to Azure's last burger. Leo handled the bike like it was an extension of his own spine, cutting corners tight and coasting the slick stretches, skidding around a stump without losing momentum.

Ahead, the drone's camera kept a running bead on the Ghost Truck. Maya watched the feed even as her own eyes watered from the cold. The truck was approaching the Cascade Cutoff, the last intersection before the highway. If they didn't intercept there, the crew could vanish into the maze of backroads and logging spurs that webbed the county for miles.

She yelled over the wind, "We have maybe three minutes to beat them to the highway!"

Leo dug in, pedaling hard, gritting his teeth. "Then we go full send!"

The last fifty yards of the trail dropped straight into a drainage ditch, slick with runoff and studded with boulders. Maya braced for impact; Leo yanked the front wheel up and rode the skid, both of them landing hard on the frozen dirt road at the bottom. They nearly toppled, but the bike wobbled, righted, then shot forward.

The main road was a two-lane blacktop, empty but for a single snowplow parked by the pullout. The Ghost Truck was barreling toward them, less than a quarter mile away, headlights off and front end streaked with frozen mud. Maya and Leo ditched the bike behind a boulder, scrambling to the center of the intersection.

"Time to make a scene," Leo said, breathless.

Maya nodded, then grabbed a chunk of log from the roadside and dragged it across the pavement, making a pathetic but real attempt at a roadblock. Leo did the same with an old tire and a traffic cone, the kind left over from summer construction.

The truck saw them at the last second and locked up its brakes, the tires shrieking on the half-melted snow. It slewed sideways, barely missing the makeshift barrier, and shuddered to a stop. For a split second, nothing happened.

Then the doors flew open, and the camo miners leapt out, yelling for Maya and Leo to move or get run over. Maya took a step back, raising her hands, her heart hammering.

"Sheriff's on the way!" she called, voice clear as a bell. "You're done. Just walk away."

The woman with the aviators spat a curse, then grabbed for a crate in the back. Her partner jumped onto the tailgate, tossing more crates into the ATV trailer.

Leo, running pure chaos, darted forward and filmed the scene point-blank, getting the whole thing on live stream. "Smile for the camera," he said, voice wild. "This is going straight to the Sheriff's Facebook!"

The miners hesitated. The second ATV, with the bruised kid, wheeled in from the side and cut a sharp U, blocking Maya and Leo

from the truck. The kid glared, blood streaking his cheek, but he didn't look eager for a fight.

Above, Maya's drone buzzed in, the camera's little LED winking a warning.

Behind them, sirens cut through the air—distant, but closing fast.

The woman driver cursed again, then made a choice. She slammed the truck into reverse, flooring it past the roadblock, and fishtailed out onto the highway, a cloud of blue dust trailing from the open bed. The other two, seeing their window closing, gunned the ATVs and followed.

Maya and Leo stood, breathless, in the vortex of diesel, pine smoke, and ozone. The chase was over. For now.

But as the sheriff's cruiser rounded the bend, sirens howling, Maya couldn't help but grin, adrenaline spiking higher than it ever had before. Leo looked at her, eyes alive, and for a second they just stood in the middle of the ruined intersection, the drone landing at their feet like a loyal dog.

"That was insane," Maya said, voice shaky with laughter.

Leo nodded. "I can't believe we're still alive."

Sheriff Adams barreled out of his cruiser, weapon drawn, eyes wild. "You two okay? Anyone hurt?"

"We're fine," Maya said, stepping forward. "But you need to see this." She held up her phone, the drone footage cued to the money shot: the crates, the faces, the plates, the whole operation.

Adams watched for five seconds, then barked into his radio for backup. "Got 'em. Outbound on 14, blacked-out truck, two ATVs, likely armed. Prepare to intercept at the Cedar Ridge turnout."

He gave Maya and Leo a long, appraising look, then holstered his weapon and pointed at them.

"Stay put," he said. "And next time, call me before you play hero."

But he was smiling.

As the rest of the world caught up—sirens, spotlights, the full cavalry of county law—Maya and Leo stood side by side, watching the road where the Ghost Truck had vanished.

The wind picked up, cold and perfect, scouring the last of the blue dust from the pavement.

Maya looked at Leo, her oldest friend and now, officially, the best damn field partner on the mountain.

She thought about the legend, the years of rumor and myth, and the strange, stubborn truth beneath it all.

And for the first time, she felt like they'd won.

The moment Sheriff Adams took off after the poachers, Maya felt a clock start ticking in her head. The Ghost Truck and the ATVs were going to make the next highway cutoff in minutes, and the only way to get ahead of them was the kind of reckless shortcut only a local—or a lunatic—would dare.

She scanned the roadside, hunting for a sign. The hidden trailhead was there, exactly where Elias had said it would be: a faint break in the brush, marked by a bent sapling and a strip of orange survey tape so faded it looked like a birthmark on the tree. Maya grabbed Leo's sleeve, yanked him back from the highway, and pointed.

"That's it," she whispered, breathless. "If we take the game trail, we can head them off at the junction before Cedar Ridge."

Leo looked at the tangled undergrowth, then at her, then at the trail again. "You sure it's passable?"

"Only one way to find out," she said, and crashed through the first line of willow branches, ignoring the way the twigs whipped her face.

Leo followed, keeping his bike upright and ready. The path was more of a rumor than a real trail: roots curled out of the ground like claws, and the slope tipped sharply downhill in places. Maya's boots slid in the muck, but her senses—amped by the day's events and probably still turbocharged from Azure's last burger—kept her moving at a steady, crazy-fast clip.

Every few steps, she checked her phone, tracking the Ghost Truck on the drone's live feed. The convoys were taking the main forest road, the path snaking wide and slow around the mountain's shoulder. If she and Leo cut straight down, they could beat them to the highway by at least a minute. If they didn't wipe out first.

At the first switchback, Leo overtook her, wheeling the bike into a

tight turn that would have dumped anyone else face-first into a rock. Maya marveled, not for the first time, at his weird, innate mountain sense. He never looked at a map, but he always ended up where he meant to go.

They moved in bursts: sprint, brake, pick a path through the undergrowth, then sprint again. The cold air burned Maya's throat, and her hands stung where the brush tore at her skin. But she didn't care. Every muscle in her body had a job, and the fear—real and sharp—made her feel more alive than she ever had.

Behind them, the sound of engines grew louder, reverberating through the trees like distant thunder. Maya risked a glance over her shoulder and saw, through a break in the branches, the Ghost Truck tearing down the forest road, ATVs bracketing it front and back.

She yelled up to Leo, "They're moving faster than I thought! You need to go all-out."

Leo whooped, the noise half terror and half joy, and crouched low over the handlebars. "Get on, we'll double-time it!"

Maya didn't hesitate. She jumped onto the crossbar, wrapping her arms tight around the stem and ducking her chin behind Leo's backpack. The bike wobbled for a split second, then Leo powered up, pumping the pedals until the tires spun mud and pine needles in a rooster tail behind them.

The next quarter mile was a blur. Every sense was in overdrive: the slap of frozen branches on her jacket, the shock of cold air in her teeth, the shudder of the frame every time they caught a root or bounced off a rock. Maya called out obstacles as she spotted them—"Left, dip, log, tight right!"—and Leo responded with impossible reflexes, cutting the turns so close she could smell the old pitch bleeding from the trees they grazed.

The trail dropped, then leveled, then pitched again, each segment a new test of nerves and balance. Maya clung for dear life, her legs floating just above the front wheel, the wind tearing tears from her eyes.

At the second switchback, the trail nearly vanished. It crossed a shallow gully, then climbed straight up a bank so steep Maya thought they'd have to walk. Leo didn't even slow. He stood on the pedals, leveraging his entire weight into one herculean effort, and powered the bike

up the slope. For a second, they hovered at the tipping point—then crested, tires clawing for purchase.

Maya saw a flash of open sky through the trees. “We’re almost there!” she gasped. “Intersection is just over the next rise!”

She checked the drone feed again. The Ghost Truck was less than a half mile behind and closing. If Adams missed them at the cutoff, there’d be nothing stopping the poachers from making a clean getaway.

Maya leaned forward, whispering in Leo’s ear: “Give it everything. No brakes, just go.”

He grinned, teeth chattering from cold and adrenaline. “You got it, Cap.”

They flew. The last stretch was straight and rough, the trail more rock than dirt. Leo pointed the front tire down the centerline, let gravity take over, and they barreled toward the clearing like a bobsled out of hell. Maya’s eyes locked on the goal, scanning for movement, hazards, anything.

A low branch whipped toward them at head height. She ducked, dragging Leo down with her. The branch skimmed the top of his helmet, snapping clean off and spinning away behind them.

The trail flattened, then spat them out onto the shoulder of the main highway. Maya and Leo skidded to a stop, the bike tires throwing up twin fans of wet gravel and dust. For a second, she thought they’d missed the truck—but then the roar of the diesel engine, so close, made her heart clench.

They had maybe thirty seconds.

Maya leapt off the bike, grabbed the nearest downed limb, and dragged it across the road. Leo did the same, grabbing anything that wasn’t frozen to the ground. They made a pathetic barricade—logs, an abandoned tire, a battered snow pole—but it was better than nothing.

Leo fumbled for his phone and thumbed the drone remote, sending it up for a bird’s-eye view.

“They’re coming,” Maya said, voice tight.

“Yeah,” Leo said, breathing hard. “But so are we.”

She braced herself, watching the shimmer of the truck’s paint as it rounded the last bend. The ATVs flanked it, engines snarling. Maya felt her blood thump in her ears, every nerve screaming for action.

This was it. No more hiding, no more running.

Leo set his stance behind the roadblock, feet planted. “Ready for glory?”

Maya laughed, wild and clear. “I was born ready.”

The Ghost Truck bore down on them, tires hissing over the icy patches, driver’s face unreadable behind the windshield. For a heartbeat, Maya wondered if they’d just get flattened.

Then Leo triggered the drone’s emergency flash—blinding LEDs ignited, painting the road with strobing white light. The driver slammed the brakes, the truck fishtailing, skidding sideways into the barrier. The ATVs tried to swerve, but one wiped out on the snow pole and went airborne, flipping once before landing in a heap.

Maya didn’t wait for the dust to settle. She sprinted to the driver’s door, yanked it open, and locked eyes with the woman in aviators.

“You’re done,” Maya said. “Police are right behind us.”

The woman’s lips curled in a snarl, but she didn’t fight. She just glared, then killed the engine, slumping in her seat.

Leo cheered, then turned to Maya, eyes bright with disbelief. “We did it. We actually did it.”

Maya exhaled, finally letting the adrenaline go. “Yeah,” she said, almost dazed. “We did.”

From up the road, sirens wailed—the cavalry was coming.

But for once, it felt like Maya and Leo had won the race.

Maya’s arms trembled as she hauled another log into place, the bark cold and sodden with old meltwater. It took everything she had to wedge it upright, her boots losing traction in the slush. Somewhere behind, Leo bellowed “INCOMING!” and lobbed a fist-sized rock onto the pile, adding a half-hearted barricade of broken snow pole and torn banner from last summer’s Fun Run. It looked like the last stand of two really determined raccoons, but Maya refused to let it go unfinished.

They had less than a minute. The drone’s camera feed, still open on her phone, showed the Ghost Truck’s headlights carving a path through

the dusk, barreling down the grade toward their position. The driver hadn't even tapped the brakes.

"Barrier's set!" Maya shouted.

Leo, who was bleeding from a dozen cuts on his knuckles, just grinned and limped over, the mountain bike abandoned in the ditch. He thumbed the drone controller with one hand and checked the feed with the other. "We got visual. She's coming in hot."

Maya eyed the road, wiped a streak of dirt across her sleeve, and said, "We're either getting pancaked, or this is going on the highlight reel for life."

Leo gave her a look—exhausted, elated, totally alive. "No regrets," he said.

The world funneled down to the next ten seconds.

The Ghost Truck crested the last rise, the grill shuddering with speed, and Maya saw the driver's face—a mask of determination and, finally, panic. She had a second to wonder if they'd just made things worse by bottlenecking a desperate crew on a frozen road, but the thought was interrupted by Leo hitting the drone's "special feature" button.

The drone, programmed to hover in the truck's lane, dropped altitude and snapped on its bank of LEDs, flooding the cab with a retina-searing blue-white light. The effect was instant: the driver yanked the wheel, lost control on the glaze of ice, and plowed into the barricade. Logs shattered, the hood buckled, and for a moment all Maya heard was the crunch of metal, the squeal of brakes, and the hollow thunk as the truck slammed into the drift behind the barrier.

The ATVs behind tried to swerve, but one caught a tire on the edge of the snow and catapulted its rider into a ditch. The second managed to fishtail past, but not before Leo's drone swooped in front and blinded the driver with another flash. Both ATVs ended up tangled in the scrub, their engines whining and wheels spinning uselessly.

Maya blinked away the afterimage, then saw the driver's door pop open. The woman in aviators staggered out, hands up, swearing loud enough for Maya to hear over the wind. From the truck bed, the other two miners tumbled out, one cradling a bleeding arm, the other clearly looking for a path into the woods.

But it was over. From the opposite direction, Adams' cruiser roared in, blue and red lights strobing. The sheriff screeched to a halt, leapt out, and covered the lot of them with his service weapon.

"Hands where I can see them!" Adams shouted, voice echoing down the corridor of dark trees.

The woman in aviators dropped to her knees, the wind flattening her parka against her frame. The two miners followed suit, one with a grunt of pain. In moments, the sheriff had them face down in the slush, zip-cuffing their wrists with the practiced speed of a man who'd always suspected the mountain held a few extra criminals in reserve.

As more county cruisers converged—drawn by the earlier call and the not-at-all-inconspicuous mess on the highway—Maya and Leo just stood there, not sure what to do with their hands or their victory.

Adams finally looked up, spotted them behind the battered barricade, and gave a little nod. "I told you to call if you got in over your heads."

Leo wiped his hands on his jacket, then gestured to the chaos. "Would you have believed us?"

The sheriff glanced at the turquoise ore glittering in the spilled crates, the high-tech drone still hovering like a hawk above the scene, the two kids who'd just arrested a crew of international mineral thieves. His mouth twitched, just a little.

"Not a chance," he said. Then, softer: "But thanks for not letting them get away."

Deputies spread out, herding the prisoners and taping off the site. A medic checked the miners for injuries, then gave Leo a bandaid and a look that suggested he should be more careful next time. Maya watched as the blue-green dust sparkled under the headlights, every fleck a tiny jewel, an unburied secret at last.

When the immediate chaos settled, Adams approached them, voice pitched low. "You two did good. Not smart, exactly, but good." He looked at Maya, then at Leo, and shook his head. "You ever think about law enforcement?"

Leo made a face. "Only if you get dental."

Maya laughed, then winced as she realized she was shaking all over. The cold, the crash, the come-down from adrenaline—it all hit at once.

“Are we free to go?” she asked, only half-joking.

Adams nodded. “You gave your statement. Go home, warm up. And stay off the roads. I don’t want to fill out a report on your parents, too.”

He turned away, then paused. “Nice work with the drone.”

Leo beamed, rubbing his thumb along the battered controller. “Best shot I ever got.”

They walked away from the scene together, step for step, heads buzzing with the wildness of it all.

Halfway to the village, Maya nudged Leo. “You know, we still haven’t had breakfast.”

He barked a tired laugh. “Azure owes us the entire menu. And maybe a pie.”

“Let’s make it two,” she said. “For science.”

They kept moving, battered and banged up but more themselves than ever.

Above them, the mountain stood silent, all its secrets bright and exposed in the snow.

For once, Maya thought, the truth didn’t just belong to the story.

It belonged to her, and to Leo, and to anyone stubborn enough to go looking.

And the mountain, in its own cold way, approved.

thirteen

exposing the truth

IF THE SHERIFF'S office had ever hosted a criminal mastermind, it was hiding it well. The place was less precinct and more hunting lodge, with a potbelly stove warming the air and the aroma of gun oil and burnt coffee blending with the dry, antique whiff of old wood paneling. Maps were everywhere: Utah, Kane County, all of Dixie National Forest in one sprawling, sun-bleached print. Sheriff Adams's desk was a monument to paperwork, ringed with three decades of coffee stains and littered with commemorative belt buckles, random field equipment, and the occasional souvenir mug from a failed local campaign.

Maya walked in first, boot laces untied, jacket half-zipped, a slim white bandage still taped across her cheek. She didn't look like a crime victim; she looked like someone who'd hiked in from a better, more dangerous story. Leo trailed behind her, clutching a battered messenger bag in one hand and his phone in the other, muttering under his breath as he prepped for their big reveal.

Sheriff Adams was exactly as Maya remembered: barrel-chested, silver buzz cut, and a mustache so perfect it could have been a decal. He glanced up, saw the state of the duo, and sighed in a way that managed to be both paternal and preemptively disappointed.

"You two again," he said. "If you brought me another shed full of raccoon skulls, I'm putting you both in the holding cell until your parents pick you up."

Maya set her jaw. "It's not wildlife this time. We have evidence—real evidence."

Adams pushed his chair back and indicated the only clear surface in the room: a two-by-three rectangle of chipped Formica that might once have served as a conference table but was now a landing zone for paperwork and whatever the Sheriff couldn't be bothered to throw away. "Show me," he said, waving a hand. "But make it quick. I've got a deputy on report duty and she's threatening mutiny."

Maya eased her pack onto the table, unzipped it, and, with the precision of a magician setting up a final trick, laid out three vials of mineral dust: NEST, BASE, and OUTCROP. Each label was neat, black marker in her own blocky print. She lined them up, then popped open her field notebook, its pages heavy with soil stains and dog-ears.

Leo, meanwhile, found a free plug and started connecting his laptop to the office's wall monitor. He kept his mouth shut, which Maya appreciated, given that the whole case probably hinged on how convincing they could be in the next ten minutes.

Adams gave the vials a skeptical once-over. "So, what am I supposed to be seeing? Dirt?"

Maya shook her head. "Cedar Green. It's a rare mineral—copper aluminum arsenate. Normally you'd have to go to old tailings pits in the Rust Belt to find it. It doesn't occur here, but it's turning up all over the mountain. Especially in places where there have been 'Sasquatch' sightings." She made finger quotes without a hint of irony.

Adams leaned forward, squinting at the vials. "And you're telling me that's not just mineral run-off?"

She smiled, allowing herself a moment of triumph. "Watch." She poured a tiny amount from each vial into three shot glasses she'd borrowed from Azure that morning, then filled each with tap water from Adams's own jug. Instantly, the water in the NEST and OUTCROP glasses shifted from clear to a vibrant, almost neon turquoise—the effect so dramatic it looked staged.

Maya held one up to the light, swirling it. "This stuff is ten times more concentrated than what you'd find in any surface water sample in the region. Someone is pulling it out, refining it, then getting rid of the residue. I'd bet my thesis on it."

Adams grunted, and for the first time, Maya saw a flicker of interest. "Alright, you got my attention. But what does this have to do with the so-called Sasquatch?"

Leo jumped in, projecting the first frame of his video onto the ancient wall monitor. "Let me walk you through last night."

The footage was crisp, night-vision green. The camera tracked up the old mining trail, showing a truck parked in the clearing, then zoomed in on three figures in patchwork camo. The ghillie suits looked even more outlandish on screen than in real life: strips of synthetic hair, painted to match the local flora, moving in unison as the miners hauled gear from the bed to the cave entrance.

Leo clicked to a still, highlighting the Mountain Crystal Works logo stenciled on a crate.

Adams's eyebrows rose. "That's a real company. They've got an office in Cedar City."

"Exactly," Maya said. "We found their invoices in the cave. They're using the cryptid story to keep everyone else away while they run an illegal extraction operation."

Leo advanced the video, letting the miners' operation play out in real time: silent drills, blue-lit workspaces, the bagging of mineral powder, all staged in the belly of the mountain. When the video reached the part where the wall panel closed seamlessly, Adams actually swore under his breath.

"So you're telling me," he said, "that the whole Sasquatch mess is a cover story for mineral theft?"

Maya nodded. "With the Miller-Whites as the unwitting—maybe not so unwitting—PR team."

Adams rubbed his face, exasperation and respect warring for space on his features. "Why didn't you come to me first?"

She let the question hang, then said, "Because last time, you said we watched too many X-Files reruns. We figured you'd want more than just stories."

He gave her a grudging nod. "That's fair."

Leo switched the monitor to the next clip—a side-by-side comparison of the drone footage and a time-stamped feed from the Miller-Whites' own cryptid hunt. The videos lined up perfectly: every time the

TV team staged a “monster sighting,” there was corresponding activity at the hidden mine. Maya watched Adams’s face, saw the pieces snap together.

He tapped the side of the vials, thinking. “And the powder—what’s it worth?”

Maya shrugged. “Depends on purity. For high-end electronics or jewelry? Six figures, maybe more per batch. Enough to make it worth the risk.”

Adams stood, circled the table, and leaned close to the monitor, watching the final loop of the miners escaping through the side tunnel. He didn’t say anything for a full minute.

Then he turned back to Maya and Leo, eyes sharp.

“Alright,” he said. “Here’s what happens next. You two sit tight, don’t talk to the press, and don’t go back up the ridge. I’m getting a search warrant for the mine, and I’m calling in state resources. If you’re right, and you are, there’s going to be a lot of people very interested in these samples.”

He jabbed a finger at the vials. “Chain of custody is key. You’ll swear out an affidavit as soon as my deputy gets here. Understand?”

Maya nodded, finally letting herself breathe.

Leo, unable to contain himself, grinned. “So we’re not under arrest?”

Adams smiled, the kind of thin, lawman’s smile that belonged on an old wanted poster. “Not today. But if you keep chasing weirdness without backup, I might charge you with being a public nuisance.”

He reached for his battered radio and keyed it up. “This is Adams. I need backup at the office, and contact state on priority. We’ve got a situation brewing.”

He let go of the mic and gave Maya and Leo a look that was almost—almost—proud.

“So,” he said, “these are our Sasquatch sightings, huh?”

He rubbed the back of his neck, then took a long, appraising look at Maya.

“Next time,” he said, “bring coffee. You might end up running this office one day.”

Maya grinned, and the knot in her chest finally loosened.

For the first time, it felt like the adults were on their side.
And, for the first time in a long time, that was more than enough.

Sheriff Adams had two settings: folksy, and the exact opposite of folksy. Interrogation mode was strictly in the latter category. He paced behind the battered table, arms folded, as the two men sat slouched in straight-backed wooden chairs, boots tapping a nervous code onto the vinyl floor. One looked to be in his fifties, with the kind of weathered, crow's-footed face you saw in feed store ads; the other, a decade younger, had a shaved head and hands tattooed with the faded blue of prison ink.

