The Easy Loop

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CHAPTER 1

It Said Easy

The burrito came before she had ordered it. A tall freckled woman with flour to the elbows set it down at Marnie's place at the counter, smothered to the rim of the plate in green chile, put a mug of black coffee beside it and stood back with a spatula in her hand, as if to see whether it would take.

"Dot's," she said.

Behind the register, a short woman with a silver-streaked bun had stopped counting the till to look. "She's got the forehead."

"She's got the chin, Celia."

"The chin's from her mother's side."

"You never met her mother."

Marnie thanked them both. As far as she knew, nobody at the Assay Office had been told who she was; she had come in at seven only because the flat over the shop held nothing to eat but a jar of instant coffee so old it had set into a single solid object.

She had come up the night before, five and a half hours from Denver, and had stopped twice on the outside stair to Dot's flat with her duffel, one hand on the rail, breathing air that was present at eighty-five hundred feet in the technical sense and doing very little else. The porch light at the top was dead. By the light of her phone she found the lock, and later, looking for a glass in the cupboard above the two-burner stove, she found instead, penciled on the

inside of the door in small square capitals, LEFT BURNER LIES. She read it twice. Then she shut the cupboard, drank from the tap out of her cupped hand and went to bed in her clothes.

"What's on today?" Junie asked.

"The broker, at two." Marnie turned her phone face-up on the counter, the app already open to the trails near town, each a colored line on Pinyon's shaded relief, the shading her team's. "I thought I'd walk first. Keeler Creek's the closest one marked easy."

"Loop's closed," Celia said.

"It's open." Junie aimed the spatula at the front window, as if the trail were out on the porch with the hummingbirds. "They moved it."

"They moved it last summer, and then they closed it for the—"

"Two summers ago, Celia. The fire was three."

"I know when the fire was."

One of the hummingbirds went past the glass with a thin metallic trill, and the two of them let the trail go unsettled, with the ease of people who had been settling things between them for decades and saw no need to finish now. Marnie kept the part she wanted, which was open.

"Walt'll be on the bench at ten," Junie said. "Out front of the shop."

"For his coffee." Celia shut the till. "Dot gave him a cup every morning since ninety-eight."

"Since before that, Celia. Ninety-eight was the key."

It was an instruction, Marnie understood, in the register of the postscripts on Dot's birthday cards. "I'll do the easy loop," she said, "and be back by noon. I have a two o'clock with the broker."

Neither of them answered that. Celia rang something into the register without asking for money, and Marnie ate the burrito, all of it, which she had not planned on either.

The plan had two verbs in it, sell and go, with a summer of clearing in front of them: Dot's stock boxed and priced, the flat emptied, the building handed to a broker in Montrose named Gwen Haldane, whose emails used periods like a woman who meant them. After that came Denver and her desk at Pinyon, and the life she had arranged since Graham so that nothing in it was loud. In four years he had never once raised his voice to her. What he had said instead, kindly and often, was "You're a lot, Marn," the way someone tells you your tag

is showing, and though she had left him eighteen months ago she still reached back to check. She had been here once before, for a week when she was eleven, reading in the back room of the shop while the lake did whatever it did outside, and she saw no reason to be louder about it now.

* * *

At ten past nine she stood at the Keeler Creek trailhead in white sneakers and a cardigan, with one liter of water, and read the burn.

It read like a page. Black snags stood in their thousands up the south-facing slope, sparser there than across the creek because south aspects burn hotter and come back slower, and the ground between them was gray ash gone to crust, pricked all over with the green shoots of fireweed. Along the creek the aspen had come back first from roots the fire never reached, suckers waist-high and so thick they looked planted. Where the fire had made its run she could see a long tongue of total kill climbing out of the drainage toward the ridge, and below it the raw gray channels where the slope had come down afterward in the rain, wider in person than they had been on her screen.

On her phone the Loop was 4.2 miles, easy, in a small green label she had once argued for in a design meeting. For the first mile the ground agreed. At a mile and a tenth the first junction came exactly where the blue line met a brown post, and she felt the small private satisfaction she always felt when the field matched the data. Twice the air did what it had done on Dot's stair, and both times she stopped and read the slope while she breathed, which she decided counted as resting.

Above the second junction the trail did something she did not like. The blue line ran straight on up the drainage, along an old grade she could follow by eye for a hundred yards as a faint level shelf in the ash before it vanished into a heap of fallen snags. To her left, a beaten path bent hard to the north and began to switchback up the slope, past a short brown post whose arrow the fireweed had half grown over. For a while she stood between them. The switchbacks climbed steeply toward nothing the map showed; the blue line went where the map said the Loop went; and she had spent eight years making it possible for strangers to trust a blue line on a screen over their own guesswork. She followed the line, because she trusted lines.

* * *

By half past eleven the shelf had run out, and so had any argument that it was a trail.

She was in the deadfall the line ran into, snags down across one another in a heap as high as her shoulder, so that she went over each one on her hands and knees and came down the far side with ash in the cuffs of her linen pants. Past the deadfall it went on into a gully, a raw-sided debris channel twelve feet deep with boulders the size of washing machines on its floor, and on its lip, with her phone held out over the drop, she finally did what she would have told anyone else to do first and zoomed in on the data stamp in the corner of the screen.

Pinyon Geospatial, 2022.

She knew the tile. Her team had built it from Pinyon's 2022 field data, and at her own desk, on an afternoon she remembered mainly because the coffee machine on four was broken, she had signed off on it herself. The next July the fire came through. In the summer after that, this slope came down in the rain and took the old tread with it, a debris flow she knew personally, since in the fall of 2024 she had mapped its channel from the county's lidar for the Keeler hazard map, in a folder nowhere near the trail tile, which she had never once thought to open beside it.

There was, standing there, a great deal to admire in how thorough it was. The map that had lost her carried her company's name on it and her initials in its metadata, and she had managed, on her first morning in a town where she meant to be no trouble to anybody, to get lost on a trail her own signature said was easy. Even if Denver never heard, she would know, and she was the person in the office who sent the polite emails about other people's metadata.

Going back would have been sensible, so she tried it, and found that from the far side the deadfall looked like a different deadfall and the shelf had gone into the ash behind her like a pencil line rubbed out. By definition a loop came back on itself; the Loop crossed Keeler Creek lower down, and the creek lay somewhere below her to the south, so she went down to find it. The descent undid her. Asked in thirty-two years for nothing harder than stairs and the occasional escalator, her legs had no view on a forty-percent slope of loose ash except to shake, and she went down it sideways, grabbing at snags that came away in her hands. Near the bottom her right foot went out from under her,

she slid, and the broken end of a downed snag opened her shin from below the knee nearly to the ankle.

She sat in the ash and looked at it. Long and shallow and packed with black grit, it bled in a businesslike way that she found, on reflection, she respected. Two-thirds of a liter of water was left; from then on she allowed herself two swallows on the hour and none between, and the phone that kept her honest about the hour also told her the battery was going faster than the water.

The drainage was wrong, too. Standing, she could see that the trickle in the bottom of it ran north, which put her in a side gully, with Keeler Creek somewhere beyond the next rib. By two o'clock thunderheads were building over the ridge, tall and flat-bottomed, their bases going gray while she watched. She climbed the rib anyway, for the signal, and at a quarter past three, from the top of a spine of bare rock and ash with one bar flickering in the corner of the screen, she called 911.

"Mears County 911. What's the address of your emergency?"

"I don't have an address. I have coordinates." She read them the way she would have wanted them read to her, digit by digit. "UTM, zone thirteen S. Two seven one four eight eight, east. Four one nine three six zero two, north. I was on the Keeler Creek Loop. I'm in the burn above it."

The dispatcher read them back, and had them right. Name, injuries, water, battery: she gave him her name, her shin, a little over a third of a liter and nineteen percent.

"Okay, Marnie. I'm paging search and rescue now. I need you to stay where you are. Can you do that?"

"Yes," she said, because it was the only answer on the form.

* * *

The lightning came over the ridge at twenty to four, and it walked.

She counted the gap between each flash and its thunder, because a number was a thing she knew how to handle, and in five minutes it went from twenty-one seconds to eight. The rib was bare, which was why it had a bar of signal on it, and which was also why, she understood all at once, she was the tallest thing on it. From enough trailhead maps of her own she knew the lightning warning by heart: get down off the high ground. Nowhere on those maps did it say what to do when a dispatcher had just told you to stay where you were.

She decided in about the time it took the next one to land. With burned sticks from the snags she laid out an arrow on the gray ash, black on gray, three feet long, its point aimed down into the drainage, and she stood back and checked it the way she would have checked a north arrow on a draft, and made the head bigger. Then she went down off the rib into the side gully while the thunder came so close behind the flashes that she stopped counting.

The rain came at half past four, cold and full of hail the size of lentils, and kept on long after the lightning had moved off east. Her cardigan soaked through in a minute and went on getting heavier for an hour. At ten past five the phone, which had been holding at three percent with what she could only call courage, went black in her hand, and she put it in her pocket anyway.

Under a snag that had fallen against a boulder and stopped there, leaning, she made herself a place. She kicked the hail out of the dry patch beneath it, broke off the low stubs that would have been in her back, and sat with her knees up and her arms pulled inside the cardigan against her ribs. Somewhere in the deadfall her heels had blistered, and somewhere on the descent the blisters had torn, and every time she moved her feet the sneakers reminded her.

"Okay," she said aloud. It came out strange, the first thing she had said since the dispatcher. "Here's where we are."

She said the rest in full sentences, the way she would have briefed somebody junior on a tile with problems. "We are maybe three hundred meters from the coordinates we gave, which is on us, but for a good reason. We have a third of a liter of water, which we are not going to drink because we're bored. The phone is dead. The pants were a choice." She looked at her shin, at the grit packed into it under the dried blood. "If anybody asks, the pants were a choice."

The light went yellow and then gray. Some time after seven, by her guess, she said, "Nobody's coming up here in the dark," and then, because she had made maps for people whose entire job was coming up there in the dark, "That's not true. That's the one thing they do." When the light was nearly gone she said, "If you die out here, Kessler, it will be on an easy loop, and somebody at Pinyon will have to write the email." She heard how it sounded in the gully. "No," she told the snag, as if that settled it, and pulled her knees in tighter.

* * *

At ten to nine, with the light gone the color of the ash, somebody called her name.

It came from up the gully, the way she had come, and then again, nearer: "Marnie Kessler." A light swung through the snags, white and steady, and behind it a man in a red jacket came down through the deadfall at a pace the deadfall did not change, with a radio in a harness on his chest.

She stood. Her legs took a second to agree to it. "Here. I'm here. Hi."

He reached her, ran the headlamp over her from her hair to her sneakers with the beam angled down out of her eyes, and keyed the radio. "Mears Base, Vigil. I have her. She's walking."

A woman's voice answered, short and level, and he let go of the key.

"You moved," he said.

"There was lightning." Her voice came out reasonable, the voice she used in meetings to explain a choice before anybody could call it a mistake. "I was the tallest thing on the rib."

He went still. It lasted about a second: the headlamp held on some point past her shoulder, his hand stayed where it was on the radio, and what she could see of his face under the light gave her nothing she could read. Then he said, "You were right to," and the beam came back to her.

"I left an arrow."

"I saw it." He was already swinging his pack down. In the spill of the light she could see that he was tall and going gray early at the temples, and not breathing hard, which seemed unfair.

"Is it just you?" she asked. "Is this the search?"

"This is the search." He held out a bar with the wrapper torn back. "Eat that."

She ate it, and would never tell Junie it was better than the burrito. He poured something hot from a thermos into its cup, tea with a great deal of sugar in it, and watched her drink all of it, and then took her wet cardigan off her and zipped her into a down jacket from his pack that came to the middle of her thighs. "Touch your thumb to each finger," he said, and she did it, clumsily, twice.

"I was on the easy loop," she said. "I'd like that on the record. It's signed easy. It's a loop."

"It's been rerouted past the second junction." He was rolling her pant leg up over the shin. "Two years now."

"Who reroutes a trail and doesn't tell anybody?"

"Forest Service. They put up a post."

She had seen the post, and did not say so.

"Whose map?" he asked.

"Mine." It sounded worse out loud than it had in her head, so she made it more accurate, which made it worse. "My company's."

He looked at her for a moment across the beam. "Okay, Loop."

With a squeeze bottle he washed out the shin until the grit ran off in the light, then dressed it and wrapped it from the knee down. After that he took off her sneakers and her socks. Both heels were raw where the blisters had torn; he looked at them for a moment, then cut a length of tape, and cut that into strips, and rounded every corner of every strip with the scissors so it wouldn't catch and peel, and laid them on one at a time, smoothing each down with his thumb before he cut the next. His hands were big and square and scarred across the knuckles, with a band of old white scar across the back of the left one, and they did one thing at a time and finished it before they began another. For a while she only watched them, because they were the steadiest thing she had seen all day, and because she was waiting.

He said nothing about the sneakers, or the cardigan, or the one liter of water, and each time his hand went back to the tape she braced a little for it, and it did not come.

* * *

At a quarter past nine they started out, and ten minutes later the dog found them: a black-and-white border collie who came down the trail with her nose low and her tail flagging, looked Marnie over with one brown eye and one blue one in the headlamp, and went straight back up to report.

Her people came down behind her, a tall man with a red beard and an orange vest who was laughing already, and a compact woman with a sun-bleached braid and forearms like a rower's, who put out her hand. "Sunny," she said. "That's Tuck. That's Pistol. She found you."

"He found me."

"Pistol found Owen finding you," Tuck said. "It counts."

They went out together on the reroute, the real one, up the north side and over and down in long switchbacks that Marnie felt in her taped heels at every turn. Owen walked in front of her. On the descents she went sideways, one careful step at a time, and he went exactly as slowly, his light on the ground just ahead of her feet and never on his own, without once turning in a way that would have let her see him wait. By the third switchback she had noticed. He never mentioned it.

At the brown post with the fireweed over its arrow, Tuck asked how she had ended up all the way over in that side gully, and she heard herself say, "It said easy."

Sunny laughed. It was a real laugh, loud, and it went off down the switchbacks into the dark, and Marnie stood there with the odd feeling of having let out something she usually kept behind her teeth, not yet sure whether she wanted it back. Ahead of her, Owen looked over his shoulder once, for about as long as it took to see that she was upright.

The trailhead, at twenty to eleven, was full of headlights.

A sheriff's SUV sat crossways at the mouth of the lot with its light bar going, red and blue over the snags, and a small woman in a deputy's uniform, a dark braid pinned up under her cap and sunglasses hooked on her collar at going on eleven at night, came around the front of it with a notebook.

"Subject located," she said to Owen. "Subject ambulatory. Team lead looks like hell."

"Thanks, Rae."

"Name for the report?" That was to Marnie.

"Marnie Kessler."

The pen stopped. "Kessler. Dot's?"

"Her niece."

"Copy." The pen went on. "Subject was last observed at the Assay Office at oh-seven-hundred, advising she'd be back by noon. Subject was off by about eleven hours." She shut the notebook. "I'm his sister. Sit down before you fall down. That part's not for the report."

Junie and Celia had the tailgate of a pickup, a thermos and something in foil.

"It's green," Junie said, putting the foil into Marnie's hands, where it was hot enough to hurt. "Celia made it fresh."

"I warmed it, Junie. It's this morning's."

"It's fresh to her."

Behind them a mail jeep idled, a right-hand-drive one, so that its passenger sat on the side nearest her: a small bent man in a feed-store cap with enormous knuckles hooked over the window frame. The driver leaned across him, cheerful in a postal shirt. "That's Walt. I'm Gil, I'm the mail. I had it at the Mercantile you were walking before Owen was off the radio."

"Bench was cold at ten," Walt said.

She had forgotten him. At ten o'clock, somewhere in the deadfall, she had not once thought of an old man on a bench outside Dot's door, waiting for the cup of coffee that had come out to him every morning for years. He was looking her over now, shin and borrowed jacket and ruined sneakers, and seemed pleased with all of it. "Keeler's gone to muck since the fire," he said. "Worse than a caved drift. You stay off it till somebody walks you up the new grade."

Gwen Haldane had waited. Her white SUV sat at the end of the row with its engine running, and she got out of it with her reading glasses on their chain and her keys already in her hand. "I sat at the shop till four," she said. "Then Celia told me where you'd gone. We'll find a day this week. Ice that leg." She squeezed Marnie's arm once, briskly, the way she might have closed a folder, and got back in.

Every one of them, Marnie understood, standing in the headlights with a burrito burning her hands, had now met the woman from the map company who got lost on the easy loop, and nobody had needed to be told which company, because Gil had told the Mercantile.

Past Celia's shoulder she watched Owen walk down the row of volunteers at the trucks, the red jackets and the orange vests, touching no one, his lips moving. He was counting under his breath. At eleven he stopped, and his shoulders came down about half an inch. She counted them herself after him, because she was the kind of person who checked other people's numbers, and got eleven: eleven people out on a Monday night, for her.

* * *

At twenty past midnight Owen walked her up Dot's outside stair in the dark.

She stopped at the landing as she had the night before, one hand on the rail, and he stopped a step below her and waited, and when she went on he came on

behind her. At the top he looked up at the dead porch light, at the bulb and the green crust around its socket, for a second or two. He said nothing about it.

"Water," he said at the door. "Ice on the shin."

"Okay."

"Okay." He went down the stair without a light, quietly, and after a minute she heard a truck start in the street and pull away.

Inside, with her shin throbbing under the wrap, she sat down at Dot's kitchen table and opened her laptop. The county's bare-earth lidar was where it had been since October 2024, in the folder with the hazard map, and with the hillshade lit low from the northwest she found the reroute in about a minute: a faint zigzag of cuts up the north side of the drainage, caught by the laser four months after the trail crew built it. She had walked every one of those switchbacks tonight behind his light. Vertex by vertex she drew them in, then deleted the segment that ran straight up the drainage into the deadfall and the gully.

In the correction ticket she wrote: Keeler Creek Loop, regional trail tile. Reroute above second junction, built summer 2024, not reflected; current line runs into deadfall and a debris-flow channel. Corrected geometry attached. Original sign-off M. Kessler. She looked at the last line for a while, left it in, and pressed send.

Then, because it was still Dot's kitchen, she got up and tried the left burner. She turned the knob to LOW. The burner caught with a soft thump and came up in a full blue ring, as high as it would go, and when she turned the knob to HIGH it sank to a rim of flame so small she had to bend down to see that it was there at all.

Written to order at crispybooks.xyz

CHAPTER 2

Porch Light

The old socket came out of the fixture in two pieces, and the green crust on it came off on his fingers.

Owen wiped them on his pants. Behind the door at his knee nothing moved. At twenty to six on Tuesday morning Main Street was empty below the landing, and the lake at the west end of it lay flat and gray in the first light. He had slept three hours, which was enough for a light fixture.

His voltage tester stayed quiet against the bare wires. Whatever switch ran the light was off inside the flat, where Marnie Kessler had probably tried it twice last night and quit. He cut the ends back to bright copper, twisted them onto a new porcelain socket and seated it, then put in a bulb from the box of spares in his back room. Folding the ladder made more noise than the job had. On the way down he kept his feet to the outside edge of each tread, where the old boards didn't creak.

At five fifty-five the urn went on. He unlocked the door at six under his father's painted sign, MAPS · LICENSES · COFFEE AT SIX, and two fishermen from Amarillo were already on the step with their rods broken down and their breath showing.

By a quarter past he had seven in the shop. The fishermen wanted licenses and the lake temperature. A couple in matching rain shells wanted to know whether the Keeler road was open past the trailhead; it was. In the corner a

college kid with an overnight pack paid for his coffee in quarters and drank it at the window with both hands on the cup. He hadn't eaten, and it showed in how still he stood. Owen set a granola bar beside the kid's change and didn't ring it up, and when the kid looked at it, Owen was already looking at the next customer.

His phone lay face-up on the counter by the register with the ringer on. At twenty past seven it rang, a woman in Ridgway asking whether he had waders in a women's nine, and he picked up before the second ring. He answered every call that way, however busy the counter was, and none went to voicemail.

At ten Walt Hendry was on the bench outside Dot's with his cap pulled down and his hands folded on one knee, and nothing in them. Owen poured a cup black, put a lid on it and carried it across the street. Walt took it in both of his big-knuckled hands.

"Cage hasn't come up," Walt said, and tipped the lid at the green door.

Up the stair the new bulb sat dark in its socket in the daylight. From across the street nobody could have told it was new. Owen went back to his register.

* * *

Marnie came in at eleven with his jacket folded into a square, the sleeves tucked under, and set it on the counter with both hands.

