

the mystery of the starlet's shadow

the duck creek mysteries
book one

Don Jones

DonJones.com

*for the many members of
our new mountain family:*

*Lisa,
Daryl,
Lucas,
April,
Huntar,
Melinda,
John,
Mark,
and Caron*

Thank you for welcoming us.

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
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foreword

My family and I have been coming to Duck Creek Village since the early 2010s—and that’s a drop in the bucket compared to some families, who have been enjoying the mountains for generations. In our time on Cedar Mountain, we’ve met an incredible number of truly amazing people, not the least of whom are the proprietors of the amazing shops and restaurants we’ve come to enjoy so much.

The Duck Creek Mysteries series is intended as a bit of an homage to them.

These books are designed to be family-friendly: You won’t find any blood, any “spice,” or any cursing. What you’ll find are pleasant, “cozy” little mysteries in a mountain setting, somewhat akin to the old TV series *Murder She Wrote*.

I’ve taken some liberties for the sake of the story: You’ll see references, for example, to Duck Creek Village’s Town Hall, which doesn’t exist. Buildings have gained cellars, lost patios, and so forth, all to provide a suitably rich set of scenes for the story.

But much of what you’ll read about—especially the locations in Dixie National Forest and the greater Cedar Mountain area—are absolutely real, and you can visit them yourself. Who knows what mysteries you’ll uncover?

I should also note that some of the people you’ll meet in this story are based on real-life folks who live near, and work in, Duck Creek

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

I hope you enjoy the story, along with the other *Duck Creek Mysteries*.

Don Jones

Duck Creek Village, UT

April 2026

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one **the mountain morning**

DAWN DID NOT SO much break over Duck Creek Village as it did seep into it—first in the shadowed bluffs, then pooling through the bristly crowns of ponderosas. On the Twisted Forest Trail, Finn felt the shift before he saw it. A prickle of light. A subtle change in the temperature that hitched the hairs on his forearm. Some people liked to say mountain mornings were “invigorating.” Finn, who had lived through them enough to know, would’ve called them brisk to the edge of disrespectful.

He hiked at a pace that would’ve winded most flatlanders, but up here at 8,400 feet, this was Finn’s version of “easy.” His breath came even and cold, fogging out as he moved through the bruised air. All around, the aftermath of last night’s storm made itself known: shredded bark dangled like party streamers from the lodgepoles, and the ground glistened with the excess of a hasty snowmelt, now just icy dribble. Pine needles, damp and spongy, squished under Finn’s boots. He took inventory with each step.

Finn had a face that seemed permanently squint-set, as if the wind had tried to sand him down but only managed to make him narrower and tougher. Sun-bleached hair stuck out from under a Prime Adventure Outfitters cap, a little salt-stained at the brim. The hat was the one thing he permitted to be out of regulation: the rest of him, from boots

to windbreaker, was as trail-ready as a state-issue ranger's. Which he wasn't—though no one ever doubted his authority out here.

The Twisted Forest Trail, so named for a half-mile stretch where ancient bristlecone pines wrestled for airspace, had only two switchbacks but was notorious for hiding its hazards until you were just about on top of them. Finn walked it like a surgeon, probing the trail's wounds and weaknesses. He stopped to clear a chunk of branch from the path, tossed it with a practiced flick off into the underbrush, and made a mental note: milepost 1.2, minor debris.

A little further along, the trail widened at a knuckle in the hillside, and here Finn stopped short. Twenty feet off the path, a ponderosa pine stood at a slant, leaning into nothing. Its trunk, normally burnished orange and deeply grooved, now gaped with a split as wide as a man's arm. The air held a bite of ozone that had not faded overnight.

Finn approached, wary of root plates and widowmakers, but more interested than concerned. The split started low and ran up the trunk, spiraling with the grain—a signature move, if you knew how to read the after-action report of a lightning bolt. The ground around the tree was gouged and churned, as if some massive animal had attempted a midnight excavation and left the job unfinished.

He crouched at the base, gloved hand steadying himself on the trunk. Up close, the ponderosa's exposed heartwood looked alive, pulsing with sap. But it was the hollow—an improbable cavity, maybe two feet deep and just wide enough for a small animal to take refuge—that caught Finn's attention.

He fished his phone out, thumbed the flashlight on, and poked his head in. The smell was damp and medicinal, with a hint of char. Somewhere up the trail a jay called, sharp and unimpressed. Finn ignored it.

Inside the hollow, just past the first crust of resin, he spotted it: a dull glint, not quite gold, not quite rust, wedged in a nest of debris. Finn reached in, arm scraping bark, and wriggled the object free. The thing was cold and heavier than he expected. He brushed it off against his jacket and brought it into the growing light.

A film canister. Metal, the size of an old-school hockey puck, crusted at the seams and stippled with rust. The label had mostly gone to history, but the remnants were enough: "Reel One: The Starlet's

Shadow (1954).” The text was faded, but Finn could make it out with a little squint and some imagination.

He turned the canister over in his palm. It was sealed tight, maybe soldered by the storm itself, and rattled with a promise. Finn gave it a shake, listening for a clue—inside, something shifted, dry and hard, like a fossilized film reel or, possibly, someone’s idea of a practical joke. He looked around, half-expecting a camera crew to emerge from the trees. Nothing but the patient, judgmental silence of the high plateau.

Finn tucked the canister into his daypack, wedging it between his trail log and the rain shell. He’d seen his share of weird on these woods—lost geocaches, forgotten love letters, once even a taxidermied possum dressed in a ranger’s hat—but this was a first. He’d bring it back for a closer look once the day’s work was done.

Before heading out, Finn gave the ponderosa a quick assessment. It’d stay upright for now, but he marked it in his notebook anyway, in a tight, square hand. If the next storm came from the west, the tree might let go all at once, and that could block the entire trail. He made a note to ping the crew at the village and flagged the GPS point.

He finished the loop in under an hour, pausing only once to clear another minor snag and check the flow in a seasonal creek. Everything else held. It was going to be a good summer for trail runners and tourists. Finn made a detour to the trailhead sign, wiped the condensation from the plexiglass, and posted a fresh caution: “Slick conditions—use care on switchbacks.” His own little public service, even if he doubted anyone read the updates.

Back at the trailhead, Finn leaned against the tailgate of his truck, pulled off his gloves, and shook the night’s chill from his hands. He set the film canister on the truck bed, studied it in the morning light. The label’s script, once bright and confident, was now a ghost of itself, curling away at the corners. Finn thought about all the things that wound up on this mountain, the stories that people brought or left behind, and he wondered who would’ve gone to the trouble of hiding a reel in a tree hollow. Who would have known to look for it in the first place.

He pocketed the canister again, started up the truck, and let the heater run for a minute before heading down toward the village. He had

a feeling this was one of those finds that would itch at the back of his mind until he solved it. Not urgent. Just a curiosity. But up here, that was as good as gold.

The bell above the bakery door announced Chloe's entrance with a cheerful, off-key jangle that always made her think of sitcom transitions: fade in, the quirky sidekick walks into the set, and the lighting just so. Chloe, in fact, often saw her own life in those terms—a series of well-lit moments, each with its own soundtrack and color grading. If her life had a signature scent, this morning it was Ground + Toasted, where the air was already thick with the promise of cinnamon and yeast.

Chloe unspooled her scarf—vintage, acrylic, tie-dyed by someone's loving grandmother—and beelined toward the counter. She was a fixture here: three times a week for the past two years, she'd arrived before the first cappuccino could foam, hair still drying at the ends, arms loaded down with sketchbooks and tote bags.

Brandi was mid-battle with a rising loaf, her dark hair slipping free from its braid as she worked the dough with the kind of practiced energy that made even heavy labor look graceful. The counter was a confectioner's dream of flour, sticky notes, and half-finished orders. Behind her, the ovens hummed their own brand of anticipation, while the espresso machine hissed in counterpoint—an ensemble cast for the morning's performance.

"Morning, sweetling!" Brandi called without looking up, voice as warm as the oven's exhale.

"Morning!" Chloe replied, her own voice pitched at musical-theater volume. She plopped her tote on the end of the counter, scattering a few colored pencils across the surface. "What's our plot twist today?"

"Wild yeast is fermenting its own revolution," Brandi said, holding up a lump of dough that threatened to ooze off the workbench entirely. "I blame yesterday's thunder."

"That would make sense," Chloe said, sliding around to the staff side of the counter and rolling up the sleeves of her favorite sweater—

oversized, canary yellow, dotted with old film buttons she'd scavenged from an estate sale. "Atmospheric pressure, and all that. It's science."

Brandi offered her a hunk of dough the size of a baby rabbit. "Go on. Knead your heart out."

Chloe dusted her hands in flour and got to work, pressing and folding with dramatic flourishes that would've made Julia Child proud. There was a rhythm to it: push, fold, rotate, sprinkle. The dough was cool and almost alive under her palms, resisting and yielding by turns. Brandi watched for a moment, then leaned in to adjust Chloe's grip.

"More of the heels, less of the fingertips. Otherwise you just poke holes."

"I do poke holes," Chloe admitted, "but only in safe, controlled environments."

Brandi grinned, eyes sparkling. "That's the spirit. Let's see what you can do with this next batch—raisin-walnut. Old-timers say it's haunted, but we don't talk about that before noon."

Chloe accepted the challenge with the gravitas of someone accepting an Oscar, then set to work. "What's the story with the haunted starter?"

Brandi slid a pan of hand pies into the oven and turned back, dusting her hands on her apron. "This place has had the same sour-dough culture for nearly a century. Folks say every baker leaves a little piece of themselves behind, and every morning, the bread remembers."

Chloe liked that idea. "So it's basically edible immortality. You could sell that."

"That's not even the weirdest part," Brandi said, lowering her voice as if the cinnamon buns might be listening. "Back in '73, a whole tray of loaves came out shaped like Elvis."

"Like, actually his face, or just the pompadour?" Chloe asked, immediately picturing both.

"Pompadour and the sideburns. Sold out by noon. Old Mrs. Rinehart still calls this place 'Graceland.'"

Chloe snorted, nearly dropping her dough. "I love this town."

They worked in companionable silence for a few minutes, broken only by the espresso machine's periodic sighs and the shuffling of Randy's boots. Randy was the bakery's barista, logistics master, and

unofficial bouncer. He was somewhere between a lumberjack and a Zen monk, massive but gentle, with hands so steady he could free-pour a rosetta on a latte without spilling a drop.

“Chloe, you want your usual?” Randy called over, his voice deep and smooth as honey.

“Of course. Surprise me on the milk ratio,” she said, “I live dangerously now.”

Randy nodded, not needing to ask what she meant. He’d memorized her quirks faster than she’d learned his name.

As she kneaded, Chloe’s mind wandered to her own summer plot arc: the internship at the local historical society. She was supposed to spend her days digitizing newspaper archives and cataloguing relics of Duck Creek’s wilder days. The part she was really excited for, though, was the basement storage room—off-limits to tourists and, according to rumor, jam-packed with unsorted film reels from the Little Hollywood era.

She shared this with Brandi as she shaped the dough into a fat, promising boule. “They let me run the scanner yesterday, and guess what? There’s a whole shelf of film cans just sitting there, labeled in pencil.”

Brandi’s eyebrows arched. “Any good titles?”

“Hard to tell. Half the labels are faded, and most of them just say things like ‘Wild Bunch #2’ or ‘Starlet—Draft.’ But, Brandi, what if some of these are one-of-a-kind? Like, never-seen B-reel footage from the 1950s?”

Brandi dusted her loaf with flour and nodded, slow and thoughtful. “You know, the world could use more starlets. Or, failing that, more bread.”

Chloe grinned, pleased by the symmetry of the thought.

Randy appeared at her elbow, bearing a cappuccino crowned with a perfect heart. He set it on the counter and retreated without comment, though his mouth twitched at the corners as he returned to the espresso machine.

Chloe took a grateful sip. “You’re the best, Randy.”

Randy didn’t turn, but raised a hand in silent acknowledgment.

Brandi peeked through the oven window, then clapped her hands in

satisfaction. "Ten minutes to cinnamon buns. You want to do the glaze?"

"Desperately," Chloe said. "But I have to warn you, my last attempt at royal icing ended with a sugar stalactite situation."

"We're a rugged establishment," Brandi said. "We can handle a little geological drama."

They leaned into the work, Chloe whisking the glaze with dramatic flicks of her wrist. Brandi recounted bakery legends—about the time a bear tried to break in for honey rolls, about the ghost of a former owner who moved coffee mugs overnight—and Chloe absorbed every word, her mind already mapping out storyboard panels and possible Instagram captions.

The bakery's morning rush was only just beginning. Through the windows, sunlight cut in thick, golden bands, catching in the flour haze and lending everything a gentle, movie-set glow. Chloe's hands were a sticky, flour-caked mess, and she'd never felt more herself.

She glanced at her phone—already smudged with dough—and made a mental note to check the historical society's film inventory as soon as she was off the clock. Maybe one day she'd find a lost movie, a reel that would put Duck Creek back on the map. For now, she had cinnamon buns to glaze and a front-row seat to the village's daily drama.

If her life was a series, Chloe figured this was a pretty good cold open for summer.

The oven timer went off with a triumphant blare, which Melinda, the assistant baker, promptly muted with the back of her flour-dusted wrist. She shot Chloe a grateful look over the racks of rising dough, then bent to fetch the hand pies—thirty-six golden rounds, each with a purple-flecked seam where the Mountain Berry filling tried (and mostly failed) to stay inside. The scent hit Chloe immediately: sweet, a little tart, and, as Brandi insisted, "defiantly local."

By half-past seven, Ground + Toasted was packed. Locals first, as always. The retired teacher (Mrs. Casper, a perennial trivia champion)

camped out at her usual corner table, sipping a dark roast and holding court on the subject of last night's thunderstorm. Two Forest Service techs—off-shift and shivering, still in their uniforms—huddled near the window, heads bent over a phone and laughing too hard at something that probably wasn't safe for public viewing. And, as if on cue, the village's resident contractor, a man with forearms like timber beams and a beagle named Bean, arrived for his morning fix.

Randy took Bean's order first: a "pup cup" with a side of bacon, always on the house. The dog's entire hindquarters vibrated in anticipation.

"Anything else?" Randy asked, voice so low it was nearly a hum.

Contractor shrugged. "Whatever the cinnamon situation is, times two."

"Coming up."

Chloe helped Melinda glaze the fresh cinnamon buns. They moved fast—Chloe wielding the icing like a paintbrush, Melinda plating with careful, even stacks. Behind them, Brandi orchestrated the chaos, calling out orders and answering village gossip with the same air of amused detachment.

Chloe found herself enjoying the show. Even when she was working, it was like watching the first act of a really good play—each character hitting their marks, lines perfectly timed.

From her spot at the counter, Chloe could eavesdrop on three conversations at once.

"...could see the lightning from over the ridge," Mrs. Casper was telling the Forest Service techs. "Did you know the ionization rate up here is nearly double that of Salt Lake?"

One of the techs nodded solemnly. "We lost WiFi for a solid hour. Real hardship."

The other rolled his eyes. "Tragic."

Bean the beagle yodeled for attention, and Randy delivered the pup cup with a dignified bow. Contractor set to work on his cinnamon buns, using the flat of his hand to break them into manageable pieces.

Chloe, sweeping up a tray of still-steaming hand pies, caught Melinda smirking at the spectacle. "He's going to finish that before his coffee's ready."

"He always does," Chloe whispered back. "Last week he tried to convince Brandi to make cinnamon bun sandwiches."

"With what in the middle?"

"More cinnamon buns."

They giggled, bumping elbows as they loaded the pastry case.

It was in the midst of this comfortable bustle that Chloe's attention snagged on the only off-note of the morning: a pair of older women, impeccably dressed for breakfast, hunched together over a single scone. Their voices were low, pitched for secrecy, but Chloe had developed the kind of ears that could tune in from across a crowded lobby.

"...the buyer's from California, of course. Who else would throw that kind of money at a rental cabin?"

"Movie Ranch Road is just the beginning. You wait—they'll pave it all, put in a food court. Turn the place into Park City Lite."

The words hung there, souring the air for a moment. Chloe's hands stilled on the tongs. She'd grown up with stories of Little Hollywood, with its cowboy sets and pine log saloons, and she knew that development was the villain in every small-town legend. But this was the first she'd heard of a new buyer.

Randy, sharp-eyed even with his head down, caught the women's glare in the reflection of the pastry case. He shot a look to Brandi, who was busy dusting flour off her apron but never missed a beat. Their eyes met: a flash of silent communication, old as yeast.

Brandi set down her rolling pin and addressed the room with the cheer of someone making an official announcement. "For those concerned about the fate of the cinnamon bun," she said, voice carrying above the hum, "I'd just like to remind everyone that Ground + Toasted has survived seventy years, three owners, and at least one bear break-in. We're not going anywhere."

A small, relieved laugh rippled through the bakery. Even the conspiracy scone committee looked momentarily sheepish.

Chloe flashed a grateful grin at Brandi, who winked back in solidarity. There was a lot of history baked into the walls of this place, and Chloe was just beginning to understand how much that mattered.

She worked through the morning, alternating between the register and the prep counter, refilling the coffee urns and trading snippets of

conversation with the regulars. She caught Mrs. Casper up on her historical society internship (“First project: digitizing town council minutes from the ‘80s. Spoiler alert: Duck Creek was spicy”), and swapped bear-scare stories with the Forest Service techs.

By ten, the crowd had thinned, the air replaced with the steady calm of an afternoon lull. Randy wiped down the tables, Melinda restocked the flour bins, and Brandi lingered by the window, gaze turned outward toward Movie Ranch Road.

Chloe found herself beside her, hands still sticky with the last batch of dough. “You think they’ll really change it? The village?”

Brandi’s answer was slow, considered. “Places like this, they hold on longer than you think. But sometimes it’s the little things that get swept away first. The stories. The people who remember them.”

Chloe nodded, a bit of worry catching in her throat. “We’ll keep the stories. You have my word.”

Brandi reached over, patted her flour-stained hand. “You’re part of them now, honey.”

The bell over the door chimed again—a new customer, a new scene to begin—and the bakery slipped right back into its groove. Outside, the village stretched up into the sunlight, bright and unchanged for at least one more day.

two

the developer's arrival

THE FIRST THING TO hit the village was the Range Rover. Black as a beetle's shell, all mirrors and attitude, it crept along Movie Ranch Road with a slowness that bordered on rude. Heads swiveled up from pastry bags and gas pumps as it coasted past the line of log cabins and hand-painted signs. Not even the local deer, usually immune to human spectacle, could pretend not to notice the city money glinting off the hood.

At the wheel, Marcus Thorne conducted his own survey. He drove with the one-hand ease of someone used to valet parking, his other hand preoccupied with a phone. Not that he was looking at it; his attention cut from one side of the street to the other, slicing through every dog walker, every Subaru, every homey imperfection. Each storefront felt like it had been staged for a theme park version of "Old West," right down to the faux gold-miner with a lollipop in the doorway of the candy shop.

He pulled up in front of a real estate office so aggressively rustic, it looked like the opening shot of a cereal commercial. The sign—"Duck Creek Realty"—was carved into pine and stained to match the dust. Marcus checked his reflection in the window. Satisfied, he stepped out and buttoned his jacket, running a thumb along the line of his lapel. The early sun hit his cufflinks at just the right angle, throwing off a spark as he closed the car door with a soft, luxurious thud.

Inside, the air was ten degrees cooler, filtered through a duct that hummed with the determination of an old refrigerator. The lobby was two chairs and a coffee table, topped with magazines so regional the covers still showed last year's snow. A wide desk bisected the room, presided over by a woman with reading glasses strung around her neck and an expression that said she had seen worse than Marcus Thorne.

"Morning," she said, voice not unfriendly but somewhere between a greeting and a challenge. "Can I help you?"

Marcus smiled. It was a quick, practiced flicker—on and off, no wasted wattage. "I believe you can. Marcus Thorne, Plateau Development." He offered a card, which the woman accepted with the same care she might use to pick up a snake. "I'm meeting with a Mr. or Ms. Jensen?"

She checked a ledger, then slid it aside. "That's me. Gloria Jensen. What brings you to our little experiment in population control?"

He appreciated the dry wit. "Opportunity," Marcus said, easing onto the edge of the visitor chair. He crossed his legs—creased navy slacks, not a single speck of dust on the loafers. "We're in the very preliminary phase of evaluating sites for a new hospitality concept. Boutique, low-impact, integrates local history."

Gloria folded her hands. "Duck Creek's got plenty of history. Most of it involves lawsuits over snow plow rights, but I suppose you want the glamorous kind."

"Old movie sets, to be precise. I've done my homework—this strip was a hot spot for location shooting back in the day?"

She raised an eyebrow. "You're the first to ask about that who wasn't looking for ghosts or blackmail photos."

Marcus allowed himself a chuckle, letting it reach his eyes just enough to look sincere. "I read that much of the land is still subdivided along the original property lines. I'd like to see the vintage parcels, especially anything tied to the so-called 'Little Hollywood' era."

Gloria pushed back from the desk and headed for the files. "Let me guess: you want undeveloped acreage, with a view, but close to the main drag."

He inclined his head. "You make it sound so crass."

"I make it sound realistic." She rifled through folders with the

certainty of someone who could do it blindfolded. "Most of that property's in the hands of Old Guard or LA retirees who'll sell only if you pry it from their frozen fingers. But there's always a loophole." She thunked a stack of deeds and plat maps onto the desk. "Some of these are tied up in probate. And the studio parcels—there are odd restrictions, but nothing an aggressive legal team can't finesse."

"That's what I was hoping to hear." Marcus leaned in, fingers steepled. "I'll need copies of everything. The oldest records, too, even if you have to dig them out of microfiche."

Gloria's gaze fell on his hands. "You must go through a lot of hand lotion, Mr. Thorne. Most people come up here to get dirty, not the other way around."

He spread his fingers, as if admiring them for the first time. "Force of habit. My mother was an ER nurse; she raised me to believe in sterile environments."

Gloria slid the top file across. "You'll want the Thimble Ranch tract. There's a legend that John Wayne once rode a horse into the lobby during filming. He got banned from the property but made a secret side door so he could get back in."

Marcus found the story amusing, but he was already scanning the maps. "This covers the entire block?"

"Mostly. Some of it burned in the 1980s, but there are original foundations, and the wells still work if you bribe the right people."

He ran his finger along a line on the map. "And this one?"

She checked. "Strawberry Point overlook. Unbuilt, but the access road is maintained. It's Forest Service on three sides, which means you'll have every hiker and Boy Scout troop within a hundred miles traipsing through your driveway."

He made a note. "Is that likely to change?"

Gloria shrugged. "There are always rumors the Feds will shut off access, but it hasn't happened yet."

He closed the file. "I'll need electronic scans, please, as soon as possible. My office is running on Mountain Time, but my patience is still New York standard."

She smirked. "If you're expecting WiFi up here, you may want to buy your own cell tower."

"I'll expense it."

As she rose to the copier, Marcus let his gaze wander. The walls were littered with sepia prints of film crews and actors, frozen in time beside the same log cabins now converted to coffee shops and tourist traps. He could see the future overlaying the past—a boutique lodge here, an "authentic" whiskey bar there. He imagined the designers already sketching mood boards in Soho lofts, maybe even sampling hand pies from the bakery across the street. He liked to know his competition.

Gloria returned with the copies and a sidelong glance. "Let me guess—you've got lunch at Aunt Sue's Chalet, then a quick drive up to the lake for the obligatory Instagram post?"

He took the papers, stacking them neatly. "Something like that. I try to blend in."

"Good luck." She tilted her head, all business again. "If you need a guide to the local rumors, I can point you to the regulars at DC Pub. They'll know what's for sale before the owners do."

Marcus stood, flashed the full-wattage smile, and slipped a folded hundred across the desk as if he were tipping at a hotel. "I may take you up on that. Thank you, Ms. Jensen."

Her expression didn't shift, but she pocketed the bill and nodded at the door. "Welcome to Duck Creek."

He let himself out, blinking at the sudden morning brightness. The Range Rover was already attracting a few amateur photographers—one kid in a faded dinosaur T-shirt ran his finger along the bumper before his mother hustled him away. Marcus found it all deeply provincial, and therefore predictable. The trick was to stay three moves ahead.

He checked his phone—five new emails, two flagged urgent. He scrolled as he walked, not watching the scenery, but the reflections in every shop window told him what he needed to know. People noticed him. Good. That was the point.

At the car, Marcus paused to review his notes, then looked across the street to the bakery, where the window was fogged with warmth and lined with people. He debated the value of a reconnaissance stop, then decided he could spare the time.

Inside the car, he dialed a number, waited for the digital ring. When

the voice answered, he kept his own low and quick. "It's me. Jensen was a soft touch. I've got copies of the original deeds, and yes, the ranch is in play. Send the due diligence team as soon as you can—if you wait for the locals, you'll die of old age."

He clicked off, set the phone aside, and let his hands rest on the wheel for a moment. The manicure was holding up. Everything was.

He started the engine, let it hum, and watched the traffic of Duck Creek Village slide by in the mirrors. In his mind, the place was already his. The only question was how quickly it would come to heel.

Finn stepped out of the glare and into the bakery's amber world. It felt a few degrees warmer inside, not just from the ovens but from the press of voices: a half-dozen tables full, plus the bakery counter crowded with regulars balancing drinks, pastries, and arguments about trail conditions.

He paused, letting his eyes adjust. The walls were knotty pine, the windows braced with branches like a stick fort, and over it all hung the scent of sugar and bread crust, chased by coffee and a sly note of mountain air every time the door swung open. If there was a heart to Duck Creek, Finn figured it pulsed somewhere near this cash register.

Chloe had the counter mostly to herself, in the sense that she moved through it like a stage set—clearing a spill with one hand, fielding a phone order with the other, her attention everywhere and nowhere at once. Her sweater was today's special: blue with gold flecks and three mismatched buttons. She was already in motion when she spotted Finn, her eyes tracking first the canister in his hand, then his face.

"Holy Hitchcock!" she exclaimed, dropping her voice to just above a stage whisper. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Probably not, unless you're thinking it's a rusty film can full of tetanus and disappointment."

"Let me see." She reached out, fingers inked with a new constellation of ballpoint marks. She handled the canister delicately, like a prop from the props cage, and turned it so the faded label caught the light.

“Reel One: The Starlet’s Shadow,” Chloe read, reverent. “This was supposed to be lost. Like, only rumors and production stills. Did you open it yet?”

“Not yet. It’s sealed tight. You want to try?”

She shook her head, hair flipping around her shoulders. “I want to take a picture first, obviously.” Chloe fished out her phone, angling it so the background captured the bakery’s “bread of the day” chalkboard, a hand pie pyramid, and at least three people Finn didn’t know by name but could recognize by snowmobile.

He let her run the show; he liked being part of it, even if only for the laugh track. Chloe returned the canister, then dug under the counter for a pair of latex gloves and a thin metal tool that looked suspiciously like it belonged in a dental office.

“Brandi’s going to want to see this,” Chloe said, gesturing at the kitchen door. “Brandi, you got a sec? We have a historical emergency!”

Brandi appeared instantly, her apron smudged with flour, eyes crinkled at the corners from smiling. “Unless the espresso machine is on fire, it’ll have to wait. We’re in the middle of a vegan scone uprising.” But when Chloe showed her the canister, Brandi’s eyebrows went up. “This is from the Little Hollywood days, isn’t it?”

Chloe nodded vigorously. “Finn found it in a tree. Like, in the tree. It survived last night’s storm.”

Brandi whistled. “That’s a first.” She reached out to turn the canister in her hands, more careful than Finn had ever seen her, then returned it to the counter. “If it’s real, you need to get it into a safe place, like the historical society’s freezer. Old reels can combust if they’re nitrate.”

Chloe absorbed this detail with delight. “So it’s literally explosive cinema. That tracks.”

Brandi shot a look over Finn’s shoulder, then switched to her customer voice. “Randy, honey? Can you take over up front for a minute?”

Randy materialized, wiping his hands on a towel. “Morning, Finn,” he rumbled.

“Morning.”

Randy’s presence seemed to calm everything down by half a notch,

and the customers at the counter gave way without being asked. He pulled a fresh sheet of waxed paper and slid two cinnamon rolls onto a plate, setting them near Finn and Chloe.

"On the house. For brave acts of local archaeology," Randy said.

Chloe snagged one instantly. "You're the best, Randy."

Randy just nodded, but the corners of his mouth turned up.

The bell over the door gave two sharp rings, and the energy of the room took on a new current. Finn turned, recognizing the Range Rover man even before he'd fully entered. The suit, the hair, the predatory focus on his surroundings—he was a chess piece moving into a new part of the board, scanning every angle.

He strode to the counter, pausing just long enough to take in Finn, Chloe, the canister, and the general layout. His suit looked even more out of place up close, like a tux at a snowball fight.

"Morning," the man said, with the kind of confidence that suggested he always got a greeting back.

Chloe, cinnamon roll half-gone, gave him a once-over. "Hi. Can I help you?"

He smiled, slow and deliberate. "Coffee. Black, please." He turned the smile to Finn, then the canister. "That's quite the antique you've got there."

"Local relic," Finn said, keeping his answer as simple as possible.

"Duck Creek is full of surprises," the man replied, still tracking the canister with his eyes. "You folks know much about old film?"

"Only what survives Wikipedia," Chloe said, licking a stripe of icing off her thumb. "And a little from the local oral history."

He watched her, amused. "I'm Marcus Thorne. Just in town for the week."

"Chloe. And that's Finn." She pointed at Finn with the tip of her cinnamon roll, then, realizing the breach of etiquette, set it down and wiped her fingers on a napkin. "What brings you to the Village?"

"Work," Marcus said. "And curiosity. I used to run a media archive—collecting, restoring. If you ever want that canister looked at by a pro, I know a few."

Chloe brightened. "That's actually super helpful. If we ever get it open, we're hoping to see if it's a real print or just a prop."

He nodded, sipping his coffee—Randy had poured it for him in a thick, homey mug with “Ground + Toasted” written on it in permanent marker. The sight of it clashed so hard with his suit, Finn felt a small, mean joy.

“So where’d you find it?” Marcus asked, casual.

“Old tree, up on Twisted Forest Trail,” Finn said. “It survived a lightning strike.”

Marcus let out a low whistle. “Resilient. That’s a trait worth preserving.”

Chloe tilted her head. “Are you here on a film project?”

He set down the mug, fingers drumming once on the handle. “You could say that. I’m looking for stories worth retelling. This village has a reputation, even if most people don’t know it.”

Brandi re-entered, holding a hand pie on a plate. “Here, Marcus. Try the mountain berry. It’s the closest we get to a happy ending around here.”

Marcus accepted the pie, but his attention kept drifting back to Finn and the canister. “You know, some film reels are worth a small fortune. There are collectors who’d pay more than you’d think.”

“We’re not really into fortune,” Finn said, shrugging.

“No,” Chloe agreed. “But we are into mysteries.”

A slow grin spread over Marcus’s face. “Good. There’s nothing more valuable than curiosity.” He took a bite of the hand pie and closed his eyes. “That’s... wow. You could sell these in Beverly Hills.”

Brandi chuckled. “Then we’d have to move to Beverly Hills, and nobody wants that.”

Finn and Chloe exchanged a look. Marcus clearly wanted something, but it wasn’t clear what, or how much he was willing to pay for it.

The next fifteen minutes played out as a dance: Marcus asking oblique questions about the village, about the history, about who might have stashed a film canister in a tree fifty years ago. Chloe matched him question for question, parrying with her own: “Why is a city guy interested in old mountain movies?” “What kind of stories are you looking for?” Finn mostly watched, gauging Marcus’s reactions, noting how he never quite relaxed.

The bakery's bulletin board—right next to their table—was plastered with flyers: lost dog, poetry night, the annual pancake breakfast, a “FOR SALE BY OWNER” sign for a lakeside cabin. Finn caught Marcus reading them all, even as he kept up the small talk.

When Marcus finally excused himself, he left his card on the table. “If you want to unlock that mystery, call me,” he said, then slipped out with the same quiet confidence he'd walked in with.

Finn picked up the card. “Plateau Development Corporation. Sounds fancy.”

“Sounds dangerous,” Chloe said, mock-ominous. She lowered her voice. “You think he's for real?”

Finn watched through the window as Marcus got into his Range Rover. “He's definitely here for something. And he's not going to be the only one.”

Chloe eyed the canister, then Finn. “You ever notice how, in the movies, the mystery always starts with someone finding something in the woods?”

“Usually ends worse,” Finn agreed.

“Yeah,” Chloe said, “but it's the in-between that matters.”

She grinned, and Finn couldn't help but smile back.

The hand pies were getting cold, but the story was just heating up.

Randy came over with a cloth to wipe down the table, setting his bulk between Finn and the nearest eavesdropper. “How's the investigation going?” he asked, nodding at the film canister.

“Not much to report,” Finn said, “but Chloe thinks it's a smoking gun.”

Chloe beamed. “It's basically the Rosetta Stone of Duck Creek. Or at least the Maltese Falcon.”

Randy gave a low, approving laugh. “Just make sure it doesn't hatch any curses.”

The Range Rover man—Marcus, as he'd introduced himself—hovered by the condiment station, stirring sugar into his coffee with an unnecessary amount of clinking. He made a production of not listen-

ing, which meant he heard everything. Brandi slid a fresh tray of hand pies onto the display shelf behind the counter, their tops still bubbling with juice, and called out, "If anyone's waiting for the mountain berry, they're ready to go!"

Marcus, always on cue, approached with a dollar folded into a perfect triangle. "These are the ones with the 'defiantly local' filling?"

Brandi sized him up with the good humor of someone who'd seen three of his type already that week. "Picked yesterday. You want ice cream on top?"

He feigned surprise. "I was told this was a wellness establishment."

"We believe in balance," Brandi said. "Pie and protein. Soul food and salad."

He liked that, or at least pretended to, and took the pie on a paper plate. He pivoted back to Finn and Chloe, holding the plate like a peace offering. "Can I join you?"

Chloe nodded before Finn could answer, already prepping her phone for an interview. "Sure! We were just talking about you."

Marcus gave a modest shrug, then sat, folding himself so the creases of his trousers lined up perfectly. "I'm used to it," he said, eyes glancing to the canister. "That's quite a relic you have."

"Chloe thinks it's priceless," Finn said.

"I think it's a piece of history," Chloe corrected, "and if it turns out to be the real deal, it should be preserved. Maybe in the Duck Creek archive, or—"

"In a more professional facility," Marcus interrupted, soft but insistent. "I know people at the university who could help. Items like that, they don't belong in just anyone's hands."

Finn felt a subtle shift. The banter was pleasant, but underneath, Marcus had an angle. He looked at the man: not a wrinkle on his shirt, not a single callus on those perfect hands. The kind of guy who never got lost, never got dirty, always had a reason.

"We were planning to turn it over," Finn said, "if it's important. But we want to see what's on it first."

Marcus smiled, but the smile was all surface. "Of course. Everyone deserves to know what's buried in their own backyard. But let me be

frank: there are collectors—very wealthy, very motivated—who would pay handsomely for a find like this. More than you might imagine.”

Randy, who had lingered a step away, cut in. “Duck Creek’s got enough secrets. Sometimes it’s better to let things rest.”

“Sometimes,” Marcus allowed. He nibbled the pie, chewed thoughtfully, then leaned forward. “I’ll make you a fair offer. You let me take that canister for proper assessment. You’ll get credit, and a finder’s fee. I’ll even guarantee a substantial donation to your local history fund.”

Finn looked at Chloe. She was already shaking her head, eyes wide and bright.

“We appreciate the offer,” Finn said, “but we’ll pass. For now.”

For a heartbeat, Marcus’s face went cold. It was quick, a flicker—eyes flat, jaw set, every line of his body suddenly taut. Then he seemed to reset, back to friendly. “If you change your mind, my card has all the numbers. I’m not hard to find.”

He left the plate and business card on the table, then took his coffee and walked out, the bell above the door ringing an oddly cheerful note.

Chloe watched him go. “Is it just me, or did that feel like a Bond villain job interview?”

Finn checked the card: the logo for Plateau Development Corp, embossed in gold. “He’s not used to hearing no.”

Chloe picked up the film canister, examining the seam with her thumbnail. “Do you think he wanted this because of what’s on it, or because of who might want it?”

Finn thought of the real estate agent’s stories, of Marcus already sniffing out which parts of the town were up for grabs. “Doesn’t matter. Either way, it’s leverage.”

Randy returned, a dishcloth thrown over his shoulder. “You know what I think?” he said, voice low. “You should keep that somewhere safe. Not here, not at home. Somewhere nobody looks.”

“Like where?” Finn asked.

Brandi, who had been pretending to polish the coffee machine, offered, “Historical Society’s got a lock-up. Or you could try the library vault, but that’s just an old gun safe painted blue.”

"I was thinking more like a decoy," Chloe said, warming to the idea. "Put something in the safe, something else somewhere else."

Randy smiled, but didn't laugh. "Smart."

The bell chimed again, and for a moment, it seemed the entire bakery took a breath. A figure stepped in—a man, though it was hard to guess the age. Hair and beard wild, clothing camouflaged in dirt and lichen, with a smell like cedar bark and rain. He walked with a light step, but every eye in the place followed him. Not out of fear, exactly. More like the way you watch an unexpected animal cross the road.

He moved straight to the counter. Brandi didn't ask what he wanted, just handed him a cup of black coffee and a whole-wheat scone, which he accepted with a nod. Then, without a glance at anyone else, he walked to Finn and Chloe's table.

He set the cup down with care. Then he looked at Finn, and his eyes—clear, sharp, a little wild—locked on.

"You found it," he said, voice low but perfectly audible.

Chloe managed a nervous smile. "The film? Yeah. How did you—?"

He waved her off. "Not the first time. Not the last." He lowered his voice. "There are things here, in the mountain. They come back. Over and over. Sometimes it's best not to watch the ending."

Finn wanted to ask who he was, but something in the man's presence made it seem obvious he wouldn't answer. Instead, he just asked, "What should we do?"

The man looked out the window, toward the shadowed peaks above the village. "The mountain's memories are stirring again," he said, as if quoting scripture or something older. "Some people think you can bottle up the past. But it always finds a way out."

He took his coffee, nodded once more, and left as quietly as he had come. The bell barely rang.

For a long moment, the bakery was silent.

"Was that—" Chloe started.

"Elias," Brandi said, filling in. "Lives up past Lava Flats. Nobody knows what he does, but he shows up right when you need him."

Finn looked down at the canister, feeling its weight in a way he hadn't before. "Do you believe him?"

Randy smiled, just a little. "Doesn't matter. Around here, stories are as real as anything else."

Outside, the clouds rolled in, covering the peaks. Inside, Finn and Chloe split a mountain berry pie, the juice staining their fingers. They had a canister, a warning, and—if they were being honest—more questions than when they'd started.

Chloe snapped a picture of the film canister, then one of Finn, who was already working out how to crack it open without wrecking the reel inside.

"Next stop, historical society?" she said.

"Unless the library vault is open," Finn replied. "Either way, let's not mention it to anyone else."

Chloe grinned. "It's more fun when you're the only ones who know."

They gathered their things, thanked Brandi and Randy, and slipped out into the gray, late-morning light. Duck Creek Village hummed behind them, full of pie and coffee and people who knew when to keep a secret.

And above it all, the mountain waited, holding on to the next layer of its story.

three

the first vision

MORNING IN DUCK CREEK VILLAGE hit different than most places. There were a million points of light, all of them slanted—gaps through log beams, flecks on a sticky wooden table, the glittering of dew on every porch rail from the last stubborn bit of snowmelt. Out back of Ground + Toasted, the patio was just coming alive, air so crisp you could probably snap it in half and serve it on a pastry.

Chloe and Finn claimed a spot at one of the sun-warmed picnic tables. The thing looked hand-built, splinters worn smooth by generations of elbows and spilled coffee. Potted thyme and basil lined the railing, and every now and then, a breeze jostled them just enough to make it feel like the whole patio was giving a standing ovation to whoever happened to be sitting there.

Chloe perched across from Finn, chin in hands, the morning light turning her hair a sort of honey-gold. She had a habit of talking with her whole body—even her ankles crossed and uncrossed with every shift in topic. Finn, meanwhile, had gone nearly motionless, staring at the battered film canister like it might explode if he looked away for even a second. He'd propped it up on a napkin to avoid getting rust on the table.

"So," Chloe said, voice low, "when are you going to open it?"

Finn tapped the canister with a knuckle. "Not sure it wants to be opened."

Chloe arched an eyebrow, the kind of expression you only perfected through hours in community theater. “I thought you were supposed to be the man of action. Or is that just for Instagram?”

“That’s for work,” Finn replied. He was already fishing a Swiss Army knife out of his pocket, but he didn’t rush the process. “Besides, this thing’s from, what—1950-something? It’s survived longer than most cars.”

Chloe leaned in, elbows squeaking on the wood. “If it was a car, we’d have it running by now.”

He looked up, the faintest tug at the corner of his mouth. “You want the honors?”

She shook her head, curls bouncing. “If it’s cursed, I want plausible deniability.”

“Brave,” Finn observed, and got to work.

The canister’s seam was crusted with a lifetime of oxidation. Finn used the screwdriver attachment, working the edge with the care of someone who’d once dismantled a wasp nest and lived to regret it. A quiet metallic groan signaled progress. Chloe held her breath—she could always tell when a moment wanted silence.

With a final pop, the lid gave way, letting out a smell that was part old pennies, part forgotten attic. Inside was a reel of film so brittle it looked like a coiled wasp’s nest, color bleached to sepia by age and time. Beside it, wedged flat against the metal, was a scrap of lined paper folded into quarters.

Chloe reached for the note before Finn could say a word. She unfolded it, careful as a surgeon, and read aloud:

“June 17th, 1954. If you’re reading this, you found the real one. The others are decoys. Don’t trust anyone from the studio, not even me. They’re after my land rights—after what’s underneath. If you want to help, show this to the Press. —Evelyn S. C.”

Chloe’s eyes went wide. “Do you know who that is?”

Finn shook his head.

“Evelyn St. Claire! She was a starlet here in the fifties, did all those westerns and then vanished. Like, mid-production, right before the last shoot. People said she ran away with a director, but there were rumors—”

He was already skimming the note again, turning it over for hidden messages, then running a thumb along the inside of the canister. "It's not a carbon copy. She wrote this herself."

Chloe reached for the film, but Finn stopped her with a gentle "careful." She obeyed, touching only the edge, holding it up to the sun. The images were ghostly, but still visible: silhouettes of mountains, a set that looked suspiciously like the old Duck Creek mill, and—through the gaps—someone in a long, white dress.

"Do you think it's her?" she whispered.

"No way to know until it's developed," Finn said, his eyes never leaving the canister's empty bottom. "But if she stashed this, and left a warning, she must've thought it was important."

Chloe's mind was already writing scripts. "What do you think was 'underneath'?"

He shrugged. "Could be anything. Water rights. Minerals. Or just a metaphor. People were big on metaphors back then."

Chloe snorted. "You're big on metaphors now."

Finn slid the film and note back into the canister, then set it gently between them. "If this is legit, we should get it to the historical society before someone else tries to buy the village and bulldoze over the past."

She reached out, hand hovering above his. "You really believe in that stuff?"

He considered. "I believe in evidence. This is a start."

The kitchen door banged open, and Brandi emerged, holding a fresh loaf of sourdough in a towel like a newborn. The aroma followed her onto the patio, bread so warm it fogged the air between them.

"Thought you two might need a little fortification," she said, setting the bread down with a prideful flourish. "Also, Randy made mountain berry jam. Try it while it's still warm."

Chloe tore into the crust, passing a hunk to Finn. He took it, then reached for the jam—deep violet, studded with bits of fruit, the kind of color you only got from actual berries and not the store-bought stuff.

They worked in companionable silence for a moment. Finn buttered and jammed his slice with the efficiency of someone who measured each movement; Chloe, meanwhile, took her time, layering the bread with enough jam to make it a structural hazard.

When their hands met in the center of the table—each aiming for the same ceramic knife—there was a static snap, an accidental brush of knuckles. Finn flinched, but Chloe laughed, a sudden, bright sound that bounced off the patio rail and made Brandi smile knowingly as she retreated inside.

Finn gave an awkward shrug. “Static. High-altitude problem.”

Chloe just grinned and broke off another piece. “Or maybe it’s a sign we’re about to open a portal to another dimension.”

He considered the loaf, the canister, the crazy chain of events that started with a hike and ended in 1954 intrigue. “If it does, we’ll need more bread.”

She beamed at him, then raised her slice in a mock toast. “To the next mystery.”

He tapped his own bread against hers. “And to not dying of botulism.”

Chloe snorted jam out her nose, then tried to cover it with her sleeve. Finn didn’t even try to hide the smile that overtook his face. He took a slow, deliberate bite, and for a moment, everything was just as it should be—sun, bread, and a friend to share it with.

But in the quiet that followed, both of them watched the canister, as if expecting it to move on its own. A shadow slid over the table as a cloud crossed the sun, and somewhere in the village, a distant bell rang, marking the hour. Chloe glanced at Finn, then at the canister.

“You ever feel like we’re being watched?” she asked, voice soft.

He chewed, swallowed, then said, “Up here? Always.”

Their fingers brushed again, this time less accidental. This time, neither of them pulled away.

And outside the little world of the patio, the mountain kept its secrets for one more morning.

The bread was still warm when it hit Finn’s tongue—a clean, sharp sour with enough bite to jolt him awake all over again. He barely had time to appreciate it before something inside his skull went white-hot. It was as if every nerve fired at once, then jammed itself into a holding pattern.

Finn's hand clamped the edge of the table. A cold shudder tore through him. Across the grainy wood, Chloe had just taken a huge bite, and her laugh died halfway into a sharp, shaky inhale. The crust tumbled from her hand. Her eyes, normally bright and quick, widened and then lost focus, pupils dilating to almost nothing.

The patio blurred out. The whole mountain vanished.

Finn couldn't move, couldn't even blink. He registered Chloe's gasp—the exact same moment as his own—but all other sensation was swept away by a rush of new ones: the hard slap of ammonia in the air, the dense, oily sweetness of spent camera bulbs, something sharp and metallic lacing underneath it all.

The sound came next—a relentless click and whirr, the staccato rhythm of film stock advancing frame by frame. He heard someone call out, “Quiet on set!” with the authority of a drill sergeant and the accent of a bygone decade.

The smell of salt and sweat and old polyester uniforms, mixing with desert dust.

A flash: Chloe, but not Chloe, her face painted in meticulous grayscale makeup, hair done up in victory rolls. A perfectly rendered fifties starlet, eyes hard and scared, pressed flat against a plywood set that only looked like a log cabin.

Opposite her stood a man in a suit too expensive for small-town Utah, face hidden behind a camera but voice unmistakable. “Sign it, Evelyn. You don't want to make a scene.”

“No,” the woman snapped—Evelyn?—her voice sharp enough to cut stone. “I'm not selling. You promised it would stay in the family.”

The man reached for her, his cufflinks gleaming. “It's not up to you anymore. Think of your sister. Think of the contract.”

A beat of silence. The whirr of the camera, the dry shuffle of someone's shoes on plywood.

Chloe gasped again, and Finn felt himself reeling. The scene dissolved, fragments spinning out: a studio logo painted on a water tower, a line of 1950s sedans parked at the base of a hill, a ledger thick with signatures, all of them written in the same black ink.

Finn's knuckles ached from gripping the table. He finally managed to breathe, dragging in a lungful of mountain air, and the patio

snapped back into focus. The herbs in their terracotta pots, the sound of a distant ATV, the sharp brightness of morning. All exactly as before.

Chloe blinked three times, then dropped the rest of her bread. It landed jam-side down on the table, a violet smear glistening in the sun.

"Did you—" she started, voice hoarse, "—just see that?"

Finn nodded, swallowing hard. "Yeah. Every second."

Chloe clutched at the napkin, fingers trembling, then let out a long, shaky laugh. "Wow. Okay. Wow. Was that supposed to happen?"

He looked at the canister, at the note from Evelyn S. C., and back to Chloe. "Not unless the jam is laced with LSD."

"Not likely," came a voice from the doorway. Randy leaned out, towel in hand, his brow furrowed. "You both looked like you saw a ghost. You okay?"

Chloe tried for a casual smile. "Just... intense flavors, I guess?"

Randy eyed her, then Finn, and finally the bread, as if expecting it to start singing. "Let me know if you want some water." He disappeared back inside, but not before tossing a knowing look at the film canister.

Chloe turned to Finn, her voice dropping to a whisper. "That was her. The starlet. And the man, he—he was threatening her. Over the land. Just like the note said."

Finn pushed back his chair, trying to will the world into behaving. "It felt real. Not like a dream. Like we were actually there."

The kitchen door swung open again, and Brandi slipped out, hands dusted with flour and smile just a little too calm. She slid into the seat next to Chloe and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"First time, huh?" Brandi said.

Chloe gawked at her. "First time what?"

Brandi smiled, a tired but genuine smile. "First time the bread talked back."

Finn frowned. "You're not surprised?"

"Not the first, not the last," Brandi said. "It doesn't happen to everyone, but every so often the old starter...connects people. Sometimes it's just a memory, sometimes more. Depends what's on your mind, and what the mountain wants to share."

Chloe's eyes glistened, almost teary. "So we just... tuned in? Like radio?"

"More like being haunted, but in a helpful way." Brandi plucked a crumb from the table and flicked it aside. "Some say the starter holds memories of the people who baked with it. All the hands, all the hearts."

Finn shook his head. "That's not possible. You can't—yeast can't transmit visions."

Brandi's lips quirked. "Science doesn't have an explanation, yet. But it's a thing. Even Randy's had it once, though he'll never admit it. Makes for good stories, if nothing else."

Chloe tried to steady her hands, but they wouldn't stop shaking. "Is there a way to control it? Or—" her voice dropped—"does it ever go wrong?"

Brandi's voice turned gentle. "It never lasts. You'll come back to yourself. But sometimes the mountain asks something in return. A promise, maybe. Or a story you need to finish."

Finn glanced at the canister. "What if it's a warning?"

Brandi shrugged. "Then you listen. Or you don't. Either way, you've got something nobody else does—a clue from the source."

Chloe finally managed a laugh, though it wobbled at the end. "So we're officially the mediums of Duck Creek?"