Leo watched from the office corner, trying not to get caught filming. Maya stood at the map wall, pretending to review the crime scene photos, but her ears were tuned to every syllable.

Adams started slow. "Let's try this again. Name, and what the hell you were doing in a cave with a truckload of mining gear and more illegal chemicals than a backwoods meth lab."

The older man glanced at his partner, who shrugged, then looked down at his boots. The silence stretched. Adams let it.

The older one finally caved. "It's not what you think, Sheriff."

Adams gave him a long, flat stare. "It's never what I think. That's why I keep asking."

The man licked his lips. "My name's Don. This is Rick." Rick offered a quick nod, as if agreeing to a plea deal before the formal offer.

Adams prodded. "And?"

Don inhaled, and Maya saw the exact moment he gave up on any hope of a lawyer. "We were contracted by a holding company. They wanted the mineral, said they had rights to it, and that the paperwork was 'in process' in Cedar City. They offered a bonus for keeping the operation off the radar. That meant running at night, no trucks in daylight, and above all, no contact with locals."

Rick added, "They paid double if we kept out of sight and got the samples out clean. Said it was a new 'sustainable sourcing' initiative for jewelry and electronics." He looked at his hands, suddenly sheepish. "We weren't supposed to make a mess. Just drill, pack, and get out."

Adams snorted. "You do know about environmental permits, right? Public land regulations? Or did the company figure no one in Duck Creek could spell 'arsenate'?"

Don smiled, just a hair. "They said no one would care, Sheriff. That the town was too busy with the Sasquatch circus to notice anything else."

That's when Maya jumped in, voice crisp. "Because the circus was part of the plan. The Miller-Whites staged all their 'sightings' at strategic intervals. Every time something weird happened—drumming in the cave, blue dust on the wind—they'd be there with a TV crew and a crowd of thrill-seekers. It gave the mining crew perfect cover to move in, work the vein, and get out. If anyone heard strange sounds, saw weird lights, or even glimpsed someone in a ghillie suit? Well, that just meant the legend was real."

Rick looked up, meeting her eyes. "You saw through it?"

She nodded. "You didn't account for someone actually caring about the science."

Adams let that land before shifting gears. "Who's the client? Real name, not the holding company."

Don hesitated. "We never met anyone in person. All contracts went through encrypted email and prepaid phones. But the deposit slips? They had a logo. Looked like a fancy bird, maybe a crane or a heron, holding a jewel in its beak."

Maya flipped open her notebook and slid it across the table to Adams. "That's the logo for Mountain Crystal Works. Their parent company is a luxury conglomerate. They've been trying to corner the market for rare minerals used in microchips and 'eco-friendly' jewelry lines."

Adams grunted, impressed despite himself. "Well, hell."

He turned to Don and Rick, voice harder. "You realize you're looking at federal charges. You want to play ball, you give me every scrap of evidence you've got. Names, numbers, emails, shipping schedules, drop points. Otherwise, you'll be lucky to get out of this with time served."

Don nodded, resigned. "We'll help."

Adams turned to Maya, softer. "And you. You're the only one who put this together. Want to help write the report?"

She gave him a tired smile. "Thought you'd never ask."

He picked up the radio, voice all business. "Dispatch, send units to the Miller-White RV at the village lot. Full search. And call Cedar City PD—tell them we've got a lead on interstate mineral theft."

He paused, then glanced at Maya and Leo, expression unreadable. "Looks like you two just bought the whole town a ticket out of reality TV hell."

Rick and Don slouched further in their chairs, the fight gone out of them. Maya pocketed her notebook and leaned against the wall, watching as Adams got to work. For the first time in months, the world made a little more sense—and for once, it was on her side.

As the deputies rolled in, Maya caught Leo's eye. He looked as surprised as she felt, but also... relieved.

They had done it.

And nothing in the world was more satisfying than seeing a liar get caught with their own blue-green fingerprints all over the evidence.

The world outside was going full sunrise, the light bouncing off the snow with that hard, heartless glare that made Maya's eyes water even inside the station. Sheriff Adams had barely finished a phone call when the door thudded open and in came Toby Miller-White, flanked by a deputy. The boy looked ten years older than he had at the cryptid nest: his hair mashed down from a beanie, the lens of his battered action camera dangling loose, and his mouth a taut, straight line that had nothing to do with teenage bravado.

He kept his hands jammed in his pockets, but the way his shoulders were pinched said everything. The kid wasn't just scared; he was disappointed in something fundamental, and Maya could feel the ache radiate off him like a signal from a dying radio tower.

Adams clocked it, too. He pointed Toby to the Formica table where Maya and Leo had just finished their evidence show-and-tell. Leo

looked up, offered a faint, not-quite-smile. Maya shut her field notebook with a quiet click.

“Have a seat, Toby,” the Sheriff said, his tone a notch softer than the interrogation mode from earlier.

Toby dropped into the chair, head lowered.

Adams set his hands flat on the table. “We’re not here to scare you. I just want your version. And I’d appreciate you being straight.”

Toby nodded, but he didn’t speak at first. He fiddled with the zipper of his jacket, worked it up and down the track until it jammed halfway. Maya watched the kid’s hands: the knuckles scraped raw, a Band-Aid wrapped tight around his thumb. Probably from hauling drones and camera rigs through the brush for months on end.

The silence hung a little too long. Adams sighed, then tried again. “I know you weren’t in the cave last night. And we both know you weren’t the one in the ghillie suit. But you and your parents, you’ve been chasing this legend hard. So let’s start there. Did you know about the mining?”

Toby swallowed, the motion audible across the room. “Not at first,” he managed, voice frayed. “We just thought it was about the show. The branding. Dad said we had to be first to the story, or someone else would take it.”

Adams nodded, encouraging. “So when did the story change?”

Toby chewed on the edge of his thumb bandage. “Six months ago. Right after our first season. Mom got an email—she said it was a sponsorship, but it was weird. No one wanted to be on camera, but they sent us a whole ‘discovery kit’ and a script for where to film the next nest. Sometimes there was a rock sample, or hair. Sometimes it was just a map pin.”

Leo’s voice was gentle. “And you didn’t question it?”

Toby shook his head. “Not then. We’d been getting so much hate online, people saying we faked everything. When we got the kit, Dad said it was proof people believed in us—enough to give us real leads. We just had to play along.”

Maya found herself leaning in, empathy knotting up her chest. She’d underestimated him; she’d underestimated all of them.

Adams let Toby keep going.

“Then, a few months back,” Toby continued, “the deliveries changed. There was cash in the drop boxes, and sometimes equipment—drones, a new GoPro. Everything had to be used for a specific shot. Mom and Dad started fighting about it. Mom wanted to say no, but Dad said if we backed out, we’d get sued or blacklisted, and the show would tank.”

He was blinking hard now, trying to force back tears. “I didn’t know it was illegal until the summer. That’s when I found out about the blue dust and the mining. They told me not to worry, just keep filming, and let them handle the adult stuff. But the emails kept coming. The guy kept saying it was all a game, like a reality show. No one would get hurt.”

A crackle from the radio cut the tension. A deputy’s voice: “Adams, we got boxes of paperwork in the Miller-White RV. Some of it’s got the Mountain Crystal Works logo, and there’s a spreadsheet with addresses and—uh, looks like drop points.”

Adams picked up the mic. “Copy. Secure it and bring in the parents.”

He turned back to Toby, voice low. “Thank you for telling us. That takes guts, son.”

Toby’s hands were shaking now, the zipper trembling with each nervous jerk. He looked up, first at Maya, then at Leo, eyes red and wet but clear.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I never meant for anyone to get hurt. I thought we were helping. That’s what they said—they needed a distraction so the world wouldn’t freak out about the mining. Mom and Dad...they just wanted us to have a shot at making it.”

Maya crossed to the table, sat beside him, and placed her notebook down. “Toby, you did the right thing. You could have lied, or blamed someone else. Most people would have.”

He tried to smile, failed, then wiped his face with his sleeve. “I don’t know what happens now. If I’m in trouble, I get it.”

Adams shook his head. “You’re a witness. Unless there’s something you’re not telling us?”

Toby shook his head hard. “No, sir. That’s all.”

A brief lull as Adams called for a deputy to start a formal statement.

Leo caught Maya's eye, and she knew he was thinking what she was: There were a thousand ways this could have played out worse. A thousand ways Toby could have stayed quiet, or lashed out, or doubled down on the family myth. Instead, he'd done the one thing neither the adults nor the cameras had expected.

When the deputy arrived to take Toby's statement, Maya stood and gathered her samples, the vials clinking quietly as she zipped the pack. Leo hovered in the doorway, waiting for her.

On the way out, Maya paused beside Toby. "If you need someone to talk to, I'm around. Even if it's just about the science."

He looked up, surprised but grateful. "Thanks, Maya."

She gave him a small, real smile. Then she and Leo slipped out, back into the bone-bright morning and the glare of the village waking up to a new reality.

Outside, the news vans were already assembling, and the usual crowd of onlookers hovered like they were waiting for a parade. Maya and Leo cut across the snow, away from the commotion, boots crunching side by side.

Leo finally broke the silence. "You okay?"

She nodded, letting herself breathe. "Yeah. Just feels different, now that it's over."

Leo glanced back at the sheriff's office. "He did the right thing, you know. Most people wouldn't."

"I know," she said. "He's braver than I gave him credit for."

They wandered, not really aiming for anywhere, letting the cold wake them up to the fact that the mountain was, for the moment, at peace. The wind was sharp, the world loud and clear, and Maya found herself wondering what the next mystery would look like—if it would come from a legend, a line of code, or just a kid telling the truth when it mattered most.

She didn't have the answer.

But for the first time in weeks, she was pretty sure she didn't need one.

fourteen

community reaction

AFTER THE CHASE and the headlines and the twelve hours of answering the same three questions for every lawman and local official from Duck Creek to Cedar City, there was only one place left for the truth to land: the DC Pub & Grill.

On the evening of the biggest blue-moon party Duck Creek had seen since the town's bicentennial, every square foot of the DC was crammed with the two kinds of people this mountain made: the Old Guard in their well-worn flannels and patched jeans, and the Modern Settlers, whose hiking gear was so fresh it still had the sizing creases. Tonight, those differences dissolved in a flood of local beer, sticky cider, and the kind of laughter that carried all the way to the parking lot.

The windows, already steamy from the crowd, glowed a rich amber, thanks to Azure's penchant for old-school filament bulbs. Inside, condensation beaded on the pint glasses and the air was scented with a holy trinity of fryer oil, cinnamon, and the sharp tang of hot peppers. There was no live music tonight, but every conversation ran at the pitch and tempo of a Friday night dance.

Azure herself worked the bar like a general with a winning war, directing her staff with a tilt of her chin or a single sharp clap. She'd prepped for the rush by doubling up on kitchen hands and running a full sheet of burgers at once. She was careful, though, to keep tonight's menu strictly by the book—no herbal enhancements, no experimental

“specials”—just the regulars, plus a mountain of onion rings and a tray of cinnamon rolls so fresh they’d collapsed under their own weight on the cooling rack.

As Maya stepped in from the dark, Leo a step behind her, the whole room turned. At first it was just a ripple—a few heads craning over, a sudden lull in the latest heated debate at Table Five—but then someone near the front recognized them and let out a cheer. The sound snow-balled: hands slapped the tables, mugs were lifted high, and, from the back corner, a voice bellowed, “To the heroes of Duck Creek!” It was Old Man Rourke, already halfway through his celebratory six-pack.

Maya flushed. She wasn’t used to being on the receiving end of a town’s gratitude, but she let herself smile as Azure beckoned them to the best spot in the house: a booth by the window, where the battered wooden benches had been worn smooth by three generations of regulars.

“Sit. Eat. I’ll bring the good stuff,” Azure said, and for once her voice was all velvet, no bark.

They slid into the booth, dropping their packs and jackets in a heap. Leo scanned the room, phone already out and thumbs flying as he prepped his story for the “Duck Creek Vibes” channel, which had gone from hundreds to thousands of followers in the past forty-eight hours. Maya let herself watch, for just a second, the strange ballet of community happening all around her.

The “Old Guard” had claimed the table closest to the heater, telling stories with big hands and louder voices. Someone had a dominoes set going, and every slam of the tiles was a punctuation mark in the evening’s retelling of local legend. The “Settlers” clustered by the bar, jackets unzipped, heads together over shared flights of cider and the latest post on the town Facebook group, which was now an endless feed of memes about Sasquatch, blue dust, and “two brave kids.” There were even a handful of college students and winter tourists, wide-eyed and loving every minute of it.

In the shadowiest booth, as far from the bar as possible, sat the Miller-Whites. Barnaby wore a face like someone had replaced his normal smugness with the blank resignation of a man who knew when the game was up. He poked at a plate of fries, but his heart wasn’t in it.

Sarah sat beside him, posture rigid, the kind of polite smile on her lips that dared anyone to talk to her. Both had the look of people who'd been up all night with lawyers and now just wanted to ride out their notoriety in peace.

The only one who seemed genuinely content was Toby. He had a spot at the central "youth" table, wedged between two high school friends and a rotating cast of younger cousins. He was animated, waving his arms as he recounted the events of the past week—every gesture exaggerated, every detail told with the confidence of a kid who'd finally been listened to and believed. For the first time in months, his laugh sounded real.

Azure swept over, loaded down with two baskets of fries, a plate of burgers, and two "Duck Creek Doubles," the house specialty that was just root beer with a scoop of vanilla and a float of espresso for those who'd had enough of the other kind of buzz. She set everything down with a flourish.

"On the house," she said. "You want to order the good beer, that's on you."

Maya managed a "thank you," but Azure waved it off. "Don't mention it. Next round's already in the works."

As Azure disappeared into the crowd, Maya and Leo dug in. The food was everything you could want after three days of survival mode. Maya let the salt and fat settle her nerves, half-listening to the room's music. She overheard at least two conspiracy theories (one involving the Secret Service, the other a billionaire collector of rare minerals), three versions of the ATV crash ("I heard the driver was a washed-up NASCAR hopeful"), and a shouted argument about whether the cryptid hair sample should be kept in a museum or auctioned on eBay.

Halfway through her burger, Maya felt a presence at her elbow. It was Old Man Rourke, holding a battered trophy mug and wearing the expression of a man with zero sense of personal space.

"Just wanted to say," he said, voice gravelly with pride and whiskey, "you made us proud, kid. We always knew you'd be the one to crack it. Never trusted them Miller-Whites, not once."

He patted her on the shoulder, a little too hard, then raised his mug

to Leo. "And you, city boy. You ever wanna learn to fish for something that don't get you shot at, you give me a call."

He shuffled off, mission complete, and Leo snorted into his root beer. "You think he even remembers my name?"

"Not a chance," Maya said.

The door swung open, and a gust of icy air knifed through the room. Sheriff Adams stepped in, still in uniform, but minus the hat and most of the usual bluster. The whole place quieted, just a little, and Adams took a moment to let his eyes adjust before moving toward the bar.

He caught Maya's eye, and she felt the unspoken question: Was she ready for this to be over?

She nodded, just enough for him to see, then went back to her burger.

The conversation at the youth table swelled, and Maya saw Toby miming the motion of the drone's crash landing, complete with sound effects. His friends lapped it up, leaning in for more.

From the booth, Sarah Miller-White watched with a complex mix of disappointment, envy, and the brittle dignity of someone who'd lost her narrative to a much better storyteller.

Maya felt something like sympathy for her, but mostly she felt relief.

The warmth of the pub was total now. The windows fogged over, the crowd loosened by food and drink and the sense of a storm finally passing.

Azure passed by again, pausing for just a second. She gave Maya a look—half wink, half appraisal—then slid a fresh cinnamon roll onto her plate.

"Best thing I ever baked," she said. "Tastes even better when you win."

Maya took a bite. It was perfect, even better than she remembered.

She glanced at Leo, who had already polished off his meal and was now fielding questions from three different Settlers, each eager to be part of his next video. He looked more himself than ever, alive and sharp and totally in his element.

In that moment, Maya knew she'd never leave this place, not for good. She'd go away for school, maybe, or work a season or two in the

city. But Duck Creek was hers—its secrets, its science, even its wild, impossible legends. And the next time a mystery showed up on her doorstep, she'd be ready.

She watched the room, the long tables where neighbors clinked glasses and shared stories, the line at the bar, the happy chaos at the youth table, and the Miller-Whites in their booth, finally silent.

The world outside could wait.

Tonight, the mountain belonged to its own.

And for once, every story in the room rang true.

A hush rolled through the DC Pub & Grill, as unexpected as a snowfall in July. It started with Sheriff Adams setting his hat on the bar—an act so rare it silenced even the most stubborn card game at Table Five—and moved like a gentle freeze until every voice dropped to a respectful murmur. For the first time that night, the only sounds were the low pop of the fireplace and the faint, sizzling echo of something caramelizing in the back.

Adams stood near the end of the long bar, arms folded across his chest, gaze sweeping the room. He looked exactly like a man who'd spent his life resisting both change and praise, but tonight he seemed more at ease with the former than the latter. He cleared his throat once, then again, and a couple of barstools scraped as folks turned to listen.

"Evening, all," he said, voice pitched to carry but gentle, almost solemn. "Sorry to interrupt, but I got something to say before everyone gets too far into their drinks."

He paused, and in that space, Maya felt a familiar tightness. Not fear—she knew Adams well enough to spot a genuine gesture from a warning—but something like anticipation, braided with embarrassment.

The sheriff's eyes landed on her, then on Leo, who was already recording on his phone, the little red light blinking like a beacon in the dark.

Adams took a breath. "I've been sheriff here going on twenty years. I know the people of this valley better than I know my own coffee

order, and I've learned a thing or two about how stories get told in a place like this."

A few grins flickered, and even Azure, standing arms-crossed behind the bar, nodded along.

"Some stories grow with the telling," Adams continued, "and some get whittled down until all that's left is the truth. Sometimes, though, you get a story so wild you'd rather believe it's all made up—until someone shows you the evidence." He held up a battered field notebook, the one Maya had left at the station earlier, now dog-eared and bristling with sticky notes.

"This week, two of our own risked a lot to find the real story," he said. "Maya Patel and Leo Sanchez—" He gestured them forward, and Maya felt her whole face go hot. "I should have listened to these two a lot sooner. Duck Creek owes them both a debt of gratitude. Because if it weren't for their stubbornness and their, uh, unconventional methods, we'd all still be chasing blue ghosts and cryptid tracks, while the real thieves kept on stripping the mountain bare."

A round of applause broke out—tentative at first, then swelling as the Old Guard led the charge. There were whoops from the youth table, and at least one "You tell 'em!" from the bar.

Maya edged toward the chalkboard where Azure usually posted the day's specials, trying to look small in the spotlight. She caught Leo's eye; he was grinning, his phone angled to catch both their faces as the crowd cheered. His notifications pinged in rapid-fire, the comment count climbing faster than the outside thermometer ever did.

Adams waited for the noise to die down, then continued. "You all know the Miller-White show brought a lot of attention to our little corner of the world. Some good, some less so. But what you don't know is just how close we came to real disaster." He let the words sink in. "That mining operation would have run the mountain dry if left unchecked. Could've poisoned half the valley, too, if the runoff made it into the lake."

He nodded toward the back, where a lean figure in battered canvas and a beard full of pine needles rose from a corner stool. It was Elias—the forest hermit—looking strangely formal with his patched coat buttoned up and a carved walking stick in hand.

The crowd's collective intake of breath was almost comical. Even the Old Guard sat up straighter, as if suddenly back in Sunday school.

Elias moved slow, his steps measured, until he stood just behind Adams. He didn't raise his voice—didn't need to. The quiet in the room made every word carry.

"Most folks think a mine is just a hole in the ground," Elias said, gaze fixed somewhere far beyond the window. "But the mountain is a living thing. Its veins run deep, carrying water and memory. When you drill wrong, when you cut too close, you bleed out more than just the rock."

He ran a hand over the walking stick, fingers lingering on a knot in the wood. "Those tunnels—they nearly broke the aquifer feeding Navajo Lake. You all know the springs out past Duck Creek? They'd have dried up in a season if the drilling kept on. The damage would have crept under the snow, then hit us all at once, when it was too late to fix."

The silence was total. Even the fryer seemed to pause.

Elias nodded once, then stepped back, letting the words settle. Adams cleared his throat, blinking away something that wasn't just a speck of dust.

"So," Adams finished, "what I'm saying is, we're lucky. Lucky to have folks who care enough to look past the tall tales and see what really matters. Lucky to have a community that still knows how to come together when it counts."

He set Maya's field notebook on the bar, a gesture of respect. "Next round's on the house. Azure will kill me for saying so, but that's just how it's gonna be."

A cheer went up, louder than the first. The room buzzed with the afterglow of something big—averted disaster, yes, but also the sense that this little town was more than a punchline or a setting for someone else's legend.

Maya felt herself relax, just a little, and even let Leo tug her into a selfie as the applause died down. He narrated to the phone, "Duck Creek, you are the absolute best," then winked and tucked the phone away.

She looked up to see Azure chalking something new on the board:

“Today’s Special—Community.” Below it, she’d drawn a wobbly Sasquatch, grinning and holding a burger.

The party resumed with a new intensity, but now the noise had a clarity, every laugh and shout anchored in the present, not the past. People drifted over to thank Maya and Leo, to ask for the real scoop, or just to share a plate of fries and a good word.

In the corner, Elias stood alone for a minute, then was joined by three or four of the Old Guard, who shook his hand like he was an old campaign buddy just back from war. Even the Miller-Whites seemed to soften; Maya caught Sarah nodding at her across the room, a silent admission of mutual survival.

As the night deepened, the world outside faded into a comforting dark, the windows now too fogged to see through. Inside, the story was simple: the mountain was safe, the truth had come out, and the people of Duck Creek knew how to throw a better party than anyone would ever believe.

It was, in every possible way, a win.

The next shift in the pub was almost chemical. As the applause died and the music of voices returned, the people of Duck Creek—young, old, flannel, synthetic—went from celebration to action with a speed that would’ve impressed any disaster prepper or football coach.

It started with the Old Guard gathering at the bar, heads together, debating the fastest way to secure the open mine entrance before weekend hikers started poking around. Next, the Settlers began passing notebooks and phones, building an ad hoc sign-up sheet for volunteers. Within fifteen minutes, a whole community project had ignited, burning away any leftover doubt or rivalry.