Her white sneakers had their backs crushed down under her heels, because of the tape. Below a pair of gray shorts the right shin was bare, nothing touching the long scab. It was mending the way it should: dry and dark, with no heat in the skin around it and no red line running up from it.

"I didn't have it cleaned," she said. "My plan was to tell you I had, and then I remembered there's no cleaner. So I hung it in the window all night, and now it smells like Dot's flat, which is mostly old paper." She pushed her glasses up into her hair with a knuckle, where a black binder clip was already holding most of it. "Sorry. Thank you. That's the part I came to say."

He put the jacket under the counter.

"How much do I owe you? For Monday."

"Nothing."

"There were eleven of you. I heard you count." She had a credit card out already, held flat on the counter under two fingers. "On a Monday. In hail."

"Rescue's free in Colorado."

She looked at him as though he might be making it up for her benefit. Then her eyes went past his shoulder to the license rack and the little printed sign about the CORSAR card, and she read it to the bottom, fine print included, the way Deb read a med list.

"That," she said. "That goes to the search people."

"To the county. For costs."

"Then I'll take the five-year one." She slid the card across. "And boots. Real ones." She looked down at her sneakers, and so did he. "I've been told I'm not a white-shoe person anymore. I'm the one who told me."

He measured her on the Brannock: seven and a half, a little wide across the forefoot. Two pairs came off the wall; he put one back and brought her the brown leather mids and a pair of wool socks. When she sat on the fitting bench, he knelt.

His tape from Monday was still on her heels, the edges curling, the blisters under it flat now. Tape's holding, he could have told her, and didn't. He worked the sock on over it, then the boot, and set her heel back into the cup with the flat of his hand. Lacing from the toe, he pulled each pass snug before he took the next and locked it at the top of the instep with a surgeon's knot. Above the ankle he left the last hooks loose, so the collar wouldn't ride on the bottom end of the scrape.

All the while the scraped shin was between them, an inch from his wrist, and he kept his hands below it. She had stopped talking. It was the first time he'd heard her stop on her own; in the quiet he could hear the cooler hum and the clock over the door, and her breathing, slower than it had been at the counter. When he did the second boot her calf was warm against the inside of his forearm. He finished the knot before he took his arm away. Looking up, he found her studying the boots with great attention, as if there would be a test on them.

"Walk the ramp," he said.

She walked up the little fitting ramp and down it, then up again, slower. At the bottom she stood and looked at her feet.

"Are they supposed to feel like this?"

"Yes."

She waited in case there was more. There wasn't. "Great," she said. "Good. Then I'll wear them out of here like a person."

He rang up the boots, the socks and the card. While he bagged the sneakers she leaned on the counter and asked where the reroute actually went above the second junction, because the Forest Service had put out a map of it drawn, she said, by somebody who had never met a contour line and didn't like her. He took the team's laminated county map from under the counter, the one they used for briefings when the barn printer was down, and slid it across.

"Bring it back," he said.

She held it flat against her chest with both arms. "I'll bring it back."

From behind the register he watched her cross. She stepped off the curb with the right foot and didn't favor it, and somewhere past the center line the hitch went out of the left. At the green door she stopped and looked down at the boots again. Then she went in.

* * *

Wednesday at four she put the map back on his counter, said, "I wrote on it. Sorry. It's only on the laminate, it'll come off with alcohol," and was out the door before he had it turned around.

She had inked the Keeler reroute in a fine black pen, every switchback up the north side above the second junction where it actually was. That much he'd expected. A mile below the Keeler trailhead the county map had always shown a spur road dropping to the creek; she had struck it through and written beside it, in letters smaller than the map's own, No road. Cut bank, willows. Lidar 10/24. On the trail above the north shore she had moved a junction two hundred yards west, with an arrow and the distance. Behind the dam, where the map ran Elk Creek down the south side of the ridge, she had picked the creek up and put it on the north side, where the water went: Drains N. Wrong side of ridge.

He knew all three. A few hundred times he had driven past the spur that wasn't there and never once looked at the map and seen that it said there was; knowing the ground had been enough. Under his thumb her lettering didn't smear.

A man came in for a fishing license and had to ask twice.

* * *

The barn on Thursday night smelled of Lyle's coffee, which smelled of the can. Owen counted fourteen in the folding chairs and Pistol under Tuck's, her nose on her paws and her blue eye on the door.

For the first hour they worked the litter on the barn floor, Sunny calling the rope and Tuck on the wheel with two of the newer members, until the new ones could rig it without looking at each other first. Afterward Deb spread the laminated map on the folding table under the shop lights and brought her reading glasses down off her head.

She studied it for a long time.

Tuck leaned over her shoulder and laughed. "She moved the creek. A whole creek." Under the chair Pistol thumped her tail once, for the laugh. Lyle came over with the pot, filled Owen's cup without asking, and stood looking down at the spur road with his flat pencil in his hand.

"That's been on there since I was teaching," Lyle said. "Thirty years, about." He put the pencil back in his pocket.

Deb took off her glasses.

"You said she was good," she said to Owen. "You don't say things."

She slid the map back across the table to him, ink side down. "Nobody briefs off it till somebody's walked that spur."

Owen drank Lyle's coffee.

At nine they went down the calendar. Sunny had the clipboard and read it out, and at the bottom she said, "And the avy refresher. The fall one. Are we doing it here again, or—"

Deb's eyes went to Owen.

"October," he said. "Who's got the rope cache inventory?"

* * *

A woman from Durango bought a paper map of the Keeler drainage on Friday, then held her phone across the counter to ask whether she'd needed it. "This says somebody fixed it."

On her screen the Pinyon line climbed the north side above the second junction, where the trail went now. Under it a gray note said the route had been updated on June 12, 2026, to reflect the 2024 Forest Service reroute.

"It's right," he said.

"So I didn't need the paper one."

"Take the paper one."

She took it. For the rest of the morning he was pleased, and there was nothing to do about it, which he wasn't used to. Twice he found himself at the front window with no reason to be there.

* * *

Saturday at one he left the counter to the high-school girl who worked his summer weekends and walked down to the Assay Office. On the porch the broad-tails were at the feeders, the males' wings making their thin metal trill past his head. Inside he counted eleven, Rae among them, at the counter in uniform. He took the stool beside her.

"Heard you recovered a cartographer," she said.

His order came. He ate.

"Subject was later observed exiting your place of business in new footwear," Rae said. "Tuesday, eleven forty."

"Gil."

"Gil is one of several witnesses."

Junie came out of the back with flour on her forearms and leaned on the pass-through. "Has he heard about the sign?" she asked Celia.

"Look at him. He hasn't heard."

"She taped it on Dot's door Thursday night—"

"Friday."

"Thursday, Celia. I was closing."

"You were closing Friday. Thursday you were in Montrose with your crown."

Junie let the crown go. "It says the Reading Trail isn't running this summer. Printed, like something from the county."

"Inez has an opinion," Celia said.

"Inez has had it twice," Junie said. "Once at seven and once at the register."

"Friday," Owen said.

Celia looked at Junie. For a while Rae looked at Owen, and then she said, "Copy," and went back to her eggs.

From his counter on Friday evening he had watched her tape the paper up; he hadn't crossed the street to read it.

The summer he was nine he had read his way up Dot's wall. One sentence a book was the rule, said out loud at her counter, and he had been a boy who could manage one sentence and not much more; his pin had a red head and a paper flag with OWEN V. on it in her pencil, and she moved it up the butcher paper one switchback at a time with her thumb. For the one about the kid whose plane goes down in the Canadian woods, he had said, "He crashes and he figures it out." Dot had looked at him over her glasses and said, "And?" and when he said, "They find him," she moved the pin.

On the way back he passed Dot's door. The paper said what Junie had said it said, in tidy print. Past it the shop was dim, and she was on the floor in the middle aisle with a tape gun, her back to the street. He kept walking.

* * *

At two he looked at the ridge out of habit. Clear, nothing building; it was early in the year for that.

At three Milo Pruett came in with his headlamp on, though the shop was bright, and stood at the counter until Owen looked at him.

"Have you ever found a skeleton?"

"No."

"Not even part of one?"

"No."

Milo took that in. He had a buzz cut and a gap where a front tooth had been, and every pocket of his cargo shorts hung heavy. "Walt says there's one in every third adit."

"Walt rounds up."

What Milo wanted was triple-A batteries. He set four rocks on the counter before he found the quarters under them, and Owen counted out the change while the boy put the rocks back, each in the pocket it had come from. On the counter the headlamp's beam had gone yellow. Owen held out his hand for it, opened the battery case, swapped in the new ones and gave it back bright.

Last August Kayla had come into the shop at suppertime, not running yet, and Owen had found the boy forty minutes later out on the dam, squatting over a dead trout at the outlet, two miles from the laundromat by the ditch road. He hadn't cut a single corner. The whole two miles he had kept to the

ditch, because the ditch went somewhere. Owen had filed him then the way he filed everyone he had ever gone looking for: Milo Pruett, seven, follows a line.

"Dot's sign says no Trail," Milo said.

"I saw it."

"I was going to get to the top this year." He switched the headlamp off and on again to check it. "Okay," he said, to nobody in particular, and went out.

At the door he turned left and walked home along the edge of the curb, one foot in front of the other, all the way to the corner.

* * *

He locked up at seven on Sunday and crossed the street.

Through the front window Dot's was boxes. They stood in stacks along the shelves and down the middle aisle, some taped and some open, and the low sun came in over the paper on the door and showed the dust hanging in the air above them. He knocked on the glass beside the sign.

The brass bell went when she opened the door. She had dust in her hair on top of the binder clip and a gray stripe of it down the front of a Pinyon Geospatial fleece, and she was wearing the boots. On the counter behind her lay a sleeve of saltines, open, and nothing else that looked like dinner.

"If somebody's lost," she said, "it isn't me. I haven't been outside since Friday."

He looked at the paper on the glass, then at her.

"The kids will be at the door at ten tomorrow," he said. "Whatever that says."

"It says it's not running."

"Half of them can't read yet."

She almost laughed. Her hand came up, the back of the wrist to her mouth, and stayed there until it passed.

"They've come the third Monday of June since I was five," he said.

"I don't know how to run it." She said it to the boxes. "I don't know what it even is, past a wall and some paper. I've been dusting around that wall for a week like it might be holding the roof up."

"Dot kept the butcher paper behind the register," he said. "The red pins are in the drawer that sticks."

She looked at the register for a while. Then she looked at him.

"Why do you care?"

She asked it straight and waited, the way she had read the CORSAR sign, as if the answer might be useful.

"I can see the door from my counter," he said.

She turned and looked across Main at his shop: the front window, the urn, the counter where he stood every morning at six with her door in plain view. Then she reached past him and peeled the tape off the glass, one corner and then the other, took the sign down, and folded it in half and in half again.

"It's one summer," she said. "Then it's somebody else's problem."

She meant it; he could hear that, and he didn't argue with it.

He had a radio in his jacket pocket, one of the two spare team handhelds from the barn cache, and he set it on the counter beside the saltines.

"Channel six," he said.

She looked at it, then at him.

"Your phone dies. Coverage here is bad."

He went out. Behind him the bell rang over the door, and he crossed the street without looking back to see whether she had picked it up.

* * *

At twenty to ten the house on the north shore was dark except for the kitchen. He had the dishes done, the one chair pushed in at the table and the stove going low against the cold off the lake, and the other radio stood on the counter beside his phone, under the county map.

It clicked.

"Is this how you talk to people?"

He dried his hands, picked it up and keyed it.

"Yes."

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CHAPTER 3

Thirty-One Summers

By five minutes to ten the line ran out the green door, past Walt on his bench and most of the way to the diner, and Marnie, who had stayed up until four drawing the most accurate map of the Calder Point trail ever put on butcher paper, began to suspect that she had studied for the wrong test.

The map hung on the east wall inside the old tape marks, eight feet by four. She had pulled the contours off the county's lidar at forty-foot intervals, sixty-five of them between the Calder Creek trailhead and the lookout, and traced each one in brown pencil, so that all thirty-seven switchbacks sat exactly where the Forest Service had cut them. In one corner sat a north arrow. Under it a scale bar gave the distance in miles and in feet, in case anyone in the program worked in either.

They came in by twos and threes, the small ones hanging on to a parent's hand and the big ones pretending to have come alone, and each took a red pin and a paper flag from her and wrote a name on the flag. By half past ten twenty-six pins stood in a clump at the trailhead, and twenty-six children were looking up at the contours with the courtesy of guests who have been shown a spreadsheet.

"Where's the lake?" asked a girl with a juice mustache.

"This one doesn't start at a lake. It starts up Calder Creek, here, at about eight thousand eight hundred feet."

The girl considered this, and then her mother, who considered the map.

Milo Pruett had his headlamp on, a rock in every pocket of his cargo shorts and a gap where a front tooth had been, and he stood so close to the paper that the beam made a small white moon on switchback nine.

"Where's the marmot?"

"There isn't a marmot."

"Okay." He moved the moon up two switchbacks. "Where's the hidden thing?"

"What hidden thing?"

Three of the older children turned around at that, and a tall girl of about eleven explained to her, with real pity, that there was always a hidden thing.

"Okay," Milo said, and meant it, and went on looking for it anyway, an inch from the paper, one switchback at a time.

When the bell rang again the line, which had not moved for anyone all morning, moved. The woman who came through it was tall and straight-backed, with white hair in a low knot and a cardigan buttoned in June, and she carried a cane the way some men carry an umbrella on a clear day; two fathers in the Westerns aisle stood up straighter. She came to the counter and looked at Marnie across it until Marnie took her glasses off.

"I saved you a chair," the woman said.

Marnie opened her mouth and found nothing in it.

"Inez Salazar." No hand came with the name, and Marnie didn't offer hers.

"Thank you," Marnie said. "I'm sorry."

It was the polite version, and the only one she had in a form that could be said across a counter in front of twenty-six children, and Inez received it the way a teacher receives homework that is three weeks late and in pencil. Then she turned to the east wall. For a long time she looked at the map, and when she spoke it was at a volume meant for the aisles.

"Dorothy drew a mountain," Inez said. "You have drawn a survey."

She sat down on the bench in the corner by Biography, which Marnie had taken for furniture and now understood to be a post, and stayed on it until noon, through the parents' polite questions and the children's polite drift toward the beanbags. On her way out the tall girl stopped at the counter, and because she was a kind child she made it a compliment: it looked like the one at the ranger station.

* * *

Gwen's listing agreement had taken nine minutes to sign at two that afternoon, at Dot's oak desk: four hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars for the building, the flat, the business and the stock, in a sentence that took up a good deal less room than the stock. At ten that night Marnie went back to the same desk to find out what kind of mountain Dorothy had drawn.

The tubes stood in an apple crate under the flat file, thirty-one of them, labeled on strips of masking tape in Dot's small square capitals, 1995 through 2025. She opened them in order, because that was how she opened things.

The first mountain was lopsided, the peak of someone who had looked at a great many mountains and never once at a topographic sheet, with a lake at the bottom and twenty switchbacks numbered up its face. A marmot sat on a rock below the summit with his paws folded. In the trees, if you looked, there was a teakettle. Held up to the lamp, every switchback showed pricked with pinholes, crowds of them low down and a few near the top, and each hole, she worked out, was a book some child had read and then stood at that wall to describe.

She unrolled 1996 over 1995, and 1997 over that. Year by year the marmot moved, onto a log, once into the lake on an inner tube, and the hidden thing changed every summer, a moose in reading glasses, a pair of boots with nobody in them. Dot had drawn the same mountain thirty-one times and it had never once been Calder Point or any other place on earth, which as a cartographic position was indefensible. By 2003 Marnie was weighting the corners with the stapler and was not, she noticed, arguing with any of it.

The 2005 map had been rolled more loosely than the others, around something. When she flattened it she found a pin still through the paper at the summit, its flag pressed flat by two decades in a tube, and on the flag, in the same hand as the masking tape, MARNIE.

She had been eleven. It had been the last week of July, her only week here before this one, and what she remembered of it was the thin air and a lake so cold it had made her shins ache, and the green couch, this couch, where she had read for most of seven days with her feet on the arm. Eleven books. She remembered telling Dot about each of them at this desk, because Dot asked, and listened to the answer, and then asked another question, which nobody else she knew at the time had been in the habit of doing. Of a pin she remembered

nothing; she must have left it at switchback eleven when her father came up to drive her home.

Every other summit on every other map was a mess of holes where the pins had come out at the end of the summer. This one still had its pin in.

Marnie sat on the floor with the 2005 mountain across her knees for a while. At some point she took her glasses off and set them on the flat file; since the room had gone soft at the edges anyway, she put them back on, which didn't help. Around midnight she rolled the other thirty back into their tubes and capped them, left 2005 open under the lamp with the pin where Dot had put it, and went out front to cut a fresh eight feet off the butcher-paper roll behind the register.

By three in the morning the new trail had twenty switchbacks. She had gotten there by merging pairs of the real ones on the lower mountain, which she could live with, because the ridge was still the ridge and the talus lay where the talus actually lay. Sawyer Lake went into the lower left corner, a few miles west of anywhere the trail went; she decided to call that an inset. On the talus a marmot lay on his back with his paws on his stomach. Down near the trailhead, if you looked, a ghost miner with a candle on his hat peered out at the children from a tailings pile.

* * *

With the new map up and twenty-six pins moved across to it, she made Walt's coffee on Tuesday. She brought it out at ten, black, and Walt took it in both hands and looked past her through the window at the wall.

"You put him in the dump," he said.

"In the tailings."

"That's a dump." He drank. "Tailings come off the mill. What you muck out of an adit goes on the dump. Your fella comes out of a drift with a candle, he's not sitting in any tailings." He said it as if she had grown up on a dump herself, and Marnie nodded the way she nodded at the database people in meetings.

"Highgrader, I'd say." He liked the ghost. "Every stope in this county's got one. Dot would've liked him."

She went back in before she could ask what a stope was, or how he knew what Dot would have liked, which was the question she meant.

When the coffee ran out he came inside. She was pricing a box of paperbacks from the shelf Gwen wanted cleared, and he set a knuckle the size of a walnut on the endpaper of the one in her hand. In the top right corner was Dot's penciled price, $4, and after it a small check mark Marnie had been seeing for a week and filing under bookkeeping.

"That one she read," Walt said. "That little tick. Means she read it and you're supposed to ask her about it."

Marnie looked at the check mark.

"Well," Walt said, after a while. "You can ask me. I only read the one fella."

She laughed before she could stop it, a real laugh, louder than the room, and Walt looked enormously pleased with himself, and she put the book back on the shelf instead of in the box. That afternoon she found the tick on something like four hundred endpapers, including, without explanation, a 1991 guide to small-engine repair, and left every one of them where it was.

The ledgers she took upstairs, a few at a time, the stair stopping her once now instead of twice. They were green clothbound books, one for every year since 1984, the sales in columns down the middle and Dot's life down the margins in pencil, and by the small hours of Wednesday she had read her way to 1999. "Walt. L'Amour again. Don't argue." That one turned up in 1986 and again in 1998, in nearly the same words, as if Dot had been tempted every time. On a Saturday in 1997: "Inez brought back the Woolf. Self-indulgent, she says. Bought two more Woolfs."

* * *

On Wednesday the first pins moved.

The rule, as the tall girl, whose name was Hazel, explained it, was one sentence at the wall about the book, and then you moved your own pin, and it had to be a real sentence and not "It was good." Until then nobody had told Marnie there was a rule. She listened to nine children tell her about nine books and turned out to be better at it than she had any right to be, possibly because one sentence about a thing was the most anyone had ever wanted from her, and she understood the form.

Milo had read three books since Monday, all of them about mines, and he said each sentence in one breath with his headlamp on. "It's about a mule that lived in a coal mine its whole life and went blind and when they brought him

up he could still smell where the grass was." He found the ghost in about ninety seconds and told the room, and for a few minutes there were eleven children with their noses to the tailings pile.

A small boy at the back wanted to know if she'd been up the mountain herself.

"Not yet. Last week I got lost on a trail that was marked easy." She heard herself keep going. "So before they let me on this one I think I need to read about forty of your books."

They laughed, the older ones first and then the small ones because the older ones had.

At twenty to twelve a boy of about ten told her, in one sentence, about a book on great white sharks that she was fairly sure had been a documentary, and she let him move his pin to switchback one. Inez got up from the bench in the corner. She crossed the room with the cane under her arm, took the pin out of switchback one, pushed it back into the trailhead and returned to the bench, and nobody said anything, including the boy, who seemed to feel the matter had been fairly decided.

Gil had known about the listing by Tuesday. He had come in with Dot's magazines, which he went on delivering because nobody had set up forwarding, and said "Four twenty-five" on his way out; Gwen's office had put the listing online, and Gil read listings. By Wednesday the mothers knew. At noon one of them asked whether the new owners would keep the program going, and Marnie said she didn't know, which was true, and watched the woman look at the pins.