Brandi squeezed her shoulder. "Only if you want to be."

She stood, leaving a faint handprint of flour on Chloe's sweater. "Let me know if you need more bread. Or, you know, answers."

She ducked back inside, and Chloe and Finn sat in silence, watching the sunlight creep up the table until it finally touched the old film canister.

Finn broke the silence. "You want to check the archives at the historical society?"

Chloe nodded, voice suddenly sure. "Absolutely. But first, I need a minute to remember how to breathe."

He reached for her hand without thinking, just enough to ground himself, and she held on, just as lost and just as found.

They sat that way for a long time, letting the world settle, and in the stillness, the canister seemed to pulse with possibility.

Town Hall in Duck Creek Village was, in essence, a glorified log cabin with delusions of bureaucracy. The floors still bore the scuffs of the original lodge, the front desk was manned by a woman who had probably been there since Eisenhower, and the walls were papered with faded maps, lost-dog posters, and hand-lettered notices about snow removal and fire bans. Into this tableau strode Marcus Thorne, and if he was aware that his suit cost more than the combined outfits of everyone else in the building, he gave no sign.

He moved with the precision of a man who had never in his life been told to take a number and wait his turn. His shoes—patent leather, gleaming—left not a trace on the pine boards, but his presence alone seemed to scuff the air. At the desk, he paused, briefly checked his reflection in the glass of a trophy case, and rapped the counter with the knuckle of his index finger.

The clerk looked up from her Sudoku book, did a swift and thorough head-to-toe assessment, and mustered a “Good morning.”

“Good morning,” Marcus replied, smile as sharp as his haircut. “I’m here to access the property archives. My office called ahead.”

She blinked once, then checked a Post-it tacked to her monitor. “Mr. Thorne. Yes. You wanted the old surveyor’s plats?”

“And the historic land claims. Anything pre-1960. I’ll need to see the restricted ledgers.” Marcus pronounced restricted with a subtle little curl, as if daring her to say no.

The clerk, to her credit, didn’t flinch. “Those are only available by permission of the County Clerk.”

He didn’t blink. “I am acting on behalf of a client with a substantial interest. The Clerk is expecting me.”

She hesitated, then reached for a ring of keys, fingers trembling only a little. “All cell phones must be left at the counter. No scanning or photography.”

He unclipped his phone, set it down next to the sign-in sheet, and glanced at his watch—a heavy gold piece that caught the ceiling’s fluorescent flicker and threw it across the far wall. “Of course. I prefer working with originals.”

She led him down a short hall. The place was dim, windows blocked by mismatched shades and battered file cabinets. At the end, a locked door with a metal tag: "Archives—Authorized Personnel Only."

Marcus watched her work the lock, the silence thick enough to pick up the faint whirr of the municipal heater. He waited, hands folded behind his back, right thumb tracing slow, tight circles around his left wrist. Once the door clicked open, he stepped through and immediately scanned the room: shelves on all sides, climate-control units humming low, a battered wooden desk under a humming bulb.

"I'll need a flat work surface," he said, as if it weren't obvious.

She pointed to the desk. "You get one hour. I'll be right outside."

He smiled, bland and toothy. "I shouldn't need longer."

She closed the door, and he listened for the latch, satisfied at the sound of her shoes fading down the hall. For a moment, Marcus just stood, letting his eyes adjust, before pulling on a pair of white cotton gloves from his jacket pocket. He moved from shelf to shelf, flipping through the files with the efficiency of a man who didn't need to read every word to get the gist.

It didn't take long. Near the back, he found a thin, brittle folder labeled "Thorne, T.—Land Patent, 1947–1954." He set it on the desk, flattening the cover, and scanned the contents: legal documents, old blueprints, a grainy photo of a younger man in a double-breasted suit—his own jawline unmistakable in the set of the ancestor's mouth.

Marcus read quickly, lips moving just enough to register the names and dates. There: a mention of an "Evelyn S. C."—St. Claire, like the note in the canister—and a hand-written memo: "All correspondence to be delivered by direct courier only. Never leave on-site." He snapped a quick mental photo, then leafed to the last page. An unsigned contract, a footnote referencing mineral rights "to be held in trust pending further litigation."

He closed the file, lined everything up neatly, and pressed his palm flat against the desk. For a brief moment, his mask of confidence slipped, and he looked almost bored.

But then he straightened, slipped the gloves off, and returned the folder with the exact care he'd found it. Back at the counter, he collected his phone and left a polite thank you in the clerk's direction.

Out front, the wind picked up, sending a twist of dry leaves across the steps. Marcus tucked his phone into his pocket, checked the street, and clocked the bakery's patio two doors down—Finn and Chloe just visible through the fence slats, deep in conversation, canister between them like a neutral third party.

Marcus watched them for a moment, then stepped into the shade of a young spruce, making a note on his phone before turning up the street. He walked briskly, shoes clicking, never once looking back.

Chloe and Finn took the long way out of the bakery, looping behind the building to the narrow footpath that led up toward the historical society. The town was awake now: ATVs spitting gravel in the gas station lot, kids in mismatched snow pants daring each other to walk the icy curb, and the strange, sweet overlay of bread baking and gasoline that seemed to belong only to Duck Creek Village.

Neither of them spoke for a while. It wasn't that they had run out of words, just that the vision had left a kind of ringing in the air—like the world was briefly too loud to hear anything else over it.

Chloe broke the silence first. "So, the plan: get to the archives, see if we can find anything about Evelyn St. Claire, and...what, solve a seventy-year-old cold case?"

Finn walked with both hands deep in his jacket, eyes on the path. "Not sure it's a case. More like a warning." He glanced over. "You okay?"

She shrugged, hugging herself. "Yeah. Just—feels like my brain did a somersault. You?"

He considered. "Feels like I know something I shouldn't. Like we cut a corner in the universe."

Chloe smiled, small and tired. "We did. You saw her, too? Evelyn?"

He nodded. "And the guy. The one in the suit. He was pushing her to sign something."

Chloe frowned, pulling out her phone to check her hastily scrawled notes from earlier. "You don't think it's a metaphor, do you? Maybe she really was being threatened. By the studio, or someone bigger."

Finn's mind clicked into the kind of hyper-focus he usually reserved for backcountry navigation. "I think it's exactly what it looked like. But who buries a film canister for seventy years? She wanted it found."

They rounded the corner onto the main street. The post office van was making its daily run, followed by the world's slowest snowplow. Finn slowed his pace, letting the noise pass.

"Have you ever had a vision like that before?" Chloe asked, voice barely above the crunch of boots on gravel.

He shook his head. "Never even believed in them, really. You?"

"Once," she admitted. "I was twelve, got knocked out during a softball game. Saw the entire next inning before it happened, pitch for pitch. They said it was a concussion, but... I don't know."

They let that hang for a moment, the town stretching out ahead of them. Chloe tried to picture Evelyn St. Claire walking these same streets, the fear in her eyes when she refused to sign the deed, the way her voice wavered but didn't break. There was a story here, maybe even a real mystery, and for the first time since she'd left the city, Chloe felt like she was exactly where she needed to be.

Finn paused at the intersection, looking both ways with the automatic caution of someone raised in a place where nothing ever moved fast enough to hurt you. "You ready?" he asked.

She grinned. "Born ready."

They crossed, shadows falling together, their footfalls in sync.

Across the street, a nondescript sedan idled with its engine off, paint the color of dirty dishwater and windows tinted to just shy of illegal. From the driver's seat, a figure watched Finn and Chloe, tracking their every step with the detached interest of a surveillance camera.

When they turned the corner out of sight, the watcher scribbled something into a small notebook, closed it with care, and waited a full minute before starting the engine. The car pulled out into the slush, tires whispering, and followed them at a distance, blending perfectly into the background noise of the town.

If Finn or Chloe felt the eyes on them, neither showed it. They

walked on, canister tucked safe in Finn's pack, the truth waiting somewhere up ahead.

four

the archivist's secret

THE STAIRS to the Duck Creek Village archives weren't so much built as grown, each step a slightly different width and a little too flexy for comfort. Chloe led the way, feet in combat boots that barely fit the tread, and Finn trailed behind, one hand on the banister for stability, the other guarding his pack with its precious cargo. The air cooled as they dropped below ground, changing from that resin-bright mountain ozone to something still and ancient. A last splinter of daylight bled down the stairwell before it vanished, leaving them in the sort of half-light that could only be described as library-colored.

The basement's corridor ran low and narrow, lined with old movie posters and faded Civil Defense signs from a time when "duck and cover" was more than just a joke in the village's name. The scent was a mix of yellowing paper, lost pencils, and something like lemon furniture polish. At the far end, a chipped blue door stood propped open with a chunk of polished petrified wood, and through it came the shuffling, steady rhythm of someone with a mission and no time to waste.

Chloe squared her shoulders and ducked through. The archive room was, in Finn's first impression, equal parts fire hazard and fairy tale: rows of metal filing cabinets rimmed with ancient masking tape, open shelves of paperbacks sagging under their own weight, and in the very back, a massive desk overwhelmed by stacks of paperwork and a large pink Himalayan salt lamp. At the desk sat Eleanor.

Eleanor was seventy-eight if she was a day, her silver hair coiled into a bun so flawless it probably had its own ZIP code. She wore a cardigan the color of old lilacs and reading glasses on a chain, which she adjusted with the precise pinch of someone who had made a study of reading glasses. Her face was a landscape of smile lines and the kind of soft defiance that only gets stronger with age.

Eleanor looked up over her glasses, registering Finn with a brief, appraising glance, then zeroing in on Chloe. "You're late," she said, but her voice held nothing but warmth.

"I brought a friend," Chloe replied, her tone toggling between sheepish and proud. "And something for the archives, maybe."

"Well, let's see it," said Eleanor, gesturing them closer with a hand that had the faintest tremor but wasted no time in being helpful. Chloe slid the battered canister onto the edge of the desk, where it rattled lightly against a rubber stamp.

Eleanor leaned in, eyes sharpening to pinpoints behind the glasses. "Lord. Haven't seen one of these in fifty years." She sniffed, then ran her thumb around the seam, the way a grandmother might check for doneness in bread. "Where'd it come from?"

"Tree hollow," Finn said, pitching his voice just above a whisper. "Twisted Forest Trail."

"Of course it did." Eleanor gave the canister a tiny, affectionate pat, as if it might respond. "They were always hiding things out there. Every season, the snow uncovers another layer of old mischief."

Chloe grinned, the fluorescent light catching in her hair. "Finn wants to see if there's anything in the archives about the movie crews from the fifties. There's a note inside—signed Evelyn S. C."

Eleanor froze, just for a second. Then her eyes widened, and her whole body seemed to lean forward. "Evelyn St. Claire. My word." She rolled the name around, savoring it like a good chocolate. "She was the queen of Little Hollywood. Every boy in town had her pin-up taped behind their door, and every girl wanted her lipstick shade."

Chloe started scribbling in her notebook, tongue caught between her teeth. Finn just watched, feeling oddly honored to be in on a secret bigger than himself.

"Evelyn came through here in '54. They shot three pictures that

summer. I was only a girl, but I still remember the noise and the costumes and the camera trucks blocking Main.” Eleanor’s eyes went dreamy for a moment, then refocused with a snap. “She wasn’t like the others. The rest of the crew would party, get in fights at Aunt Sue’s Chalet, but Evelyn—she’d sit out by the lake for hours, just watching the water. Said it was the only place she ever felt real.”

Eleanor pushed back from her desk and reached for a battered shoebox wedged between stacks of file folders. “I keep a collection,” she confessed, sliding off the lid. Inside were dozens of black-and-white photographs, their edges soft and curling, each stamped with a date and a looping blue pen signature on the back.

She fanned out a handful, and Chloe swooped in, fingers leaving pale prints on the glossy surfaces. “These are beautiful,” Chloe breathed. The photos showed Evelyn in a dozen different guises: cowgirl in a fringed skirt and six-shooters, Victorian lady posed against a paper-mache waterfall, explorer in a pith helmet, laughing with one foot in a mountain stream.

Finn looked closer. The backgrounds were all real—he recognized the lava beds, the bright slash of birch trees against black rock, the unmistakable cliff face near Cascade Falls. Some of the shots were clearly candid; Evelyn with her hair down, staring off at the mountains with a look of quiet longing. “She doesn’t look like she’s acting,” Finn said.

“She wasn’t,” Eleanor replied. “She fell for this place. Bought a parcel up on the plateau, said she was going to retire here after the next picture.” Eleanor’s thumb swept gently along the edge of the photo, her gaze gone gentle. “People said she did it to keep the land out of the hands of the big developers. There was a whole thing—rumors of oil, or uranium, or some mineral. But Evelyn just wanted it to stay wild.”

Finn nodded, tucking the information away. The story fit the note, the canister, even the weird vision he and Chloe had experienced over cinnamon buns.

“After the third movie wrapped,” Eleanor continued, “they held a party at the lodge. Evelyn didn’t show up. No one saw her leave, not even the driver. Next day, there were stories—she’d run off with a lover, or she’d gotten into trouble. I never believed any of that.”

“Why not?” Chloe asked, voice soft.

Eleanor hesitated, then looked at Finn and Chloe with the intensity of someone who could still feel the past pressing on her bones. “Because she left her favorite dress behind. And her cat. You don’t abandon the things you love unless something’s gone very wrong.”

They fell quiet, the silence underlined by the faint tick of a distant radiator and the sigh of a page turning itself somewhere in the stacks.

Chloe set down the photos, suddenly solemn. “Would it be okay if we made scans of these? For the archive, and maybe... for the story?”

Eleanor’s answer was immediate. “That’s why I kept them.” She slid the box over, then gestured at a hulking, ancient scanner against the wall. “Have at it. But be careful with the edges, please—they’re older than you are.”

Chloe nodded and got to work, arranging the photographs on the scanner bed with a reverence Finn hadn’t seen in her before. As she worked, Finn watched Eleanor, who now seemed content to simply watch the pair of them, like a chess player waiting for the next move.

“Can I ask,” Finn said, “if anyone ever tried to investigate what happened to Evelyn?”

Eleanor gave a short laugh. “There were plenty of rumors. The studio hired a detective—he lasted a week and left in a hurry. Sheriff Adams, back then, said she probably just wanted to disappear. But I always thought someone wanted her gone.”

Chloe glanced up from the scanner. “Do you think it had to do with the land?”

Eleanor shrugged, but her eyes said yes. “Duck Creek’s always been the kind of place where people think they can buy what they want. Sometimes, the land pushes back.”

Finn heard a faint echo of Brandi’s words—about the mountain holding onto memories—and felt a shiver run through his arm.

A silence settled, heavy but not uncomfortable. Then Chloe straightened, tucking her hair behind her ears. “Thank you for trusting us with this.”

Eleanor smiled, the lines around her mouth deepening. “I spent seventy years waiting for someone to ask the right questions. It’s about time.”

They scanned the rest of the photos in silence, the gentle whirr of the scanner a weird comfort in the cavernous room. When they finished, Chloe handed the box back, then slipped a small slip of paper into Finn's hand. "Found this tucked in with the negatives," she whispered.

He unfolded it. It was a torn scrap, the same lined notebook paper as the canister's note. In the same slanted script: "Meet at the overlook. The Starlet's Shadow is almost ready."

Finn tucked it away, mind spinning.

Chloe glanced at the time, then at the dusty windows. "We should go before the next storm sets in."

Eleanor waved them off, then called after, "If you find out what happened, let me know. Some stories deserve a real ending."

They climbed the stairs together, shoes echoing in the hollow air. At the top, the sunlight was shock-bright after the archives. Chloe blinked and shaded her eyes, but Finn barely noticed. He was already running scenarios, connecting dots between a vanished starlet, a greedy developer, and a film reel left waiting for seventy years.

As they reached the door, Finn felt a flicker of gratitude for small towns and the people who remembered everything, even when the rest of the world tried to forget.

Behind them, the air in the archives was thick with the smell of history and old hope. Ahead, the village looked exactly as it had that morning, but Finn was sure nothing would ever feel quite the same again.

They didn't get a hundred feet before Chloe yanked Finn's arm and redirected him behind the historical society, where a picnic table with one listing leg offered privacy and a view of the parking lot's comings and goings. She dropped her pack with a grunt, fished out her notebook, and started writing as if her hand could catch fire at any moment. Finn kept lookout, every so often scanning for Range Rovers or unfamiliar eyes, but the only traffic was the gentle breeze and a distant snowplow.

Chloe worked in a silence that was all business. Finn liked it—no drama, just raw concentration—but after five minutes of scrawling, she finally sat back, sucked in a breath, and said, “We need to talk about the Thorne connection.”

Finn nodded. “Yeah.”

She flipped to the new photo Eleanor had let them scan: Evelyn and a man in a suit. The guy’s features were sharp enough to file patent claims, and even in black-and-white, his tie looked expensive. “That’s him, right?” she said, tapping the photo. “The ancestor. Thomas Thorne.”

Finn stared at the print. “Looks like the guy who came into the bakery this morning.”

Chloe snorted. “More like his evil grandpa. But yeah—same jaw, same ‘I’ll own you’ energy.” She bit her lip, then recited from her notes: “Thomas Thorne, personal manager. Rumored to have set up the land deals for the studios in the fifties. Got into some kind of legal brawl with Evelyn St. Claire after she refused to sign away her property.”

She leaned closer, voice lowering. “That note in the canister said not to trust anyone from the studio, not even her. You think she meant Thorne?”

Finn considered the image, the tilt of Thorne’s head, the stiffness in Evelyn’s stance beside him. “She looked scared,” he said. “Not like in the other photos.”

Chloe nodded, eyes bright. “Eleanor said the rumors were that Evelyn found out he was forging documents. Maybe that’s what got her in trouble.”

Finn thumbed through the stack of scans. Each had a code number, a date. He noticed two gaps: mid-June, and a set labeled “Overlook—Final Day.” “Do you see this?” he said, holding up the list. “There’s a whole section missing.”

Chloe caught on quick. “Those dates—right around the time she vanished. And the location matches the note: ‘overlook.’”

He scanned the rest of the list. “If Thorne was messing with the paperwork, maybe he had help erasing the evidence.”

Chloe sat back, tapping her pencil on her chin. “Eleanor said files

went missing from the archives, right? Maybe someone came in after the fact, cleaned up the paper trail.”

Finn checked the clock. They had just under thirty minutes before the archives closed for lunch. “Should we go back in and ask about the missing boxes?”

Chloe nodded. “Absolutely. Maybe she’ll let us see the Hollywood Collection.”

They retraced their steps, dodging a delivery guy and a pair of giggling school kids on the stairs. Eleanor was right where they’d left her, head bent over a crossword, but she looked up as soon as they entered.

“Back so soon?” she said, a twinkle in her eye.

Chloe didn’t waste time. “Can we see the Hollywood Collection? The film reels, the scripts, production notes—anything from the fifties.”

Eleanor raised an eyebrow, but gestured them to a locked rolling ladder at the end of the room. “You’ll find the cabinets against the north wall. Everything’s alphabetized, more or less.” She rummaged in her desk drawer and handed Finn a ring of keys. “But fair warning—half the collection is missing. Some city folks came through a few years ago, said they were doing ‘digital preservation.’ Took a lot, never brought it back.”

Chloe set off at a brisk pace, Finn following with the keys. The Hollywood Collection was a hodgepodge of dented metal canisters, battered leather-bound script copies, and thick, rubber-banded folders. The air here was even older, carrying the sour note of decomposing celluloid.

Finn flipped through a file labeled “Starlet’s Shadow—Correspondence.” Most of the letters were carbon copies, but several pages had been torn out, leaving a ragged edge. “Look at this,” he called.

Chloe crowded beside him, reading over his shoulder. “It’s all about land access,” she murmured. “And here—‘final notice to Miss St. Claire, cease all further contact with cast or crew until the matter is resolved.’ What matter?”

Finn’s fingers followed the trail. In the next folder: a stack of memos, several stamped “CONFIDENTIAL.” The last one was

unsigned, but the handwriting matched the canister note: "I know what you did. I won't let you win."

Chloe's eyes were huge. "That's a threat, if I ever saw one."

They kept going, careful not to crease or tear the fragile pages. Chloe found a production ledger with cast and crew lists. There, next to the line for "Personal Security – Consultant" was the name "E. Larsen." Finn's memory flickered—he'd heard that surname before, maybe in one of Brandi's stories, or on a park maintenance report.

Chloe read it aloud. "E. Larsen. Maybe he's still around."

Finn made a note. "We could check property records. Or see if Eleanor remembers him."

As if summoned, Eleanor glided up behind them, hands folded in front of her. "Find anything interesting?"

Finn glanced at Chloe, who nodded encouragement. "Do you know who E. Larsen was? Security for the studio?"

Eleanor pursed her lips. "Only that he was a drifter. Not a local. Came through with the Hollywood people, left just as quick. There were rumors..." She let her words trail off.

Chloe pressed. "What kind of rumors?"

Eleanor toyed with her glasses chain. "Nothing you can prove, but folks said he was the last person seen with Evelyn. Up at the overlook, near where she had her land."

Finn felt a chill, as if the air had dropped ten degrees.

Chloe was already on it. "Is that location still there?"

"Of course," Eleanor said. "You take the old logging road past Strawberry Point, follow the ridge. There's a fence, but the overlook's public access. Most people go for the view, not the history."

Finn jotted the directions. "Thank you, Eleanor. For everything."

She smiled, but her eyes stayed on the files in his hands. "Be careful up there," she said, just a shade too serious. "The mountain has a long memory."

They packed up their notes, scanned the most important documents, and returned the keys. As they left, Finn glanced back at Eleanor. She stood perfectly still, framed by the dim light, as if she knew the ending of the story but wasn't quite ready to share it.

Once outside, Chloe leaned into Finn, her voice low and electric. "We have to see that overlook."

Finn agreed. "Let's tell Brandi first. If anyone knows about missing starlets, it's her."

They stepped into the mountain air, heads together, not even noticing the car across the street as it watched them pull away.

They made it back to the archives with a minute to spare, barely dodging a janitor wheeling an enormous mop bucket and a bored teenager delivering envelopes. Eleanor handed them off with a "You break it, you bought it" warning, and left them to work at a sturdy table beneath a massive taxidermied eagle that Chloe instantly named "Detective Feathers."

Finn didn't sit. He sorted through the "Hollywood Collection" like a surgeon with a full waiting room, lifting each document with two hands and scanning for details. Chloe set up with her back to the wall and a coffee from the lobby, notebook open, foot bouncing so hard the table shuddered.

Finn cracked the first drawer—"Production Schedules: 1952–1956"—and flipped until he hit the Starlet's Shadow folders. Most of it was budget sheets and call times, but at the very back was a bundle of script pages heavily annotated in three distinct hands. Chloe hovered behind him, reading upside-down.

"Look at that!" she said, jabbing a finger at the margin. "That's Evelyn's handwriting, isn't it?"

Finn compared the script note with the letter from the canister. "Yeah," he said, "same lean to the letters. Same weird way of making an 'F'."

They worked through the pile, Chloe narrating her theories as she pieced together the timeline. "She was getting pressure to sign over her land right up to the last day," she muttered. "And then poof—she's gone, no more script notes from her, just these weird legal memos."

Finn sorted the rest of the drawer. There were a few glossy studio stills, the sort that made even the most exhausted extra look like a maga-

zine ad. In the “Correspondence – Private” folder, he found a single torn envelope addressed to Evelyn at the old ranch, postmarked two days before her disappearance.

Chloe slid it free and squinted at the return address. “This is from the studio lawyer. But the signature’s smudged. Wasn’t Thorne a notary or something?”

Finn shrugged. “Wouldn’t surprise me. Back then, the managers ran everything.”

He kept flipping. In a bottom drawer labeled “Location Scouts – 1954,” his fingers hit something odd: a manila envelope, water-stained and a little warped, but sealed with what looked like blue painter’s tape. It was heavy. Finn broke the tape with his thumbnail, careful not to rip the label.

Inside was a survey map of the Markagunt Plateau, covered in handwritten notes, and marked in three spots with big, looping X’s. “Chloe,” he said, voice low.

She leaned in, all impatience. “What is it?”

He spread the map out, using his coffee cup and the edge of a tape dispenser as weights. The ink had run in places, but the X’s were clear: one on a ridgeline above Duck Creek, one near the lake’s lava dam, and the third way up past Cascade Falls, deep in forest. Each X had a date beside it, all in June of 1954.

Chloe snapped a picture with her phone, then ran her finger along the paths. “This is a treasure map, Finn. Or, like, a crime map. Why would she mark these spots?”

Finn considered. “If the story’s right, maybe she was planning to hide copies of the reel. Or evidence of what Thorne was doing.”

Chloe traced the route to the first X. “This one’s closest. Bet we could hike there in an hour.”

They were so absorbed they barely noticed when the archive door creaked open. A rush of cold air swept in, and with it, Elias.

He looked even more out of place under fluorescent lights than he did in the woods—beard dusted with snow, patched jacket streaked with dried mud, hands tucked into his armpits like he was afraid of freezing solid. Eleanor, from the front desk, trailed behind him, clearly not sure whether to call security or offer hot cocoa.

"Found something interesting, I see," Elias said, voice dry as the mountain wind.

Chloe straightened, covering the map with one arm. "We're working on it."

Elias nodded at Finn, then gave the map a long, careful look. "The forest keeps what people forget. You think you're the first ones to look?"

Finn hesitated. "You know these spots?"

Elias's eyes lit up, just a flicker. "Was groundskeeper at the old ranch after the crews left. They never cleaned up. Just left the set to rot." He tapped the second X. "That's where they built the cabin for the movie. Burned down in the eighties, but the stone's still there."

Chloe's face was all awe and suspicion. "You were there? When it happened?"

Elias shrugged. "Didn't see her go, but I saw the sheriff haul Thorne up for questioning. Man looked like he'd seen a ghost."

Eleanor, having decided on cocoa, appeared at the table with two chipped mugs and a third for herself. "Elias, these two are working the St. Claire mystery. You remember that summer, don't you?"

Elias grinned, teeth even whiter in the basement light. "Remember it well. No one ever figured it out. Not the official way." He leaned in, conspiratorial. "But everyone knows the land up there was worth more than gold. Still is."

Finn pointed at the last X. "What's at this spot?"

Elias's face grew distant. "Springhouse. It was the old water source. Still runs clear, even in drought. Some say she hid something in the wall there."

Chloe made a quick note, then turned back to the map. "Would you show us? Where these places are, I mean?"

Elias laughed, but it was a good-natured sound. "You city kids, always wanting to rush in. You got boots that can handle the climb?"

Finn and Chloe both nodded.

Eleanor sipped her cocoa. "Just be careful. The old roads get slick in the freeze."

Elias shrugged into his jacket. "If you're serious, meet me at the gas station at dawn. I'll show you the trail."

Chloe beamed, tucking the map into her notebook. “Deal.”

As he left, Elias paused at the door. “One more thing,” he called. “The sourdough remembers what people forget. Ask Brandi about her grandmother, if you want the whole story.” He left on that note, vanishing up the stairs.

Finn and Chloe sat back, stunned and suddenly ravenous. Chloe folded the map along its old creases, careful not to tear it. “We should go before Eleanor throws us out,” she whispered.

They packed up, left the archives a little lighter than they’d come in, and thanked Eleanor with a promise to return the map once they had answers.

Back in the sunlight, Chloe looked at Finn. “What do you think Elias meant?”

Finn grinned, already plotting the next day’s hike. “I think it means Brandi’s got more secrets than just her starter.”

They crossed the village in long strides, eager to eat, sleep, and chase whatever the next morning brought.

The mountain waited, as it always had, but this time, Finn and Chloe knew exactly where they wanted to go.

five

the bakery's archive

THE MID-MORNING LULL at Ground + Toasted was the best time to feel the place's soul. By then, the first storm of regulars had moved out into the world, carrying with them the scent of cinnamon and the residue of small-town news. The air was thick with fresh sourdough, and the light from the high windows sharpened every dust mote into gold. Finn let the door swing shut behind him and stood just inside, taking a second to listen: the scrape of a knife on toast, the muted clink of plates, and, under it all, the heavy warmth of a stone oven holding onto its secrets.

Chloe moved ahead, as always, a step or two faster than Finn's more methodical gait. She scanned the counter, found Brandi in conference with Melinda over a tray of rising dough, and threw her arm up in a silent greeting. Brandi, for her part, barely needed the cue; she caught their eyes, finished whatever point she was making, and excused herself with a quick pat to Melinda's shoulder.

"You two look like you just hiked out of a B-grade noir," Brandi said as she joined them by the register. "Did you sleep at all, or is this still the same day?"

"Feels like the same day," Finn said. Chloe slid onto a barstool and grinned. "We have questions. Historical questions. Possibly bread-related."

Brandi's smile was real, but a flicker of something more traveled

through her eyes. She wiped her hands on her apron—today’s theme: blue with hand-stitched mountain ranges—and leaned in. “Shoot.”

Chloe dropped her voice to a stage whisper. “Was your grandma really Evelyn St. Claire’s chef? Or is that one of those urban legends that gets inflated every time someone puts schnapps in a bundt cake?”

Brandi’s laugh started soft and rolled out, just a hair too loud for comfort. She looked over her shoulder, then, seeing nobody close enough to eavesdrop, she beckoned them around the counter. “Let’s take this to the back. You’ll want to see for yourself.”

Finn liked how Brandi handled things: nothing dramatic, just a gentle nudge toward whatever mattered most. He followed as she led them through the kitchen’s swinging door. The heat in here was different than the bakery—it was sharp, focused, alive. Melinda, the assistant baker, was wrist-deep in dough, her hair cinched tight under a scarf and her face shining with effort. The rhythm of her kneading was almost hypnotic: fold, press, turn, repeat.

“Hey Melinda,” Brandi said, keeping her voice low but not conspiratorial. “Taking our guests on a family field trip.”

Melinda barely glanced up. “Don’t let them eat anything that’s not labeled. Some of it’s an experiment.”

Chloe eyed a tray of what looked like mutant croissants. “Define experiment?”

“If it’s still warm, it’s a prototype,” Melinda replied, grinning. “Try at your own risk.”

Brandi motioned them to a narrow hallway lined with floor-to-ceiling sacks of flour and sugar. The floorboards creaked with every step, and the chill increased as they neared a battered wooden door at the very end. Brandi produced a ring of keys from her apron and thumbed through them with a kind of reverence.

“Technically, this is storage,” she said, “but it’s always felt more like a vault.” The key clicked, and the door swung inward to reveal a staircase that dove straight down into shadow. The air changed again: cool, faintly damp, with a trace of something earthy.

“Watch your step,” Brandi said, and started down.

Finn, who was not overly fond of basements, hesitated a fraction, but Chloe was already following, so he set his jaw and went next. The

steps were bare wood, slicked by years of traffic, and the only light came from a single bulb halfway down, giving the walls a bruised, golden glow.

At the bottom, the cellar stretched out in a narrow band, brick walls packed tight with shelving. Most shelves were stacked with baking pans, extra flour, and cleaning supplies, but one corner was clearly devoted to things that didn't have a culinary use. There was a steamer trunk, a pile of old event banners, and, wedged beneath a shelf, a cardboard box covered in a thick coat of dust.

Brandi knelt, pulled the box out with a grunt, and set it on a low table made from an upturned milk crate and a board. "I haven't gone through this in a long time," she said, "so if you see a mouse, just warn me."

Chloe immediately flopped cross-legged to the floor and began lifting things out. The first was a sheaf of black-and-white photographs, some curled so tight they looked like scrolls. She unfurled a few and spread them on the crate table. Finn bent over them, careful not to smudge the old emulsion.

The images were crisp, more so than he'd expected—there were shots of film crews in front of classic log cabins, a set staged to look like a frontier town, and, in nearly every frame, a beautiful woman with a gravity all her own. She wore a costume in one—long gingham skirt, boots, hair tied with a ribbon—but in another, she was in a bathrobe and slippers, cigarette in hand, laughing like she'd just told a really good joke.

"Evelyn St. Claire?" Finn asked, tapping the best of the bunch.

Brandi nodded. "The legend. Most of those were taken by my grandmother, Hazel. She was hired as the set's personal chef, but she did a little of everything. Kept a journal, too."

Finn watched Chloe's eyes go wide as she found the recipe cards next: dozens of them, handwritten in looping script, some spattered with old butter stains. "This is her handwriting?" Chloe asked.

"My grandma's, yeah," Brandi said. "She said every movie had a 'food mood'—you cooked to match the tone of the day. Western? Biscuits and beans. Romance? Angel food cake and too much sherry."

Chloe thumbed through the cards reverently. "These are gorgeous."

Finn kept at the photos, looking for patterns. In some, Evelyn was posed with a man in a suit—sometimes the same man, other times a rotating cast, always in the background, always just out of focus. The cameras caught her, though. She seemed to know how to find the lens, even when she looked like she'd rather be anywhere else.

He set aside a few photos and watched as Brandi dug deeper into the box, finally pulling out a battered leather-bound journal. She laid it flat and opened to the first page, the paper brittle enough to whisper as it turned.

"That's Hazel's journal," Brandi said. "She didn't write every day, but she was a lot more honest than she meant to be."

Chloe, now fully in detective mode, moved the crate table so all three could huddle over the pages. The handwriting was small, neat, with the same slant as the recipe cards. Finn read along as Brandi summarized the best bits.

"She loved working for Evelyn. Said she was kind, but also a little haunted." Brandi flipped ahead a few pages. "This part—here—talks about a weird day on set. Something about 'three guardians' and a 'Plan B deed.'"

Finn read the passage aloud, careful to keep the words steady: "If anything happens, the guardians know what to do. The deed is hidden, but not the one they expect. Plan B is for the future, tucked where shadow meets light."

Chloe pulled her phone and snapped a picture of the page. "This is incredible. Do you think she was talking about land rights?"

Brandi shrugged. "I always thought it was about some movie contract, but the older I get, the more I think Grandma was in on something bigger. She baked for everyone—crew, actors, even the studio brass. Sometimes she'd hide little messages in the bread. People trusted her. She knew all the gossip."

Chloe's eyes danced. "It's like the kitchen was her confession booth."

Finn leafed through the journal, careful not to tear the paper. Most entries were short—gripes about weather, cast drama, the high altitude making dough rise weird. But every few pages, a line or two would jump out, always coded but never completely opaque. "The

guardians are worried,' or 'E. stayed up past midnight, too much on her mind.'

He turned to the back, and there, on the inside cover, was a symbol drawn in black ink: a rough sketch of a star with a bread loaf at its center.

Chloe spotted it, too. "That's the Starlight Productions logo," she said. "But I've never seen it with the bread thing before."

Brandi took a closer look. "Grandma said the best secrets always had a key baked in."

Finn smiled, but the gears were turning. The logo matched a marking on the map from the archives—the one with the three X's. He ran a finger over the page, the roughness of the ink standing out against the old paper.

"I think we found our connection," he said.

Chloe nodded, her face all bright angles and wild ideas. "So the 'shadow meets light' bit—what does that mean? A place? A time of day?"

Brandi leaned back, hands braced on her knees. "There's a spot up past the old lake dam. At sunset, the ridge splits the light in two. My grandma called it the 'hourglass.' She'd walk there sometimes to 'think her thoughts,' as she put it."

Chloe's voice went up an octave. "That's on the map, too. The second X!"

Finn closed the journal gently, then looked at Brandi. "If you don't mind, could we borrow this for a day? Just to see if we can piece it together?"

Brandi smiled, but there was a shadow of worry behind it. "I trust you. But if you see anything about my grandma that makes her sound crazy, remember: the mountain gets to everyone, eventually."

Finn tucked the journal into his pack, along with the photo copies and a handful of recipe cards. Chloe took another scan with her phone, then stood and dusted flour off her jeans.

Brandi watched them, arms folded, expression a blend of pride and nostalgia. "I hope you find what you're looking for. And if you do, come back and tell me. I think Hazel would've wanted that."

They climbed the stairs, each step creaking a little louder on the way

up. When they reached the kitchen, the air felt even warmer, the smell of baking bread an anchor to the present.

Melinda looked up from the bench, flour up to her elbows. “Any ghosts in the cellar?”

“Just a few,” Finn said, and meant it in every sense.

Chloe grinned at Melinda. “If you ever want to teach a bread history seminar, I’m in.”

Melinda winked. “You just want the dough secrets.”

Finn and Chloe found a corner table and spread out their findings. They were joined a minute later by Brandi, who carried a tray of still-warm rolls and two mugs of coffee.

“On the house,” she said. “Detectives need fuel.”

Chloe dove for a roll, and Finn raised his coffee in a toast. “To the next piece of the puzzle,” he said.

Brandi touched her mug to his, then leaned in. “Just be careful,” she said. “Stories have a way of taking over.”

Chloe laughed, brushing a crumb from her chin. “That’s what we’re counting on.”

As the late morning light pressed through the bakery windows, Finn spread the map and traced the X’s with his finger. The journal, the photos, the recipe cards—all pointed to the ridge at sunset. He felt the quiet hum of the mystery, both bigger and smaller than he’d expected, and right at the heart of it, a loaf of bread and a lost starlet.

He looked at Chloe, who had already started sketching out a plan of attack, then at Brandi, who watched them with a mix of hope and caution.

The future, Finn realized, was a lot like sourdough. Full of wild things that only made sense when you let them rise.

He sipped his coffee, and waited for the next act.

The next act arrived sooner than Finn had anticipated, and it didn’t have a soft landing. They were halfway through analyzing the journal’s more cryptic passages—Brandi explaining her grandmother’s unique system of abbreviations—when the kitchen door banged

open, scattering the comfort of the table. It was Randy, his silhouette framed against the warm bakery light. His gaze flicked from Finn to Brandi, landing at last on Chloe, who was halfway through a bite of a roll.

"Brandi?" Randy called, voice pitched just low enough to telegraph the gravity. "That guy is asking for you. Says it's business."

Brandi's face didn't move, but the set of her shoulders told Finn that this was not a new scenario. She stood, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear, and gave Finn and Chloe a small, steady smile. "Give me a minute. You two can keep going through the stuff if you want."

Randy held the door, and Brandi passed through, leaving a slipstream of bakery scents in her wake. Finn waited a beat before nudging Chloe, who was already craning to see beyond the kitchen.

"Think it's Thorne?" Finn whispered.

Chloe's face said absolutely. "No one else wears business as an aura."

They abandoned their notes and drifted to the kitchen threshold, keeping just out of sight. The bakery's main room was half-full, populated mostly by mid-morning regulars. At the counter, the newcomer could only be Marcus Thorne—expensive suit, shoes that glinted in the dusty light, and the look of someone who had already decided on the outcome of the conversation.

He did not appear to notice the mismatched mugs on the shelf or the flour handprints on the countertop. Instead, his gaze was laser-locked on Brandi, who approached with the kind of calm that made Finn proud to know her.

"Mr. Thorne," Brandi said, making his name sound slightly less than necessary. "What brings you to our humble establishment?"

Thorne's smile was airbrushed and hollow. "I hear you do a very fine cinnamon bun, but that's not why I'm here." He paused, as if waiting for applause, then continued. "My company is making a series of offers on properties in the area. As the owner of Ground + Toasted, you're high on our list."

Brandi didn't flinch. "We're not for sale."

Thorne's smile did not change, but his tone cooled a fraction.

"Everything is for sale. It's just a matter of price, or, if I'm being frank, pressure."

Randy materialized behind the counter, arms crossed and jaw set, a silent statement that Brandi was not alone. Thorne clocked him with a flick of the eyes, then shifted his stance to one of practiced patience.

"We're prepared to offer you triple the current market value for this property," Thorne said, his words so smooth they almost didn't sound real. "All cash. You could walk away today, if you wanted."

Brandi planted her hands on the counter, fingers splayed. "There's not a number that would make it worth it."

Thorne's eyebrows rose, the performance of surprise. "That's a very rare attitude these days."

Randy leaned in, voice steady. "Maybe that's why people come here."

Thorne regarded him, the smile never wavering. "I appreciate tradition. I do. But progress is inevitable, Mr..."

"Randy is fine," Randy supplied.

"Randy." Thorne let the name sit between them. "You seem like a reasonable man. You know that places like this—they don't last forever. The tax situation alone—"

Brandi cut in, gentle but iron-hard. "We pay our taxes. We serve the village. And we're not looking to be a footnote in someone else's corporate memoir."

Thorne's patience wore thin enough to see through. "You should know, then, that when the other properties sell—and they will—what's left here will be isolated. Less foot traffic, more logistical issues. It may even affect your supply chains." He looked at the bread racks, then back at Brandi. "And if I'm honest, there are better locations for a bakery. Places that make sense. Places with growth."

Randy didn't move. "Duck Creek Village is our place."

Thorne shifted tactics. "You're not the only bakery on our radar. I could—if I wanted—open a dozen of these in a month and undercut you on price and convenience. Is that how you want to spend the next year? Defending yourself from the inevitable?"

Brandi smiled, a real one this time, full of pity for his lack of imagination. "You don't understand small towns, Mr. Thorne. People don't

eat at Ground + Toasted because it's convenient. They eat here because it means something. And I'd rather go down fighting than serve coffee to your board meetings."

Randy placed a hand on the counter, palm flat. "You've had your answer."

For a second, Thorne looked past Brandi and Randy, scanning the room. Finn and Chloe ducked a little, not quite fast enough; he noticed, but did not acknowledge them. Instead, he took a slow breath, reset his smile, and lifted his phone as if to check the time.

"Very well," Thorne said, voice now pure frost. "But I will leave my card. In case you change your mind, or in case the numbers change." He set it on the counter with two fingers, like a magician palming a coin. "I admire your spirit. Just remember—when change comes, it comes fast. You can profit from it, or you can be swept aside."

He turned to leave, his shoes making a soft tick on the worn wood. As he passed, he gave Finn and Chloe a nod—acknowledgement of equals, or maybe just a reminder that he'd seen them—and let himself out. The bell over the door rang, cheerful and completely at odds with the atmosphere he left behind.

Randy exhaled and shook his head. "The gall of that guy."

Brandi slid the business card into the tip jar, buried under a pile of one-dollar bills and a handful of loose change. She looked shaken, but only for a second.

Chloe stepped forward, voice low. "Does he do this a lot?"

Brandi nodded. "The last month, it's been every week. Different faces, but same pitch. They're tightening the screws. Some of the businesses on Movie Ranch Road have already caved. Most of them are just holding out for better offers."

Finn considered the situation, feeling the pressure of time. "You think he'll make trouble for you? Beyond the threats?"

Brandi glanced at the journal, then at Finn. "He's the kind who doesn't get his hands dirty, but he knows people who do."

Randy shrugged, broad and immovable. "Let them try. They won't get anywhere."

Chloe looked from Brandi to Finn. "Do you think this has anything to do with Evelyn's land?"

Finn nodded, mind clicking into place. "If the studios wanted the property for more than filming, and if there's still something there worth hiding... Yeah, I do."

Randy poured coffee for the table, a peace offering or maybe just an excuse to give Brandi a minute to collect herself. She did, and the steadiness came back to her voice.

"I'm not giving up the bakery. Not for him, not for anyone."

Chloe grinned. "We'll help you. Whatever you need."

Brandi reached out and squeezed Chloe's hand. "Thank you."

Finn sipped his coffee, eyes on the door where Thorne had left, and wondered what line they'd just crossed. Whatever it was, it felt permanent.

The bakery's warmth slowly returned, the air filling again with sugar and yeast and low voices. Finn and Chloe went back to their table, but neither could stop glancing at the door.

"Tomorrow," Finn said. "We go up to the overlook. If there's something there, we find it before Thorne does."

Chloe nodded, energized. "And if he shows up again?"

Finn looked at Randy, then at Brandi. "We'll be ready."

For now, the bakery was safe. But the mountain never forgot.

The bakery hummed on, but a layer of unease clung to the air, as if Thorne's presence had left a faint chemical residue on the day. Brandi retreated behind the counter, her movements a little sharper than before, while Randy took up a position near the espresso machine, polishing it to a shine with methodical, almost meditative strokes. Chloe and Finn reclaimed their corner table, spreading out the clues: Hazel's journal, the photo prints, and the now-memorized map from the archives. Finn was the first to break the silence.

"He won't give up easy," he said, voice pitched low.

Chloe toyed with the edge of a recipe card. "He's got a vibe. Like he could buy and sell the whole mountain if he felt like it."

Brandi came over, carrying a tray with fresh mugs. "He's not just

after me. He's hit every business on this road. Even the gift shop lady, and she's a retired IRS agent—nobody pushes her around.”

Randy joined them at the table, arms folded, anchoring the group with a calm that seemed to slow everyone's heart rate. “He'll keep trying. They always do, until something stops them.”

Finn pulled out the map, smoothed it across the table, and set Hazel's journal next to it. “I think the answer is here,” he said. “It's just a matter of matching the right pieces.”

Chloe leaned in, eyes darting between the handwritten notes and the crisp, typewritten survey lines. “You notice this?” she said, tapping the symbol on the back cover of the journal. “It's not just a logo. Look at the map. Same symbol, right next to the first X.”

Finn traced the spot with his finger, and sure enough, the sketch was nearly identical—a rough star, the center marked by a dot. He cross-referenced the legend. “That's the old Starlight Productions camp. The one they used for all the location shoots.”

Brandi peered over, interest sharpening. “My grandma used to talk about the camp. Said it was a little city, just for the film people. But after the last movie, they tore it all down. Supposedly.”

Chloe grinned. “Supposedly is my favorite word.”

Randy poured coffee, the sound soothing the edge off the room. “What about the other X's?” he asked.

Finn checked the journal entries. “Second X is on the ridge, near the overlook. Third is up by the springhouse. Hazel mentioned all three, but always in code—‘guardians’ and ‘shadow meets light.’” He looked at Brandi. “Any idea what she meant?”

Brandi shook her head. “No, but if she said it, she meant it. Grandma was big on word puzzles.”

Chloe spun the journal so Finn could read a passage upside-down. ““The guardians watch from above. The spring is their voice. The star marks the beginning, but not the end.”” She let the words hang, then said, “This is literally a treasure map. I feel like I'm on a set for *Goonies*.”

Finn smiled. “Minus the booby traps. Probably.”

Randy sipped his coffee. “So what's the next move?”

Chloe, as if on cue, said, “We get there before Thorne does. What-

ever Evelyn and Hazel wanted to hide—it's for the people who care, not the people who buy."

Finn nodded, but something felt incomplete. "We're missing a piece. There's got to be a reason she used the word 'guardians.' Hazel wouldn't write it just for effect."

Brandi tapped the edge of the table, thinking. "There was an old story, before even my grandma's time. About three folks who watched over the land—the Keeper, the Guide, and the Witness. I always thought it was local myth, like Paul Bunyan but more... Utah."

Chloe's eyes lit up. "That tracks. Hazel was the Witness. She wrote everything down."

Finn glanced at Chloe, impressed. "Then who's the Keeper? Or the Guide?"

A long silence followed, filled by the drone of the espresso machine and the hum of low conversation from the bakery's remaining customers. It was broken by the bell above the door, which let out a cheerful ping as someone entered—a man who looked as if he'd just stepped out of a windstorm and into civilization by mistake.

Elias stood in the doorway, shoulders dusted with fine red dust, eyes scanning the bakery until he spotted the group in the corner. He advanced with deliberate, soft steps, giving each person in the bakery a quick, courteous nod as he passed.

"Coffee?" Brandi asked, already pouring a cup.

He accepted, cupping the mug in both hands before sitting down at the table. The other customers eyed him with curiosity, but his manner was so self-contained that he seemed more a part of the woodwork than the crowd.

Finn slid the journal and map across. "We've got questions."

Elias took a long drink before answering. "That's a good thing. Most people in this town stopped asking them a long time ago."

Chloe wasted no time. "Were you really the groundskeeper at the old movie ranch?"

Elias smiled, beard twitching. "For a time. Until they shut it down. I saw a lot, but nobody ever asked me about it." He looked at the map, then the symbol. "That's where they kept the film vaults, you know. Not for storage—just so people wouldn't steal from the set."

Finn nodded. "You remember Evelyn St. Claire?"

"Vividly." Elias's tone softened. "She was different. Treated everyone the same, no matter if you swept the floors or starred in the picture. She was scared near the end. Said someone was coming for her, but she wouldn't say who."

Randy looked up. "You think it was Thorne's family? Or Thorne himself?"

Elias shrugged. "Could be. Power like that doesn't vanish. It just puts on a new jacket and walks right back in."

Chloe pulled out the canister from Finn's bag. "What about this?"

Elias studied it, turning the battered tin over and running a finger along the seam. "Old, but not ancient. There's a trick to opening these without breaking the reel. You want me to try?"

Finn hesitated, but Elias's hands were steady, gentle. "Go for it," he said.

Elias worked the edge for a minute, then popped the lid with a faint metallic snap. Inside, the reel was intact, but the label was what caught Chloe's eye—typed, but with three tiny stars stamped next to the title. She pointed. "That's the same symbol!"

Brandi leaned in. "Grandma used to do that—mark things she wanted us to remember."

Elias extracted the reel, held it up to the light. "If you run this through a projector, you might get one good pass before it falls apart. But there's a way to digitize it, if you trust the right person."

Chloe almost jumped out of her seat. "There's an A/V lab at the college down in Cedar. My friend runs it—she can transfer stuff without touching the original."

Randy grinned. "So, we have a plan."

Finn looked at the group—Brandi's fierce resolve, Randy's quiet strength, Chloe's spark, and Elias's calm. He'd never thought of himself as a leader, but somehow, he felt responsible for all of it. "We need to hit all three spots on the map. Get whatever evidence is there. Then figure out how to keep it safe, and make sure Thorne can't wipe it out."

Chloe added, "And maybe get a little famous. But mostly the justice thing."

Elias set the canister down and said, “You’ll want to go at dawn. Less people, less risk.”

Brandi squared her shoulders. “I’ll have a breakfast basket waiting. No hero ever won on an empty stomach.”

Randy nodded. “And I’ll drive. Nobody gets there faster.”

They sat in companionable silence for a minute, each drinking coffee or letting the moment settle. Outside, the mountain loomed, old and unmoved, but Finn felt like it was rooting for them all the same.

Chloe summed it up, voice bright: “We’re like the Guardians of the Plateau.”

Finn smiled. “Sounds about right.”