Azure, catching the wind of change, wiped the chalkboard clean with a practiced hand and handed Maya a new stick of colored chalk. “You’re running point on this one,” she said. “That science degree’s finally earning its keep.”

Maya ducked her head but moved to the board, sketching the outline of the ridge, the known cave entrances, and a quick map of the water flow as Elias had described. She marked X’s over the most damaged sites and drew arrows for where help was needed first. Even her handwriting, blocky and functional, felt like a kind of leadership.

“We’ll need three teams,” she said, projecting as best she could without yelling. “First: water testing. Anyone with experience—or just a strong stomach—meet here tomorrow at ten.”

She underlined the next bullet: “Second: we need to replant ground cover and native shrubs where the mining tore up the surface. If you have a shovel, gloves, or, honestly, just good knees, we’ll take you.”

Maya paused, then smiled a little. “Last, we need to secure the caves and fill the smaller tunnels. No one’s going spelunking this spring if I have anything to say about it.”

A wave of hands shot up around the room. Old Man Rourke claimed the water team (“Been testing this creek since before you were born, kid!”), and three of the high schoolers instantly volunteered for the cave patrol. A hiking group from the city, in town for the weekend, pledged their Saturday to hauling bags of fill dirt. One couple even promised a pot of chili for all the volunteers, which got the second biggest round of applause all night.

Leo, perched on a barstool, narrated the whole process for his channel, swinging the camera to catch the earnest faces, the scribbled sign-up sheets, the arms raised in commitment. Every time Maya finished a sentence, he added a commentary—part hype-man, part proud sidekick.

It was, she realized, the happiest he’d looked since their first hike of the season, the one where he’d sworn he could beat her to the overlook and then pretended he hadn’t tried that hard when she actually won.

Elias hovered by the window, quietly guiding the next generation of environmentalists—Toby and a couple of the younger kids—through the logic of watershed repair. His voice was low, but his words were careful and full of odd, memorable phrases: “Think of the roots like stitches in a wound,” or “water remembers every place it’s ever been.” Maya watched as Toby soaked it up, nodding with the solemnity of a boy who knew what it meant to be given a second chance.

When the board was full and the teams sorted, Azure rang a cowbell she kept under the bar for emergencies and birthdays.

“Alright, you beautiful weirdos,” she said, voice booming over the crowd. “Tomorrow at ten, we fix the mountain. Tonight, we toast to doing things the Duck Creek way: together.”

She set down a tray of apple cider shots—non-alcoholic for the kids,

something much harder for the adults—and passed them around the room. The first round went to Maya, Leo, and (to the crowd's surprise) Elias, who took his glass with a shy, lopsided smile.

Azure set a second glass by Maya's elbow and leaned in. "Knew you'd fit right in with our rhythm," she said. "Next time, I want a heads-up before you make me cry in public."

Maya laughed, the knot in her chest finally loosening for good. "No promises," she said.

The night wrapped in a blur of plans and hugs and old stories retold with new pride. The mountain outside was quiet now, the darkness pressed to the window like a soft, safe blanket. Inside, the glow of the bar and the low hum of voices knitted everyone together—no one stranger, no one outsider, at least for tonight.

As the crowd trickled out and the chairs stacked, Maya and Leo lingered, watching as Azure scrawled one last message on the chalkboard:

"Tomorrow, we heal."

She underlined it twice and, for good measure, added a doodle of the mountain, with two stick figures standing side by side at the summit.

Maya looked at Leo. "You think we'll ever top this?"

He shook his head, a grin splitting his face. "Not a chance. But I'd be cool with trying."

Outside, the night was star-bright and frozen clean, the sky wheeling above like a promise.

And for the first time in a long while, Maya felt like she was exactly where she belonged—at the start of something good, with the mountain, the story, and her people right there with her.

fifteen

unexpected discovery

MAYA HAD BARELY PARKED the lead university van before Tyler, the lab tech, started humming the theme from Jurassic Park. It was a deep-winter morning, the kind that shrank your toes inside two pairs of wool socks, and the snow above Navajo Lake was so clean and blue-bright it made Maya's eyes water. She flicked off the ignition, then rolled down her window just far enough to catch the hollow, mineral tang rolling out of the cave mouth fifty yards ahead.

"Kind of majestic, isn't it?" Leo mused, squinting through the windshield at the cave, now rimmed in high-vis yellow tape and two layers of "Utah State Geological Survey—Do Not Disturb" signs.

She grinned. "Majestic is the word people use right before they're buried in a rockfall."

Tyler popped his head between the seats, chewing on a protein bar like a horse on a bridle. "Fun fact," he said, spraying oat crumbs, "four of the last seven cave expeditions in Utah ended in near-death or actual death. Only two had TV coverage, though. So: are we in it for science or drama?"

Maya smirked, then caught Leo's eye in the rearview. He was already prepping his camera, the new one, the one with night vision, LiDAR, and a sticker that said "Duck Creek Vibe—Official." She suspected he'd applied it while sleepwalking, or maybe just to see if anyone would call him out. She had no intention of doing so.

“Let’s get moving,” Maya said, pulling her field notebook from the dash. “Dr. Chen gets antsy if we’re late, and if we lose the sun, we’ll never see the airflow patterns.”

The team fell out of the van like a well-trained circus act. Maya went first, already shrugging into a high-viz vest, then the others: Amber, the archeology grad with the messy bun and a laser focus that could cut steel; Tyler, in a utility vest loaded down with tools; and, last, Professor Winters, who looked like he’d been born to hold a clipboard and bark orders, but who (so far) let Maya run the show.

Dr. Chen stood at the cave mouth, arms crossed, a wind meter spinning lazily at her hip. She looked Maya up and down, then nodded, as if satisfied to see a real team and not just “the prodigies and their YouTube hype man.”

Maya held up a hand. “Sorry for the delay, Dr. Chen. The turnoff was ice all the way down.”

Dr. Chen smiled, but only with the corners of her mouth. “You’re here. That’s all that matters.” She scanned the team, pausing on Amber’s clipboard, then on Leo’s camera. “We all set?”

“Ready as we’ll ever be,” Maya replied.

They spent the next ten minutes in a ballet of gear. Tyler and Leo unloaded the trunk—collection kits, LiDAR rig, two drones, six GoPros (plus the “special” one Leo kept for pranks), headlamps, water test strips, and one roll of flagging tape already covered in Leo’s graffiti. Amber triple-checked the bags, then hand-counted the sampling tubes and made a show of logging every item on her tablet. Maya liked this about Amber; she’d never met a grad student more likely to finish a field study with everything intact, and also never one more likely to stab a PI in the foot for mishandling an artifact.

Dr. Chen gathered the group at the base of the entrance, then gestured at Maya. “Since this is technically your show, Ms. Patel, why don’t you walk us through your plan?”

Maya didn’t hesitate. “The illegal mining crew made a mess, but they also exposed a section of lava tube that’s been sealed since the last collapse. There’s a persistent airflow pattern here, even in low barometric pressure, which suggests an internal connection to the other side of the mountain. We’re here to map the new passages, sample the

mineralization, and, ideally, get enough data to understand how the illegal operation disrupted the aquifer.”

Leo raised his hand. “Will there be monsters?”

Amber sighed. “Monsters are strictly under the purview of local TV crews. Sorry, Leo.”

He shrugged, unbothered, and turned the camera on Maya, catching her as she squatted near the cave wall.

She traced the first set of drill marks with her gloved fingers. “You see this?” she said, angling her head toward the team. “These are rotary, not percussion. Whoever ran the rig was in a hurry, probably using a rental—see the chatter in the first six inches?”

Tyler leaned in, eyes bright. “Nice. What’s the matrix—silica or something fancier?”

Maya smiled, pleased by the engagement. “Basalt. But it’s flecked with secondary copper. The whole area was low-grade ore, which is why they gave up on it in the 1920s. But the modern equipment—” She tapped the edge of the drill scar. “—was meant to chase a narrow band of enriched material. That’s why the extraction was so clean.”

Amber snapped a photo, then followed with a probe. “Did the miners get far?”

“Not as far as they wanted,” Maya said. “But enough to alter the air movement. And possibly open new groundwater routes.”

Professor Winters, who had kept a polite distance, now weighed in. “We’ll want to check for arsenic and secondary metals in the spring samples. Any evidence of surface runoff?”

Maya shook her head. “No new runoff since the snows, but the hydrology’s a mess. There’s a blue stain on the rocks below—copper sulfate, likely, but we’ll know more after lab.”

Dr. Chen nodded. “Alright, then. Let’s go see if the legend matches the rock.”

They clipped on helmets and rigged their lights. Maya went in first, with Leo and Tyler behind, followed by Amber and the rest.

The first fifty yards of tunnel was tight—barely enough room for the team to walk double file. The walls were a blur of black and blue, the occasional white streak from frozen groundwater, and every so often, a section of graffiti older than any of them. Maya made notes as

she moved: drill scars every four meters, a faint but growing breeze from deeper in, and, once, a slumped pocket of snowmelt that had refrozen into perfect glass.

Tyler held a hand up. "You feel that?" he whispered.

Maya paused, tuned in. There it was—a rhythmic pulse, barely perceptible. The same frequency as the wind they'd measured at the surface, but now sharper, as if the rock itself was exhaling.

"Air exchange," she said, not hiding her excitement. "We're near an intersection. Get ready to log samples."

At the first fork, they stopped. Maya swung her light over the right-hand passage. "This was blocked last time we checked. They must've cleared it out after the first collapse."

Amber ran a hand over the debris, then pulled a battered plastic toy from the rubble. It was a Sasquatch, the kind they sold at the general store. She held it up with a grin. "Local color."

Leo caught the moment on camera, narrating. "Documentary evidence: even the cryptids fear OSHA violations."

The team chuckled, tension dissolving.

They pressed on, deeper into the dark. The air grew colder, but also fresher, with a bracing tang Maya recognized from waterlogged basements and old riverbeds. More drill scars, more flecks of blue. At one turn, Leo found a length of knotted rope embedded in the wall; he gave it an experimental tug, then backed off fast when the wall shed a curtain of black dust.

It was messy, slow work, but Maya was in her element. She mapped every branching, logged every odd mineral deposit, and stopped at intervals to check her phone's air sensor. She encouraged the others to call out anything odd, and more than once, Tyler flagged a stray wire or scrap of plastic as evidence.

By the time they reached the third chamber, the team was loose and joking, confidence high. Dr. Chen lagged behind, measuring air velocity and occasionally jotting numbers on her sleeve with a grease pencil.

At the threshold of the new passage, Maya slowed. She could feel a subtle pressure change, as if something in the rock was breathing with them. She raised a hand, quieting the chatter.

"Listen," she said. Everyone stopped.

There was a faint hiss, a shift in the airflow, and then—so subtle that only Maya’s hyper-tuned ears caught it—a soft, irregular click. Almost like a relay snapping on, or a distant heartbeat.

Amber frowned. “That wasn’t there before.”

“No,” Maya agreed. “Let’s get eyes on it.”

She led the team forward, motioning for Leo to keep his light low. The passage narrowed, then angled left. Beyond, a faint shimmer of blue light painted the walls.

“Whoa,” Tyler breathed. “That’s not sunlight.”

Maya signaled for quiet, then crept forward. She could feel the air now, cold and alive. As they turned the last bend, the tunnel opened into a domed chamber maybe twenty feet across.

At the far end, a wall of pure crystal arched across the black basalt, lit from behind by a weird, watery glow. The effect was otherworldly—almost like a stained glass window, but made entirely of nature and accident.

Leo let out a low whistle, panning the camera. “Well, that’s a shot.”

Amber stepped forward, breath fogging the air. “This is insane. I’ve never seen anything like it. Is that...?”

Maya nodded, awe and scientific greed duking it out in her chest. “It’s a selenite band. And it’s flawless.”

Dr. Chen moved in, eyes wide. She ran her instrument over the surface, then grinned. “This is the find of the season. Maybe the decade.”

Professor Winters gave Maya a look that was part pride, part “we are absolutely getting published for this.”

They all stood silent for a minute, drinking in the sight.

Then Maya did what she did best: she started taking notes. “We’ll want to sample the mineral, run a CT on the structure. Leo, get a good 360. Amber, log the location and see if you can find any associated artifacts.”

They set to work, the initial awe melting into focused excitement. Maya walked the edge of the crystal, running her gloved hand over its surface. At one point, she spotted a tiny inclusion—a thread of something that didn’t belong.

She called Amber over. “You seeing this?”

Amber squatted next to her, then snapped a photo with her tablet. "Yeah. Organic, maybe? Could be pollen, or fiber."

Maya grinned. "Let's bag it. Might be a clue to the last time this was exposed."

As they packed the sample, Leo called from the far end. "Hey! There's another air current here. Feels like it's going somewhere."

Maya felt the pulse again, sharper now. She stood, dusted off, and joined him. The wall behind the selenite was cool and slightly damp, and at its base, a draft tickled her fingertips.

Dr. Chen crouched, holding the wind meter. "Looks like another chamber beyond."

Professor Winters stepped in, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. "Maya, you want to do the honors?"

She beamed. "Always."

She found a natural seam, then tapped along it, listening for hollow spaces. At the third try, a section of stone shifted, just a fraction of an inch. She gripped it with her fingers, then leaned her weight.

With a muffled crunch, a chunk of rock peeled away, revealing a narrow, ragged passage. The air that poured out was cold and heavy, but it carried a scent Maya hadn't expected: not just mineral, but organic—wet earth, old leaves, a faint, wild tang like moss after rain.

She leaned in, shining her light. The tunnel beyond ran straight and smooth, no drill marks, no signs of mining. This was all natural, untouched.

She looked back at her team. "We're going in," she said. "But carefully."

Leo grinned, flicking on his camera. "You heard the boss."

They squeezed into the new tunnel, each step echoing in the close, living dark.

Somewhere ahead, something waited. Maya couldn't tell if it was science or legend, but either way, she was ready.

And if she felt a little bit like the first person on the moon, well, maybe that was okay.

She'd earned it.

They moved in single file, headlamps painting the tunnel's ribs in shifting bands of white and blue. The new passage was tighter than Maya expected: the roof shrank to a crouch, and in places the walls pinched together so close she had to turn sideways and hold her breath. The first ten meters tasted of untouched air—icy, with a metallic sharpness that cut through the must of old basalt. Maya's knees scraped against the rough, damp stone, her gloves already dusted with powdered crystal.

"Good thing I skipped leg day," Leo muttered behind her. His voice sounded huge in the tunnel, booming off the wet, dark walls. "You think any of this was mapped, like, ever?"

Amber replied from behind him, "I've gone through every cave register since the sixties. There's nothing about a natural tunnel past the old mine face."

Maya grinned, and the smile pressed cold stone to her cheek. "Then we're making history. Or at least a viral video."

She heard the GoPro beep, and Leo's voice dropped into his "content narrator" register. "Day two of the Duck Creek expedition. Rumor says this cave is haunted, but if we find a skeleton, it'll probably be one of us."

"Or a miner," Tyler called from the rear. "But sure, us works too."

Dr. Chen, right behind Maya, hissed a warning. "Hold up. Air pressure just shifted."

Maya felt it, too: a sudden, soft pull at her ears, followed by a faint breeze blowing against her face. She let the others catch up, then pointed her lamp at the right wall. There, a hairline fracture ran the length of the basalt, wide enough to slide a pencil through but, crucially, not man-made.

"Here," she said. "There's something behind this."

Professor Winters, a little winded but pretending otherwise, peered over Maya's shoulder. "Natural fault line?"

"Or something collapsed," Maya said. She tapped the seam with the back of her hand. The sound was hollow, a muted drumbeat. "Help me out, Dr. Chen?"

Chen nodded, set her pack down, and together they worked the crack, first with fingers, then with the blunt ends of a sampling trowel

and a gently persuasive hammer. The mineral coating on the wall crumbled away in fine, glittering flakes, and with a sudden give, a chunk of basalt peeled free.

Cold, black air swept over them, carrying a smell that Maya could only describe as wild—like ancient river mud, plus a hint of something green and alive. She shone her light through the gap. It vanished into nothing, a void that swallowed even the beam's full power.

"I think there's a crawlspace," Maya said. "Maybe a real chamber beyond."

Amber, never one to shy from a squeeze, squatted next to her. "If you can fit, I can fit."

"I'm getting this on camera," Leo announced.

"Of course you are," Maya said.

She tested the gap with her shoulder, then wiggled through, feet first. The world pinched tight, stone scraping her hips, then abruptly widened. She slid the last few inches and landed on her knees, bracing herself with her gloves.

For a second, everything was pitch. Her lamp caught the powder in the air, a drifting shimmer of particles like blue snow. She blinked, and when her eyes adjusted, she realized she was kneeling at the edge of a ledge—one that overlooked an open space maybe the size of a two-car garage.

She drew a sharp breath, not in fear but in raw, unfiltered awe.

"Guys?" she called back, voice bouncing in a hundred ghostly echoes. "It's a chamber. And it's perfect."

There was a scramble at the wall, then Dr. Chen emerged, landing next to Maya. "Whoa," she breathed, then shone her own lamp into the void.

The ceiling soared above them, a natural dome shot through with jagged crystal. The walls were smooth in some places, rough in others, every surface slick with mineral deposits that caught and split the light into bright, rainbow-flecked shards. On the far side, a curtain of crystal needles grew outward from the stone, each one flawless and sharp as a scalpel.

Leo wriggled through the gap, clapping his hands as he popped out. "I feel like I just got rebirthed by a mountain," he said, filming his own

face with a grin. Then he turned the camera on the chamber and let out a low, appreciative whistle. "That's the money shot."

Amber and Tyler tumbled in after, careful not to step on the weird, glassy formations underfoot. Winters brought up the rear, and for once, even he looked impressed.

No one spoke for a minute. They just let the headlamps sweep the space, every turn of a wrist transforming the blackness into a different kind of magic. Where the beams crossed, the crystals fired off bright, pure colors, and in the shadowy edges, Maya could see layers of ancient mineral veins tracing secret paths through the stone.

Amber was the first to move, breaking the spell. She circled the perimeter, notepad out, every step deliberate. "No modern markings," she said. "And no evidence of tools. This is pristine."

"Is that—" Tyler pointed, mouth half-open.

Near the ceiling, just above head height, the wall was streaked with a pale, almost phosphorescent mineral. But in the center of the band, something else caught Maya's eye: a cluster of smooth, deliberate lines. She walked closer, lamp raised, and froze.

She couldn't quite say why, but the sight made the hair on her arms stand up.

"Amber?" she said. "You seeing this?"

Amber joined her, squinting. She adjusted her lamp, let the beam rake across the wall at a low angle, and then whistled. "That's... impossible."

Tyler pressed in, careful not to crowd. "What? What is it?"

Amber didn't answer. She just started taking rapid-fire photos.

Maya knelt, holding her own light steady. Now that her eyes had adapted, the lines were clearly intentional—not random fissures or natural cracks, but purposeful, organized marks. They ran parallel, then branched, then curled back in tight, repeating patterns.

Leo found his way over, camera on. "Petroglyphs?"

Maya nodded, feeling her pulse hammer in her ears. "Looks like it. But I've never seen anything like these. Not in basalt. Not in this region."

Amber bit her lip. "I have."

She tapped her phone, pulled up a photo. “Parowan Gap. The Fremont petroglyphs. Some of them look just like this.”

Professor Winters looked from the photo to the wall, then back. “But this cave is miles from any known Fremont site.”

Amber shrugged, eyes wide. “Maybe they never made it out this far. Or maybe this was their secret spot.”

Dr. Chen made a small, delighted sound. “We just rewrote the regional history.”

For a minute, nobody moved, each of them letting that idea settle.

Then Maya said, “Let’s document everything. Nobody touches the wall. Amber, can you grid the surface? Leo, get a slow pan of every inch. Tyler, you and Dr. Chen test the air; see if there’s a biotic component. Winters—” she hesitated, then smiled. “Just enjoy the view.”

They sprang into action, the space suddenly alive with quiet, purposeful motion. Amber mapped the petroglyphs in overlapping photos, using the glare to read the depth and age of every line. Leo, utterly focused, circled the chamber in wide, careful steps, his lens hungry for every odd reflection. Dr. Chen and Tyler compared notes, sampling the air and scraping tiny vials of dust from the wall and floor.

Maya hung back for a second, watching her friends at work, watching the way their curiosity knitted together in a single, stubborn, unbreakable chain. She felt more herself in this moment than she ever had in a classroom, or a lab, or even at home.

Then she set to work, too—measuring, sketching, dictating observations to her phone. She logged the precise temperature, humidity, and light angle. She described the colors, the smells, even the sound of water trickling somewhere deep beneath the rock. The more data she collected, the more the room felt alive, not just a hollow in the earth but a capsule of time, untouched until now.

It was Tyler who broke the silence, ten minutes later. “Hey, not to weird anyone out, but does anyone else feel like we’re being watched?”

“Only by a thousand-year-old civilization,” Maya deadpanned, but she shivered anyway.

Amber snickered. “If it’s haunted, at least we have it on tape.”

They all laughed, even Winters.

Maya finished her sweep, then went back to the petroglyphs. This

time, she traced them slowly, finger hovering just above the surface. The design wasn't a random motif or totem, as she'd first guessed. It was something else: a network, or a map. It reminded her of the way water flowed through sediment, or how tree roots spread under the forest floor.

She let her eyes unfocus and saw it—there, in the center: a spiral, marked out in deep, deliberate cuts. The spiral connected to a series of branching lines, all leading outward, radiating to the edges of the wall.

Maya snapped a photo, then called to Amber. "If you map this to scale, does it match the watershed?"

Amber blinked, then started overlaying the grid on her phone. After a minute, she grinned, awed. "You're not going to believe this, but—yeah. It's a near-perfect match."

Maya turned to Winters, and he was already shaking his head in amazement. "They mapped the entire underground system. Without sensors, without anything but experience."

"Or legend," Dr. Chen said softly.

They all stood for a minute, letting that sink in. Then, as if on cue, they started to pack up. The air in the chamber seemed lighter now, easier to breathe. The team moved a little slower, savoring the moment.

Maya lingered, last to leave. She traced the spiral one more time, this time with a bare fingertip. The stone was cold, but it felt like it remembered every hand that ever touched it.

She turned off her lamp and stood in the dark, just for a second.

Then she followed the others out, the memory of the cave—a perfect, impossible secret—carried with her in the deep, bright blue behind her eyelids.