* * *

The burrito came at seven on Friday with a slice of sour cherry pie beside it.

"It's seven in the morning," Marnie said.

"It's Friday." Celia set the coffee down.

"She had it with the—" Junie said from the pass-through, flour to the elbows.

"After, Junie. She had it after."

"With. Alternating. A bite of one and a bite of the other."

Marnie ate the pie with the burrito, alternating, at the counter, with Dot's booth empty by the front window, while the hummingbirds on the porch

trilled at the feeders and drove each other off them. Across the street Owen was setting the rental kayaks out on their rack in front of the outfitters, checking each strap before he went back for the next, and his truck was where it had been when the thin air woke her at five.

"Does he go home?" she asked.

"He goes home," Celia said. "He just doesn't stay there. He's been like that since the Moss boy—"

"Celia," Junie said.

Celia took the coffeepot down the counter, and since nobody was going to say anything else about it, Marnie finished the pie.

* * *

Sunny walked into Sawyer Lake that evening up to her collarbones, said one word the kids on the public dock pretended not to hear, went under, and came up laughing at herself with her braid stuck across her face.

Marnie had come down to the town beach because Sunny had put her head in at the end of the Friday program, while Milo was moving his pin to switchback five, and told her to, in the tone of someone making her a dental appointment. She stood at the edge in rolled linen pants, the scab on her shin pulling as she bent, and put one bare foot in.

"Oh, shit," she said, out loud, at a volume she had not used in public in about two years. "Oh, no. That's not water. That's a diagnosis."

Sunny laughed so hard she went under again.

"Fifty," she said, when she came out, wringing her braid onto the sand. "Fifty's good for June. You stop feeling it."

"That's the symptom."

Afterward they sat on the end of the dock in the last of the sun, Sunny in a towel with her forearms on her knees and Marnie with the foot tucked under her as if it had done something wrong, and watched the light go off Pine Point. When the beach had mostly emptied, Marnie asked who the Moss boy was.

Sunny didn't answer right away. "Skier got pinned on Ruby Peak two winters ago, in a March storm," she said. "Owen was on the phone with him all night. They got up to him at first light, and he'd died." She pulled the towel tighter. "That's all anybody knows. Don't ask him."

On the rib in the burn, when Marnie had told him she'd moved, Owen had gone completely still for a second before he told her she was right to. That second came back to her now, with her foot under her and the lake going dark; she still couldn't read it, and she wasn't going to ask.

* * *

Deb Okafor came into the shop at four on Monday with a three-ring binder under her arm and looked around the room once, the way Marnie had watched Owen look around the trailhead. She was small and wiry, with gray hair cropped close and reading glasses pushed up on her head, and she wore a fleece vest in which every pocket had a pen; Marnie, who counted things too, counted five.

"Owen says you fixed his laminated one," Deb said.

"Some of it."

Deb put the binder on the counter and opened it. "Show me."

It was the team's map book: the county cut into fifty-odd sheets, printed in 2019 and slid into sheet protectors gone cloudy, with corrections in grease pencil in at least four hands. On the Keeler sheet the old tread still ran on above the second junction. Marnie put a finger on it, then on a spur road a mile below the trailhead that the lidar said wasn't there, then on Elk Creek, drawn on the wrong side of its own ridge, and Deb watched the finger and not her face.

"Will you fix it before you leave?"

Marnie said that it was a big job, which it was, and that she was only here through the summer.

"Summer people leave," Deb said. "I'm asking anyway."

"Yes," Marnie said. "Okay. Yes." Then, because a yes with nothing behind it had never been worth much at Pinyon: "I'd need to see the Calder drainage from above. The lidar gives me the ground, but it can't tell me what's growing on it."

"Owen goes up Calder Point Thursday. He swaps the battery on the repeater every June." Deb pulled her glasses down, looked at the Keeler sheet once more through them, and pushed them back up. "Tell him I sent you or don't. He'll know."

She left the binder on the counter. Marnie took that to be as close to a contract as Deb Okafor was going to offer.

* * *

Gwen's white SUV pulled up at half past ten on Tuesday, and the Marchettis got out of it already admiring things. Before he was through the door Tom had said "Look at the light" twice; Lise gave the rolling ladder a small push along its rail. They were from Boulder and pleasant and they liked everything, and Gwen, reading glasses swinging on their chain, let them.

"We're thinking a coffee bar," Lise told Marnie in the back-room doorway. "With a few curated shelves."

Marnie, who had spent a week finding check marks, said that sounded nice.

Back in the front Lise asked if she could measure, and took a tape from her purse and ran it along the east wall under the Reading Trail, its metal tongue catching for a second on the clump of pins at the trailhead. "Twelve feet four," she said to Tom. "That's the espresso counter. Right there." Then she saw the flags. "Oh, is this the kids' thing? Is it all summer?"

"Through Labor Day," Gwen said.

"That's darling," Lise said, and wrote twelve feet four on the back of her hand.

Through the window Walt sat on his bench with his coffee and his cap pulled down, looking at Main Street. When the Marchettis came out Tom said "Morning!" to him with real friendliness, and Walt said nothing at all, and from inside Marnie couldn't tell whether he had turned his hearing aid off or simply not answered.

"They liked it," Gwen said at the door. "Don't get excited." She looked at the map wall, then at Marnie, and went out to the SUV.

* * *

She crossed Main to the outfitters at half past five on Wednesday, under Ray's old painted sign, MAPS · LICENSES · COFFEE AT SIX, and found Owen behind the counter coiling a rope, one turn at a time, each laid exactly on the last.

"Deb says you're going up Calder Point tomorrow," she said.

"Repeater battery."

"Can I come with you?" She had practiced it crossing the street, and it came out in the right order. "For her map book. I want to see the burn and the Calder drainage from above, what's grown back and where."

He finished the turn he was on and set the coil on the counter. "Four point eight miles. Twenty-six hundred feet."

"Is that a lot?"

"Yes."

She waited. He looked at her boots, the ones he had fitted, then at her, in a way she couldn't take apart and didn't try to.

"I leave the trailhead at seven," he said. "Storms come by two."

"Okay."

"Three liters of water."

On June eighth she had carried one. "Three," she said.

From the doorway somebody said, "Copy that." Rae was leaning on the frame in uniform, saying it to nobody in particular and looking at the ceiling, and Marnie had no idea how long she had been there. Behind the counter Owen picked the rope back up. Marnie bought a trail map of Calder Point from the rack by the register, a map she had now drawn twice, and left before anyone could say anything else.

Across the street she turned the sign on the green door to CLOSED and went to the east wall. At noon Milo had told her about another book in one breath, backing out the door while Kayla towed him toward the laundromat: drilling contests, two miners and one hammer against a block of granite in front of a whole town. He had said it in the door and not at the wall, which by Hazel's rule might not count, and she had told him she would think about it. Without asking anybody she took his pin out of switchback seven and put it in at eight. It came to her with the pin still in her fingers that she had not once since the fifteenth asked anyone whether they might take this off her hands, and so she opened the drawer that stuck and counted the pins left in it, eleven, and on the back of the receipt for the Calder Point map she wrote red pins, 50, and flags, and under that, after a moment, one more tube.

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CHAPTER 4

One Cot

Marnie had her printed map flat against the trailhead board and a pencil in her teeth when Owen pulled in at five to seven. She was comparing the two.

The battery came out of the truck bed last. It was forty pounds of sealed lead in a gray case, for the repeater on the lookout roof; a winter up there took most of the life out of one, so every June he carried a new one up. He set it in the top of the pack, high and close to his spine, cinched the hip belt and looked at her feet.

She was in the boots. Seven and a half, brown leather, creased now across the toes where her foot bent. Over the gray Pinyon fleece she wore the blue rain shell she'd bought off his wall Wednesday, at a price he had made up at the register.

"Heels?" he asked.

"Taped. The way you did it." She took the pencil out of her mouth. "Your sign has the lookout at eleven-four. It's eleven-four-twenty."

"It's rounded."

"It's twenty feet. That's a two-story building."

He looked up at the ridge. From the lot it showed above the spruce as a long gray line with the cab a small square at its end, and behind it the sky was clean all the way across. Nothing stood up in the west yet. His phone said clear, thirty percent after two. In late June thirty percent meant it was coming; the number was only a guess at when.

"Turnaround's one-thirty," he said. "Wherever we are."

"And if I'm slow."

"You'll be slow. It's still one-thirty, Loop."

She looked at him over the top of the map for a second. Then she put the pencil behind her ear, where Dot had kept hers, and started up the trail in front of him without being asked.

For the first mile the trail climbed through spruce-fir on a grade that looked kind and wasn't. By the second bend she was breathing through her mouth. She stopped every few switchbacks with her hands on her hips, and each time he stopped at the same distance behind her, drank when she drank and said nothing. A person working at altitude didn't need anybody talking at her.

At the fourth stop she unfolded the map.

"Next one's long," she said. "Then two short ones close together, and it steepens. Then a bench where it cuts back south. There's water on the bench, probably. The contours kink."

There was water on the bench: snowmelt running over flat rock, and a log someone had laid across it. She stepped over the log and didn't turn to see whether he'd noticed.

He'd noticed. In more trips up this trail than he had counted, he'd never learned the order of the bends below the talus; his legs knew them, and that had always been enough. She called every one before it came. Long, short, the one that doubled back around a boulder the size of his truck, the place where the trees thinned and the lake showed behind them, small and very blue. She was right every time, and every time she said it in a flat voice, as if she were reading off a coordinate, and kept walking.

Above the trees the trail crossed talus, gray blocks the size of woodstoves, and the marmots were out. One lay spread on a warm slab with all four legs out and his chin on the rock. She stopped. The marmot opened one eye at her and shut it again.

She laughed out loud on the open slope and forgot to get her hand up in front of her mouth; one of her lower teeth sat a little crooked. He hadn't seen it before.

"He's not even sorry," she said.

"They never are."

She kept looking at the marmot, still laughing a little, and Owen kept looking at her. Then he looked at the sky in the west, because that was his job.

* * *

By twelve-forty the sky to the west had stood up.

He'd watched it since eleven: first the white tops over the far ranges, then the gray going flat under them, then at half past twelve one column on the near side of the valley that grew while he looked at it. Thirty percent after two had been wrong by an hour and a half. They were on the long traverse below the ridge. Behind them lay a mile of open rock and then the switchbacks, all of it downhill, which was where she was slowest. Ahead, forty minutes at her pace, the lookout sat on the end of the ridge, grounded.

He did the arithmetic twice.

"Lookout's nearer than the trees," he said. "You in?"

She looked west, and her face changed when she found the column. "That's early."

"Yes."

"In."

He went in front for the last stretch and kept it slower than he wanted. On the ridge the wind came up cold off the snowfields, and she put her hood up without being told. At twenty-five past one he had the team's key in the padlock on the stair door, and then they were up the stone steps and inside the cab.

Fourteen feet by fourteen, glass on every side. In the middle the Osborne Fire Finder stood on its pedestal with its brass sighting ring and its old map under glass. Against one wall was the steel cot with its thin pad; by the stove, not much split wood; near the pedestal, the lightning stool on its four glass insulators. She went past all of it, straight across and out the far door onto the catwalk, and he followed her as far as the door.

East of the ridge lay the whole Keeler burn. From up here it was one thing, all fourteen thousand acres: the snags gone silver over gray ground, and the debris-flow channels cut down every drainage, raw and light, fanned out at the bottom where they had dropped what they carried.

"I mapped those," she said. "From the lidar. Every one."

She didn't say anything else. With both hands on the rail she stood and looked at it, and the quiet she went into was a kind he hadn't seen on her. He'd

seen people go quiet on a lot of ridges. This one he couldn't place, so he filed it and went to change the battery.

A steel ladder ran from the catwalk to the roof. The repeater sat in its box beside the solar panel. He had the lid off and the old battery out when the first thunder came from the west, long and low and a long way off. That one he didn't count. One thing at a time: the new battery in, the terminals on and tight, the lid. The light on the controller came up green. He lowered the dead one to the catwalk on a sling and climbed down after it.

She was still at the rail.

"I'd come in," he said.

She came in.

At twenty to two the hail arrived, white and sideways across the catwalk and so loud on the roof that she said something he didn't hear. The windows went gray, then white. Then the lightning found the ridge.

He put her on the lightning stool. "Feet on the rung. Off the floor." She sat with her knees up and her hands in her lap, small on the stool in the middle of all that glass, and watched him. Crouched by the pedestal, he started the watch.

Flash. Thumb on the button, and the numbers ran. Thunder; thumb again. Nine seconds. Then six. Four. Each time he reset it and waited with his thumb ready and his eyes on the little gray screen, and it felt like counting minutes on a call. He reset the watch.

The next strike he didn't need to count. Light and sound came as one thing, the floor jumped under his boots, and every grounding cable on the building took it down into the rock at once. Something in the stove rang. Marnie made a noise that wasn't a word and then one that was.

"Holy shit. Was that us?"

"The ridge. Fifty yards, maybe."

"Fifty yards."

"The building's grounded. It's doing what it's for."

She looked at the cables where they came down the corner posts, then at him, and nodded, and kept her feet on the rung.

By three the cell had gone east over the burn, trailing rain, and the light came back yellow. Out on the catwalk he looked west. It was building again where the first had come from, darker at the base, with more tops behind it. He stood there long enough to be sure, and went back in.

"We're staying the night," he said. "It's building again out west, and it can sit there till dark or be on top of us in an hour, and I can't tell you which. Down is a mile of open ridge and then the talus, and you're slow going down. Everybody is, the first time. If it catches us out there, there's nothing to get under. In here we're grounded and dry, and I've got a bag and dinner. We go down at first light. Is that all right with you?"

From the stool she looked at him for a while.

"Do I have a choice?"

"Yes," he said. "It's a bad one."

Something went out of her shoulders, and she laughed once, not much of a laugh. "Okay. Yes. It's all right."

He unclipped the radio from his chest harness. "Mears Base, Vigil."

It came back clear through the new battery. "Vigil, Mears Base. Go ahead." Deb, from her kitchen by the sound of it.

"Two at Calder Point lookout. Sheltering. Out at first light."

"Copy. Two at Calder Point, sheltering, out at first light." A pause. "You on the new battery?"

"New battery."

"Copy. Mears Base clear."

He clipped the radio back on. Staying: he had said it twice now, once to her and once to the county, and the word sat wrong in him. At the stove he knelt, split kindling off one of the sticks with his knife, laid a fire he wasn't going to light until dark, and counted what was left.

* * *

At half past seven he lit it with half the wood and kept the rest for morning.

Dinner was two foil pouches from the bottom of his pack, chili mac and something that called itself beef stroganoff, with water heated on the stove. She ate on the cot with his sleeping bag around her shoulders. He ate on the floor with his back against the Fire Finder's pedestal, where he could see both doors.

"Do you always carry dinner for two?"

"When there's two."

"And a sleeping bag."

"Always a bag."

She looked at the cot, then at him, and he could see her getting ready to argue.

"You're on the cot," he said. "In the bag. I'm on the floor."

"In what?"

He held up the bivy, orange foil in a stuff sack the size of his fist.

"That's a baked potato," she said.

"It's warmer than it looks."

"It would have to be." She didn't argue the rest, which meant she was colder than she was saying. He noted it and put another stick on.

Dark came after nine, with rain and no lightning. Out west the cloud he'd watched all afternoon sat on the far ranges and lit up from inside now and then, too far off to count, and didn't come. He let the stove go down and lay on the floor in his puffy with the bivy pulled to his chest and the radio by his head, squelch turned low.

She talked in the dark. Having spent the last of the light bent over the Fire Finder with her glasses on, she told him about it now: the map on the table was an old Forest Service base, she could tell from the lettering; the ring was graduated in degrees; a lookout up here and a lookout on some other peak would each take a bearing on the same smoke, and where the two lines crossed on the map, somebody sent a crew. People had sat up here whole summers doing it.

"Sorry," she said. "I talk when it's dark."

"It's fine."

He lay with one hand under his head and found that he liked it, her voice going on about bearings and lettering in the cold room. He didn't say so.

After a while she said, in the same voice, "I was supposed to be married by now. I was engaged. I left, eighteen months ago." The bag shifted on the cot. "That's all of that I'm going to say."

"Okay."

He didn't ask. She had told him where the edge was, and he stayed back from it.

Later she asked, "Is the radio on all night?"

"Yes."

"Do you ever—" She stopped. He heard the question turn in the dark and go around something; he'd been hearing that sound from half the county for a year and more. "Never mind. Is the repeater solar, or just the battery?"

"Both."

So somebody had told her. Sunny, probably, or the diner. She knew there was a winter, and she had come right up to it and gone around it, and she wasn't going to come back. He lay there and didn't know what to do with his hands, and turned the radio down a notch, and up again.

* * *

The second cell came over at half past one.

Because he wasn't asleep, he had the watch going when the windows lit. Eleven seconds. The next was fourteen, the one after that sixteen; it was tracking north along the far side of the ridge, heavy with rain, and he let his thumb come off the button. Rain went across the glass in sheets. Between the rolls of thunder he could hear her teeth.

"You're cold," he said.

"I'm fine."

"Give me your hand."

After a moment a hand came out of the bag and found his shoulder in the dark and went down his arm to his hand. It was cold, the fingers stiff and slow to close. Nothing dangerous: cold enough that she wasn't going to sleep, and a night without sleep at eleven thousand feet made a wet descent worse. He held it a second longer than the check needed, and gave it back.

"There's room," she said. "I'm not being brave, I'm being cold."

For the length of one roll of thunder he lay on the floor.

"You want me up there?"

"Yes."

He got out of the bivy and spread it over the bag. In the puffy he lay down on the outside edge, on his side, his back to the cold glass; the frame complained, and most of him was on the rail.

"There isn't room," he said.

"There isn't. I measured it while you were doing the stove. Thirty inches."

"Then you knew."

"I knew."

There was nowhere for her to turn but toward him, and she turned. His arm had nowhere to go but over her, across the bag.

"Okay?" he asked.

"Okay."

She was still shaking. He could feel it through the down, a fine fast tremor all along her, and he lay still and let the two layers do the work. It took a while. The thunder went on north, further off each time. The shaking came in waves that got shorter until they stopped, and her breathing changed, and the air in the inch between his face and hers went warm.

He knew it was an inch. When the lightning came he could see her, her hair come loose from the clip and her eyes open, on him.

Her hand came out of the bag and settled on his forearm, on the sleeve of the puffy, and stayed. He let it. Neither of them said anything for long enough that he heard the rain thin on the roof and quit.

"Can I kiss you?" she asked.

She asked it plainly, the way she had called the bends on the trail. He didn't move back. There was nowhere to go on thirty inches of cot, and he wouldn't have gone if there had been. Nor did he pretend not to understand her. He wanted to. For longer than this cot he had wanted to, and lying here with her breath on his mouth didn't make it any smaller, and there was light enough from the north for her to see it on him. He let her see it.

But he had also brought her up here. He'd made the call that kept her here, on the radio, under his name, and until he put her in her car at the bottom, every choice on this mountain was his to answer for. This wasn't going to be one of those.

"Not up here," he said.

She was quiet. Then: "Because I'm cold?"

"Because I brought you up and I'm taking you down. Till then I'm working."

Water ran off the roof and down the corner cables. Her hand hadn't moved.

"Is that a no?"

"It's a not up here."

She laughed, short and helpless, into the edge of the bag, and it went on longer than she meant it to; he felt all of it along the length of the cot.

"Oh my God," she said. "Okay. Okay."

"Okay."

"I just asked the rescue guy if I could kiss him on the clock."

"Yes."

"Don't agree with me."

He didn't say anything to that. Her hand stayed on his arm; she didn't take it back, and he didn't move the arm. After a while she said, "Not up here," quietly, as if she were writing it down.

Neither of them slept, and neither pretended to. She stayed against him for the warmth, and he stayed on the rail with his arm over the bag, close and no closer, and the cot held. On the floor by his head the radio hissed and clicked. He listened to it the rest of the night the way he would have listened for a voice. Nobody called. At a quarter to five the windows went gray.

* * *

At ten past six the ridge was clear and washed, every rock dark with water, the snowfields pink. He was rolling the bivy when the radio spoke.

"Vigil, Mears Base."

Rae, on the barn set. He keyed it. "Go ahead."

"Sheriff's office requests a welfare check on two at Calder Point."

"Two. Fine. Walking at six-thirty."

"Copy." When she came back the needle had gone out of her voice. "Be advised, town took two inches of rain and hail on Main in ninety minutes yesterday. The flat roof over Dot's let go. Water came through the ceiling and into the shop's back room."