Tomorrow, they would go to the first X. But for tonight, they had each other—and, for once, that felt like enough.

six

the twisted forest clues

THE MOUNTAIN WAS NOT DESIGNED for morning people, but it made them out of anyone with a reason. Finn hit the Twisted Forest Trail at first light, breath coming easy in the bite of pre-dawn air, boots setting the pace. The rest fell in line without complaint: Chloe, in a vintage army jacket that was more patches than fabric; Brandi, with a canvas pack slung over her shoulder and hair still wet from a rushed shower; Randy, whose stride never varied even as the trail turned from pine needles to black cinder and back again.

The trees were just waking up—ravens making passes overhead, a robin's alarm clock up the slope. The scent was all resin and cold dirt, with a sweet undercurrent from the last of the snowmelt. Finn always liked this part of the day: the mountain had not yet decided what kind of story it wanted to tell.

They walked in a line, Finn out front, Chloe just behind, narrating their progress in a running whisper: "If this were a documentary, the camera would be on a drone, tracking us through the trees." Brandi snorted at that, but didn't slow. Randy gave a soft grunt that might have been agreement.

The trail coiled up, switchback by switchback, until it reached the knuckle where Finn had found the film canister. Even after the years, the bristlecone pines never looked quite right—some of them grew at ninety-degree angles, some looked as if they'd survived three or four

apocalypses. The ponderosa in question stood in the middle, trunk split and charred from the lightning strike that had started all this.

Chloe paused, lips parted in awe. "It looks like the set from a Tim Burton remake of *Bambi*," she said.

Finn ignored her and crouched at the base of the tree, eyes scanning the ground. "It's here," he said, not looking up. "The canister was right inside that hollow." He pointed, then started feeling around in the needles and moss, gloved hands precise.

Brandi knelt next to him, gaze sharp. "You see anything?"

Finn nodded. "Someone's been here before us. The ground's disturbed."

Chloe peered over his shoulder. "Is it too late to pretend we're in a Scooby-Doo episode and there's going to be a skeleton hand?"

Randy, who had hung back, now stepped in close. "What are we looking for?"

"Anything unnatural," Finn said. "That's what you said, Brandi?"

She nodded, eyes narrowing. "If Evelyn was hiding something, she wouldn't just stick it in a tree. She'd want a second line of defense."

Finn swept the area, methodical as a search dog, and stopped at a patch of earth where the pine duff was lighter, as if it had been moved and replaced. He brushed it back with his gloved hands, then paused, running his finger along a half-buried shape.

Chloe leaned in, squinting. "That's not a rock."

It wasn't. It was a fist-sized lump of something black and heavy. Finn pried it loose and dusted it off: a rusty metal box, the kind that might once have been used for film reels, or maybe as a geocache. He set it on the trunk and gave a satisfied grunt.

Brandi's face was part glee, part reverence. "You think it's hers?"

Finn shrugged, already examining the latch. "Only one way to find out."

The latch resisted, but Finn's pocketknife made quick work of the corroded screw. Chloe knelt close, hands clasped as if awaiting a magic trick.

Inside, a stack of paper wrapped in oilcloth filled the box to the edges. Atop the stack sat a heavy brass key, engraved with a single word: TOWN HALL BASEMENT.

Chloe's eyes went dinner-plate wide. "That's straight out of a conspiracy movie. There's going to be a secret room and everything."

Finn set the key on his palm. It was cold and surprisingly heavy, the patina so old it had gone green around the letters. He lifted the stack of papers and unwrapped them with care. The top page was a handwritten note in slanted cursive:

"Production Notes—The Starlet's Shadow. For safekeeping, until the truth matters more than the story."

Finn glanced at Brandi, who mouthed the words along with him. He peeled the next few pages free. They were lined, yellowed, full of edits and crossed-out dialogue. Scene headers, descriptions of locations, directions for camera angles—some with asterisks and arrows, as if the author had been racing to capture every detail before the world forgot.

Chloe read over his shoulder, voice trembling with excitement. "She wrote it all down. Not just the movie, but the whole situation—see? 'If anything happens, check the springhouse. The code is the date of our first picnic. Don't trust the studio. Not even me.'" She pointed at the marginalia, her finger shaking.

Randy whistled. "That's a lot of faith in paper."

Brandi stared at the script, the neat rows of blue ink, and her mouth worked as if she might cry, but she only said, "Hazel used to say Evelyn couldn't stop writing, even when she was supposed to be sleeping. She'd write on napkins, receipts, anything she could find."

Finn passed the papers around. Randy accepted them with care, as if holding a lost child. Chloe flipped to the back, scanning for secrets.

"There's a map," she said, eyes bright. "A hand-drawn one, with arrows. It's like she knew someone would come looking."

Finn traced the lines. "It's here. The tree. And the overlook, and the springhouse—just like on our map from the archives."

Brandi exhaled, long and slow. "It's not just a treasure hunt. She left a trail."

Chloe hugged the box to her chest, then immediately set it back down, aware of the dirt. "This is the best morning of my entire life."

Finn, still holding the key, let the silence settle. The sun had finally found its way through the trees, lighting the ground in bright slashes. A jay screamed overhead, impatient and hungry.

Randy stepped back, surveying the scene. "So what now?"

Chloe answered first. "We get to Town Hall. Or the springhouse. Or both."

Finn nodded. "We divide and conquer. But we take copies of everything. Just in case."

Brandi folded the pages back into the box, handling them like artifacts from a church. "I'll guard these with my life," she said.

Randy nodded, solemn. "We'll get you there safe."

They packed up, brushed the dirt from their knees, and set off down the trail. Chloe looked back at the tree one last time, as if expecting it to wave goodbye.

Finn kept the key in his palm, feeling its weight all the way back to the truck.

They hadn't made it a hundred yards before the silence broke, not with a crash but the most delicate snap—a twig, maybe, or just the static of four minds all focused on the same impossible question.

Elias stepped out from between two bristlecones, as if the trees themselves had grown him. His beard looked longer than yesterday, speckled with lichen and dotted with needles. His canvas jacket had seen better centuries, and his boots left only ghost-prints in the mulch. Finn flinched; Chloe yelped and immediately tried to pretend she hadn't.

"Morning," Elias said, low and polite. "Didn't mean to spook you."

Randy grinned. "You always move like you're trying not to wake the forest."

Elias shrugged. "It's polite to ask permission, before you take."

Brandi held out the battered box. "We found something. Actually, Finn did. Can you tell if it's legit?"

Elias took the box in both hands, turning it so the weak sun caught the oilcloth seam. He didn't open it right away. Instead, he closed his eyes, holding it to his chest for a count of three, like a radio operator listening for a distant signal.

"Production notes," he said, almost reverent. "She left these for someone. Or for anyone."

Finn watched Elias's hands—steady, gentle. He thought about what Brandi had said the night before, that the mountain got to everyone, eventually.

Chloe couldn't help herself. "Were you here when they shot Starlet's Shadow?"

Elias smiled. "I wasn't even born yet, but my father was. He showed me the old sets before the forest took them back." He gestured up the ridge. "That knoll, over there, used to be the corral. You can still see the posts if you know where to look. And the springhouse—" he pointed through the pines "—they built it for a scene, then left it."

Brandi nodded, remembering. "Hazel always said the mountain makes better sets than plywood ever could."

Elias set the box down, knelt, and ran a hand along the burnt edge of the ponderosa. "She loved this place. More than Hollywood ever could understand. They thought she came here to hide from the press, but she came to be part of the mountain."

Finn noticed something in Elias's tone—a soft, mournful respect. "You believe she meant to come back?"

Elias nodded, still staring at the tree. "Or never really left."

Chloe knelt beside him, close enough to touch the oilcloth herself. "There's a key, too. For Town Hall. You ever see the basement?"

Elias looked up, his eyes bright. "Never been below, but the clerk says the whole place is a warren of lost things. Files, evidence, things the town outgrew but couldn't throw away."

Chloe grinned. "That's the best kind of place."

A jolt of movement caught Finn's eye—just a flicker on the far side of the trail, something man-shaped, but gone before he could get a good look. He tensed, holding up a hand for quiet.

"Did you see that?" he whispered.

Randy went still, every sense locked in. "Where?"

Finn pointed. "By the rock fall. Looked like—" He hesitated, not wanting to sound paranoid. "Someone watching."

Brandi scanned the woods, lips pressed tight. Chloe, not quite whispering, said, "Is this the part where the villain sends in the minions?"

Finn ignored her and picked up the box. "Let's move."

They took the long way back, circling wide, and every so often Finn

would catch another glint, a scrap of color out of place, the hint of a figure always just ahead or behind. They never got a clear look. At the trailhead, Finn finally turned, squinting into the trees. The watcher was gone.

Elias lingered a step behind, gaze deep in the woods. “Don’t worry,” he said, voice low. “The mountain’s on your side.”

Chloe snorted, but her laugh was nervous. “Let’s hope the mountain has good WiFi.”

They loaded up in Randy’s truck, Finn riding shotgun, and as they pulled away, he glanced at the rearview. No one followed.

Chloe held the box in her lap the whole drive, like a kitten she meant to keep safe. Finn didn’t take his eyes off the road, but he felt the weight of it all—the key, the watcher, the ghost of a woman who might still be writing her own ending from some place just out of sight.

Duck Creek Village always looked smaller coming out of the woods than it did from the highway. From the ridgeline, the buildings pressed close along Movie Ranch Road, each one painted in a color that made up for how cold the winters got. By nine a.m., the bakery was already sending up a signal of steam and cinnamon that Finn could smell from the edge of the parking lot.

Inside, the warmth hit hard—a quick fog to the glasses, then the punch of fresh bread and coffee strong enough to cut through exhaustion. Finn led the way to a corner booth, one with a view of the whole shop. Randy pulled a chair so it creaked, and Brandi got right to work laying out the evidence: the box, the oilcloth bundle, the key, and the photocopied map from the archives, corners already soft from handling.

Chloe hovered, alternating between snapping photos and making quick notes in a battered reporter’s notebook. She had started a new section, “Evidence Log,” complete with bullet points and highlighter.

Brandi set down four mugs of coffee, then joined them, folding her arms and watching the room with the wariness of a seasoned gambler.

For a few blessed moments, the only sounds were the thumps of the espresso machine and the soft shush of pastries sliding into the display

case. Then the door opened with a gust of mountain air and a clatter of conversation.

At the next table over, two men in crisp fleece jackets were deep in a debate about property lines. Behind them, a pair of vacationers pecked at their phones, one reading aloud: "Thorne's got a meeting at Town Hall at ten. They say he's unveiling the 'Duck Creek Renaissance Project.'" The words hung in the air, heavy as syrup.

Randy leaned in. "He's moving fast."

Chloe set her phone on the table, face down. "He's already bought three places. The gift shop, the old Lodge, and the gas station, according to the Facebook group. People are mad, but nobody thinks they can stop it."

Finn spread the map, aligning it with the napkin holder and the edge of the table. "He's not just buying up land. He's targeting every anchor the town has. If he flips Movie Ranch Road, he wins."

Brandi's jaw set. "We have to get ahead of him. If Evelyn left something in Town Hall—something that proves Thorne's family forged the deeds, or that the land was never really theirs—it could freeze his whole operation."

Randy's coffee mug made a heavy sound on the tabletop. "And if we get caught snooping around, he'll bury us in lawsuits before we get a word out."

Chloe brightened. "Good thing we have the Key of Destiny." She cradled the brass key between her palms, reading the etched words again: TOWN HALL BASEMENT.

Finn studied the key under the bakery lights. It wasn't a standard cut; the grooves were deep, and the bow had a second inscription—barely visible, but there: a string of numbers that looked like a date.

Brandi noticed. "That's June seventeenth, 1954. Same as the note in the canister."

Finn tapped the table. "Tonight, after hours, we go in. I'll handle the lock. Chloe, you're with me for the archives—nobody navigates bureaucracy better. Brandi, can you give us cover if anyone comes looking?"

She grinned, not shy about her confidence. "You want a distraction, I'll bake up a pie fight."

Chloe's laugh turned heads, but she didn't care. She squeezed Finn's arm. "If we find proof, the press will eat it up. No way Thorne can spin it."

Randy finished his coffee, already bracing for trouble. "You'll need to move fast. Town Hall's cleaned by old man Larsen—he's deaf, but paranoid."

Chloe wrote this down. "Good. Maybe he'll tell us all his secrets if we bring a peace offering."

Finn pocketed the key, feeling its weight again, this time less like a burden and more like an invitation. The nerves were there, but so was the purpose—the sense that they were walking into someone else's story, but now with a shot at changing the ending.

Brandi collected the empty mugs and gathered the box. "We'll stash this in the kitchen safe. You get caught, they won't find anything on you."

Chloe dusted off her hands and stood. "Time to make history. Or at least some really good headlines."

They left Ground + Toasted together, stepping into the bright noon sun. The whole village was alive now, every shop window buzzing with rumors and possibilities. Across the street, a noticeboard advertised the town meeting, Thorne's name in fat black marker at the top.

Finn looked at Chloe, who was already halfway to the next clue, hair a mess and eyes on fire. He smiled, thinking how Evelyn would've approved.

They walked in step, ready for whatever the mountain—or the man in the suit—could throw at them next.

"Whatever Evelyn was hiding," Finn said, turning the key over in his hand, "Thorne's grandfather wanted it badly enough to forge documents. And now his grandson is back to finish the job."

Chloe slipped her hand into his, and together they crossed the street, aiming straight for the heart of the secret.

seven

the midnight archives

THE VILLAGE LAY QUIET, snow settling into the shallow ditches and lighting up the ground in a way the moon could never hope to. Finn and Chloe moved along the sidewalk with their hoods up, a pair of shadows stitched to the edge of Movie Ranch Road. Most houses were dark; only the odd porch light or television screen glowed behind thick curtains. Town Hall, if anything, looked even more abandoned than the rest—its log-cabin siding dark under a roof thick with ice, windows clouded by years of underfunded janitorial work.

They paused beneath the eaves, where a blue-tinted security lamp cast a soft circle over the front steps. Finn ran a glove along the banister, feeling for frost. The building exhaled heat into the cold, a slow rumble of old pipes and the faint, continuous hum of a furnace older than both of them combined.

“You ready?” Chloe asked. She bounced on her toes, half from cold, half from nerves.

Finn checked his watch—not because he cared about the time, but because it gave his hands something to do. “Should be clear until the next cleaning shift at five. They don’t even lock up on weekends, just trust the town.”

Chloe snorted. “I trust the town about as far as I can throw it. Which, by the way, is farther than you’d think.”

Finn smiled, but his eyes were all business. He checked the street

both ways before fishing out the brass key. Chloe angled her phone so the light hit it just right: “TOWN HALL BASEMENT,” etched by hand, the letters all caps and a little wobbly, as if the engraver was more used to labeling dog collars than municipal property.

“Moment of truth,” he said.

He went up first, keeping his back to the wall and moving with the easy caution of someone who’d opened more than a few forbidden doors in his life. Chloe followed, phone at the ready, the flashlight app painting the entry with sharp-edged shadows. She didn’t even bother to whisper; the air was so thick with quiet, even their breath sounded like a confession.

The main lobby was pure nostalgia: dusty banners from parades past, a plexiglass case displaying the first postmaster’s desk, and a giant map of the plateau that had faded to the color of bad tea. Behind the desk, a sign-in sheet waited for after-hours visitors, which Finn signed with a flourish: “Researcher – urgent archive work.” Chloe added a smiley face next to his name.

They didn’t speak until they were past the first hallway, then Finn whispered, “Watch for motion sensors. If it blinks, backtrack.”

Chloe nodded, gaze locked forward, but she still managed to absorb every detail: the snowshoes on the wall, the faded photo of some forgotten mayor, the faint chemical tang of floor polish.

The elevator, as expected, was decommissioned for “budget reasons.” That left the stairs—a narrow switchback set between cinderblock walls, the kind of space that funneled every sound and made it ten times louder.

Halfway down, Chloe froze. “Did you hear that?”

Finn tensed. He waited, but the only thing he caught was the soft, persistent vibration from the furnace. He relaxed, just a hair. “It’s nothing.”

“Pretty sure it’s never nothing,” she muttered, but followed him down.

At the base of the stairs, the concrete floor spread out in three directions. The lighting was minimal: a bare bulb at the top of each hallway, giving the place the look of an unfinished film set.

The door they wanted wasn’t hard to spot. Unlabeled, its paint the

same institutional green as the walls, but the keyhole was new—a brass cylinder that gleamed against the chipped surface.

Finn held the key up to the light. “Here goes.”

The metal slid in clean, but the lock resisted for a heartbeat—a little snap of tension in the wrist—before giving way with a muffled click. Finn eased the door open, careful not to let it bang the stopper.

It was pitch black inside.

“Let me,” Chloe whispered, flicking her phone light forward.

The beam lanced out, cutting through the dust. The room was much bigger than Finn expected, the ceiling low, walls lined with battered gray filing cabinets and towers of cardboard banker boxes. In the center, an old AV cart stood like a monument, its wheels permanently bent under the weight of a projector that looked like it could have survived the first nuclear tests.

“Welcome to the home of lost things,” Chloe breathed.

Finn stepped in first, shining his own light along the ceiling for signs of wires or sensors. Nothing. He closed the door behind them, and the sound of the latch echoed like a gunshot.

They split up: Finn stuck to the walls, scanning for anything that looked like a second entrance or an escape hatch; Chloe gravitated to the AV cart, hands trembling just a little as she ran her finger over the rusted projector controls.

“This is like stumbling onto a secret director’s cut,” she whispered. “If Spielberg had been a hoarder.”

Finn ignored the joke and started testing cabinet drawers, working one after another with the quick, silent rhythm of someone trying not to leave fingerprints. Most were empty, or stuffed with old forms—dog tags, firework permits, property-tax threats from thirty years ago. But then he hit one with a little more weight to it: a folder, thick and gray, labeled “Production—Starlet’s Shadow (1954).”

He carried it over to Chloe, who was already lost in the smell of crumbling film stock and brittle tape. “Look at this,” Finn said.

Chloe gasped—actually gasped, like a kid on Christmas. She snatched the folder and flipped it open, letting the contents spill out over the projector’s scuffed metal hood. Inside: handwritten cue sheets, a script marked up in three colors of ink, and a pile of black-and-white

contact prints. Some showed actors in costume, others featured the set under construction, and one, at the bottom, was a candid shot of Evelyn St. Claire. She stood on a rocky overlook above the village, staring out over the valley, her hair loose and wind-tangled, her eyes so alive it hurt to look at her for too long.

"This is a goldmine," Chloe whispered.

Finn reached for the script, but Chloe clung to it. "Hold on. The best part is always in the footnotes."

He let her scan. Instead, he moved to the next banker box, opening it to reveal an entire stack of film canisters, some labeled in the same faded marker, others bare but for a piece of masking tape and a date.

"Did you know about this?" Chloe said, voice edged with awe.

"Nope. Nobody did. It's not on any of the plans. No reference in the archives index."

Chloe glanced up, a wild spark in her eye. "Do you think this is the original? Like, the actual reel?"

Finn shrugged, then nodded. "Feels right."

She grinned. "Then we just found the lost cut."

There were so many boxes. Chloe lost herself in the rows, finding treasures with every handful: more canisters, call sheets, letters on onion-skin paper, a whole roll of Polaroids rubber-banded together and marked "Do Not Develop." She laughed aloud, then clapped a hand over her mouth.

Finn paused in his sweep of the perimeter, eyebrows raised. "Keep it down."

"Sorry, but look!" She waved the Polaroid roll. "This is the smoking gun, or at least the behind-the-scenes bonus feature."

He couldn't help it—he smiled. It was impossible not to, with Chloe's enthusiasm bouncing off every surface. He scanned the door, listened for footsteps, then checked his watch again. Time was slipping by, faster than he wanted.

He moved closer, lowering his voice. "Let's pack as much as we can carry. If Thorne or anyone else is after this, we need to make sure they can't just walk in and clean it out."

Chloe nodded, suddenly all business. "We split it. I'll take the photos and the small reels. You grab the ledgers and the paperwork."

They loaded up, stuffing their finds into Finn's pack and a battered tote Chloe found under the cart. Every so often, she'd pause, unable to resist reading a snippet of script or tracing a thumb along the edge of a photograph. Finn let her, but kept glancing at the door, waiting for the luck to run out.

When the bags were full, Finn took one last sweep of the room. He stopped at the projector, stared at it for a long second, then unplugged it and slipped the power cord into his coat pocket.

"Really?" Chloe said, eyebrow up.

"Never know when you'll need leverage," Finn replied.

They were halfway to the door when Chloe froze, staring at the bottom shelf of a battered bookcase. "Wait."

She reached in, knuckles grazing the rough concrete, and drew out a battered envelope. "This wasn't in a box," she said. "Someone meant to come back for it."

Finn took it, holding it to the light. It was thick, unsealed, and packed with loose pages. He opened it and let the stack fall to his palm. The top page was a letter, written in the same slanted hand as the note from the film canister. But this one was addressed to Evelyn herself.

Chloe leaned in, reading aloud: "If you're reading this, they found out. Don't trust the studio. Don't trust anyone but the mountain." She looked up, skin pale in the glow of her phone. "She left it for herself?"

Finn checked the page, flipping it over. "Or for whoever found it next."

Chloe tucked the envelope into the pack, her expression gone thoughtful. "I don't think this is just about the land. She was protecting something bigger."

Finn nodded, and for a second, he let himself imagine the mountain as more than just a heap of rock and snow—a thing that cared about what happened to people like Evelyn, and maybe even to people like him and Chloe.

They eased out, closing the door behind them. Finn twisted the lock, and it latched with a soft, final snap. They took the stairs two at a time, heads ducked, hearts pounding with the thrill of a clean getaway.

Outside, the air hit them like a slap—sharp, freezing, and absolutely alive. Chloe was grinning, eyes wild, arms full of history.

“That,” she said, “was the coolest thing I’ve ever done.”

Finn let himself laugh, just a little. “Not bad for a Tuesday night.”

He checked the street again, then motioned her down the block. “Let’s get this to Ground + Toasted. We can sort it there, and if anyone’s following us, they’ll have to get past Brandi’s cinnamon buns first.”

Chloe walked backward for a few steps, watching the lights of Town Hall fade behind them. “You realize we just stole from a government building, right?”

Finn shrugged, hands buried in his jacket. “You said it yourself. Some stories are worth breaking the rules for.”

They disappeared into the darkness, the echo of their footsteps the only proof they’d ever been there at all.

The bakery was closed, but Brandi had left the side door unlocked for them—her idea of plausible deniability. Finn led the way in, holding the tote of contraband close, and Chloe tiptoed behind with her backpack slung over one shoulder, clutching the envelope as if it might vanish if she let go. The kitchen was silent except for the occasional click from the proofing oven. The air was tinged with sweet yeast and cooling loaves, which did absolutely nothing to settle Finn’s nerves.

They ducked into the back office, squeezing between racks of flour sacks and stacks of order forms. Finn cleared a space on the prep table, then spread their haul out under the naked bulb that Brandi insisted was “vintage, not just old.” Chloe set the canisters down with theatrical care, then popped a squat on the table’s edge, boot heels leaving smudges on the laminate.

Finn went for the folder first, flipping through a half-dozen contact sheets before Chloe could even get her phone out. “Let’s start with the diary,” she said, voice low, eyes sparking with anticipation.

He handed her the battered journal, which had the sort of heft that came from decades of secrets. The leather was worn smooth at the corners, and the first few pages had been thumbed so often they had

rounded like the edge of a river stone. Chloe opened it delicately, as if it might breathe.

She read aloud, voice slow and careful: "April 5th, 1954. The first day on set. The director keeps calling me 'the girl with two faces'—one for the camera, one for the crew. I think he means it as a compliment. I think I hate him." She snorted, then turned the page.

Finn peered over her shoulder, reading the script of someone who had learned penmanship before TV. The entries began casual, even playful, but as the weeks passed, the tone darkened: "He's watching me again. The man from the studio. Says he's protecting me, but I can hear him on the phone at night, always the same words: 'If she won't sign, find a way to make her.'"

Chloe's finger tapped a line. "This is the good stuff."

Finn grunted. "Assuming any of it's real."

She looked up, incredulous. "People don't fake fear like this, Finn."

He let her have the point. "Keep going."

Chloe did, voice dropping to a near-whisper. "May 27th. The notary came. They want me to sign the land trust over to the studio. I refused, and he left angry, said no one would ever find me up here if I disappeared." She turned the page, then pointed at a streak across the bottom: "That's a bloodstain."

Finn leaned in, but Chloe shook her head. "Ketchup. Has to be. No one just bleeds on their journal and then keeps writing."

"Unless they're making a statement."

She read the next page. "June 9th. It isn't safe to leave anything above ground. I buried the first proof in Red Canyon, where the sun hits at noon. The second goes to Ashdown Gorge. The third... haven't decided yet. If they catch me, I hope the mountain will remember what I did."

They both went silent, the only sound the hum from the fridge unit.

Chloe turned the page and gasped, holding it out for Finn to see. Taped to the inside cover was a tiny hand-drawn map, the paper so thin it was nearly translucent. Three X's, each marked with a date: Red Canyon, Ashdown Gorge, Powell Point. There was an arrow from the center, with "Begin Here" scrawled beside it.

Finn took a photo of the map, then folded it back in place. "She was serious."

Chloe beamed. "It's like the world's coolest scavenger hunt, only the stakes are actual history."

Finn reached for the letter addressed to Evelyn. "Let's see if there's more."

The envelope was thick with loose notes—some on hotel stationery, some just ripped from yellow pads. Most were lists: "People I trust: Hazel, maybe the mailman. People I don't: everyone else." The handwriting started steady but grew jagged with each sheet, as if the writer had become less herself with every word.

One sheet, written in all caps, said: "IF ANYONE READS THIS—TRUST THE FILM. THE FILM DOESN'T LIE."

Chloe let the silence soak in, then whispered, "That's almost poetic."

Finn disagreed, but he didn't say it. He scanned the rest of the folder, looking for signatures, but every page ended with the same dashed-off initials: ESC.

He glanced up at Chloe, who was turning the diary over and over in her hands. "What do you think happened to her?" he asked.

She didn't answer at first, just traced a finger along the spine. "I think she was scared. And I think she was right to be."

Finn opened his mouth to reply, but a loud clatter in the front of the bakery snapped both of them alert. He moved quick, killing the light, then pressed himself against the doorframe, listening.

Footsteps—a single pair, heavy, deliberate. Not Brandi or Randy; too slow, too loud. Finn motioned to Chloe, who scooped the diary and the map into her pack, then followed him into the dark hall. They ducked low, crouching behind a tower of flour sacks just as the footsteps neared.

A flashlight beam swept the office, lingering on the abandoned canisters. A voice, sharp and edged: "You sure it's here?"

Another voice, this one older, nervous. "I swear. Saw them come in. They've got something from the records—maybe the film."

Finn felt his stomach drop. Marcus Thorne.

He peeked through a gap in the flour sacks. Thorne stood in the

doorway, suit sharp even in the bad light. Behind him, the Town Clerk, pale and sweating, clutching a manila folder.

"Find it," Thorne snapped. "I'll handle the rest."

The clerk stumbled inside, started rifling through drawers and boxes, making a mess of everything. Thorne watched, cold, hands in his pockets.

Finn inched back, barely breathing. Chloe squeezed his hand, her fingers cold and clammy. They waited, hearts pounding, as the clerk overturned a bin of old calendars, then pounced on the folder Finn had left on the table.

"Here!" the clerk hissed.

Thorne took the folder, flipping through it with expert speed. His mouth twisted. "Nothing. Just old scripts and garbage." He tossed it onto the table, then scanned the room. His eyes lingered on the canisters, the empty AV cart, and for a second, Finn thought he would see them.

But the footsteps receded. Thorne's voice dropped to a hiss. "If you don't find that film, you'll be answering to the board. And to me."

The bakery door slammed, and the silence returned.

Finn and Chloe sat frozen for a long minute, then dared to breathe.

"That was close," Chloe whispered, voice so thin it barely made a sound.

Finn nodded, then helped her to her feet. "We need to get out. Now."

They crept out the back, into the freezing night, diary and map pressed tight between them. The moon was lower now, the village deep in sleep.

They didn't talk until they'd crossed the parking lot and hit the shadows of the old sawmill. Only then did Chloe let out a shaky laugh.

"I feel like we're in the second act of a thriller," she said.

Finn checked behind them, then at the horizon. "Yeah," he said, "and the villain just changed the game."

They ran the rest of the way, holding the map as if it was the only thing tethering them to the truth.

Finn and Chloe doubled back through the side streets, sticking to the unlit routes behind the abandoned cabins and the shadowed edges of the post office. Chloe's lungs burned, both from the sprint and from the cold that sliced through her three layers of thrifted sweaters. Finn was silent, his eyes everywhere, never stopping long enough for their pursuer to catch up. At the edge of the village, they cut through the back lot behind the historical society, climbed a drainage ditch, and found themselves beneath the blind side of Town Hall.

They ducked into the crawlspace beneath the building's annex, an old maintenance tunnel Finn had mapped as a kid. The space was tight, the air sour with trapped moisture and ancient carpet glue. But it was safe, at least for a while.

They crouched in darkness, the only light the faint blue of Chloe's phone, screen dialed down to preserve the battery. Finn didn't dare speak until his heartbeat calmed. When it did, he whispered, "They'll check the bakery again. And probably here."

Chloe nodded, then drew the diary out of her pack, cradling it like a relic. "We can't stay long," she said. "But I want to look one more time before we go."

He watched as she flipped to the last pages. There, in Evelyn's looping script, was the entry she'd read earlier: "I've split the truth into three parts and hidden them where only the mountain can find them. If something happens to me, the land will still be protected." Next to it, in a different pen, was a hurried scrawl—almost a postscript: "Trust only the ones who listen. The rest will forget."

Finn considered that. "You think it means Elias?" he asked, voice barely above the hum of the furnace vent overhead.

Chloe shrugged. "I think it means anyone willing to believe her side of the story."

She folded the diary shut, and for a moment, they just listened to the village—wind rattling the aluminum gutters above, a dog barking on the next block, a lone snowmobile revving somewhere out near the lake.

Then, suddenly, footsteps. Heavy, slow, measured. Not Finn's or Chloe's. Not the cleaning crew, either—too careful, too aware. They

heard the outside basement door squeal open, then a cough, then voices.

Chloe's hand clamped Finn's wrist, fingers digging deep. They pressed themselves flat against the concrete, not daring to breathe.

The voices grew louder, echoing down the corridor: Thorne and the Town Clerk, less than a wall away.

Finn caught the words through the vent: "You said the files would be here," Thorne spat. "That girl had something. I saw the log. She signed in as a researcher."

The Clerk's voice trembled. "I... I checked. But some of the old legal boxes are missing. Maybe in the auxiliary archive, maybe in the safe—"

Thorne cut him off. "We're running out of time. My grandfather's letters said everything depended on the trust. If we can't find it, it's all for nothing."

A long pause. Then Thorne again, lower, colder. "If those kids get to it first, you're out of a job. Maybe worse. Do you understand?"

Chloe shivered, and Finn put a steadying hand on her back. The voices moved, fading into another section of the building, but they didn't dare shift for a long time.

When Finn finally risked a peek, he saw the beam of a flashlight slicing through the cracks in the vent, then receding. He counted to fifty before whispering, "They're gone."

Chloe let out a shaky breath. "We need to get to the first X. Before he does."

Finn agreed. "Red Canyon. At noon, the sun hits the exact spot."

Chloe zipped the diary into her pack. "Then we need to move."

They scrambled out of the crawlspace, careful not to leave prints in the thawing snow. By the time they reached the main street, the only sign of life was a pair of headlights prowling slowly up and down the block. Finn and Chloe kept to the shadows, sticking to fences and alleys, until they were well clear of the village.

They didn't speak until they reached the safety of the woods. Then Chloe, a wild grin on her face, said, "This is the part where the heroes split up, right?"

Finn shook his head, deadpan. "You're not getting rid of me that easy."

She laughed, and for the first time in hours, it sounded real.

They hiked through the forest toward the trailhead, the map and the diary pressed between them like a pact. Above, the sky was starting to pale—just the faintest promise of sunrise, and with it, a new chance at the truth.

By the time they made it through the last stand of aspens, the village was starting to thaw. Frost glittered on the roofs; a couple of ravens were already arguing over the dumpster behind the pizza place. Finn kept one hand on the strap of his pack, the other wrapped tight around the edge of the map. Chloe was buzzing, but trying to look casual—her idea of inconspicuousness was to walk with her chin up and hum the theme to *Mission: Impossible* under her breath.

They rounded the corner of the bakery, which was still shuttered and dark, and found a patch of sunlit concrete by the side entrance. Finn checked the alley; clear. Chloe peeled off her gloves and flipped open the diary.

“Let’s go over it one more time,” she said, spreading the map out over her knees.

Finn nodded, but his eyes never stopped scanning the sightlines. “Red Canyon. Noon. That’s the first X.”

Chloe traced the route with her finger, lips moving as she counted the switchbacks. “We can make it in three hours if we cut cross-country. Unless the snow’s deeper than we think.”

She looked up at Finn, her face lit with a sort of wild, unfiltered hope. “You think this is really going to work?”

He shrugged. “Worked for her. And she had less gear than we do.”

Chloe grinned, then pulled the diary out, flipping through the last few entries again. “She really was a badass. You read the bit about the snake in her bed?”

“Yeah,” Finn said, “but I bet the studio put it there.”

Chloe considered that, then laughed. “The mountain has more integrity than any of those guys.”

They sat in silence, the adrenaline wearing off, exhaustion rushing

in to fill the gap. A delivery truck rumbled by, leaving a smell of burnt diesel and fresh donuts in its wake. Finn glanced at Chloe, then at the sky, then back to the street.

He was the first to see Elias.

The forest hermit didn't so much appear as step out of the place between two moments—one second, there was empty sidewalk; the next, a man with a beard full of ice and a jacket older than most of the town's buildings. He walked with a purpose, but not a hurry, and paused a good ten feet from the table where Finn and Chloe sat.

Chloe went stiff. "Uh... do you know him?"

Finn nodded, just once. "He's helped me before. Off the books."

Elias's eyes landed on the diary, then the map, then on Finn himself. "You made good time," he said, his voice a little rough, like it came from deeper in the woods than he did.

Chloe tried for humor. "If you're here for the sourdough, we haven't broken in yet."

Elias's lips twitched. "I'm here for the story. And for the ones who don't let go when the trail gets weird."

He took a step closer, then crouched so his eyes were level with the table. "She left more than memories," he said, nodding at the diary. "You know what happens at Red Canyon at noon?"

Finn shrugged, but Chloe was eager. "That's where she filmed the shadow scene. The last day. But the notes say it's about the light, not the view."

Elias nodded, impressed. "You have to see it to understand. Most days, the sun splits the canyon in half. But on the solstice—today—it lines up so the shadow points directly to the old spring. That's where she hid the reel."

Chloe's jaw dropped. "That's the coolest thing I've ever heard."

Elias looked at Finn. "You'll need to beat the developer's crew. They'll be at the rim by noon, but they won't know where to look."

Finn nodded. "We'll move fast. Is there another way in?"

Elias smiled. "There's always another way. The trick is listening to the rock, not the map."

He stood, dusted his hands on his pants, and stepped back. "The mountain's been waiting a long time. Don't keep her waiting anymore."

With that, he vanished—back into the morning, or maybe the trees, or maybe just into the kind of story Duck Creek was built for.

Finn and Chloe watched him go. For a long second, neither spoke. Then Chloe closed the diary, rolled up the map, and looked at Finn.

“We’re really doing this,” she said.

Finn grinned, the edge of worry falling away for the first time since all this started. “Yeah,” he said. “We are.”

They hoisted their packs and walked into the light, two new guardians of a secret old as the mountain. And this time, Finn let himself believe that maybe, just maybe, the story would end the way it was supposed to.

eight

red canyon revelations

IF THE WORLD had ever needed proof that time travel was possible, Finn would have nominated Red Canyon in the hour after sunrise. The place looked exactly like it did in the 1950s promo reels—strata of garish rust, ochre, and even a hint of cobalt if you squinted—but unlike in the black-and-white westerns, today’s air was so dry it scraped the back of your throat on the way down. They’d parked the truck at the end of a Forest Service road and started the hike with boots still damp from the morning’s snowmelt.

Chloe’s first impression: “This is what Mars would look like if it had air and a sense of narrative.” She said it lightly, but her breathing had already picked up from the climb.

Elias led the way, silent except for the crunch of gravel underfoot. He moved with the unhurried confidence of a man who spent most of his life outside, every motion measured against the cost of calories and the risk of drawing attention. Finn came next, always glancing left and right, occasionally kneeling to study the ground or a clutch of dry moss on a sunbaked boulder. Chloe drifted between them, sketchbook in one hand, other hand trailing along the wind-scoured rock.

They didn’t bother with small talk. The hike demanded enough of them already.

A mile in, Finn stopped and crouched at a fan of dirt below the lee

of a rock. He pressed his gloved finger beside a set of fine, dotted lines that ran in quick arcs before vanishing into a clump of sage.

"That's a desert cottontail," Finn said, voice so low it barely rose above the wind. "See how the paws splay, almost like a V? And then the scat. Perfect little spheres."

Chloe peered over his shoulder, shading her eyes with her sketchbook. "They always make it look cuter in cartoons."

Finn shrugged. "They're food for literally everything out here. They don't have time to be cute."

Elias gave a dry chuckle, then pointed with his chin up the trail. "Movie folks used to bait them with carrots near the sets. Sometimes the rabbits ended up in the stew instead."

Chloe made a face, but Finn just brushed the dirt from his hands and kept moving. He had a way of returning to his feet with the elasticity of a cat, never needing to brace or grunt. Chloe tried to mimic it, but she nearly lost her balance and ended up grabbing Finn's elbow for stability.

"Sorry," she muttered, but Finn just steadied her, no judgment.

They rounded a bend and the landscape opened up, a shallow bowl framed by towering cliffs the color of oxidized pennies. In the center, a slumping fence of split rails surrounded a clearing the size of a tennis court. Finn scanned the boundary, then headed for the gate, which hung loose from one remaining post.

"Was this a ranch?" Chloe asked, eyes wide as she took in the site.

"Starlight Productions built it for one movie," Elias said. "Then used it for every other picture. They called it 'the ranch' even after the buildings burned down. You can see the fire line, there." He gestured at a ring of blackened stone, half-swallowed by the ground.

Chloe pulled out her phone and snapped a dozen photos, moving clockwise around the clearing. "I saw this exact spot in a lobby card for 'Starlet's Shadow,'" she said, more to herself than to anyone else. "Evelyn's tied to the fence, and the villain is about to... I forget, but it's a great shot."

Elias nodded, gaze fixed on the way the sunlight cut sharp edges on every shadow. "She hated that scene. Said the knots were too tight, and they filmed it on a cold day. Her wrists bled."

Finn ignored the commentary and paced the perimeter. He paused at a pile of collapsed lumber, then called to Chloe: "See the nails on this side? They're old-style, square-cut. Pre-1955." He pried one loose, showing her the iron spike, then pocketed it without explanation.

Chloe arched an eyebrow. "You collect nails now?"

"Sometimes they have clues," Finn replied, deadpan.

The trio fanned out, Chloe photographing and sketching, Finn sweeping methodically for anomalies, and Elias simply watching. There was a quiet to the place—no bird calls, no engine sounds, just the relentless, shifting wind and the dry click of beetles in the grass. It made every movement feel too loud.

Chloe found herself drawn to the largest standing feature: a wall of stacked stone, blackened but still holding together. The inside was hollowed out, floor swept by years of wind and dust.

"This is where the big standoff happened," she said. "The climax. You can almost see the actors running out, then ducking behind the wall while the stunt guy in the fake mustache does a somersault."

Finn joined her at the ruins. He circled once, then pointed to a line of faded boot prints fossilized in the cemented sand. "Different tread than ours. Recent."

Chloe squatted to see. "Could be hikers?"

Finn shook his head. "Nobody hikes out here without a dog, and there's no dog prints. These are size twelve, maybe. Soles are expensive—look at the arch."

Chloe glanced at her own boots, then at Finn's. "Definitely not us, then."

"Could be Thorne's people," Finn said. "He's got local contractors. Maybe they're doing recon."

Elias chimed in, voice softer than before. "Or maybe the mountain has its own guards." He grinned, but the joke landed flat.

Chloe switched gears and flipped through her notes from the diary. "The clue says, 'Where the light creates the perfect shadow at noon.' Which is—" She checked her watch, did some math. "We've got forty minutes until the sun's directly overhead."

Elias pointed up the canyon wall. "That's where they shot the scene."

You see how the rock bulges, like a nose? At noon, the shadow falls straight down and points to the fire ring.”

Chloe gawked at the symmetry. “Did they build the set to match the geology?”

Elias shrugged. “Or they wrote the story to fit the rocks.”

They made their way up the sloped canyon floor, climbing between boulders the size of SUVs and shrubs that looked half-dead but were probably just in seasonal denial. Finn set the pace, but Chloe insisted on pausing every so often to jot a line or scribble a quick outline. She was determined to capture the moment, even if the sketch didn’t survive the wind.

The ascent was short but punishing. The sun was higher now, burning the exposed skin on the back of Chloe’s neck, and by the time they reached the overlook, her shirt was pasted to her spine with sweat. Finn didn’t look winded at all; he stood, hands on hips, scanning the whole canyon as if memorizing it.

Chloe set down her pack and looked over the edge. The ranch set was a dollhouse below, the rails casting perfect lines on the dust. She flipped to a fresh page in her sketchbook, then looked at Finn. “You think Evelyn planned this?”

Finn glanced at the diary in her hand. “She wrote everything down. She probably rehearsed the scene at home, blocked out the sun’s angles, made sure it would be dramatic.” He shielded his eyes and pointed at the far cliff. “If you stand there at noon, you’ll see the shadow reach the fire ring.”

Elias settled on a patch of moss and closed his eyes, as if tuning into some frequency only he could hear.

Chloe watched the light change. The sun rose, the colors intensified, and the shadows shrank until there was only one left—a sharp, perfect line bisecting the clearing.

Chloe nudged Finn. “It’s almost time.”

He checked his compass, then the position of the sun. “Give it three minutes. When the shadow lines up with the boulder, we move.”

Chloe fidgeted, tried to draw, then gave up and just watched. She could feel Finn’s tension, even if he was too stoic to admit it. Elias

hummed softly, a song Chloe didn't recognize but found oddly comforting.

When the shadow finally hit the mark, Finn didn't hesitate. "Let's go."

They scrambled down the slope, Finn first, Chloe a half-step behind, Elias moving last but always sure-footed. They hit the bottom just as the shadow's tip grazed the edge of the fire ring.

Finn dropped to his knees and started brushing away loose sand. "It has to be here," he said.

Chloe joined him, digging with both hands. Elias stood back, watching the sun and the walls of the canyon like a sentry.

After a minute, Finn's fingers caught on something hard. He pried it loose—a tin the size of a sardine can, corroded but intact. He held it up, triumphant.

"Is that it?" Chloe asked, voice hushed.

Finn nodded, wiped the dirt off with his sleeve. "Only one way to know."

He popped the lid with a careful twist. Inside was a folded packet of waterproof paper, tied with twine, and a single strip of black-and-white film, wound tight and taped at the edge.

Chloe gaped. "That's got to be the lost reel."

Finn handed the film to Chloe, who held it up to the sun. The image was ghostly, but she could make out the shapes: three people at the fence, one with a cowboy hat, one in a dress, one in a suit. Evelyn, the villain, and someone else—maybe Hazel, the chef. The focus was strange, but the drama was there in every grain of emulsion.

Elias knelt, picked up the packet of paper, and untied it. He scanned the writing, then passed it to Finn. "It's legal stuff. Deed transfers, notary records. The real history."

Finn read the top page, then looked at Chloe. "She wasn't just acting. She was making sure nobody could rewrite the ending."

Chloe smiled, lightheaded from the sun and the thrill of it all. "We just solved a seventy-year-old cold case."

They sat in the dust, catching their breath, letting the silence refill the canyon. Chloe looked at Finn, saw the way his jaw unclenched, and realized he was finally letting himself feel proud.

Elias hummed the last note of his tune, then looked up at the sky. "The mountain remembers what people forget."

Finn didn't answer. He just sat, holding the can, as if it was the only thing in the world that needed holding.

They waited for the shadow to pass, then started the slow walk home.

Noon came on with a vengeance, the desert sky more blinding blue than anyone back in the village would believe. The three of them huddled at the base of the battered fire ring, squinting up as the shadow crept closer. It was the kind of moment Finn lived for—not because he loved drama, but because, out here, nature did half the storytelling for you. He checked his watch, then the angle of the sun, then the way Chloe was nearly vibrating out of her skin with anticipation.

"Five seconds," he said, barely audible. Chloe practically held her breath.

The shadow inched over the canyon floor, losing all its blur as it struck the wall—then, perfectly, it resolved into a shape Finn hadn't noticed in all his trips here. Not just a line, but a contour: a profile of an old film camera, lens and all, the kind used in every behind-the-scenes photo from Duck Creek's "Little Hollywood" days.

"There!" Chloe blurted, jabbing a finger at the wall. "It's like an Easter egg for cinephiles. I knew she'd do something theatrical."

Finn followed her gaze, then traced the shadow to its endpoint. There, in the sun-bleached face of the stone, a sliver of dark cut horizontally—almost invisible until you looked straight on. He didn't waste time; he set down his pack, wedged a hand into the gap, and felt a scrape of metal against skin.

"It's deep," Finn said. "I'll need a light."

Chloe, already ready with her phone, used the flashlight app to cut through the gloom. Finn could see now: a rusted can wedged tight, and behind it, a cylinder capped in what looked like old wax.

He worked the can loose, careful not to crush it. The label, faded but legible, read "Reel Two—Final Edit." Finn handed it to Chloe, who

cradled it like a rare egg, then reached for the cylinder. The wax broke under his thumb, revealing a waterproof plastic container that looked newer than the canister—someone must have re-hid the evidence after the initial stash.

Elias watched, expression solemn, but he didn't move to help. It was as if he knew the mountain demanded witnesses more than participants.

Chloe broke the seal on the plastic, then slowly tipped the contents into her palm: a thick wad of photographs, each sleeved in archival plastic, and a set of folded legal papers. Her fingers shook as she fanned out the first few pictures.

"Holy—" she started, then caught herself. "These are all dated, Finn. Every one. And look—county stamps on the margins."

Finn leaned in. The images were stark: a room in the old Town Hall, the notary's desk, and—centered in three frames—Thomas Thorne, hair perfectly slicked back, forging a signature on what could only be the disputed land deed. Next to him, in one shot, stood a woman whose face was shadowed, but whose profile matched Evelyn's in every studio portrait. Finn picked up the sequence, flipping from photo to photo, then at the documents themselves.

"These are originals," Finn said. "Look—the thumbprint, here, is smudged exactly like the one in the archive copy. She must have staged this to prove it was a forgery."

Chloe was already scanning the legal documents, eyes darting back and forth. "This one's notarized in the next county over. She must have had a second copy filed, just in case." She looked at Finn, eyes wide and bright. "This is exactly what we needed. It's not just a story—it's case law."

Elias reached out, slow and deliberate, and touched the edge of the canister. He didn't smile, but his voice was lighter than Finn had ever heard it. "She always said the land would tell the truth if you waited long enough."

Chloe, never one for silence, started piecing together the timeline aloud. "So she staged the shots, left the originals here, and then made sure the studio only got the cleaned-up version. It's classic noir. She didn't just want to survive—she wanted to win the sequel."

Finn grunted, impressed. "And she made sure nobody could erase her. That's the kind of planning that gets you killed, or canonized."

Chloe snorted. "Or both."

The three of them sat with the evidence for a moment, letting the gravity set in. Finn, never one for ceremony, started sorting the photos and documents by date, already thinking ahead to how they'd get this past the Village's rumor mill without tipping off Thorne or the other interested parties.

Chloe watched him work, then thumbed through the reel. "Think we should try to play it?" she asked. "It might have a message."

Elias shrugged. "If it's meant to be seen, it'll survive a little light."

Finn weighed the risk, then nodded. "Back at the bakery. Brandi's got the old projector and a blackout curtain in the back office."

Chloe zipped the canister and container into her pack, then hoisted it onto her shoulder. She looked at Finn, her expression half thrill, half nerves. "Let's get this home."

The shadow on the wall had already shifted, losing its camera shape as the sun arced westward. Finn glanced at Elias, who was already a step ahead, retracing their path with the same measured pace as before.

Chloe, as always, brought up the rear, but this time she was humming the opening theme from "Starlet's Shadow." Finn didn't mind; it matched the mood.

They left the canyon behind, carrying with them the last act of a drama seventy years in the making.

The hike out of Red Canyon felt different than the way in, like every step had a watcher. Chloe kept scanning the ridges, sure she'd see a coyote or a mountain lion, but the only movement was the wind kicking up trails of dust in the distance. Finn moved faster now, cutting the switchbacks where he could, glancing back every hundred yards. Elias brought up the rear, a little slower on the incline, but with the same unhurried dignity as before.

They hit the final saddle before the trailhead when Finn stopped cold, eyes narrowed. The others caught up, and before Finn could

peak, a sharp crackle echoed from the rocks above—like boots skidding on loose shale. Chloe was first to spot him: halfway up the slope, crouched behind a boulder, was the same man she'd seen in the woods days before. Only now he wasn't pretending to be invisible. He wore sunglasses and a parka that looked military-issue, and he held a pair of high-powered binoculars trained directly at their group.

Chloe nudged Finn. "That's our fan club," she whispered.

Finn nodded, then, without breaking stride, veered up the embankment toward the man. The watcher must have realized the game was up; he ducked, scuttled higher, then popped up to watch Finn's approach. Chloe followed at a safe distance, heart pounding hard enough she could feel it in her wrists. Elias hung back, expression unreadable.

As Finn crested the slope, the man tried a nonchalant act—lowered the binoculars, forced a friendly smile, but never quite hid the tension in his jaw.

"Lost?" Finn called out, tone flat.

The man shrugged, flashing teeth. "Just birdwatching. You know, red-tailed hawks. Beautiful country."

Finn didn't break pace, stopping close enough that the man had to step back or risk a collision. "You've been watching us since the trail-head. That's not birdwatching."