They gathered around the wall, shoulder to shoulder, the hush broken only by the click of Amber's camera and the scratch of Tyler's notes. Headlamps cast their beams in overlapping bands, and where the glare hit the petroglyphs just right, the incisions shone like fresh cuts in the basalt.

Amber's voice was brisk, almost reverent. "This motif—here, the

spiral, and the way it connects to these radiating branches—matches the Parowan Gap Sun Spiral. But the orientation is wrong, and these side-bars aren't solar. They're...rivers, maybe?"

Maya, kneeling by the wall, traced a line with her gloved finger. The groove was deep, the shape unmistakable: a branching system, fractal and precise, like a tree's roots or a nervous system diagram. She leaned back, then gestured for the others to see.

"It's a watershed," she said. "Look—if you overlay the topography, this is Navajo Lake, here. That's Cascade Falls. The main spiral is the old water table, and these lines are the subsurface channels."

Leo, hovering with the camera, whistled. "You're telling me they mapped the whole mountain's plumbing before plumbing was even a word?"

"Not mapped. Understood," Maya corrected. "They must've seen the water appear and disappear, tracked it through the seasons. Maybe followed the wildlife, or just watched where the springs opened up after storms."

Amber nodded, energized. "The Parowan Gap stuff is all celestial. This is terrestrial. A hydrology record, written in rock."

Professor Winters peered over his glasses, peacock-proud. "It's a Rosetta Stone for ancient water engineering."

Dr. Chen, careful as always, took a step back to look for more context. "If they recorded this much, it means they had a practical use for it. Survival, migration, or...maybe even mining?"

Tyler snorted. "Who needs Google Maps when you have a two-thousand-year-old cheat sheet?"

They laughed, softly, and then it was all business. Amber gridded the wall with bright orange tape, then started a high-res photogrammetry sweep. Tyler and Dr. Chen logged every environmental parameter, from humidity to microflora. Leo ran his camera in a slow circle, framing the chamber as both documentary evidence and art. Winters paced, dictating ideas into his recorder, every few lines breaking to shake his head in delighted disbelief.

Maya let herself drift a little, eyes half-closed, absorbing the patterns and the meaning behind them. Her hands remembered every semester

of mapping, every hour she'd spent tracing the stubborn logic of water through layers of sediment and clay. She felt the deep, structural genius of the old carvers—not just the artistry, but the lived experience behind every etched line.

She snapped awake as Amber let out a triumphant “Yes!” and flashed her phone screen. “If you rotate it ninety degrees,” she explained, “the whole pattern aligns with the actual orientation of the ridge. Every spiral, every branch. The lines even match the seasonal outflows—look here, and here.”

She passed the phone around; even Winters looked awestruck.

“That’s...incredible,” he managed. “How did they do it?”

Maya grinned. “They didn’t have to do anything. They just watched and remembered.”

Leo caught her on camera, microphone poised. “So what’s the headline, Dr. Maya?”

She rolled her eyes at the “doctor,” but let herself play along. “Uh—‘Ancient Utahans Predict Modern Hydrology with Nothing But Rock, Patience, and Superior Observation Skills?’”

He grinned, then turned serious. “But really. What’s it mean for the mountain? For us?”

She looked back at the wall. “It means that the water here—the stuff the mine almost wrecked—was the lifeblood of a whole civilization. We mess with it, we’re not just screwing up a pretty lake or a few tourist traps. We’re erasing something sacred. Something that literally kept people alive for generations.”

The team fell quiet, the weight of the find settling over them.

Professor Winters, eyes bright, pulled out his phone. He thumbed a number, then held it to his ear. “President McLean? Sorry to call after hours, but you’re going to want to sit down for this. Yes. No, we’re not dead. In fact, we may have just discovered the first physical link between the Fremont and the ancient watershed cultures of southern Utah. No, I’m not joking. We’ll send photos. Get funding ready for the fall.”

He hung up, still grinning. “That should shake loose a grant or two.”

Tyler snickered. “Or a few dozen grad students.”

Amber, still focused on her photos, muttered, “Let them try to one-up this. We’ll be legends.”

They spent the next hour capturing every square inch of the chamber. Maya set up a low-res LiDAR scan, overlaying the petroglyphs onto a 3D model of the space. Tyler started labeling sample tubes: dust, lichen, crystal flake. Dr. Chen ran another air test, this time flagging a faint spike in pollen—a biological clock hidden in the mineral record.

It was methodical, tedious, and perfect. By the time they finished, Maya could barely feel her knees, and her hands were numb even in the double-thick gloves. But she didn’t care. Every note, every photo, was a thread connecting her to the people who’d walked these caves before—people who’d stood in this exact spot, staring up at the spiral, trying to make sense of the world.

Amber called her over, voice reverent. “Come look at this.”

Maya joined her at the far end of the chamber, where the lines grew fainter, more fragmented. At first, they looked random, just scratches. But then Maya leaned in, and the shapes resolved into a story: there, a river flooding; here, a crack opening in the earth; above, a set of tiny, perfect circles, like raindrops or seeds.

Amber whispered, “It’s a calendar. It tracks the wet and dry years.”

Maya felt a chill, deeper than the cave could make. “They saw the cycles. Knew when it would change.”

Amber nodded, eyes wide. “We’re not smarter than they were. We just forgot how to pay attention.”

Leo caught the exchange on camera, then put a hand on both their shoulders. “You’re going to break the internet with this, you know.”

Maya smiled, but it felt different this time—less about ego, more about the story itself.

She set her own hand next to the carving, palm flat. For a second, she tried to imagine the artist: maybe kneeling just like she was, in the same chill and dark, carving each line with a patience that no algorithm would ever teach. The world had changed, but the need to map it, to know it, was still here.

Winters clapped her on the back, startling her. “Patel, you’re leading the paper. And the project. You’re the only one who gets both sides of this—the science and the story.”

She stammered a protest, but he cut her off. "I mean it. You found it, you mapped it, you're the reason we're standing here. If you're up for it?"

She nodded, feeling a hot rush of pride. "Yeah. I'm up for it."

The team started packing up, everyone moving slow, reluctant to leave the chamber behind. Leo got one last group shot, everyone framed by the blue-white shimmer of the petroglyph wall. Tyler double-checked the samples, and Amber ran one more sweep with her camera, just in case.

Before they left, Maya took a last, long look at the spiral. The pattern burned in her mind, bright as a memory.

They wormed back through the crawlspace, hands and knees scraping, then blinked into the relative brightness of the upper passage. The air felt lighter, almost celebratory, as they retraced their steps to the cave entrance.

Outside, the world was still locked in winter, but the sun had inched a little higher. Maya stood in the cold for a minute, breathing in the sharp, clean air, watching as the others loaded gear into the vans.

Amber sidled up next to her, hands jammed in her pockets. "So, project lead. What next?"

Maya grinned. "We process the data. We publish. And then...we come back. With better gear, bigger teams. Maybe even some local students, once the university signs off."

Amber nodded. "And until then?"

"Keep the secret," Maya said, quiet but sure. "Let it rest until we're ready."

They watched Leo coaching Tyler through a ridiculous TikTok outro for the field day. Winters paced, still dictating, and Dr. Chen plotted out the next set of samples on a dog-eared notepad.

For a moment, Maya let herself feel the scale of it—the history, the community, the way one day's fieldwork could change the story of a whole place.

Then she picked up her pack, shoulders squared, and walked back to the team.

The mountain would wait. But this time, she'd be ready for whatever it decided to show her next.

And when she looked back at the cave, the petroglyph spiral shimmered in the sun, a perfect promise of everything still waiting to be found.

sixteen

farewell to the miller-whites

AT FIRST LIGHT, the Miller-White RV looked like a prop from an action movie: forty feet of steel and fiberglass, camped right across two lanes of Movie Ranch Road, engine idling with a low, glum purr. It shimmered faintly in the blue chill, condensation icing the windows, the exhaust lacing out in a twisting, ghostly banner over the empty street. Every light inside glowed—high-power LEDs along the roofline, a battery of little reading lamps at each window, and, in the kitchenette, a full string of plastic chili pepper lights strung over the curtain rod.

Outside, Barnaby Miller-White paced the gravel with a clipboard and a phone pressed to his ear, orchestrating the departure with the intensity of a man who thought every goodbye needed a PA system and maybe a fog machine. Every three steps, he'd slap the clipboard for emphasis, check his watch, and cast a longing look at the diner across the street, which wasn't set to open for another hour.

Sarah, in contrast, had commandeered a collapsible table at the curb and set up a micro office: travel documents in one pile, water bottles and electrolyte packs in another, and, between them, a color-coded printout labeled COMMUNITY SERVICE: DUCK CREEK, in all caps. She wore her coat draped like a lab coat and seemed to radiate caffeine and the unmistakable energy of someone who'd spent the night stress-cleaning the entire RV.

Toby, perched on a boulder at the edge of the pines, looked about

ten years older than when Maya had first seen him—his hair hacked shorter, a Band-Aid on his thumb, and a pair of battered work gloves jammed in his back pocket. He was already nose-deep in the control app for his new drone, which flickered and whirled in soft, uncertain increments above the snow-dusted grass.

Maya and Leo walked up the road from the DC Pub & Grill, each clutching coffee in biodegradable cups. The morning was so clean it felt like you could see every atom of it—high, sharp, and full of the particular silence that only came after a blizzard had cleaned the night's air. Somewhere nearby, a woodpecker worked the deadwood with a sound like slow applause.

Barnaby noticed them first. He cupped a hand around his mouth and called, "Intrepid investigators! Couldn't leave town without a sendoff from our local heroes, could we?"

"Wouldn't dream of it," Maya called back, grinning despite the way the cold burned her lungs. "You're sure you're packed for every possible emergency?"

He glanced at the clipboard and nodded, grave. "We have three months of supplies, four portable batteries, every first aid kit known to man, and the world's last unopened box of Twinkies. Oh, and Sarah's bringing enough hand sanitizer to disinfect a mid-sized city."

Sarah, without looking up, raised her hand and waggled the small bottle as if toasting them.

Maya and Leo stepped into the glow of the RV, just as the sun crested the pines. Leo nudged Maya, whispering, "Even their coffee machine is bigger than my parents' car."

She elbowed him and handed the second cup to Sarah, who took it with an honest, weary smile.

"It's nice to see you two vertical this early," Sarah said. "After last night, I figured the entire town would sleep till Tuesday."

Leo grinned. "We don't sleep. We hibernate, then reset at dawn."

Barnaby seemed determined to run the day like a press conference. He swept the air with a flourish, gesturing at his wife, his son, and the town behind them. "Well! What a saga, eh? Fake Sasquatch nests aside, this was quite the expedition. Made my whole career look like a series of amateur scavenger hunts."

Maya took a sip of her coffee, watching him over the rim. "You always this dramatic in the morning, or is that a special treat?"

He smiled, sheepish. "I do stage fright in reverse. The closer I am to leaving, the more I crave a captive audience."

Sarah set her coffee on the table and began stuffing papers into an expanding folder. "I told him to keep it low-key, but you know how that goes."

There was a lull as the adults squared off in the universal ritual of parents preparing for road trips. Maya watched Sarah quietly adjust the stack of documents, hands trembling just enough to betray a little anxiety. She realized, suddenly, that whatever else the Miller-Whites were—attention-hounds, maybe, or world-class exaggerators—they were, at their core, a family doing its best to stay glued together.

The drone made a lazy circle overhead, its little camera eye catching the morning sun. Maya turned her attention to Toby, who now wore the concentration of a kid programming an escape pod for Mars.

"Getting a feel for the controls?" she asked.

He nodded, not looking up. "It's trickier than the simulator. Wind's different at altitude. But I can practice on the drive."

There was something different in his voice—less bluster, more focus. Maybe it was the last few weeks, or maybe just the aftershock of the truth finally coming out, but Toby seemed changed in a way Maya couldn't quite name.

She nudged him with her boot. "You ready for your next mystery?"

He glanced at her, eyebrows raised. "Actually... I was thinking I might stick to environmental science for a while. Like, for real. Maybe work on conservation after my probation."

Sarah and Barnaby stopped mid-pack, both turning in surprise. Barnaby's face went soft, then proud. "We'd support that. In fact, that's the best thing I've heard all week."

Sarah blinked twice, then gathered herself. "I'm...very glad, Toby." She smiled at Maya, her voice softer. "Thank you for showing him there's more than just chasing stories."

Maya shrugged, a little embarrassed. "He did all the work. We just provided the coffee."

Leo piped up, “And the memes. Never underestimate the healing power of a solid meme.”

The adults laughed, and the moment lightened again. The drone zipped in for a landing, and Toby caught it without missing a beat.

Barnaby raised his coffee cup in salute. “To new beginnings, then. And to our friends who made Duck Creek the best stop on the map.”

Sarah reached for her son’s shoulder, squeezing it gently. “Here’s to fewer fines and more actual science.”

Toby grinned, even as his ears went pink.

For a while, they just stood in the quiet, letting the sunlight and the scent of pine fill the silence. Maya felt the soft, inevitable shift that came at the end of every big adventure—the knowledge that life would go back to its old rhythms, but not exactly as before.

And that, she realized, was a good thing.

The shadow of the RV fell crisp and long over the last patch of street, making a perfect stage for goodbyes. It was colder in the shade, the old snow crunching underfoot and every breath a tiny cloud. When Barnaby called the group together, he did it with the ringing certainty of a man announcing the final act.

He produced, with an almost magician’s flourish, a weathered envelope sealed with a faded sticker of the Utah state bird. Inside: the original 1939 map, brittle as old bark and edged in brown like toast left too long in the fire. He set it on the collapsible table and smoothed it flat, careful as a priest with a relic.

“I suppose,” Barnaby began, “it’s customary to award a trophy to the victors at the end of a great quest. The problem, of course, is that none of the real heroes ever get to keep the dragon’s hoard.”

Leo shot Maya a look, grinning. “Can’t say I’ve ever been accused of heroism, but I’ll take it.”

Barnaby ignored him, eyes fixed on the map. “This little piece of history started us all down the path, didn’t it?” He looked at Maya, then Leo, then back to the map. “You know, when I was a boy, I used to believe every story my uncle told me about the mountains. He said the

best secrets never made it into textbooks, only into the hands of people who knew how to listen.”

He peeled up the corner of the map, and the yellowed edges caught a slice of sunlight. Dust motes spun in the air above it, making the paper seem to shimmer, as if it was drawing the light into itself.

“So,” Barnaby said, “even if this journey ended with mineral thieves instead of the Duck Creek Sasquatch, I still believe there’s something real in these old legends.” He folded the map with reverence and handed it across the table, right into Maya’s hands.

She took it, a little surprised at the weight of it—not physical, but the way her palms tingled when she touched the paper. She opened it carefully, letting the creases settle, and for a moment it was just her, the map, and the soft, piney scent of the valley.

Leo leaned in. “If it starts to glow or leads us to a lost temple, you call me first.”

Maya smiled, rolling it up with gentle fingers. “You’ll be the first to know.”

Barnaby cleared his throat, obviously pleased. “I expect you’ll keep it safe, Ms. Patel. And that you’ll keep the story alive. You’re better at it than you think.”

There was a quiet, like the moment before a curtain rises. From somewhere behind, a bird sang three crisp notes, then another, making a little scale in the cold.

Not to be outdone, Leo produced a gift of his own. He pulled a cardboard box from under his arm, sealed with orange electrical tape and labeled in black marker: TOBY, FOR SCIENCE. Inside was a drone, not the toy kind but a real field model, fitted with a brace of tiny sensors and a miniature weather vane glued to the tail.

He handed it to Toby, who immediately dropped his phone to cradle the box. His hands trembled just a little. “No way,” he breathed.

“Way,” Leo said. “You see this part?” He popped the lid and pointed to a bead-sized lens embedded in the hull. “That’s an air quality monitor, with a live data stream to your phone. I set it up for baseline readings, but you can mod it for soil temp, barometric pressure, whatever.”

Toby ran a finger along the edge, eyes wide. “It’s beautiful.”

“It’s real science,” Leo said, giving him a quick, friendly punch on

the shoulder. "Use it to track weather, air, water—maybe even find your own legends out there, if you want. Just...maybe not the Bigfoot kind."

Toby nodded, grinning, and for a second Maya saw the little kid in him again, the one who'd come to Duck Creek chasing a myth but found something way better.

Maya leaned against the table, watching the sun creep up the side of the RV. "Guess you'll be famous on the science fair circuit."

Toby shrugged, but his face was lit up like the sun itself. "Only if I can get a signal in the next town."

Sarah, who had been quiet, stepped forward and ruffled her son's hair. "He'll figure it out. He always does."

The five of them stood for a moment in the golden hush, the gifts exchanged, the air between them warmer than the temperature could explain.

Maya held the old map against her chest, its soft crunch matching the beat of her heart.

Above, the new drone buzzed to life, carrying its little payload into the cold and perfect sky.

Sarah was the first to break the spell of the map and the drone. She swept Toby's hair off his forehead, kissed it, then started shepherding the family's loose ends toward the RV door with the brisk authority of a woman who'd survived both academic conferences and cross-country road trips.

Barnaby paused to gather the table and the last of the coffee cups, then turned to Maya and Leo. "You know, I've spent my whole life looking for the thing that would finally make me famous," he said, voice soft and earnest. "But after this? I think it's enough to have met people like you."

He stuck out his hand, and Leo grabbed it, expecting a standard dad shake. Instead, Barnaby squeezed so hard Leo thought his knuckles would fuse, then slapped him on the shoulder with his free hand.

"When I write the book," Barnaby said, "I'll put you both on the dedication page. Under 'local legends.'"

Leo couldn't help it—he laughed, a real laugh, and shook his head. “Just don't spell my name wrong.”

“I promise nothing,” Barnaby said, and let go.

Sarah, meanwhile, pulled Maya into a tight hug. “Thank you,” she whispered, “for being so patient with us. With him.” She nodded toward Barnaby. “And for showing Toby what real science looks like. Not just the stories, but the heart.”

Maya, caught off guard, just hugged her back. “You're welcome,” she said, then added, “Tell him I'm rooting for the scholarship.”

Sarah pulled away, her eyes shiny. “I will. And you—keep taking care of this place, okay?”

“Always,” Maya said.

The RV was nearly buttoned up by then, the chili pepper lights flicked off, the table folded and stowed. Barnaby climbed into the cab and immediately started futzing with the satellite radio, hoping to catch the first news of their own departure.

Toby stood in the doorway, one hand still on the drone controller, the other holding the manual at eye level. He waved at Maya and Leo, a little awkward but sincere, and said, “See you in the feed!”

“See you there,” Leo called.

The RV rumbled, a turbine crescendo building as the engine woke up. Sarah climbed the steps, offered one last wave, then vanished inside. The massive vehicle creaked, hissed, then rolled slowly forward, its tires grinding a fresh track into the slushy shoulder. As it gathered speed, it honked a single, theatrical goodbye, then rolled out toward the far bend of Movie Ranch Road.

Maya and Leo stood side by side in the road's hush, their breath making twin ghosts in the cold.

They watched the RV until it vanished around the curve, sunlight catching on the rear window and making a little flash, like a wink.

Leo let out a sigh. “You think they learned anything?”

Maya thought for a second, then smiled, remembering the careful way Toby had cradled the drone, the way Barnaby's voice had dropped for that one, true moment. “More than they came for,” she said.

The wind picked up, pushing a drift of pine needles across the empty street. A single raven called from somewhere up the hill. The

quiet came back to Duck Creek, deeper than before, but gentler, as if the whole valley had exhaled.

Maya tucked the old map under her arm. "Come on," she said. "Let's get breakfast."

Leo looked back at the DC Pub & Grill, the lights just now flickering to life. "Think Azure saved us any cinnamon rolls?"

"She always does," Maya said, and started up the sidewalk, boots crunching over the old, packed snow.

Side by side, they made their way into the new day, the mountain's long shadow stretched behind them, and the promise of a fresh story waiting just up the road.

seventeen

return to normal

SUNRISE MADE Navajo Lake look fake, as if someone had unwrapped a sheet of foil and tucked it perfectly across the snowline. Maya could tell it was below freezing, because the tip of her nose stung with every inhalation, and the zipper pull on her vest wanted to bite the skin under her chin. She didn't mind. If she had to choose between the heat of summer fieldwork—bugs, sunburn, snake warnings—and this, she'd take cold every time.

She set her thermos in the cup-holder notch of the portable folding crate and braced herself for the short trek to her monitoring array. Her boots crunched over the shoreline's dry snowpack, a perfect split-second sound that made her want to record it just for fun. Halfway to the station, she paused to re-tighten her glove, then glanced over the neat, methodically placed rows of gear boxes and equipment cases along the edge of the embankment.

The array, newly installed and bright enough to shame a reflective road sign, sported a university sticker so fresh the corners hadn't even curled. "Duck Creek Watershed—Patel Project, 2023-24" in blocky sans serif, plus a barcode, plus a tiny, unnecessary drawing of a duck in a lab coat. Maya ran a thumb over the sticker. It was stupid, but it made her a little bit proud.

First task: download the last week's readings from the temp loggers.

She worked the port cover open with a fingernail, then slotted the thumb drive into place. The logger beeped. She checked the readout and, satisfied it was green-lit, started in on the pH and conductivity samplers. The process was so ingrained that she barely needed to think about it. Measure, log, reset. Repeat. The meditative nature of the routine always calmed her, even if her thoughts trailed off to nowhere.

Today, though, she was annoyingly present. She noticed how the wind shifted every time she moved, how the new cord on the Secchi disk didn't tangle like the old one had, how her own exhaled breath kept fogging her safety glasses. She made mental notes of all these things, the way a chef might memorize the differences in a fresh batch of onions.

She clipped a fresh probe into the meter and dropped it into the water, careful not to jostle the surface. The lake responded with a lazy ripple, undisturbed otherwise. The data came back a fraction lower than the day before—interesting, but not dramatic. She logged it on the waterproof clipboard and jotted a quick note for her future self: “Verify temp—cold snap, or calibration off?”

As she turned to set up for the next test, her eyes snagged on the edge of the far peninsula—the spot where, two weeks ago, she and Leo had chased a camo-clad poacher into a cave that was supposed to be a dead end. It looked so ordinary in the clean, slanting light, just a bruise of darker shadow against the snow. But she could still remember the sting of that morning: the pulse of adrenaline, the echo of her own heartbeat in the narrow, frozen tunnel, the mix of terror and awe when they found what the mining crew had left behind.