Marnie sat on the cot with one boot on. She didn't move.

"Copy," Owen said. "Anybody hurt?"

"Negative. Nobody hurt." A pause. "Didn't want you two coming down in the dark for a ceiling. Mears Base clear."

Marnie got the other boot on. She laced it wrong and did it over, and he watched her hands and didn't help.

Going down, she went faster than she could. The talus was wet and every block of it was slick, and on the third traverse her boot went out from under her and she caught herself on both hands. She stayed down a second. Then she got up and looked at her palms.

"Can we go faster?"

"You can," he said. "I wouldn't."

She looked down the slope, toward where the town was. Then she turned sideways to the hill, the way she had on the burn, and went down at her own

pace. He kept his behind her and didn't hurry her once. They were at the cars at a quarter past ten, and he followed her down the Calder Creek road at the same distance the whole way, past the barn.

* * *

Somebody had already got a blue tarp over the back half of Dot's roof and weighted the scupper end with cinder blocks. Tuck's knots on the corners. Owen saw them from the street at eleven.

On the outside stair she stopped once, which she hadn't done in a week, and he stopped below her. At the top the porch light was fine. Inside, the flat had taken the worst of it. The ceiling had come down over the bed in one wet slab, lath and plaster and the gray insulation behind it, and the mattress under it was ruined; he could smell that from the door.

She stood at the foot of the bed and looked at it. Then she went to the closet, which had stayed dry, and took out Dot's flannel shirts one at a time, the blue-and-green plaid first, and laid them over her arm.

Downstairs he counted the shop when he came in: Gil at the register with a mop, Inez in the back-room doorway with her cane, Walt out on the bench. The back corner was wet. A brown stain the size of a door spread across the ceiling there and still dripped into a mop bucket. Where the ledgers lived the shelf was empty. Against the wall the flat file stood with all eight of its drawers gone, and the apple crate under it was gone too.

Marnie saw the shelf and went pale, and he was already moving toward her.

"Your aunt's ledgers are on my dining table," Inez said. "They are dry. You may thank Walter."

The brass bell went. Walt came back through the shelves with his cap in his hand.

"Had a key since ninety-eight," he said. "Water was coming down that wall like a raise in a wet spring, so we pulled her out at four, me and Gil and her." He tipped his head at Inez. "Plats drawer by drawer, the tubes with 'em. They're on the parcel shelf at the post office. Map's laid flat on two tables at the diner." He looked at Marnie, pleased. "Didn't drop a pin."

"Thank you," Marnie said. Her voice went, and she tried it again. "Walt. Thank you."

Walt reached up and turned his hearing aid on, so she had to say it a third time, and he listened to all of it.

"You may collect the ledgers," Inez said, "when you have somewhere dry to put them."

Gil leaned on the mop. "Called the roofer in Montrose for you. Can't get up here till the middle of August." He let that sit. "And the Lakeview's full through the Fourth. Most of July after."

Dot's flat was gone for the summer, and the back room smelled of wet paper and would go on smelling of it. Marnie stood in the middle of it with Dot's shirts over her arm. Owen thought about the empty room over his shop, and looked at Gil, and didn't say it.

* * *

At seven that evening he crossed Main with two keys.

She was sitting on the bottom step of Dot's stair with the shirts folded on her knees and her laptop bag at her feet, and she watched him come the whole way across.

"This one's the outside stair," he said, and gave it to her. "This one's the door at the top of the inside stair, from my back room. It locks from your side. It's the only one."

She held them both in her open palm. "Where's yours?"

"You're holding it."

"You don't keep a copy."

"No."

She closed her hand on them. "I'm paying rent."

"You don't have to."

"Forty a week."

"That's not real."

"It's what Sunny paid."

"Sunny paid forty a week?"

"No," she said. "But I'm paying it."

She took two twenties out of the pocket of her fleece and held them out, and kept holding them out. He took them, because she was going to sit on that step with her arm up until he did, and put them in his shirt pocket.

He carried the duffel. She carried Dot's shirts. On the landing at the top of his outside stair she ducked in through the door and hit her head on the slant of the ceiling anyway, said a word Inez wouldn't have liked, and stood rubbing it, looking at the bed under the window. Across the street Dot's windows were dark.

By eight Celia had crossed Main with a paper sack: a breakfast burrito smothered in green, black coffee and, because it was Friday, a slice of sour cherry pie. She came straight to his outside stair without trying Dot's. The diner knew already.

* * *

Saturday at five fifty-five he ran the grinder, set the urn going out front for the six o'clock hikers, and went back to the small pot on the back counter that was his own.

Overhead the floor creaked, then creaked again over by the bath. It was a thin floor. He had known that for eight years and never once thought about it.

When he looked down he had poured two cups. The second was in the blue enamel camp mug with the chip in its rim, the speckled one from the shelf over the sink that he never gave customers, and he had set it on the back counter at the end nearest the stair, where someone coming down would reach it first. He considered it, and didn't move it.

The radio on the back counter clicked.

"Outfitters, upstairs. Status of coffee?"

The stair door was twelve feet away. He could have called up it. Instead he picked up the radio and keyed it.

"Coffee is on."

Written to order at crispybooks.xyz

CHAPTER 5

Overdue

The grinder went at five fifty-five on Monday, directly under the bed, and Marnie sat up into the ceiling for the third morning running.

It was a low ceiling everywhere in the apartment, and over the bed it came down at thirty-eight degrees, a figure she had taken on Saturday with the level on her phone out of professional resentment and which, on any slope map she had ever built, would have been shaded the orange she kept for avalanche terrain. Through a floor that seemed to be one board thick, the grinder ran for eleven seconds and stopped; at six the till drawer opened with a double clank she could by now have picked out of a lineup, and somebody wanted a fishing license and was told in five words where the fish were.

The radio sat on the windowsill where she had left it on Saturday. She had not keyed it since, on the principle that twice was a routine and she had not come to Ruby Fork to acquire routines with the man downstairs; she had come to clear a shop and sell it. That was still the plan, written on a legal pad on Dot's desk under a coffee ring.

At a quarter past six she went down the inside stair with the key in her fist and found the blue enamel mug on the back counter, full, with the chip in its rim turned away from her, as it had been on Saturday and on Sunday. She had decided not to ask about it. There were only two possible answers, and she did not know which one she wanted.

Mornings went across the street to Dot's, to the Reading Trail and the clearing, in a back room that still smelled of wet plaster under two of Lyle's box fans. Afternoons she worked at Owen's back counter, between the rope wall and the page board, on a La Plata County evacuation map for Kendra Liu, her boss at Pinyon, and on Deb's 2019 map book, which she was marking in red wherever the book said trail and the lidar disagreed. The Wi-Fi was better there. It was also true that he was there, which she said to nobody, including, for the first two afternoons, herself.

From the back counter she could see the front through the open door. On Monday a family came in for water bottles, two parents in new sunhats with two boys and a girl of about four on her father's shoulders, and the father asked for four. Owen looked at them once, the look she had seen at the trailhead the night he found her, his lips moving very slightly over the crowd, and set five bottles on the counter.

"We'll share," the father said. "She's with me."

"Five of you," Owen said.

The father bought five. When the bell had stopped swinging, Marnie said through the doorway, "Is that a sales technique?"

"No," he said, and went back to the license book, and she went back to the Animas drainage and did very little to it for an hour.

* * *

On Tuesday at four Sunny put her head in at the back door and said, "Lyle needs hands," and Marnie, who had never in her life been described as hands, followed her across the alley to the shed.

Overdue sat right side up on two sawhorses under a bare bulb: fourteen feet of flat-bottomed plywood with its sides sanded to gray in long patches. Lyle Okafor knelt at the stern with a new piece of transom and a flat carpenter's pencil, sawdust in his eyebrows. In a camp chair by the bow sat Walt, his cap pushed back, supervising.

"You want to lag that like a headframe," Walt said. "She'll work loose on you."

"Inch-and-a-quarter screws," Lyle said. "Six-inch centers." He looked at Marnie's hands, then at her face, and seemed to arrive at something slowly. "Sunny says you can hold a straight line."

"On a screen."

"Same muscle."

At the bow, on the outside, somebody had masked off a word with painter's tape so that the sanding had gone around it, and Marnie knew the capitals before anyone told her whose they were: small and square, in white, the hand that had priced four hundred paperbacks and warned her about the left burner. OVERDUE. "Ninety-five," Lyle said, following her eyes. "First June. I paint around it."

"Has she ever finished upright?"

"Not yet."

"Not even close," Sunny said from the other side of the hull, grinning, and turned the sander back on.

"With Walt up front she'll sit an inch and a quarter low at the bow," Lyle said, as if he were continuing a conversation he had been having with the boat. "I've measured."

"Thirty-one years I watched her sink from the beach," Walt said. "This year I'm going down with her."

Lyle stood up, which took a while, and moved the work light.

The names ran in bands across the bottom of the hull and up the insides, a year to a band, each name with its year after it, all in white enamel and in Dot's hand. Marnie read them the way she read any legend she had not built, from the corner out. At the transom, 1995 had eight names. Near the stern on the port side, between a DANIELLE R. and a TJ, she found OWEN V. 1999 and stood over it longer than she meant to, over a nine-year-old she could not imagine and a man across the alley she could. RAE V. 2004 was a hand's width forward. Because she was a person who finished a legend, she went on to 2005 and read the band twice, seventeen names, and was not in it.

Which was fine. She had read her eleven books and gone home in the last week of July, and the pin Dot had moved to the summit after she left was on Dot's desk, where Marnie had set it in June.

Lyle took the flat pencil from his shirt pocket and pointed it, without saying anything, at the bow.

Inside the bow, by itself, where the hull narrowed and no band had reached yet, was MARNIE K. 2005. The 2025 band stopped about ten inches short of it.

"She did that one in September," Lyle said. "By herself. Wouldn't let me hold the can."

Marnie said, "Okay," and went out to the alley.

She stood by the woodpile with her arms folded and looked up at Calder Point, a gray knob over the trees with the lookout too small to see, until it was only a ridge again. When her face was dry enough to pass for the altitude, she went back in.

On the sawhorse nearest the door Lyle had laid a brush across an open can of oxblood enamel. Nobody said anything. She picked it up and began painting book spines along the port side between the lines he had ruled in pencil, an inch and a half wide and some of them two, and Lyle went back to the transom and did not ask her a single thing. Across the shed, Walt told Sunny about a drift on the Ruby Queen's fourth level that had made water for a month in 1963.

Rae came by at five in uniform and stood in the shed door with her thumbs in her belt.

"So you're living with my brother."

"Above your brother," Marnie said.

"Copy. Above." Rae looked at the spines. "Those are straight."

"I make maps."

"I heard," Rae said, in the voice of someone entering it into a record, and went to ask Lyle whether the eighty-four-year-old in the camp chair had a life jacket that fit.

* * *

Gwen called at ten past twelve on Wednesday, while the last of the Reading Trail kids were still at the east wall arguing about whose pin was higher, and Marnie took it in the back room with a box fan blowing plaster dust across Dot's desk.

"They came in at three ninety-eight," Gwen said. "Closing after Labor Day like you asked, and they've seen the roof. It's a real offer, Marnie."

"It's twenty-seven under."

"It's a bookstore with a tarp on it in a town of nine hundred people." Gwen's voice was kind, as it generally was, and as it generally did it also said the number. "You don't have to love it. You have to answer it."

"I'll answer by Monday."

"Monday's fine. Don't make it Tuesday."

She was writing 398 on the legal pad, under the coffee ring and above the word SELL, which she had underlined twice in June, when the bell went and Gil came in with Dot's mail: a quarterly about Western history and a seed catalog for a woman who, as far as Marnie could determine, had grown nothing at any altitude in her life.

"Three ninety-eight," Gil said, setting them on the counter. "That's not bad, with the roof."

Marnie looked at the legal pad, which faced away from him, then at Gil.

"Lise Marchetti mailed a postcard to her sister Monday," he said. "I don't read them. She writes big." He tapped the seed catalog. "Still nobody's set up forwarding on these."

"I'll do it."

"Don't," Gil said, and went out to his jeep. It was two hours later, sanding, that she understood he had meant he liked bringing them.

That evening she sanded Overdue's port gunwale for Lyle, because it needed doing and nobody in the shed asked her about numbers, and a sliver of old fir went into the heel of her right hand at an angle she could see and not reach. She left it. At midnight she was still awake under the slanted ceiling doing arithmetic: three ninety-eight, less Gwen and closing, plus the thirty-one thousand she had saved toward a condo in Denver, which together would buy a condo in Denver with a second bedroom she would never go into. It was a good plan. She had made it when Ruby Fork was a building and a stock count, and she was going to take the offer.

Before anything happened with the man downstairs, though, she was going to say so out loud. She knew exactly what she wanted to happen and had known it since a cot at eleven thousand four hundred and twenty feet; she was not going to start it on the morning she meant to call Gwen and say yes. With the splinter aching faintly in her palm, she promised herself that much.

* * *

At six on Thursday she keyed the radio.

"Outfitters, upstairs," she said. "Status of coffee?"

There was a pause long enough for her to regret it in two separate directions. Then the radio said, in his voice, "Coffee is on."

Barefoot, she went down the inside stair in Dot's blue-and-green flannel with the sleeves rolled twice and the shorts she slept in, not how she had come down on any other morning; she noticed that only on the fourth step, when it was too late to do anything but keep going. At the back counter he was waiting, and beside him the blue mug sat with its chip turned away. She picked it up in her left hand and held out her right, palm up.

"Splinter," she said, which was not the thing she had come down to say.

He took her wrist and turned her palm into the light over the bench. Without letting go he opened the first-aid drawer, found an alcohol pad and a pair of fine tweezers by feel, and tore the pad open against the edge of the counter. He wiped the heel of her hand. Then he pressed the skin on either side of the sliver with his thumb until the end of it stood up, bent his head over her hand and went in with the tweezers so slowly that she could have counted the seconds, if she had been able to think about seconds.

He was close. From there she could see where the gray started at his temple, and a white nick across one knuckle among the others; she could smell coffee and the cold-metal smell the shop had at six, and feel his breath on the inside of her wrist.

"Hold still," he said.

She had not held this still since the snag.

"Quarter inch," he said, and showed her a gray sliver of Overdue on the tip of the tweezers. Then he looked up.

Their faces were about six inches apart, and neither of them moved back. She was going to kiss him, having decided on the fourth step or possibly on the cot, and he knew it; she could see him know it and stay exactly where he was, her wrist loose in his hand, waiting without leaning in. At midnight, though, she had promised herself she would say it first, and she had meant it.

"I have an offer on the shop," she said. "I'm going to take it."

"I know."

"How do you know?"

"Gil."

Of course Gil. "I'm leaving after Labor Day."

"I know that too."

He let go of her wrist. There was no argument and no case made for anything, and he didn't close the six inches she had left; nor did he take them

back. Leaving them where she had put them, he dropped the tweezers in the tray and capped the alcohol.

She took the mug upstairs. On the top step she looked at her palm, where there was a red point and nothing else. The splinter was out.

* * *

The boat parade went at ten, slowly, along the town beach, while most of Ruby Fork and all of the Lakeview stood at the waterline and shouted at boats by name. Blue Plate Special came first as champion four years running, a plywood hull painted white with a blue rim to look like a diner plate, Junie and Celia paddling in aprons and correcting each other's stroke the whole length of the beach. After it came Sawyer Hardware's barrel raft, six blue barrels under a deck of pallets with the owner's two sons standing on it in snorkel masks, and a family in a raft of pool noodles that Marnie privately rated the soundest structure on the lake; then Overdue, with her eleven oxblood spines down the port side and Sunny's greens and navies down the starboard, which the beach cheered with the particular warmth of people who had watched it sink every summer since 1995.

Walt rode in the bow in a life jacket over his flannel shirt, cap jammed down, calling the stroke. "Muck," he called, and they pulled, "and muck," and they pulled again. Marnie had stopped asking what his words meant some time in June, but she had absorbed that muck was the broken rock you shoveled out after a blast, which was a fair description of her paddling.

Out past the swimming rope the safety boat idled: sixteen feet of aluminum with an outboard, throw bags under the seats and wool blankets folded in the bow. Owen stood in it with one hand on the tiller and a clipboard against his hip. As each boat went by she watched his pencil move, once for the boat and once for every head in it. He did it for the pool noodles. When Overdue came past she saw him get to three, and she did not look away fast enough when he looked up.

At eleven the race went, from the beach around the buoy off Pine Point and back, about six hundred yards. Overdue left the line last, as Lyle had said it would; a flat bottom carrying fourteen feet of painted books did not leave lines quickly. By the buoy, though, Sunny was paddling like a woman who did this for money, and when they came around it Walt shouted, "That's the station!

Now up the raise!" and Marnie, whose shoulders had stopped being shoulders some time ago, found that she could. Halfway home they passed the barrel raft, which had lost a barrel. A hundred yards out she could hear Lyle on the beach, a man who had never raised his voice in her hearing, shouting, "Upright! Upright!"

Forty yards out, Walt turned in the bow and pulled off his cap to wave it at the beach.

The bow had been sitting an inch and a quarter low since the start. When Walt leaned out to port with his cap in his fist, the wake from Blue Plate Special, which had finished and was coming back along the course to gloat, found the inch and a quarter, and the lake came over the gunwale in one smooth sheet. Overdue went down by the head with great dignity. In the second she had, it was plain that Lyle had measured this exactly, and then she was in fifty-degree water.

The cold took the air out of her. For a moment she could not get any back, only a short hard gasp and then another, while her life jacket rode up under her chin and her legs went somewhere far off and unimportant. Then she got a breath, and turned to look for Walt, and he was not there.

Overdue lay on its side, swamped, spines up. Walt's feed-store cap floated beside it upside down. She said his name, not loudly enough, and then loudly, and got one hand on the hull and pulled herself along it toward the bow, and for two seconds, which she would afterward be able to measure exactly, there was only the cap.

Then he came up on the far side of the bow, held up by his life jacket with his mouth open and his white hair flat to his skull, and the safety boat was already there with its engine cut. Owen knelt on its gunwale, reached down, got Walt under both arms and lifted, and the lake went up his shirt to the chest as he did it; Walt came over the side all at once and landed in the bottom of the boat in a heap of life jacket. Sunny came next, kicking herself up at the stern with one of Owen's hands on her shoulder strap. Marnie hung on to Overdue and waited her turn. Her legs had stopped reporting in. In the bottom of the safety boat, Walt sat up streaming water, his hearing aid somewhere in Sawyer Lake, and shouted at the beach in a voice she had never heard him use, "Thirty-one years! Lyle! You see that? I went down with her!"

And Marnie laughed.

It came out of her all at once and would not stop, a great unlovely helpless honk of a laugh, out over the water in front of the whole town, with both hands on the gunwale of a sunk stack of books and nothing free to put over her mouth. From the beach, forty yards off, the laugh came back to her from the whole shore at once, two or three hundred people laughing with her, and she lifted her head and laughed harder.

Then Owen's hands were under her arms, and she came up out of the lake and over the aluminum side and landed beside Walt, still laughing, in a slop of cold water and wool.

Owen counted them aloud. "Three," he said, and wrote it down.

They towed Overdue in on a line, and by the time Tuck and Lyle had dragged it up the sand, the white capitals on the bow had begun to come away. Thirty-one Junes of tape had kept the sander off them, and the lake had gotten under them in ten minutes. The V went first, in a long curl, the E after it, and Lyle stood at the bow with his thumbnail on the bare plywood where they had been and said, to nobody, "Forty yards."

Overdue, which had not finished, was last, as it had been every Fourth since 1995.

At the ambulance by the boathouse, Walt sat on the back bumper in Deb's blanket and shivered hard while Deb held two fingers to his wrist and said, "Tell me," and he told her about 1963. Inez came down the beach with her cane in her hand, not leaning on it at all.

"He is eighty-four," Inez said to Marnie. "You put him in a plywood box on a fifty-degree lake."

"I know."

"You do not know. If you knew, you would not have done it." She was very straight and very tall, in a cardigan in July, and she did not raise her voice, because she had never needed to. "If he takes a chill tonight, I will hold you responsible, and I will be right to."

"Yes," Marnie said, because it was true and there was nothing to put beside it.

"Can't hear a word, Inez," Walt said through his chattering, delighted. "Aid's drowned."

Inez looked at him for a long moment. Then she sat down on the bumper beside him, took his wet hand in both of hers, and did not look at Marnie again.

* * *

Owen was at the safety boat logging the last boats in when she found him, still wet to the chest, his shirt dark from the pocket down and RUBY FORK OUTFITTERS gone nearly black. On Walt he had put a blanket, and one on Sunny, and two on her, and none on himself. Taking the second one off her own shoulders, she put it over his.