The man's smile wavered, then reappeared, a little thinner. "Just making sure no one gets into trouble out here. Corporate's got a liability clause."

Chloe stepped in, brandishing her phone as if it might shoot lasers. "Marcus Thorne sent you, right? You're not even trying to blend."

At the name, the man's expression changed—no more smile, just calculation. He backed up a few steps, but Finn blocked his retreat.

"Look," the man said, voice dropping, "I'm just supposed to keep an eye. If you found something, I need to report it. No harm, no foul."

Finn crossed his arms. "Or what?"

The man's bravado cracked. "Or I lose my job. Simple as that."

Chloe stepped closer, narrowing her eyes. "You know, I always wondered what kind of person took a gig as a professional stooge."

The man bristled. "It pays better than you think." Then, seeing no

sympathy, he bolted. It wasn't graceful—he nearly face-planted on the first patch of loose rock, then tumbled into a half-run, half-slide down the far side of the hill.

He dropped something in the scramble—Finn saw it bounce, then skitter to a stop near the lip of the ridge. Chloe was on it in a flash, grabbing the object: a battered phone, screen spiderwebbed but still glowing.

Finn called down to Elias, "He's gone. But we've got his phone."

Chloe turned the device over. "No passcode," she said, thumbing through the messages. "Wow. Either Thorne has no imagination, or he thinks we're too dumb to check." She read aloud: "Status update—still trailing. They're on target. If they find anything, retrieve and destroy." Chloe grinned. "Subtle."

Elias, finally catching up, shook his head. "Some people never learn from history."

Chloe scrolled farther, then froze. "There's a file here. Attachments. Thorne sent maps—he knew exactly where we were going." She looked at Finn, the excitement dimming a little. "He's not just trying to outsmart us. He's covering all his bases."

Finn took the phone, scanning quickly. He set his jaw, then looked back the way they'd come. "We need to move. He'll be waiting for us at the village."

They made the final descent in silence, each lost in thought. The sun was behind them now, throwing long, deep shadows over the road. By the time they reached the truck, the sky had gone from cobalt to a bruised indigo, and the first lights of Duck Creek Village were flickering on.

They drove straight to Ground + Toasted. The sign in the window glowed WELCOME, and inside, Brandi had already locked up for the night. She let them in with a wave, eyes widening as she saw Chloe's dirt-smeared face and Finn's grim set of his mouth.

"Trouble?" she asked, wiping her hands on her apron.

Chloe handed over the phone, then the canister and the documents. "We've got evidence," she said. "But we've also got a tail."

Brandi's eyes darted over the photos and the reel, then back to

Chloe. "You're safe here. Randy's at the counter. He's better than a bouncer."

Chloe leaned against the prep table, trying to slow her breathing. Finn joined Brandi at the back, filling her in on the man from the ridge, the chase, and the phone's contents. Chloe let her eyes wander the room, finally resting on a TV over the counter—a relic from the 1990s, usually tuned to weather or sports. But tonight, it blared the local news, and the crawl at the bottom of the screen made her stomach drop.

"Demolition scheduled for historic Duck Creek property," she read aloud. "Project manager Marcus Thorne to break ground tomorrow morning."

Finn's face darkened. He strode over, reading the crawl himself, then turned to the group. "He's moving up the schedule. He knows we have proof."

Chloe's hands balled into fists. "He's going to erase the cabin. That's what he wanted all along."

Elias set a calming hand on Chloe's shoulder. "The mountain doesn't forget. Neither will the people, once you show them."

Finn nodded, thinking fast. "We digitize everything tonight. Send copies to every media contact. Then we get to the site before Thorne does."

Brandi smiled, a little feral. "I'll have breakfast ready at five. Nobody fights on an empty stomach."

Chloe met Finn's eyes—tired, fierce, determined. "We're not letting him win."

Finn returned the look. "Not a chance."

They worked through the night, scanning, copying, sending emails with shaky hands and hearts fueled by black coffee and righteous anger. Outside, the village settled into uneasy darkness, but inside, the lights stayed on.

Whatever happened at sunrise, the truth would be waiting for it.

nine

the starlet's story

IF THERE WAS one place in Duck Creek that could host a séance with sourdough instead of spirits, it was the kitchen at Ground + Toasted. The air itself had a weight, soft and yeasty, the ghost of every loaf ever baked settling over the racks and mixing bowls. The counters were so dusted in flour, Finn suspected the finish on the wood was more gluten than lacquer. At five a.m., the only light was from a rack of LED strips above the oven bank, which gave everything a perpetual, contented glow.

Chloe rolled up her sleeves as she squeezed into the narrow prep area, careful not to jostle the bowl of rising dough that looked as if it might burst from its own ambition. Melinda, up to her elbows in the next batch, nodded a sleepy greeting and resumed slapping the dough with the practiced rhythm of a street drummer.

“Don’t mind the mess,” Brandi said, smoothing her apron, though she wore flour like a medal. “We run an open kitchen, meaning chaos is always on the menu.”

Randy was already present, perched on the stool nearest the coffee urn, hands folded with a patience that suggested he’d been there since the invention of time. Elias took his place quietly at the end of the counter, eyes drinking in every surface as if trying to memorize the pattern of crumbs on the table.

Brandi caught Finn’s glance and grinned. “You want to do the

honors?" She gestured at a serrated knife and the trio of loaves resting on the cooling rack.

Finn hesitated only a moment before stepping forward, feeling every eye on him. He picked up the knife, inhaled the aroma—a round-house punch of caramelized crust and a more subtle, tangy note that spoke of slow fermentation. He made the first cut, the crust shattering with a satisfying crackle, and sliced again, each wedge falling open to reveal a marbled, golden crumb.

Melinda abandoned her bowl for a second to watch. "That's the oldest starter batch," she said, like a proud parent. "Dates back to before my parents were born. Maybe even before Brandi's."

Brandi shot Melinda a look—affection and mock-scolding in equal measure. "If you must know, this starter was a gift. From my grandmother's boss. Evelyn St. Claire herself."

Chloe, who had been eyeing the bread like a museum piece, perked up. "No way. That's in the DNA of the place, then."

Randy poured himself and Elias fresh coffee, the old carafe steaming as he passed mugs down the line.

Brandi picked up the story. "She left it with Hazel—my grandma—when the movie wrapped. Said it was for luck. Hazel took it as gospel and kept it alive through every move, every hard winter." She looked at the loaf, hands spread as if invoking a benediction. "They called it 'remembrance bread.' You baked it for funerals, celebrations, or just when you needed to remember why you were doing all this in the first place."

Chloe set her phone to record, eyebrows arched. "Is it... haunted?"

Brandi laughed. "Only in the best way. But tradition's tradition. First slice goes to the newest voice in the room." She nodded at Finn.

Finn shrugged, though a flash of warmth ran through him. He took the end piece, still steaming, and set it on a plate.

Brandi handed Chloe a thick, pearlescent scoop of homemade berry jam. "You too," she said. "This is for the people who carry the story forward."

Chloe grinned, accepting her slice with both hands.

Melinda, a study in economy, took hers, slathered it with butter, and inhaled half of it before anyone else had sat down.

Randy and Elias each accepted their portions with quiet ceremony. Randy waited for everyone to be served before he bit in, while Elias stared at the crumb, ran a thumb over the crust, and only then took a deliberate, contemplative mouthful.

Brandi went last, cradling her own piece as if it was a note from an old friend.

For a heartbeat, the kitchen fell silent but for the sound of chewing and the hum of the proofing oven. Finn tasted the bread—first the sharp crackle of crust, then the interior, tangy and complex. It was less like food and more like the sensation of waking up early on a snow day, when the whole world was blank and possible.

Chloe's reaction was immediate: eyes wide, then half-lidded in bliss, then wide again as if she'd caught a flavor note she couldn't identify.

Melinda grunted, "Nailed it," and reached for another piece.

Brandi tilted her head, as if listening. "If you listen close, you can hear the story in it."

Chloe licked jam from her thumb and said, "You're not kidding. That's like... memories of something I haven't lived yet." She stopped, brow furrowed, and glanced at Finn. "Do you taste it, too?"

Finn was about to make a joke, but the sensation hit him. A warm tingle, rising from his chest, then radiating to the tips of his fingers. The smells in the kitchen—yeast, jam, coffee—grew sharper, but so did the echo of something older. For a second, Finn swore he could hear a film reel whirring, catch the tail end of a woman's laughter in a different room. It was as if every sense had dialed up to eleven.

Elias set his coffee down, slow and careful. His eyes didn't leave the bread. "Now that's interesting," he murmured.

Finn tried to speak, but his voice came out softer than he intended. "What's in this?"

Brandi wiped her hands on her apron, then rested her palms on the table, steadying herself. "Just the basics. But when you use the old starter, sometimes it brings more to the table than you expect."

Randy's brow furrowed. "You all feel that?"

Chloe nodded, her voice pitched high with nervous excitement. "It's like *deja vu*, but in technicolor."

Melinda, who had already gone for her third slice, just grinned. “Told you it was special.”

A quiet settled, not awkward but reverent. Finn felt as if the whole room was holding its breath.

Brandi broke the spell. “Let’s have a toast.” She lifted her coffee, then nodded for the others to join. “To old stories, new friends, and the kind of bread that never lets you forget.”

They clinked mugs. Even Elias participated, a faint smile creasing the edge of his beard.

They chewed, sipped, and for a moment, the world was reduced to the warm circle of the table. Finn thought about the night ahead—the plan to digitize the film, the certainty of confrontation at sunrise—but let it go, just for a second, in favor of this. He met Chloe’s gaze, saw the same shimmer in her eyes, and felt something click into place.

The air vibrated, not with sound, but with the pulse of shared memory. Brandi’s bread had set the stage; whatever happened next, they would face it as a unit.

And, Finn thought, if that starter could carry the essence of a vanished starlet forward through three generations of winter, maybe it could get them through one more hard day.

He finished his slice, savoring the last tang of berry jam, and waited for whatever came next.

For a moment, nothing happened. Finn watched the crumb on his plate soak up a bead of jam and thought maybe the mystical starter was more fable than fact.

Then the room tilted—not in the obvious, world-is-spinning way, but in a subtle, vertigo-slick roll that made Finn blink and lose the thread of his own breath. The air was sharp with the chemical snap of old film stock, and the light from the oven door seemed to flicker in time with the pulse of a whirring camera somewhere just out of sight.

Chloe gasped, not loud, but enough for Finn to catch it over the background hum. She gripped the table’s edge, knuckles whitening.

“Anyone else—” she started, but never finished.

The walls receded. Finn's focus telescoped down to a single sensation: the oily, intoxicating aroma of acetate and fresh-printed photos, spooled through a projector that lived on the edge of memory. The table was gone, replaced by a battered vanity scattered with black hairpins, lipsticks worn to nubs, and a half-finished bottle of bourbon.

He saw her in the mirror: Evelyn St. Claire, not as the world remembered her, but as she might have looked in the seconds between scenes. Hair ragged, roots showing; face half-made-up, one eye rimmed in kohl, the other bare. She pinched a cigarette between two knuckles, exhaled, and reached for a folder on the vanity. Finn watched as she opened it, hands trembling.

In the folder: a set of property deeds, all bearing her name, the ink still fresh. Behind them, tucked in a pocket, was another set—identical, but with a single word altered in each. The signatures were her own, but Finn felt the recoil in her chest as she realized the second set was a forgery. There was no explanation for how he knew her thoughts, but he did: she was afraid, but also angry in the precise way a cut-glass bottle was angry when dropped on concrete.

The vision flipped, like a splice in a reel. The scent changed—brine, sage, and the dry bite of wind on a remote ridge. Evelyn running—truly running, dress torn, shoes long since discarded, knees bleeding. She carried the folder close to her chest, scanning the tree line for movement. Every footfall was a message: move, move, move, or lose it all.

At the edge of the frame, a man appeared—Finn knew instantly, even in silhouette, that it was Thomas Thorne. He wore a suit like armor, hair so dark and smooth it caught the sun, and his shoes left no prints in the dust. He wasn't running; he never had to. He was already there, waiting at the next turn.

Evelyn doubled back, ducked behind a boulder, and reached for the canister hidden in her bag. She pulled out a length of film and wound it tight, then scribbled a note—her hand shaking, words nearly illegible—and sealed it all up. With every motion, Finn felt the push and pull of memory: the ache in Evelyn's wrist, the burn in her eyes, the absolute clarity that this moment was everything.

The vision cut again, this time to a small kitchen—Brandi's, but older, linoleum yellowed and peeling at the seams. Evelyn pressed the

starter into Hazel's hands. She looked older now, lips chapped, hair pinned back. "It's all that's left," she said, her voice gritty with tears she wouldn't let show. "Keep it alive. Someday, someone will need it."

Hazel nodded, never asking why.

The final cut was a long dissolve: Evelyn at the edge of Duck Creek Village, standing on a bluff at sunset, her silhouette silvered by the last light of the day. She was older—much older than the photos in the bakery, older than the stories. Her hair was pure white, skin lined but still defiant. She watched the village as if it was both sanctuary and trap, a place she could never truly leave or rejoin. Her hands rested on a walking stick, knuckles swollen but unbroken.

From behind her, a figure approached—at first, Finn thought it might be Thorne again, but as the shape resolved, it was instead a child. The girl's hair was the exact shade of Evelyn's, her posture half-hiding, half-seeking approval. Evelyn smiled, the only time in the vision that she did, and placed the walking stick in the girl's hands. There was no sound, but Finn understood the intent: This is your watch now.

The world snapped back to the bakery with such violence that Finn's eyes watered. He jerked upright, heart pounding. He tasted blood—must have bit his tongue—and the whine of the oven fan was as loud as any camera motor. For a second, he couldn't move.

Across the table, Chloe's face was sheet-white, her pupils so wide they nearly swallowed the color of her eyes. Brandi gripped the edge of her seat, mouth open, as if she'd just surfaced from underwater. Even Randy looked rattled, blinking and flexing his hands as if to remind himself they were real.

Melinda was the first to break the silence. "What the hell was that?"

Brandi's lips trembled, but she managed a whisper. "A memory. But not mine."

Elias exhaled, long and shaky. "Sometimes the land keeps what people leave behind," he said. "But I never thought it could travel through bread."

Chloe looked at Finn, and he saw the answer in her gaze before she spoke. "She didn't die," Chloe said, voice cracking on the word. "She chose to disappear."

Finn nodded, still too stunned to speak. The certainty of it was

absolute—he felt Evelyn's stubbornness in his own chest, the same unwillingness to give Thorne even the dignity of knowing where she'd gone.

Brandi wiped a tear from her eye, then covered it with a laugh. "Well, if I wasn't a believer before, I am now."

Randy steadied himself, then reached for the coffee pot. He poured another round, hands steady with every splash.

Finn tried to shake it off, but the sensation lingered—a deep, marrow-level knowing that Evelyn had left more than a starter behind. He glanced at Chloe, who was already scribbling in her notebook, hands shaking so bad she nearly tore the page.

"Did you see the map?" Chloe said, not looking up. "In the vision. She had the real deeds. The originals. Not the fakes."

Elias nodded. "She left them out there."

Finn thought of the way Evelyn's eyes had scanned the horizon, always searching for the next place to hide a part of herself. "The clues aren't just in the archives," he said. "They're in the wild."

Chloe grinned, all feral adrenaline. "Then we're going to need better shoes."

They sat in silence, every sense overclocked, until the sound of the oven timer brought them back to the here and now.

Brandi broke the bread into another round of slices, and this time, nobody joked about ghosts or memory. They just ate, and prepared for whatever the morning would bring.

The kitchen had cooled since the vision. Even with fresh loaves stacked on the racks and the last heat of the oven clinging to the walls, there was a draft in the air—something like the aftertaste of a storm. Chloe wiped a sleeve across her forehead, and for once, didn't care about the streak of flour she left behind.

She met Finn's gaze across the table, and saw in his eyes a weird mix of skepticism and belief. Not the skepticism of a doubter, but the practical, measured resistance of someone who'd seen just enough to question his own boundaries.

Brandi cleared her throat, the sound a little tremulous. "That was a first, even for me," she said, voice low. She poured another round of coffee and nudged the mug toward Elias, who looked more thoughtful than shaken.

Chloe said, "It was like a movie, but I was inside her head. Did you see how she planned it all? How she staged her exit?"

Elias sipped his coffee, then set the cup down with care. "Evelyn always struck me as a survivor. I used to think she died up there, but now..." He let the words dangle, unfinished.

Randy, who had said nothing during the entire episode, finally spoke. "If that bread can do what it just did, we'd better get the next piece of the puzzle fast. I don't trust Thorne to wait."

Elias nodded slowly. He reached into the inside pocket of his old canvas coat, fingers finding something small and metallic. He turned it over in his hand for a while before he placed it on the table—a brass compass, dulled by age but still working, the needle quivering as if it remembered the way north.

Chloe leaned in, eyes wide. "That's the same compass from the vision," she whispered. "The one Evelyn used in the last scene."

Elias smiled, and it was a kind, tired smile. "Found it in a hollow up near Strawberry Point, twenty years back. I was tracking an elk, but she found me instead. Old woman, white hair, eyes like coals. She gave me the compass, said it was 'for the days when the mountain changed its mind.'"

Chloe caught Finn's glance, then looked at Elias. "Did you know it was her?"

"I suspected. She didn't give a name, but the way she carried herself... it was like she was still onstage, just waiting for her cue." He shrugged, slow and loose. "We only talked a minute. She said she'd been hiding longer than I'd been alive."

Finn took the compass, feeling its weight. "Why tell us now?"

Elias's voice went soft. "Because the mountain only keeps secrets until it doesn't. And because you two look like the kind who finish what they start."

He fished another item from his pocket, this time a photo, cracked at the edges and faded but still clear enough: a much younger Elias,

beard less wild, standing in a clearing next to an old woman with an imperious nose and a scarf knotted around her neck. She was looking away from the camera, but the eyes were unmistakable.

Chloe cradled the photo, holding it in her hands as if it might shatter. "That's her. It's got to be."

Brandi pressed closer, then grinned. "She aged better than most Hollywood royalty."

Randy kept his eyes on the photo, jaw working as if he was chewing over the meaning behind the lines.

Finn set the compass and the photo side by side. "You realize what this means? The clues aren't just in the archives or in Hazel's journals. They're in the land, and the only way Thorne wins is if he gets to them first."

Chloe, who'd been holding it together with caffeine and bravado, suddenly felt the weight of what came next. "We have to move."

Melinda popped her head around the kitchen door, a tray of doughnuts balanced on her arm. "Did I miss something? Or did the bread work again?"

Brandi took a doughnut, but didn't eat it. "We need to hit the next X. Where was it, Finn?"

Finn checked the old map, now thumbtacked to the side of the fridge. "Ashdown Gorge. If we hike the rim, we'll make it in three hours. Maybe less, if the snow isn't too deep."

Elias nodded. "That's where she'd go. Lots of caves. Good cover. Nobody hikes there except the old-timers."

Chloe's phone buzzed—a news alert. She didn't want to look, but did anyway. "Thorne's breaking ground on the old set at noon. They're starting early."

Randy stood up, all business. "We'll never get through if they close the road. I can drive you to the trailhead. But you'll need to move fast."

Brandi patted Finn on the shoulder. "You need supplies? Take anything you want. If you need backup, I can bring a distraction."

Chloe grabbed her pack, then looked at Brandi and Melinda. "Thanks for everything. If we don't make it back, tell everyone the bread was worth it."

Brandi laughed, but her eyes were shiny. “You’re coming back. The mountain’s not done with you.”

Elias tucked the photo back into his jacket, then led the way out the side door. The cold outside was a slap, but it felt good, real, a reminder that the vision was over and the chase was on.

At the abandoned cabin site, the day was already roaring to life. Construction crews in orange vests moved like ants, hauling fence posts, loading up the first of the earth-movers, and painting survey marks on anything that stayed still. Over it all, Thorne stood in a parka, his phone glued to his ear, barking orders in the rapid-fire cadence of someone who’d rather be anywhere else.

He waved his arm, and a backhoe rumbled to life. The engine cough echoed off the walls of the narrow canyon, louder than it should have been.

“Dig out the access road first,” Thorne snapped. “We need the big trucks on-site before ten. The foundation work starts at noon, and I want the area cleared before the board gets here.”

One of the workers, face flushed from cold, sidled over. “There’s an old root cellar under the north end. Looks unstable. Should we brace it?”

Thorne’s lip curled in annoyance. “Just collapse it. If it caves, it caves. It’s all getting demolished by next week anyway.”

He strode away, not bothering to look back. He checked his watch, then scanned the tree line, eyes lingering just a bit too long on the places where the woods ran thick. It was obvious he expected trouble—just not from anyone local.

He thumbed a message into his phone: “Increase sweep on the gorge perimeter. Expect interference. No press allowed inside the work zone.”

Then he slipped the phone away and watched the machines do his bidding, the crash of old beams and frozen earth a perfect soundtrack for the start of his Duck Creek Renaissance.

Chloe hated riding in the back of Randy's truck—mostly because it always felt like the tailgate might give out and drop her in the road—but today she barely noticed the bone-jarring ride. She and Finn huddled beneath an old wool blanket, watching the scenery blur past as the truck shot up the service road toward Ashdown Gorge.

Elias sat up front, window cracked, humming something that might have been a hymn or a campfire song. The wind streamed in, and every so often, Chloe caught the scent of pine or the metallic tang of snow about to melt.

Finn pulled out the compass, running his thumb over the initials carved into the back. "E.S.C.," he said. "Evelyn St. Claire. No mistaking it."

Chloe's teeth chattered—not from cold, but from the energy that wouldn't sit still. "We need to beat the crew. If they grid the gorge, we'll never get in."

Finn pointed at the needle. "The compass points northwest, but the trail runs due north. If Evelyn wanted to throw off trackers, she'd have picked the path of most resistance."

Chloe grinned, a little wild. "Then we go off-trail."

Randy pulled up to the turnoff, tires skidding on the ice. "If you're not back by sundown, I'm coming to find you," he said, voice flat.

Finn nodded, shouldering his pack. "Thanks, Randy."

Elias stepped out, boots crunching in the snow. "I'll guide you as far as the lip, then it's all you."

Chloe zipped her jacket, pulling it tight. "Let's go."

The trail was a frozen suggestion, crusted over with old tracks and the kind of animal prints Chloe couldn't even name. Finn took point, compass in hand, the rest falling in behind like a mountain rescue team.

They made the gorge rim in under an hour, lungs raw from the climb. The view was a gut punch: a ribbon of dark water slicing through red rock, the sun barely clearing the ridge, painting everything in a bruised gold.

Elias stopped at a stand of bristlecone pine. "This is as far as I go. I'll wait here, keep watch."

Finn nodded, then scanned the slope for a way down. "There's a ledge there," he said, pointing. "She'd have gone that way. Too exposed anywhere else."

Chloe followed, boots slipping, heart pounding. She was used to drama, but this felt more real than any scene she'd ever played on stage.

They crab-walked down the ledge, knees bent, arms out for balance. The snow was slick, but Finn moved as if he had spikes for feet. They reached a shelf midway down, and there—wedged between two boulders—was a rusted metal box. No hiding it, no camo, just left out like a dare.

Finn crouched, brushing off the snow. "Here it is," he said, voice low.

Chloe felt every nerve fire at once. "Open it."

He did, slow and careful. Inside was another canister, smaller than the last, and a thick envelope tied with red string.

Chloe stared at the canister. "Is that the film?"

Finn pulled out the envelope, untied it, and read the top sheet. His eyes widened.

"It's a letter," he said. "From Evelyn. Addressed to Hazel. And... there's more." He pulled out a set of blueprints, scrawled with notes in Evelyn's unmistakable hand.

Chloe took the canister, holding it up to the sunlight. "There's something inside. I can hear it move."

Finn read aloud, hands trembling:

"If you're reading this, the truth is safe. Don't let the suits have it. Show it to the people who care. That's all that matters. —E."

Chloe's breath fogged in the cold. "She knew exactly how this would play out."

Finn nodded, eyes never leaving the envelope. "She left a way to prove Thorne's grandfather stole the land. The film, the letters, even the damn blueprints."

Chloe hugged the canister to her chest. "We have to get it back to the bakery. And then..."

She didn't finish. She didn't have to.

Finn grinned, raw and fierce. "We show everyone."

They scrambled back up the ledge, breath burning, fingers numb,

but hearts warm with the knowing. At the top, Elias waited, just as he promised, and together they ran the trail back, the wind at their backs and the mountain—for once—smiling on their side.

At the road, Randy's truck waited, engine running, cab already warm.

Chloe slid into the seat, cradling the film and the letter, and looked back at the red rocks one last time.

"They almost won," she said. "But they never met Evelyn St. Claire."

Finn squeezed her hand. "Or us."

Randy grinned, then put the truck in gear. "Where to?"

Chloe smiled, all teeth and defiance. "Home."

And as the sun dipped behind the ridge, it felt, just for a second, like they were right where they belonged.

ten

sabotage at the bakery

BRANDI UNLOCKED the front door of Ground + Toasted a full hour before sunrise. The bakery always smelled faintly of yesterday's sugar, but on these dark mornings, the air also carried a silence you could lean against. She flicked on the first row of lights—soft, warm, the color of apricot flesh—and made straight for the back of the kitchen.

Most people would've stopped to check the ovens or maybe the cash drawer, but Brandi's feet found the tile path to the prep fridge by memory alone. She reached inside for her prized culture: a quart jar, labeled with a strip of tape that read "MOTHER—DO NOT TOUCH." The tape had been there since her first year at the bakery, never replaced, just layered over as each new generation of starter was born.

This morning, the lid was ajar. Not off, but twisted so it sat crooked, catching the rim at a slant. She frowned. Randy never touched the starter, and Melinda's hands were too small to torque the lid like that. She lifted the jar, squinting through the glass. Instead of the usual latticework of bubbles and the nutty, almost sweet tang of ferment, the contents were flat, still as a corpse. The liquid on top wasn't the usual golden hooch but a pearly gray film, and the smell—Brandi winced—was sharp, antiseptic, wrong.

She unscrewed the lid and the odor punched out hard, like a slap.

Bleach. Her hands hovered over the jar as the fact of it landed: someone had killed her mother.

She stood there for a long moment, jar cradled in her hands, chest tight as if the bleach had gotten to her lungs too. The old starter was a living thing—technically millions of things—but it had history. Character. She'd grown it from her grandma's own jar, who had gotten hers from Evelyn St. Claire, who (if the family stories held any truth) had smuggled it up to the plateau in a film canister lined with waxed paper.

Brandi's thumb pressed into the glass. It was cold and clammy. She couldn't remember the last time her hands had trembled so badly.

She set the jar down, gingerly, as if it might spill everywhere. "Please," she whispered, "tell me this is just a bad batch." But she knew, with the instinct of someone who'd raised hundreds of breads and mourned a few dozen, that this was deliberate. A starter could get sick, sour, dry out, turn to mush—but it never, ever went bleach-gray on its own.

The sound of the back door unlocking drew her up straight. Randy appeared, every inch the mountain man: thick beard, calloused knuckles, even his hoodie looked like it had been milled from lumber. He nodded at her, then registered the look on her face.

"What happened?" he asked, voice still sandpapered from sleep.

Brandi stepped aside, showing him the jar without a word. Randy picked it up, sniffed, and set it back down without flinching. He just looked at her, steady, letting her set the pace.

She felt her own breath coming in uneven bursts, so she counted silently to five—an old trick from her grandma—then said, "Someone did this on purpose."

Randy's eyebrows dipped, his version of outright fury. "Melinda?" he asked, not really believing it.

"She wouldn't dare," Brandi said, voice flat.

He looked at the fridge. "Could've been a customer."

Brandi shook her head. "You'd have to know where to look, and you'd have to want to hurt us."

Randy's hand went to the security keypad on the wall, the big green digits glowing faint in the half-dark. "I'll check the footage."

Brandi followed, shoulders hunched. The kitchen lights seemed too

bright all of a sudden, and the hush in the bakery felt less like peace and more like the gap after an avalanche, the air waiting to see if there was another slide.

Randy keyed through the last night's camera logs with the single-minded focus of a man who, if left to his own devices, would have lived perfectly happy as a lighthouse keeper. Brandi watched the monitor over his shoulder. The early footage was boring: the cleaning crew, Melinda finishing a late shift, Brandi herself doing final prep before locking up. Then, at 2:17 a.m., the feed from the back alley pinged with movement.

A tall man in a windbreaker, hood up. He moved with the careful, not-quite-sneaky stride of someone who'd cased the place in advance. He slipped a tool into the lock, hesitated for maybe two heartbeats, then ducked inside. Three minutes later, he left through the same door, wiping his hands on a rag.

Randy scrolled forward, switched to the camera above the prep fridge. The man didn't look at the cash drawer. Didn't touch anything else. He went straight to the jar, uncapped it, poured in something from a nondescript plastic bottle, replaced the lid, and left. No wasted motion.

Brandi's stomach turned. It was like watching a video of someone poisoning a dog. She clenched her fists, fighting the urge to yell at the monitor.

Randy went frame by frame. "I know him," he said. "That's Thorne's guy. The one that's been tailing Finn and Chloe."

Brandi pressed her palms to the countertop, grounding herself. "This is more than just a business war, isn't it."

He didn't answer right away. Instead, he toggled the video back and forth, then snapped a photo of the man's face as he turned toward the fridge. "I'll send this to the sheriff. Want to see what he says."

Brandi exhaled, slow and shaky. "Thanks." She looked at her hands, which had stopped trembling, but now felt cold and a little numb.

Randy set his hand gently on her back, just for a second. "We'll fix it. You always keep some at home, right? For emergencies?"

She nodded, the first faint bud of hope flickering. "It's not as strong, but I can build it back."

He looked her in the eye, steady as bedrock. "Then we're not out yet."

Brandi almost laughed, except she was pretty sure if she started, she'd tip over into sobs instead. "You don't get it," she said, voice thin and high. "It's not just bread. That jar—my grandma said it had the mountain's memories. Everything we ever were, carried forward a little at a time."

Randy, who never believed in ghosts or soul magic, didn't argue. He just nodded, and Brandi was grateful for it.

They stood in silence for a long minute. Outside, the first light started to creep up over the ridge, painting the frost on the windows in thin gold lines. The bakery felt different now—not ruined, but wounded, like a place that knew what it was to fight for itself.

Finally, Brandi squared her shoulders. "We're opening on time," she said, voice firm. "We'll just have to start from scratch."

Randy grinned, just a little. "That's your specialty, isn't it?"

She managed a weak smile, then pulled a new jar from the cupboard, wiped it clean, and set it on the counter.

As she worked, Randy printed out the photo of the saboteur and tacked it to the inside of the office door. He wrote a note beneath it: "NOT A CUSTOMER."

Brandi watched him do it, then went back to the dough, her hands moving with the old rhythm—flour, water, salt, the starter from home.

The bakery would survive. And so would she. But somewhere deep in her chest, the bleach still burned.

Randy drove into the lot behind the sheriff's station just as the sun scraped over the horizon, lighting the tips of the chain-link fence in the kind of pink that made even barbed wire look delicate. He pulled the old F-150 into a spot labeled "Reserved: Sheriff Only" and let it idle. No one in town would care, not at this hour, not if they knew it was him.

He stepped inside, stomping snow from his boots. The station's lobby was smaller than most people's living rooms—two beat-up chairs, a rack of glossy pamphlets about rural crime, a coffee pot that looked

like it might have brewed its last cup during the Reagan administration. Sheriff Adams was already in, hunched at his desk with a stack of paperwork and a half-eaten bear claw. The man's uniform looked like it had been pressed by a two-ton weight, but his face had the puffy, slightly lopsided look of someone who'd slept in his office. He didn't even bother with small talk.

"Got a call from Brandi," Adams said, not looking up. "Said you'd be coming."

Randy pulled his phone from his pocket and thumbed up the video. He set it on the edge of the desk, screen angled so Adams didn't have to shift his bulk to watch.

The sheriff squinted at the footage, the reflection of the screen making his eyes seem even paler than normal. He watched the break-in twice, then zoomed in on the man's face as he turned toward the camera.

"Recognize him?" Randy asked.

Adams nodded, lips pressed tight. "Thorne's boy. PI out of Vegas. Name's Pelligrini, but he's been using alias since he got here. Pretty sloppy."

"He poisoned the starter," Randy said. "With bleach. It's a miracle he didn't burn the place down."

Sheriff Adams watched the clip a third time, then leaned back in his chair until it creaked. "I can bring him in for trespassing, maybe vandalism. Breaking and entering if I want to push it. But that's a misdemeanor, Randy. Bleach in a jar, not a Molotov cocktail."

Randy crossed his arms. "It's deliberate sabotage. And it happened right after we started digging into the old land claims. You think that's a coincidence?"

Adams's nostrils flared, just once. "I'm not an idiot, Randy. But the law is what it is. Unless you've got video of Thorne handing him a bottle and saying 'Go ruin that bread,' there's nothing we can pin on the big man. And even then, the DA would laugh us out of the room."

Randy felt his jaw go rigid. "This guy's following kids around, breaking into businesses. You think it ends with a ruined starter?"

Adams's mouth twitched at the corner, a smile so faint it was almost

a tic. “No, I don’t. That’s why I’m glad you came in, instead of handling it mountain-justice style.”

He slid the phone back to Randy and dusted his hands on a napkin. “I’ll send a deputy to talk to him. He won’t admit a thing, but sometimes just a conversation slows ‘em down. And if he comes back, we’ll have him on record as a repeat offender. Get him on the next one.”

Randy tucked the phone away. “That’s not going to stop Thorne.”

Adams shrugged, broad and tired. “Maybe not. But it’ll make him sweat, and sometimes that’s enough to make people screw up bigger.”

He stood, stretched his arms overhead, and yawned. “Let me be clear, Randy: don’t take this into your own hands. You come to me first, every time. The other way gets ugly, and I don’t want to be the one putting cuffs on a friend.”

Randy nodded, but it felt hollow.

As he turned to leave, Adams called after him: “For what it’s worth, I don’t trust Thorne either. But the law’s got to catch up to him the old-fashioned way.”

Randy opened the door, letting the cold in, and for a second, the two men just looked at each other—Sheriff behind his desk, Randy framed in the morning light. It was the closest thing to an alliance either of them would get.

He walked out, boots crunching on the sidewalk, and promised himself he’d keep it by the book. At least until the book ran out of pages.

By seven a.m., the village’s daily machinery had started grinding: snowplows passing on the hour, trucks nosing into the bakery’s lot, the occasional dog walker trailing a breath cloud big enough to hide behind. Brandi was deep in a new starter build when the bell over the side door gave a single, crisp ping.

She looked up, expecting Randy, but it was Elias. He ducked through the doorway with the caution of a man entering a trap, his coat zipped to his chin and a thick canvas bundle slung across one shoulder. The cold followed him in, swirling the scent of juniper and leaf mold

and something else—maybe burnt sage, maybe just the last, stubborn memory of a forest campfire.

He set the bundle on the flour-dusted prep table, then unwrapped it. Inside: a clutch of wild herbs, a knotted bag of lichen, and a small jar filled with pale brown water.

Brandi wiped her hands, fighting the urge to hug him. Instead, she managed, “You heard?”

Elias’s mouth twitched. “The woods have ears. And Melinda never keeps news for long.”

He eyed the ruined starter on the far end of the table. “They used bleach,” he said, tone not accusing, but almost gentle. He lifted the lid, sniffed, and winced. “That kills everything. Even the memory.”

Brandi’s chest tightened again. “That’s what I thought. It’s gone.”

Elias nodded, then reached into his bundle. He laid the wild herbs in a line, like tools at a surgeon’s table. “The mountain takes,” he said, “but it also gives.”

Brandi glanced at the clock, then at the front window, where a few regulars pressed their noses to the glass, eager for coffee. She had half an hour, max, before the first rush. “You think this’ll work?” she asked, more skeptical than she meant to be.

Elias grinned, a sly, quiet thing. “All yeast is wild, once.” He uncapped his jar, dipped a finger in, and smeared a dot of the liquid on his wrist. “This is birch sap. Collected just before sunrise, from the flats down near Lava Point. I started a culture with it—smells like spring, if you know what to look for.”

He uncapped the jar and handed it to Brandi, who sniffed. The aroma was unfamiliar—less bread, more meadow—but underneath, she caught a faint echo of the old starter’s tang.

She set it down gently. “I have a backup at home,” she confessed, voice low. “It’s... tired. I haven’t fed it since Christmas, but—”

Elias looked pleased. “We’ll blend them. Wake up the old with the new.”

He motioned for her to bring the backup. Brandi darted out, returning minutes later with a battered Tupperware, its lid crusted in the flour of a dozen forgotten loaves. Elias opened it, sampled the scent, and nodded approvingly.

He went to work, the process less science than choreography: a scoop of the birch starter, a spoonful from Brandi's backup, a dribble of warm water, a palmful of flour. He mixed it all together in a glass bowl, then dusted the top with a pinch of his lichen blend.

Brandi watched his hands. They were marked by the woods—scrapes, resin, a smudge of green at the knuckle—but steady as any surgeon's.

"What's the lichen for?" she asked.

"Memory," Elias said, not missing a beat. "Oldest life on the plateau. Survives everything. Even bleach."

She laughed, a small, raw sound. "You could start a church with this stuff."

He gave her a look, half wink, half sermon. "The land is the church."

While the new starter rested, Brandi prepped the front counter for opening, keeping one eye on the bowl. The hope inside her was fragile, but growing.

At 7:30 on the dot, Finn and Chloe blew in through the main doors, dragging a gust of wind and the stink of wet down. Chloe's hair was damp, cheeks pink, and she wore the same patched jacket as yesterday. Finn carried a mesh bag with two battered thermoses and a day-old donut.

Chloe clocked the newcomers and zeroed in on the bowl. "That the resurrection?" she asked, bright and hungry.

Brandi nodded. "We're trying."

Chloe peered at it, then at Elias. "You know, most people would just buy a packet of yeast."

Elias shrugged. "Most people forget where yeast comes from."

Finn set down the thermoses and scanned the room, assessing the new tension. "You think it's related? The sabotage?"

Brandi blinked. "To what?"

Finn dropped his voice. "Everything at the ridge, the film, Evelyn's stuff—someone's nervous we're getting close."

Elias nodded, slow and grave. "Some try to kill the past. The mountain remembers."

Chloe snorted, but not unkindly. "If I ever get murdered, I hope I get a chorus like that in my eulogy."

Brandi found herself smiling for real, just a little. "You're not wrong," she told Finn. "It's all connected. Thorne, the land, the old stories—nobody does this to a starter unless they're trying to make a point."

Chloe took out her phone and snapped a photo of the bowl. "For the record," she said. "If this works, we're naming it after you, Elias."

He lifted an eyebrow, bemused. "Call it what you want. It'll answer to the yeast."

Randy returned from the sheriff's with his own bundle of news and a sense of grim satisfaction. "Adams'll talk to the guy," he said. "But it won't stop Thorne."

Brandi shrugged. "Doesn't matter. We've got work to do."

As the morning picked up, a steady stream of locals filtered in—contractors, teachers, the guy who ran the snowmobile tours. Brandi moved through them with her usual warmth, but behind the counter she kept stealing glances at the bowl, watching for any sign of life.

By noon, a delicate fizz had formed around the edge—a rim of bubbles, tiny but stubborn. Brandi grinned, triumph and relief mingling in her chest. She showed it to Finn and Chloe, who both nodded as if they'd witnessed a birth.

Elias stayed until the lunch rush, then packed up his herbs. "Keep feeding it," he said, "and it'll be stronger than before."

Brandi nodded, all business now. "Tell the mountain thank you."

He smiled, vanished into the cold.

The bakery hummed, as always. But this time, Brandi felt a little less alone in the fight. She set aside a ladle of the new starter for tomorrow, then prepped the dough for the next day's bread. Every step was the same as before, but different—more sacred, maybe.

At closing, she washed the bowl and set it in its place on the shelf, right next to the photo of her grandma Hazel.

She whispered, "It's not over yet," and meant it.

By eight, Brandi had already refilled the coffee urn three times and was rationing cinnamon rolls. The usual early crowd—contractors, skiers, a retired couple who spent all winter arguing over the sports page—was thicker than normal, and they lingered, sipping and murmuring, the hush of bad news giving way to a steady rumble.

It wasn't the regulars who caught her attention, though, but the parade of townsfolk who'd never once crossed the bakery's threshold before. Some came alone, others in pairs or with kids in tow, each with a Tupperware, Mason jar, or battered Ziploc bag cradled in their hands like a religious offering.

At first, Brandi didn't get it. She was busy running orders and restocking the scone display, and she thought maybe they were part of some impromptu bake-off, a school project, or a weird version of a potluck. It wasn't until the third person, an older man with cheeks the color of ketchup, set a peanut butter jar on the counter and said, "Heard about your starter. Mine's been alive thirty years. She's a real survivor—name's Madge," that Brandi realized what was happening.

She tried to protest, but the man pushed the jar forward, his hands trembling a little. "Used to bake with my wife. She passed last fall. Now it's just me and Madge. Figured you could give her a new home."

Brandi blinked so hard her lashes clumped together.

It kept coming, each hour a new face, a new origin story for a starter. A young mother with dark circles under her eyes and a toddler on her hip handed over a tiny jelly jar, explaining, "We call it the 'magic bug juice.' My grandma swore it could turn sawdust into cake." A bearded man who ran the snowplow company arrived with a plastic deli cup of suspiciously brownish goo, saying, "This one's a beast. If it doesn't eat your flour, it'll eat your counter."

By ten a.m., the counter looked like the world's weirdest science fair. There were notes attached to most of the jars: "Best for pancakes," "Good for soft pretzels," or "Warning: Unleash at own risk."

Chloe and Finn stopped in midmorning to see the spectacle. Chloe took photos, of course, narrating the tableau for her followers: "Duck Creek may have lost its original yeast, but the entire town just showed up with a literal army of replacements." She nudged Brandi. "You know you're the town's mother hen, right?"

Brandi tried to laugh, but the effort made her eyes sting.

Randy watched from behind the espresso machine, arms folded, but his usually rock-solid face was cracked open with something softer. Brandi caught him wiping at his eye once, and he made a joke about “espresso dust” when he caught her watching.

A man she'd never seen before, with hands stained a permanent walnut brown, came in and placed an ancient, scarred crock on the counter. “My great-aunt’s. She said the sourdough kept her alive during the bad winter, back in seventy-three.” He left before Brandi could say thank you.

Another woman, hair in a perfect beehive, brought a yellowed recipe card, not a jar, and whispered, “I haven’t baked in years, but you can have this. My mom said the trick was adding a spoonful of honey to every batch.”

Brandi lined up the jars and cards on the prep counter, the scent of a dozen different ferments fighting for dominance in the air. She wanted to pick just one, to keep the memory simple, but each gift had a story, and every one reminded her of why she'd come home to the mountain in the first place.

She couldn't hold off forever. Before closing, Brandi stood behind the counter and called out, “Okay, folks. I can’t use them all, but I’ll take a little from each. Today, we make a new mother.”

The crowd—thinned but still attentive—let out a cheer, and even Randy pounded the counter once in approval.

Brandi measured a spoonful from every jar, blending the wild, the sweet, the “beast” and the “bug juice” into her glass mixing bowl. She added a little of her grandma’s old, tired starter, and for good measure, a few drops from Elias’s birch sap. She mixed it all together with care, feeling for a moment like a witch, or maybe just a matchmaker.

When she set the bowl down on the warming shelf, it already looked alive, the surface bubbling in anticipation.

One of the regulars, a guy with an eternal farmer’s tan and a laugh like loose gravel, said, “If that stuff’s as good as the old one, I’ll eat my hat.”

Brandi grinned, real this time. “I’ll bake you a bread hat, and we’ll both try it.”

The bakery stayed full until close, and even as she wiped down the tables and counted the till, Brandi couldn't help but watch the bowl on the shelf, the mix rising strong and fast.

That night, she wrote every contributor's name on a sticky note and stuck them to the fridge. "Community mother," she labeled the new jar. And for the first time since the sabotage, she felt ready for whatever came next.

Randy came up behind her as she was shutting down, wrapped his big hands around her waist, and leaned his chin on her shoulder. "That's the best thing I've seen in years," he said.

Brandi let herself lean into him, just for a second. "People think bread is just flour and water," she whispered. "But it's mostly memory. And love, if you're lucky."

He squeezed her, gentle but sure. "Then we're set for a long winter."

She set the starter on its shelf and left the light on, just in case it got lonely.

By the time the lunch crowd thinned, Brandi was running on caffeine and the adrenaline of small victories. The new starter, now dubbed the "Community Mother," was thriving—dough rising faster than she could shape it, the kitchen a riot of flour and warm air. Chloe set up her laptop at the corner table, live-tweeting the day's events for a growing audience of bread enthusiasts and local busybodies. Finn drifted between clearing tables and swapping out trays of pastries, his usual reticence loosened by the optimism buzzing in the air.

At 11:13 sharp, Eleanor from the historical society arrived. She wore a faded cable-knit and corduroy skirt, her hair pulled back with the kind of clip that had been out of fashion since the Carter administration. She carried a folder thick with manila envelopes, which she clutched to her chest like a holy relic. She scanned the bakery, caught Brandi's eye, and made a beeline for the counter.

"I need to talk to you," Eleanor whispered, leaning in. "And to the others. Somewhere... less public?"

Brandi glanced at the full tables, then nodded toward the corner by the display of antique rolling pins. "Give me five," she said, and called Finn, Chloe, and Randy over.

The group squeezed around a tiny table sticky with sugar glaze, and Eleanor carefully unfolded her folder, spreading out its contents as if prepping for a forensic exam.

"These are from the county archives," she said, arranging deeds and survey maps with trembling fingers. "I spent the last four hours cross-referencing every transfer of property on this block since the 1920s. And there's something you all need to see."

She pushed a faded map forward, traced a line with a chewed-up pencil. "Look. This lot—" she tapped the bakery's parcel, shaded faint pink "—was carved out of a larger holding in 1954. It was part of the St. Claire estate. Evelyn's property, at the time."

Brandi blinked. "But she disappeared. Wouldn't that have gone to probate?"

Eleanor nodded. "That's the thing. The rest of her land did, but not this piece. There's a deed of transfer, signed the week before she vanished, naming the bakery's original owner as beneficiary. It never went through normal channels. No taxes, no public record—just this one document, notarized by the same notary in all the letters from Evelyn's diary."

Chloe leaned in, eyes wide. "So the bakery was special to her?"

Finn, ever pragmatic, cut to the point. "What does this mean for Thorne?"

Eleanor looked at him, then at the group, her face creased with anxiety. "It means that whoever controls this lot controls the St. Claire estate. Under Utah's weird old inheritance laws, the bakery acts as the anchor. If it stays independent, nobody can legally develop or subdivide the rest. But if Thorne gets it—" she let the implication hang.

Randy's face darkened. "He can bulldoze the entire valley."

Eleanor nodded, the motion small and sad. "I think that's why he's so desperate. Not just for the land, but for the bakery, specifically."

The group sat in silence, the weight of it pressing down.

Chloe broke it, whispering, "So the bread really is the key."

Brandi felt the burn behind her eyes again, but this time she didn't

bother to fight it. She wiped her hands on her apron and tried to focus on the facts. "If we hold the bakery, we hold the line. Even if the rest of the village caves."

Eleanor smiled, weak but genuine. "That's why I wanted to warn you. I can keep digging, but if he gets a court order..."

Brandi's hands curled around a coffee mug, knuckles white. "He won't. I'll fight it. We all will."

Chloe reached out and squeezed Brandi's arm. "You got us. And the whole village, apparently."

Finn nodded, the gesture somehow more solid than words.

Eleanor gathered her papers, repacked the folder, and stood. "I'll call if I find anything else. But be careful. Thorne plays rough."

As she left, Brandi watched her walk out into the sun, the folder hugged tight like a shield.

The group sat in silence for a minute, then Finn said, "We need a plan."

Randy grunted, "We've got one. Keep the bakery open. Don't let them in the door."

Brandi looked at the new starter, rising in its bowl, and felt something fierce well up inside her. "Let's bake him out," she said, voice low and sharp. "If Thorne wants this place, he'll have to go through every loaf, every cookie, every single one of us."

Chloe let out a whoop, and even Finn managed a smile.

Brandi felt it then—the mountain at her back, the whole town behind her, the promise that some things could be saved.

She rolled up her sleeves and went back to work.

The bakery's late afternoon hush was different from the morning's chaos—quieter, sharper, like the time between lightning and thunder. Brandi wiped down the prep counter, hands sticky with dried dough, while Finn and Chloe sat at a table littered with topo maps and hastily scrawled notes. Elias had claimed the end seat, chin in hand, eyes scanning the lines of elevation as if reading a language only he knew.

Randy moved through the kitchen with more intent than usual. He

stacked sandwiches in wax paper, double-checked the thermoses, then topped each with a thick rubber band to keep the lids from rattling. Every so often he looked over at Brandi, who in turn looked out the window, where the clouds were massing heavy over the ridge.

Finn worked a pencil between his fingers, the stub gnawed almost to the eraser. He traced their route from the trailhead to the gorge, lips moving as he calculated the hours. "If we cut cross-country, we can save an hour, but it'll be all loose shale and some snow. If we stick to the creek, we'll be slower, but less chance of blowing out an ankle."

Chloe eyed the map, then shrugged. "Drama's at the waterfall. Evelyn always wrote her third acts that way." She slid the diary toward Finn. "Page seventy-four—she literally called it 'the climax.'"

Elias grunted, a deep sound that rumbled up from somewhere near his boots. "The falls will be running high this time of year. Harder to get close. But she'd have wanted a real stage."

Brandi came over with three sourdough rolls, the last from the morning's "old" starter. She set them down, one in front of each. "Carbs before cardio," she said, smiling, but her eyes were red at the rims.

Randy slid a row of sandwiches into a daypack. "There's apples, jerky, and a first-aid kit in there, too. The rest is up to you."

Chloe reached out and squeezed Brandi's hand. "We'll be back before the morning bake."

Brandi pulled her into a hug, holding on for an extra breath. When she let go, she whispered something in Chloe's ear. Chloe nodded, face solemn for once.