The lake had seemed stranger to her ever since, like it might be hiding an entirely different landscape underneath the surface. Today, though, it was just cold and still. The most dramatic thing out here was a distant coyote, yipping somewhere up the slope. Maya smiled, then set the probe to rinse in a beaker and thumbed through the next log sheet.

She kept moving, each task a tidy little victory: dissolved oxygen, nitrates, phosphates, and a quick skim for microplastics. The latter made her lips twist in irritation when she saw two tiny flecks of green and one suspicious red thread. “You’d think after a felony poaching bust, people could pick up their trash,” she muttered, flicking the sample into a vial.

By the time the sun had cleared the ridge, Maya had worked through half her to-do list. The air had warmed just enough that her fingers moved again, and the steel of her instrument kit didn't bite back. She paused to sip her thermos—lukewarm by now, but still better than any vending machine coffee on campus.

She let herself sit on the cold, tidy edge of the crate, notebook balanced on one knee. The day's data so far looked promising; the conductivity spike from the mining operation was already trailing off, and the lake's profile was starting to look like its old self again. It was, in a way, the perfect start to a field season. No disasters, just the methodical unraveling of the mountain's secrets, one decimal place at a time.

Maya flipped to a fresh page and scribbled a heading: "Navajo Lake—Subsurface Dynamics, Day 14." She sketched a quick outline of the basin, then started annotating: "Surface frozen except inlet channel—possible groundwater inflow east edge. Revisit cave entrance for permafrost check." She underlined that last note twice, then circled it. Her mind itched to go back to that cave, but she kept herself disciplined. Sampling first, spelunking second.

She finished the log, stood, and started stowing the gear. Each piece clicked into its foam cradle with a sound that was far more satisfying than it needed to be. Maya moved with care, but not because the equipment was new. She just liked the feeling of order, of each thing in its place.

As she loaded the crate for the last time, a gust of wind swept across the lake, bringing with it the faintest hint of old smoke and something wild—a scent she couldn't quite name. It made her think of the forest hermit, Elias, who sometimes appeared at the research station without warning, pockets full of hand-rolled cigarettes and unsolicited advice. She wondered if he was out there now, watching from the trees.

Maya slung the crate into the back of her car, then took one last look over the lake. The sun was up for real now, the water a mirror broken only by the faintest, laziest ripple. She tucked her notebook into the glovebox, then slid into the driver's seat and pulled the door shut with a soft, insulated thunk.

She checked her phone—no new messages, but three missed calls

from the department head, and a text from Leo: “Meet at DC Pub later? I have new memes. And pie.”

She smiled, then thumbed back: “11:30. Loser buys.”

Her hands were raw and cold, but she felt good. Satisfied, even. The mountain was quieter today, and so was her mind.

And she had a full day’s worth of science to show for it.

Leo’s editing den wasn’t much—a converted mudroom at the back of his family’s rental cabin, wedged between the furnace closet and the back door to the woodpile—but it was all his. He’d strung up a pair of Christmas lights around his monitors for “ambiance,” which, by late morning, meant a steady pulse of cheap red and blue LEDs through the steam off his coffee. The desk was an old door propped on crates, but the monitor setup would’ve made any YouTuber weep: three screens, two of them scavenged from old thrift store finds, and one that still had the shrink wrap on the bezel because Leo was paranoid about scratches.

He scooted in, kicking aside a pair of battered mountain bike shoes, and rolled his chair tight to the keyboard. On screen, the rough cut of his next Duck Creek Vibes episode played in silence, the captions doing most of the heavy lifting. He ran it at double speed, eyes flicking between jump cuts—first: drone shot over a patch of snow-melted meadow, all golden grass and new green; next: a pan over the old mining scar, now ringed in bright orange snow fence and sprouting with what looked, optimistically, like baby willows. Then a quick, intentional whip to the lake, where the ice was thinning and the surface reflected the whole sky.

The right monitor was pure chaos: a vertical scroll of live comments, all-caps reactions, and reaction gifs from the Duck Creek Vibes community. Leo kept half an eye on the stream, just in case a regular dropped something gold. His personal favorite was from “Big-FootBandit”—“BRUH IS THAT A BEAVER?? WELCOME BACK, KING”—in response to the shot of a beaver hauling sticks across the frozen dam. He screenshotted it for posterity.

On the left screen, his analytics dashboard pulsed with numbers: trending video, subscriber bumps, the last thirty days of likes graphed like the EKG of someone in cardiac arrest. He grinned, seeing the line spike after his last collab with Maya. Science + drama = internet gold, as he'd told her, and for once the numbers proved it.

He reached for his mug (Duck Duck Creek, with the duck wearing sunglasses), sipped, grimaced, and then set to work on the voiceover for the "Cedar Green explained" segment. He tweaked the EQ to mellow out his S's, then cut in a shot of the mineral sample under Maya's microscope. The colors popped on camera—electric blue, a shimmer of metallic turquoise. He looped in a ten-second timelapse of Maya prepping slides in the field, then did a quick cut to his own GoPro shot where he made a face and licked a rock for science. (The comment section loved that bit, even if Maya had nearly lost it laughing.)

He rewatched the segment. It was solid—tight, nerdy, and just self-aware enough to pull in the non-geology crowd. He dropped in a lower-third banner: "Cedar Green—Utah's Shiniest Secret." Underneath it, in smaller type: "DO NOT EAT."

A ping from the second monitor made him glance over. Someone had tagged him in a meme—a photoshopped poster of Maya and Leo, wearing lab coats and holding water pistols, with the tagline "Duck Creek's Ghostbusters: No Mystery Too Weird." He cackled and retweeted it, then added a caption: "Who you gonna call? (Don't call the sheriff, he still hates us.)"

He checked the clock. Crap, already past eleven. He was supposed to meet Maya at the DC Pub & Grill, and if he was late, she'd razz him for a month.

He clicked "save all" on the project, then grabbed his phone and checked the latest notifications: mostly fans, a few odd PR requests, and a DM from Azure: "Be nice to the new waitress or I'll spike your burger with ghost pepper again." He texted back a string of chili emojis.

He did a quick mirror check—hair: acceptable, hoodie: clean, hands: not too much dirt under the nails—then zipped up and shouldered his camera bag. Just as he was heading out, he paused at the corner of his workspace, where a battered mountain biking helmet

hung off a rack, next to the framed screenshots of his channel's biggest milestones. Last week, he'd cracked 5K followers. This week, it looked like 10K was in reach.

He gave the helmet a little fist bump, then hit the lights and bounded out the door.

The cold smacked him in the face and woke up every cell in his body. He hopped down the steps two at a time, then jogged the shortcut through the side yard to the main road. His boots skidded once on a patch of black ice, but he caught himself, laughed, and kept running.

At the edge of the woodlot, he slowed. The lake was visible from here, rimmed in a blue haze, and the reflection off the surface made the air feel electric. He paused, dug out his phone, and snapped a quick pic for his story: "Spring vibes, incoming."

He thumbed open his notifications one more time. The new video was already live, the comment count climbing every second.

"See you at the pub, legends," he posted, then powered down and stuffed his hands in his pockets.

He couldn't wait to see what Maya thought of the edit. Or of the meme, if he was lucky.

It was a good day to be the King of Vibes.

The DC Pub & Grill always smelled like victory at this time of day—victory, plus bacon, plus the faint, perpetual undertone of spilled IPA and wood smoke. By four p.m., the regulars had migrated to their seats like birds settling onto a power line, and the afternoon sunlight cut the room into golden stripes, lighting up every dust mote and making the bar top shine. Maya pushed through the door and gave herself a second to just stand there, taking in the buzz.

Azure was at the tap, her platinum-blond hair done up in a swirl that looked equal parts diner chic and heavy machinery. She wore a T-shirt with a cartoon yeti on the front (caption: "I Believe in Burgers"), and when she saw Maya, she waggled a spatula in greeting. "Corner booth, right? Your boyfriend's already nesting."

Maya flushed, but only for a split second. "He's not—oh, never mind. Yes, please."

Leo was already at the booth, spread out like he owned the place. He had a stack of napkins, his phone, and a battered composition notebook fanned open like he was prepping for a debate. When Maya slid in across from him, he grinned and pointed at the menu.

"Azure says the new special is 'Yeti Nachos.' I said, 'does it come with a side of urban legend?' She said, 'if you're lucky, it won't come back to haunt you in the morning.'"

Maya snorted. "I'll just get the burger."

"That's what I said!" Leo tapped the table, pleased. "I already ordered the Squatch Burger for both of us. Hope you're in the mood for pickles."

A quick glance around the room showed every kind of Duck Creek character: the snow-plow guys, just off shift and still in their neon jackets; a couple of retired teachers arguing in low, fierce voices about crossword clues; three local teens hunched over a phone, playing Leo's newest video on silent and trading smirks. It felt normal, but better than normal. It felt like home, and Maya could tell Leo felt it too—he never sat this still unless he was happy.

Azure swung by the table with a pair of sodas, clunked them down, and said, "You want fries or the healthy thing with the carrot slaw?"

"Fries," Leo and Maya chorused, then shot each other grins.

Azure rolled her eyes, but she looked weirdly proud. "Coming up. And don't think I haven't noticed your faces on the wall of fame. You're at least as popular as the championship bowling team, and they had their own float last year."

Maya looked up and, sure enough, there it was: a new photo tacked up next to the "Local Heroes" collage, showing her and Leo standing side by side with the sheriff, holding the old field notebook and giving the world's most awkward thumbs-up. Maya covered her face for a second. "Tell me they didn't use the one where I look like I'm about to sneeze."

"Nope," said Azure. "They used the one where you look like you're ready to sue the State of Utah for emotional damages. Very intimidating."

Azure was gone before Maya could reply, already wrangling a tray of wings to a corner table.

Leo leaned forward, voice low. "You know, a year ago, I couldn't get a single person to care about water science unless it involved a mudslide or a viral TikTok. Now look at this—" He tapped his phone, showing the avalanche of comments from his latest upload. "People actually want to know how the mountain works. It's wild."

Maya nodded, feeling the pride swirl inside her. "You deserve it. You put in the work."

Leo shrugged, suddenly bashful. "Sure, but you're the brains. If you didn't show me how all the weirdness fits together—mines, water, the whole history—I'd just be a guy licking rocks on camera."

She grinned. "You'd still have a million views, though."

"Maybe." He made a dramatic show of raising his glass. "To us, the unlikely science squad."

They clinked, then sipped, and for a while, they just watched the sun drift lower outside, casting a pale pink across the snowbanks.

Maya picked at the label on her glass, thinking. "You ever wish it went back to how it was? Before the cameras, before the blue dust thing blew up?"

Leo considered, then shook his head. "Nah. I mean, it was chill, but... this feels like doing something that matters. Even if half the comments are just people shipping us like we're on a CW show."

Maya groaned, but she was laughing. "I've seen the memes. '#SasquatchPowerCouple.'"

"Honestly, that's an honor," Leo said. "There are worse legends to be."

Azure arrived with the burgers and fries, then lingered for a moment, leaning on the booth. "Heads up, kids—Sheriff's coming in hot. He's on the warpath, so either he's got good news or someone's parked in the fire lane again."

As if on cue, the door thudded and Sheriff Adams walked in, uniform crisp, badge reflecting a slice of sunlight like a mini disco ball. The room got a notch quieter; Adams had that effect, even off-duty. He made a beeline for the counter, ordered a coffee, then locked in on Maya and Leo's booth.

He walked over with the solemn, deliberate steps of a man about to issue a proclamation. When he got to their table, he eyed their fries, then grunted. "Don't mind if I do," and helped himself to one.

Maya bit back a smile. "To what do we owe the pleasure, Sheriff?"

Adams slid into the empty seat beside the booth. "Got news. Thought you'd want to hear it from me, not from a bunch of randos on the internet."

Leo perked up, fries halfway to his mouth. "Is it about the trial?"

"Better." Adams looked at them, eyes twinkling. "The jewelry company execs copped to everything. They pled out—federal charges. Turns out running a smuggling op under cover of fake cryptid sightings is not a smart long-term strategy. The whole bunch is getting sent down for a good, long while."

He sipped his coffee, savoring the drama. "And the cherry on top: the state's giving the research grant a massive bump. Environmental restoration, ongoing. Maya, you're basically the new face of watershed science. Leo, the Governor's office wants to license your video for education campaigns."

The words hung in the air for a minute. Maya felt her heart do an odd little loop—the kind you get right before a roller coaster drops.

"Wow," she managed, which was about all she could think of.

Leo did a little finger dance on the tabletop. "So... We're legit now?"

"Legit as it gets," said Adams. "If you ever want to try law enforcement, let me know. But until then, keep making me look good." He stood, stretched, and gave them a rare, real smile. "I'll let you celebrate. But be careful—next time you blow up the internet, you might have to deal with the press yourself."

He walked off, already answering a call on his radio.

Azure slid by, saw the look on their faces, and set down a piece of pie. "On the house," she said. "You earned it."

Maya and Leo stared at each other, then at the pie, then at their future—big and open and very, very real.

They raised their glasses again, voices in perfect sync.

"To Duck Creek," Maya said.

"To the legend," Leo replied.

And, just for a second, the noise of the bar faded away, and it was just the two of them, side by side, ready for whatever story came next.

The DC Pub & Grill was a nest of warm sound, the kind that stuck to your ribs and made the world outside seem a hundred miles away. Maya's hands, finally thawed from the lake, wrapped around her soda glass, and the afterglow of the big news from Sheriff Adams made her feel ten pounds lighter. She didn't even mind the buzz of conversation around them, or the gleeful shrieks from the far table where some kids were making an art project out of napkin holders and ketchup packets.

She'd just finished a fry, and was about to tease Leo for eating all the pickles off her plate, when the front door opened with a slow, reluctant creak. It was like someone had cranked down the pub's volume knob—voices dipped, forks paused, and even Azure looked up from the register, eyebrows arching in surprise.

A figure stood in the entry, all earth colors and moss, an aura of winter forest still clinging to him. Maya recognized the beard first—more wild than groomed, and dusted with what looked like pine needles. Then the patched, ancient canvas jacket, with its many, many pockets, each stuffed to bulging with who-knows-what. She'd seen Elias exactly twice before in her life, but he was the kind of person you didn't forget.

He moved through the tables slow and careful, like he was afraid to break the floor. People whispered, but no one called out, and for a moment Maya wondered if the whole bar would just go silent. But as he got closer, the sounds picked up again, only now everyone's attention was just a little bit askew, as if waiting for something to happen.

Elias reached their booth and stood, looming but gentle, his gaze flicking between Maya and Leo. He gave the barest nod of greeting, then set a battered, leather-bound journal on the table. The thing was so old, it looked like it had spent a decade in a root cellar.

"Thought you might want this," he said, voice rough but calm. "Been keeping notes since before most folks in here could spell their own names. Found a few things you might like."

Maya hesitated, a weird thrill running up her arms. “You want me to—?”

He nodded, once. “You’ll know what to do with it.”

She slid the journal closer, her fingers tingling at the touch. The cover was soft, the kind of worn that only came from thousands of miles in a rucksack. She opened it, breath caught in her throat, and flipped past the front page. The handwriting was a miracle of neatness, old-fashioned cursive, every line slanting just so. Inside: water samples, daily weather logs, hand-drawn diagrams of the ridge and the tunnels, some with cross-sections and tiny notes on “flow anomalies.” Some pages had pressed leaves; a few had what looked like hair or feathers stuck in the creases.

“It’s beautiful,” she said, voice just above a whisper. She looked up, found Elias studying her as if she was the one on display. “Why give it to me?”

He shrugged, and it made his jacket rustle. “Mountain speaks through its waters. You’re the only one listening.”

Leo piped up, “If it’s got a treasure map, I call dibs.”

Elias’ lips twitched, almost a smile. “Depends on the kind of treasure you’re after.”

Maya thumbed through more pages, and the sense of time hit her hard—decades of careful, obsessive observation, each entry a brick in a wall of knowledge. The back half of the journal shifted to sketches: fungi, cave patterns, even a few animals she didn’t recognize, all drawn in a tight, practiced hand.

She closed it carefully, then looked at the old man. “Thank you. I mean it.”

Elias nodded again, then slid a packet of wildflower seeds across the table. “For after the thaw. The old burns need new roots.”

She watched as he moved off, slower than before, but with a peace that made her envy him a little.

Leo snorted, then grinned. “You realize this makes you the Mountain’s Official Successor, right? Like, the Chosen One.”

Maya rolled her eyes. “If I’m the Chosen One, does that make you the Sidekick?”

He preened. “Obviously. I’ll get a cape. Or, like, a cool hat.”

Azure appeared with the bill, but hovered, glancing at the journal. "You two just collecting all the lost history in town, or is this for the next video?"

Maya ran a hand over the leather cover. "This is just...for the mountain. For science. But maybe we'll share."

Azure's smile was sharp, but kind. "That's what I like to hear." She slid the bill to Leo, winked at Maya, then moved on to the next table.

After they'd finished the meal and packed up, Maya couldn't help but linger by the wall of fame near the exit. Next to the local hero collage was an even older relic: a faded 1939 map, the kind drawn by hand and annotated in fountain pen. Maya had always liked the look of it, but today something new caught her eye.

At the base of the map, near the edge of Navajo Lake, someone had drawn a tiny spiral. Not a label, not a path—just a spiral, the same shape as the petroglyph in the hidden cave. Next to it, a pair of numbers, and a short phrase: "Water never lies."

She turned to Leo, who was fitting his camera bag over his shoulder.

"Look at this," she said. "Did you ever notice the spiral before?"

He squinted at the glass, then let out a low whistle. "Not a chance. You think it's the same as in the cave?"

Maya nodded. "It has to be. Elias mapped every spring on the ridge. If this map is right, there's a channel that hasn't been found yet—see here?" She traced the faint line, then tapped the spiral. "It goes under the old landslide. No one's ever cored it, not even the old mining crews."

Leo's eyes went wide. "You're saying there's an undiscovered tunnel? Or a whole cave system?"

She grinned, the thrill of a new puzzle sparking through her. "Maybe. There's only one way to find out."

They stood in the hush, the world outside dipped in blue twilight, and Maya felt the pull of the unknown all over again. She looked at Leo, saw the way he was already calculating the best way to document their next expedition, and laughed.

"Tomorrow?" she said.

"Tomorrow," he agreed. "But I'm not licking any rocks this time."

She shrugged into her coat, feeling the weight of the old journal in

her bag, and led the way out. The pub was still full, but for a moment, the cold outside felt even more alive—a promise, a challenge, a secret just waiting for someone to listen.

As the door shut behind them, Maya felt the mountain settle, quiet and expectant.

She couldn't wait to hear what it said next.

eighteen

the final footage

LEO'S EDITING den was a completely different animal after dark. During daylight, the place was only a cave for his digital creatures: the old three-screen array, the battered keyboard with four keys stuck down by pure willpower, and the tangle of cables he called "the neural mesh." But at night, the room went full mission control. All the warmth came from LED and LCD, and the blued-out shadows in the corners seemed to swallow up the world outside. The air smelled of warm plastic, a bit of ozone, and, always, the earthy top note of whatever energy bar Leo had most recently devoured.

Tonight, every light in the house was off except for the glow of the monitors and the cheap, battery-powered strip of LEDs Leo had tacked under the desk. He moved through the shadows with the fidgety energy of a raccoon on the hunt, piling and re-piling the already neat stacks of SD cards, adjusting the focus on his primary camera, double-checking the status of the GoPro chargers even though all four little lights blinked in unison.

He'd texted Maya a half hour before: "Need your take on something. It's a little weird."

She hadn't answered right away, and that made him even more jumpy. He sat, spun, checked his phone, then stood again. He knew if he called, she'd show up looking like it was an emergency, and the last

thing Leo wanted was to get called out for “the digital equivalent of Bigfoot clickbait.” He needed her curiosity unfiltered, not defensive.

On the third lap between desk and the mini fridge, he heard the familiar knock—three fast, one slow. Maya, even when in a hurry, wouldn’t rush the doorbell. He cracked the door, squinting into the cold blue porchlight.

“You said it was urgent,” she said, voice wry, one eyebrow up.

“It’s not, like, police urgent,” Leo replied, letting her in, “but it’s pretty wild.”

Maya entered, shedding her windbreaker. Underneath she wore a university hoodie, hood up, and a pair of hiking tights with actual dirt still caked to the ankles. She looked at the digital command center, then at Leo. “Let me guess—an Amazon delivery drone dropped a burrito on your car again?”

He snorted. “Worse. Way worse. It’s from the trail cam I set up at Cascade Falls—last week, when the Ghost Truck story peaked.”

She shot him a look. “I thought you said you didn’t believe in the Ghost Truck anymore.”

Leo shrugged. “I don’t, not as a ghost. But you know how Adams said he found tire tracks near the ridge? I wanted a visual. Just for the ‘Duck Creek Vibe’ channel.”

She let herself be guided toward the main desk. The monitors ran in triple formation, two vertical, one horizontal. On the central display, a paused video frame showed a winter-blasted lane of forest, trees black and bone white, the top third of the image a deep, starlit blue. A date stamp in the corner: 11:39 PM, two nights after the big bust.

Maya dropped into the battered wheeled chair, rolling right up to the screen. Leo hovered behind, doing that thing where he crossed and uncrossed his arms, unable to decide if he wanted to be “chill” or “mad scientist.”

He hit play. The camera feed flickered to life, each frame smoothed by the motion-capture algorithm he’d built last year out of boredom. The first few seconds were empty: just wind, shadow, the splay of snow over a broken log.

Then headlights bloomed at the edge of the frame. The light wasn’t spectral; it was halogen-bright, the kind you got from an ATV or a

truck with high beams on. The vehicle itself remained offscreen, but the way the light swept through the trees was almost hypnotic.

"There's your Ghost Truck," Maya deadpanned, but she was leaning in, glasses reflecting the monitor's cold light.

Leo nodded. "Wait. There's more."

He scrubbed ahead. The next minute was chaos—flashing reds and blues from Adams's car, then the thudding arrival of a second set of lights. The screen shook as the Ghost Truck slammed the barricade, scattering a spray of snow, then went black for a second as the camera tried to refocus. When the picture returned, Maya watched as the shapes of people—two, then three, then four—moved in the harsh, blown-out light. At the edge of the frame, the sheriff's silhouette loomed.

She recognized the scene instantly. "That's from the night you called in the drone chase," she said, turning to look at him. "Did you get the full takedown?"

He grinned. "Better. Watch."

He dialed the play speed down to a crawl, then pointed at a section of the screen Maya hadn't noticed before. A patch of black, halfway between two pines, just behind where the Ghost Truck had stopped.