He let it stay for about four seconds, which she suspected was some kind of record. Then he took it off, folded it in quarters and put it back on her.

"You're colder," he said.

"You're wetter."

"I'm working." He went back to the clipboard.

The thunderheads had been building over the ridge since noon, and at two the first of them let go over Calder Point. Owen had the safety boat off the water before the second clap, and the beach emptied into the boathouse and under the porches at the foot of Main. It rained hard for forty minutes and quit. By four the lake was steaming and the sun was out again, and Marnie sat on the sand in a dry River Company tank top of Sunny's with her wet things spread around her, not thinking once about the sun at eighty-five hundred feet. At six her shoulders were already the red she used for active fire perimeters.

The picnic went on along the beach until dark. From the diner Junie brought down a sour cherry pie in a cardboard box and Celia brought the forks, and they disagreed about how many years Blue Plate Special had won until Sunny took the box away from both of them. Owen was gone most of an hour, trailering the safety boat and stowing it behind the boathouse. When he came back across the sand in a dry shirt with his hair still damp, looking along the blankets until he found her, she heard herself say, "One."

He stopped where he was.

"Present," he said, after a moment, and sat down beside her.

At half past nine the fireworks went up over the lake from a barge off Pine Point, and the whole town lay back on its blankets to watch. She had put on Dot's flannel at dusk, and it sat on her shoulders like sandpaper. Walt had gone home at four with Inez driving. Beside her, Owen sat with his knees up and his forearms across them and watched the sky, their shoulders not touching, and she knew how far apart they were to the inch the entire time.

* * *

By twenty past ten the beach was down to a few kids setting off the last of somebody's bottle rockets over the water, and Owen carried her bag of wet clothes up the outside stair behind her, set it down by the door and did not go.

From the landing she could see down the length of Main to the lake, black now, and one late green rocket going up over the cove and coming apart. Her hair smelled of the lake, and her shoulders hurt. He stood at the top step with a hand on the rail, close enough that the bulb over the door showed her the gray at his temples, and said, "I could hear you from the safety boat. The whole race."

She had known since about eleven-twenty that something like this was coming, and she had her answer ready; she had kept it ready for years. "I know," she said. "I'm a lot."

It came out in the old shape, worn smooth. Graham in the car outside one of his parents' dinners, kind and even, his hand over hers so it would land softly: "You're a lot, Marn." It had always landed softly.

Owen looked at her for a while, the way he had looked at the ridge from the lookout before he said anything about the weather.

"I said I could hear you," he said. "I was listening for you."

It had come out of him heavier than he meant it to; she could see that, and see him decide to leave it where it fell. She found she had nothing to say, and so she stepped in and stopped an inch from his mouth, because this was down here by any survey she could think of, and she wanted to hear what the rule was now.

"Yes?"

"Yes," he said. "Please."

She kissed him.

It landed. That was the first thing she knew about it, before anything else: that it landed, and that he kissed her back like a man who had been waiting a good deal longer than since Thursday and intended to take his time about it now. His hands came up to her shoulders, and when she made a noise at the sunburn they stopped at once and moved to her face instead and stayed there, his thumbs along her cheekbones. He tasted of sour cherry. At her back was the railing, and her hair was still wet at the ends, and she did not care about either.

"For the record," she said against his mouth, when there was a gap, "I've been thinking about this since the tweezers."

"Okay."

"Before the tweezers. I'm not going to give you a date." She kissed him again. "Also, I hit my head on your ceiling every morning. I measured it. It's thirty-eight degrees, which is avalanche terrain, and as a tenant I feel like I should raise —" and she heard herself, the whole tumbling run of it out loud on a landing above Main Street, and stopped. "Sorry. That was a lot."

"Don't stop talking," he said.

So she didn't. In between she told him that she had nearly kissed him on Thursday and had decided not to on the fourth step, and then decided again at the bench; that she had laughed in the lake in front of three hundred people and nobody had died of it, herself included. He kissed her in the gaps, slowly, as if there would always be another gap. Once he laughed against her temple, low, at something she had not known was funny until he did. Smoke from the last rockets drifted up Main past the bulb over the door, and he held her face in both hands and listened to all of it.

When she drew back, it was only far enough to see him.

"I need this to have an edge," she said. "Until Labor Day."

He said, "Okay."

It came a half-beat late and a little lower than his other okays. Neither of them took it back.

"Then I want every day of it till then," he said.

She looked at him. "That was a whole speech."

"Yes."

She laughed, and he put his forehead down against hers, and they stood like that while the last of the smoke went over. Then she let go of his shirt, one hand and then the other.

"Tonight's this," she said. "Out here. I'm going in by myself."

"Okay, Loop," he said.

In the burn he had said it dry as the ash. She had not heard it like this. He touched her face once more, along the jaw, and went down the outside stair, and she stood on the landing and listened to him all the way down and along the side of the building and out of hearing.

Inside, she did not turn on the light. She sat down on the edge of the bed, remembered the bag of wet clothes on the landing, stood up for it and drove the top of her head into the ceiling.

"Ow," she said to the empty room. "Ow. Tenant down. She's down by the head, Lyle, forty yards short, you saw it—" and then she was laughing too hard to finish, flat on her back across the bed in Dot's flannel with both hands over her face, then with her hands off it, laughing in the dark.

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CHAPTER 6

Dot's Ledger

"Copy," Rae said through the open window of the sheriff's truck, and drove on down Main before Marnie could ask what, precisely, had been received.

It was eleven on Sunday morning, and Rae was the second. Gil had been first, at nine, outside the Mercantile with a gallon of milk; he had looked at her the way he looked at a parcel whose return address pleased him and said nothing at all, which from Gil amounted to a press release. For the rest of the walk Marnie drafted the report Rae would file: Subject observed on the outside landing above the outfitters at twenty-two twenty hours. Sunburned. Did not appear to require assistance. She did not say it out loud; she had a drawer full of those.

At ten past noon, in the Assay Office, two slices of sour cherry pie came down at her elbow on two plates, though she had ordered a grilled cheese and nothing after it.

"One's for the swim," Junie said.

"One's for Walt," Celia said from the register. "She got Walt a blanket."

"Owen got Walt out, Celia. She got Owen the blanket."

"Then one's for the blanket."

"One's for the landing," Junie said, and Celia said, "We don't know a thing about the landing," in the voice of a woman who could have drawn it to scale.

Marnie ate the first slice so that her face would have something to do. The news had crossed Ruby Fork at a speed she would have liked to model, given base data and a free afternoon, and its source was plainly the landing itself, which stood fourteen feet above Main and could be seen, she now understood, from the diner porch and every other window on the street. What nobody had drawn to scale was how small it was. There had been one kiss on the landing, with a date said out loud in the same breath, and a second that morning at the bottom of the inside stair before he turned the sign, quick and sure, his hand at the small of her back below the sunburn. That was all of it. She ate the second slice too.

When the evenings came they kept to the scale. If the sky held there was the landing after closing, and if it didn't there was the back room, and at the end of either there was the inside-stair door, where he kissed her goodnight on his side of it and waited until he heard her turn the lock. Then he drove home to the north shore. He did it every night, and she lay under the slanted ceiling hearing the truck go down Main toward the lake. It was a good design, with an edge on every side.

* * *

Gwen had opened her Montrose office at eight so that Marnie could be back for the kids by ten, and she had the Marchettis' contract tabbed in yellow, one flag for every place a signature went.

"Three ninety-eight," Gwen said, sliding the first page across, her glasses swinging on their chain. "Closing Friday, September eleventh. Their lender will want an inventory of the stock before then, and I'll send you the form."

Marnie signed where the flags were and initialed where they weren't, and Gwen said congratulations and meant it, being a woman who liked a clean closing the way Marnie liked a clean edge-match, two sheets meeting along a line with nothing left over. On the drive back up she put the folder on the passenger seat and, without quite deciding to, buckled the belt across it, which she noticed at the top of the pass and did not undo.

Walt was on the bench outside Dot's at a quarter to ten, his cap pulled low. He had the spare hearing aid in, the beige one he had found in a drawer after the lake kept the good one, and when she parked he looked at the folder on her seat and then down Main at the water. About Montrose he asked nothing. She

unlocked the green door and made the coffee the way Dot had, black and too strong, and when she brought it out he took it and said nothing, no stope or highgrade, nothing in mining words or any other. For long enough to be sure, she stood beside the bench. Then the first child came up the street with a book held over his head, and she went inside to get the pins.

* * *

At ten on Wednesday Owen came across the street with a cardboard box under his arm, ducked the brass bell and stood in front of the Reading Trail wall while thirty-eight children sat on Dot's pine floor and looked up at him the way they looked at the marmot.

"Mears County Search and Rescue," he said. "We look for people."

"You found her," a girl said, pointing, and thirty-eight heads turned toward the counter, where Marnie raised a hand to confirm that she had been found and would take questions after.

Out of the box came an orange plastic whistle on a cord and a folded black garbage bag. He showed them that one was for being heard and the other was a raincoat once you poked a hole for your face, and the box went around the floor. Then he crouched, forearms on his knees, so that he was nearer their height, and gave them the rule.

"If you're lost," he said, "stay where you are."

He stopped. It was half a second, if that, about the gap between two radio transmissions, and in it his eyes went to the front window and whatever was beyond it; then they came back, and he went on in the same even voice. "Hug a tree. We'll come to you."

Nobody on the floor noticed. Hazel was retying a shoe, and Milo, under the headlamp he wore indoors, was testing the whistle against his palm without blowing it. Only Marnie, at the counter, who had spent a month learning what Owen looked like when he didn't stop, saw him stop. She knew the town's version of the winter, which was three sentences long and came with an instruction not to ask.

Milo's hand went up. "What if you're somewhere cool?"

"Then stay where you are somewhere cool."

The whole floor laughed at once, and Owen let it. At the door he handed out the whistles on the condition that nobody blow one inside a bookstore, a

condition that held as far as the sidewalk. Marnie kept the half-second with the other things she had seen and not been told, and she didn't ask about it, at the counter or that night at the door.

* * *

On Friday, after pins, Milo washed his hands at the back-room sink twice without being asked a second time and presented himself at the flat file holding them up like a surgeon.

"Fourth drawer," Marnie said. "Edges only."

He lifted the sheets the way she had shown him, by two corners, breathing through his mouth. The fourth drawer was claim plats, blueprints mostly, faded to the blue of old denim with the lines in white, and he went through six of them before he stopped.

"Lucky Ten," he read. "Mineral Survey number nine-one-one-two. Eighteen ninety-one." He bent close, and his headlamp put a white circle on the paper. "That's the Ruby Queen. That's the mill. Walt worked there."

"He did."

She came around the desk to look. The claim was the usual long rectangle, tied by a bearing to a monument in the corner of the sheet, and from the mill at its lower edge a dotted line climbed west and then bent north, labeled in the surveyor's careful hand as a wagon road. In the margin beside the bend, in the pencil capitals Marnie would have known on any scrap of paper in the world, Dot had written WALT: CABIN STANDING '68, STOVE IN IT.

"Is the cabin still there?"

"Probably not." Nearly sixty years of snow on a roof somebody had built out of whatever was growing nearby. "Roofs don't last long that high up."

He put one finger on the mill and looked at her, and when she nodded he traced the dotted road up the sheet, slowly, past the bend and Dot's note to the corner of the claim, the way she had traced rivers in an atlas in this same room when she was eleven.

"This is on a plat," she said. "It isn't on any map. Nobody's walked it in a long time, and you don't go anywhere near anything on this sheet without a grown-up."

"Okay," Milo said. He slid the Lucky Ten back into the fourth drawer by its corners and went to wait for his mother on the green couch, headlamp on, the drilling-contest book open on his knees for the second time.

* * *

She told Owen at six on Tuesday, over the counter, where she was going and when she would be out, because that was what you did, and he said, "Okay," and wrote it on the back of a fishing-license pad without looking up.

The burn looked different in July. The snags were the same, black and limbless above the gray ash soil, but the aspen suckers had come up to her waist, and wherever the ground lay open the fireweed had bloomed, so thick and so magenta on the slope below the first junction that it looked like a mistake in the color ramp. At the second junction it had grown up around the post until only the tip of the arrow showed. She stood in front of it for a while anyway, in her boots, with three liters of water on her back and her own correction on the phone in her pocket, unopened, and then she turned up the north side onto the reroute she had put on Pinyon's map herself, two summers late.

It climbed the way the contours had said it would, in long traverses with tight turns at the ends, and the air let her keep going, which in June it would not have. From the top she could see the debris-flow channel she had mapped from a desk in Denver, a raw gray gash down the far slope with the old tread hanging off its lip, and she ate a granola bar looking at it and did not take any of it personally.

Going down was worse. Her shins started at the first steep stretch and kept on, the right one hurting most, along the pink line where the deadfall had opened it in June, and she took the steep parts sideways, as she always did, with all the confidence of a woman backing out of a room she wasn't supposed to be in. By noon a thunderhead had built over the ridge behind her. For the last mile it followed her down, the light going flat, then yellow, the first thunder a long way back and then not a long way back, and since her shins would not let her run she walked faster than they liked.

At one o'clock Owen's truck was idling at the trailhead beside her car, and he was behind the wheel with a clipboard propped against it.

"Paperwork," he said.

"Is it?"

"No."

The first drops hit the windshield, big and far apart, and she climbed in on the passenger side, both shins objecting to the step, while he set the clipboard on the dash, blank side up.

* * *

Graham's text came at twelve minutes to seven on Wednesday evening, while she was sweeping Dot's floor, and she read it standing up with the broom in her other hand.

"Saw your name on the Keeler fix in the Pinyon newsletter. Good for you, M. Hope it's peaceful up there. You always needed more quiet than you thought. —G"

It was kind, entirely kind: he had read the newsletter, where Kendra had given the Keeler fix a paragraph and her name, and he had taken the time. She leaned the broom against Biography and read it again, and she heard the last sentence in his voice, reasonable and even.

At the diner she was bright. Over green chile she told Owen about the fireweed and the color ramp, and asked whether hummingbirds slept, and laughed in all the right places and said nothing she meant. Owen ate his dinner and watched her do it.

At ten, in the back room of the outfitters, she put her key in the inside-stair door the way she did every night and, instead of going through and turning the lock behind her, held it open.

"Come up," she said.

He looked at her in the dark of the back room. "You're sure?"

"Yes."

The stair was narrow enough that he climbed it behind her with his shoulders turned, and at the top she didn't reach for the lamp. She turned around in the dark and kissed him hard, before he had finished straightening under the slant, her hands fisted in the front of his shirt, and walked them backward toward the bed under the window, quick, the way you go down a slope you don't trust, all momentum and no looking. For a moment he came with her. His hands were at her waist over Dot's flannel and he was kissing her back, and the backs of her knees found the edge of the mattress. Then his hands went still, and he leaned back far enough to see her by the light from Main.

"Where are you?"

"Here."

"No." He didn't let go of her. "I want you loud. This isn't loud."

She sat down on the edge of the bed. For a while she looked at her own hands, at the graphite down the outside of the right one, and found that she was going to talk after all.

"I got a text," she said, and held out the phone. He sat down beside her and read it, the screen lighting his face from below, and gave it back.

Then she told him, because he had asked where she was and she wanted, it turned out, to answer. Four years, engaged for two. A financial planner with a nice laugh who had never once raised his voice at her, which she said twice, because it mattered that Owen understand that part. "You're a lot, Marn," said kindly, and often enough that she could hear it when Graham wasn't in the room; and in the car outside his parents' dinners or before his work things, the longer version: "I love how much you are. Could you be a little less of it tonight?" By the second year she was editing in advance, so there would be less to ask for, keeping the jokes inside where they couldn't cost anybody anything. One night on the drive home he told her she had been lovely, and she counted back and found she had said fourteen words since the soup.

"I believed him," she said, and made herself say the rest of it slowly. "I left, and I kept believing him. I've been quiet on purpose for a year and a half, and the thing is, he's not wrong, he was never wrong, and tonight I wanted to come up here and not be a lot about a text."

"You are a lot," Owen said. "It's the right amount."

She could see he meant it exactly as he had said it, the way he meant "Yes" and "Okay," a measurement with nothing added.

"Can I tell you something I've never said out loud?"

"Yes."

"Rae's report on tonight." She cleared her throat. "'Subject observed at the diner being bright. Vigil reports subject was also quiet, and at twenty-two hundred asked subject where she was. Subject has since been located. No arrests.'"

He laughed, loud, with his head going back, and the back of his head met the slanted ceiling with a thump that made him laugh harder, one hand on top

of his skull, and it came to her that in five weeks she had never once heard him laugh out loud.

They talked until past midnight, sitting on top of the covers with their backs against the wall where the slant began. He said more than she had ever heard him say, which was still not much, and she said the rest. When they first sat down he had set his phone on her nightstand, face-up, and she had seen his thumb check the ringer switch before he let it go; it lay there all night between the lamp and her glasses, dark and ready, and she noticed it each time she looked that way and did not ask. At twenty to one he went down the inside stair, and she turned the lock behind him and watched from the window as the truck went down Main and around the end of the lake toward the north shore.

Before she slept she picked up her phone and answered Graham. "It's loud up here. I like it."

* * *

The read-aloud on Friday ran until four, and when the children had gone out the green door in a body, Inez Salazar stayed on her bench by Biography with her cane across her knees. Marnie stacked the floor cushions and understood that she was being waited for, and that the waiting had been going on since the second of May.

She set the last cushion on the stack and said it before she could arrange it into something polite.

"I had the car packed." Inez didn't move. "For two hours I sat in it in the garage under my building with the keys in my hand. I knew I'd cry in a room full of people who'd known her better than I had, and I'd be the loudest grief in the room. And the one person who had never once told me I was too much was the one everybody was there for." Her voice held, mostly. "So I went back upstairs and worked on a fire evacuation map all day."

Through the front window, which Dot had always kept propped open in July, she could hear the hummingbirds at the diner's feeders two doors down. Inez looked at her for a long moment, straight-backed.

"That is a reason," Inez said. "It is not an excuse."

She stood, using the cane for the standing and not after, and walked to the door and stopped there with her hand on the frame.

"Dorothy used to say you were the loudest child she ever had on the Trail." She did not turn around. "She said that somebody had since taught you to stop."

The bell hung silent above her.

"I have not decided about you," Inez said, and went out, and the bell rang behind her.

Two pins were still waiting from the afternoon, a sentence apiece told to Marnie at the door on the way out, and she crossed to the wall and moved them up, one switchback each.

* * *

The lender wanted the stock counted by category, with an estimated value for each, on a form Gwen had sent with the categories already typed in. So on Sunday, the second of August, Marnie had the green ledgers down from their shelf, where they had been since Inez returned them dry in a laundry basket, and was working through the later years for Dot's used-book tallies, one finger running down columns of penciled prices.

The note was in the margin of a page of paperback Westerns, in Dot's pencil, pressed a little harder than usual: "M. left him. Good. Told her to come up. She won't. Yet."

Dot had said it on the phone in four words, come up for a while, and Marnie had said she would think about it, and had thought about it, she supposed, for a year and a half.

She closed the ledger and set it on the desk, square to the edge. Then she went out the green door and two doors west to the Assay Office, where at a quarter past two the lunch crowd had thinned to a pair of summer people at the counter, and she sat down in Dot's booth by the front window, which she had never sat in and which nobody sat in.

Celia came over with the pad. Behind the pie case, Junie looked up.

"A breakfast burrito, smothered in green," Marnie said, out loud, at a volume that carried to the counter. "Black coffee. And whatever pie there is."

It was peach. Junie brought it herself and set it down beside the burrito and went back behind the case without a word, and Celia poured the coffee and returned to the register and stood there with the pad held against her chest,

writing nothing down, and Marnie ate all of it, every bite, in Dot's booth by the window, while for once neither of them said anything at all.

Written to order at crispybooks.xyz

CHAPTER 7

North Shore

At the rock step the wheel went off the edge and the litter came forward with it. Owen had the front right handle, so the weight found him first. For two seconds he held most of a man and a litter on one arm, until Tuck got a shoulder under the rail and Sunny caught the back corner, and somewhere in those two seconds the top of his right shoulder pulled the wrong way and stayed there.

"Set," Tuck said.

Sunny said, "Set."

"Go," Owen said, and they went on down.

The page had come at ten past one. A man from Wichita, fifty-four, camped at the creek crossing a mile and a half up the Calder Point trail, had gone down the bank for water in the dark and come back up it on his hands and one knee. Both bones below the knee, closed, by the feel of it; the foot warm and pink. Owen had padded the splint himself, and since then he had checked that foot at every switchback while the man apologized to each of them by name, as soon as he had the names. Six on the litter and three spelling them, a mile and a half up and the same back down: three miles by headlamp, with the creek loud on the left the whole way.