Randy clapped Finn on the back. "You watch her," he said, half command, half hope.

Finn nodded, then tucked the map, diary, and a battered compass into his pack. He checked the rolls, squeezed the sides, and grunted approval.

Elias hoisted his own pack—a canvas satchel that looked as if it had been stitched together from two older, sadder satchels—and stood. "Let's go. Sunset'll catch us in the gorge if we don't make time."

They buttoned up, zipped jackets, and stepped into the cold. The wind had picked up, cutting through even the best layers. The trio

moved off in a line, Elias first, Finn close behind, Chloe bringing up the rear, phone out and recording from the very first step.

Brandi and Randy watched from the door, arms looped around each other, nothing to say that hadn't already been said.

"Think they'll find what they're looking for?" Randy asked, voice low.

Brandi nodded, chin set. "Even if they don't, they'll find something that matters."

He squeezed her closer, and they stood that way for a long minute, watching the shapes shrink along the snowbound path.

Back inside, the bakery was empty, save for the hum of the proofing oven and the tick of the old clock. Brandi went to the fridge, opened the new starter, and checked for life. The surface was a universe of bubbles, each one bright and new, none yet broken.

She closed the lid gently, as if tucking in a child, and turned out the light.

Outside, three sets of tracks ran into the dark. Inside, the bakery waited, alive and rising.

eleven

ashdown gorge expedition

THE TRAIL out of Duck Creek cut east, then vanished, as if the mountain didn't care to be tamed by paths and survey tape. Finn had always liked that about this country. He walked out front, boots angled to the contour, listening to the dry crunch of snow crust and the loose, rubbery echo that meant rock below. Behind him, Chloe picked her way along, head down, muttering to herself as she compared the landscape to the film stills in her hand. Elias trailed the group, shoulders loose, occasionally pausing to tap the bristlecone trunks as if checking their pulse.

The gorge came into view not as a grand opening, but as a tightening: walls of red stone converged until the sky pinched to a paper-thin strip. The sun was just high enough to rake a knife of light along the rim, turning every pebble and frozen weed into a spotlight. Finn stopped at the first switchback, pointed at a churn of paw prints in the shallow drift. "Coyote pack came through last night," he said. "You can see where they split to hunt. This set—" he used the tip of a glove to outline the tracks "—went after something up-canyon. That's where we're headed."

Chloe grinned, snapping a photo with her phone. "You talk about tracks the way my mom talked about family trees."

Finn shrugged. "Better company, usually."

Elias laughed, a low, wood-smoke rumble. "He's not wrong."

They picked their way into the gorge, rocks getting bigger, snow getting sparser. The air changed, too—colder in the shade, but shot through with the sudden sting of wild sage and, every so often, the sulfur edge of mineral water. Chloe stopped at every outcrop, holding up her phone and a still from Starlet's Shadow, squinting between the two. "Look! See this crag? It's the exact same one as in the chase scene, when she doubles back and the camera tilts up to the sky." She nudged Finn, holding both images side by side for effect.

He glanced at the rock, then the photo, and nodded. "Studio must have shot on location. Makes sense, since the set burned."

Chloe did a slow pan of the walls, lips pursed in concentration. "Evelyn used the rock formations as natural story beats. Every scene starts or ends on a landmark." She pointed up the sheer face to a ledge ten yards above them, half-buried in snow. "That's where she did the hero shot. The one they used on the posters."

Finn didn't bother looking; he already had it mapped. "We'll hit that on the way back. It's a dead end up there."

Elias, who had kept to himself so far, piped in: "Not if you know the old trails. The miners put a ladder in, used it to shortcut to the next basin." He ran a hand along the bark of a dead pinon. "Or maybe just to avoid the bears."

Chloe arched an eyebrow. "You ever see a bear out here?"

Elias grinned, eyes crinkling. "They see me. Every time."

The trail narrowed. The drop-off on the right side went from harmless to instant-regret in two paces, and Finn held out a hand to Chloe without thinking. She took it, bracing herself as the path skidded underfoot, and they moved in a careful tandem, boots toeing for any purchase.

"Rock's wet here," Finn warned. "Watch your step."

"Got it," Chloe said, though her tone was only half listening. She was busy scanning the walls for more matches to her film stills, narrating as she found them: "That's the ambush spot... That's where she hides from the villain... And that's the tunnel they crawl through at the end." Her voice echoed off the stone, both alive and a little theatrical.

Elias kept back, never crowding, but Finn could sense him watching

the sky, the wall, the line of their passage. It was like hiking with a crow perched on your shoulder—unsettling but strangely reassuring.

They rounded a bend and the canyon tightened to a slot, just wide enough for one at a time. Finn took point, testing each handhold before passing it along. The stone here was cold, slick, but drier than above; he could feel the old ash of campfires burned fifty years ago, the residue of cigarettes and coffee that never really left the surface.

Halfway through the slot, Chloe stopped dead. “Wait,” she whispered.

Finn turned, ready to steady her, but she pressed her finger to the rock wall, tracing a faint spiral carved into the face. “This is in the movie. There’s a close-up, right before the fight. Evelyn touches it and says, ‘The mountain never forgets.’”

Elias leaned in, inspecting the carving. “That’s Fremont work. Petroglyph’s older than anyone in this village.”

Finn shrugged. “Art department probably borrowed it for authenticity.”

Chloe snapped a photo, then another. “Or Evelyn wanted us to find it.”

Finn had no answer for that, so he pressed on. The light was shifting, now more shadow than sun, and the further they dropped into the gorge, the louder the noise of water became—a constant hush, never quite a roar, but getting closer.

The path opened onto a flat, a shallow basin dotted with stunted juniper and an abandoned fence line. Finn knelt, brushing the needles aside. “They ran cattle here, back in the day. See the wire? It’s rusted to nothing, but still there.”

Chloe joined him, looking not at the ground, but at the horizon line where the stone wall met the sky. “If I were hiding something, I’d put it where the light changed most.”

Elias nodded, almost solemn. “That’s how the mountain works. Sun tells you what matters.”

Finn’s pulse picked up, not from exertion, but anticipation. This was the part of the job he liked best—the moment before discovery, when everything hung in the balance and the clues actually mattered.

They moved on, following a faint path to the base of the next

switchback. Here, the trail was all boulder-hopping, each stone rimed in ice, and Finn took his time, making sure Chloe and Elias had solid holds before they moved. The canyon walls here leaned in, close enough that Finn could smell the resin in the rock, the sharp tang of lichen, and beneath it all, a faint sweetness—maybe the vanilla echo of old campfire marshmallows, or maybe just Chloe’s hand sanitizer.

At the top of the switchback, the world opened up again. The gorge widened into a pocket amphitheater, the sound of water now a definite, thrumming pulse. Finn stopped, scanned the basin, then pointed to a break in the wall where water trickled over mossy stone.

“That’s the spring. Main source for the creek. Probably where she’d hide something if she wanted it to last.”

Chloe whooped, actually whooped, and bolted ahead. Finn let her, knowing she’d only get so far before the footing went bad. He looked at Elias, who just shrugged.

“She’s got energy,” Elias said.

“She’s not wrong,” Finn replied.

They followed Chloe, who had reached the base of the waterfall. It wasn’t a huge drop—maybe twenty feet—but the mist from the splash zone soaked everything in a cold, clean spray. Chloe turned to face them, hair already wild with damp.

“This is the spot,” she said, voice nearly drowned out by the water. “I’d bet my tuition on it.”

Elias grinned. “Good thing you’re not betting tuition.”

Finn set his pack down, kneeling at the base of the fall. “We look for something that shouldn’t be here. Metal, glass, anything out of place.”

Chloe began scanning the edge, hands darting over every odd patch of moss or debris. Finn worked the perimeter, keeping an eye out for movement up above. Elias wandered off, drawn to a shelf of stone that jutted out over the pool.

The light shifted as clouds slid over the sun, sending a prism of color through the spray. For a moment, the canyon was painted in every shade of orange and red, and Finn let himself appreciate the view. Then Chloe yelled, “Got something!”

She stood at the edge of the pool, pants soaked to the knee, holding a chunk of battered tin. “It’s a film canister,” she said, breathless.

Finn took it, turning it over in his hands. The lid was rusted but not fused. He worked it back and forth, then popped it open. Inside, wrapped in oilcloth, was a roll of what looked like old microfilm, and beneath that, a small velvet pouch.

Chloe's eyes went wide. "Is this—?"

Finn grinned. "Probably."

Elias ambled over, peered at the find, and nodded. "Looks about right. Evelyn always liked her drama."

Chloe hugged herself, grinning so hard her face hurt. Finn pocketed the canister, then helped her across the rocks back to dry ground.

They stood for a moment, wet, cold, but utterly triumphant, the noise of the water filling the air.

"Best day ever," Chloe said, and for once, Finn didn't argue.

They looked up at the canyon wall, the sky a pale ribbon above, and all three thought—though none would admit it—that maybe, just maybe, the mountain really did remember.

The spray from the waterfall hit Finn in the face like a sack of ice cubes. He'd expected the creek to be cold, but not this cold—mountain snowmelt, straight out of the limestone, atomized into a fog that soaked through every layer he wore. Chloe squealed as she ducked beneath the overhang, twisting her hair into a makeshift bun to keep it from freezing solid. Elias just grinned, his beard bristling with a thousand tiny droplets, and stepped right up to the curtain of water like it was a beaded entryway at a thrift store.

The roar was louder up close—a deep, shaking thrum that set Finn's teeth on edge. Water pounded the moss-black stone and blasted into the pool below, sending out a constant wind of vapor and noise. He let his eyes adjust, scanning the perimeter for anything out of place. The canyon walls here were streaked with green and orange, every seam packed tight with damp moss or shivering colonies of lichen. The spray caught the sunlight and bent it into rainbows, little arcs that shimmered and vanished with each gust of wind.

Chloe held her phone aloft, yelling to be heard over the falls:

“According to the diary, this is where they filmed the romantic scene—she called it her ‘dampest kiss in cinema history.’” She made a face, then cackled, delighted by her own nerdiness.

Finn grinned in spite of himself. “I’ll take your word for it,” he shouted back.

He skirted the pool, searching for anything that didn’t fit—flattened grass, a line of stones, a patch of color out of sequence with the rest. Elias, meanwhile, wandered upstream, poking at the base of the fall with a stick. Chloe hovered close to Finn, eyes everywhere, mouth running even when she wasn’t talking. She waved a still from the movie at him, comparing the frame to the real thing, then tried to recreate the actress’s pose, arm draped against a boulder, expression dreamy and far-off.

Finn had to admit, she had the vibe down.

He found it by accident: a seam in the rock, half-hidden by a curtain of moss, just wide enough for a hand to slip through. He felt along the seam, fingers numb, and hit metal—a ring, bolted into the rock, slick and cold.

“There’s something back here,” he yelled, motioning to the others.

Chloe darted over, nearly slipping on the wet stone, and peered into the gap. “Is it a cave? Oh my god, it’s a cave, isn’t it?”

Finn set his jaw, testing the ring. It gave a little, then stuck, then popped free with a gritty wrench. A flap of moss peeled back, revealing a gap in the wall just big enough for a person to crawl through. The air inside was sharp and cold, but it didn’t have the death-mold stink of most caves. It just smelled wet, and old, and—if Finn was honest—a little bit like the inside of a movie theater: dust, stone, and the faint echo of a thousand words shouted into the void.

He turned to Chloe, who was already wriggling out of her backpack. “We should check it out,” she said, not waiting for permission.

Elias watched them, eyes unreadable. “Be careful,” he said. “The rock is slicker than it looks.”

Finn went in first, using the ring as an anchor. The crawlspace angled up and left, then widened enough for crouching. Chloe followed close, headlamp on, swinging the beam back and forth across the low

ceiling. Shadows danced in every corner, and their footfalls echoed as if the cave went on forever.

"Echo's wild," Chloe said, voice bouncing in the dark. "You could do some seriously cool foley work in here."

The tunnel bent again, then opened onto a shallow chamber. Finn squinted—at first, he saw nothing but stone and the bright glare of their own lights. But then, in the far corner, a shelf jutted from the wall. Something metal gleamed from the surface, faint but definite.

He crossed the chamber, careful not to slip, and found the source: a small box, battered and streaked with rust, wedged into a crevice as if it had grown there. Finn pried it loose, surprised by its weight. Chloe hovered behind him, practically vibrating with anticipation.

"Is it another canister?" she whispered.

Finn set the box on a rock and wiped the grime from the lid. A crude star had been scratched into the metal, and beneath it, three letters: ESC.

Chloe traced the letters with one gloved finger, then hugged herself in excitement. "That's her. Evelyn St. Claire. You think she put it here herself?"

Finn shrugged. "Makes sense."

He worked at the latch, which was stiff but not locked. The lid snapped open, revealing the contents: a film canister, battered but sealed with wax, and next to it, a brass compass—dented, the glass cloudy, but otherwise intact. Finn picked up the compass, turning it over in his hands. The markings were odd, not standard—someone had scored extra notches at intervals around the bezel, and instead of true north, the needle pointed stubbornly west.

Chloe picked up the film, turning it over. "It's labeled. See? 'Final Cut. For Hazel only.'"

Finn didn't say anything, but the back of his neck prickled. They'd expected a clue, maybe a confession, but not a literal last will and testament.

Elias stepped into the chamber, ducking his head to avoid a low section of ceiling. He took one look at the compass and made a sound low in his throat. "That's a surveyor's needle. Old kind—they used

them before GPS. The needle points to the last position it was set for. You can reset it by twisting the dial.”

Finn tested the mechanism, feeling the catch. When he released it, the needle spun—then settled, not on north, but a few ticks off.

“Where’s it pointing?” Chloe asked, leaning in.

Elias took the compass, sighted along the line, then pointed up through the cave entrance. “Powell Point,” he said, certainty in his voice. “That’s the highest spot on the plateau. You can see the whole world from there.”

Chloe’s eyes shone. “She wants us to go there.”

Finn pocketed the compass, double-checked the canister’s seal, and zipped them both into the inner pouch of his pack.

Chloe ran her hand along the wall, eyes wide with wonder. “She knew. She planned all of this.”

Elias smiled, soft and sad. “People underestimate how much the mountain teaches you about time. If you want to be remembered, you leave a trail.”

They made their way out of the cave, careful on the slick rock. The noise of the waterfall was a shock after the silence—louder, somehow, as if the canyon was rooting for them.

Chloe whooped again, grinning at the sky, and Finn let himself relax for the first time all morning.

Then he noticed it: on the ridge above, two silhouettes, motionless and dark against the sky. Watching.

He didn’t say anything, just quickened his pace. Chloe and Elias followed, the canister and compass secure in Finn’s pack, the next clue burning a hole in his mind.

They had what they came for, but the race was on.

They didn’t have to wait long. The moment Finn’s boots hit dry ground, Thorne was there—standing between two squat pines, hands in the pockets of a neon-bright jacket, mirrored sunglasses reflecting the light like a pair of burning searchlights. The PI, Pelligrini, hung back a step, but there was nothing relaxed about it; he had the look of a dog at

a command, muscles bunched, gaze flicking between Chloe, Finn, and the battered box in Finn's hands.

"Thought you'd take the old trail," Thorne called out. His smile was thin, no real warmth in it. "It's not the scenic route, but it does get the job done."

Finn braced, spreading his feet, the box clutched tight against his chest. Chloe eased in behind him, keeping the canister just visible at her hip, as if daring Thorne to make a move.

Elias moved up on Finn's left, folding his arms across his chest, expression unreadable. He eyed Thorne, then the PI, then the patch of ground between them.

Finn said, "What do you want?"

Thorne gave a mock sigh, as if disappointed. "We both know you found something. You've been telegraphing your every move since the archive, and Pelligrini here—" he nodded at the PI "—has been watching you for days. So let's just skip the part where you play dumb and I pretend to be patient."

He stepped forward, the soles of his boots leaving bright orange splotches on the damp earth. "You have something that belongs to my family. The film, and the compass. Hand them over."

Finn stared him down, but Thorne didn't flinch. "I don't see your name on it."

"You wouldn't. Not unless you knew the story," Thorne said, voice dropping to a purr. "My grandfather spent his life trying to recover what that woman stole. The so-called legend of Duck Creek, Evelyn St. Claire. She was a grifter, pure and simple. The rest is just local folklore."

Chloe started to answer, but Finn shook his head.

Elias cut in anyway, voice low and steady: "That's not how it happened."

Thorne kept his eyes on Finn, but a muscle worked in his jaw. "Old man, you want to know what really matters? Possession. Of the evidence. Of the land. Of the story. You can whine about heritage all you want, but the people with the paper—and the leverage—always win."

He nodded at Pelligrini, who edged closer, one hand inside his jacket.

The canyon felt smaller, suddenly, the sky further away. Finn saw how it would play: Thorne's guy would get physical if he had to, and even if Finn or Elias fought him off, the next step would be police, lawyers, or worse.

Finn eyed the terrain, searching for an angle. He saw movement to his right: a flash of tan, a mule deer nosing through the snow-melt grass.

He made a decision. "You want it?" he said, loud enough for the deer to hear. "Come take it."

He tossed the box just past Thorne, hard, and at the same instant scooped up a rock and sent it skidding toward the deer. The animal spooked, bolting across the open, and for a split second, Pelligrini's eyes followed the motion—he actually turned, maybe expecting backup, maybe just a reflex.

Chloe used the moment. She slipped the film canister into her backpack, zipped it, and stepped forward, holding the compass in both hands.

Thorne pounced, grabbing the compass before Finn could even react. He flipped it over, eyes greedy, turning the dial and watching the needle swing.

"My grandfather was right all along," Thorne said, a note of actual awe in his voice. "This isn't just a relic. It's a map. It points to the trust document."

He thumbed the dial, testing the resistance, then tucked the compass into his pocket. "You can keep the canister, for now," he said, tone suddenly magnanimous. "But don't bother making copies. We'll have what we need by tomorrow."

He pivoted, motioned for Pelligrini to fall in, and together they disappeared up the ridge, moving fast and light. Finn watched them go, fighting the urge to throw something else.

He turned to Chloe, who was already unzipping the backpack, hands shaking a little from the adrenaline. "You think he bought it?"

"Yeah," Finn said. "But that means he'll be at Powell Point before us. We just gave him the next move."

Elias watched the ridge, eyes narrowed. "Sometimes, letting the fox run is the best way to catch it."

Chloe grinned, but her voice was a little thin. "Next stop: Powell Point. Let's see if the mountain's on our side."

Finn nodded, already plotting the route in his head. If Thorne wanted to play dirty, they'd have to beat him at his own game.

But first, they had to survive the hike out.

They started down the trail, the echo of the waterfall fading behind them, the weight of the canister and the promise of the next step heavy in Finn's pack. Chloe leaned in close, keeping a hand on his shoulder for balance, and together they walked, never looking back.

They would get there first.

They had to.

They kept a bruising pace on the hike out, Finn's longer stride eating up the ground, Chloe fighting to keep up and not look winded. The canyon had changed in the short time since their arrival—shadows stretched farther, blue creeping into every dip and hollow, the moss along the water gone almost black. No one talked until they'd cleared the last switchback and the roar of the waterfall was just a memory.

Only then did Elias break the silence. "You know, she never trusted easy," he said, voice gone gentle. "Not after Hollywood, not after the first threats. She always carried two of everything. Keys. Scripts. Even compasses."

Finn stopped in his tracks. "You're saying—"

Elias pulled his own battered compass from his pocket. It was nearly identical to the one they'd given Thorne: brass, knurled edge, same faint initials on the underside. But when Elias twisted the rim, a tiny latch popped open, revealing a hollow behind the needle.

He held it out. "She kept the real secrets in the double. Only three people knew: Hazel, me, and Evelyn herself."

Chloe let out a shaky laugh, her relief obvious. "Thorne's running after a wild goose."

"Goose with teeth," Finn corrected, already thinking two moves ahead. "He'll figure it out eventually. We've got to get back before he does."

They pressed on, Finn setting a punishing rhythm, Chloe still chattering but now fueled by adrenaline more than nerves. She talked to Elias about the old days, about the studio, about how Evelyn had managed to make herself a myth even before she'd disappeared.

"She used to write fake diary entries and hide them all over the village," Elias said, voice barely above the wind. "Like time bombs. Some of them haven't even turned up yet. She loved the idea of being found over and over."

Finn half-listened, half-watched the ridgeline for any sign of Thorne's crew. The blue hour was coming on fast, shadows pooling in the gullies and the temperature dropping. They didn't dare stop for more than a mouthful of water.

By the time they crested the last ridge above Duck Creek, the sun had already dipped behind the far hills, and the world was painted in cold powder-blue. At first Finn thought he was seeing things: a yellow backhoe, parked like a trophy at the edge of the village, its steel teeth sunk into a mound of fresh-turned earth.

Chloe gasped. "They started already?"

Finn scanned the horizon. There were survey flags everywhere, a ribbon of orange tape tracing the line between the old cabins and the new, soon-to-be subdivision. On the rise above the site, a generator thumped, lights shining down on a crew of men with clipboards and survey poles.

"He's moved up the timeline," Chloe whispered, voice thin. "The demolition is starting tomorrow morning."

Elias didn't answer. He just looked at Finn, then at the compass, then back at the village, sadness in his eyes.

They made the last descent in silence, all three feeling the weight of what waited for them at the bottom. The air smelled of diesel and fresh-cut pine, and Finn hated it.

At the edge of the parking lot, Brandi was there, waiting. She stood in her flour-dusted apron, hands on hips, steam rising off a fresh tray of cinnamon buns that she'd brought out "for fortification," as she put it.

Chloe ran to her, almost tripping, and hugged her so hard Brandi nearly dropped the tray. "We did it," Chloe blurted, face buried in Brandi's shoulder. "We got the last canister. And the real compass."

Brandi grinned, tears in her eyes. "Good. You'll need the carbs for what's coming."

Finn smiled, too tired to be clever, and grabbed a bun straight from the tray. "Tomorrow, then?"

Brandi nodded. "We hold the line."

Elias leaned against the porch, looking up at the stars just starting to appear. "The mountain remembers," he said, more to himself than anyone. "Let's see if the town can, too."

They went inside, locking the door behind them. Outside, the heavy machinery waited, but inside the bakery, the warmth and light pushed back the dark for another night.

They would rest. Tomorrow, they'd fight.

And this time, Finn let himself hope they might actually win.

twelve

the town hall showdown

THE TOWN HALL had never seen this much action, not even in the glory days when the mayor's potluck was the only entertainment for a fifty-mile radius. Tonight, every seat was taken and people stacked three deep along the pine-paneled walls. Finn took a moment at the door, sizing up the crowd: Old Guard up front in their best flannel, Modern Settlers in Patagonia and recycled-fiber puffy coats, and the usual clutch of Second-Home Seekers wearing snow boots like costume pieces. They were all united, at least, by the flush of cold and the high-altitude pulse of a confrontation worth showing up for.

Marcus Thorne had the best seat in the house, or rather, all the seats. He prowled the stage in a tailored navy suit that was both too slick and too slim for a man built on Denver steak dinners. He had a smile that could crack glass and the restless energy of someone who was only pretending to be on your team.

Chloe let Finn lead the way, but the moment she spotted Brandi near the front row—apron still dusted with flour, chin held high—she slid into the seat next to her, pulling Finn down by the wrist. Chloe's phone was out instantly, the notes app open and ready. Finn scanned the stage: the projection screen, the tripod of poster boards with sunglare renderings of "Duck Creek Renaissance," and the Town Council, a row of faces behind a folding table littered with manila envelopes and half-empty thermoses.

Thorne raised a hand, and the din of three generations of Duck Creek quieted to a hush. “Thank you, everyone, for coming on such short notice,” he began, voice smooth as the gel in his hair. “I know most of you have heard the rumors, so let’s get ahead of them, shall we?”

He clicked a remote. The projector beamed a 3D rendering onto the pull-down screen. In place of the familiar patchwork of forest and meadows, there sprawled a horseshoe of “artisan” cabins, each with a hot tub perched on its own bluff. Strings of fairy lights snaked through groves of white birch, and in the foreground, a two-story “community lodge” boasted a glass-walled yoga studio. The final insult—a neon-blue swimming pool, glittering in the center like a lost Vegas wedding ring.

Chloe made a noise, half snort, half gag, but Finn kept his focus on Thorne, who launched into his pitch without missing a beat.

“What we’re proposing isn’t just a development,” Thorne said. “It’s a rebirth. A chance for Duck Creek to thrive. New jobs, new revenue, and a sustainable future that honors the mountain’s unique character.”

He cycled through more slides: a golf course etched like a scar down the valley’s spine, a shopping district where the bakery and the hardware store currently stood, and—because the consultants couldn’t help themselves—a faux-rustic bandstand for “outdoor concerts and civic gatherings.”

Finn caught the side-eye from Brandi, her jaw set so hard it must’ve hurt.

Thorne clicked to the next slide, a pie chart with wedges labeled “Hospitality,” “Recreation,” and “Lifestyle.” “We’ve already secured six properties,” he said, each syllable calculated to sound both casual and inevitable, “and we’re finalizing options on eight more. That’s over thirty percent of the core village.”

A rustle of whispers ran through the crowd, but Thorne pressed on, shifting tactics: “And let’s not forget the upgrades to the wastewater plant and the road. We’re talking about infrastructure improvements you won’t have to pay a dime for.”

A hand shot up from the Old Guard row. “What about the wildlife corridor?” The speaker was Mary-Anne Reilly, who’d been on every zoning board since the Reagan administration. “That creek is the only

thing keeping the elk off the highway. You going to fence it off so your guests don't get dirty?"

Thorne smiled, wide and reptilian. "We've engaged a world-class environmental consultant, Ms. Reilly. Every new cabin will use state-of-the-art filtration, and the green space is triple what code requires. The wildlife will be safer than ever. In fact, we're going to brand Duck Creek as the new gateway to nature."

Another voice from the back—Frank DeVries, plaid shirt, voice like he gargled gravel—called out: "Heard that before. Last time they called it 'Pine Meadows Preserve,' bulldozed the whole north slope, then went bankrupt."

Laughter, bitter but genuine, rippled through the room.

Thorne raised a hand again, his patience engineered to withstand this. "I understand the skepticism, I truly do. That's why I want to be transparent about our intentions. My family has deep roots here, and I take that legacy seriously." He clicked to a photo of a stoic man in a 1960s suit, standing beside a barely-paved Movie Ranch Road. "My grandfather was one of the first to invest in Duck Creek. He always believed this mountain had potential. And now, we have the chance to fulfill that."

Chloe leaned in and whispered, "I didn't realize the villain was so good at narrative structure."

Finn managed a half-smile, but his mind was on the deed transfers. If Thorne really had thirty percent of the village locked up, time was short.

The head of the council, a woman who looked like she'd wrestled more than a few snowplows, cleared her throat. "Mr. Thorne, the community's main concern isn't jobs or even change. It's what happens to the people who built this place. Are they supposed to leave?"

Thorne's response was velvet-wrapped steel. "No one has to leave. But every family here will have a choice: join us in building the new Duck Creek, or take advantage of the most generous buyout ever offered on this plateau. No pressure. Just opportunity."

Finn scanned the crowd—some people were nodding, hopeful, others openly scowling. A handful of Second-Home Seekers looked delighted at the thought of a golf course.

A brittle old man stood up, his cane trembling as he gestured. "What about the cemetery?" he demanded. "You can't just uproot it."

Thorne's answer was ready. "We've already budgeted for full preservation and enhancement. New fencing, new signage, even a historical marker for the original founders. It'll be a centerpiece of the project."

Chloe snorted again. "Maybe they'll put in a visitor's kiosk with souvenir headstones."

Finn could tell the room was turning, not toward Thorne but toward the sense that maybe nothing could stop this. He spotted Randy near the exit, arms folded, gaze fixed on Thorne with a look that would have done a bear proud.

The head councilwoman tapped her pen against the table. "Are there questions from the audience?"

A chorus of hands shot up. Most wanted to know about roads, water rights, or the fate of existing businesses. Finn stayed silent, eyes locked on Thorne, searching for any tell, any hint of uncertainty. Thorne fielded every question like a quarterback, pivoting from "public good" to "market forces" to "generational investment" with hardly a blink.

When the questions finally wound down, Thorne shifted gears. "I'd like to invite anyone with concerns to meet with our team individually. We have consultants in the back ready to answer every question. But before we adjourn, I have one more thing to add."

He stepped forward, voice lowering to a confidential tone. "There's been some speculation about the old St. Claire estate, and whether the land is even eligible for development." He paused, letting the crowd catch up. "Let me assure you, my grandfather's original trust document gives our family exclusive rights to develop on this plateau. The rumors of a deed restriction are just that—rumors."

A shiver ran through the crowd—some incredulous, others afraid.

Thorne smiled, this time showing teeth. "If anyone disagrees, I encourage them to present evidence to the contrary. We believe in open competition."

Finn clenched his jaw, feeling Chloe's gaze dart to him.

The councilwoman gaveled for order, her voice brisk. "Thank you,

Mr. Thorne. We'll take this under advisement and reconvene next week. Until then, meeting adjourned."

The crowd erupted into a hundred separate arguments, old friends turning to neighbors, some angry, some resigned. Thorne stayed on stage, accepting handshakes from the Council and ignoring the mutters in the aisles.

Brandi cornered Finn and Chloe by the door. "You see the way he skipped every real question?" she said, voice tight.

Finn nodded. "He's got the votes, if not the soul."

Chloe glared at the screen, where the rendering of Duck Creek's 'rebirth' still burned bright. "He's writing over history with a paint roller and a hashtag. If we don't stop him, this whole place will look like Aspen in a bad Hallmark movie."

Finn's gaze drifted to the far end of the hall, where Elias stood apart, arms folded, eyes never leaving Thorne.

"We have to move fast," Finn said. "Tomorrow, we go to Powell Point."

Brandi nodded. "Tonight, I'll get the bakery ready. If this is going to be a fight, we feed the army."

Chloe grinned, the spark back in her eyes. "It'll be a showdown worthy of the movies."

Outside, the village looked the same as ever—dark, cold, and quiet under the mountain. But inside Town Hall, the fuse had been lit.

The Town Hall smelled like gym mats and burnt coffee—an aroma Finn would've ignored on a normal day, but today it cut through his adrenaline high like a bad omen. He and Chloe slipped in through the side door just as Thorne gestured toward another glossy rendering, this one a high-rise hotel "designed to echo the rustic charm of the plateau." The mountain air clung to Finn's jacket, and his boots left dark, wet outlines on the linoleum as they hustled for seats.

The room was even more crowded than before. Thorne's team had set up a folding table by the door, manned by a pair of public relations consultants who handed out brochures with the zeal of missionaries.

Finn ignored them, zeroing in on Brandi, who sat in the third row, arms folded and apron still streaked with flour. She caught his gaze and gave a micro-nod, a signal as old as any secret handshake.

Chloe nudged Finn, her breath still ragged from the hike back. “We need to tell Brandi about the third canister,” she whispered, eyes locked on Thorne. “It’s a game-changer.”

Finn kept his eyes on the dais but angled his head toward her. “You watched the reel?”

Chloe grinned, the thrill of it pushing color to her cheeks. “It’s an interview. Evelyn herself, sitting on the porch in a flannel robe. She explains the Plan B deed—if the originals ever vanished, she left a duplicate in the hands of her lawyer. She says it on tape. ‘Nobody’s taking this land unless I want them to.’”

Finn’s pulse quickened. “That’s enough for an injunction, at least.”

Chloe tucked a flyaway strand of hair behind her ear, her smile fading as she watched Thorne bask in the glow of his PowerPoint. “But only if we can get the council to listen before he breaks ground.”

Brandi stood up, the suddenness of it silencing the three rows behind her. “Excuse me,” she called, not waiting for the gavel. The head councilwoman nodded, eyebrows raised in a blend of surprise and respect.

Brandi planted her feet, hands visible and steady on the back of the chair in front of her. “I want it on the record: Ground + Toasted will never sell to Thorne Holdings or anyone like them.” She paused, letting her words fill the room. “The bakery isn’t just a business. It’s a legacy. My family’s, Evelyn’s, and this whole town’s.”

A murmur rippled through the crowd, building to a smattering of applause. Even some of the snowbirds in the back row clapped, reluctant but moved.

Thorne’s smile didn’t so much as twitch, but the hand on his clicker tensed. “I respect your conviction, Ms. Larsen. But you might be surprised to learn that your mortgage has already been purchased by a third party. In fact,” he said, pulling a sheet from his briefcase with a stage magician’s flourish, “if the debt isn’t settled in full by the end of the month, foreclosure proceedings begin automatically.”

Gasps shot through the front row, and Brandi went pale, but she

didn't sit down. If anything, she stood taller, jaw set like she could take a punch from the mountain itself.

Chloe squeezed Finn's arm, her own face gone tight. "He's bluffing," she whispered. "Right? He can't do that overnight."

Finn shook his head, slow. "If he bought the note, he can. But if we move fast—"

The councilwoman slammed the gavel, cutting the rising tumult. "This is a community meeting, not a foreclosure notice. If Ms. Larsen wishes to contest the mortgage, that's her right, and the council will see that she's heard."

Brandi nodded, gratitude flashing in her eyes. She finally sat, but her hands never stopped clenching and unclenching on the chair.

Thorne picked up, this time with a whiff of triumph. "I appreciate your candor, Ms. Larsen. Let's hope the rest of the village is equally honest about their intentions."

He switched the slide to a sunset shot of the plateau, the words "A New Legacy" floating over the image in gold serif.

Finn caught Elias near the exit, leaning in the shadow and watching the room. The old man gave a subtle thumbs-up.

Chloe exhaled, the tension flooding out of her. "We have to get the tape to the council. Before the bank moves."

Finn nodded. "Tonight."

He locked eyes with Brandi. For the first time, he saw fear there—but behind it, something hotter. A refusal to be erased, no matter the odds.

They had hours, maybe, before Thorne played his next card.

And for the first time all winter, Finn believed they had a fighting chance.

It took the sheriff three tries to get the crowd's attention. First with a throat clear, then a call for order, and finally—when none of that worked—a sharp rap of knuckles on the council table.

Sheriff Adams wore his full dress uniform, and the effect was biblical: his presence alone tamed the din from full-blown ruckus to a

grudging mumble. He stepped forward, boots echoing off the cinderblock, and faced the dais. "Before this goes any further, I have information relevant to the last few minutes." He glanced around the room, making eye contact with half a dozen people before continuing. "It concerns the alleged vandalism at Ground + Toasted."

Brandi looked like she might faint, but she squared her shoulders, bracing for impact.

Adams held up a slim folder, as if presenting evidence to a jury. "We received a forensic report late this afternoon. It confirms that the bakery's sourdough starter was contaminated—deliberately—with household bleach. The act was caught on security camera and we have fingerprints matching a known associate of Thorne Holdings. We also recovered a vehicle belonging to the same individual, with evidence of recent travel from Las Vegas."

A collective gasp rolled through the crowd, then a sharper edge: someone in the back hissed, "Told you!" while another muttered, "What a crock."

The sheriff raised his hand again. "Let me be clear: the evidence is conclusive against the individual. But at this time, we have no legal grounds to charge Mr. Thorne or his company with ordering the act."

Every eye in the room was on Thorne, who betrayed nothing except for the tic in his jaw and the faintest trace of sweat above his brow. He folded his arms, the smile gone, and waited for the room to calm down.

Adams set the folder on the table. "The individual will be prosecuted. But let's not let this distract from what's being decided tonight."

The head councilwoman nodded, eyes sharp as flint. "Thank you, Sheriff." She squared her papers, then looked out at the assembly. "I think we've heard all sides. Unless there's new evidence, it's time to vote."

A hush, the kind that only comes before a storm, settled over the room.

The seven council members exchanged glances. Each took a ballot, marked it, and slid it forward with all the drama of a firing squad. The head councilwoman tallied the slips, her lips pressed in a straight line.

"Motion carries," she said, voice cracking just a little. "Four to three."

The proposal for clearing the abandoned cabins is approved. Work may commence at dawn, pending environmental inspection.”

The gavel fell, once, with a finality that sucked the oxygen out of the space.

Finn gripped the edge of his chair so hard his knuckles went white. Next to him, Chloe sat rigid, face pale, eyes wide and locked on the screen, as if waiting for it all to glitch and undo itself.

Thorne packed up his portfolio and passed through the crowd without a single word to anyone. He collected business cards from a handful of men in trucker hats, shook hands with the occasional landowner, and accepted a grudging nod from the council. It was over, and he knew it.

The room split down the middle—half surging toward Brandi, offering comfort or anger, the other half trailing after Thorne, already talking up the new amenities and the “opportunity” this would bring.

Brandi, shell-shocked, managed to keep her head up. She fielded a series of hugs and backslaps, her face never betraying what it cost her to stand there.

Chloe turned to Finn, her voice a whisper even though there was no longer any need to hide. “We have until dawn. Then the bulldozers move.”

Finn nodded. “Powell Point. We take the real tape and the map to the surveyor’s office. Tonight.”

She stood, and Finn followed, catching Brandi’s eye on the way out. The look they shared wasn’t defeat, but the acknowledgment of a higher summit just ahead.

In the hall, the two walked side by side, Finn’s stride measured, Chloe’s almost skipping with tension.

She said, “You ever think you’d be the hero in a land war?”

He shook his head, but the smile was real this time. “Just hope we don’t end up as the cautionary tale.”

They pushed into the night, air cold and pure, with only the moon and a single streetlight to guide them.

Inside, the Town Hall erupted in shouts and arguments, a whole mountain’s worth of voices refusing to fade quietly.

Outside, the last battle was just beginning.

thirteen

the night of doubts

FOR ONCE, Ground + Toasted was dark as a cave. Someone—probably Randy—had draped canvas over the front windows, muting the evening to a permanent predawn, and the only light came from the work lamp Brandi had clamped to the prep counter. She'd propped it up on a crate of flour, its beam pooling onto the scarred wood like a criminal spotlight. The ovens were cold, the register dead, and everywhere Finn looked he saw another limp drop cloth or unplugged espresso machine, like the place was being readied for its own wake.

Finn paced the length of the bakery in five-second laps: from the shut-down espresso bar, past the stacked chairs, to the counter where Chloe hunched over three battered film canisters. He felt the electricity in his muscles, the leftover adrenaline from the council meeting, and tried to channel it into something productive. But the air was all wrong—yeastless, silent, a heavy funk of burned coffee and defeated hope.

Randy stood sentry at the door to the kitchen, arms crossed, expression flat as the dough Brandi had thrown out earlier that afternoon. He hadn't said more than a dozen words since the sheriff's report had made the rounds, but every time Finn caught his eye, he felt the silent dare: Fix this. Or at least die trying.

Brandi busied herself behind the counter, scrubbing her hands on her apron even though there was nothing left to clean. She'd swept the floor three times, wiped down every exposed surface, and now she just

wiped and wiped at the same patch of flour on her apron strings, like if she did it long enough she could erase the last forty-eight hours.

Finn's next lap brought him up close to the cluster at the counter. Chloe had the three film canisters spread out in a precise triangle, lids off, the spools inside gleaming dully in the work light. She'd laid out several strips of film on butcher paper, pinning the ends with metal measuring spoons, and was holding a segment up to the light with trembling fingers. Her notebook was open but untouched, her pencil abandoned beside a smear of raspberry jam.

Finn stopped, half-raised a hand as if to offer comfort, then decided it would just get in her way. "Anything?"

Chloe's face was lined with exhaustion, her eyes red at the rims. She didn't look up. "The first two are almost identical. Dailies, mostly. Take after take, nothing that's not in the official cut." She let the strip dangle, the celluloid catching motes in the beam. "The third is the insurance reel. The one from the safe deposit box."

Brandi wiped her hands, coming closer. "And?"

Chloe grimaced. "It's bad. Really bad. Like, water damage and mildew and maybe actual fungus." She pinched a crumbling bit of film and let it drop. "If there was ever anything sensitive or incriminating on here, it's gone."

Randy snorted, the first sound he'd made in half an hour. "Figures. The mountain eats everything in the end."

Finn felt his stomach flip, anger fighting with despair. "So after all that, we're chasing ghosts. Meanwhile, Thorne's got lawyers and surveyors lining up bulldozers."

Chloe shrugged, not quite apologetic. "There's a chance I could reconstruct a frame or two. If the light was right, if Evelyn staged something really bold, maybe a close-up survives. But we need an actual expert, or a miracle."

Brandi slumped onto a stool, face drawn. "We're out of time for both."

Finn watched as Chloe ran her thumb along the edge of a film strip, then winced as the brittle acetate gave her a shallow cut. She licked the blood away, then let her hand fall to the counter.

The silence thickened, deep enough to smother a sneeze. Then

Randy, still at the door, cleared his throat. "Look, I'll say what everyone's thinking: What exactly are we fighting for? Thorne has politicians, money, and the law. Even if you find some smoking gun, they'll bury it in paperwork. The rest of us just get to watch our homes turn into golf courses."

Finn bristled. "You want to just roll over?"

"I'm not saying I like it," Randy said, voice flat but not angry. "But I'm not a fool."

Chloe set the film strip down with a soft clatter, then spun her stool to face Randy. "You're wrong about one thing. The town isn't his yet. He wants to buy everyone out, but he can't if we're the last ones standing. The bakery, the guide shop, the inn—if just a couple of places refuse to sell, he's stuck."

Brandi gave a dry laugh. "Doesn't matter. The bank called the note this afternoon. Thirty days, or they seize the bakery."

The words landed like a punch. Finn tried to find something to say, but Brandi just kept going, voice mechanical. "Thorne bought the note last week. Didn't even bother to hide it. They sent a courier up the mountain with the paperwork. I had to sign for it before the council meeting."

The weight of it pressed in, the cold metal smell of defeat sharper than the bleach that still haunted the kitchen.

Chloe's voice was a whisper. "We can't raise that kind of money. Not in a month."

Brandi looked at her hands, turning them over as if she couldn't recognize them. "My grandma paid off this building twice. I could mortgage my soul and it still wouldn't cover the balloon payment."

Randy's jaw flexed. "You still have options."

"Like what?" Brandi snapped, the anger a crack in her usually sunny tone. "Sell to Thorne? Sign the place over for a check and a year's supply of their designer scones?"

Randy didn't answer.

Finn couldn't take it anymore. He stalked to the window, pushed back the canvas, and stared out at the empty lot across the road. He remembered when the space had been a weed-choked field, home to nothing but quail and the occasional packrat. Now it was flagged with

survey tape, marked for future glory as “The Plateau’s Premier Outdoor Experience.”

He let the drop cloth fall and turned, pacing a circle back to the group. “We’re not beat yet.”

Chloe looked up, skeptical. “You got a plan?”

He swallowed, then said, “We get the last piece. Whatever Evelyn left at Powell Point, that’s what Thorne wants. Maybe it’s another reel, maybe it’s the actual deed, maybe it’s just a map to the map. But we get it first, and we put it on every phone in the state.”

Randy grunted. “He’ll have someone at the trailhead. They know we’re coming.”

“Then we don’t take the trail,” Finn said. “We bushwhack. Old game trails, the ridge line, whatever it takes.”

Brandi offered a weak smile. “And if we don’t come back with a miracle?”

Finn thought about it, about the bakery and the bread and the way the whole village came alive at the first whiff of cinnamon. “Then at least we didn’t let him win easy.”

Chloe nodded, face brightening just a hair. “I like it. Dying on your feet beats living on your knees.”

Brandi chuckled, the sound thin but real. “That’s what my grandma used to say, when the propane delivery came late and the pipes froze. ‘Don’t let the bastards get you twice.’”

Randy softened. “Fine. We go at first light. If we’re quick, we make it before the snow starts.”

Finn glanced at the covered windows, imagined the sunrise waiting for them on the other side. “Then we sleep in shifts. Someone’s got to keep watch, in case they try for round two.”

They fell into silence again, but it was a different silence—one built not on despair, but a thin, stubborn hope.

Finn knelt beside Chloe, checked the film canisters, and tucked them into his pack. “If anyone’s got an ace up their sleeve, now’s the time.”

Brandi tied off her apron, wiped her eyes, and nodded. “I’ve got a trick or two left.”

The four of them sat in the half-light, alone but not alone, and waited for whatever the morning would bring.

Elias had spent most of the evening camped in the bakery's far corner, perched on an upturned milk crate with a mug of cooling coffee cupped between both hands. He wore his usual layers—a battered wool shirt, the sleeves patched with mismatched corduroy, and a vest that looked older than most of the trees on the ridge. His boots left a permanent ring of pine needles and red silt around the crate, and he watched the group with the patient amusement of a man who'd seen too many storms to be impressed by thunder.

When the noise from the others died down, he finally spoke. "You all ever notice," Elias said, "how sometimes the mountain saves its best secrets for when you're too tired to care?"

Finn looked over, eyebrow raised. "You mean like when a bear waits until you've given up hope before it raids your food stash?"

Elias smiled, slow. "Something like that."

Brandi poured him a fresh mug, nudging the sugar closer. "You got a secret for us, old man?"

Elias sipped and set the cup on the counter with a gentle tap. "Maybe." He let the silence stretch, then added, "It's about Evelyn."

Chloe, who had been using a paring knife to pick at the edge of the butcher paper, sat up, suddenly alert. "Did you know her?"

"I did. Not well. Not at first." He leaned back, fixing his gaze on the cold, blank ovens as if they might flicker to life on memory alone. "I was a kid in the summers when she first came to the village. She wasn't the kind of person you forgot, even before she was a legend."

Chloe hugged her knees to her chest. "What was she like? For real, I mean."

Elias considered. "Sharp. Funny. Always seemed to know exactly what you were thinking, even if you didn't." He smiled again, more privately this time. "She had a way of showing up just as you made a mistake. Or right before."

Finn frowned. "I thought she disappeared after the fire."

"She did, for a while. But she came back." Elias's voice was softer now, almost a confession. "I saw her, years later. Not in the village, but up by Navajo Lake. I was camping out—tracking the late fall migration, I think. She walked out of the trees like she'd never left."

Brandi rested her arms on the counter, eyes wide. "What did she want?"

"She brought bread," Elias said, and for a second, he almost laughed. "No lie. Sourdough, baked in a Dutch oven. I think she just wanted to talk." He shrugged. "She said sometimes the mountain keeps its most important secrets until the last possible moment."

He reached into his vest pocket and pulled out an envelope, edges worn and softened by years of handling. He set it on the table, sliding it toward Chloe.

She opened it, careful with the fragile paper. Inside was a photograph, washed out and starting to silver at the edges. Two people stood in front of a rock wall streaked with lichen. One was a much younger Elias—shorter beard, less weathered, but unmistakable. The other was a woman in a checkered scarf and battered hat, her face lean and strong, eyes bright as the autumn sky.

Chloe ran her thumb along the edge. "That's her."

Brandi leaned in, squinting at the image. "She looks happy."

"She was," Elias said. "We talked until dusk, and she made me promise not to say she was alive. Said the story was better if she stayed a ghost."

Finn grunted. "That doesn't help us much now."

"It might." Elias tapped the photograph. "She said if it ever got real bad, if someone tried to steal the land, she'd left a message. A proof nobody could erase. But only if you looked in the right place, at the right time."

Finn's mouth twitched. "Which means what?"

"Means you need to get to Powell Point before sunrise," Elias said. "And you need to bring the picture."

Chloe clutched the envelope to her chest, the determination back in her voice. "We can do that."

Randy checked his watch, eyes calculating. "We'd have to leave now. Snow's coming in."

Brandi tossed a loaf of day-old bread into Finn's pack, then handed Chloe a flask of coffee. "Go."

Elias stood, bones popping in his knees, and followed them to the door. "One more thing," he said, catching Finn's arm. "The ridge trail is washed out in two places. You'll have to stick to the old footpath, the one that hugs the canyon. There's a cairn where it splits. You'll know it when you see it."

Finn nodded. "Thanks."

The four of them pulled on their jackets and stepped into the black night, snow beginning to fall in hard, slanting lines. The mountain loomed invisible, but Finn could feel it in his bones—waiting.

As the last of the bakery's light died behind them, Chloe looked at Finn, her breath already fogging the air. "You believe him?"

Finn cinched his pack tighter. "Doesn't matter."

She grinned, teeth white in the dark. "I do."

They set off up the ridge, boots crunching, the old photograph safe in Chloe's pocket. They had hours, maybe less.

But that was more than enough time for a miracle.

They'd barely cleared the edge of the village when Finn's phone rang—a brittle jangle that echoed too loud in the brittle night air. He fished it out of his pocket, checked the number, and answered.

"Yeah?"

A woman's voice, tight with stress and fatigue. "It's Dana. From the Service." She skipped pleasantries. "Thorne's people are up here. Three rigs, half a dozen men. They have an emergency permit. Heavy equipment's coming up from Cedar by five. They plan to start clearing before dawn."

Finn felt the cold sink deeper, his breath coming sharp. "Is the road blocked?"

"Not yet. But they're setting up at the Point. I can stall them, maybe, but if you're going to do anything, it's now or never."

He closed the phone, snapped it back to his chest. "They're already there," he said. "We have to move."

The wind picked up, whistling through the scrub and pinyon. In front of him, Chloe was already pressing up the incline, her gait quick and sure despite the dark and the snow. Behind them, Brandi and Randy matched their pace, nothing left to say.

Finn looked up, searching for the faintest glow of dawn on the horizon, but it was just more darkness.

He kept moving.

They all did.

fourteen

midnight strategy

THE KITCHEN at Ground + Toasted was a planet of its own, orbiting through the night while the rest of the village slept. One work lamp shone over the central island, banishing everything beyond to the shadows; the only other light was the glow from the proofing oven and the tick-tick-tick of the ancient fridge shivering against its own chill.

Finn stood at the island, both hands flat on a topographical map that barely fit the scarred butcher block. His watch face glimmered each time he glanced down, which he did every ninety seconds without fail. Chloe leaned in across from him, one elbow planted among a heap of dog-eared printouts, diary pages, and two battered thermoses. Brandi bustled around the periphery, her body a blur of apron and sleeve, measuring spoons clinking as she tried, for the fifth time, to salvage the contaminated mother from the morning.

Randy parked himself at the far end, a one-man blockade by the door, legal pad and two burner phones lined up at his elbow. Elias perched on a stool in the corner, back to the wall, hands folded in his lap like he was waiting for a sermon to begin.