"Look at this," he said, voice low.

He ran the footage forward, frame by frame. At first, nothing. Then, as the officers dragged the driver from the cab, a shape flickered in the background. It was subtle—a darker dark, against the shadow of the woods—but it was there, hunched, moving, then stopping dead as the flashlights swept over it.

"Pause it," Maya said.

He froze the frame.

Now, with the scene static, she could see it: a massive, upright figure, shoulders like a linebacker, legs half-bent in a runner's crouch. The face was lost to the dark, but the outline was distinct. Not a person, at least not any person Maya had ever seen.

"Could be a bear?" she offered, but even as she said it, she wasn't convinced.

"Bears don't do that," Leo said, voice barely above a whisper. "And it was standing before the lights hit. Watch when it runs."

He advanced the video. The figure moved—fast, way faster than a bear—darting between the trees in a motion that was oddly graceful, almost practiced. For a few frames, it crossed into the open, where the snow caught its shape: huge, maybe eight feet tall, arms swinging, then vanishing into the black.

Leo ran the sequence three more times, then let the frame linger on the spot where the thing had been.

Maya stared, the gears in her head spinning. “No one reported anything like this?”

“Not to Adams,” Leo said. “But on the Discord, at least three people said they saw something off the road, like a shadow or a person. One of them even said ‘it looked like a gorilla on stilts.’”

Maya’s skepticism was armor, but it had a crack in it now. She shook her head, not in dismissal, but in awe.

“I know what you’re going to say,” Leo said, but she cut him off.

“No, you don’t,” Maya said, frowning. “I was going to ask if you checked the other angles. If it’s real, it should have left a track, or a shadow, or—” she flailed for the right word, “—a signature, on more than one camera.”

He beamed. “Already on it. I’m stitching a composite from the other two cams. Just wanted your take before I ran the algos.”

She shot him a sideways glance, one corner of her mouth curled up. “So, what? You think we just caught the real Duck Creek Sasquatch, live, on video?”

He tried to play it cool, but his hands jittered on the desk. “If we did, I want you as my co-host when I go on Fallon.”

Maya snorted, then turned her attention back to the monitor. The still frame was ghostly now—the headlights and snow and blur of bodies locked in some tableau of chaos, and just behind it all, the phantom shape.

She reached out and tapped the screen, right at the edge of the shadow. “Let’s see the composite,” she said. “If there’s something out there, I want to know what it is.”

Leo grinned, already typing. “It’ll be ready by midnight.”

She sat back, arms crossed, but her eyes were alive with the same

fever that had brought them out to the cave, to the lakeshore, to every mystery Duck Creek ever coughed up.

“Just promise me,” Maya said, “that if this turns out to be another hoax, you’ll buy me breakfast for a week.”

He nodded, solemn. “Deal.”

“Double if it’s just a guy in a fursuit.”

He tried not to laugh, but failed. “Quadruple if it’s Old Man Rourke.”

They watched the screen together, the whirl of the hard drive and the soft hum of the monitors the only sounds in the dark.

Outside, the mountain stood silent, holding on to its secrets for just a little longer.

Inside, Maya and Leo waited, wide awake, for the story to tell itself.

By midnight, Leo had the feeds stitched and ready. He’d also switched the LED strip to “night mode,” which made the room even darker, except for the wash of blue-white from the monitors. Maya perched on the edge of the rolling chair, one knee pulled up, her heel digging into the threadbare cushion. She sipped what was probably the dregs of Leo’s energy drink but didn’t complain about the taste. Her eyes never left the screen.

Leo ran his cursor over the timeline. “Okay, so this is the wide shot from the falls cam. If you look—” he zoomed in on a band of gray between the trees, “—there’s a weird jump here, at 23:41:06. Watch the right side.”

He scrubbed, slow, frame by frame. The forest went from static nothing to a jittery, shadowy tangle of branches. Then, as the lights of the Ghost Truck glared through, a lump of blackness detached from a tree.

Maya leaned in, glasses catching the light. “That’s just—wait. Go back. There.”

He slid the frames backward, then hit pause.

Now the figure was clear. It stood perfectly upright, half in shadow, half lit by the diffuse spill from the truck’s headlights. Even with the

pixelation, Maya could see the scale—at least a head and shoulders taller than any human. And the way the arms hung, not like a person at rest, but like a runner waiting for the starting pistol.

Leo held his breath. “Not a bear.”

“No,” Maya said, voice low. “Not even close.”

He toggled the contrast up, dropped the saturation, ran a quick motion filter. Each change made the shape more distinct: the curve of a massive thigh, a head perched forward, the slight shimmer of what could only be fur along the shoulders.

Maya pointed. “Freeze it right there.”

The creature was caught mid-step, one foot planted, the other just about to break from the snow. There was a hint of a face, not clear, but present—two dark patches for eyes, something like a brow, and a jawline that was way too robust to be human.

“Jesus,” Leo whispered. He’d never meant the word more literally.

Maya sat back, hands tight on her knees. “That’s not possible. There’s no native primate here. Closest you get is a moose, but even then—”

He replayed the sequence. As Adams’s headlights swept the forest, the figure turned, fast, and vanished into the gloom with a movement that was liquid and precise. Leo slowed the frames even further. There: the flex of a shoulder blade under the fur, the splay of fingers digging into the trunk as it pivoted away.

He flicked on another window, lining up all three feeds: the wide, the medium, and the trail cam behind the curve. “Let’s triangulate. If it’s real, there should be overlap in at least two angles.”

Maya helped, watching as he set up the synchronized playback. In the second feed, the thing barely registered—just a blur between the lights. But in the third, as the Ghost Truck spun out, the figure darted from cover to cover, never fully illuminated, but always present. The speed was unreal. Not superhuman, but not possible for someone weighed down in a suit, especially on a slope that steep.

Leo ran the sequence again, every time ending with the same moment: the creature, arms extended, bounding through the deep snow like it weighed nothing.

“This isn’t a prank,” Maya said, almost to herself. “No way you

could fake it, not with that motion. You'd need a CGI budget, or at least a puppet team."

He didn't answer, just kept playing it, eyes wide.

For a while, neither of them spoke. The only noise was the click of the mouse and the low drone of the computer's fan.

Maya finally broke the silence. "So, what do we do?"

Leo looked at her. "What do you want to do?"

She considered, long and hard, then smiled, but it wasn't a happy smile. "I want to go back up there. See if there's any evidence left. Tracks, hair, even just a scent. But if we tell anyone before we get more proof, we'll sound like... like the Miller-Whites."

He nodded. "So, secret for now?"

She agreed. "Until we know what it is."

They watched the footage one more time, slow, then in real time. The figure appeared, moved, vanished. And behind it, the mountain stood silent, holding on to one last mystery.

In the glow of the monitors, Maya's face looked both terrified and alive.

Leo thought about what the mountain would say if it could see them: two kids with nothing but screens and a stubborn refusal to accept the obvious. Maybe the mountain would laugh. Or maybe it would just wait, patient, knowing they'd come looking for answers, no matter how wild they turned out to be.

He closed the video file, but the image of the creature lingered on the afterburn of his retinas. He didn't think he'd sleep tonight, or any night, until they got the truth.

And he was pretty sure Maya felt the same.

For a full minute after the last frame flickered off, neither of them said a word. Then Maya began to pace, weaving between the desk and the spare chair, her steps perfectly in sync with the analytic gears turning behind her eyes.

"There has to be a natural explanation," she said, half to herself, half

to Leo. "What if it's a prank? One of the miners in a suit? They could've staged it to distract from the heist."

Leo let her go, knowing she was winding up for a full hypothesis dump. "They didn't have time," he said, pushing off from the desk and standing, too. "If you watch the time stamps, the truck doesn't stop long enough. Adams had them cuffed and flat on the road in under two minutes."

Maya stopped mid-pace. "Okay, but—" She pivoted, finger in the air. "What if it's an accomplice? Maybe someone planted to scare off pursuers. There are companies that rent out gorilla suits, you know."

Leo pulled up the browser. "Sure, but not ones that fit, what, eight foot two? Also: you saw how it moved. No seam at the neck, no flapping zipper, nothing you'd get from off-the-rack party store stuff."

She closed her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Fine. If not a costume, then a projection. Maybe something rigged to throw a shadow—like a prank hologram?"

He brightened, but shook his head. "I ran the feed through artifact detection. No drop in frame consistency, no color banding or pixel glitches that you get from a video overlay. Even if you could project an image, you'd have to lug a crazy-powerful lamp up the hill, and it'd show up in the other angles. This thing had substance."

She opened her mouth, shut it, then spun on him. "But you want it to be real."

He raised his hands. "I want the truth. And right now, the truth is: we have video evidence of something with arms down to its knees, a running speed of about thirty kilometers an hour, and a footprint bigger than my entire head. Show me a local mammal that matches that."

She hesitated, then said, "Moose."

He pulled up the still frame, lined the figure with red overlays. "Wrong joint placement. Moose don't have deltoids, or, you know, shoulders. And they don't stop to look directly at cameras."

Maya, grudgingly, let herself study the frozen image. The eyes—or at least the suggestion of them—were fixated on the lens. It didn't read as animal. It read as aware.

She perched on the corner of the desk, arms folded. "Let's say, for

the sake of argument, that it's...an anomaly. Not a prank, not a moose, not a camera glitch. What then?"

"Then," Leo said, voice steady, "we have to verify it."

She nodded. "You still have the time stamp?"

He grinned, back in his element. "Down to the second. I can match it to the air temp, humidity, even the wind speed. I'll bet the trail is still visible if it didn't snow after."

She shook her head in disbelief, but there was a flicker of excitement. "So we go up there. Tomorrow. Like real field techs."

He leaned in, lowering his voice to a stage whisper. "And if it's still there?"

She didn't blink. "We sample the soil, measure the tracks, and—if it left anything behind—run a full DNA panel. No blurry photos. No stories. Just data."

He offered a hand. "Deal?"

She clasped it, her grip way stronger than he expected. "Deal. But we don't tell anyone else. Not even Azure."

He nodded, then thumbed off the monitors, one by one, until only the main screen was left. The figure still hung there, half-hidden by the digital snow, a riddle caught between worlds.

Maya broke the tension with a shaky laugh. "We are going to be so roasted if this turns out to be an elk."

"Or," Leo said, "we'll be the first ones to get real evidence."

She considered. "Either way, I want a waffle after."

"Done."

He walked her to the door, and for a second, neither of them wanted to leave the circle of light from the monitor. Maya pulled her hood up, zipped her jacket, and stepped into the cold. Leo lingered in the entry, watching her silhouette blend with the night. He could see the glimmer of her glasses as she turned once, catching the porch light just right.

"See you at sunrise?" she called.

He shot her a salute. "I'll bring the coffee."

As the door swung shut, Leo looked back at the monitor, now the only light left. The figure on the screen seemed to watch him, not threatening, but expectant.

He saved the project file, labeled it “MYSTERY_001,” and backed up the raw footage to three places, just in case. Then, for the first time all night, he let himself feel the shiver, not of fear, but of possibility.

Tomorrow, they’d have answers.

Tonight, the story was theirs alone.

And somewhere, in the hush between mountain and sky, something waited for them to come looking.

nineteen

return to cascade falls

CASCADE FALLS WAS EXACTLY how the rumors promised: loud enough to drown your thoughts, cold enough to hurt your teeth, and wild enough that if you stared at the wall of white water long enough, you'd see faces in the foam. Maya led the way up the ridge, boots scuffing the old snow that lingered in the shady spots, her hands wrapped in a pair of ancient, fingerless gloves that she swore were good luck for field days. Leo trailed, balancing the camera bag and a heavy aluminum case with the grace of a kid who'd never hiked in full daylight, much less on a day like this.

The sun had already ducked behind the mountain, but the whole canyon glowed with an indirect, high-altitude blue that made shadows look thin and the wet rocks shimmer. The air tasted like ice and moss and something bright, a note Maya thought of as "chlorophyll on steroids." She paused near the overlook, pulled her phone from her vest, and checked the GPS. The little red dot lined up exactly where Leo's trail cam had triggered, two days and twelve hours ago.

"Here," Maya called, waving Leo forward. "Should be right under the falls. Your sense of direction is actually decent for once."

He snorted, but his breath came out in a white, shaky cloud. "I live to exceed expectations."

She smiled without meaning to, then stepped off the main trail onto

the dark, peaty soil below. The closer they got to the waterfall, the more the air turned into a cold mist, clinging to their jackets, fogging their glasses, making the world seem a little bit underwater. Somewhere in the spray, Leo's cam had caught a single, five-second frame of a shadow moving upright and quick behind the curtain of water.

Maya's pulse kicked up, just a tick. She crouched and ran her hand over the flattened grass at the base of the falls, then froze. The mud was pocked with prints. Not deer or elk—these were enormous, human-shaped, with a spread that looked like a man in snowshoes stomping around in circles. But the stride was wrong. The stride was huge.

She knelt, wiped a glove across her glasses, and bent in, close.

Leo set down his bag and joined her, eyebrows up. "That's not...?"

"Yeah," Maya said, "that's exactly what it looks like." She pulled a tape measure from her pocket, then a tiny pair of calipers, and got to work. "Heel to toe is—fifteen point three inches." She whistled, a flat, impressed sound. "And the ball of the foot's almost six inches wide."

"Bigfoot confirmed?" Leo was already recording, phone angled over her shoulder.

She glanced up, grinning. "I'll settle for 'big foot, lower case.' Let's get a shot of the whole sequence. There's more than one print—here, here, and there, up the ridge."

She fished out her battered field notebook, flicked the pen open with her thumb, and started a quick sketch. "Print one—left foot, most complete. Print two, partial, but see how the toes dig in? It's a running stride." She measured the gap between prints. "Almost seventy inches between steps."

Leo whistled, then leaned in, squinting at the ground. "You ever seen a track that big? Even from a hoaxter?"

Maya shrugged. "Not this detailed. The Miller-White fake prints were good, but they left rubber seams and were way too symmetrical." She traced a finger over the mud. "Look. These toes aren't just impressions—they have pressure curves. Real toes, or the best prosthetic job I've ever seen." She slid her hand across the arch, then paused. "There's even a dermal ridge here. Like a fingerprint."

She fished a ruler from her pack, then measured the print again. "If this is a fake, it's a million-dollar one." She took out her phone, snapped

a dozen close-ups, then signaled for Leo. "Can you get a slow-motion video from this angle? I want to show the depth."

Leo obliged, kneeling in the mud. "You know, at some point, you're going to owe me new pants."

She rolled her eyes. "Just get the shot."

He did, and Maya talked through every measurement, every angle, every weird little anomaly. The sound of the falls made it hard to hear her own voice, but she hoped the camera's mic would pick it up. When she finished, she sat back on her heels and stared at the print, letting the puzzle work its way into her mind.

Leo broke the silence. "What do you want to do next?"

Maya thought about it, then said, "We cast it." She dug in her bag for the plaster kit—standard field issue, a leftover from last semester's fossil workshop—and checked the mixing bag. "I'm going to need a few minutes. Can you do a perimeter sweep, see if there's more evidence?"

He nodded, grabbed his camera, and vanished up the trail, leaving her with the footprints and the hiss of falling water.

She scooped mud from around the track, careful not to disturb the fine lines, then mixed the plaster with bottled water until it was the consistency of thick yogurt. She poured slow, letting the liquid fill every contour, then topped it with a mesh square to keep it from crumbling in the mold. She set her phone for a ten-minute timer, then leaned back to watch the cast set.

Even in the weird light, the print looked uncanny. Not just in size—Maya had seen her share of stunt tracks, even tried to make a few for a summer prank—but in the way the weight distributed, the flex at the ball of the foot, the subtle pressure at the tips of the toes. She tried to picture the gait, the stride. It didn't move like a person, not quite. The heel dug deeper, and the toes splayed in a way that spoke of weight and speed and something not quite human.

She pulled her gloves off and touched the edge of the plaster, smoothing the surface as it began to harden. Her fingers tingled from the cold, but she liked the feeling, the raw edge of being out in the field with something new and unexplainable.

A branch snapped above her, sharp against the wall of waterfall noise. Leo jogged back, face flushed. "You need to see this."

She stood, brushing mud from her knees. "What is it?"

"Just come on," he said, excitement pushing his words together.

She jogged after him, boots slipping on the mossy rock, and followed his line of sight to a downed pine about twenty yards upstream from the falls. The bark was gouged, peeled away in deep, ragged strips. Above head height—way above—tufts of dark hair clung to the raw wood, caught like spiderweb.

Maya stepped in, staring up. "How high do you think that is?"

Leo pulled out the tape. "Twelve feet, easy."

She nodded, then pulled a specimen bag from her vest. "Let's see what we've got." She reached up, stretching to grab the hairs, then sealed them in the bag, careful not to touch them with her bare fingers.

"Smell that?" Leo said, wrinkling his nose.

Maya did. It was a musk, wild and heavy, but nothing like the bear scat or elk wallow she'd gotten used to over the years. "It's weird," she said. "Not animal, but not human, either."

He snapped a photo, then held the bag up to the light. "You want to run a DNA panel back at the lab?"

She grinned. "You know me too well."

They surveyed the area, working outward in a slow spiral. More prints, less distinct, led up the ridge toward the overlook. One set ended at a tangle of brush, where something heavy had broken a game trail through shoulder-high ferns. Maya measured the distance again—nearly eight feet between steps.

Leo filmed everything, his narration switching from campy to genuinely amazed. "If you're just joining, we're tracking the world's biggest cryptid through the wilds of Southern Utah. Our guide is Maya Patel, part scientist, part bloodhound. Maya, tell the audience what we've found."

She played along, straightening up with mock dignity. "Today, class, we have a possible new species of megafauna. Its tracks are consistent, its stride is beyond human, and it's strong enough to shred trees for fun." She flashed a smile at the camera, then let it drop. "Seriously, though—I don't know what this is. But I want to."

He turned the camera on himself. "And if we die out here, please

make sure my YouTube password gets to Azure. She'll know what to do with it."

Maya snorted, then went back to the prints. "Come on," she said. "We need to bag the cast before it freezes solid."

They retraced their steps to the waterfall. The plaster had set up perfectly—a clean, sharp negative of the print. Maya worked a trowel under the edge, pried it loose, and set it on a foil tray.

Leo panned the camera over her shoulder. "That's a beaut," he said, awe in his voice. "You think anyone will believe it?"

She looked at him, eyes serious. "Doesn't matter. We have evidence. And we have the real thing, right here." She wrapped the cast in a towel, then tucked it gently into her backpack.

They stood together for a minute, watching the last of the sun fade behind the ridge. The roar of the falls felt different now—less a background, more a heartbeat. Maya felt the old, familiar thrill of having pushed the world a little bit closer to its secret.

Leo shivered, then pulled up his hood. "You ready to head back?"

She nodded, then lingered for one last look at the print site. "Let's get this to the lab before we freeze to death."

They started down the trail, boots squelching in the mud, Maya already rehearsing her notes for the report. But behind her eyes, the puzzle worked on, a relentless, hungry thing.

Tomorrow, they'd look for DNA. Tomorrow, they'd test the hairs and the cast and the story itself.

But for tonight, she let herself believe that something was still out there, watching from the deep blue shadow, waiting for them to come looking.

By the time Maya finished packing the footprint cast, her fingers were stiff and half-numb, the tips tingling even through the gloves. She flexed her hands a few times, then watched as Leo orbited the scene, phone in one hand, field mic in the other, narrating everything for his channel in a voice pitched somewhere between camp counselor and low-key conspiracy theorist. He had an eye for the small stuff—when he paused

by a log, he zoomed in on the half-melted animal print in the snow; when he passed a sapling, he ran his fingers over the weird frost patterns on the bark.

She expected him to keep close, maybe try to goad her into a snow-ball fight or make a joke about cryptid scat. Instead, he ranged farther up the slope, eyes locked on something just out of sight.

Maya double-checked the print site, then jogged to catch up. “What’d you find?”

He pointed, wordless, up at a stand of young pines. At first Maya only saw the tangle of bare branches silhouetted against the sky, but as her eyes adjusted, the break became obvious: a row of limbs, snapped clean at the trunk, forming a jagged, uneven ladder up the main tree. The highest break had to be at least twelve feet off the ground.

She craned her neck, whistling. “No way a bear did that. No claw marks, and look at the twist in the fibers.”

He zoomed in with his phone. “What does that? Elk rut?”

She shook her head. “Not unless the elk in Duck Creek are climbing trees now.”

He grinned, then circled the base. “There’s hair,” he said, voice pitched low. “Up there, near the wound.”

Maya followed his gaze, then spotted the tuft: a wedge of coarse, dark hair, tangled around the raw wood. She fished a sampling swab from her pocket, then used the tip to lever the hair loose, careful not to touch it.

She held the sample bag up, turning it in the light. The hair was almost black, but glinted with a faint blue in the twilight. Not bear, not deer, not anything she’d ever handled before.

Leo recorded the process, keeping the camera steady even as he chattered. “This is wild. You ever see anything like that?”

She closed the bag, sealing it tight. “No. The root’s intact—should be enough for a DNA run.” She caught herself, then smirked. “Assuming it’s not some elaborate wig prank.”

He laughed. “Only if you’re pranking me, Patel.”

Maya didn’t answer. Instead, she let the sensory input wash over her: the wet, mineral-heavy air; the dull roar of the falls below; the faint, musky odor that rode just behind the scent of mud and evergreen. It

wasn't skunk or weasel or even wildcat—more like a cross between sun-baked leather and the sour tang of gym mats after a wrestling meet. The hairs on her arms went up, and she realized she'd stopped breathing for a second.

Leo noticed her pause. "You good?"

She nodded, forcing a grin. "Yeah, just—something smells weird."

He sniffed, then shrugged. "Maybe it's me. Haven't showered since the Squatch Burger challenge."

"Gross, but not quite the right note," she said, then set her jaw. "Let's keep moving. If there's more evidence, it'll be up the line."

They angled uphill, following the tracks as they wove through brush and around deadfall. The pattern repeated: prints spaced far apart, always just on the edge of deep mud or soft snow, never stepping in the same place twice. At one point, Maya found a half-print on a rock shelf—just the ball of the foot and two toes, as if something massive had landed with perfect balance and then pushed off again.

She measured the leap. "Eight feet," she said, voice low. "From standstill."

Leo stared, then did a mental math. "That's, like, twice my broad jump."

She smirked. "You're not exactly Olympic material."

"Neither is the average wildlife in Utah," he shot back, but there was no bite to it.