He left the shoulder alone. You could carry on a shoulder like that if you didn't think about it, and there were better things to think about: the foot, the

footing, Sunny's boot on the wet rock, the Montrose ambulance waiting at the trailhead at twenty past four with its back doors open and its heater on.

At ten past five, in the bay at the barn, he counted them. Nine had gone up. Under the lights nine were pulling off harnesses, Tuck already eating something out of a paper sack, Sunny with her braid come loose and mud to the knee. Deb sat at the folding table with the log open and her glasses pushed up on her head. He counted twice, the second time without deciding to. All home.

Nobody had seen the shoulder. He made sure of it by carrying the litter bag out to the rack with his left arm.

The Calder Creek road was going gray when he drove down it. A quarter mile below the barn he keyed the radio on the dash, the one of the pair he had kept.

"Upstairs, Outfitters. Status of coffee?"

The answer came with no gap at all, as if she'd had the radio in her hand.

"Coffee is on."

* * *

The lights were on when he pulled in at ten to six. He had not left them on. Through the front window he could see the urn's red light and Marnie behind the counter in Dot's blue-and-green flannel, sleeves rolled twice, glasses on, the radio clipped to her breast pocket and her pen moving on the pad by the register.

She looked up when the door opened.

"One," she said.

"Present."

"I heard the page. One-ten." She tipped her head at the radio. "It comes in on that. I keep it by the bed."

It did come in on that. In June, on the evening he left it on her counter, he had set the pair to scan the team channel and had not mentioned it. So she had heard all of it, his voice at the crossing and Deb's answering from the barn. Four and a half hours of it from upstairs, on a radio he had given her so that she could reach him.

She came around the counter with a paper cup and put it in his left hand. He had not noticed he was reaching with the left.

"Lie down," she said. "Back room. The cot. I'll open."

"No."

"Lie down, Owen. I'll open."

He looked at the urn, which was on, and at the till, which she had counted, the twenties all faced the same way in the drawer. Nobody but his father and him had opened that door at six since 1988. He thought about saying so. Instead he went into the back room and lay down on the steel cot under the rope wall with his boots on, and let her.

At six the door opened, and he knew the first ones by their boots. Lyle came in for coffee, as he did most summer mornings, and stood at the counter a while without ordering.

"Where's Owen?"

"Asleep," Marnie said.

Lyle thought about that. "He know?"

"Now he does."

After Lyle came a man who wanted a fishing license. Owen heard the state's printer run, then the man say, "That's a lot more than the sign," then a silence in which he could hear Marnie reading the screen.

"Okay," she said. "So. I've sold you a year."

"A year."

"Of fishing. In Colorado. It's good through next March." There was a pause. "I'd lean into it."

The man laughed. On the cot Owen looked at the ceiling; lying still was harder than the rock step had been. Next came a family for a tent, the father reading their trip aloud off a map while two children argued about whether a marmot was a kind of beaver. Silver Basin, eleven-six, two nights, and they wanted the cheap one with the mesh top off the rental shelf.

"Can I see the map?" Marnie asked.

Paper moved on the counter.

"So you're here," she said. "North side of the basin, right under the headwall. That's north-facing, and it's a bowl. At night the cold air runs downhill and sits in bowls, which means by three in the morning your tent is at the bottom of a bucket of it. Thirties. That one is mostly screen."

"It's August," the father said.

"Everywhere but there."

They took the two-pole tent with the full fly and four wool hats, and she rang it up right.

A while later she came into the back room with a bag of ice from the bait freezer wrapped in a shop towel and set it on his right shoulder. Two ibuprofen went into his palm. A paper cup of water went on the floor by the cot.

"Right one," she said, and went back out front.

He had told nobody. With the cold going into the joint, he went back over the morning looking for the place he had given it away and couldn't find it. Out front she was giving somebody the Calder Point forecast, correctly, with the turnaround time. He didn't get up, and a while after that he was asleep.

* * *

On Monday night there were seventeen in the folding chairs at the barn, counting Marnie's, which was empty because she was standing at the front.

The team's old projector sat on a sawhorse and threw the map book onto the roll-up door a page at a time, eight feet tall. Deb had printed the book in 2019. Since June Marnie had been taking it apart in the afternoons at his back counter, every trail run against the county lidar, every junction moved to where the junction was, and now she stood beside it with the clicker in one hand and a pen in the other and talked. Tonight she talked for twenty minutes. Four times the room laughed, Tuck loudest, and Owen counted.

"Page forty," she said, and clicked. The Calder Point trail came up on the door with Deb's note in the margin in Deb's small slanted hand. "Deb's note says four miles, mostly shade." She let them read it. "It's four point eight. I know because I walked the point eight personally, in June, at a speed I've been asked not to discuss. And the last mile and a half is talus and open ridge. The only shade up there is a marmot, and he doesn't share."

That got the loudest laugh of the night. In the front row, Deb did not.

"Show me," Deb said.

Marnie clicked, and the trail's profile came up, the long climb through the spruce-fir and then the bare line to the top. She put the tip of the pen on the door where the trees quit. "Talus starts about ten-six on that side. Everything above it is in the sun from nine in the morning on."

Deb looked at the door for a while. "Change it."

"Already did."

That was when Deb stood up. She did not stand at meetings as a rule; she asked her questions from the chair.

"The county has a little money for this book," Deb said. "Not much. Will you sign on? Mapping lead."

Sixteen people looked at Marnie. She lowered the clicker.

"I'm leaving after the eleventh," she said.

It was quiet enough to hear the fan in the projector. Deb's eyes went to Owen, in the back row by the door where he always sat, and stayed on him long enough that two other people turned to see what she was looking at. He was looking at the page on the door, at the place where the trees quit.

Afterward, with the chairs stacked, he coiled the hundred-meter rope from Thursday's drill at the rope bin, working the left arm harder than it should have had to work. Deb came and stood beside him and watched him do it.

"You going to say anything to her?"

"No."

"Owen."

He kept coiling.

* * *

The hummingbirds were working the feeders on the Assay Office porch, just outside the open window behind Rae's head. It was a quarter past twelve on Tuesday. Rae had her cap on the seat beside her and her sunglasses hooked on her collar, and she was eating his fries one at a time, since he wasn't.

Across the room, in Dot's booth, Marnie was telling Sunny about the fishing license. She was telling the whole diner, in fact, since she had not lowered her voice for any of it.

"A year," she said. "Of fishing. He was so nice about it. Says he's coming back in October to get his money's worth."

"He won't," Celia said from the register.

Marnie laughed. When she and Sunny had paid she was still talking as they went out across the porch, and the hummingbirds lifted off all three feeders at once and came back.

Rae watched them go. "Subject was observed talking for forty minutes straight."

"Thirty-five," Owen said.

"You going to ask her to stay?"

"No."

"Why not."

Owen didn't answer. He had told one man to stay where he was, once, and the man had.

Rae waited, and he looked at the window. Behind the counter at Dot's, two doors down, there was a feed-store calendar on the wall with the eleventh of September circled once in Marnie's pen. The roofer from Montrose started across the street from his shop on the seventeenth, a Monday. He knew both dates without having tried to know either; they had come in the way the weather off the ridge came in by two, and stayed.

Rae put her sunglasses on, indoors, which meant she was done with him for the day, and took the last fry.

* * *

He had asked her at six on Wednesday morning across the counter, with the till drawer open and his hands in it. Perseids tonight under a new moon, and his dock was the darkest place he knew; would she come out. She had looked at him long enough that he shut the drawer.

"Yes," she said. "Obviously. Yes."

At nine he drove her out the gravel road along the north shore, the mile and a half of it, with the lake on the left going from gray to nothing. Nobody but Rae had been inside the house since he moved into it in 2018. He thought about that on the gravel and then quit thinking about it, because it was decided. She was in the truck.

In the kitchen he lit the stove first, since the house would be cold by ten even in August, and she stood in the middle of the floor with her hands in the pockets of her fleece and looked at everything. He let her look. The county map hung by the door, and nothing else hung on any wall. Books stood in square stacks along the baseboards. At the table there was one chair. She watched him take his phone out of his pocket and set it face-up on the counter, and her eyes stayed on it a second after his hand had gone.

"One chair," she said.

"Rae stands."

At half past nine they carried two sleeping bags and the foam pad from the truck down to the dock and lay on the planks with the cold coming up off the water. There was no moon. The sky over the lake was so full that it took her a minute to find a dark patch to watch, and then the first one went over, long and green, low in the northeast.

He had left the kitchen window open a hand's width so he would hear the phone from the dock. It didn't ring.

For most of an hour she counted out loud. She took the long ones and the quick ones, and one that broke in two, which she counted twice on purpose, and she argued with herself over a satellite. Owen counted too, without saying it, the way he counted anything that moved. Somewhere past twenty she stopped to tell him about the radiant, which was in Perseus and was why they were called what they were called, and when she came back she said, "Twenty-four? Twenty-six. I've lost it. How many was that?"

"Twenty-nine."

"You were counting."

"Yes."

She told him then that they were grit off a comet that came around every hundred and thirty-three years, bits the size of sand going into the air at thirty-seven miles a second. When the cold got into her he reached over and pulled the bag up around her shoulder without taking his eyes off the sky.

She lay with her head on his arm, the left one, and looked up for a while without counting anything. Then she turned her head and looked back up the dock at the house, dark except for the stove showing orange through one window, and said, lightly, "So this is where you keep yourself."

It went in deeper than she had meant it to. He saw her hear it a second after she said it, and saw her start to take it back, and he did not want it taken back. That was where he kept himself. For eight years he had made sure nobody came out here, and tonight he had driven her out the gravel road himself.

"Come inside," he said. "I want you in my bed."

She didn't say anything for a moment. Under the dock the water knocked once against a post.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Yes."

They left the bags on the dock. Going up the planks he had her hand, and she took two steps to his one and didn't say a word about it, which he noticed, because on foot she said a word about most things. The kitchen was warmer. As the iron came up to heat, the stove ticked, and the cold still sat in the corners where the light didn't reach, and the one chair stood at the table where it always stood.

He turned her by the shoulders under the kitchen light. Her hair was clipped up off her neck with the black binder clip she had worn every day he had known her. He reached up and opened it and took it out, slowly, so it wouldn't pull, and her hair came down to her jaw. The clip went on the counter beside his phone. Those were the only two things on the counter, and she looked at them lying there together and then at him.

Then he kissed her. He did it slowly, the way he did a thing he meant to finish, with one hand along her jaw. Under his thumb her pulse was going quick and light; he kept his thumb there and felt it, and did not hurry it or himself. Her hands came up to the back of his neck, and they were cold. So was the end of her nose. He took both her hands down and folded them between his and held them there, between the two of them, until they warmed, and she watched him do it.

"You're very thorough," she said.

"Yes."

She laughed, and he felt it against his mouth more than he heard it, because by then he was kissing her again. He noticed everything and kept all of it: that her shoulders came down when he held her hands, and that her hair smelled of the shop's coffee and, under that, of the lake. For once he did not do anything with what he noticed except want it.

It was for him. He had asked for it for nobody else. The eleventh of September was circled on the calendar behind Dot's counter, and he knew the date as well as she did, and he had asked anyway, for tonight, which was a thing he could ask for.

He leaned back far enough to see her face.

"I've wanted this since I fitted your boots," he said. "You were standing on the incline board with your heels taped, asking me if they were supposed to feel like that. I wanted it then."

"The boots?"

"The boots."

For a moment she only looked at him. Then she put both hands flat on his chest, went all the way up on her toes and kissed him herself, a long time, in the warm kitchen with the stove ticking.

The bedroom was at the end of the short hall, and its door stood open on the cold. Past it he could see his grandmother's quilt on the bed and, beyond that, the lake in the window, black and full of stars. He stopped in the doorway with her hand in his.

"Still yes?" he asked.

"Still yes."

They went in together, and he shut the door behind them against the cold.

* * *

At ten to six he had been awake for an hour and had not got up.

The window over the bed had gone from black to gray, and the lake under it was flat and white with the cold coming off it. Across town the urn was off and the front door was locked with no card on it, and somebody in waders was probably standing on the step reading Ray's sign about coffee at six. He lay there and knew it. Marnie was asleep on her side under his grandmother's quilt with her hair across the pillow and one hand under her cheek, the outside edge of it gray with graphite.

Nobody but him had slept in this house since 2018. Rae had been inside often enough, but she had never stayed.

At five to six Marnie opened her eyes without moving anything else.

"You're late," she said.

"Yes."

"Is that allowed?"

"I own it."

She laughed with her mouth open and the crooked tooth showing, and didn't put her hand up. Under the quilt she found his hand and kept it, as if she had been doing it for years and didn't need to ask, and he let her keep it.

At six he sat up on the edge of the bed and reached for yesterday's work shirt on the bedpost. He had one arm in it when she said his name in a different voice, and he knew what she was looking at.

The scar ran about eight inches along his left ribs, ragged and pale, the skin around it gone shiny. Kandahar Province, 2012, a truck on its side in a ditch; he had worked on two of the others before anybody looked at his shirt. She came up on one elbow and touched it with two fingers, along its length, the way she ran a pen down a contour to see where it went. He let her do that too.

"Truck," he said. "Twenty twelve."

She didn't ask anything else about it. Her eyes went past him to the nightstand, to the phone lying face-up with the ringer on, and stayed there.

"What happened in March?"

He sat with the shirt on one arm. Out on the lake a duck came down onto the flat water and skidded.

"I'll tell you," he said. "Not today."

She looked at him a long time. "Okay."

Then she took his hand and laid it flat on the scar, and put hers over it, and held it there.

"Loop," he said. It wasn't a tease. She kept his hand where it was.

* * *

He drove her back at seven with the heater on and the binder clip in her hair again. In the back room he made her coffee on the hot plate and poured it into the blue mug, the chip turned away from her, and she sat on the back counter with it and her boots hanging and watched him not hurry.

At twenty to eight he unlocked the front door. In eight years he had never once been late without a card on the door. This morning there was none, since there had been no call to hang one for, and two men in waders were sitting on the bench under the window with their thermoses, and one of them looked at his watch.

"Morning," Owen said.

Rae's truck came down Main from the east, slowed in front of the window and went on toward the lake without stopping. Half a minute later his phone lit on the counter by the register.

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He read it, left the phone face-up where it lived, and didn't answer it.

Written to order at crispybooks.xyz

CHAPTER 8

The Lucky Ten

On the last Friday in August, Milo Pruett gave his book talk with his headlamp switched to high, so that the eleven children cross-legged on Dot's pine floor had to listen to him with their eyes shut.

"Lamp," Hazel said.

He clicked it down to the setting he used for reading indoors under perfectly good lights and held up his book, a library-bound history of San Juan ghost towns whose corners had gone soft from three weeks in a backpack between a rock collection and a sandwich. Hazel folded her arms. At eleven she had made herself the wall's standard of evidence, and everyone knew her rule: one real sentence about the book, and "It was good" didn't count, because that was a receipt.

"In a ghost town," Milo said, "the people leave and the stoves stay, because a stove weighs four hundred pounds and nobody wants to carry it down a mountain."

Hazel turned this over for a while. "That's a real one."

Marnie took his pin out of the seventeenth switchback and pushed it into the eighteenth, where the trail on the butcher paper bent around the marmot's talus and turned for the last two climbs to the summit. She had been back in Dot's flat since the twenty-second, under a new roof that still smelled of tar, among boxes marked KEEP and DONATE and one marked DOT—DON'T,

which held Dot's reading glasses on their beaded cord and the paperback from her nightstand with her pencil still in it, and which she kept moving from room to room as though it had asked to go somewhere. Every morning since, she had woken at ten to six listening for a grinder she could not possibly hear through two walls and the width of Main Street; every morning at six she had given up and crossed the street, where Owen had a paper cup poured and lidded before the door finished closing behind her. On Thursday, when she came in with her hair still wet, he had handed it over and laid the backs of his fingers against her cheek for a second to see how cold she was, in front of two men buying licenses, which in Ruby Fork meant the Mercantile knew by eight.

"Walt says the stove's still in the Lucky Ten," Milo said, to the room, in the voice of someone reporting a fact. "Up from the Ruby Queen. It has a lion on the door. I'm going to find it for my last talk, so I can bring something real."

Eleven faces turned toward Marnie, because the Trail had a rule for everything and they wanted to know whether it had one for this.

"Not without a grown-up," she said.

"Okay," Milo said.

He meant it. She could watch him mean it, the whole freckled face of him agreeing; she had also spent most of a summer with forty children and had learned that an eight-year-old's okay was a forecast, reliable for about the length of an afternoon. Then Hazel's brother wanted to talk about squid, and the morning went on.

Out on the bench, Walt had finished Dot's coffee and was reading the ridge with his cap pushed back.

"You told him there's a stove," she said.

"There is. Saw it in sixty-eight. Four-hole, lion on the door, roof going." He looked pleased with every one of these facts. "Nobody packs a stove off a claim. Too heavy to highgrade."

"Walt. He's eight."

"I was eight on the Queen dump," Walt said, and reached up under his cap and turned his hearing aid off.

* * *

At twenty to four on Sunday, the radio Owen had left on Dot's counter in June gave the long tone it gave for a page, and Marnie stopped halfway up the

rolling ladder with the lender's inventory on a clipboard and one finger on the fourth Louis L'Amour from the left.

"Mears County Search and Rescue, callout. Missing juvenile, eight years old, Calder Creek day-use area at the Ruby Queen mill. Last seen ten minutes to three. Respond to the barn."

She came down the ladder sideways, the way she came down everything, and stood at the front window. The storm that had broken over the ridge at two had left Main steaming and both gutters running, and across the street the outfitters' door opened and Owen came out in the red jacket, already talking into the radio on his chest, hung Ray's card in the glass, looked once at Dot's window, lifted a hand when she lifted hers, and was gone in the truck toward the Calder Creek road before her own hand was back at her side.

Eight years old. There were nine eight-year-olds on the wall, and she found that she knew all their names in the order of their pins, which was not a list she had meant to keep. Because the inventory was what she had, she went back up the ladder and wrote a 4 beside the Hondos, and could not have said whether she had already done the bottom shelf. On the counter Deb's voice came on and took the incident; team numbers went out. Owen's said "Vigil, en route," and a minute later Tuck's said he had the dog. At five past four a sheriff's SUV stopped in the middle of Main with its lights turning and no other car on the street, and Rae came through the green door so fast that the brass bell was still going when she reached the counter.

"Deb wants Milo Pruett's reading list," Rae said. "Kid reads. What he reads is where he goes. You keep the list."

Marnie did not need the list. She handed it over anyway, the Trail notebook open to his page, seventeen sentences in her own handwriting about drilling contests and ore carts, a hoist that had once killed a mule, a headframe taller than the Lakeview, and at the bottom, in the eighteenth, Friday's stove. While Rae read it, Marnie was in the back room with the fourth drawer of the flat file open, lifting out the Lucky Ten.

"He's going to the cabin," she said. "Walt told him the stove's still in it. He told me on Friday, and I told him not without a grown-up."

"And he said okay."

"He said okay."

Rae looked at her for one second longer than the shorthand allowed. "Copy," she said. "Get your stuff."

The plat was a blueprint gone pale at the folds, the claim drawn as a long rectangle on a slope of hachures, the wagon road dotted west and then north from the mill, and in the margin, in Dot's pencil, WALT: CABIN STANDING '68, STOVE IN IT. Dot's flatbed took ninety seconds a pass. Marnie stood over it with both hands flat on the lid and watched the lamp crawl under the glass, and did not let herself think about July: the boy in this room with his headlamp on, his finger on the dotted line, and her own voice telling him what it was. She packed the laptop, which had carried the county's bare-earth lidar since the hazard map, with the Pinyon fleece on top of it, and put the radio in her pocket. Rae drove them up the Calder Creek road past the barn at a speed the road had not been graded for, and said nothing at all about her brother, which was how Marnie knew how frightened she was.

* * *

By twenty to five the day-use lot below the Ruby Queen was a row of trucks parked nose-out, a canopy still dripping over a folding table, and Deb Okafor at the table. Above the lot the mill stepped up the hill in concrete foundations. The two tailings dumps spilled rust-orange and bare toward the creek, the ore bin was folding in on itself, and the headframe lay on its side in fireweed still blooming at the tips. Brown with the storm, the creek was loud enough that people stood close to talk.

Deb's briefing took less than a minute. Point last seen was the picnic table with orange tape around one leg, at ten to three, after the rain; the boy was wet through, in a gray sweatshirt and cargo shorts, with a headlamp in one pocket; tonight would drop into the thirties at ten thousand feet, colder than that in the drainage. Down at the bank Tuck crouched beside Pistol with a hand on her back, and when Marnie looked at him he shook his head. The dog had run the track from the table to the water and stopped there with her nose down and her tail still, and would not take it any farther.