Nobody talked for a long minute. The only sounds were Brandi's soft muttering as she weighed flour ("twenty grams, then rest, then fold"), the low fridge hum, and the rattle of the oven as it cycled on. Finn's pencil hovered, poised to redraw a route, then dropped.

"Six hours minimum by the main trail," Finn announced. He traced

the red path with his index finger, pressing so hard the map nearly tore. "If we break off at the old cattle gate, we can get to the east overlook by sunrise. Maybe an hour before Thorne's people."

Chloe, hunched over the spread of Evelyn's diary, didn't look up. "That's assuming we don't get stuck at the creek crossing. Last week's snow is still jammed in the gorge."

"It'll be packed down. Tourists have been up there all month." Finn's tone was flat, but Chloe could tell he was doing the math in his head, running variables on altitude gain, the night's forecast, the probability of running into someone less friendly than a snowplow operator.

Chloe fished a sticky note from the diary, holding it up to the light. "Listen to this," she said, tapping the page for emphasis. "Where earth meets sky at the highest dawn. Trust what the old ones marked, but step where the shadow stands." She looked around the table, eyebrows arched. "That's the same phrase from the last canister. And Evelyn double-underlined it. Has to be the north rim at Powell Point."

Randy didn't bother to mask his skepticism. "Which puts us head to head with Thorne's team, right where he wants us." He spoke without looking up, his pen working the legal pad with the relentless rhythm of a tattoo gun. "We can file a temporary injunction by eight a.m. I've got three affidavits ready and a call into the Forest Service supervisor, but without physical proof, it won't hold."

"Physical proof is what we're going to get," Finn said. He pulled the map closer, then jabbed at a faint dotted line on the west side. "Shortcut through Box-Death Hollow. Saves three hours, maybe more, but the elevation change is brutal."

Brandi broke away from her dough to lean over the map, her arms streaked with a pale dust that glittered in the lamplight. "That trail is closed for a reason," she said, voice gentle but with an edge. "Last time someone tried it, they had to get airlifted out. And that was in daylight."

Elias finally spoke, voice low but even. "It's doable, if you move fast and don't overthink the drops. The cold will keep the footing solid." He looked straight at Finn, not unkindly. "You up for it?"

Finn nodded, twice. "We don't have a choice. If Thorne gets there first, the paperwork won't matter."

Chloe, sensing the turn in the room, started gathering the diary pages and loose notes into piles. She did it almost subconsciously, like she was prepping props for a scene she hadn't memorized. "This is Evelyn's final play," she said, arranging the papers in a fan. "She wanted someone to find it. She just didn't trust anyone enough to say where directly."

Randy's voice was a grumble. "If she'd written a better clue, we wouldn't be in this mess."

Brandi cut in, gentler than before. "She did what she could. Some people only know how to talk in riddles." She shot a look at Elias, who shrugged, a small smile creasing his beard.

Finn checked his watch again. Midnight, on the dot. He rolled the map, then snapped a rubber band around it.

"We leave in thirty," he said. "Chloe, you prep the packs—two liters water each, crampons, the first aid kit. Brandi, we'll need high-carb food. Randy, keep the phones open. If Thorne's PI starts moving, I want to know."

Brandi wiped her hands on her apron. "There's still the matter of the bread," she said, half apologetic, half desperate. "If the starter's gone, even if we save the land, it won't be the same bakery. It won't be ours anymore."

Elias tilted his head. "Does it have to be the same? Or does it just have to survive?"

Brandi looked at her hands, then at the jar of new starter bubbling on the counter. "I don't know."

Chloe set the last of the diary pages into a waterproof sleeve. "Evelyn didn't want to be remembered for what she lost. She wanted to be remembered for what she left behind."

Finn opened his mouth to say something, but stopped. The silence that followed wasn't empty, just full of everything they didn't say.

At the thirty-minute mark, they broke. Chloe zipped up her coat, the sleeves stiff with patches and marker doodles. Finn rolled the map tighter and tucked it into his pack. Randy handed off a cheap but functional burner phone to each, programmed with speed dials and pre-loaded with every emergency contact in the county.

Brandi wrapped two sourdough rolls in wax paper, then tucked

them in a paper sack with an energy bar and three packets of honey. She pressed the sack into Chloe's hands, then, in a move that surprised everyone, pulled Chloe into a floury hug.

"Don't do anything dumb," Brandi whispered, her voice muffled by Chloe's jacket. "At least not alone."

Chloe grinned, her face half-smeared with flour. "Dumb is what I do best."

Elias took up the rear, slinging a battered canvas pack over one shoulder. "You want a shortcut, I'll show you the old path." He nodded at Finn. "But you lead. The mountain likes you."

Finn managed a rare, crooked smile, then pulled open the back door. The cold outside was shocking, the dark absolute. They lined up single file, boots scuffing the snow, breath clouding into nothing.

As the kitchen door swung shut, Brandi caught the last glimpse of the group: Finn in the lead, Chloe already halfway through a roll, Elias a silent shadow at the end.

Randy locked the door, then watched the snow gather on the stoop.

"Think they'll make it?" he asked.

Brandi picked up the jar of starter, still frothing with borrowed life. She set it on the prep counter, then squared her shoulders.

"They have to," she said.

Inside, the fridge hummed. The new starter rose.

The mountain waited.

Brandi was never more herself than with her hands in dough. She attacked it with a focus that left flour in her hair, across her cheeks, even smudged above one brow like a baker's war paint. She worked in near silence, save for the wet slap of the dough hitting wood and the steady rhythm of her breath. Each motion looked improvisational, but the recipe she followed was strict—scrawled, not on paper, but on a recipe card so stained and creased it had to be ancient.

Chloe watched from her perch on the prep table, feet swinging above the floor. "You said this one is special?" she asked, voice pitched low so as not to break the spell.

Brandi didn't glance up. "It's memory bread," she said, kneading with the heel of her hand. "Hazel had a ritual. Special feedings, certain shapes. This one's for clarity. Evelyn left the instructions in her notes."

Finn leaned on the opposite counter, lining up supplies for the hike: flashlights (three, in case one failed), first aid kit, two lengths of blue climbing rope, a pocket compass, and a pile of handwarmers. He listened to the dough, the way Brandi seemed to coax a new sound from it with every turn. "You think the starter's got enough punch?" he asked.

Brandi dusted her hands off and winked. "It's the mountain's starter now. The whole town contributed." She shaped the dough into a rough oval, then scored the top with a crosshatch, her knife moving with the confidence of years. "If anything can show us what we're missing, it's this."

Chloe grinned, but the corners of her mouth trembled. "If bread can solve our problems, I'd like to register my vote for a cinnamon roll-based government."

Randy, glued to the phone in the far corner, didn't look up. "If bread could solve our problems, none of us would have lawyers," he said, then barked a laugh, sharp and short. He returned to his call, his voice dropping to a mutter as he rattled off times, names, and a string of protest logistics for the morning.

Finn double-checked his pack, then walked over to Chloe. He nudged her foot with his own. "Nervous?"

She shrugged, but her shoulders stayed high, like she didn't want to let go of the tension. "Only about the part where we cross Box-Death Hollow at night. Otherwise, I'm fine."

Finn gave a half-smile, then looked at the oven, which was starting to heat up the kitchen. "You want to talk about the vision? From the last bread?"

Chloe stared at the wall for a second, then shook her head. "I'd rather see what this one brings. No point second-guessing the plot if you haven't watched the next episode."

Brandi slid the dough onto a cast iron tray, then set it inside the oven. She leaned against the counter, letting the heat seep into her back. "You want coffee?" she asked. "Or something stronger?"

Finn shook his head, but Chloe said, "If it's a last supper, I want the works. Make it black and sweet as sin."

Brandi poured two mugs, then set one in front of each. She pulled a chair up to the island, then looked at Finn and Chloe in turn. "Here's how Hazel did it," she said, voice gone teacher-clear. "When the bread comes out, you cut it warm, and everybody eats at the same time. No exceptions." She glanced at the oven, then back at her audience. "You have to think about what you want to know. You don't wish for it, you just... focus."

Finn rolled this around for a second. "You ever see anything?" he asked.

Brandi shrugged. "Once. When I was fifteen. I asked Hazel what it meant, and she said, 'It means you're ready for something hard.'" She laughed, low and a little sad. "She was right."

Randy ended his call, then strolled over. "Elias is doing rounds. He'll be back before the hour's up. Brandi, you need anything else for the—what did you call it?"

"Memory bread," Brandi said. She pressed a finger to the oven glass, watching the loaf rise. "It's almost ready."

Randy poured himself coffee, then sat next to Chloe. "I've got calls in to every landowner on this side of the ridge. If Thorne wants to bulldoze, he's going to have to clear a path through forty angry ranchers first."

Chloe grinned. "That'll slow him down."

Randy's eyes flicked to Finn. "Don't get careless. If they think you're onto something real, they won't play nice."

Finn nodded, then looked at Brandi, who was already donning oven mitts. "Showtime," she said.

She pulled the loaf, steam fogging the kitchen, and set it on a wire rack. The smell hit instantly—rich, sharp, with a tang that prickled behind the eyes. Brandi sliced the bread in silence, dividing it into five thick wedges, and set them on mismatched saucers around the island.

Elias drifted in, stamping snow off his boots. He hung his coat on a hook, then took the last seat at the table. "Did I miss the ritual?" he asked.

Brandi slid a piece of bread to him. "Right on time. Everyone—grab a slice."

They did. Five hands, each from a different world, each reaching for the same thing. Brandi's voice went softer. "Focus on Powell Point," she said, and that was all.

Finn bit in. The taste was electric: sour, deep, almost smoky. He chewed, then felt a ripple at the edge of his vision—like the first drop of a rollercoaster, or a caffeine rush that started behind his eyes. The kitchen walls faded; the light from the lamp fractured, then softened, then vanished.

He was somewhere else. He could feel it in his skin, in the prickle of cold against his forearms, in the grit of sandstone under his nails. The air smelled of old film chemicals and fresh-cut pine. He saw hands—Evelyn's hands, he knew—peeling back moss from a crack in the rock, sliding a flat, waterproof metal case into the hollow. She glanced up, eyes wary, then pressed the moss back into place.

A cut. The scene shifted: Finn stood at a distance, watching as a second figure moved through the trees—a man, big shoulders, a coat too nice for the forest. Thorne's grandfather? No, too young. The man stopped, looked at the horizon, and pulled out a cigarette. A second, then a third figure joined him, whispering.

Finn could hear the words, though the lips barely moved: "Once these forgeries replace her deeds, the entire plateau will belong to us. Nothing can challenge the chain of custody if the originals are burned. If she talks, she won't live to see winter."

There was a rustle in the brush; the men froze. One darted off, boots crunching, the other two stood perfectly still.

A shift again, then another: a flash of Evelyn writing a note, sealing it in a red envelope, leaving it in the hollow with the metal case.

The bread was hot and dry in Finn's mouth. He swallowed, felt the world contract, the vision swirl away. The kitchen blinked back into being, lamp buzzing, heat from the oven slapping him in the face.

Around the table, the others looked just as stunned. Brandi's fingers had curled so hard around her slice that it crumbled between her hands. Elias blinked, then grunted: "She left it for Hazel. A note, maybe more."

Chloe's eyes shone, wide as headlights. "Did you see the exact rock?"

The ledge with the lichen? I know that spot. I can draw it from memory.”

Finn nodded. “She wanted us to find it, but she didn’t want anyone to see her place the box.”

Randy exhaled, slow. “It’s a confession. If we get the original deeds, and the note, it’s over.”

Brandi set her slice down, then wiped her eyes. “She left it for family. If we don’t find it, Thorne’s people will.”

Finn grabbed a notepad and started sketching the crack in the rock, the lichen patterns, the slant of the ledge. Chloe peered over his shoulder, adding quick notes in her spidery handwriting.

Brandi pushed away from the table, already thinking ahead. “We have to bake a second loaf. One for the morning—if we make it back, we’ll need to show everyone what we saw. Hazel always said: if you want to prove a miracle, share it with the doubters.”

Elias nodded, a faint smile on his lips. “She was right.”

Randy made a fist, thumped the table once. “We’re ready.”

For the first time all night, the tension in the kitchen lifted. The group looked at each other, five faces washed by exhaustion but bright with the clarity of shared vision.

Chloe took the last bite of her bread, then winked at Brandi. “Best TV I’ve ever watched,” she said.

Finn zipped his pack, checking every pocket. “We leave in five,” he said. “Let’s go bring Evelyn home.”

The kitchen door opened to the dark, the snow, and the cold. But this time, it felt like something was waiting for them—a path, a purpose, maybe even a little luck.

They stepped outside together, the last of the bread warmth clinging to their hands.

Above, the mountain was silent, but Finn thought he could feel it listening.

Nobody slept. Not in the village, not in the bakery, and definitely not on the slick, narrow trail up through Box-Death Hollow. If the moun-

tain ever wanted to shake off its trespassers, tonight would be its chance.

Inside Ground + Toasted, the final hour before the hike felt like the backstage of a makeshift war room. Chloe stood at the island, sketching a map on the back of a bakery invoice—her drawing a tight, angular memory of the ledge from the bread vision, complete with patches of lichen and the weird, snaking shadow of a dead tree. Finn hovered beside her, tracing routes on the topo map, double-checking every contour and switchback.

Elias hunched over the battered canvas of his pack, laying out gear like a street magician: old but sturdy climbing rope, a compass with a cracked face, a Ziplock bag of herbal pastilles, and a silver whistle on a knotted lanyard. “If you lose the trail,” he said, pressing the whistle into Finn’s hand, “three short blasts. I’ll hear it, even if the coyotes are howling.”

Brandi worked at a different kind of triage—she packed two Ziploc bags with thick-cut sandwiches (egg, onion, cheddar, and a slick of mustard) and slotted in a half-dozen of the honey-laced rolls from the morning. She poured strong coffee into battered thermoses, screwing the caps on tight. “You’ll want this when the temperature drops,” she said, setting them on the counter with the care of a parent prepping a lunchbox for the world’s worst field trip.

Randy paced the kitchen’s short corridor, phone glued to his ear. “They’re up the canyon already,” he reported. “Four men, one with a headlamp bright enough to land a plane. Thorne’s staying back at the ridge house, but his PI’s in charge. We’ll have to assume they’re carrying.”

Chloe blinked, once. “Noted,” she said, and returned to her drawing.

Finn stowed the sketch in the waterproof map case. He slung his pack, checked the weight, and then shouldered the climbing rope Elias handed off. “You coming with us?” he asked.

Elias smiled, a wrinkle-worn thing. “I’ll walk you to the trailhead. But Box-Death Hollow likes to test the new blood. She won’t want me there.”

Brandi tucked the sandwiches into Finn’s side pouch, then

turned to Chloe. "Watch each other's backs," she said. Her voice broke on the last word, but she pressed on. "You find that box, you get home fast. Randy and I will be at the bakery, keeping the lights on."

Chloe looked at the clock, then at Finn, then at Brandi. "If you see us running, unlock the back door."

Randy checked his watch, then drew a folded sheet of paper from his coat. "This is a declaration of intent. It says you're acting in service to the historical trust of the village. If Thorne's men try to block you, you read this, and you keep moving."

Finn took it, read the first two lines, and tucked it next to his compass.

Elias zipped his pack, then pulled on gloves, the knuckles black with old resin and dirt. "Time," he said.

They filed out, single file, the cold biting even before the door finished closing. Brandi watched them from the window, palm pressed to the glass. She didn't move until the last headlamp pinpricked into the dark and the wind stole the afterimage away.

The night air in the hollow was a blade, cutting through every layer. The first mile was easy—a packed trail, a gentle slope, the sky still clear enough that Orion and Cassiopeia hung like ornaments above the pines. But as they left the comfort of the main path, the world went weird: the snow grew deeper, each step sinking to the ankles, and the trees crowding the gorge grew thicker, pressing in like the backdrop in an old stage play.

Chloe followed Finn's boot prints, which cut straight and deep through the crust. She couldn't feel her nose, but her hands were fine—adrenaline and maybe the memory bread keeping the blood hot. "You sure this is the split?" she asked, voice loud in the hush.

Finn checked the compass, then his own memory. "Matches the map. We go left, then down."

Elias, ten paces behind, called out, "You'll hit a cairn at the next turn. If it's covered, look for a scar on the birch trunk."

Chloe glanced at Finn. "He's like a cryptid. Pops up with the answer, then goes back to lurking."

Finn smiled, barely. "Makes sense, considering the mountain picked him as its oracle."

The trail narrowed. They hit the cairn, buried under a drift, but the birch scar was there—an ugly black gash, sap frozen around it in amber beads. They veered left. Now the real work began: the trail, such as it was, became a game of leapfrog over frozen logs, scramble up slopes glazed with ice, then shimmy down chutes of loose scree and snow. More than once, Chloe slipped, only to have Finn grab her sleeve or elbow. "You okay?" he asked each time.

"Fine," she replied. "You?"

Finn's breath steamed out in a big cloud. "Let's just say I'll never complain about stairwells again."

They pressed on. Twice, they saw the stuttering beam of a headlamp on the opposite ridge, and Finn would kill their lights and pull them behind a rock or bush until it passed. Chloe lost track of time, then of the pain in her legs. After what felt like hours, they hit a dead end: a wall of limestone, twenty feet straight up.

Chloe stared, then pointed. "That's it. The ledge from the drawing."

Finn unslung the rope, eyeing the wall. "You up for this?"

She nodded. "On belay."

Finn tied off, then braced her as she climbed, the crampons biting into the softer seams. Her hands were numb by the third grip, but she kept moving, fueled by the vision and a kind of stubborn, last-ditch joy. The ledge was right where she'd drawn it—wide enough for both feet, slick with rime and moss, a dead juniper clinging to the edge like a flag.

Chloe peered into the crack, her fingers already searching for the box. At first, nothing—just loose bark, a film of old lichen, the soft dust of mountain decay. She ran her palm along the stone, remembering the vision: moss, then a twist, then—

Her hand hit metal.

She yanked, but the box was wedged tight. "Finn!" she shouted.

He was already halfway up, climbing with the efficiency of someone who'd spent a lifetime bouldering. He reached the ledge, braced his feet,

and together they worked the box free. It came loose with a pop, a flake of moss spinning into the air.

Finn held the box between his gloves, breath coming in quick bursts. "You want to do the honors?" he asked.

Chloe nodded, but her hands shook as she broke the wax seal. Inside: a red envelope, a roll of microfilm, and a single, hand-written note.

She read aloud, voice flat and clear against the wind: "To Hazel, or whoever finds this. The originals are here. Don't let them win. They can't change the mountain—only try to outlive it. Love, E."

Finn tucked the envelope into his inner pocket. "We have to get this to the Service. They can stay the demolition with this."

Chloe nodded, then looked at him, really looked. "You realize we just outplayed the entire Thorne family?"

Finn grinned, teeth white in the dark. "Feels pretty good."

He tucked the microfilm away, then checked the slope below. Lights—two, maybe three—bounced at the base of the hollow, less than a quarter mile away.

"They're here," Chloe whispered. "What now?"

Finn pulled the climbing rope back into his pack. "We stick to the route. And we run."

Chloe nodded, then turned to the ledge, her last look lingering on the scarred stone. "Goodbye, Evelyn," she whispered.

They dropped off the ledge, sliding more than climbing. Snow filled their boots, burned the skin at their ankles, but they hit the main trail and moved, heads low, hearts thumping. Finn took the lead, the compass steady, Chloe right behind. The world shrank to a tunnel of breath and noise and the slap of boots on frozen mud.

Behind them, the headlamps drew closer. Chloe risked a look—two men, moving fast, voices muffled by the wind.

They rounded the final switchback and saw it: the village below, lights twinkling from the bakery, smoke curling from a chimney. Chloe could have cried.

Finn didn't break stride. "You go first," he said. "I'll cover you."

She ran, pumping her arms, ignoring the bite of cold and the

screaming in her calves. The bakery door opened before she got there, Brandi framed in the light, her apron a beacon.

Chloe barreled inside, nearly collapsing.

Finn followed, panting hard, then slammed the door and threw the bolt.

Randy already had the phone out, dialing the Service.

Brandi caught Chloe, hugging her so hard she almost knocked the breath out. "You did it," she said. "You really did it."

Chloe opened her palm. The box, the envelope, the note. Proof.

Finn slumped to the floor, letting the exhaustion wash over him. "They'll be here in minutes," he said. "But we're ahead."

Brandi poured coffee, handed Finn a mug. "You want to watch the mountain from the window?" she asked.

He smiled, accepting the cup. "Yeah," he said. "Let's see if she's on our side."

They lined up at the glass, Chloe still holding the box. Down the road, two men trudged toward the bakery, faces hidden by balaclavas and hoods.

Randy opened the door before they could knock, holding up the legal document like a shield.

"This is private property," he said, loud and even. "You want anything, you call the sheriff."

The men hesitated. One looked at the other, then at the window where Chloe and Finn stood, arms linked.

They retreated, silent, melting into the night.

Brandi watched until the last headlamp vanished, then turned to the others.

"We made it," she said.

For the first time in days, Finn believed it.

He drained his coffee, then turned to Chloe. "You ever want to do this again?"

She grinned, wild and bright. "Only if you're leading the way."

They all laughed, even Brandi, the sound rising to fill every corner of the kitchen.

Outside, the mountain was quiet, and for now, that was enough.

fifteen

box-death hollow

THE MOON, almost full, sailed high and sharp above the ridgetop as Finn led the group out of the last circle of village light. Even with the snow, Box-Death Hollow lived up to its name—cold, black, hungry for whatever blundered inside. The world shrank to the scuff of boots and the beam from Finn’s headlamp, stabbing ahead in a jittery cone that found every gnarled root and frozen stone. Chloe kept pace a few feet behind, her breath steaming wild, the screen of her phone bouncing in her palm as she narrated into the dark: “Seventy minutes in, team morale holding steady, and I for one am not regretting the bread.”

Elias, trailing them both by the length of a small shadow, didn’t carry a light. Instead, he watched the sky through the fringe of old pine, as if the stars told him everything he needed. Sometimes he’d stop, listen, then shuffle faster to keep the gap from widening. He never tripped.

Finn’s world, always tuned for the next bad step, felt every patch of crust break underfoot, every subtle shift in the wind. Where others might have found the trail by memory or by GPS, Finn read the faint disruptions: the line of brittle willow sprigs, the fox scat frozen to a puck, the glimmer of quartz dust shaken loose in a washout. At the first turn-off, where the regular path bowed west toward the overlook, Finn left it without hesitation, breaking right into the narrow, unmaintained cut that ran the length of the hollow. Here, the drop grew steeper; the

walls pressed in. The snow in the bottom, trampled and re-frozen, became a chute that sucked them along at twice the speed, half the control.

He risked a glance back at Chloe, who had switched from talking to muttering. She was videoing now, holding her phone at a low angle, sweeping it from Finn's heels to the walls towering around them. "People at home won't believe how narrow it is," she whispered. "It's like a throat."

Finn tapped a gloved finger to his lips—shh—and the next time she started, she only did it in a whisper.

The path bent and the world blinked to a new kind of dark. In this section, the pines grew so close overhead they knotted the moon right out of the sky. Wind punched down the hollow in waves, each gust shaking a cloud of ice-dust onto their heads and shoulders. Loose rock slid under Finn's feet. Somewhere up the draw, something crashed through a drift—deer or rabbit, maybe, but for a second all three stopped, listening to the echo chase itself around the bend.

Afterward, the air seemed even colder. Finn saw the next hazard before Chloe: a sharp edge where the snow gave way to a patch of ice, hiding a field of loose scree. He angled sideways, using the slope to slow himself, then motioned for her to copy. "Crampons," he said, just loud enough. She nodded, grinning even as her phone slipped in the dark and she fumbled to catch it.

He watched to make sure she had her footing, then picked the best line forward. A few minutes later, he reached back to steady her as the ledge tilted under their boots. Her hand shot out, catching his forearm; her grip was strong, even through two layers of glove.

"Thanks," she whispered, more sheepish than he'd ever heard her.

They made the next section in careful tandem, Finn leading each switchback, Chloe following his exact boot prints, Elias drifting along behind like a rumor. After twenty minutes, the cut opened into a wider saddle, and the stars poured in again. Finn took the opportunity to scan the skyline for anything moving, any unnatural flicker of light. Nothing yet.

Elias paused in the opening, set his pack down, and stood with his back to a dead cedar. He tilted his face up, eyes fixed on the stars.

"Give it five," he said. "There's a wind shift coming. Might as well let it pass."

Chloe, less sure on her feet now, leaned against the same cedar, rubbing her thighs and flexing her ankles. "I thought I was in shape," she said, breathing hard.

Finn shook his head, not unkind. "The mountain decides."

Chloe snorted, then pulled out her phone again. "This is incredible," she said, recording the bare, gnarled trees against the backdrop of black sky. "Look at that," she murmured, voice gone soft. "It's like the set from *Starlet's Shadow*, only better because it's real."

Finn looked at Elias, who hadn't moved. The old man's face was soft with the light from above, and for a second, Finn thought he looked almost at peace.

Then Finn noticed the weirdest thing: on the patch of exposed dirt near the base of the cedar, a set of prints. Not animal—human. Deep, sharp-edged, and recent.

He crouched, sweeping a finger through the depression. The edge was clean, snow pushed aside by a boot. "Someone's ahead of us," he said, keeping his voice even.

Elias didn't seem surprised. "I saw a headlamp on the switchback. Maybe fifteen minutes ahead."

Chloe looked up, startled. "Thorne?"

Finn shook his head. "He's not the hiking type. But his PI is." He motioned at the tracks, which zigzagged off into the next stretch of hollow. "They're moving fast."

Chloe pocketed her phone. "Do we follow?"

Finn glanced at Elias. "If we take the side cut, we can get above them."

Elias smiled, just a twitch. "You're learning," he said, then hoisted his pack and started off at an angle that looked, to anyone else, impossible.

Finn followed, motioning Chloe to stay close.

The new route was barely a route—more an idea, suggested by the tilt of the slope and the thread of game trail that cut between boulders. They scrambled, hands and knees at some points, Chloe cursing quietly but never stopping. At the crest, Finn turned off his headlamp and let

his eyes adjust. Down in the hollow, a pinprick of light jittered along the main path. Not Thorne—Finn recognized the body language of a pro. The man was efficient, always checking his six, never lingering at a turn.

Finn held up a hand, then motioned for Chloe to lie flat behind the crest. She did, panting, her hair slick with sweat and half-frozen to her temple.

Elias, prone beside them, whispered: “He’ll miss the marker at the birch. We keep to the rim, we’ll beat him to the point.”

Finn nodded.

They crawled along the ridge, every breath frosting in the cold. Finn checked the sky, then the path below, then the way forward. The trail was less treacherous up here, but the wind was twice as mean—blowing sideways, threatening to strip the heat from their faces. Chloe lost her beanie and swore, then pulled her hood tight.

At the last saddle before the final ascent, Finn looked back. The headlamp below had vanished.

He scanned, found it again—closer than before, moving at a dead sprint.

“We have to go,” Finn said, urgency pressing into his words.

Elias smiled again, wider this time. “I said the mountain likes you.”

They moved. No more talk, just the whip of wind and the crunch of boots on the thin snow. The top of the hollow was in sight, and just beyond, the faint suggestion of Powell Point, still miles off but painted silver in the moonlight.

They crested the last rise, dropped over the edge, and Finn let them rest only once the slope was between them and the path. He pressed his back to the rock, closed his eyes for a second, then looked at Chloe, who was shaking but grinning.

“I can’t believe we’re outrunning a PI up a mountain,” she said, laughing despite the chill.

Finn found himself laughing, too. “You get used to it.”

Chloe wiped her face, then held her phone up again, hands shaking a little. “I’m definitely using this as my new lock screen.”

Elias, backlit by the moon, just stood and looked at the next line of the horizon. “Let’s not wait for him to catch up,” he said.

Finn nodded, but something in the pit of his stomach had turned.

The tracks, the speed, the way the light had doubled back—this wasn't an ordinary pursuit.

But for now, they had the lead.

He shouldered his pack, took one last look at the world below, and pressed forward. Next stop: Powell Point.

They broke treeline as the world flipped from pitch-black to endless—nothing between them and the stars but wind and the rim of the plateau. Finn stopped at the first clear of the ridge, catching his breath and scanning the open. Chloe slumped next to him, hands on her knees, the heat of exertion making steam off her collar.

Elias joined last, eyes fixed not on the ground but the sky. "Half-way," he said, voice so quiet Finn barely heard it over the wind.

Finn checked the time, then the trail ahead. "Another mile to the old logging road, then straight shot to the Point. If we keep to the east face, we'll see anyone coming."

Chloe straightened, voice shaky but proud. "You think he's still behind us?"

"Doubt it," Finn said, but the answer wasn't for her—it was for the mountain. "If he's smart, he'll double back and try to cut us off at the car."

Chloe frowned. "I thought you said Thorne wouldn't hike."

Elias' head jerked up, nose twitching the air. "He wouldn't. But he's not coming by foot."

Finn looked where Elias was looking: a break in the ridge, maybe two miles north, where the forest opened onto a shallow bench. At first, Finn saw nothing—then, a stutter of light on the horizon, bouncing, then steady, then a long yellow streamer crawling across the far slope.

He sucked in a breath. "That's the old access road. Nobody drives it this late unless they're working."

Chloe watched the lights, then glanced at Finn. "You think it's Thorne?"

Elias didn't take his eyes off the glow. "He's coming to Powell Point. There's no other reason to drive at this hour."

Finn watched the headlamps as they climbed the switchbacks. “We have maybe forty minutes,” he said. “He’ll hit the Point before sunrise.”

Chloe’s jaw tensed. “So what do we do?”

Finn set his mouth, looking back the way they came. “We move,” he said, and started off without waiting for agreement.

The rim trail was exposed, wind skimming the surface and pushing the cold into their faces like a slap. Chloe tried to focus on her breathing—one-two, one-two, like Finn had drilled her on their practice hikes—but the ground was uneven, and her legs were shot from the scramble up Box-Death Hollow. Elias moved with a weird, rolling gait, somehow immune to the rocks and the thin air, and every so often he would hum, low, as if syncing with the wind.

Finn’s pace never wavered. He navigated by dead trees, by boulders split with frost, by the faint memory of snowmobile ruts worn into the crust. Every time Chloe started to lag, he’d look back and wait until her headlamp bobbed even, then push forward again, as if he could will the three of them to the finish line by stubbornness alone.

They were three-quarters to the summit when the trail turned ugly—a stretch of loose, powdery shale, interrupted by the jagged spines of buried sandstone. It looked manageable from the approach, but halfway across, the world under Chloe’s boots slid. She threw out a hand, missed, and suddenly she was glissading on her butt, speed picking up, rocks slicing through her pants and leaving fire in her thighs.

Finn shouted, but Chloe didn’t hear; the sound of shale and her own heartbeat drowned out everything. She tried to dig in her heels but bounced instead, then skidded sideways, arms pinwheeling. Her phone, barely gripped, pinwheeled out and vanished into the dark. She saw a sharp edge ahead—a drop, ten feet or more, nothing but black beneath it.

She didn’t even have time to scream before Finn was there, sliding on purpose, feet out, one arm stretched. He caught her wrist with a force that nearly dislocated her shoulder, then used his momentum to whip both their bodies into a rut along the trail. Dust choked her, then everything stopped.

It was silent, save for their ragged breathing.

After a few seconds, Finn said, "You good?"

Chloe tried to laugh, but it came out as a sob. "Yeah. I think I lost my phone."

Finn let go only when her grip loosened. His gloved hand lingered, just a second longer than necessary, then he pulled away and started scanning the drop for the phone.

Chloe rolled to her knees, crawling after. "Don't worry about it—"

He held up a hand, then crouched to peer into the darkness. "There," he said, then glanced at Elias, who was picking his way down, slower but just as sure-footed.

Finn eased down the slope, feet braced against each slide, and after a minute came back up with her phone. The screen was spider-webbed but still lit. He handed it to her, the gesture careful.

Chloe took it, her hands trembling. She wiped her face, then looked at Finn, really looked. His face was flushed and cut at the cheek, dirt smudged on his chin.

"Thanks," she said, voice small.

Finn shrugged. "Gravity's a pain in the ass."

They sat, catching breath, while Elias joined them on the shelf. He patted Finn's shoulder, then set his own pack down. "When you hike in the dark," he said, "it's always the last fall that gets you."

Chloe tried to grin, but her hands still shook. "Is it always like this?"

Elias looked at her, then at Finn. "If you're lucky, yes."

Finn dusted off his pants, then stood, offering Chloe a hand. She took it. The look between them was different now—a silent contract that neither would say out loud.

They pushed on.

The wind dropped as they moved into the lee of the summit. The sky, once endless black, was starting to gray at the rim—a hint of morning, just enough to see the outline of Powell Point in the distance. The road snaked up to it, a pale scar in the blue.

Finn picked up the pace. "We'll have to run the last quarter," he said. "Thorne will see us if he's looking."

Chloe tucked her phone away, then nodded. "Just tell me when."

They hit the flat before the Point and ran—Elias jogging, Finn lead-

ing, Chloe in the middle, her shoes slapping the crust and spraying dust behind her.

In the distance, a car door slammed. The headlights angled away, but Finn knew better than to think Thorne hadn't seen them.

"Last push," Finn said, half-growl.

They reached the Point together, lungs burning, muscles screaming. Ahead, the world dropped away—miles of canyon and snow, the sunrise just beginning to paint the sky with color. Chloe staggered to a stop, hands on her knees, and looked back to see Thorne's rig idling at the road's end, the man himself standing next to it in a slick jacket, arms folded.

Finn glanced at Chloe. "We're up first," he said.

She nodded. "Let's do this."

Elias smiled, the lines in his face deepening. "She would have liked you," he said, and together they stepped toward the rock, ready for whatever the mountain would ask next.

The ridge above Powell Point was nothing like the maps: instead of a smooth saddle leading to the summit, it offered a broken comb of stone outcrops and wind-scoured scrub, each step a new improvisation. For a while the three moved in silence, the only noise the crunch of frost and the dry rasp of their own breathing. But as the dark peeled away from the east and the stars started to blink out, Elias broke the quiet with stories.

"She hiked this ridge before they built the road," he said, voice steady but faint. "Carried two canisters in her pack. Did it in winter once, in a blizzard. Next time, midsummer—heat so bad the tar on the old film case almost melted through her shirt."

Chloe pressed on, but found herself listening, imagining the legend herself: Evelyn St. Claire, face lined with cold, hands never shaking, the wind flattening her hair to her skull as she marched up these same rocks. "Why pick this spot?" Chloe asked, bracing herself on a wedge of sandstone. "Why not just bury it in the village?"

Elias paused, breath coming out in small, even clouds. "She knew

the mountain could be bought. But not the sky." He swept his arm at the horizon, now the color of an old bruise. "You hide something out here, you have to really want it."

Finn said nothing, but his jaw flexed with every step. He understood the logic: up here, nothing was easy, nothing casual. If you wanted to stash your legacy in a place nobody would bother to check, you picked the spot that meant the most, the spot you'd died for, in a way.

They hit the last knob before the Point and found the trail again, raw and exposed. Chloe checked her phone, amazed it still worked, and saw the time: 6:38. Sunrise in twenty minutes.

As if on cue, the stuttering glare of headlights crested the far ridge. The vehicle—big, black, and absurd in this setting—bounced along the access road, picking up speed as it aimed for the overlook. Chloe felt a pulse of pure, animal fear. "They're almost here," she said, voice breaking.

Finn checked the gap. "We can beat them on foot," he said, "but we have to go now."

Chloe's heart hammered, but she nodded. They moved, not hiking but running: every muscle screaming, lungs shredding on the cold, but none of them slowing. Elias' pack thudded against his spine, but he never looked back. Finn led, eyes fixed on the crown of Powell Point, every part of him tuned to the route. Chloe pushed herself, the memory of the near-miss on the shale still fresh, and followed every step exactly, not trusting her own instincts.

The mountain faded in and out behind clouds, the sky growing lighter and lighter, the first hint of sun just kissing the far edge of the world. The ground here was bare except for tufts of wiregrass and a few old juniper, the soil a weird red-black that looked like Mars. Chloe realized, with a jolt, that she'd stopped shivering; all her blood was working overtime to keep her upright.

They hit the last hundred yards at a dead run. Finn veered right, toward a narrow chimney in the rock, then pulled up short. "Here," he said, voice sharp with adrenaline. "Chloe, the photo."

She fished it from her inner pocket, hands numb. The old picture showed a gnarled pine, long dead, with a curl of branch pointing to a

vertical seam in the cliff. Chloe scanned the real world, found the pine, and shouted. Finn was already there, probing the seam with bare fingers, Elias at his elbow.

Below, the car had stopped. Two doors slammed. A man's voice echoed faint, then again, louder, less patient. "You can't outrun a truck," it called.

Finn ignored him. He scraped at the lichen, then jammed his hand into a hole. There was a metallic click, then a scraping sound, and Finn pulled out a battered steel box the size of a lunch pail.

Chloe exhaled, the relief almost nauseating. She reached out, but Finn held it up first, just as the sun crested the far rim and flooded the scene with gold.

Thorne appeared at the bottom of the outcrop, a tiny figure in a technical parka, breathing hard from the climb. He stared up, then back at his companion, then at the three standing on the crown of Powell Point, silhouetted by the rising sun.

For a long moment, nobody moved.

Finn handed the box to Chloe. Her hands shook so badly she could barely hold it, but she opened the latch and looked inside.

Film canisters, labeled in neat block letters. A thick envelope, sealed with tape so old it had fused. And a single folded note, creased and yellow.

She read the note, lips moving. Then she handed it to Finn, who nodded. "It's the original deed," he said, voice thick. "She left it here because she knew nobody else would ever find it."

Elias sat on a rock, legs splayed, and looked out over the canyons below. He didn't say anything for a while. Then: "She said the land was just a stage. The play was what you did with it."

Chloe wanted to cry, but instead she laughed—a breathless, ridiculous giggle that turned into a full-throated shout. She waved at Thorne, who just stood, fists in his pockets, looking up at them like he might bite through the mountain itself.

Finn sat next to Elias, then patted the rock for Chloe. She joined, and the three of them just sat, basking in the sun, holding the box. Below, the headlights shut off.

For a while, nobody spoke. Then Elias said, "You did good."

Chloe nodded, the wind drying tears she hadn't realized were on her cheeks.

Finn smiled, just a twitch, but it was real.

The mountain, for now, was safe. The legacy would hold. The secrets were still secrets, but the right people knew them now.

And as the sun rose, burning away the last of the night, the three watched together—quiet, proud, and alive.

sixteen

**dawn at
powell point**

THE SUN CAUGHT the tip of Powell Point in the exact way Chloe remembered from the photograph—an orange halo flaring against the blue nothing, so bright she had to squint through watering eyes. Even Finn, whose face did not register much besides hunger and weather, took a second to stare into it, the wind on the ridge flattening his hair straight back from his forehead. Behind them, the last mile of snow looked untouched, their own tracks erased by the gusts that battered the crest. There was no sign of the PI, of Thorne, or of any other living soul.

Chloe dropped her pack and clambered up the first shoulder of the formation, boots slipping on the frost-rimed limestone. Elias didn't even break stride; he hoisted himself over a split boulder and was already scanning the cliff face for the marker from the photo. Finn lingered a few steps behind, his fingers running absently over the laminated copy of the photograph, like he was checking it for heat.

They'd barely slept, and what rest they had managed was interrupted by coyotes yipping in the hollow and the constant edge-of-ear alertness that came with knowing someone was chasing them. But the bread vision, as Chloe had decided to call it, burned hot in her mind: the split in the ledge, the dead tree, the way the sun would angle right through the gap at dawn. The specifics of the plan—get here first, find

the box, get it out without being caught—seemed more like improv than strategy, but sometimes improv worked.

She reached the old pine from the photograph and circled it, checking for the vertical seam in the rock. The wind howled up the canyon, snatching the ends of her scarf and battering her against the trunk. She found the seam just where she'd seen it: a ribbon-thin crack, rimmed with black moss, the kind of thing that only stood out if you were looking for it.

"Here!" she called, her voice blown back at her by the gale.

Finn and Elias joined her at the ledge, their breaths ragged, faces pale as flour. Elias nodded at the crack. "Looks right."

Finn dropped to a crouch, brushing the moss with gloved fingers. "It's deep," he said, voice all business. "If there's anything in there, it's wedged."

Chloe reached in first, her hand trembling with cold and anticipation. She expected nothing—maybe a rock, maybe the hollow would be empty, and they'd just freeze here while the world moved on. But there was a flat surface, slick and metallic, just inside the seam. She gripped it and pulled, meeting a little resistance, then a pop as it slid free.

It was heavier than she'd expected—a rectangle of dull gray, cold as ice. Finn took it and set it on the ground, brushing away a layer of grit. "Waterproof case," he said, mostly to himself. "Old kind, before they started using plastic."

Elias knelt and helped unscrew the cap, his beard catching on the rim. Inside: three items. Each perfectly preserved in a sleeve of waxed cloth. Finn tipped the contents onto a patch of clear stone.

Chloe didn't wait for permission. She snatched up the first—an envelope, yellowed but intact, sealed with a notary stamp. She fumbled it open, careful not to tear the paper, and unfolded the document inside.

Finn leaned in, reading over her shoulder. His breath was a cloud of fog on her cheek. "'Transfer of property from Evelyn St. Claire to Hazel A. Larsen, in perpetuity and for purposes of conservation, with full documentation of chain of custody.'" He scanned further, a line of concentration cutting his brow. "It's the original deed. Signed, nota-

rized, and with a second signature—looks like the lawyer from the other reels.”

Chloe exhaled, feeling the tension in her chest crack. “So it’s real. We have it.”

Finn nodded, not smiling but softer, a faint relief lighting his face.

She reached for the second item: a tiny reel-to-reel audio tape, maybe six feet of ribbon, boxed in a foam sleeve. A handwritten note wrapped it: “For Hazel, to prove the truth. May it be enough.” The handwriting was the same as the letters in the archive—Evelyn’s, slanted and sharp.

Chloe swallowed. “We can play this at the village,” she said. “At the Town Hall meeting. The council has a player.”

The third item was a film canister, black plastic with silver tape around the seam. In red marker, someone had written: “Final Cut—Starlet’s Shadow, Scene 89.” Chloe ran a thumb along the tape, then looked at Finn, unable to keep the grin from splitting her face. “The lost reel. She really left it here.”

Finn took it from her, turning it in his hands. “You sure this is the right one?”

Chloe nodded, feeling it in her bones. “It’s the reel from the vision. The one they never released.”

Elias watched, silent, but his hands shook a little as he brushed the waxed cloth from the case. “We should get moving,” he said. “If they’re on the road, they’ll be here by sunrise.”

Finn nodded, snapping the canister and the deed into his pack. “We go down the west face, keep to the rock line. He won’t expect us to take the hard way.”

Chloe tucked the audio tape into her jacket, then risked one last look at the sky. The sun had finished climbing, painting the cliffs gold and copper, every shadow deep and blue. She felt like she’d never see a morning this clear again.

But then, from below—a rumble. The sound of a car engine, muffled by distance but growing.

She caught Finn’s arm. “He’s here.”

Finn didn’t waste time. He motioned them to the edge, already

plotting the best route down. Chloe scrambled after, and Elias, with one last glance at the ridge, followed.

They didn't look back at the box or the pine or the way the mountain held the light. They just ran, the secret burning a hole in their pockets, the last hope for the village riding in Finn's pack.

Behind them, a black SUV crawled into view, headlights sweeping the base of the Point.

The race wasn't over yet.

They made it halfway down the switchbacks before the voices caught up, echoing off the stone: not shouts, exactly, but the deliberate sound of a man who expected to be obeyed.

"Stay where you are!" The words skidded over the crusted snow and made Finn's skin tighten. He glanced at Chloe, who mouthed a silent curse and hunched deeper into her parka. Elias slowed, waited for them to bunch up, then steered them off the trail into a patch of wind-stunted juniper.

Footsteps crunched up the switchbacks—two sets, one heavy and purposeful, the other less confident but trying to sound mean. Thorne crested the rise, his wool coat flapping open to show a suit that had never seen a laundromat, let alone a dry cleaner in this county. The PI, Pelligrini, wore a down jacket but looked cold anyway, his hands shoved into pockets and the ears red as sunset.

Thorne stopped three paces above them and took in the scene, his eyes hard. "Hand over the case," he said, pointing directly at Finn.

Finn shrugged, keeping his body between Thorne and Chloe. "Not happening."

Thorne looked past him, sizing up the rest. His gaze lingered on Elias, and his face twisted, surprise breaking through the polish. "Well. Didn't expect to see you above ground, Elias."

Elias didn't bother responding. He took one step forward and rooted himself, arms folded, boots square on the ice.

Chloe held the audio tape behind her back, like a relay runner

waiting for the baton handoff. "You drove all the way up here to play repo man?" she asked, letting her voice bounce with feigned innocence.

Thorne's face darkened. "You have no idea what's at stake." He turned his attention to Finn again. "That's not just a box. My family's been hunting for those documents for decades. They prove my grandfather committed fraud—the real story, not the local fairy tales."

Finn felt Chloe shift behind him, her shoulder pressing his. He had no plan, just the certainty that if Thorne got his hands on the evidence, the village was finished.

Thorne started down the last few steps. "Be reasonable. Nobody needs to get hurt."

Pelligrini trailed behind, eyes darting, his mouth working like he was chewing something bitter. He kept glancing over his shoulder, like the whole ridge might be about to collapse.

Elias spoke, soft but with a thread of iron. "You take one more step, you'll regret it."

Thorne hesitated, then smiled. "You going to stop me, old man?"

Elias smiled back, and Finn felt a chill that had nothing to do with the wind.

Thorne looked past Elias, seeing the path to the trio blocked. "You're protecting them? You were the caretaker. You know how this ends."

Elias didn't budge. "Sometimes the mountain picks a side."

Thorne reached out, making a show of patience. "Give me the case, and I'll let you walk away."

Finn shook his head. "We'll let the court decide."

Thorne dropped his hand, something in his face cracking. "You don't get it. If this goes public, my company is finished. The Trust collapses, and everyone in the village loses, not just your little bakery."

Chloe grinned, teeth bared. "Funny how you only care now."

Thorne's eyes narrowed. He took a breath, like he was about to launch into a speech, but then from behind him, there was a sharp, metallic thunk.

The PI spun around just as the black SUV, parked nose-out on the edge of the switchback, started to drift backward. The ground beneath

the rear tires had given way; the car inched, then picked up speed. Thorne and Pelligrini lunged for it, but the vehicle was already rolling.

They managed to grab at the side mirrors, but the weight of the SUV pulled them off balance, sending both men sprawling onto the snow as the car slid backward in a slow, deliberate arc. It reached the curve in the road and, as if the mountain itself was passing judgment, the rear wheels dropped into a hidden sand pit. The chassis hit the dirt with a meaty, terminal thump, and the car tilted, nose to sky, like a turtle on its back.

Thorne scrambled up, cursing, his coat now streaked with mud and white. "You idiots!" he barked at the PI, who was rubbing his knee and looking at the SUV like it might bite.

Elias turned to Finn and Chloe, not bothering to hide the satisfaction on his face. "Go," he said. "They're not following on foot."

Chloe didn't need telling twice. She took off down the narrow wildlife trail, Finn close behind, the precious cargo thumping against his ribs. Elias followed, steady and unhurried, taking the time to watch the sky, the ridge, the two men scrambling and shouting behind them.

As they rounded the bend, Chloe looked back and saw Thorne standing by his helpless car, screaming into the wind. The PI had given up and was just kicking at the sand, probably regretting every life choice that had led him to this point.

The sound of their frustration followed the trio down the ridge, growing fainter with every step. Finn slowed only when they reached the first stand of pines, then doubled over, catching his breath.

Chloe pulled the film canister from her pocket and kissed it. "Thank you, mountain," she said, laughing wild and breathless.

Elias caught up, face split with a grin. "Told you she picks her favorites."

They didn't stop again until the road flattened and the village was just a smudge of white and smoke below them. Finn let himself look back—just once—and saw the SUV, still stuck, still at the mercy of the place Evelyn had chosen to leave her secrets.

The mountain, Chloe thought, had finally spoken.

And, for the first time in weeks, she felt like they were going to win.

Finn led them onto the wildlife trail before Thorne even had time to dig the car out. The switchback faded to a goat path, barely wide enough for a single set of boots, but Finn knew the habits of mule deer and pronghorn—they always picked the line with the best footing and the least wasted effort. He moved fast, banking on the fact that Thorne's shoes probably cost more than Finn made in a month, and would never survive the descent.

The slope funneled them down through spindly junipers and fallen timber, the sun barely up but already melting last night's frost into a sopping mess. Chloe's knees ached with every step, but she kept pace, one hand on the precious film canister, the other clutching the battered phone she'd refused to lose. Elias was a silent, sturdy shadow behind them, and if he was feeling the pace, he didn't show it.

After fifteen minutes, the trail leveled out in a hollow choked with sage and deadfall. Finn checked behind: no sign of pursuit, just the echo of Thorne's voice, swearing up a storm a hundred yards above.

Chloe risked a look at her phone. "Signal's back," she said. "We're in the clear." She dialed with numb fingers, then put the call on speaker.

Randy picked up after the first ring, breathless. "Talk."

Chloe didn't waste time. "We have it. The deed, the tape, and the last reel. ETA ninety minutes—can you stall that long?"

On the other end, a crash of static and voices. "We'll try. They're here already—five trucks, two dozers, and a guy with a clipboard who looks like he drinks his own spit. But we've got half the village in a human chain across the road. Brandi's set up a table with thermoses. Nobody's breaking through unless they want to get scalded with the world's worst coffee."

Chloe grinned, but it didn't quite land. "How bad is it?"

A pause, then Randy's voice, lower. "They've started marking trees. The foreman's calling the sheriff—claims we're trespassing. We've got maybe an hour, two if the news vans show up."

Finn reached back, grabbing the phone. "Randy. They lose if this goes public, right?"

“Right. But only if you make it in time.”

Finn snapped the phone shut. “Let’s move.”