The wind picked up as they climbed. The sun was gone now, leaving only a thin, lavender haze over the trees. The ground leveled at a flat ledge of shale, and the tracks ran straight for the edge, then stopped.

Maya edged forward, boots skidding on loose scree, and looked down. A sheer drop—at least thirty feet, maybe more—yawned between them and the far side of the canyon. Below, the river twisted out of the falls in a chaos of white water, then vanished under a spray of ice and mist. The far side rose up quick, sharp, and black against the sky.

She looked at Leo. "Your rangefinder handy?"

He was already lining up the shot. "Thirty-one, maybe thirty-two feet across. If you jumped from here, you'd be lucky to make it to the second bush."

She crouched, scanning the lip of the ledge. The final print was clean, the toes gripping the edge, mud still wet where it had peeled away. No blood, no claw marks, just that same impossible impression: the weight, the balance, the unmistakable suggestion of a thing that had not only reached the ravine but maybe, just maybe, cleared it.

Leo followed her gaze, then turned to the far side. He squinted, then pointed. "Is that—?"

She blinked, then saw it: a shadow half-hidden by vines and the sweep of old ferns, a shallow but distinct oval in the cliff face. "Cave," she said, and the word sounded weirdly loud in her own ears.

He adjusted the camera, zoomed in. "That's where it went, right? The track is a straight line."

Maya nodded, thinking. "It would have to climb, but the angle's good. There's even a handhold near the top."

He stared, awe plain on his face. "What...what does that? Even a bear would slide."

She watched the shadow of the cave, the way the blackness seemed to pulse as the wind shifted the branches around it. For a second, she imagined something watching from inside—a glint of eyes, the promise of another impossible print on the floor.

Leo broke the silence. "You want to cross?"

Maya shook her head. "Not tonight. The bridge is out, remember? Even with a rope, it's too risky in the dark."

He nodded, but his hand hovered over the camera, reluctant to look away.

She reached out and squeezed his arm, grounding them both. "We document from here. Tomorrow, we come back with the right gear."

He relaxed, then grinned. "You're the boss."

They spent the next ten minutes photographing every angle, taking more hair samples, and marking the site with a flagged rock. As they worked, Maya felt the hum of energy in the air—not fear, exactly, but the sense that the rules had changed. That the world was bigger than she'd thought, and tonight, for once, she'd gotten a glimpse of what waited just beyond the edge.

As they packed up, Leo glanced back at the cave, then at her. "You think anyone'll believe it?"

She smiled, tired but honest. “Doesn’t matter. We know what we saw.”

Together, they made their way down the slope, each step lighter than the last.

And behind them, on the far cliff, the cave waited, black and watching, holding on to its secret until morning.

The hike back started as a victory lap—Maya and Leo trading one-liners about TikTok clout, the cold snap in the air, and who would be first to claim “cryptid DNA” as a senior project. But as they threaded down the slope, dusk deepening the blue haze between the pines, the world shifted. The ordinary noises faded. No coyote, no birds, not even the usual needle-drop of wind through the trees. It was as if the forest had closed its own ears, leaving only the crunch of their boots and the sound of their own breath, sharp and clouding in the cold.

Maya picked up the change first. She slowed, tilting her head, letting the hush work into her bones. With every step, the sense of aloneness grew—not just the two of them, but a full mile of nothing else alive. Even the falls sounded muted, the roar swallowed by the ridge.

Leo paused, holding the camera steady, and whispered, “Is it just me, or—?”

She shook her head. “It’s not just you.”

They kept moving, but the mood had changed. The dusk pressed in, thick and close. The weirdest part was how empty it felt—no rustle of rabbits, no chirp of late insects, just a vacuum of sound and movement.

They were halfway to the switchback when the first thump hit.

It was low—so low Maya felt it in her heels before she heard it in her ears. A bass hit, like someone pounding a massive drum far off, or a train running slow and deep on buried rails. The second thump came before she could process the first, then a third, and then a pause, and then two in quick succession.

She stopped, one boot halfway off a stone. The hairs on her arms stood up.

Leo froze, then panned the phone in a slow arc. “Is that...mining?”

Maya listened, eyes closed. The rhythm was almost mechanical—steady and repetitive—but the pattern was wrong. It wasn’t the

grinding echo of a drill, or the stutter of an engine. It was too clean, and the interval shifted just a hair every few beats, like the syncopated knock of a heart.

She opened her eyes. "That's not a machine," she said, and her own certainty startled her.

Leo fumbled in his bag, pulling out a shotgun mic and setting it up on the tripod with shaking hands. "If this is a prank, it's the most expensive prank in state history."

They stood in silence, letting the thump roll through them. It seemed to vibrate up from the rock, not the air. Maya's teeth buzzed, her breath syncing with the pulse whether she wanted it to or not. There was nothing else to hear, just that deep, endless drum, rolling out over the snow.

Maya tried to localize it. She turned slowly, listening for changes, triangulating the sound. It came from uphill—back toward the falls, but higher, maybe along the ridge where they'd lost the trail. The forest glowed blue-black, every tree a jagged silhouette, the sky above draining from lavender to full indigo.

She whispered, "It's moving."

Leo's eyes were wide, but he kept the mic pointed steady. "Toward us?"

She shook her head, not trusting her voice. "No. Across the slope."

They stood like that for a long minute, neither daring to talk over the sound. The thumps grew louder, then softer, then stopped altogether.

The silence that followed was so absolute it made Maya's ears ring. She waited for a return, a call, a click, even a whisper of wind, but nothing came.

Then, from somewhere deep in the trees, a second sound began—soft at first, almost below the level of hearing, then rising in pitch and volume. It was a vocalization, but not a howl or a bark or anything she could pin to an animal. It was lower than any bear, higher than any elk, a rolling, layered hum that built and built until the whole forest seemed to vibrate with it.

Maya felt it in her ribs before it hit her ears. A pressure wave, like the sound had mass.

Leo stared at the recorder, watching the meters spike into the red. "What is that?" he breathed, voice tinny and thin in the stillness.

Maya couldn't answer. She wanted to say "moose" or "geology" or "wind in the canyons," but the word stuck in her throat.

The hum grew into a full, resonant bellow—long, slow, impossibly loud. It rattled the branches, shook clumps of old snow off the pines, sent a shiver up Maya's spine she'd remember for the rest of her life.

Then, as suddenly as it started, it stopped. The sound sliced off clean, leaving only the faintest echo curling back through the woods.

They stood motionless, the recorder still running, their own breathing now the only thing making any noise at all.

Maya scanned the trees, every sense wired to the edge. "Did you see...?"

Leo shook his head. "Heard. Didn't see."

They waited, another minute, maybe two. No follow-up, no movement. Whatever made the sound was gone, or waiting, or maybe just listening to see if anyone would answer back.

Maya reached for her phone, hands shaking, and typed a few quick notes: "Thump sequence, twelve to fifteen beats, pitch 30–40 Hz. Vocalization, estimate 85–100 dB. Resonance—felt, not just heard. Unnatural but not electronic."

She swallowed, then looked at Leo. "Let's go."

He didn't argue. They packed the mic, double-bagged the cast and the hair samples, and started down the last stretch of trail.

Behind them, the forest stayed silent, but it felt anything but empty.

Every now and then, Maya glanced over her shoulder, half-expecting to see a shadow moving between the trees. She didn't, but the feeling stuck with her all the way to the car, and even as they drove out, headlights splintering the dark, she kept scanning the rearview, waiting for something to cross the road.

At the turnoff to Duck Creek Village, she finally exhaled.

Leo broke the silence. "You think it'll show up on the audio?"

She nodded, voice quiet. "It'll show up."

They didn't talk the rest of the way in. The night had teeth, and it was better to let it bite in peace.

When they pulled into the familiar glow of the DC Pub & Grill,

Maya let herself relax, just a notch. They'd brought back evidence, maybe even the start of an answer.

But as she stepped out into the parking lot, the echo of that last, impossible sound followed her, deep and steady, alive in the bones of the mountain.

And somewhere in the trees, something else listened, too.

twenty

the scientific method

MAYA WORKED the pipette with both hands, as if she could coax the secrets out of the hair sample by sheer force of will. The first drop—clear as meltwater—landed with a slick tap in the microtube. She was careful, maybe too careful, to keep the transfer sterile, working under the cone of her ancient desk lamp. The rest of the cabin was a flicker of blue and gold, moonlight and the oil stove's flame, but this bench was all business: glass beakers lined up like soldiers, a battered field notebook open to the day's first empty page, and, at the center, the university's portable DNA sequencer, still whirring softly after three years on loan.

She loaded the tube into the tray, shut the hatch, and leaned back, listening for the sequencer's startup song—a musical, rising trio of tones that sounded like optimism in machine language. The display pulsed green. Maya exhaled, then logged the time and sample code. For a second, she just watched the blinking light, letting her eyes drift out of focus, letting the hum of the fan fill her brain.

The cabin smelled like cut pine and instant coffee, with a top note of wet socks drying on the woodstove rail. Outside, a thin frost etched the window. Inside, it was warm enough for Maya to roll her sleeves to the elbow, even at this hour.

Across the room, Leo sat cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by plaster casts. He wore a fleece blanket like a toga and had a battered

magnifier perched over one eye, an effect made more absurd by the string of holiday lights he'd woven through his hair earlier as a joke. The floor was his kingdom—half the footprint casts laid out on towels, the rest propped along the wall or balanced on stacks of outdated tech magazines. He'd sorted the prints by size, then by clarity, and was now muttering under his breath as he compared the newest one to a printout of “known hoax” samples he'd cribbed off the internet.

She watched him for a while, working up the courage to voice the thing that had been gnawing at her since last night. He looked up, catching her gaze.

“Progress?” Leo asked, tucking the blanket around his shoulders like a cape.

“Run's at twenty-eight percent,” Maya replied. She tapped her notebook, then her pen, then the edge of the bench. “I pulled the root intact. Should be enough for a full panel.”

He nodded, not really listening. “You wanna see something cool?”

Before she could answer, he scooted over, trailing the blanket like a robe, and set the best cast on her lab bench. It was the one from the base of Cascade Falls—the print they'd both measured three times, just to be sure.

He set his phone to flashlight mode and held it at a low angle, raking the light across the plaster. “Check this out.”

Maya leaned in. The print was enormous, that much was obvious, but it was the detail that stopped her. Under Leo's light, the cast's surface bloomed into a tiny topography: skin ridges, whorls, a whole universe of texture. She reached out and traced the ball of the foot, feeling the smooth arch and the uneven valley left by mud and, maybe, muscle.

Leo wagged the magnifier at her. “Dermal ridges. Like fingerprints, but on the whole foot. I looked up a bunch of fake Bigfoot prints—nobody ever gets the ridges right. You'd need a full-on silicone mold, or, I don't know, a real foot.”

She didn't answer right away. She took the magnifier, peered closer, let the evidence do its own talking. The ridges spiraled and looped, some faded, some sharp, every one different. She'd seen enough microscopy to know the difference between artifact and design.

She tried to logic her way through it. "Could've been a prank, but—"

"But what?" Leo grinned, eager. "You're not gonna say 'hoax' are you? Because this is the least hoaxy thing I've ever seen."

Maya sat back, folding her arms. "I'm just saying it's...not impossible. It could be a really good prosthetic. Or a zoo animal, maybe, if someone got creative."

He grinned wider. "Show me the Utah gorilla, Patel."

She rolled her eyes, but she felt the cold crackle in her chest—nerves, or maybe something closer to excitement.

Leo picked up the next cast, smaller but still human-adjacent. "They're all left foot. You notice that?" He showed her, one by one, the weird consistency. "Every print, same left foot, same toe splay. But they're not from a person. Not unless the person is a size, what, thirty?"

She looked at him over the rim of the magnifier. "There's no way this came from a known species. Not with these pressure points."

He raised his eyebrows. "So?"

"So." Maya hesitated, then ran her thumb along the arch again, letting herself believe it for half a second. "So it's weird. I'll give you that."

Leo sat back, satisfied, and started documenting the cast with his phone, shooting from every angle. "I'm putting this on the Vibes Discord," he said. "With a disclaimer. We're still scientists, right?"

She didn't answer, just watched as he meticulously uploaded each image. There was something reassuring in the routine, the way he turned anxiety into action, the way he could treat even the wildest find as just another data point in the world's biggest group project.

The sequencer chimed, breaking her train of thought. She rolled her chair to the edge of the bench, tapped in her password, and watched the results line up on the screen: "Mammalian DNA. No species match. No species match. No species match."

She stared for a minute, running the alignment again. Same result.

"Hey, Leo?" she called. "Come look."

He shuffled over, one sock trailing a string from his blanket, and peered at the readout. "That's...not what I expected."

Maya felt the first prick of genuine curiosity, sharp and clean.

“Could be an error,” she said, more out of habit than conviction. She ran a second check, this time pairing the unknown sample against the human, bear, and primate panels.

Again, the results lined up in the no-man’s-land between known and “are you kidding me?”

Leo pointed at the species bar. “So it’s close to primate, but not a match.”

She nodded, fingers drumming the bench. “The mitochondrial sequence is off by a factor of two. And the markers for bear are way out of alignment. It’s not even in the same genus.”

He let out a low whistle. “Do you realize what this means?”

She did. She just didn’t want to say it.

Leo, never one for restraint, said it for her: “It means you discovered a new species. Possibly the biggest new mammal in North America since, what, the Pleistocene?”

She looked at him, then at the screen, then back at the print. “Or it means someone swapped out my sample with a mutant pig hair.”

He snorted. “Or it means you’re the first. Like, for real.”

She closed her eyes, just for a second, letting the possibilities spin out. When she opened them, she started a fresh page in her notebook. “I want another sample,” she said. “I want hair, blood, something that hasn’t been compromised. And I want a time-stamped record of the whole thing. If it’s real, we do it right.”

He grinned. “Deal.”

They worked in parallel, Maya logging every step, Leo prepping the casts for a full photogrammetry scan. The night got deeper, the stove burned low, and the only sounds were the sequencer’s soft fan and the tap of pen on paper. Outside, the wind rattled the eaves, but inside, the warmth was a bubble.

It was close to two when Maya finally sat back, staring at the ceiling, thinking. “You ever wonder if we’re not meant to know?” she asked, voice soft.

Leo was sprawled on the couch, a pile of towels under his head. “Not for a second. The mountain wants to be found out. It’s just waiting for someone stubborn enough to listen.”

She smiled, a real smile, and for the first time since the sample run, she let herself hope the evidence would hold up.

"I want to set camera traps," Maya said. "If we can prove a pattern, maybe get thermal imaging—"

"Done," Leo replied, eyes still closed. "I'll pull the gear tomorrow. We'll blanket the whole ridge."

She wrote the plan in her notebook, neat and methodical. Then she drew a spiral in the margin—a habit she'd picked up as a kid, every time she wanted to remind herself to look deeper.

For the rest of the night, they planned and plotted, outlined the next moves. There was a sense of motion, of inevitability, that made sleep seem beside the point.

When the sun finally cracked over the ridge, the world was the same, but they weren't.

And Maya, for all her skepticism, was almost ready to believe.

By eight in the morning, the kitchen table was a disaster of laptops, cords, and Leo's improvised "media command post," anchored by two mugs of terrible coffee and a Tupperware of leftover cinnamon rolls scavenged from the pub. The night's adrenaline had morphed into a steady, nervous energy, and neither of them had slept more than a handful of hours. Maya re-read the last entries in her notebook, lips moving, pencil smudging the margin, while Leo hunched in front of his battered MacBook, importing the field audio from Cascade Falls.

He tapped the trackpad, chewing the inside of his cheek, as the waveform unfurled across the screen: a dense blue-green graph, peppered with the white noise of wind and the distant hiss of the waterfall. He toggled through filters, ran a few preliminary spikes, then leaned back and watched the screen in silence. It was the only time he ever looked serious—when the data forced him to pay attention.

Maya drifted over, notebook in hand. She caught the scent of ozone and dust and, underneath, the sharp tang of stress. "Anything?" she asked.

He didn't look up. "You ever seen a frequency graph do this?" He

clicked and dragged a section of the waveform, zooming in tight. The blue line arced up, a perfect, unnatural parabola, before diving into a trough Maya had never seen in field audio.

She squinted. "It's an artifact, probably. Digital glitch."

Leo snorted. "That's what I thought. But watch." He played the segment, and the speaker rattled with a low, sustained hum—more felt than heard. The sound was thick, layered, almost alive. A second later, the harmonics kicked in, an odd, ringing overtone that sent a ripple across Maya's skin.

She blinked, then blinked again. "That's not machinery. No motor, no feedback—just a raw waveform."

"Exactly." Leo tapped a few keys, overlaying the spectrogram. "This pitch is subsonic, under twenty hertz. A bear can go as low as thirty, but only when it's pissed." He highlighted a section. "But this? This holds steady for almost a minute. And it never drops off. It's like something using resonance to... I don't know. Announce itself."

Maya chewed the inside of her cheek. "Could be wind," she said, but her heart wasn't in it.

He grinned. "Could be. But wind doesn't hit a harmonic overtone at exactly sixty-four hertz and keep it there. That's a D note. Someone with a hell of a larynx could do it, maybe."

She listened again, letting the hum fill her head, vibrating through her jaw and down her neck. She'd spent a summer cataloguing owl calls—she knew every trick sound could play on the brain. But this one felt...aimed, somehow.

"Try boosting the high end," Maya said.

Leo did, and the room filled with a cold, glassy whistle. The hair on her arms went up. She checked the time stamp. "That's right when we found the last print."

Leo nodded, lips pressed thin. "I overlaid the GPS data. The sound source is fixed, or nearly so—uphill, near that old mine vent."

Maya sank into the chair beside him, reading the numbers as if she could force them to explain themselves. "So we're saying something made that sound. On purpose."

Leo shrugged. "I'm saying we should find out what."

They sat in silence for a minute, just the laptop's fan humming

and the strange echo of that low note hanging in the air. Maya scribbled a quick outline in her notebook, double-checking herself as she went.

Leo watched her. "You're making a plan."

She glared at him. "I always make a plan. You're the chaos agent here."

He smirked. "I just like the weird stuff."

She scanned her own writing, then tapped the page. "We need more data. Thermal imaging, camera traps, maybe even a parabolic mic if you can get one from the AV closet at the rec center."

He raised his eyebrows. "You want to stake out the ridge? Old-school?"

"I want to science the hell out of this," Maya said. She tried for bravado, but it came out as hope. "The unknown doesn't stay unknown forever. We just need the right sample size."

He saluted with his coffee mug. "Yes, ma'am."

She ignored him and wrote out a research protocol: three camera traps, one at the ravine where the cave was, one at the edge of the falls, and one near the old mining adit. Environmental logging gear at each site—air temp, barometric pressure, humidity, and (if Leo could swing it) an audio sensor with remote upload. Weekly field checks. And, if possible, a rotating schedule to minimize gaps.

She looked up, pencil hovering. "You in?"

He grinned. "With you, always."

For the first time in hours, she let herself relax. The protocol was something to hold on to, something the mountain couldn't shift out from under her. It was the same strategy she'd used to get through freshman year, then the bad semester, then every family argument about why she didn't want to go into business.

She tore the protocol page from her notebook and pinned it to the fridge, next to the faded polaroid of her and Leo at age twelve, faces red from sledding, arms thrown over each other like they were both holding each other up.

"Let's make this official," she said, and he nodded, solemn.

Outside, the mountain was white and silent, the only motion the spiral of steam from the coffee mug.

But inside, they'd drawn the first line against the unknown, and for now, it was enough.

The day passed in a blur of prep: Leo in town, sweet-talking the rec center manager into letting him borrow the best parabolic mic in the AV closet, Maya hiking the short loop around the upper ridge to check for fresh signs before the snow set in again. Every time she looked at her phone, there was another ping from Leo, a link or a meme or a grainy YouTube video that was half joke, half warning.

When he finally came back, his backpack bristled with borrowed gear, and his cheeks were raw from the cold. He dumped everything on the table with a flourish, then held up a battered field guide. "Look what else I scored."

She turned it over in her hands. It was a copy of "Fauna of the Cedar Mountain Region," fifth edition, marked up with notes in at least three different handwritings. She flipped to the section on large mammals, scanning for anything she'd missed.

Leo watched her, then nodded at the fridge. "You sure you want to put it all out there? The plan, I mean?"

She shrugged. "If anyone's going to find out what's in those woods, it's us."

He started to say something, then stopped. For a second, Maya thought he might be about to ask if she was scared. She was, but not in the way he thought. It was the idea of being wrong—of chasing a legend and ending up with nothing but empty data and another footnote in the college archives.

But as she caught his eye, she saw none of the old teasing, only a steady confidence that made her want to believe, too.

"I'll set the first trap at the falls tomorrow," Maya said, voice firmer than she felt.

He grinned. "I'll handle the cave."

They sat together for a while, sorting gear and laying out cables, their hands brushing as they reached for the same pack of batteries. The

whole time, the hum of the laptop and the memory of the weird, unearthly sound filled the air between them.

When it got late, and the windows were fully dark, Leo pulled the blanket from the couch and tossed it to Maya. "If you get scared, you can always crash at the pub."

She snorted. "I'm not scared."

He shrugged, then grinned. "Neither am I."

They parted at the door, a rush of cold hitting them both at once. Leo turned, hands shoved in his pockets, and looked back up at the little cabin. "See you in the morning?"

"Yeah," she said, already planning the sample runs in her head.

He walked off into the dark, footsteps muffled by the fresh snow.

Maya shut the door, locked it, then checked the protocol one last time. It was solid, airtight, built to withstand even the weirdest findings.

She left the lab lamp on, its cone of light a tiny fortress against the unknown.

And if she found herself listening, just before sleep, for a note of that impossible sound on the wind—well, that was just her brain, learning to pay attention.

Tomorrow, the hunt would start for real.

Maya was still laying out her field gear—batteries in, SD cards labeled, the sharp tip of the field knife checked against her thumbnail—when the knock came. It was just past sunset, the hour when the blue shadow pooled at the edge of the woods, and the only people who ever showed up this late were lost tourists or, occasionally, Leo with his arms full of snacks.

The knock was brisk, businesslike. She wiped her hands on a paper towel, rolled her neck, and opened the door a cautious three inches.

Azure stood on the stoop, wrapped in her DC Pub apron, the word "YETI" embroidered in gold across the chest. Her hair was half out of its usual bun, and she clutched a brown-paper parcel in one hand and a mason jar of chili pepper honey in the other.

"Evening, science squad," Azure said. "Am I interrupting a eureka moment?"