"He had his headlamp," Kayla Pruett said from the end of the table. "He always has his headlamp."

"Good," Deb said. "Eight-year-olds go to water." Every team went to the creek.

Afterward Kayla stood by their truck holding a dry sweatshirt her son had not wanted to put on, folding it in half and in half again, then shaking it out to start over. Ben walked the bank above the high water with a flashlight he did not need yet, calling his son's name at a creek that was louder than he was.

Marnie waited until the teams were moving, then set the laptop on the table in front of Deb.

"Tell me," Deb said.

She told her: the Friday talk, the stove, Walt, the plat in the fourth drawer, a dotted road from the mill to a claim at ten thousand four hundred feet. "Show me," Deb said, and Marnie showed her the scan with Dot's pencil in the margin. Deb listened to all of it, more than Marnie had expected, and asked one question.

"When's this from?"

"Eighteen ninety-one."

Over the top of the screen Deb looked at the creek, then at the dog working the bank. She uncapped one of her pens and wrote on the whiteboard, under the three team numbers, LUCKY TEN / WAGON RD, and beside it, LOW.

"Work it," she said. "Bring me something I can send people to." She slid the team's laminated map across the table with a grease pencil on top. "First the creek. Pieces a team can clear in an hour."

Owen came past the table with Sunny and Tuck behind him and Pistol out ahead, the radio harness buckled over the red jacket. He looked down at the scan for as long as it took to read Dot's note.

"How far can an eight-year-old even get?" Marnie said.

"Two miles, last August," Owen said. "On a ditch road."

He was already moving. At the edge of the canopy he turned back, and for a moment he looked about to say something that belonged to the two of them. "Send me what you get," he said. "Phone's on." Then he took Team Two up the creek.

* * *

By twenty past five she had the creek cut into nine pieces, each a stretch a team could clear in an hour on that slope with that much water in it, and Deb took the map back, looked it over and said "Good" the way she might have said

it about a splint. After that the hood of Rae's SUV was Marnie's, warm under the laptop for the first hour and then not.

Around her the night's work went on in a shape she had only ever seen as lines on a map. Teams called segments clear in four words. Deb moved magnets on the whiteboard and wrote times beside them in a small, unhurried hand. When the laptop battery fell under twenty percent, Rae ran an orange cord from the dashboard and said nothing about the percentage, which Marnie appreciated more than she could have explained.

The plat tied the claim's first corner to Mineral Monument No. 3 by a bearing and a distance, and the county's survey layer had a point for Monument No. 3, so she pinned the scan to that point, turned it until the surveyor's bearings ran true, and let the claim and its dotted road hang from the one pin. On the bare-earth hillshade, with the trees stripped away and the light raked low from the northwest, the slope above the mill was a gray field of gullies and old rockfall. Where the dotted road crossed it there was a bench: faint, level, cut across the contours with the patience of something built on purpose.

She checked it three times. After the sun went behind the ridge at twenty to eight, and the lot went blue and then black, and the laptop became the brightest thing at nine thousand three hundred feet, she checked it again, while the creek filled with headlamps moving very slowly and Ben's voice went on somewhere below them. At ten to nine she sent Owen the coordinates, zone thirteen S, easting and northing. In less than a minute his voice came over the radio on Deb's table.

"Mears Base, Vigil."

"Go ahead," Deb said.

"Request a hasty check on the bench Kessler sent. Me and Ruiz. One hour."

Across the lot, Deb was quiet for two long seconds. "One hour," she said. "Go."

The hour went by on Rae's dashboard clock, one green minute at a time. Two headlamps, Owen's and Sunny's, left the creek and climbed above the mill, and Ben stopped calling to see where they went; from the hood Marnie followed them as they picked their way up the slope she had been looking at all evening, a different slope entirely in the dark, steeper, made of things the hillshade had smoothed away. At twenty to ten they stopped moving.

"Mears Base, Vigil. Bench is a logging spur. Cut stumps, a choker cable in the dirt. Seventies, maybe. No sign of him. Coming down."

"Copy," Deb said. "Team Two, back to your segment on the creek."

An hour. For an hour two of the people who knew that creek best had been on the wrong slope, and their stretch of bank had sat in the dark with nobody on it, because a woman from Denver had found a road on a screen. She was still looking at the screen when Ben came up out of the dark into its light, wet to the thighs, his face white under the sunburn, the flashlight off in his fist.

"You showed him that map," he said.

It was true, so she said so. "Yes. In July, at the shop. He asked what it was, and I showed him."

"He's eight," Ben said.

She had said the same thing to Walt on Friday, on the bench, and it had not been enough then either; there was nothing she could put after it. Kayla came across the gravel, took her husband by the arm and said "Ben," only that, and walked him back toward the water.

Marnie stood with one hand on the cooling hood. It would have been easy to shut the laptop, give Deb back her low priority and stand at the edge of the lot until morning being sorry, which was a thing she was good at. She opened the hillshade again.

Then she turned to Rae. "I need Walt."

Rae already had her phone out. "Gil," she said into it. "Bring Walt up. Yes, now."

* * *

At ten she found it in the attribute table, where she should have looked at five o'clock. The county's point for Mineral Monument No. 3 carried a source line, and the source was a resurvey from 1902. Whoever drew the Lucky Ten in 1891 had tied his corner to the monument that stood on the hill in 1891; some later surveyor had set a new one about thirteen hundred feet away and given it the same number, and the county had kept the newer one, as counties do. She had trusted the point because it was the county's, which was exactly what every hiker on the Keeler trail had done with her company's line.

Gil's jeep came up the road at twenty past ten with its steering wheel on the wrong side and Gil talking before the door was open. "I had Walt at the Spur

already, and Inez said if Walt was going she was going, and I said, Inez, it's ten at night, and she said she was aware of the time." Walt climbed out with his cap on. Behind him Inez unfolded herself from the back, the cane under one arm and a steel thermos in the other hand.

Marnie turned the laptop toward Walt. "Where's the Lucky Ten from here? Not on the map. From here."

He didn't look at the screen. Up the hill, in the dark, the mill foundations showed pale where a headlamp crossed them.

"Lucky Ten's above the second dump, past the ore bin," Walt said. "Wagons took the grade from the mill." He pointed up the dark slope, as if everybody knew where the grade went and always had.

The plat had both dumps on it, drawn as hatched fans below the mill, and the mill-site corner marked with a post. In the lidar the dumps were as plain as furniture, and the mill's concrete corner was a square edge that nothing in nature makes. She gave the scan those three points instead of the one monument, and it stretched a little, turned a hair and slid thirteen hundred feet up the slope; then the dotted road lay down on a bench she had not seen before because she had not been looking there. It was faint and even, under the trees, holding its grade the way only a road built for mules holds a grade, and it switchbacked up through the spruce-fir to a flat at ten thousand four hundred feet. On the flat was a rectangle. She swung the light around to the northeast so its edges would throw shadow, and it stayed a rectangle, about fourteen feet by sixteen, four walls with nothing standing inside them: the cabin, the only roof up there.

"There," Walt said, as if she had found it on foot.

Inez had been standing at her elbow for some time. "Sit down," she said. "You are of no use to that boy pacing."

Marnie had not known she was pacing. Looking down, she found she had worn a groove in the gravel between the hood and the front tire, four steps each way. She took the coffee Inez poured into the thermos lid and drank it standing up, and Inez, for once, let something go.

She sent the new coordinates to Owen's phone, and at twenty past eleven she carried the laptop to Deb's table.

Deb read the screen without touching it. Then she looked at the creek, at the whiteboard where LOW was still written in her own pen, and up the far bank at the string of headlamps that was Team Two.

"I have one team that can move," Deb said. "You want it off the creek on your second guess."

Everyone in the lot heard it: Rae by the Pruetts' truck, Gil, Walt, the two volunteers on the base radios, Ben at the edge of the water.

"Yes," she said, and it came out loud enough that Ben turned around at the bank. "He's on the road. The road goes to the cabin. The cabin's the only roof up there."

Deb looked at her for a long time over the laptop. The creek went on. Marnie made herself stand still and be looked at, which was harder than the fit had been.

The radio on the table spoke first. "Mears Base, Vigil. Team Two can take the grade."

Deb did not look away from Marnie. "Two hours," she said, to her and into the radio both. "Then you're back on the creek."

From the dark by the truck Kayla Pruett said, "Go."

* * *

At twenty to midnight Team Two's headlamps came out of the creek bottom, crossed the mill site in a line, climbed past the second dump and the ore bin, and went into the trees one at a time. After that there was only the radio.

She did not go. Nobody told her to stay at the bottom, and she understood that nobody would; she had come down every slope all summer sideways, and on a mule grade under a hundred years of deadfall in the dark she would be the slowest thing on the mountain and the second person Team Two had to carry home.

"Mears Base, Vigil. On the grade."

From then on he gave his position every fifteen minutes, whether or not anyone asked for it, in the same level voice, a tenth of a mile at a time. Marnie kept her radio inside her fleece against her chest, where the battery would stay warm, and said each number back under her breath after him. She knew what kind of night this was for him. Since the tone came over Dot's counter she had known it, and she did not take it out and look at it; she listened to him, which was the thing she could do from the bottom.

The storm had scoured the sky. By one the stars came all the way down to the ridgeline, and the Milky Way ran out from behind the fallen headframe,

over the top of the sky and down the far side. Rae's dashboard said thirty-three. In the left-hand passenger seat of Gil's jeep, Walt slept with his cap over his face, with Gil awake beside him and the heater running. At half past twelve Junie and Celia had come up in the diner's van with a cooler, and Celia put a foil-wrapped burrito into Marnie's hands without asking.

"Smothered green," Junie said. "Dot's—"

"Marnie's," Celia said.

Marnie ate half of it standing at the hood. Inez sat on Rae's tailgate with the thermos between her feet and refilled the lid each time Marnie set it down, and neither of them said anything about it. Ben stood at the bank with his back to the lot, facing the stretch of creek nobody was on.

Around one, Rae came and leaned on the fender beside her.

"He doesn't have to give position that often," Rae said.

"I know," Marnie said.

Rae didn't move after that, her shoulder an inch from Marnie's, looking up the black hill.

At twenty to two Deb keyed the base radio. "Team Two, Base. That's two hours."

The channel stayed open long enough for Marnie to hear the creek through it.

"Pistol's working," Owen said.

Deb looked at the water, then at Kayla, who had not moved from the open door of the truck all night. "Copy," she said. "Stay on it."

At eight minutes past two: "Base, Vigil. Structure in sight. Two hundred yards. Deadfall."

Then the fifteen-minute positions stopped, because there was nothing to give but deadfall, and the channel was empty except for the hiss it made between words. Marnie stood with both hands around the radio inside her fleece. At twenty past, Inez poured the last of the coffee and held it out, and Marnie took it and did not drink it. Kayla got out of the truck at half past and stood beside it with the sweatshirt over her arm. Rae's clock went to two-forty, and Marnie watched it, and it went to two forty-one.

"Mears Base, Vigil. Subject located. Responsive. He's cold. Possible ankle. Packaging now."

Kayla made a sound Marnie had never heard come out of a person, short and low, and put both hands over her mouth, and took them away again to say her son's name. Ben came across the gravel from the bank, and his hand came down on Marnie's shoulder, heavy and cold from the creek, and stayed there.

Behind her Inez said, "That child will be impossible at the wall on Friday."

Deb was reaching for the base radio. Before she got to it, Marnie had her own radio out of her fleece and keyed, and said, "Copy, Team Two," much too loud, her voice going out over the whole channel and up the grade to the cabin, and then she sat down on the cold ground beside Rae's front tire, because her legs had decided to.

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CHAPTER 9

First Light

"There's a lion on the door," Milo said. "The oven door. Not the top part."

"Okay," Owen said.

"The top part's got four holes for pots, with lids on. Walt said it would."

The wheel took a root and climbed it, and six pairs of hands held the rails level while it rode down the far side. From the head of the litter Owen could see the boy's face in the wash of his headlamp and, past it, the grade running on through the spruce at the slope it had kept since the cabin: a bench as wide as an ore wagon and no wider, which nobody had walked on purpose in a hundred years. Team Three had sawed out the worst of the deadfall on their way up. What was left they lifted over on his count. His right shoulder, three weeks on from the rock step, took each lift and kept quiet about it.

By his watch it was five-forty, with half a mile to the mill. Six on the rails, Sunny at the foot. Out ahead went Tuck with a handheld light, Pistol working loose in front of him, her tail flagging in and out of the beam. Eight, and the dog. He had counted them at the cabin and at every rest since, and he counted them again where the grade bent, because Sunny dropped out of his light there for one step and came back.

Milo was warmer. At the cabin his fingers had not been able to find the zipper on his own sweatshirt, and his words had run together at the ends; now he was wrapped to the chin in a bag and a blue tarp, with a padded splint on

his left ankle and half a cup of warm sweet tea in him, and he would not stop talking. Owen let him. A kid who talked was a kid who was warming up.

"I wasn't going to take the lion," Milo said. "For Friday. I was just going to look at it and tell about it. It's too heavy anyway."

"It's cast iron."

"I know." The boy watched the spruce go over him for a while. "Most of the roof's down. There's one corner still up, by the stove, so I sat in the corner. I pulled my sweatshirt over my knees."

"Good."

"I stayed where I was. Like you said at the shop."

"You did good," Owen said.

He kept his hands on the rails. Somebody behind him said, "Log," and he called the lift, and six people lifted and set down, and the grade went on dropping toward the mill at the slope the ore wagons had needed, steady enough to walk asleep. Since twenty to midnight he had been on it, up it in the dark and now down it in the gray, at the one pace he had. The boy had said it meaning it, as he said everything. It went in where Owen kept the night he had said those words to one man, a year and a half ago, into a phone. There was nothing to do with that on a carry. On a carry you kept the rails level and got to the trucks.

The light came before the trees ended. Gray at first, it took on some color as they went, and at fourteen minutes past six the spruce opened and there below them lay the mill foundations and the two dumps, pale on the slope, and past them the command post's canopy with the trucks nosed in along the creek, and the ambulance from Montrose with its back doors open and its lights turning without sound. To the north Ruby Peak would have the sun first. Owen watched the ground in front of the wheel.

Kayla Pruett reached them before the first dump, walking fast, the way people walk when they have been told not to run at a litter, and she put her hand flat on her son's face and kept it there while they went on walking.

"Mom, there's a lion on the stove," Milo said.

"I know," Kayla said, though she couldn't have.

Ben came behind her with his hands open at his sides, as if he had been carrying something heavy and set it down and forgotten what it was. At the ambulance he said, "Hey, bud," twice, and climbed in after the gurney, too big for the doors, and sat where the medic pointed. Owen gave the handoff in the

order the medic would write it: found at two forty-one in a collapsed cabin at about ten thousand four hundred feet, mild hypothermia, rewarming, alert since about four, left ankle splinted with no deformity, sweet tea at four. The medic wrote it. Kayla climbed in last. Before the doors shut, Milo said "Okay" to something he had been asked, and then the ambulance went down the Calder Creek road toward town and the ninety minutes to Montrose.

Deb had the board propped on her tailgate. Name by name he went down it against the faces in front of him, every team off the grade and the creek, and Pistol, who wasn't on the board and whom he counted anyway, until there was no name left out. Then he did it again. Deb watched him do it the second time and said nothing.

Walt was asleep in a camp chair by the canopy pole, his cap over his face and an emergency blanket over the rest of him. Beside him sat Inez, upright, the thermos on her knee, awake in the way she had presumably been awake since 1969. She looked at Owen, then at the empty litter, and nodded once.

He found Marnie last, and not by accident. Since the trees he had known where she was, standing at the folding table under the canopy with the laptop shut in front of her; he had left her for after the work. Up close she was pale under the freckles. She had the gray fleece on over Dot's blue-and-green flannel, the flannel buttoned one hole off at the collar, and graphite down the outside of her right hand to the wrist. At her elbow sat a burrito in foil, the foil still sealed.

"Good map," he said.

She looked at him long enough that it had to be his color. "Go sleep."

He put one finger on the foil, which was as much as he was going to say about that, and went to help Sunny break the litter down for the truck.

* * *

The barn smelled of wet nylon and of the coffee Lyle had made too strong at seven. At nine o'clock there were nineteen in the folding chairs, and Owen counted them coming in and counted them sitting down and then took the end of the back row, where he could see the door.

Deb ran it standing, a pen going down the log line by line. "Tell me," she said to each team lead in turn, and each of them told her. The creek teams, then the road. Rae, on the radio log, in a voice with no needle in it at all. When it

came to Owen he gave it in four sentences, and Deb wrote something after the fourth and looked up.

"Go home, Owen."

"After the kits."

"That's not a suggestion."

Across the barn she held his eyes. It was how she had looked at him all last March, from the first week until the snow came off Ruby Peak, when she thought he wasn't watching. He was always watching. So he nodded to her, which she could take however she wanted, and when the meeting broke he lifted the litter into the bed of his truck himself, before anyone could be assigned to it, and drove down to the shop.

* * *

By two o'clock he had the wheel off the litter and its bearing on a shop rag on the back counter, and he had dropped the axle nut twice. The second time, he left it on the floor a while before he bent for it. Laid out in a row on the cot were the six hypothermia kits, restocked, each with two heat packs, a vapor barrier, a wool hat, a fleece and four packets of cocoa, each zipped and dated on its tag in marker. In between he had sold two fishing licenses and a quart of white gas. Ray's card had been off the front door since eleven.

The bell went. Rae came in out of the glare in uniform, stood in the door to the back room, and looked at him, then at the kits laid out on the cot.

"You good?"

"Fine."

"You said that last time."

He knew which last time. She had stood in this same doorway in March, at about this hour, with a plate Celia had sent over, and he had said fine then too and gone on flaking a rope that didn't need it.

Rae set a sandwich on the counter in the Assay Office's wax paper. "Turkey and green chile. Celia says you'll eat it." She looked past him out the front window, across Main. "Subject across the street has been observed looking at your door nine times since I parked."

"You counted."

"Learned it from somebody." She tapped the counter twice beside the sandwich and went out, and the bell went behind her.

He didn't eat it. The bearing went back in and the wheel back on, and when he spun it, it ran true. Through Dot's front window he could see Marnie at the east wall with a box of red pins, putting up the Trail's last week: the summit flags going in along the top of the butcher paper, the names climbing a switchback at a time. Every little while she stopped with a pin in her fingers and looked across Main at his door. He spun the wheel again. It still ran true.

* * *

At twenty to nine the porch light was on at the top of Dot's stair. He had put that socket in himself in June, and he checked it now as he checked any repair of his. It had held. He went up quietly and was lifting a hand to knock when she opened the door.

"Do you know what time it is?" she said.

"Eight-forty."

"I told you to go sleep fourteen and a half hours ago." She stepped back to let him in. "I watched you not do it all day."

She was in the same flannel, still buttoned one hole off; she hadn't slept either.

Since he had carried her boxes up on the twenty-second, the flat had filled with more of them. They stood against every wall, some taped and some open, KEEP and DONATE across them in her marker capitals. Over their heads was the new roof the Montrose crew had finished on the twenty-first, and through the bedroom door he could see the new ceiling over the bed, drywall taped and mudded and not yet painted. The whole place smelled of joint compound and green chile. On the right burner a quart of Celia's chile, which Junie had walked over at six, was going in Dot's pot; the left burner was off. Inside the cupboard door Dot's capitals still said LEFT BURNER LIES.

She sat him at Dot's table, in the kitchen chair with the split in the seat, and stood back and looked at him.

He knew what she was doing. The order was his. Color first: she looked at his face, at his mouth and under his eyes. Then his hands on the table, the knuckles, and whether they were steady, which they were, mostly. Last she looked at the counter where he had set nothing down, and at his shirt, and he watched her work out that nobody had seen him eat since Sunday.

"Eat," she said, and put a bowl in front of him.

He ate. Celia's, which meant it was too hot and correct. She tore a tortilla in half and laid the half on the rim of his bowl the way Junie did at the diner, and sat across from him with her own bowl and didn't eat much of it, and watched him finish. When he had, she took his bowl away and put something down in its place.

It was his mug. The blue enamel one with the chip in the rim had gone across the street on the twenty-second in a box marked KEEP, between the Imhof and a coffee can of Dot's pencils, and he had seen it go and said nothing. Inside was cocoa. Warm sweet drinks, if the patient was alert. He was alert; she had checked.

Both hands went around it. It was too sweet. He drank half, set it down, turned it a quarter turn so the chip was away from her, which was how she always set it, and laid his thumb on the chip.