They hit the next mile in silence, Finn scouting the trail, Chloe tight behind, Elias sweeping up any sign they’d been there at all. The path dropped into a gully, then skirted a beaver pond rimmed with hoarfrost and the first, stupidly brave ducks of the season. In another life, Finn would have stopped to watch them; now, he just noted their escape route and kept moving.

The evidence rode in the top pocket of his pack, triple wrapped in the waterproof sleeve. Every so often, Finn patted it, like checking the pulse of a very small, very expensive animal.

They cleared the forest edge and saw the village spread below—Movie Ranch Road cutting the snowpack, cabins huddled in shadow, the pale plumes from bakery chimneys visible even from here. Beyond the old bridge, a row of construction vehicles lined up like a firing squad.

From this distance, it looked like any other weekday, except for the bright slash of bodies blocking the main road. Finn recognized the snowplow guy’s orange jacket, the spindly form of the hardware store clerk, and at the epicenter, a table loaded with Brandi’s loaves, flanked by two old thermoses the size of mortar shells.

Chloe slowed, clutching her side. “We made it,” she said, mostly to herself.

Elias stopped at the tree line, gazing at the standoff below. “Time to finish what Evelyn started,” he said.

Finn grunted. “We’ll go through the east meadow, less exposure. Chloe, you call Brandi. Tell her to stall for fifteen minutes, no matter what.”

Chloe dialed, and this time Brandi picked up.

“You alive?” Brandi’s voice had a wild, half-laugh edge to it.

“Barely,” Chloe said. “We’re coming in the back. Can you hold the fort?”

Brandi cackled. “I’ll serve them so many scones they’ll beg for mercy.”

Chloe clicked off, then looked at Finn, her face a weird mix of hope and exhaustion. “If this doesn’t work—”

Finn shrugged. "It's better than the alternative."

They moved off the trail, winding through a band of scrub oak. Finn led them down a drainage ditch, then up a frozen cow path that dumped them directly behind the bakery. They moved in a crouch, using every fallen log and shadow to avoid being seen from the road.

They reached the back door just as Brandi cracked it, face flushed, eyes shining. "Get in, get in," she hissed.

Inside, the kitchen was a chaos of flour, bread, and open laptops. The morning crew—three high school kids and a woman in ski bibs—gawked at the trio as they tumbled through the door.

Finn dumped the case onto the prep table. Brandi opened it with trembling hands.

Chloe peeled off her coat, then tugged the deed and the tape from her pocket. She hesitated a second, then handed them to Brandi.

Brandi read the deed, lips moving silently. Tears formed, but she blinked them away, then brandished it like a magic ticket. "This is it. They can't ignore this."

Finn checked the window. The line of construction trucks was inching forward, the front loader now so close he could see the name of the rental company stenciled on the hood.

"Randy?" Finn called.

Randy stomped in from the dining room, a ski mask slung around his neck, face red and ears steaming. "They're getting ready to break through. Sheriff's on site. News van just showed up from Cedar."

Brandi clapped her hands. "Perfect." She stuffed the deed and the tape into a plastic bakery bag, tied it shut, and handed it to Randy. "You take this straight to the council office. Tell them to stop the demolition until the hearing."

Randy nodded, then looked at Finn. "You coming?"

Finn shook his head. "We'll go with Plan B."

Chloe raised an eyebrow. "Plan B?"

Brandi grinned. "If the mountain wants a show, we'll give her one."

They all piled out the back, circling around the building. Brandi shoved an armful of day-old loaves into Finn's pack, then armed herself with two trays of cinnamon rolls.

They hit the standoff just as the sheriff was stepping between the human chain and the foreman, hands raised for calm.

Brandi strode to the front, tray overhead. "Who wants breakfast?" she hollered, and for a second, even the men in hard hats paused.

Chloe scanned the crowd and spotted a reporter from the local affiliate, holding a camera steady on her shoulder. Chloe bee-lined over, shoving the film canister into the reporter's hands. "It's the lost reel," Chloe blurted. "It proves everything."

The woman stared at her, then at the label. She broke into a grin and called over her cameraman.

Randy charged through the crowd, bakery bag above his head. "I need this delivered to the council office," he said, thrusting the bag at a deputy. "It's evidence."

The next fifteen minutes passed in a blur. Reporters interviewed Brandi while she handed out bread, making sure to mention the St. Claire legacy with every roll. The sheriff conferred with Randy and three other townsfolk, then called a halt to the demolition pending review. Finn watched it all from the edge, winded, but with a creeping, giddy sense that for once, maybe the good guys had a chance.

Thorne and his PI never made it down the mountain. Chloe watched for them, half expecting them to barrel in and start yelling, but the village belonged to itself for at least one more morning.

When it was over, the construction crew drove away, the snowplow guy did a donut in the main lot, and Brandi led the whole bakery staff in a whoop so loud it startled birds from the trees.

Finn lingered on the stoop, watching the sun climb over the ridge. Chloe joined him, rubbing her knuckles where the cold had split them.

She said, "So. Do we celebrate?"

Finn shrugged, but his eyes were lighter than Chloe had ever seen. "We survived."

Chloe nodded. "I'll take it."

Inside, Brandi began shaping dough for the next batch, and the whole place was alive with stories and steam and the impossible, perfect scent of bread.

Finn and Chloe sat on the bench outside, not talking, just breath-

ing, until the sound of laughter and rolling pins drowned out the last worry of the night.

The village, for now, was safe.

And so were they.

seventeen

the truth in the dough

THEY MADE it back to Duck Creek Village just after sunrise, boots crusted with frost and their breath puffing little clouds in the mountain air. The place looked like a cross between a tailgate and a parade: every local with a stake in the village had gathered along the shoulder of Movie Ranch Road, arms locked in a human barricade, bodies bulked out by flannel and mismatched thermals. Behind the line, the threatened cabin sat like a stage set—one wall half-covered in a tarp, windows already boarded up, but the front porch swept clean and draped with a bunting of vintage dish towels. It was the last of its kind, Finn realized. The rest had already vanished, replaced by the prefab A-frames that Thorne had started dropping in like Monopoly houses.

In front of the cabin, Brandi and Randy had constructed a counteroffensive entirely out of carbohydrates. Two folding tables bent under the weight of Mountain Berry Hand Pies, sourdough bread bowls steaming with “Truth Chili” (as Brandi had christened it), and platters of kolaches studded with charred sausage from the last rancher left in the valley. There were stacks of mugs and carafes of black coffee, the kind that could wake the dead. Finn caught a whiff as he led Chloe and Elias up the driveway, and for a second, the cold ache in his chest eased. The smell was home, and anger, and a weird kind of hope.

The media had turned out, too. Two news vans and a camcorder crew with “KSLC” stenciled on their parkas were already interviewing

the oldest Old Guard in sight—Mrs. Durnell, who had survived three husbands and nearly as many avalanches, and looked ready for another. Behind them, Finn saw the stiffer, more uncomfortable shapes of Thorne’s demolition crew, standing in a tight cluster around their vehicles. Hardhats and neon vests, but not a single smile among them. The bulldozer, already off its trailer, glared at the cabin like it was sizing up prey.

The return of the trio did not go unnoticed. First a few heads turned, then a ripple ran through the whole line as people recognized them: Finn in the lead, his gait stiffer than usual; Chloe next, her battered pack slung over both shoulders and her phone held up to record the scene; and Elias, who looked less like a legend than a man who had just lost a bet with a blizzard. The human chain broke into spontaneous applause, and Chloe, in a move that was either pure showbiz or just Chloe being Chloe, took a low bow before shuffling up to the food tables.

Brandi, elbow-deep in the chili pot, saw them and brightened by at least three lumens. She wiped her hands on her apron and powered through the crowd, Randy at her heels. “You made it!” she called, then lowered her voice as she took in Finn’s face. “You okay?”

He nodded, jaw tight. “We got what we went for.” He held up the waterproof metal case, every nick and dent on its surface gleaming in the sun.

Randy’s eyes went wide, but he kept his hands behind his back, like he didn’t dare touch the thing yet. “Is it really in there?”

Chloe’s voice was thin from the cold, but steady. “Deed, the trust, and the last reel.” She set her pack down on the edge of the table, careful not to spill anything, and dug out the microfilm and envelope. “She hid it exactly where the diary said. Powell Point. We barely beat Thorne’s guy to it.”

Brandi glanced down the road, where the hardhats were starting to look impatient. “They’ll try to claim it’s fake. They’ll say anything to get that bulldozer rolling.”

Elias, who had been standing silent, finally cleared his throat. “Then we show them the proof. And we do it in front of all these cameras.” He swept a hand at the media cluster, which had already begun to circle.

Finn didn't answer; he was watching the construction crew, who were now in a heated discussion with a wiry man in a suit three shades too bright for morning. The man's hair was slicked back to an unnatural shine, and he was waving a sheaf of papers at the line of villagers as if it was a wand that could make them vanish. Finn recognized him: Thorne himself, the Denver lawyer-turned-developer with a penchant for fancy breakfasts and a deep, deep hatred of losing.

Chloe caught Finn's look and sidled up. "He's going to play dirty," she said under her breath. "Maybe we should prep a statement for the cameras. Make it hard for him to spin."

Brandi overheard and grinned, wicked. "Nothing spins like the truth. Especially when you serve it in a bread bowl."

The joke worked—Finn actually smiled, then passed the metal case to Brandi, who accepted it with the gravity of a judge receiving the evidence at a murder trial. She whisked it off to the cabin, with Randy and Elias in tow, leaving Finn and Chloe to face the growing cluster of journalists.

For a second, Finn just stood and took it in. The morning was brilliant, the snow dazzling, every breath crisp enough to bite. The villagers—his neighbors, and sometimes his customers—stood shoulder to shoulder, not an inch of daylight between them. Even the teenagers, who usually slept till noon and could barely make eye contact with each other, were in the line, their faces set like they understood the stakes.

He heard Chloe give the quick version of their story to a reporter, her hands drawing shapes in the air as she spoke. She described the climb, the vision, the way the old deed had survived untouched for sixty years. She did not mention the part where Finn nearly dislocated her shoulder, or the part where she almost cried from relief. But he saw the look in her eyes when she said, "We found it. And it's real." It was the first time she sounded like she believed it herself.

Brandi reemerged, the case now open and the yellowed deed spread on a clipboard. She motioned Finn over, and together they joined the other side of the food tables, where Randy had lined up the rest of the documents like a museum display. The crowd pressed in, and for a moment, Finn felt the entire weight of the village, all of it, pressing on his shoulders.

He looked at Chloe, who flashed him a quick grin. "Ready for the main event?" she whispered.

He shrugged. "The mountain decides," he said. But the truth was, for once, he hoped it might actually be on their side.

Marcus Thorne arrived the way most men dreamed of leaving: in a hail of noise and flashing lights, a ruined SUV fishtailing to a stop at the edge of the bakery's lot. The vehicle, streaked in red mud and sporting a dent the size of a bowling ball on the rear quarter, screeched in on two wheels before shuddering into park. For a second, nobody moved—then the driver's door exploded open and Thorne himself stormed out, tie flapping, suit pants torn across one thigh, the remains of a dry-cleaning bag still tangled around his shoulders.

He looked like he'd spent the night wrestling a snowplow, and from the fury in his eyes, maybe he had.

He didn't go for the cameras right away. Instead, he cut straight through the food tables, ignoring the shouts and the faces turned toward him, and threw himself into the gap between the villagers and the threatened cabin. The demolition crew, seeing their boss in the flesh, perked up—until they took in the state of his suit, at which point two of them exchanged looks and began examining the treads on their boots.

Thorne wasted no time with pleasantries. "Out of my way!" he barked, voice carrying above the buzz of the crowd. "This is private property as of yesterday, and you're all trespassing. I will see every one of you in court. Now step aside before I have you arrested."

Someone—probably Mrs. Durnell—hissed, "You and what army?"

The human chain held. If anything, it thickened, elbows digging in and bodies turning sideways to block even more of the drive.

Thorne switched tactics, scanning for the nearest authority. His eyes landed on the news crews, who by now were broadcasting live, and he spun to face the nearest camera.

"This is what happens when people think they're above the law!" he declaimed, holding up a sheaf of papers, which fluttered in the

wind like so many useless ballots. "I have a signed order from the County. The demolition is lawful. This structure is condemned, and any person impeding our work is subject to civil and criminal penalty!"

He looked around, waiting for the effect to land. The only response was the sizzle of a coffee urn and the shifting of snow under a hundred pairs of boots.

Then, from behind the line, a voice: "You might want to get your facts straight before you start threatening grandmas, Marcus."

Chloe, who had been lurking with Finn behind the bakery's sign, stepped out, phone held high to capture every second. "We've got the original deed and the trust. The real ones."

She motioned for Finn, who slung the metal case up onto the food table like it was a brick of gold. Brandi unclipped it with the flourish of a magician and lifted the top, revealing the yellowed papers inside, each sheathed in its wax sleeve.

A collective hush swept the crowd.

Finn stepped forward, aware that the entire village (and half of Utah, via the news vans) was watching. His hands weren't shaking, but he felt the adrenaline singing in every tendon.

He spoke quietly, but the words seemed to echo. "This proves Evelyn St. Claire legally protected this land in 1954. There's an affidavit and a trust, plus the supporting documents. None of your filings matter if this is real."

Thorne moved like a shark: quick, all angles, no wasted motion. He snatched the top document and held it to the light. The crowd pressed in. Even the reporters edged closer, cameras rolling with almost predatory attention.

For a second, Thorne said nothing. His face did a complicated dance: triumph, then suspicion, then a spike of real, animal panic. He snapped to the next page, then the next, flipping them so fast the edges ripped.

He slammed the folder closed and turned on Finn. "This is a joke," he said. "A desperate, amateur forgery, just like the rest of your little scheme." He threw the document back on the table. "My grandfather—rest his soul—spent his entire life fighting these exact rumors. He had

every one of them examined and disproved, including your so-called 'original' trust."

Finn felt the eyes of the whole world on him, but he didn't flinch. "Maybe that's why you tried to bulldoze it before anyone could check."

Thorne's face went a shade darker. "I have a court order. I have permits from the County, and the Forest Service, and the State. I'm the only one with a legal right to be here." He pointed at the cabin. "And if you don't clear out, the sheriff will be here in five minutes to remove you."

As if on cue, the sheriff's blue-and-white patrol car crawled up the drive, snow crackling under its tires. Sheriff Davis stepped out, expression unreadable, and took a long look at the scene: the barricade of villagers, the TV crews, Thorne in his ruined suit, Finn and Chloe behind the food line, Brandi with her arms crossed and apron still dusted with flour.

Davis let the silence build, then said, "Let's all take a breath here."

He walked to the center of the standoff, boots crunching in the snow, and addressed Finn first. "You got papers you want to show me?"

Finn handed him the folder, pointing out the relevant sections. Davis flipped through the deed, trust, and affidavit, taking his time. After a long minute, he looked at Thorne.

"You got permits, Marcus?"

Thorne produced his packet, still trembling at the edges. "Right here."

Davis took them, scanned the top page, then handed them back. He looked at Finn, then at the villagers, then at Thorne.

"Let's go inside, you and me," he said to Thorne. "We'll sort this out."

Thorne bristled, but followed. The two disappeared into the cabin, slamming the door behind them.

For a moment, nobody spoke.

Then, from the back of the crowd, someone let out a breath and said, "That's the first time that door's been shut in years."

Laughter rippled through the human chain. Brandi poured Finn a mug of coffee and handed it to him, her hand warm on his.

"You did good," she said, low. "Whatever happens, you did right by her."

Finn sipped, the burn of the brew grounding him. He looked at Chloe, who was texting so fast her fingers blurred, and at the villagers, all standing together in the cold.

Then, through the glass of the cabin window, he saw Thorne's face—a red, angry smear—and the slower, surer movements of Sheriff Davis as he dialed his cell.

The standoff wasn't over. But for the first time, Finn thought it might be a fair fight.

The news crews were circling like dogs around a fallen hot dog cart. The moment Sheriff Davis and Thorne reappeared, the reporters closed in, microphones thrust forward, red lights blinking from a dozen handheld cameras. Thorne looked pale, lips pinched white around the corners, but he summoned up enough bombast to bark, "This is all nonsense. The original documents are lost—nobody in their right mind would believe what these people claim." His voice, which had the deep-down boom of a televangelist, wobbled just enough to be picked up on the best microphones.

Davis, stolid as bedrock, raised a hand. "We have an official process," he said. "If there's evidence, it'll be reviewed in court."

Someone in the crowd shouted, "Can't fake a sixty-year-old sourdough!"

Chloe, who had been lingering at the edge of the gathering, sidled up to Brandi. "You have the thing ready?" she whispered.

Brandi nodded, eyes glinting. "Three loaves in reserve, and two gallons of the good batch." She nodded to Randy, who began ladling "Truth Chili" into the fresh-baked bread bowls, stacking them on trays, and passing them out to the crowd like communion wafers for the end-times faithful.

It was a masterstroke: suddenly, the protest line turned into a party line. Neighbors who had only nodded at each other for decades now stood elbow to elbow, blowing steam off their chili, using the warm

bread as both sustenance and shield against the cold. Even the teens were in on it, posting selfies with the bread bowls and tagging #MountainTruth in an instant social media dogpile.

Sheriff Davis accepted a bowl, took a thoughtful bite, and murmured, "Damn, that's good." He said it just loud enough for the nearest reporter to catch, and the phrase ricocheted through the crowd with approving laughter.

Thorne, ever the alpha, tried to wave it off, but his stomach growled so loud even the construction crew smirked. Brandi seized the moment. "You want some, Marcus? It's not poison, promise. My grandma's recipe."

He glared, then snatched the bread bowl from Brandi's outstretched hand. "Fine. Maybe it'll soak up the stupidity." He bit in, tearing a hunk of bread away with a snap of his teeth, and chewed with the grim determination of a man consuming evidence.

Chloe watched, almost holding her breath.

He went for the second bite, slower this time, gaze fixed on the cluster of cameras just out of arm's reach. "This changes nothing," he muttered, bits of chili flecking the rim of his mouth. "Your forgeries will be laughed out of court—"

He froze, mid-bite.

At first it looked like a coughing fit. Thorne's face paled, then went florid, then oscillated between both at a speed only possible in the high country. He clutched the edge of the folding table, knuckles whitening, and the bread bowl tumbled from his hands, landing upright in the snow.

He made a strangled sound. "How did you—what's happening to me?"

The crowd hushed. Even the demolition crew stopped pretending to look at their phones.

Thorne staggered back, colliding with the hood of the nearest SUV. "I can see him," he gasped, wild-eyed, scanning the empty air above the news vans. "My grandfather—he's in his office—he's laughing—he's forging her name—" His voice pitched up, frantic. "He's saying, 'They'll never find the real one. We'll take it from her as soon as she's out of the picture—'"

He clamped both hands to his skull, eyes rolling in terror. "Make it stop," he begged, but the words came out a shriek. "It's all a fraud! The documents were forged, just like these new ones I had made!"

For a moment, the only sound was the wind and the sizzle from the still-hot chili.

Then, from behind the wall of reporters, someone said, "You getting this?"

Every camera zoomed in. Every phone in the crowd was up, filming as Thorne slid to his knees in the snow, muttering and crying, the whole confession tumbling out in ugly, mortifying detail. "It was never ours," he sobbed. "Never. Dad just told us to keep it quiet, to bribe anyone who asked about the survey, to make up stories about the fire—"

Brandi, standing nearest, locked eyes with Finn. "That's the power of good bread," she said, voice even.

Chloe darted in, cell phone on record, and asked, "Are you saying you conspired to commit fraud against the village? Is that your statement, Mr. Thorne?"

He nodded, drool freezing to his chin.

Sheriff Davis, never one to waste time, hauled Thorne to his feet, wincing only a little as the developer's wailing turned to outright bawling. He turned to the private investigator, who had edged away and now looked like he'd rather face an actual avalanche than this disaster.

"You want to add anything?" Davis asked.

The PI hesitated. "He hired me to break into the bakery. Said to spike the starter with bleach. I... kept the texts."

Finn blinked. "You have texts?"

The PI nodded. "Screen-shotted. I emailed them to myself last night, just in case."

Randy let out a low whistle. "You ever seen a case close itself this fast?"

Brandi snorted. "It's the yeast. It's alive."

The crowd, silent till now, erupted in a sound that was part cheer, part prayer, part the collective exhale of an entire town released from siege.

Thorne slumped in the snow, the vision gone but the damage done. The news crews, already giddy with the prospect of a live meltdown,

swung their focus to Brandi and Finn. Chloe was everywhere at once, being interviewed by three different camera crews, her phone up, fingers flying.

Brandi dusted flour from her hands and stepped up to the table, a queen reclaiming her court. "This bakery stands. This town stands," she said, not loud but with enough certainty to carry to the far end of the street. "And if anyone wants a taste of what truth looks like, you're welcome to try my chili."

Someone started clapping. Then everyone did.

For a long, bright minute, Finn just stood and took it in: the laughter, the relief, the way even the demolition crew lined up for seconds. He felt Chloe slip a hand into his, her grip warm and electric.

The mountain, he realized, didn't decide everything. Sometimes you had to fight for it. Sometimes you had to earn it.

But for once, at least, the good guys had won.

Sheriff Davis wasted no time. As Thorne's last, hoarse confession wound down, the lawman stepped forward and read from a small, dog-eared notepad. "Marcus Thorne, you're under arrest for attempted fraud, conspiracy, and trespass." He turned to the news crews, who were eating this up, and shrugged, as if to say: it's just the job. He clicked the cuffs on Thorne's wrists, then gently, almost kindly, hauled the broken developer to his feet.

Thorne didn't fight. He muttered the whole way to the squad car, still mumbling about forgeries, visions, and how nobody would ever believe this in Denver. Chloe almost felt sorry for him—almost.

The private investigator, looking less like a tough guy and more like someone desperate for a plea deal, sidled up to Davis. "I'll make a statement," he said, voice flat. "He paid me cash. Sent me to spike the starter. Told me to torch the old files in the county building, too, but I couldn't get past the records clerk. It's all in the messages."

Davis wrote this down, then patted the PI's shoulder. "You want a cup of coffee before we process you?" The man nodded, pale and spent, and slumped onto the bakery's stoop, where Brandi pressed a mug into his trembling hands.

The demolition crew didn't need to be told twice. Within minutes, the bulldozer was back on its trailer, the hardhats gone, and the only

trace of them was a rectangle of mud where the treads had sunk into the thawing dirt.

The crowd, finally free to celebrate, surged forward, shaking hands, hugging, high-fiving. Someone started a chant—"Duck Creek! Duck Creek!"—and, weirdly, it caught on. Even Mrs. Durnell hoisted a bread bowl over her head and whooped. Reporters roved the crowd, aiming for the soundbites: "How does it feel to win?" "What's next for the bakery?" Chloe smiled for the cameras, but her eyes kept drifting to Finn, who stood apart, watching the whole thing with a look of disbelief and—she was pretty sure—pride.

Brandi and Randy met in the middle of the makeshift plaza. She flung her arms around his neck, nearly knocking his beanie off, and he caught her up and spun her like they were alone in the world. Chloe cheered, then caught herself and snapped a picture, immediately uploading it to the bakery's account.

Elias, meanwhile, drifted to the edge of the commotion and just watched, hands jammed in the pockets of his ancient vest. His smile was quiet, the kind that didn't need witnesses.

It was Eleanor, the archivist, who found Finn and Chloe as the initial storm died down. She wore a puffer vest that looked like it belonged to a much taller person, and her hair was wild from the wind, but her eyes were sharp as ever.

"I saw the interview," she said, holding up her phone. "I thought Evelyn's secret would die with her. But you... both of you. You finished it." She looked at Finn, then at Chloe, and nodded once. "She'd be proud."

Finn looked away, embarrassed, but Chloe stepped in. "Couldn't have done it without the mountain. Or the bread."

Eleanor grinned. "Or the right people, in the right place, at the right time." She took the folder from Finn's hands, leafed through the documents with reverence, then tucked it into a canvas bag. "I'll get these to the records office. The story's safe now."

She left them alone, and for a long, golden minute, neither said anything.

"You okay?" Chloe asked, bumping Finn with her shoulder.

He nodded. "Just tired. And hungry. And sort of amazed."

She smiled. "You get used to it. Eventually."

The crowd had migrated to the bakery's porch, where Brandi had set up a spread worthy of an old-time wedding. Coffee, cider, all the left-over Truth Chili, plus a whole mess of sweet rolls she'd conjured out of nowhere. People ate and talked and finally, for the first time in weeks, relaxed.

Sheriff Davis came back from the patrol car, dusted snow off his boots, and poured himself a cup. He raised it in a toast, and the crowd answered in kind. Finn and Chloe sipped their own coffee, letting the warmth fill up the space where worry used to live.

A few feet away, the news crews were packing up, already cutting segments together for the noon broadcast. "Local heroes foil land grab," Chloe read from one producer's teleprompter. "Good headline," she mused.

"Yeah," Finn said. "I guess it is."

Someone started a fire in the old cast iron pit out front, and the smell of woodsmoke curled up to the pale blue sky. Finn watched it for a while, then looked at Chloe.

"Next time we do something dumb, can it be less freezing?" he asked.

She laughed, clear as the mountain air. "Deal."

The last of the morning sun caught on the sign above Ground + Toasted, making the letters blaze. The bakery, the village, the mountain—they were all still standing.

For now, that was enough.

Late that night, long after the crowd had gone home and the bread oven cooled, Finn found himself walking the perimeter of the village. The air was sharp, the stars stitched so thick overhead he could barely find the black between. He thought of all the stories he'd heard as a kid—of mountain ghosts, of lost mines and starlets and secrets buried in the snow. None of them ever ended like this, with a small win and a big breath of relief.

He rounded the corner by the old cabin. Chloe was there, sitting on

the porch steps, wrapped in a thrifted blanket, her phone resting on the step beside her.

She patted the space next to her, and Finn sat. They looked out at the dark trees, the faint glow from the bakery's sign, the world at peace for the first time in ages.

"Think we did okay?" she asked.

Finn took a long time before answering. "Yeah," he said. "I think we did."

They sat in silence, letting the mountain listen.

eighteen

the starlet's legacy

MORNING FOUND the bakery glowing with a light so rich and thick it felt like the air itself was rising. Ground + Toasted was alive with the kind of energy that made even the regulars blink, pause, and inhale twice before stepping through the door. The tables, normally haphazard and wobbly from a lifetime of rearrangements, had been corralled into two long rows down the middle of the floor, with every available chair, bench, and upturned milk crate pressed into service. Brandi moved among them, apron dusted with flour, her hair up in a lopsided knot, and a radiance on her cheeks that had nothing to do with the ovens.

In the kitchen, the ancient range rattled and coughed, barely keeping up as Brandi pulled a pan from the lower rack. The loaf inside was golden, crust fissured at the top and dusted with a moonscape of flour. The aroma hit like a memory—sharp and tangy, the sour of a hundred years resurrected and alive.

Brandi set the bread on the counter, let the steam billow around her, and for a moment just stood, head bowed, hands on the cooling rack. Behind her, Melinda, the assistant baker, clapped softly, the sound of oven mitts on skin, then reached for the bread knife. Brandi stopped her with a look: not yet.

Instead, she turned and scanned the bakery, where a dozen or more locals had already packed in, voices rising and falling in a rolling tide.

The one-week anniversary of Thorne's arrest had drawn out every Old Guard loyalist and at least half the Modern Settlers, all elbow to elbow. At the front window, Mrs. Durnell and Mr. Peterson sat arguing over the correct ratio of cinnamon to sugar in the morning buns, their plates empty but their coffee mugs full. At the far end, a cluster of teenagers devoured a mountain of sticky rolls and pretended not to care about the news vans still parked outside.

Randy worked the perimeter, shepherding late arrivals to open spots and topping off mugs with a practiced grace. He wore a clean flannel, sleeves rolled high, and barked out greetings like a bingo caller. At the bar, he lined up a row of to-go orders, then swept the crumbs from the counter with a single, practiced swipe.

Elias arrived early, but kept to the corners, content to watch. He looked less wild with his beard freshly trimmed, but still wore the same patched jacket and cargo pants, as if dressing up meant making the dirt stains symmetrical. He was quietly tucking sprigs of wild sage and tiny white flowers into the napkin jars at each table, moving so gently that no one noticed until the scent had already started to drift into the air.

Finn and Chloe entered together. If anyone was paying attention, they might have noticed how their hands kept finding ways to touch—fingers grazing as they reached for the door, elbows brushing as they squeezed through the morning crowd. Finn wore the same battered cap he always did, but his posture was looser, a little less ready for bad news. Chloe looked like herself, but brighter: hair still in defiant disarray, boots dusted with new mud, a smile on her lips that seemed to have nowhere else to go.

They moved as a pair, not quite a couple but definitely more than friends, and found seats near the kitchen where the air was warmest.

Brandi, catching sight of them, called out, "You're just in time!" She gestured with the bread knife, beckoning Finn and Chloe forward. "First batch from the new starter. Well, not new—old, actually. Ancient."

Chloe wriggled onto her chair, eyes fixed on the loaf. "Does it taste like a miracle?"

Brandi winked. "Better. It tastes like history." She slid the bread onto a wooden cutting board, then sawed through the crust in one deci-

sive motion. The shatter of crust was audible, followed by the faint, elastic tear of the crumb. The slices steamed, each one marbled with wild air pockets and a faint swirl of purple from whatever berry Brandi had snuck in.

Melinda, no longer able to restrain herself, started buttering slices, which vanished into eager hands as fast as they hit the plate.

Brandi leaned in, voice lowered for Finn and Chloe. "Want to know the trick?" She nodded toward the back, where Elias was contentedly stirring a mug of tea. "It's half the old method, half Elias's wild harvest. Hazel always said the starter needs to taste like the place. So I foraged what I could—juniper dust, rose hips, even some of the wild yeasts he brought me. The rest was in the notes from Evelyn. You mix them, you don't force it. Let them argue in the bowl, see who wins."

Chloe inhaled the bread, closed her eyes. "It's perfect," she said, and meant it.

Finn bit his slice in two bites. "You could sell this in Paris," he said, not a trace of irony.

Brandi beamed, then turned to help Melinda shuttle more loaves onto the line.

A moment of quiet settled over their table. Chloe leaned toward Finn. "You realize we're living through the weirdest epilogue in Utah history?"

Finn shrugged. "Could be worse. Could be a scorched earth deal." He jerked his chin at the window, where the survey flags had vanished, replaced by a row of snowmen built by the neighborhood kids.

Chloe followed his gaze. "What happens next?"

Finn considered. "I guess that's up to us."

The morning unwound in a series of small celebrations. Locals drifted from table to table, swapping stories, pressing each other for details about the "Thorne confession" or the "Bread Bowl Miracle." It became clear, even before noon, that Ground + Toasted would not run out of customers—or volunteers—anytime soon.

Mrs. Durnell, after three mugs of coffee, decided she was ready to tell her favorite Evelyn story, and she did so with the full weight of her lungs. "My father was a grip on her film set, you know. Duck Creek Flickers, back in '37. She used to sneak out of her trailer at night to go

skinny-dipping in Navajo Lake.” She let this hang in the air, enjoying the scandalized looks from the Modern Settlers. “They say she left a bottle of gin in every hollow log up the ridge. For emergencies.”

Mr. Peterson, not to be outdone, launched into a tale about his own grandfather, who’d delivered bread to the St. Claire cabin for thirty years. “She tipped in silver dollars,” he said, “and always signed the wrappers with a lipstick mark. I still have one somewhere.”

Chloe, emboldened, shared her own brush with legend. “My mom claimed she saw Evelyn once, in the grocery. This would have been late eighties, after everyone thought she’d disappeared. She said she bought nothing but sardines and lipstick, and paid with a check signed ‘Evelyn Lastname.’ The cashier didn’t even blink.”

The room filled with laughter, the kind that rises in rings and never quite dies out. Even the teenagers at the far table abandoned their phones to listen, caught up in the weird, rolling warmth of it all.

As the sun climbed, its angle made the dust motes visible, hanging in the beams like a snow globe. Brandi brought out a pan of cinnamon rolls, the sugar crust bubbling and dark at the edges, and set it in the middle of the longest table. “I declare this a community brunch,” she said, grinning at the crowd. “Eat until you’re happy. Or until we run out.”

Chloe watched the roll’s sugar glaze catch the light. “Should we say something?” she whispered to Finn.

He shrugged. “About what?”

She thought. “About how this started? About the mountain? I feel like we’re missing an ending.”

Finn reached for a roll, then paused. “Maybe it’s better without one.”

Chloe nodded, satisfied, then broke the roll in half and handed him the bigger piece.

At the door, a little bell chimed. Eleanor from the archives entered, arms full of paperwork and what looked like architectural drawings. She navigated the maze of tables, set her burden down, and cleared her throat. “I have an announcement,” she said, projecting like a librarian calling story time.

The bakery stilled.

Eleanor held up a leather-bound folio. "As of this morning, the Village Historical Society has formally acquired the St. Claire cabin and the adjacent land. We're designating it an open archive and museum, to be managed by the community." She let the words hang, then added, "The cabin will be restored as the Evelyn St. Claire Museum. And the bakery's starter is officially the oldest living tradition in Duck Creek."

Applause rolled around the bakery, followed by a spontaneous clinking of mugs and a rising chatter.

Brandi clapped, then wiped away a streak of flour from her brow. "This means you're all responsible for keeping the story going," she said. "No skipping out on pie auctions or potlucks, understood?"

The crowd cheered.

Chloe leaned into Finn's shoulder. "You ever think you'd be a footnote in mountain history?"

He glanced at her, deadpan. "I always wanted to be an asterisk."

She laughed, and this time the whole room joined in.

Outside, the mountain was bright and cold, but inside, the bakery felt like the warmest place in the world.

They ate, they talked, they passed the bread, and nobody noticed when the first slice of the miracle loaf vanished, leaving only a dusting of crumbs and the memory of something rare and beautiful that had, for a little while, belonged to everyone.

After the initial wave of sugar and stories, Brandi called for attention by simply rapping a bread knife against the counter. The sound rang clear, slicing through the morning laughter and drawing every gaze to where Eleanor stood, portfolio hugged to her chest like a last, sacred relic. In the hush, even the espresso machine seemed to pause mid-hiss.

Eleanor stepped forward, her posture equal parts librarian and mountain lion. "If I could," she said, "I'd like to properly present the Historical Society's plan." She set her portfolio on the nearest table, gently nudging aside a line of buttered bread slices, and began to unroll the blueprints with a delicate, almost reverential care. The paper

crackled and snapped, curling at the edges as she flattened it across a dusting of flour.

Brandi provided the introduction. “This is for the cabin,” she said, but Eleanor shook her head gently.

“It’s for all of us,” Eleanor replied. She looked around the bakery, her eyes lingering on the familiar faces—Mrs. Durnell, Mr. Peterson, even the cluster of teens pretending not to listen. “The cabin is more than a landmark. It’s a way to say that what happened here—the real story—won’t be bulldozed away.”

She gestured to the plans, which showed a careful balance between restoration and reinvention. “The front porch will be rebuilt to original spec, but the inside will host rotating exhibits. We’ll install a viewing room for Evelyn’s reels, and a corner for bakery lore—recipes, artifacts, and maybe even a live feed from Brandi’s proofing drawer.” A ripple of laughter moved through the crowd.

“But that’s not all.” Eleanor flipped to a second sheet, this one covered in annotations. “We want the museum to double as a community archive. If you have photos, letters, or even good stories, we’ll document them. Every voice matters, not just the famous ones.” She looked at Finn and Chloe, eyes twinkling. “Especially the ones who climbed the mountain for the truth.”

This brought a small, collective gasp. For a moment, Finn wanted to slip beneath the table, but Chloe—never shy—raised her hand and said, “Want to know how it really went down?”

A chorus of “Yes!” rolled from both tables.

Chloe leaned in, palms braced on the table edge, eyes bright. “First, let me set the scene. It’s black as pitch, we’re halfway up Box-Death, and Finn here is moving like he’s part bloodhound. I’m trying to keep up, but it’s all ice and brush, and I’m literally narrating the trip into my phone because I figure, if we don’t make it, someone’s going to need a record for the search party.”

She told it fast and funny, skipping over the scarier parts, embellishing just enough to keep the mood light. When she described the run-in with the PI (“slinking around like a budget Bond villain”), even Elias chuckled. Finn piped in when she got to the ridgeline: “She says she

nearly died, but really she just lost her phone. I had to climb down and fish it out of a crevice the width of a sandwich.”

“Lies,” Chloe shot back, grinning. “I was fine.”

“She cried,” Finn deadpanned, but there was nothing mean about it.

“Not from fear,” Chloe clarified. “From the wind.”

The room erupted with laughter. The teens, emboldened, started peppering them with questions. “How cold was it? Did you really sleep outside? Was there, like, actual danger?”

Elias answered that one, voice low. “The only real danger was not finishing what we started. That mountain doesn’t give up secrets for free.”

Brandi and Melinda worked in tandem, ferrying fresh coffee and pastries to the table, refilling mugs the moment they hit the halfway mark. Randy, never missing a beat, swept in from the kitchen with a tray of sparkling cider, which he distributed with the solemnity of a wedding toast.

Chloe wound down her story with a flourish. “We made it back right before sunrise, and Brandi had the ovens fired up already. We walked into the smell of baking bread, and I knew we’d survived. If that’s not a happy ending, I don’t know what is.”

Brandi set down the pan of coffee cake, then ruffled Chloe’s hair, leaving a streak of cinnamon on her temple. “Next time, bring back the wild yeast alive, not frozen.”

They were still laughing when the bakery door swung open with a gust of cold and a heavy tread. Sheriff Adams entered, hat in one hand, a thick leather folder in the other. He stood just inside the doorway, waiting for the room to quiet.

When it did, he lifted the folder and spoke with the weight of someone who hated unnecessary words. “Got an update from the County this morning.” He paused, sweeping his gaze over the crowd. “They’ve voided every one of Thorne’s purchases. Deeds revert to original ownership as of 1954. Foreclosure is off the table. Ground + Toasted and every other disputed property is safe, effective immediately.”

There was a stunned silence, then a spontaneous, raucous cheer that bounced off the windows and rattled the mugs.

Adams held up his hand. "That's not all. The forensic team finished their work on the tape. It matches the voice of Thomas Thorne, recorded in 1954. The affidavit and the confession are both legally binding." He looked at Brandi. "You're in the clear."

Randy whooped, uncorked two bottles of the cider, and started filling every glass in sight. Brandi looked at Finn, who couldn't help but smile, and at Chloe, who gave her a thumb's up, already one step ahead on the next selfie.

Elias took it in stride, just sipped his tea, but his eyes were softer than Finn had ever seen them.

Adams shrugged back into his coat. "I'll leave you to celebrate. Try to keep it under a riot." He managed a rare, private smile, then stepped out into the cold.

Eleanor, never one to miss a beat, stood and raised her glass. "To Duck Creek Village," she said. "To truth, and bread, and every soul that makes this place what it is."

They drank, and for a long moment, it felt like nothing bad could ever happen again.

Finn found himself between Chloe and Brandi at the end of the table, the warmth of their shoulders pressed to his, the smell of yeast and sugar and morning light all around. He let himself relax for the first time in weeks.

Chloe nudged him, her voice pitched just for him. "You ready for the next mystery?"

Finn thought about it, then looked at the crowd, at the mountain outside, at the people who mattered most.

"Bring it on," he said, and meant it.

The party drifted into afternoon. The crowd thinned, but the warmth inside the bakery stayed, clinging to the beams and the backs of every chair. Dishes clinked, laughter scattered in loose knots around the

room, and the glass bell over the door chimed only now and then—a polite, off-duty sentinel.

At a table near the window, Finn sat with Chloe, a pile of crumbs and two drained mugs marking their territory. For the first time in days, the silence between them was easy. Chloe leaned back, letting the sun warm her face, and Finn just watched the dust motes rise and fall in the light.

Elias slid into the empty seat beside them, moving with the silent grace of someone more at home in the woods than at a table. He set his mug of herbal tea on the wood, fingers curled around the rim.

“Hell of a morning,” he said, nodding at the now-empty platters on the counter.

Finn grunted. “Could’ve been worse.”

Chloe smirked. “Could’ve been a lot quieter.”

Elias’s eyes narrowed, amused. “You two ever stop moving?”

Chloe thought about it. “Only to breathe or eat.” She winked at Finn. “He’s worse than me.”

Finn shrugged, but didn’t disagree.

Elias’s gaze drifted to the small brown envelope Finn had tucked beside the bread plate. The reel, still sealed, looked innocuous, almost domestic—something you’d use to bind string or tape together, not the final relic of a vanished Hollywood legend.

He nodded at it. “That’s the one. Never shown, not even once?”

Chloe leaned forward, all playfulness gone. “Not even once. She filmed it, stashed it, then vanished. There are three competing rumors online, and none of them even come close to the truth.”

Finn shifted in his chair. “You know it’d be worth a fortune.”

Elias looked at him, then at Chloe. “So what’ll you do with it? Sell it to some studio? Archive it in the museum?”

Chloe blinked, surprised at how quickly the question made her heart pound. “I don’t know.” She looked at Finn, who just watched her, his expression open. “Part of me wants to see it more than anything. The other part thinks... maybe it shouldn’t be found.”

Elias sipped his tea, let the silence settle. “She left it out there for a reason.”

Chloe fiddled with the envelope, rolling it between her palms. "Maybe it's better as a secret. Or a legend."

Finn put his hand over hers, the motion quick and gentle. "We could put it back."

Chloe smiled, soft around the eyes. "The lightning tree. Where you found the first canister."

Elias's mouth twitched into a rare, fond smile. "I think she'd approve."

Finn finished his coffee, then dusted a crumb off the sleeve of Chloe's sweater. "You okay with that?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I think I am."

For a while they just sat, letting the last of the bread warmth and the sun spill over them. The crowd grew even thinner. Brandi, sleeves rolled high, cleaned the counter with broad, happy sweeps. Randy restocked the napkin jars, humming some old country tune.

Elias stood, picking up his mug, and paused with his hand on Finn's shoulder. "Some things are better left wild," he said.

Finn nodded. "Guess that's the mountain way."

Elias headed for the door, and as he passed, Brandi handed him a bag with two thick slices of the new loaf. "For the trail," she said, smiling with her whole face.

Elias accepted it with a slight bow, then vanished into the noon-bright world.

Chloe watched him go. "You think he ever goes into town?"

Finn followed her gaze. "Only when there's bread. Or trouble."

They grinned at that, and fell quiet again, the envelope between them.

"Should we do it now?" Finn asked.

Chloe shook her head. "Let's wait until sunset. Feels more... cinematic."

He agreed, and they watched the light crawl across the floor, slow and golden, as the day shifted from celebration to something more reflective.

Later, when the bakery finally emptied, and the last of the afternoon shadows stretched across the parking lot, Finn and Chloe slipped out the back. They walked the old trail, boots squelching in late-melt

mud, the reel safe in Chloe's pocket. They didn't talk much; they didn't have to.

At the tree—a battered old juniper, blackened by storms and half-split by a decade-old lightning strike—Chloe traced her finger along the bark. She found the hollow, the spot where the first reel had waited, and pressed the new one deep inside. She paused, then tucked the brown envelope into the crack, making sure it was wedged tight.

Finn watched, hands in his jacket. He'd never felt more sure that this was right.

Chloe stepped back, wiped her palms on her jeans, and stood next to Finn. "Let's leave it for the next legend," she said.

He nodded. "Or the next crazy couple who wants to freeze to death up here."

They laughed, breath misting in the dusk. The wind picked up, carrying the scent of juniper and old secrets.

They stood together until the sun dipped behind the far ridge, and the mountain, for the first time in a long time, seemed utterly at peace.

The reel stayed in the tree. The secret stayed with them. And Duck Creek, for now, belonged to those who could keep a story safe.

nineteen

guardians of the forest

THE SNOW HAD FINALLY GIVEN up its hold on the Twisted Forest Trail, leaving behind a patchwork of melting drifts and stretches of bare, resin-scented duff. Finn and Chloe wound through it in the kind of companionable quiet that comes after all the urgent things have been said. The sun, late in its arc, angled through the broken canopy and made the whole path flicker gold and green, spotlighting the buds just daring to open on the stunted, high-elevation pines.

They moved without hurry, footsteps whispering over the matted needles. Every now and then, Finn paused to point out the oddities—an old elk scrape, a cluster of pale mushrooms punching through the thaw, or, once, a chunk of bark clawed clean off by something bigger than either of them wanted to meet. Chloe logged these with the reverence of a field reporter, fingers flicking notes into her phone but otherwise keeping her gaze skyward, as if she was afraid to miss anything the mountain might choose to reveal.

A thousand feet below, the village was visible only as a faint, woodsmoke haze curling above the trees. Up here, the world belonged to the wind, and the birds, and the steady, crunching progress of two people who had nothing to prove except that they could walk the whole way together without freezing or fighting.

Chloe broke the silence first. “You ever think the mountain was

actually on our side? Like, not just metaphorically, but really rooting for us?" She said it half as a joke, but the way her voice softened on "our side" betrayed more than a little hope.

Finn considered, eyes narrowed at a speck circling overhead. "Not sure the mountain cares that much," he said, "but it definitely helped."

"Like with Thorne's SUV?"

He nodded. "Nobody's ever gotten stuck in that sand pit unless they were an idiot or in a hurry. He managed both."

Chloe laughed. "Classic villain move. The universe loves poetic justice."

"Or maybe he just doesn't know how to drive on cinders."

She let that hang, then kicked at a fallen pinecone. "Still. Sometimes it felt like the trail was clearing for us. Like we were getting hints."

Finn shrugged, but his mouth twitched up at the corners. "Maybe. Or maybe we just wanted it more."

They walked a while longer, the only sound the steady rhythm of boots and the occasional whistle of a Clark's nutcracker. In places, the trail ducked under low, twisted limbs, forcing Chloe to stoop and Finn to nearly crawl. At one bend, a carpet of juniper berries had stained the ground a faint blue, and the air was thick with the punch of resin and last year's smoke.

"Remember that jam-smeared vision of Evelyn in 1954?" Chloe asked, lowering her voice as if the ghost of the starlet might be listening. "She looked right at us, Finn. Not just through us, but at us. That's still wild to me."

"Yeast remembers everything," Finn said. "Starter's been part of this place longer than either of us."

Chloe tried to picture that—generations of bread, rising and falling, the same culture passed from hand to hand to hand. It was stranger than any Hollywood plot twist, but also, somehow, sweeter.

"Do you think it'll work? The museum, the new archive?"

Finn bent to clear a branch from the path, then straightened. "Eleanor's not the type to let it fail. And Brandi's already planning a pie auction to pay for the roof."

"Pie auction," Chloe repeated, tasting the words. "So retro. I love it."

They rounded a curve and the forest opened up, revealing a view of the canyon that would have made a drone operator weep. In the distance, the jagged outline of a single ponderosa pine stood out, its trunk blackened and split by lightning—a local landmark that every kid in the valley grew up hearing about, usually as the setting for some haunting or other.

Chloe stopped, pointing. “That’s our tree.”

Finn nodded. “Doesn’t look like much from here.”

“It’s a perfect third-act location. You get the climax, then you get the catharsis.” She grinned. “You think the starter will send another message?”

He hesitated. “If it does, we’ll be ready.”

They set off again, the tree now a fixed point pulling them onward. The ground here was soft and spongy, and every step released a cloud of scent—old needles, damp earth, a faint trace of something sweet Finn couldn’t name. He watched the back of Chloe’s head, how her hair had started to frizz out in the humidity, how she walked with more confidence than she let on. It was nice, this part: the gentle aftershock, the unscheduled minutes.

As they neared the tree, the light shifted, and for a second it looked like the blackened trunk was burning anew, haloed by the sun and the last of the winter mist. Chloe slowed, almost reverently.

“I used to be afraid of this tree,” she said. “When I was a kid, I thought if you touched the lightning scar, you’d catch a ghost.”

“Did you ever try?”

She smiled, wry. “No, but my little brother peed on it once. Claimed he saw a face in the bark.”

Finn circled the trunk, scanning for the old hollow. He found it just where he remembered—about chest height, rimmed with sap and jagged at the edges. “It’s here,” he called, and Chloe came over, the wind catching at her jacket.

She ran a finger along the scar, then peered into the hollow. “Did you ever think you’d be here, after all this?”

He didn’t answer right away. Instead, he reached into his pack and pulled out the old canister—still sealed, the label gone soft from being handled so much.

Chloe caught her breath. "Full circle."

He nodded. "You want to do the honors?"

She took the canister, hands careful. For a second, she just looked at it, eyes gone shiny. Then, with a little ceremony, she tucked it into the hollow, wedging it tight so it wouldn't rattle loose.

They stood back, side by side, and let the moment settle.

"Closure," Chloe said. "Like the perfect post-credits scene."

Finn reached out and squeezed her hand, just once, then let it go. "Ready to head down?"

She nodded, but neither of them moved. Not yet.

High above, the nutcrackers were still calling. The forest, for once, felt like it was listening in.

The tree up close was even stranger than Chloe remembered from her childhood: a band of charcoal-black bark running the length of the trunk, so sharply defined it looked like a special effect. The hollow, half-hidden by a twist of old sap, seemed deeper than before—wide enough for a canister, or a bird's nest, or maybe a secret if you knew just how to look for it.

Finn reached out and ran his palm along the scar. The bark was gritty and cold, catching at the lines on his hand. He circled it once, then bent to peer into the hollow, his breath clouding against the rim.

Chloe watched him, then drew the third reel from her pack, holding it up so the sunlight shimmered through the clear plastic. "You ever see a story end so neatly?" she asked, rotating it to catch the flare. "It's almost too poetic."

Finn shrugged. "Sometimes it just works out."

She smiled, though it felt a little sad. "You know, in every movie I ever loved, the heroes bury the MacGuffin and walk away. But it never feels real. This... does."

He nodded, accepting the canister from her. "What should we write for the next person?"

Chloe thought, then pulled a crumpled receipt from her pocket.

She borrowed Finn's pencil and, crouched against the tree, scrawled out a message in big, loopy script:

*If you found this, you found the real thing.
Thanks for taking care of the mountain. Don't let anyone
tell you it's not magic.
-C & F, Duck Creek*

She handed the pencil to Finn, who studied the note, then added beneath it in small, block letters:

P.S. Wear gloves. Sap doesn't wash out.