Maya grinned, shaking her head. "You're just in time for data validation." She held the door wider, inviting the older woman inside.

The blast of cold air made the whole cabin shiver. Azure stepped in, closed the door behind her with her boot, and surveyed the scene: field gear on the table, Leo's makeshift electronics nest in the corner, and, everywhere, the faint buzz of anticipation that Maya hadn't been able to shake since last night.

"You and Leo get any sleep?" Azure asked, handing over the parcel. "This came in for you two, c/o the Pub. No return, just a note: 'for the real investigators.'" She squinted, then laughed. "Almost makes it sound illicit."

Maya took the parcel. The paper was heavy, the corners patched with old tape and what looked like a smear of resin or sap. She read the address: MAYA PATEL / LEO NGUYEN, then the inky scrawl at the bottom—DUCK CREEK VILLAGE, UT.

Leo emerged from the hallway, blinking, hoodie on backwards and hair standing up like he'd run a static test. "Did somebody say package?"

Azure snorted. "You're a child, Leo."

"Only when it comes to mail," he said, and dropped into a chair, spinning it around so he could rest his arms on the back.

Maya set the package on the table and carefully slit the tape. Inside was a book, or what was left of one: leather-bound, the edges cracked and flaking, the pages thick and yellowed. A journal, or maybe a logbook. Tucked in the front cover was a folded note: "Duck Creek Mystery—Original Field Notes, 1939."

Leo whistled. "That's gotta be from the old map era, right?"

Maya opened the journal, turning the pages with the reverence she reserved for rare finds. The writing was tiny, precise, looping letters that filled the margins. Some pages were topped with dates, others with crude hand-drawn maps, all in that same unhurried hand.

The first entry was short, just an observation about a "persistent knocking noise in the far woods." The next few detailed "hair samples of unknown origin," "unusual behavior in local deer population," and,

a few days later, “visual of large bipedal form, dusk, clear line of sight, not bear.”

She looked up at Leo. “You seeing this?”

He leaned in, eyes big. “Are you kidding? ‘Visual of large bipedal form’—that’s, like, the exact phrase from the Miller-White archive.”

Azure pulled up a chair, curiosity overtaking exhaustion. “Read it out loud, will you? My eyes aren’t up to that handwriting.”

Maya cleared her throat, then read: “March 27, 1939. Night patrol. Persistent knocking in the timber. Three times, intervals about twelve seconds. No echo. Suspect origin on north side of ridge. Sampled tree bark at site—found scoring at six to eight feet above ground, no tracks below. Unnerving.”

She skimmed ahead, reading entries at random: “Early spring melt. Found footprints along creek bank—size unmeasurable, but stride matches over six feet. Impressions showed no shoe pattern, just smooth. Possible dermal ridges—am I imagining this?”

“April 3: Came across cave mouth north of the falls. Freshly disturbed brush, mud splattered up the walls. Found hair—coarse, dark, blue-black in sun. Bagged sample. Uncanny.”

Leo looked up, unable to hide his awe. “This is—”

“Confirmation,” Maya finished for him. “It matches our findings almost exactly.”

They read on, Maya and Leo trading off when one’s voice got too tight. The next pages covered the writer’s attempts to track the creature, the failures and near-misses, the endless search for a logical explanation. Here and there, sketches appeared: a footprint, an outline of the cave, a shadowy form darting behind trees. The language was old-fashioned but deeply methodical, the kind of writing Maya had seen in her granddad’s field notebooks from the old country.

“Here’s something,” Leo said, tapping a page near the back. “June 1, 1939: Legend of the mountain guardian. Locals say it protects the land from those who take too much. Miners, trappers, now even surveyors. Wonder if it’s the same entity? Began to suspect intelligence.”

Azure listened, arms crossed but eyes fixed on the page. “My gramps used to tell stories about the guardian,” she said softly. “Said it kept the wild wild. Never thought it was anything more than a campfire myth.”

Maya flipped ahead to the last few pages. The ink was faded but legible: “July 22: Water table anomaly. The old surveyor’s map was wrong—underground flows shift every spring. Guardian seems to track these changes, stays close to the best springs. Might be coincidence, but... doubt it.”

The final entry was a mix of dread and hope: “July 25: Heard knocking again, this time answered by a second knock. I think they communicate. I want to tell someone, but who would believe it?”

Leo shut the journal, letting the weight of it settle in. “So there were two,” he said quietly.

Azure reached for the book, then pulled back, as if it might burn her. “Who sent this?” she asked.

Maya shrugged. “No clue. But it lines up. The sample dates, the ridge, even the knocking pattern.”

Leo leaned back, hands folded behind his head. “You realize what this means, right? It’s not just a cryptid thing. It’s—” he struggled for the word, “—ecological. They’re tied to the water, the seasons. Maybe even to each other.”

Maya sat silent for a moment, letting it all sink in. The DNA. The prints. The sound. And now, the history—another thread, connecting her to a stranger eighty years in the past, both staring at the same impossible thing.

Azure finally reached for the book and opened it to the front cover. “This handwriting,” she said, “it looks like my grandfather’s. He worked forest service during the Depression. Said he kept a log, but I thought it was lost in the fire.”

She paused, tracing the letters with her finger. “He wasn’t crazy. And neither are you two.”

They sat in the hush for a while, the only sound the distant rumble of a snowplow on the highway. Outside, the blue night pressed close, but inside, the circle of the table felt like the safest place in the world.

Maya picked up the protocol page from the fridge, holding it beside the old journal. She smiled, the kind of smile that hurt, and said, “We’re not alone in this, are we?”

Azure’s voice was soft. “Never have been. Not on this mountain.”

Leo looked from Maya to Azure and back, then grinned. "So we keep going, right? We keep the story alive?"

"Not just alive," Maya said. "We do it right. Science, story, all of it."

Azure uncapped the honey and set it on the table. "Then I'll make sure you're well fed while you rewrite the textbooks."

They laughed, and it was real, the edge of fear dissolved by the sudden surge of belonging. Maya opened the journal to the last page again, tracing the crude map there. She compared it to the old survey map, noting the caves and streams, the places where the two overlapped. She drew a quick line in her notebook, connecting the old sightings to the new.

For the first time since this started, she felt like she could see the shape of the thing they were chasing. Not just a legend, but a living, breathing secret, old as the mountain and just as stubborn.

She set the journal beside the field gear, ready for morning.

Outside, the night was blue and deep, but inside, the light never wavered.

They would keep looking. They would keep asking.

And maybe, just maybe, the mountain would answer back.

epilogue: the mountain's secret

The DC Pub & Grill's patio had a view built for big decisions: rough-hewn railings, a panorama of Cedar Mountain's slopes, and, as Maya liked to point out, air so sharp you could calibrate a pH meter on it. Late sun striped the floorboards in copper and cream, catching the glassy edges of the beer mugs and the battered, salt-stained tables. On most nights, the patio hosted local shop guys in fleece vests and the occasional dog with better table manners than its owner. Tonight, it belonged to Maya and Leo, who'd colonized a corner table with a double sprawl of laptops, battered field notebooks, and a tangle of sensor cables that threatened to strangle anyone reaching for the ketchup.

Maya sat with her back to the railing, posture straight, her ancient ThinkPad and three layers of printouts squared in front of her like the ramparts of a tiny fortress. She worked in quick, efficient bursts, highlighting, cross-referencing, and annotating. Between every run, she'd snap a photo of her notes with her phone and upload it to the shared project drive. Her hands moved fast, but her eyes kept darting to the horizon, like she was waiting for the mountain to blink.

Leo was less fortress, more campfire. He slouched, then perched, then bounced his knee, swapping between his phone, the GoPro, and a pair of wireless mics with a giddy impatience that made it seem like he was prepping for a televised awards show. He wore a jacket two sizes too

big—borrowed from Azure, apparently, and, judging by the rainbow hair on the sleeve, last worn by the pub's mascot dog. Between bites of sweet potato fries, he talked Maya through a list of B-roll ideas: trail cams at twilight, time-lapse of the old mine gate, and a "closing credits" shot of the two of them, toasting their field gear with hot chocolate at the overlook.

A breeze picked up, and Maya's highlighter rolled off the table. Leo caught it without looking, then tossed it back underhand. "Think we'll ever get used to having real funding?" he asked, voice half-drowned by the wind.

Maya tapped the stack of permits with a finger. "It's not funding until it hits the account. And I'm not betting on the grants office moving faster than a glacier."

Leo snickered. "You say that, but you've already got the year mapped out." He angled his phone at her, snapping a photo of Maya mid-glare. "Maya Patel: Out-Stubborns All Known Bureaucracy."

She didn't argue, just grinned in a way that said he'd probably earned it.

Below, the parking lot slowly filled as the regulars rotated in: snowplow crew, postmistress, the Mormon twins who played pool and swore only in medical terms. The pub lights flicked on, flooding the windows with warm amber, but the patio stayed in that rare, blue dusk that made the whole ridge look painted. In the hush between the wind and the kitchen's fanfare, Maya heard the first coyote call, a thin, sharp sound that made the world feel bigger and emptier all at once.

She checked her phone, then looked across the table at Leo. "You actually ready for this? Not just the hikes and the late nights, but... the weird?"

He nodded, too quick. "Absolutely." Then, after a beat, "Wait, which kind of weird?"

"Like, the kind that doesn't go away when you turn off the camera."

He considered this, then shrugged. "Weirder the better. It's what the internet's for."

She smiled, then passed him the newly printed "Duck Creek Watershed Research Team" card, complete with both their names, the univer-

sity logo, and (at Leo's insistence) a tiny, pixelated sasquatch at the corner.

He squinted at it, grinned, and slipped it into his phone case behind the library card. "We're official, huh?"

"As it gets," Maya said.

The inside door banged open, and the warmth from the bar rolled out, carrying with it the scents of fried onions and beer and, underneath, a spike of ozone from the ancient neon sign above the tap. Azure strode out, balanced as always, even on the patchwork of the icy patio. She carried two wooden platters, each crowned with a burger large enough to disrupt planetary tides, and flanked by fries in mason jar mugs. She set the food down with a flourish, then leaned in, voice lowered.

"These are the last of the Squatch Burgers until next Thursday, so don't waste 'em," she said, then winked. "You're going to need the protein for your next expedition, trust me."

Leo saluted with a fry. "Any hints where the legend's hiding?"

Azure shrugged. "If I told you, it wouldn't be a legend. But you're looking in the right place." Her gaze flicked to Maya. "And you—don't stay up all night reading again, or you'll miss the best light."

She left them to their feast, and the air seemed warmer after her words.

Maya examined the burger like it was a rare fossil. The bun was seedy and fresh, the patty perfectly charred, but the real spectacle was the layer of forest mushrooms, sautéed and glistening, topped with a green herb Maya couldn't place by sight. She poked at it with her fork, then sniffed. "This is... rosemary? And something else."

Leo bit in, chewed, then rolled his eyes back in exaggerated bliss. "Azure calls it 'proprietary blend.' Pretty sure it's just rosemary, parsley, and whatever she finds on the walk over."

Maya made a note: "Herb ID, Azure." Then, with a scientist's caution, took a bite.

The flavor was wild—bright, a little smoky, with a savory aftertaste that lingered in her nose. She closed her eyes and tried to memorize it, already plotting how to bribe Azure for the recipe. She finished the bite, wiped her mouth, and set the burger down with reverence.

"I get why people believe in magic out here," she said, only half joking.

Leo, already a third of the way through his, nodded. "Duck Creek runs on two things: weird science, and whatever Azure can grill."

They ate in companionable silence, the kind where the lack of words meant you didn't need them. Above, the lanterns kicked on in sync, each one painting a slow, wobbly circle of light on the table.

After a few minutes, Maya checked her phone, then looked at Leo with a glint of challenge. "So, about the project plan—are you really up for year-round tracking? We'll need to be out there in mud, sleet, probably freezing rain. Some of those cams are at least a mile in."

Leo wiped his hands on a napkin. "You realize I biked here through a snowstorm once just to get footage of a raccoon eating a cinnamon roll, right?"

She laughed, the sound unexpected. "I remember. You crashed into the mailbox and tried to blame it on a 'local cryptid.'"

He raised his burger in a toast. "That's called brand synergy."

She rolled her eyes, but the laughter stuck, making her feel lighter than she had in weeks.

The sun dipped, and the ridge line faded from gold to navy, the trees standing out in perfect cutout silhouette. Maya leaned back, soaking in the chill and the color, letting herself feel the slow unwind after months of chasing, running, doubting. She thought about the old journal, the stories handed down, the weird intersection where folklore and fieldwork became the same thing.

For a second, she let herself believe—really believe—that the truth they were chasing was out there, and that maybe, if they stuck to the plan and didn't get distracted, they'd be the ones to find it.

She glanced at Leo, who had his phone out, thumb flying, but he wasn't posting; he was making a note in the shared folder. The thought made her grin—who'd have guessed that Duck Creek's king of memes would be the most diligent field tech she'd ever had?

He looked up, caught her staring. "What?"

She shrugged. "Nothing. Just—this feels like a good start."

He nodded, serious now. "It is. And if you ever want to quit, just say so. But I think we're about to do something nobody else even tried."

She reached out, flicked his wrist, and said, "I won't quit. Not until we get the footage that proves the legend."

He gave her a look, the kind that said he'd hold her to it, then turned his attention back to the horizon.

In the dark, the mountain glowed a little—just enough to promise more stories, and more secrets, and maybe, if you were stubborn enough to listen, an answer or two.

They finished their meal slow, the patio all but empty except for them, and when Maya finally packed up her notes and shut her laptop, it was with a sense of possibility, sharp and bright as the mountain air.

"Tomorrow?" she said, voice soft.

"Tomorrow," Leo agreed.

By the time Maya and Leo circled back to the patio after their impromptu "expedition planning dinner," Duck Creek's after-dark regulars had filtered into their places at the bar, and the last daylight had melted off the ridge like butter from a skillet. Lanterns above the tables were on now, but they didn't really touch the sky; it was just a deep blue with the first smudge of stars burning through the dusk, a backdrop that made even the gas station signs look gentle.

Maya set her backpack on the bench and dug out the folder of research forms, flipping to the permit page with the precision of a bureaucrat. She checked the signatures twice, then three times, fingers lingering on the gold-stamped badge at the top of the special access letter. "Sheriff Adams is really going to let us run camera traps out past the East Rim," she said, mostly to herself. She held the permit up to the lantern. "I half expected him to say 'no dice' and toss it."

Leo leaned over, the last of his fries in hand. "He owes us, remember? Plus, nobody wants to be the sheriff who shuts down a historic research project." He reached into his jacket and slid his phone across the table, screen open to a map dotted with neon-colored pins. "I scouted all the likely choke points for the next few weeks. If something's migrating or circling the caves, we'll see it. I even found the old snowmobile route up past the Pink Cliffs."

Maya eyed the map. "How many cameras are we up to now?"

"Counting the rec center loaners? Nine. If I get the drone working, we can do flybys over the south ravine." Leo zoomed out, then drew a

virtual line from the lake to the ridge. "We could catch everything from mountain lions to a lost Jersey cow."

Maya smirked. "And, if we're lucky, the mountain's most eligible cryptid bachelor."

He laughed, then caught her expression—a mix of pride and anxiety that lingered even in the half-light. "You're not actually nervous, are you?"

She traced the edge of the table with her thumb. "Not about the cameras. About what happens if we find something." She hesitated, then spoke quieter. "I keep thinking—what if we actually document it? What if it's real, but we're the ones who ruin it by making it a spectacle?"

He leaned back, face serious. "You mean, like, turn it into another internet circus?"

Maya nodded, words coming in a quick, low run. "My granddad said the best mysteries are the ones that leave space for hope. If the world's last wild thing is up there, I want to protect it, not make it a sideshow."

For a long minute, they just sat, letting the owl's hoot echo up from the hollow, letting the clink of glasses from inside drift out. The air had the taste of moss and river chill, the kind of cold that made your teeth ache and your head clear.

Leo finally broke the silence. "You know, you're allowed to want both. The truth, and the legend."

She considered it, then exhaled. "I just... don't want to be the one who finds the edge of wonder and then cuts it off."

He reached across and stole one of her fries, grinning. "Then don't. We can decide what we show. You're the boss."

She laughed, shaking her head. "We're not exactly the type to keep secrets from each other, are we?"

"Not unless you count my cinnamon roll recipe," he said, then added, "which you're never getting."

She rolled her eyes, then checked the permits again, folding them and tucking them into her notebook with deliberate care. "We'll do it right," she said. "We'll set the cams, get the data, and if something needs keeping... we'll talk about it first."

He toasted her with his soda, solemn as a knight. "Deal."

For a while, they worked in parallel: Maya sketching out the rough boundaries of their research grid on the back of a napkin, Leo scrolling through motion-activated alerts and muttering "Nope" and "definitely not" every few seconds. Their worlds overlapped, but neither tried to outdo the other. It was a rhythm that worked.

A pickup rolled by on the road below, its headlights brushing the edge of the patio before vanishing down the bend. Somewhere out in the dark, a coyote called again, joined by a second, then a third—each a little farther away, like a line of dominoes falling into night.

Maya finished her map, then laid it on the table. "This is good. Better than good, actually." She tapped the star she'd drawn at the edge of Mammoth Cave. "If there's a pattern, we'll find it. And if there isn't... at least we'll have fun trying."

Leo grinned, his own nervousness gone. "What if we're the first ones to see it up close?"

She shook her head. "Then you're in charge of naming it. I'm terrible at that."

He pretended to think. "Leo's Duck Creek Monster has a nice ring."

"Too on the nose."

He nodded. "We'll keep workshoping."

As the night finished settling, the mountain felt close—almost listening. Maya felt a weight shift in her chest, not fear, but something more like readiness. She tucked her napkin map into the folder and closed it, then zipped her backpack with a click that sounded oddly final.

"Tomorrow?" she said again, softer this time.

Leo looked up, eyes bright in the lantern glow. "Tomorrow."

They gathered their things, and when Maya glanced back, she saw the stars had multiplied. The mountain's outline was sharper now, cut glass against the sky, and the air had gone from blue to black, but not in a way that felt scary. It felt like the first page of a notebook, blank and waiting.

Inside the pub, the voices picked up, a thread of laughter rolling out every time the door opened. For a second, Maya imagined herself years

from now, sitting on the same patio, maybe with the same friend, maybe with a dozen stories that nobody would believe unless they'd seen it too.

She let herself hope that was what came next. She let herself want it.

And as they turned down the steps, the sound of the owl echoed once more, a question with no answer yet, and Maya decided she liked it that way.

They'd barely made it down the stairs before Leo's phone chimed—a stuttery, synth sound that meant motion detection, not just a text. He fumbled for it, nearly dropping the thing in his rush. Maya paused, already knowing by his posture that it wasn't another meme.

"It's from Ice Cave," he said, eyes glued to the screen. "Cam four."

She stopped beside him, the old porch light flickering above, and they both stared as the camera's live feed loaded. The blue-white glow of the display painted their faces, harsh and ghostly in the night.

At first it was nothing: a static shot of wind-gnawed aspens, the snow at their feet glowing like old paper. Then, on the left edge, movement—a shadow, slow at first, then fast, almost purposeful. It crossed the clearing in three strides, blurred by the thermal filter but unmistakably upright, impossibly tall.

Leo went silent, thumbing the replay. They watched again. This time Maya saw it: the bulk of the torso, the splay of arm, the shape of a head too big for any known animal. For a split second, the thing stopped and turned, not quite facing the lens, but close enough that Maya could swear it was looking at them.

The feed blipped, then the shadow was gone. The trees swayed, the snow rippled, and the world reset itself as if nothing had happened.

Maya leaned in, breath frosting in the cold. "Rewind it," she said, voice even.

Leo did, scrubbing frame by frame. The figure was there, then it wasn't, the pixels struggling to keep up. "Could be a person," he said, but it sounded like a question.

Maya's mind flipped through the options: a prank, a hunter in a ghillie suit, a trick of the wind. None of them fit. The stride was too long, the posture wrong, and the way it moved—direct, aware—set her teeth on edge.

She tried to logic her way through. "Could be a bear," she offered. "Maybe standing—"

He shook his head, still replaying the loop. "Bears don't move like that. Not on two legs, not that fast."

They watched the feed a third time. The stillness after was worse than the sight itself.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. Maya felt her skepticism fighting with a deep, animal certainty. She wanted to call it a glitch, but her hands shook just enough to give her away.

Leo finally looked up, his voice small and bright with awe. "Did we just...?"

Maya nodded. "I think we did."

They stood, phone between them, letting the moment settle like dust in the cold air. Above, the stars were out, sharp and infinite. The ridge line cut the sky in a clean black line, and for the first time in her life, Maya saw the mountain as a thing that could keep secrets from her.

She looked at Leo, saw the wild hope in his eyes, and tried to match it. "You want to check the feed again?"

He grinned. "You know I do."

They hurried back up to the patio, settling in the shadow of the big lantern. The world outside was silent except for the low, familiar hum of the bar and the distant hoot of the owl, staking its claim over the valley.

They pulled up the archive, queued it, and watched the impossible thing walk the same path again and again.

Inside the bar, Azure caught sight of them through the window. She didn't wave, but she smiled, wide and sharp, like she'd expected this all along.

Maya felt the science in her brain sparking, the urge to explain clashing with the thrill of not knowing. For the first time, she let the not-knowing win.

She turned to Leo, the old skepticism gone, replaced with a new, brighter thing.

"We're going to need more cameras," she said.

He nodded, eyes never leaving the screen. "And a bigger notebook."

They watched the night for a while, letting the mountain watch

them back. The wind shifted, and somewhere in the dark, something moved. Maybe it was just the owl. Maybe not.

Either way, the secret was out. And Maya, for the first time in her life, felt ready for it.

Above, the stars burned on, and Duck Creek settled in for another night, the legend now a little closer—and a little more real—than anyone would have guessed.

want free novels?

Some of Don's earliest novels, along with short stories from his *Clara Thorn* and *stories of witchkind* universes, can be yours for free! All you have to do is visit his website, DonJones.com, and click "Freebies." That's it! There's nothing to sign up for, no gimmicks, and nothing standing between you and *five* full-length novels. Just click Download!

The Achillios Chronicles
Alabaster • Onyx • Verdant

The Prime Wave Accounting
Power Wave • Superior Wave

Also, consider following Don on Amazon, Bookbub, or Goodreads for notifications of new novels. You'll find following buttons right at the top of DonJones.com.

also by don jones

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 & Pica • 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* good 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.