He underlined it twice. Chloe burst out laughing, the sound cutting clean through the hush of the woods.

They rolled the note tight, wedged it inside the hollow next to the canister, and pressed it deep so the wind wouldn't tug it free. For a second, their hands overlapped—his calloused and steady, hers ink-smudged and quick.

"Closure," Chloe said, but quieter this time.

Finn stepped back, brushing the last flecks of bark from his sleeves. "You ready?"

She lingered, one hand resting on the lightning scar. The birds had gone silent; even the wind seemed to pause. Chloe closed her eyes, just for a second, and thought she heard the bread starter fizzing somewhere far below, memory bubbling up through the dark.

Then she stepped away, bumping Finn's shoulder with her own. They turned and started back, the shadow of the tree stretching long behind them.

The forest, for now, was content to let the secret sleep.

As Finn and Chloe started down the trail, they heard the faintest crack of a twig—so soft that Finn, who made a habit of noticing things, had to double-check that he'd really heard it. He glanced back and

caught sight of Elias, framed by the gray-blue haze of the woods, moving with the kind of stealth that made even the birds pause to watch.

Elias said nothing at first, but walked up to the tree, squinting at the scar, then at the hollow. He ran one palm along the blackened wood, then nodded once, a gesture of rare approval.

"The mountain approves," he said, voice barely above a whisper.

Chloe grinned, but held it in check. Finn just inclined his head, a fellow craftsman respecting another's work.

Elias didn't move away from the tree. "She'd have liked this," he said. "The care you took. Most people just carve their names, never thinking who else needs the space."

Chloe tucked her hands into her jacket. "You ever meet her? Evelyn?"

Elias smiled, lines bracketing his mouth. "She was already legend when I started at the Forest Service. I was just a kid—groundskeeper, nothing more. She'd show up at dawn to collect saplings or fix an old fence, then vanish before the first shift change." He traced a groove in the bark with his thumb. "She trusted few, but those she did, she trusted completely."

Finn listened, every sense on alert. "She really lived out here? Year-round?"

Elias nodded. "Off and on. The last decade, she stayed in a loop—cabin to cave to another cabin. Locals called her the Forest Lady, sometimes the Witch, but it was all stories. She left bundles of wild herbs for sick kids, marked the safe paths in blizzards, and always—always—kept the mountain cleaner than when she found it."

He reached into his coat, pulling out a battered envelope and something wrapped in a twist of fabric. "She left instructions. I never thought I'd find anyone fit to follow them, not until you two stirred up the starter." He held out the envelope, the edges yellowed and curling, a faint scent of rose hips and loam drifting from it.

Chloe took it, careful as if it might shatter. "You sure it's for us?"

Elias shrugged, but there was gravity in the motion. "Her last wish was that the next keepers would know when to hide a story, and when to share it. I've been watching you, since the first canister. You could've

sold that film, or vanished with the deed. Instead, you brought it home.”

Finn accepted the wrapped object. Inside: an old iron key, simple but heavy, polished smooth by decades of turning in a lock. “This opens her main cabin,” Elias said. “Up past the first fork, right at the stone marker. You’ll know it by the way it faces the sunrise.”

Chloe hugged the letter to her chest. Finn rolled the key in his palm, weighing the responsibility.

Elias stepped back from the tree, fixing them both with a gaze that was part warning, part blessing. “Whatever you find, remember: some secrets are best left buried, but others—others keep the mountain alive.”

With that, he turned and slipped away, the forest closing behind him as if he’d never been there at all.

Finn and Chloe stood in the hush, the envelope and key between them, the ghost of a starlet and the promise of a new story whispering through the branches.

The mountain, Finn decided, really did want them to have this.

The letter felt heavier than it should. Chloe handled it first, running her finger along the sealed flap before breaking it open with a gentle, practiced swipe. The paper inside was lined in blue, the edges curled and soft, the writing a delicate cursive that barely wavered until the last few lines.

She read the first part aloud, the words tumbling out in a hush:

“If you are reading this, you found the heart of the mountain. I’ve watched over her for most of my life, but the time comes when a new set of eyes, and a steadier hand, is needed. The mountain chooses its protectors. If you felt called, it’s because you belong here.

Trust each other, and trust your own senses. When the

time is right, you'll know what to do with what I've left behind.

*Yours in faith and flour,
Evelyn S. C."*

Chloe's voice cracked on the last sentence. She folded the letter, smoothed it, then tucked it into her jacket pocket.

Finn didn't say anything at first. Instead, he studied the old iron key, thumb working the groove worn by a hundred hands. "You really think it's up there?" he asked, squinting up the slope toward where the trees bunched tightest.

Elias answered with a shrug. "Nothing's ever really lost out here, just waiting to be found."

Chloe grinned. "You realize this is basically the setup for a whole new franchise, right? Two youngish guardians, a secret cabin, and a mentor who only appears when the plot needs it."

Finn smirked. "Only if there's less running."

Elias smiled, a flash of white in the shadow. "I'd show you the way, if you're up for it."

They set off in the new direction, the trail narrower and less defined, Finn in the lead now, Chloe at his elbow, Elias bringing up the rear with the quiet confidence of someone who never needed to hurry. The sky overhead was a wash of late blue, and the trees blunted the sun into dappled, ever-moving shapes. The farther they walked, the more the path seemed to sense their purpose, opening in front of them and closing up behind.

Chloe kept glancing at Finn, then at the envelope in her pocket. He caught her looking once and, instead of teasing, just reached for her hand and squeezed.

They walked that way for a long time—past the cairn where the shortcut split from the main trail, past the stone marker that Elias had promised. At the last switchback, Chloe spotted the cabin: smaller than she expected, half-choked by wild rose, but neat as a pressed shirt. The windows flashed with the last of the sun, and a battered stovepipe leaned out from the roof at an impossible angle.

They stopped in front, none of them moving to open the door right away. Finn turned the key over and over, then looked at Chloe, then at Elias, who gave a short, approving nod.

"You want to do the honors?" Finn asked.

Chloe shook her head. "It's yours. You found the first reel."

He smiled, then unlocked the door.

The inside was cool and dark, but the air was dry, and the walls lined with shelves—jars of starter, bundles of dried herbs, row after row of handwritten notebooks and carefully labeled film canisters. In the back, a narrow cot and a table set with three mismatched cups, as if Evelyn knew this day would come.

Elias stepped inside, but stayed near the threshold, letting Finn and Chloe wander. Finn ran his hand along the notebook spines, reading the labels. Some were just dates; others had names, or places, or cryptic phrases ("Noon Shadow," "Box-Death," "True North"). He selected one, flipped it open, and found a log of daily observations, written in the same looping cursive as the letter. Every so often, a second hand had added a note in the margin, sharper, more impatient.

Chloe picked up a canister and held it to the light. "This is incredible," she whispered. "It's all here. The whole history. All the pieces they tried to erase."

Elias, watching them, seemed content. "You don't have to decide anything now," he said. "Take your time. Let the place speak to you."

Finn nodded, understanding. He looked at Chloe, who was grinning so wide it made his cheeks hurt, and realized they'd already started the new story, whether they wanted to or not.

They left the cabin as the sun dropped behind the ridge, the long shadows stretching all the way to the village below. The walk back was easy—lighter, somehow, than the hike up. They talked about nothing much: bread, movies, maybe a picnic at the overlook once the snow melted. Every now and then, Finn would glance at Chloe, and she'd be looking back, both of them sharing the secret that now lived in their pockets and under their skin.

At the last bend before the main trail, Finn stopped and looked back. The cabin was already half-hidden, the windows catching the first

stars. He wondered if the mountain would ever speak to him again, or if maybe it already had.

Chloe squeezed his hand, the key warm between their palms.

“Ready?” she asked.

He nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “I think I am.”

The three of them headed down the path, the hush of the forest following like a benediction.

And somewhere, in the dark, the mountain listened on.

twenty
**ground +
toasted renewed**

THE MORNING BROKE gold and absolute over Duck Creek Village, sunlight catching the tips of the old pines and spilling through the windows of Ground + Toasted like it was trying to fill up the whole place before the crowd even arrived. The bakery—Brandi’s bakery, the one they had all fought for—looked impossibly fresh. The new paint glowed a warm cream, making the hand-lettered sign pop from the street, and the window boxes overflowed with petunias that someone (probably Melinda, though she’d deny it) had lined up the night before. On the sidewalk, Randy was already setting up the sandwich board, using a level to make sure the words “GRAND RE-OPENING” and “FREE COFFEE WITH PURCHASE” would not tilt even a single degree. He wore the navy shirt with his name stitched in a script so tight it looked like a magic trick. Brandi watched him from behind the counter, hands planted on either side of the cutting board, and felt the first good kind of nerves she’d had in months.

Inside, the old sourdough starter sat like a queen in her glass jar, the new batch bubbling more furiously than she’d ever seen. Brandi eyed it, then tapped the lid, just to hear the happy fizz of the air. The starter was alive—really alive, not just surviving—and for the first time since the break-in, she believed they might actually make it through the week with loaves to spare. The shelves behind her, once a warzone of half-burned pans and shattered flour canisters, were now lined with shining

new tins and a pyramid of proofed doughs waiting for the oven. Even the battered mixing bowl, the one with the chip shaped like Nevada, gleamed as if it was in on the miracle.

To the left of the counter, where the coffee station used to be just an afterthought, now stood a shrine to caffeine: a three-group espresso machine, every lever and knob polished to a mirror, and beside it a stack of mugs branded with Brandi's own logo—an hourglass-shaped mountain, simple and sly. Randy had spent the better part of the week experimenting, and now he finessed the dials and hoppers with the concentration of a man about to launch a rocket.

The first order of business, though, was the museum corner. Where once there was a dead space between the register and the coat rack, Brandi and Randy had installed a set of glass display cases. In one, a grid of black-and-white film stills, each labeled with a handwritten note: "Evelyn in 'Starlet's Shadow,' Scene 14, 1954" or "Duck Creek Saloon—Set Build, Summer 1947." The next case held Brandi's grandmother's recipe cards, annotated with rows of faded pencil, plus a folding knife rumored to have been borrowed (and never returned) from the set of *The Searchers*. The last case displayed a clutch of old press photos: Evelyn St. Claire in costume, hat cocked and smile cool; a production crew posing with the first loaf ever baked in the original village oven; and, tucked in the corner, a shot of a much younger Brandi, flour up to her elbows, grinning at the camera as if she knew she'd end up here.

"Looks like you're ready," Randy called, voice booming through the still air. He popped his head through the pass-through, then turned his wrist and pointed at the clock. "Six minutes till we open. You want to do the honors?"

Brandi hesitated, brushing a streak of invisible flour from her apron. She let herself scan the bakery—just once, fast—then nodded. "Yeah. I'm ready."

Randy unlocked the front door and swung it wide. The village was already waiting: a tangle of neighbors, regulars, and the sort of strangers who somehow always made it into the first line of the day. Mrs. Durnell, in her usual fleece and pearls, held a bouquet of wildflowers wrapped in a page from last week's *Gazette*. Behind her, the park ranger with the red beard and the high-schoolers from the gas station. Even the

town librarian, who rarely left the archives before noon, hovered near the back with a paper bag full of returns.

"Come in, come in!" Brandi said, waving them all inside. The crowd swept through, laughing and talking, bringing with it the crisp cold and the electricity of something about to happen.

The first to the counter was Mrs. Durnell. "Don't tell me you're out of sourdough already," she said, feigning horror.

"Not a chance," Brandi replied, lifting a loaf from the cooling rack. She sliced it with a showy, practiced hand, the crust shattering in a small, perfect line. "Try this. First from the new batch."

Mrs. Durnell took a bite. Her face went absolutely blank for a second, as if she'd seen a ghost, then she looked at Brandi with a sudden, delighted suspicion. "There's something different," she said. "It's... it's like lemon, but also not." She sniffed the bread, then giggled. "And for a moment, I swear I smelled—what is that? Like old perfume. Or film?"

Randy, who had been pouring the first espresso shot, grinned. "You're not the first to notice," he said. "Some say it's haunted. Some say it's just the local yeast." He handed her the cup, the crema golden and thick. "Try this—'Starlet's Shadow,' our new blend. Notes of dark chocolate, cherry, and a little mountain air."

The crowd oohed as Mrs. Durnell took a sip, then held the cup at arm's length, as if weighing it. "Oh, that's good," she pronounced. "It tastes like—" She paused, thinking. "Like watching a movie alone, but in the best way."

Brandi laughed, then handed out samples to the others, each slice of bread or tiny pastry passing from hand to hand with a flurry of "oohs" and "wows." The room filled up fast, but instead of chaos, it felt more like a party: everyone talking, everyone tasting, everyone happy to be exactly where they were.

At the display cases, the museum pieces drew their own crowd. Kids pressed noses to the glass, tracing the lines of the old film equipment with their fingers. Teens snapped photos of the recipe cards for their feeds. Even the out-of-towners lingered, reading the captions aloud and comparing their own family legends to the village's cinematic past.

Brandi watched it all, a hot swell rising in her chest. She'd dreamed of this—of the bakery as more than a business, of it as the living,

breathing heart of the village. For a while, she'd thought it was gone. But the way people crowded in, the way they cared for each other, the way the old starter seemed to pulse and fizz with every passing minute—it was all back, and more.

She blinked, and for a moment the world swam a little. Melinda, from the kitchen, noticed and slipped her a napkin. "You okay, boss?"

"Yeah," Brandi whispered. "Better than okay."

Across the room, a regular took a bite of bread and stopped mid-chew. His eyes went wide, and he sniffed the air, then turned to his friend. "You ever get that, like, flash?" he asked. "I just—swear to god, I smelled my uncle's old camera bag. The one that always had those weird plastic film canisters in it." He laughed, a little embarrassed, but the friend just nodded.

"Same," said the friend. "For me, it was like—like being backstage at the high school musical. You know, the glue and the fake mustaches. Only real."

People started comparing notes, each describing a different, fleeting vision or scent or sound: a reel-to-reel click, the tang of 1950s hairspray, the sharp pop of a flashbulb. Nobody seemed scared. If anything, the magic was half the fun.

Brandi caught Randy's eye, and he gave her a thumbs up. "You've got something special here," he mouthed, then turned to the next customer with his barista grin.

By the time the sun had climbed over the roofline, the bakery was packed wall to wall, the museum cases fogged with the heat of so many voices. Brandi just kept baking, hands steady, heart thumping. Every now and then, she'd pause, take a breath, and listen: not just for the timers or the hiss of the espresso machine, but for the laughter, the stories, the new traditions winding their way through her bakery.

They'd saved the starter. They'd saved the bakery.

And maybe—just maybe—they'd saved something of the mountain, too.

Finn arrived precisely at 8:12, a fact that surprised even him—he'd spent the better part of the morning clearing the last storm-blown branches from the Twisted Forest Trail, and yet here he was, in full Forest Service green, boots scrubbed, and hair tamed enough to fit under his Prime Adventure Outfitters cap. He carried a gift: a ponderosa pine seedling, roots wrapped in burlap and tucked in a tin can painted with stripes of blue and white. He'd chosen it for its stubbornness—the same trait that had, in the end, saved half the mountain from Thorne's backhoes. He paused at the bakery's new front step, considered the can in his hands, and for just a second, allowed himself to feel proud.

Inside, the bakery was louder than any church and twice as crowded. Brandi saw him through the crowd and waved, then angled her chin toward the wall where the other gifts had been corralled: wild-flower bouquets, a hand-thrown mug from the pottery crew, even a pair of snowshoes with the words "Let it Rise" burned into the wood. Finn set the pine among them, and as he did, a cluster of kids who'd been eyeing the pastries drifted over to inspect it.

One boy, maybe nine, poked the needles. "Is it magic?"

Finn shrugged. "Could be. It'll live longer than any of us if you treat it right." He meant it as a joke, but the kid just nodded, solemn, and moved on.

He'd barely gotten his bearings when the first neighbor cornered him. "Finn! Quick question—when does the lake trail open for bikes?" a woman asked, balancing a toddler on one hip and a blueberry scone in the other.

Finn replied, "Soon as the snowpack's under six inches. I'm scouting next week. You'll be the first to know."

Another: "Is the backcountry fire risk really that high already?" "It's going to be a bad year if we don't get another storm," Finn said, "but the old-growth stands are holding moisture. Stay off the ridge until the signs say otherwise." He answered each with the speed and certainty of someone who'd finally stopped second-guessing himself.

It didn't take long for the new Finn—confident, direct, almost gregarious—to draw a crowd. Brandi, overhearing him talk a neighbor through the finer points of trail etiquette ("It's simple: If you can't pack it out, don't pack it in"), winked at Randy. "Our boy's grown up," she

said. Randy, who was busy dosing espresso for a customer with a deep tan and ski goggles on his head, just grunted, but there was pride in it.

The morning rolled on, the line never shrinking, and still the little museum in the corner drew its own gravity. Chloe entered just after nine, pausing at the threshold as if needing to soak up the scene before wading in. She wore a battered Sundance Film Festival tee, a scarf in red silk, and boots that left a trail of mud. A notebook bristling with color-coded tabs peeked from her tote. She bee-lined for the display cases, notebook already open, and started narrating to a group of teenagers who'd gathered to gawk at the old film canisters.

"This one is from 'Starlet's Shadow,'" she said, tapping the label. "The lost reel? It was literally hidden in a tree. Real film, not digital, so it probably smells like vinegar and dust." She looked at the nearest teen, a girl in purple glasses. "You know how heavy these things are? Try to lift it." The girl did, surprise lighting her face. "Imagine hauling that up a mountain," Chloe said, grinning.

Another hand shot up. "Is it true she faked her own death?"

Chloe's grin got wider. "Not faked. More like... staged it. She wanted to escape the press and the contracts, so she left behind the wildest possible rumor. Her last years, she lived right up there—" Chloe pointed through the window, at the shadowed slope above the village. "People say she haunted the forest, but really she just wanted to be left alone to make her own art."

The crowd nodded, impressed.

A woman with a Ranger District ballcap asked, "How did you get interested in this stuff?"

Chloe glanced toward Finn, who had drifted over to listen. "Honestly? Kind of a fluke. I came for a summer job, stayed for the bread, and fell in love with the stories." She thumbed her notebook, then added, "I'm switching my major. Film preservation and regional history. My big project this year is digitizing every old photo from the village archives. It's like making a movie out of ghosts." The passion in her voice was contagious—the kids hung on every word.

Finn caught her eye, and she flashed a look that was both triumph and dare. He gave her a thumbs up, then noticed she'd brought a

second, smaller notebook, its cover stenciled with a glittery lightning bolt.

"Still writing the screenplay?" he asked, as she peeled away from the group.

She leaned in, lowered her voice. "It's a trilogy now. But I'll change the names so we don't get sued."

He laughed, and the sound made Chloe's eyes crinkle. "You want a tour?" she asked, jerking her head toward the display cases. "It's the premium experience."

"Lead the way," he said, and let her guide him.

Chloe moved from artifact to artifact, narrating each one with a mix of reverence and wild speculation. At the recipe cards: "See the blue ink? That's Brandi's grandmother. She wrote tiny notes in the margins—like, 'Add more sugar for a sweeter crowd,' or 'Never use store-bought cinnamon, it's an insult to the starter.'" At the black-and-white photos: "This was the first location shoot after the road opened. The director hated snow so much, he shot everything at dawn just to catch it in silhouette." At the press photo of young Brandi: "You see the apron? Same one she uses now. Vintage is in."

They paused at the last case, where the battered, yellowed deed rested under a glare of tiny LEDs. Chloe's voice softened. "You know, if it wasn't for that hike, none of this would exist."

Finn shrugged. "You did most of the work."

Chloe made a face. "You carried me up a mountain. And made it down in one piece."

He looked at her, and for a moment, the din of the bakery faded. "Good team," he said, and meant it.

Chloe held his gaze for a beat, then snapped the notebook shut. "Best team," she corrected.

They were interrupted by Eleanor, the archivist, who arrived like a cold front—quiet but undeniable. She wore her usual down vest and had a large envelope tucked under her arm. She made a beeline for the center of the room, then tapped a teaspoon against her coffee mug. The sound cut through the chatter, and the bakery fell silent.

Eleanor cleared her throat. "If I may have your attention for a

moment.” Her voice was gentle, but the hush held. “I have some news that might interest more than a few of you.”

She waited, letting the suspense build. “I received an inquiry this morning from the UCLA Film & Television Archive. And another from the Academy’s library. They want to know more about the Evelyn St. Claire collection, and about the legend of Duck Creek’s hidden film reels.” She let that settle in. “They want to visit. And, if we’re willing, to help us preserve and showcase the collection. The right way.”

A ripple of applause ran through the room, followed by real cheers. Brandi, who was frosting a batch of cinnamon rolls, stopped to listen, eyes shining.

Eleanor continued, “This means the story is bigger than us now. And with careful planning, it means more visitors, more business, and—if we do it right—respectful tourism, not the chaos of last year.” She looked at Brandi, then Finn, then Chloe. “We did this together. The story belongs to the village, and it always will.”

After a moment, a man in his seventies stood, holding a mug of coffee with both hands. “I remember the first crew that came through,” he said. “They hired me to hold reflectors for five dollars a day. Never thought those films would mean anything to anyone outside this mountain.”

Next, Mrs. Durnell: “I still have the telegram my aunt sent after they wrapped ‘The Starlet’s Shadow.’ She said the cast parties were better than any Sunday service.”

More voices chimed in, each with a memory or a legend: old ski jumpers conscripted as stunt doubles, teenagers paid to dress up as extras and riot in the “jailbreak” scene, even a rumor that the bakery’s original dough mixer was borrowed from a prop truck and never returned.

Brandi wiped her hands, then raised a cup. “To the next hundred years,” she said.

Randy rang the bell by the espresso machine, loud and clear. “To the mountain,” he echoed.

Finn felt Chloe’s elbow press against his, a small but certain contact. She whispered, “They’re going to want us to give a tour, aren’t they?”

Finn nodded. "You'd love it."

Chloe grinned, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. "I really would."

The bakery buzzed again, voices overlapping, the future suddenly as vivid and unpredictable as the starter bubbling in its jar. Finn looked around, at the people who made the place what it was, and then back at Chloe, who was already scribbling a note for her next story.

For the first time since he could remember, the past and the future felt like a single, seamless thing.

And right then, in the middle of Ground + Toasted, it was exactly enough.

By late afternoon, Ground + Toasted was running on pure momentum. The sunlight that had started the day so bright now slanted through the bakery windows in sharp, honeyed angles, catching on the dust motes, the chrome edges of the espresso machine, and the glaze atop the commemorative loaf Brandi had proofed all night for this exact moment. She presented it to the crowd with a bow, then a flourish of her bread knife. The first cut was deep and decisive—a clean, straight line that sent a ripple of anticipation across every face in the room.

"Moment of truth," Randy intoned, and rang the little bell he'd mounted next to the espresso machine. "First cup of the 'Starlet's Shadow' blend, coming up!" The crowd cheered, and a line formed instantly.

The bakery vibrated with more than conversation. It was a kind of energy, raw and hopeful, that had been missing for months. Each table was a small world: the high school crew plotting summer jobs, the old-timers trading stories about set builders and movie extras, a tourist couple listening in with wide, delighted eyes. At the window, the pine seedling Finn had brought sat in a place of honor, its needles catching the afternoon sun.

Brandi made a loop through the room, arms loaded with bread baskets, pausing to listen at every table. She laughed loudest at the

“missing prop mixer” story, and for every memory someone shared, she seemed to have a related one of her own. In the new museum corner, kids stood in awe at the old film reels and vintage camera—one even dared to ask if he could touch the lens (“Not unless you want to lose a finger,” Chloe warned, but she winked after).

Local guides had set up shop at the far end, handing out walking-tour maps of the “Starlet’s Shadow” filming locations. Each was marked with little stars, hand-drawn and uneven, but the effect was charming. Chloe drifted through the crowd, trailed by a few teens who hung on her every word as she narrated the real and apocryphal stories behind each stop on the tour.

The bakery’s porch was the only place that offered quiet. Finn stepped outside, partly for the cold, partly to see the world in stillness for a minute. The sky was turning the color of old pennies, clouds just beginning to line up for a good sunset. He exhaled, letting the air bite his cheeks, and only then noticed Chloe had slipped out before him.

She sat at the edge of the porch, feet dangling, a mug of coffee between her palms. “Didn’t think you’d need air before I did,” she said as he settled next to her. The bench creaked, but neither moved.

Finn looked out at the slow-rolling clouds, the ink-black edge of the mountain, the way the light caught on the bakery’s sign. “It’s a lot,” he admitted. “Good, but a lot.”

Chloe sipped, then set her mug on the railing. “Feels different now. Like, not just mine. Like it’s everyone’s story.”

Finn nodded. “You ever think it would end up this way?”

Chloe laughed, hair escaping her scarf in the wind. “Nope. Thought I’d be in LA, writing about movies I’d never see. Now I’m here, part of the weirdest community in the state, and loving every second.” She gave him a sideways glance. “Even the snow.”

He grinned. “You used to say you hated the cold.”

“I did. Now I hate leaving it.”

They watched in companionable quiet as a group of kids on the new tour map pointed and argued over which house was in the background of the famous chase scene. Chloe leaned back, arms braced behind her, eyes searching the horizon.

Finn let himself notice the little things: the way her shoes barely touched the porch's edge, the way she tapped out the rhythm of her thoughts on her jeans, the way she always looked at the mountain as if it was about to give her a secret.

He cleared his throat. "Evelyn's journals. You still reading them?"

Chloe nodded. "Yeah. It's wild, Finn. Some of the stuff she wrote about—she saw things exactly the way you do. Not just the nature stuff, but the people. The way a whole town could be shaped by what you did when nobody was watching."

Finn mulled that over. "You think we owe her something?"

Chloe shrugged, but it was a thoughtful one. "We owe the story. Not to keep it the same, but to keep it alive. You're good at that. I want to be, too."

They let the silence fill up again. Finn tried to think of something smart or poetic to say, but nothing fit. So instead, he just reached for her hand, let it rest on the worn wood between them, not quite touching.

Chloe looked down, then grinned. "You know what my favorite part of today was?"

He shook his head.

She nudged his shoulder. "When you told that lady about the snow-pack. You made it sound like it was the most important thing in the world."

"It is," Finn said, dead serious. "Otherwise you get mudslides. Or wildfires. Or tourists stuck in the wrong kind of shoes."

Chloe laughed, louder this time. "See? Most important thing in the world."

They watched as the sunset finally broke, pouring orange and purple over the ridge. Inside, the bakery's windows glowed like a string of lanterns, laughter and music threading out with the light.

"It's home now, isn't it?" Chloe asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Finn nodded. "Yeah," he said, no hesitation. "It really is."

They sat like that, side by side, the world going from golden to deep blue, neither in a hurry to move. Eventually, Finn would have to go inside, help with the close, maybe walk Chloe home if she wanted. But

for now, it was enough to be here, in the hush between day and night, with the mountain listening in.

When the last of the sun slipped behind the ridge, Chloe squeezed his hand, and Finn squeezed back. They stayed that way a little longer—together, as the lights came on one by one down the road, and Duck Creek Village, at last, settled in for the night.

epilogue - the mountain's memory

A year to the day since the first canister surfaced, Movie Ranch Road was alive with the kind of spring light that made every log cabin glow like fresh dough in an oven window. The last snow had shrunk to a rumor on the north slopes, and the air smelled of wet wood, new grass, and the faintest trace of woodsmoke—just enough to remind you the mountains liked to keep their secrets warm.

Finn led the tour in his best Forest Service shirt (which, to be fair, was the only one he owned without a bloodstain or melted sleeve), a group of seven film-history students trailing behind him in a lopsided pack. Half had notebooks. All had phones out, and the smallest of the bunch—a blue-haired, big-glassed kid named Morgan—alternated between filming everything and tripping over their own boots.

“Up ahead on the left, you’ll see the original sheriff’s cabin,” Finn said, pausing to point with a hiking pole at the battered A-frame barely visible behind a drift of last autumn’s leaves. “The one in the background of Starlet’s Shadow. They shot the first jailbreak sequence on that porch. You can still see the dent from where the prop shotgun misfired.”

Morgan raised a hand, half eager, half sardonic. “Did they clean up the blood?”

Finn gave a one-shoulder shrug. “Rumor says it’s still on the railing. The insurance paid triple for the reshoot.” The group laughed, but Finn

moved them on before anyone could linger too long on the porch's grim provenance.

Chloe walked at the rear, occasionally falling back to get a better angle on the group. She wore a patched up navy peacoat, rainbow scarf, and, today, a pair of rubber boots she'd customized with sharpie doodles of cameras, stars, and tiny bread loaves. In the past year she'd stopped dyeing her hair ("too much work for no payoff," she claimed), but the new growth blended in a way that looked intentional, even in the harsh daylight.

As the tour strung out along the main drag, Chloe caught up to Finn at the front. "You missed the part about the haunted makeup trailer," she whispered.

He nodded, not breaking stride. "We only have an hour. They can google the ghost stories later."

She grinned, then darted back, overtaking the group and positioning herself just in time to intercept the next student question.

"Is it true Evelyn St. Claire really set the fire in '52?" asked a lanky kid in a letterman jacket.

Chloe threw out her hands in a mock gasp. "You have to specify which fire. There was the stage fire, the hotel fire, and the infamous pyrotechnics disaster." She launched into the story, fingers drawing arcs in the air: how Evelyn had a habit of showing up wherever there was a camera, a cigarette, or a local legend in need of upgrading. "She was Duck Creek's own femme fatale, but with more public-works projects."

A ripple of laughter. Even Finn smiled. He let Chloe handle the rest of the walk, content to steer the group up the short incline toward the bakery. He pointed out the shallow gully where last year's mudslide had closed the road ("Thorne's construction site was at the bottom. Instant karma."), and the old cattle grid ("Broke three filmmaker ankles. They paved it last fall. The town council put up a memorial plaque.").

They made it to Ground + Toasted five minutes ahead of schedule, the bakery's sign swinging gently in the breeze. The windows fogged with the first rush of the day, and even from the sidewalk, the smell of baking bread overpowered every other sense. The students flowed in, voices rising as they spied the new museum corner tucked behind the main seating area.

Brandi waited behind the counter, as always. She wore a red bandana, sleeves rolled high, and an apron that looked like it had survived the Battle of Verdun. The flour on her cheek matched the gray in her braid. As the students poured in, she raised her rolling pin in greeting.

"Welcome to the world headquarters of Mountain Truth," she declared. "And the only place in Utah where the ghosts are friendly." She winked at Morgan, who looked both mortified and honored.

Randy, manning the espresso machine, slid a tray of miniature cinnamon rolls down the line, each one topped with a perfect, trembling glaze. He poured black coffee into a dozen mismatched mugs and set them on the counter with a soft, practiced "Careful, it's hot."

The tour group zeroed in on the museum corner. Brandi had outdone herself: three glass-fronted shadow boxes held an arrangement of black-and-white photos, film stills, a handful of telegrams, and a rack of costume jewelry that Chloe claimed had been worn by Evelyn in no fewer than four productions. The centerpiece was a battered 16mm camera mounted on a hand-cut slab of local juniper, the brass plaque reading: "E. St. Claire's Eyewitness, 1947-1955. Do not touch without gloves, or the ghost will reset your password."

Morgan read the plaque and snorted. "You could sell these jokes."

Chloe leaned in, voice low. "We do. It's part of the business model."

Finn stood back and watched the group circle the displays, taking photos and scribbling notes. Every now and then, a question floated his way: "What was it like hiking to the drop site?" "Did you really see a bear on the trail?" "What did it feel like to hold history in your hand?" Finn gave his answers straight, letting the myth accumulate in Chloe's stories instead of his own.

Brandi brought over a plate of Mountain Berry Hand Pies, warm enough to steam the air. "On the house, for the next generation," she said. "But don't blame me if you see old movie scenes in your dreams tonight."

The group devoured the pies in under a minute. Finn took one, then another, not even pretending he could resist them. Brandi, noticing, passed him an extra on a napkin. "For later," she said, voice pitched so only he could hear.

Chloe, now in her element, motioned everyone to the biggest table and began handing out copies of Evelyn's annotated scripts, the margins crowded with her tiny, looping handwriting. She pointed out the notes—stage directions, story changes, even the occasional recipe scribbled mid-monologue. "She never thought of herself as just an actress," Chloe said, warming to her subject. "She was a fixer, an archivist, and a prankster. She'd send the crew on wild goose chases, then bake them cinnamon rolls as an apology."

Finn watched the way the students leaned in, notebooks forgotten, as Chloe riffed on the art and the mystery. She didn't need to embellish—the truth was strange enough. Still, every few minutes, she looked his way, making sure he was there to anchor the story.

One of the students, a senior with an entire constellation of facial piercings, asked, "What's with the sourdough starter? Wasn't it, like, one of the clues?"

Chloe gestured grandly to the glass case behind the counter, where the century-old starter lived in state. "Behold, the living record of Duck Creek Village. Legend says it's been passed down since the 1920s. If you listen close, you can hear it bubble."

Morgan leaned in close, squinting through the glass. "Did you ever get any... like... weird bread visions from it?"

The question lingered in the air, a momentary hush settling over the group. Finn and Chloe caught each other's eye, and for a moment neither spoke. Finn cleared his throat. "Sometimes you get a flash," he said, "if you're tired enough. Or if you're open to it."

Chloe, deadpan: "If you see anything, let us know. It's usually more fun than scary."

A ripple of laughter. Brandi, sliding by with a tray of sparkling cider, muttered, "It's the wild yeast. Gets in your head."

The group, refueled and newly intrigued, spent the next half hour combing through the display. Brandi answered the practical questions—about the bakery, the building, the way the kitchen layout hadn't changed since 1961. Finn fielded anything involving hiking, maps, or the practicalities of surviving a night on the mountain. But it was Chloe who handled the heart of the story, weaving fact and memory and what

she called “cinematic logic” until every head at the table was nodding along.

When the tour was done, Brandi corralled them at the door. “Next time, you bring your own story,” she said. “We’ll add it to the wall.”

Finn and Chloe waved the group out, watched them amble up the road toward the next stop on the tour—Powell Point, or maybe the old ranger station. As soon as they were out of earshot, Finn let out a long, low exhale.

“You’re really good at that,” he said.

Chloe looked at him, a little surprised. “What, talking?”

“Making them believe in it.”

She shrugged. “What’s the point of history if you can’t make it stick?”

He nodded, silent for a moment. Then: “Did you see the way Morgan looked at the starter?”

Chloe grinned, wicked. “Think they’ll be the next victim?”

“Or the next hero.”

They stood together on the bakery steps, the day as clear and cold as any in memory. Down the road, the group’s laughter faded into the hum of the mountain, and Brandi’s bakery bell chimed behind them, calling the village to the next round.

Finn glanced at Chloe, who was already scribbling something into her battered notebook.

“Ready for the next act?” he asked.

She smiled, all sunlight and mischief. “You know it.”

They headed off, not quite side by side, but close enough that a sharp-eyed observer could see the space between them shrinking with every step.

The trailhead for Twisted Forest was less dramatic than the brochures promised. No archway, no big sign—just a weathered post and a hand-painted arrow pointing up a zigzag in the snowless duff. But there was a kind of hush here that even the students noticed: a shift from caffeine and small-town chatter to the low, living quiet of the woods.

Finn led the way, boots leaving crisp tracks in the damp needles, the trail climbing gently at first before steepening just enough to force the group into single file. The air tasted of thaw and old resin, with the occasional splash of something floral when a breeze hit the aspens just right. The whole slope was waking up, last year's needles pressed flat to the ground and the first shoots of grass poking through in clusters.

The students, chattier at the start, quieted as the grade increased. Finn heard their footfalls, uneven at first but then settling into the rhythm only found on a real hike. Chloe hung back at the end, making sure no one lost the path; every so often, Finn glanced over his shoulder to find her walking backward, snapping photos of the group, her scarf trailing like a banner.

He paused at a curve where the view opened—below, the village in miniature, the new roofs catching sun, the bakery's sign a mere suggestion at this distance. He pointed out a pair of Steller's jays fighting over something in the brush, and the group gathered, breathless but curious.

"Those are the loud ones, right?" asked Morgan.

"Loud and smart," Finn confirmed. "They'll imitate a hawk to clear the trail. Not much for subtlety."

One of the students, a guy with curly hair and a patched jacket, said, "Kind of like the town?"

Finn smiled. "Duck Creek doesn't do secrets. Not for long, anyway."

They continued up, the switchbacks getting tighter. In a hollow where the sun only touched after noon, Finn stopped again—this time for the tree. The ponderosa had been struck by lightning years before, the trunk blackened in a stripe that ran from crown to roots. The wound was still raw at the edges, pale wood against the deep red of the bark. He felt the group gather behind him, their breathing slowing as the hush closed in.

Chloe came up, camera in hand. "This is it," she said. "Where he found the canister."

The group crowded close, a little uncertain at first, then emboldened by proximity. They circled the tree, someone touching the burnt wood with two fingers, another crouching to look for the hollow. Finn stood back, letting them make their own discoveries.

Morgan, face pressed to the split in the bark, called, "Can you still see the space where it was?"

Finn nodded. "It's still there, but we leave it be now. The canister did what it needed to do."

Chloe joined Finn, shoulder to his, and together they watched as the students took their pictures and notes, the patch of ground transformed by a year's worth of story.

He noticed, then, what the others had missed: a scatter of fresh green at the base of the burn, little fans of needle pushing through the char. New shoots, bright and almost defiant.

Chloe saw it too. She knelt, balanced on her toes, and brushed the needles with a careful finger. "Rebirth," she whispered.

Finn said, "Doesn't waste any time, does it?"

Chloe looked up at him, eyes glinting. "Neither do you."

He shrugged, a little embarrassed. "You see it everywhere if you look."

They lingered, letting the students do their thing. The air shifted, warmer now, and above them the branches creaked in a way that made the whole tree seem alive, not wounded.

A student asked, "Did you ever think of taking the whole tree down? Preserving it or something?"

Finn shook his head. "It's not ours to take. That's the whole point. It stays, and it changes, and so do we."

Chloe smiled at that, brushing a line of dust off her camera lens. She let the group crowd around the base, a few of them climbing up onto the fallen limbs for a better angle. For a few minutes, the tree was as much a classroom as any lecture hall.

When the photos were done, the notebooks full, the group gathered again. Chloe fielded the last of the questions—about the "hike of doom," about whether the sourdough starter could be traced genetically to Evelyn's kitchen, about if the stories ever felt bigger than they were.

Chloe answered honestly. "They were always bigger. That's the fun of it."

Finn caught her eye, and for a second, the hush was just theirs. He realized how much of the last year had been like this—small moments

stacked on each other, each more surprising than the last, but all leading here.

He touched the blackened trunk, feeling the warmth of the sun in the bark. "You know," he said to Chloe, keeping his voice low, "I always thought the mountain would just... stay broken. Like the fire would never stop burning."

Chloe put her hand on his, fingers cool and light. "But it doesn't."

He nodded, watching the students gather their packs, eyes still wide with the novelty of it all. "No. It really doesn't."

They watched as the group started back down the trail, laughter and talk starting up again as the path leveled out. Finn and Chloe lingered, not quite ready to leave.

She looked at him, smile crooked. "It's like the mountain is healing itself."

"Just like the village," Finn said.

They let the quiet fill the space between them, the sun warm on their backs and the promise of green already working its way up from the dark.

When they finally turned to go, Finn glanced back at the tree, at the scar and the new shoots. For the first time, he didn't see what was lost. He saw what was coming back.

He took Chloe's hand—no pretense this time, just a simple, honest hold—and together they followed the group down the trail, every step lighter than the one before.

That night, the bakery felt less like a business and more like the living room of a mountain commune—if such a thing could pull off twinkle lights and hand-thrown pottery mugs. Brandi had done her magic again: every table dragged end-to-end into a single, meandering line, the surface crowded with hand-labeled jars of pickled things, local honey, and loaves of bread stacked like bricks in a hearth. The walls flickered with the glow of mismatched mason jars, each holding a trembling candle stub. The regular chairs were joined by whatever the neighbors had in their garages: paint-spattered folding chairs, a pair of deck reclin-

ers, one dining room bench that still had a tangle of Christmas garland stapled to the back.

The guests were half the village, most of them in thrift-store “costume” as a tribute to Evelyn’s era. Chloe spotted a half-dozen swing dresses, three wool suits with crooked ties, and, on Mrs. Durnell, a full set of fur-trimmed gloves and a matching pillbox hat. She laughed so loud the room turned, and Mrs. Durnell winked at her across the table.

Randy, manning the drinks, had outdone himself. The “Starlet’s Shadow” blend steamed in carafes at every table, and if you didn’t want coffee, there was the punch bowl, currently bubbling with something red and suspiciously fizzy. Finn ladled himself a cup, tasted, and coughed once. “That’ll wake you up,” he said to Chloe, eyes watering.

At the far end, Brandi was doing her own theater, slicing bread with a practiced flick, stacking slices into woven baskets, then passing them down the line. She was all in tonight, hair up in a swirl and an apron that sported a starched collar, a vintage brooch, and—at Finn’s request—three safety pins for emergencies.

Chloe drifted toward the main table, where Eleanor from the archives had already set up shop, her notepad open and a line of pencil stubs organized by length. She motioned Chloe over. “Sit, sit,” she said, “before the good seats are gone.”

Chloe scanned the table and spotted Finn at the other end, deep in conversation with Elias. Elias looked even more out of place than usual, in a sweater vest and slacks that had clearly never seen a washing machine. He spoke quietly, but when he leaned back to laugh at something Finn said, his smile was huge and toothy, a field of white in the glow.

Chloe settled in next to Eleanor, who whispered, “Did you see the bread? She used a new scoring pattern.”

Chloe shook her head, intrigued.

“It’s a star,” Eleanor said. “Evelyn used to doodle them everywhere—scripts, phone books, even on the wall of the powder room at the old lodge. Brandi said she wanted it to look like the kind of bread you’d bake for someone you loved.”

Chloe felt something hitch in her throat, but she swallowed it down and poured herself a splash of the punch.

When Brandi brought out the commemorative loaf, the room fell silent for the first time all night. It was enormous—easily twice the size of the usual, the crust a deep, shiny brown with five precise arms of a star slashed across the top. She carried it on a cutting board like a relic, and when she set it on the main table, she raised the bread knife overhead.

“This is for Evelyn,” Brandi said. “And for everyone who fought for this place. And for anyone who wants to believe in stories.”

A murmur of agreement, then a little applause.

She sliced, and the loaf crackled as if it was alive. The aroma—warm, tangy, sharp with the edge of wild yeast—spread instantly, and conversation died again as everyone leaned in, noses twitching.

Brandi made a show of ferrying the first two slices to Finn and Chloe, one for each. She set them down with a bow.

“Thanks, Boss,” Chloe said, but Brandi just beamed and moved on.

The rest of the room sprang back to life, the bread vanishing slice by slice. At the table, Finn and Elias traded stories—Finn about the “bread vision” rumors, Elias about old trail signs Evelyn had supposedly carved herself. Eleanor took notes, interjecting questions with the precision of a deposition.

Chloe watched, then turned her attention to the bread. The slice was still warm, and when she tore it in half, the crumb opened up in a honeycomb, steam curling off in faint blue threads. She took a bite.

The flavor landed like memory: sour, yes, but rounded, threaded with something floral and faintly citrusy. It was both new and utterly familiar.

Finn caught her eye from down the table and raised his slice in salute.

Chloe took another bite, slower this time, letting the taste fill her head.

She blinked, and for a moment—just a moment—the room went double. The lights smeared, the laughter and clatter muted. It wasn’t like the first time, no shock or jolt, just a slow shift, like stepping onto an old movie set where everything was a little too bright and every voice echoed. She saw herself, Finn, even Brandi, but younger—ghosted into

the edges of the scene, all of them replaying the year's stories over and over.

Then it was gone. The table snapped back into focus, and the only thing that lingered was the taste of the bread and the warm brush of Finn's fingers as they both reached for the same stick of butter.

Their hands touched, Finn's callused thumb over hers. For a second, everything else faded.

He leaned in, voice low, "Did you get it too?"

Chloe nodded. "Less like a vision. More like... *déjà vu*."

"Yeah," Finn said, and let go, but the space between their hands stayed small.

Brandi, seeing them side by side, grinned from across the room. "Make a wish," she called, and half the guests picked up the cue, closing their eyes and blowing on imaginary candles.

Chloe laughed, and the sound was clear and high, cutting through every other voice in the bakery.

Around her, the villagers talked and ate and argued about whether the new loaf was truly better than the old. Brandi served the last of the punch, Randy put on a record, and someone even dragged the Christmas bench into the middle of the room for a group photo.

Chloe watched it all, then glanced at Finn, who was still looking at her, still half-smiling in that lopsided way that made her want to grab his hand and pull him into the next year, and the next, and the next.

She closed her eyes, just for a second, and let the bread and the warmth and the story settle in her chest.

Then she opened them and reached for another slice.

They tasted the bread together, and it was as if the whole room dimmed, the lanterns and chatter receding until only the table and their joined hands remained in the light.

Finn felt it before he saw it: the old, remembered warmth of the starter blooming somewhere behind his eyes, threading out into every limb. This time, though, there was no rush of cold or snap of panic. The vision took him gently, as if the yeast itself wanted him to linger.

He was standing on Powell Point, the wind cold but somehow not unpleasant. The sky was painted with the last of the day, a blue so deep it felt like looking up from the bottom of a well. And there, seated on the edge of the overlook, was Evelyn herself—not the starlet from the reels, but an old woman, hair silver and wild, wrapped in a patched coat and a blanket.

She did not turn when Finn approached. Instead, she gazed out over the spread of Duck Creek Village, the lights coming on one by one as dusk settled. Her hands—gnarled, strong—rested on her knees, and every so often she would flex her fingers, like she was kneading invisible dough.

Chloe was there, too. She knelt beside Evelyn, then looked back at Finn and smiled. No shock, no fear. She patted the stone next to her, and Finn joined them, the three of them staring out over the world Evelyn had chosen to guard.

The vision shifted. Time ran backward, then forward, skipping through decades in flares of color and scent: Evelyn, young and fierce, loading a battered pickup with sacks of flour and bundles of wild sage; her hands leaving packets of herbs and handwritten notes at cabin doors during the whooping cough epidemic; the middle years, where she marked the safe way up the mountain with secret cairns, a code only the children of the village learned to read.

Another leap in time: a night blizzard, the wind screaming, and a flashlight beam wobbling through the trees. Evelyn was guiding someone—a child, lost and cold, half-frozen but stubborn. The child's hand was gripped in hers, and when they burst into the safety of a ranger station, the faces inside split into tears and shouts of relief. The child, Finn realized, was a much younger Elias.

Back on the Point, Evelyn finally turned to look at them, her eyes as sharp as they'd been in every story, but softer now. She smiled, and for a second Finn felt the weight of all her choices: the stage names and the disappearances, the vanished reels, the rumors and the real kindness she had left behind.

Then she was gone.

The sound of the bakery swept in, loud and bright, a wave of voices and the clink of mugs. Finn blinked, then saw Chloe blinking too, both

of them jolted into the present at the same instant. Their hands still touched, fingers tangled in the butter wrapper.

Only one person had noticed: Elias, who sat quietly across the table, watching them with the calm of someone who knew how stories worked.

He leaned forward. "You saw her, didn't you?"

Chloe nodded, her voice low. "She was on the Point. Watching over the village. She looked so... happy."

Elias looked at Finn. "And you?"

Finn cleared his throat. "She saved you. As a kid, in a storm."

Elias nodded. "She saved a lot of people." His voice was quiet, but his eyes shone. "Most never knew it was her."

They sat like that for a moment, the three of them holding the silence as if it were a living thing.

Then Finn said, "She chose to be a ghost in her own story. Not for the fame, but for the mountain."

Elias smiled. "Some guardians work best unseen."

Chloe, still staring at the crust of her bread, said, "We should do something with the journals. All her notes, the bread formulas, the sketches. Maybe a documentary." She looked at Finn, then at Elias. "If you're willing to help."

Finn nodded, but felt a deeper urge—a sense that the mountain, or maybe Evelyn herself, was nudging him toward something bigger. "Let's go to all the places," he said. "The ones she marked in the journals. The old bakery, the stage sets, the Point. Every spot that mattered."

Chloe grinned, her old fire back. "A pilgrimage."

Elias raised his coffee. "And a feast, at every stop."

The night stretched on. The villagers drifted from table to table, laughter rising and falling like the tide. Chloe sketched out ideas in her notebook; Finn borrowed Elias's map and started circling spots. Brandi brought a second loaf, and the kids—wound up on sugar and legend—ran laps around the tables, arguing about who would play Evelyn in the movie version.

It grew late, the bakery finally winding down. Most of the guests trickled out, but Finn, Chloe, Elias, and a few others lingered, letting

the quiet settle in, the glow of the last lanterns and the smell of fresh bread filling up the dark.

At the end of the night, as Finn and Chloe stepped outside, the mountain air was cold and perfectly clear. Above them, the stars crowded close, and the lights of Duck Creek Village winked from every window.

Chloe wrapped her scarf tighter, then bumped Finn's shoulder with hers. "You think she's really out there, watching?"

Finn thought about Powell Point, the cold wind, the silver hair shining in the sunset. He thought about the bread, and the visions, and all the small ways the mountain had called to them over the year.

He nodded. "She's part of the place now. Like the yeast. Like the trail."

They walked home together, boots crunching the old snow, the sky so bright it cast their shadows in silver.

As they neared the end of the road, a breeze swept down from the ridge, carrying the scent of pine, smoke, and something sweet and impossible to name.

Finn smiled, and Chloe laughed, and the mountain—softly, contentedly—listened on.

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about the author

Don Jones is a multi-award-winning author of fantasy, science-fiction, cozy mysteries, and cozy fantasies. After a career in tech, numerous positions at tech startups, and more than sixty published tech books (the ones they seemed to sell by the pound, back in the day), Don left it all behind and started writing down the stories that had been banging around in his head. The result is more than two-dozen novels—with more every year—that have received rave reviews and numerous industry awards. Today, Don writes primarily from a cabin near Duck Creek Village, UT, diligently overseen by a Goldendoodle named Corentin.