"You asked me about March," he said.

Across the table she went still. "I did."

"His name was Caleb Moss."

He gave it to her the way he would have given it at a debrief, in order, because that was the only way he knew to get to the end of a thing.

"He was twenty-six, from Fort Collins. Fixed bikes. Strong, and a little too sure of himself, the way they are at twenty-six." He looked at the mug. "It was a Monday. March tenth, the winter before last. An ordinary night. He went up the east shoulder of Ruby Peak by himself, and a storm came in three hours ahead of the forecast, and at about twelve-one, right where the shoulder tops out, he broke a binding. Whiteout by then. Wind over fifty."

His hands had come off the mug. He laid them flat on Dot's table.

"He called 911 at eight minutes to seven. By seven-oh-eight they had me on with him. In a west wind there's one way onto that shoulder, and it's the Chute, and that night it was loading the whole time. The danger was High. Four. I held the team at the trailhead. Deb agreed. I told him to dig in under the rock band on the lee side, keep the phone inside his jacket against his chest so the battery would last, and stay where he was."

His right hand had gone to his own shirt pocket, where his phone was. He took it away and put it back on the table beside the other one.

"We talked all night. The call dropped six times, and six times I got him back. Every half hour I had him count his fingers to me, then his toes. He had

one bar left. I made him eat it in quarters, one an hour, so he'd have something coming. He told me about bikes, and I told him about the shop, my dad's sign. Small things. Whatever was there."

He moved the mug an inch and moved it back.

"Around four-thirty he went quiet a different way. Then he asked me three things."

She didn't say anything. He was glad of that.

"He said, 'If I walk now, do I make the trees?' I said, 'Stay where you are. We're coming at first light.'"

His hands had closed. He opened them.

"He said, 'Will you stay on? Don't hang up.' I said, 'I'm not hanging up. I'll be the first one to you.' Then he said, 'Talk about something that isn't snow.'"

The window over the sink was dark, with the porch light making a yellow square on the landing beyond it. Owen looked at that.

"So I told him about the lake in August. Fifty degrees, and people swim in it anyway. The regatta at the end of the summer, the homemade boats. Your aunt's, painted up like a stack of books, finishing last every year." There he stopped, and started again. "He laughed at that. Said he'd come up for it."

Her hand moved on the table and stopped.

"About five-thirty he stopped answering. I kept talking. The line was open, and I could hear the wind on it. A little before six the wind dropped and we went, and I kept talking on the way up, forty minutes about, until somewhere in the Chute the call dropped." He turned the mug the quarter turn back, then forward again. "We got to the rock band a little before seven. First light. I was the first one to him, like I said I'd be."

He said the next part to the table.

"He'd been dead about an hour."

On the right burner the empty pot ticked as it cooled.

"The review in April said holding the team was the correct call. It was. I'd make it again tonight. The slope didn't slide that night, and nobody can tell you whether it would have slid with him on it, if he'd walked. Nobody can tell you whether he'd have made the trees." His hands were flat again, and he kept them flat. "I've been asking since. Whether 'stay where you are' was the wrong thing to say to him."

He had never said it end to end to anybody. When he got to the end of it he was still sitting up in Dot's chair, and his hands were where he had put them.

Marnie was quiet for a while. Then she pushed with a knuckle at glasses she wasn't wearing.

"Where he was dug in," she said. "Under the band. Which way does it face from there, how steep is it, and how far down to the trees?"

"East. A little north of east." He could see it without trying; he always could. "Thirty-eight degrees, about, steeper through the middle. Seven hundred feet to the first trees."

He watched her lay it on a map in her head. She did it fast and all at once, her eyes going a little past him to the contours pinching together through the middle of the Chute and a man on one ski going down into it in the dark.

"That's a slope I'd tell anybody to stay off," she said. "On paper. In daylight." She looked at him. "It doesn't settle anything."

"No."

"I know it doesn't."

He nodded, and found that his hands had come off the table.

"Can I hold you?" she said.

He looked at her across Dot's table, at the graphite on her hand and the collar buttoned one hole off, and said, "Yes."

She got up and came around the table, and she didn't make him stand. Standing between his knees, she put her arms around his head and shoulders and drew his face in against her, against the flannel over her ribs, and held on.

For a while his hands stayed on his knees; he didn't know what to do with them. He had held people on more nights than he could count, in the backs of trucks and on the ground beside a litter, and he knew how it went from that side: you took the weight and didn't let anybody see what it cost. Her arms were taking the weight now. He could feel that they weren't used to it, and that she was not going to let go on account of that. After a while his hands went up to her back and took hold of two fistfuls of Dot's shirt.

"Loop," he said, into the flannel.

"Mm."

"I don't know how to do this part."

Her hand moved on the back of his neck. "I do," she said. "Come to bed." Then, before he could do anything with that: "To sleep. I want to hold you. Is that all right?"

"Yes."

She turned off the kitchen light and took him by the hand into the other room. It was cold in there; she had the window cracked an inch, and the air coming in under the sash was already down in the thirties. The one lamp sat on a box. Around the bed the boxes went two and three high, KEEP and DONATE, and at the foot of the bed stood one by itself, taped shut, DOT—DON'T across the top in her capitals. He read it and didn't ask. At the edge of the curtain the porch light laid a yellow line along the sill.

She sat him on the edge of the bed, knelt on the floor in front of him and started on his boots.

He had double-knotted them at the barn that morning. She worked the knots with her bitten nails and didn't hurry when the first one fought her. With the left lace loose she opened the boot all the way down to the toe, the way you open a boot on a foot you don't want to hurt, eased it off by the heel and set it on the floor. "Left boot," she said. Then the right: "Right boot." She set them side by side with their toes to the wall. After that she took his left wrist in both hands, turned it over and undid the strap of his watch, the cheap black one he took pulses by, and rubbed the dent it had left in his skin with her thumb. The watch went on the nightstand beside his phone, which he had set there face-up, and which she moved half an inch so her water glass wouldn't sweat on it.

In June, in the Keeler burn by headlamp, he had gone over her one thing at a time, telling her what came next, and she was doing it back. Since a truck had rolled in Kandahar Province he had not been on this end of it, and that time only until he could get up.

She looked up at him from the floor, still holding his wrist.

"I'm going to be a lot about this," she said.

He laughed. Before he could do anything about it, it got out of him, loud in the small cold room, and on the far side of it his shoulders came down for the first time since twenty to four on Sunday afternoon. His hands, which had been closed on his knees since the kitchen, opened.

She got up off the floor and turned back the blanket and lay down on the far side, against the wall, and held out her arm.

He lay down. Not knowing how, he did it the way she showed him: on his side, his head on her chest, her arm coming around his shoulders and her other hand going into his hair. The blanket came up over both of them. Under his ear was Dot's flannel, and under the flannel her breathing, and for a while he timed it without meaning to, and then he quit timing it.

Somewhere around then the shaking started. He didn't know it was him until her arm tightened across his back. It came up out of his legs first and then the rest of him, the way it came up in people he had wrapped on cold ground, and he had always told them it was all right, that it was only what a body did. Nothing like that came from her. Her arm stayed where it was. She didn't ask him to stop or try to make it stop, and after a while he turned his face into her neck and cried.

The last time he had done that he was a boy. He did it now with her hand going in his hair at one steady pace, the pace he kept on a trail, and her other arm across his back, and he found that he could still talk, which he had not known about himself.

"I'm getting your shirt wet."

"It's Dot's," she said, and her hand didn't stop.

She put her mouth against his hair, once, and left it there a while.

It went on longer than he would have let it go in front of anyone. She didn't get tired of it, or if she did she kept it from him. Being on this side of it was strange. You didn't have to do anything. On a litter you were strapped down and six people were counting; here nobody was counting, and the arms stayed whether he did anything or not.

At some point she reached across him and turned off the lamp.

Except for the porch light at the edge of the curtain, the room went dark. Her breathing under his ear had slowed, and his own had slowed with it. His face was wet, and so was her neck, and neither of them did anything about it.

"One," she said.

"Present."

For a while that was all. A truck went slowly down Main toward the lake and was gone.

"The eleventh," he said.

"I know." Her hand stopped in his hair. "You're not going to ask me."

"No."

"Because—"

"Because the last time I told somebody to stay—"

He stopped there. She had the rest of it; he had given it to her at the kitchen table an hour ago.

"I know," she said.

He didn't ask. With his head on her chest and the closing eleven days off, he lay there and didn't ask, and she didn't make him.

Her hand started moving in his hair again.

"You're staying here tonight," she said.

"Yes."

Against the wall his boots stood side by side where she had put them, and his watch lay on the nightstand beside his phone, face-up, the ringer on. Her hand kept on in his hair at the same pace. He went to sleep with it still moving.

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CHAPTER 10

The Last Splash

"I'm going to give you the short version," Kendra said, "since you've never once wanted the long one."

At Dot's desk in the back room, with the phone against her ear and a roll of packing tape in her other hand, Marnie could see straight through the shop to the propped-open front door and to the back of Walt's cap on the bench, where it had been since ten. She put the tape down on the blotter.

"Okay," she said.

"Remote from Ruby Fork, for good. Not a summer arrangement and not a pilot, and nothing I revisit next year because somebody in finance got bored. You keep the trail tiles and the county hazard work. IT says your connection up there is a crime, and I've decided that's your problem."

"And the team."

"The team goes to Priya. She's in the building, and the job is mostly being in the building. I'm not going to dress that up for you."

"Please don't," Marnie said.

"You were in line for it."

"I know."

A keyboard went on the line for a while. Kendra typed when she was deciding whether to say a thing, and Marnie had sat across enough conference tables from that sound to wait it out.

"Is this about the shop?" Kendra asked.

"It's about a few things."

"Then I'll say one more and stop. You emailed me on a Wednesday night at eleven-fifteen with no subject line, and I've had people quit with more ceremony. Take the week. The offer doesn't have a clock on it."

After the call the back room was quiet except for Walt's cup going down on the bench outside. Behind the front counter the eleventh of September was still circled once on the calendar in her own pen. She looked at it the way she looked at a contour she didn't trust yet, and then she picked up the tape and closed a box marked DONATE, which settled the future of forty-one cookbooks and nothing else.

* * *

By ten on Saturday the shop held about sixty people, twice what the occupancy card on the back of the door allowed and roughly sixty more than Marnie had planned for in June, when she had planned for nobody. Eighteen red pins stood at the summit of the east wall. Their paper flags were crowded so tightly around the peak she had drawn without believing anyone would need it that Hazel had spent Friday afternoon straightening them with a pencil, and two switchbacks below them the nineteenth pin waited on a boy in a walking boot.

Milo came in on crutches with his headlamp on, indoors, as always. Kayla held the door, then the crutches, and Ben stood by the register with his arms folded, too big for the aisle and sunburned across the nose, and did not take his eyes off the back of his son's head.

"Two books," Hazel said. She had the Trail notebook open against her chest. "One sentence each. A real one."

"I know the rule," Milo said.

The first book had come off the cart that went around the children's floor at the hospital in Montrose, and it was about the mules that worked underground. "They lived down there for years and they still knew every turn in the drift, and Walt says they could count the ore cars, and if you hooked on one too many they wouldn't pull."

"That's like four sentences," Hazel said.

"It's one with ands."

From the bench by Biography, Inez said, "It is one sentence," and Hazel wrote it down.

The second was a ghost-town guide with a cracked spine from the bottom shelf of his own room. "You can find where a house used to be even when there's nothing left," Milo said, "because the rhubarb keeps coming up."

Marnie, who had spent eight years drawing maps of Colorado that left out every rhubarb patch in the state, took the notebook from Hazel and wrote that one herself.

He couldn't reach the summit from crutches, and he knew it, and he looked at the wall for a second with his mouth set. Ben came down the aisle before anyone asked him, put his hands under Milo's arms and lifted him, boot and all, until the boy's face was level with the eighteenth switchback. Milo pulled his own pin and pushed it in one switchback higher, and then once more, at the top, pressing it home with his thumb, hard, to be sure. When Ben set him down he left one hand on top of the buzz cut and kept it there.

The room went up, kids first. Marnie yelled with them.

"Walt gave me this," Milo told her afterward, digging in a cargo pocket and coming out with a dull gray lump that was heavier than it looked. "It's highgrade. Off the Queen. He says now I don't have to go get one."

"He doesn't," Kayla said.

Deb came at noon, when the shop had emptied down to Walt and a drift of paper flags on the floor, and stood in front of the wall.

"Nineteen," she said.

"Nineteen."

"Mapping lead's still there. I didn't take it back."

"I didn't think you had."

"People think things." Deb moved a pen from one vest pocket to another, which Marnie had learned was how she bought herself a second. "And the county'll pay for the map book. A contract. Small."

"How small?"

"Not much. I'm asking anyway."

Marnie had an answer and didn't give it. Deb looked at her, counting what was there and what wasn't, and nodded as if the briefing had gone about as she'd expected.

"Tell me when you know," she said, and went out past Walt, who lifted his cup an inch.

* * *

Lyle had measured the space before she got to the shed and written it on the sawhorse in flat carpenter's pencil: 10 1/4. Between the end of last year's band and the inside of the bow, where her own name sat by itself in Dot's white capitals, there were ten and a quarter inches of bare painted plywood, and she had nineteen names to fit into it.

"Two rows," Lyle said. "Small. She went small when she was short."

"Did she ever run out?"

"Said every June she'd run out of boat before she ran out of kids." He handed her a fine liner brush with a long handle and pried the lid off the enamel. "Never did."

All week she had practiced Dot's capitals on the backs of cereal boxes at the kitchen table, small and square and a little heavy on the downstroke, and by the sixteenth box she could set one beside a price in a Dot paperback and not tell them apart. In the hull it was harder. She lay on her side on a folded tarp with her head under the bow seat and her glasses sliding down her nose, and Lyle held the boat still and told her when she drifted off true. Hazel went in first, because Hazel would check. Theo went in somewhere in the middle, the shark-book boy, whom Inez had sent back to the trailhead in June and who had climbed the whole mountain again out of spite.

MILO P. 2026 went in last, at the end of the second row. Lyle laid his tape across the gap between it and her name.

"Inch and a half," he said, as if it were a tolerance he could live with. "Monday I want her upright. Start to finish. That's all I want."

"That's a lot to want from this boat."

"Thirty-one summers," Lyle said. "I can want it one more."

He went home at six for supper with sawdust in his eyebrows. She stayed to fix an S she didn't like, then a second one, and the light through the shed door went long and gold across the hull and thinned, and when it went out entirely it was because Inez was standing in it.

She was upright as a survey stake, with the cane under her arm, and she looked into the boat for long enough that Marnie sat back on her heels with the brush in her hand and waited.

"Your S is wide," Inez said. "Dorothy made hers narrow."

"I've redone it twice."

"It is still wide." Inez took something from her cardigan pocket, an index card folded once, and held it out. "I kept this. I see no further use for it. I have decided about you."

Marnie took it with her clean hand, and then with the other one too, enamel and all, because one hand did not seem like enough. Inez did not say what she had decided. She went back down the alley toward Main with the cane carried more than used, and did not turn around, and Marnie unfolded the card in the last of the light. RESERVED, it said, in the upright schoolroom cursive of a woman who had taught forty years of fourth graders to stay on the line. On the corner, where she had not been careful enough, there was now a white thumbprint of enamel.

* * *

The lender wanted the stock counted by section and the counts on a form, and by nine on Sunday night Marnie had eleven thousand four hundred and six books and a spreadsheet that agreed with her about all but nine of them. Sunny had done Fiction A through K in the afternoon and left a sticky note on the register that said K WAS ROUGH. Walt had counted the Westerns at ten, with his coffee, and handed her a receipt with 44 written on the back and nothing else, which was the most he had said about the sale since July.

For the form she needed the year's totals, and the year's totals were in the last green ledger, the one for 2026, which she had not opened. Dot's columns ran down through January and February in pencil and thinned in March, when nobody bought anything in Ruby Fork but maps of places they wanted to be, and on Monday, April 13, under eleven dollars of paperbacks and a fishing guide, the last line read: "Pins (red), 200. Call M."

She took out her phone and went back through April in her calls, past Gwen and a dentist and Kendra twice, and there was nothing from Ruby Fork on the thirteenth, or on the fourteenth, or after. It could have been about the program, or about coming up for a while, or about nothing much; sometimes Dot had

called just to tell her what the lake was doing. She would never know which. Until the front window went dark and the streetlight came on across Main in front of the outfitters, she sat at the desk with the pencil, and she did not put the ledger down.

At eleven she was still there, with one lamp on, and none of it was a reason by itself. The card propped against the lamp was Inez's, and the yes in the email on her laptop was Kendra's, and the map book open beside it, with her pencil all over Deb's trail notes, belonged to a team that wanted her for not much; the wall in the dark with nineteen pins at the top was hers along with the shop around it. When she laid all of it out on the desk she found that she wanted every piece, which was a separate question from affording it, and that she had answered it sometime in July without telling herself.

Owen had not asked her to stay, and he was not going to, and she knew why. On the north shore his phone would be face-up on the nightstand with the ringer on, and he would answer on the first ring. She turned hers over on the blotter and left it there.

Under Dot's last line, in capitals she had been practicing all week, she wrote: "Pins (red), 200." Then she found the supply house on the old receipt and ordered them, and read twice the line that said orders could not be returned. On the calendar behind the counter, in Monday's square, she wrote GWEN 8, and turned off the lamp, and went up Dot's stair in the dark without stopping.

* * *

Gwen picked up on the second ring with a holiday in her voice, and Marnie said it in three sentences, the way she had rehearsed it in Dot's bathroom mirror while the kettle sat on the left burner and lied to her.

Gwen didn't say anything for so long that Marnie took the phone away from her ear to see whether the call had dropped. It hadn't dropped. Out the front window Gil's jeep went by with Gil on the wrong side of it, and two hummingbirds worked the feeders on the diner porch, and the line stayed open and silent.

"They can hold you to it," Gwen said at last. "You understand that."

"I understand."

"They won't. Tom won't, anyway." Another silence, shorter. "My marketing came to eleven hundred, and I'll send you that. The rest of the commission

I'm not going to bill, and I would like you not to thank me, because I'm going to be annoyed about this until at least Thursday."

Lise Marchetti answered the next call with Tom on speaker behind her, and said "Oh," in a small voice, and then was decent about it, which was worse. Their inspection, their appraisal and the lock on their rate came to thirty-one hundred dollars, and Tom said five thousand on top of that in the apologetic tone of a man asking a favor rather than granting one.

"We bought the machine in August," Lise said. "It's in our garage in a crate. Italian." She laughed, not well. "It's fine. It's a very good machine. Somebody will have a wall for it."

"I'm sorry about the wall."

"It was a good wall," Lise said. "Twelve feet four."

Thirty-one hundred to the Marchettis, five thousand on top, eleven hundred to Gwen: nine thousand two hundred dollars out of the thirty-one thousand she had been saving toward a Denver condo with a parking space. She had worked it out before Lise finished saying goodbye; it left twenty-one thousand eight hundred dollars and a building with a new roof.

At ten past eight on Labor Day she turned the sign on Dot's green door to OPEN, and the brass bell rang for nobody. On the counter the radio was still on channel six. She picked it up.

"Outfitters, Dot's. Status of coffee?"

A beat of static, then his voice, from across the street and a little tinny. "Coffee is on."

She took the blue mug out of the cupboard where it lived now and carried it over Main with the chip turned away from her. At the counter he filled it without asking and looked her over for color and whether she'd eaten, and she let him.

"You're open," he said.

"Who opens a bookshop on Labor Day?"

"You."

She drank half of it standing there and told him what the wind was doing on the lake, which was nothing, and not one other thing.

* * *

At ten the summit kids had ridden the boat parade in the River Company's biggest raft, nineteen orange life jackets with Milo's walking boot propped on the bow tube, and by half past they were loose on the town beach with potluck brownies. Sunny sat at the tiller of the safety boat with the clipboard on her knee and Owen's radio clipped to her life jacket, idling off the end of the public dock. Owen stood on the dock beside Overdue in a rental vest off his own wall, red and a size too small across the shoulders, holding a paddle.

The town noticed. It noticed out loud.

"Be advised," Rae said, stopping on the dock in uniform. "Subject observed in a personal flotation device, not in the safety boat. I'm going to need a minute."

"Sixteen regattas he's driven that boat—" Junie said from the potluck table.

"Seventeen."

"Sixteen, Celia. This would be seventeen, and he's not driving it."

Gil, as usual, had been first. He had told the potluck table by ten and the beach by a quarter past, and now he was telling the River Company raft, which was mostly children and did not care.

"I've got it, Vigil," Sunny called.

"I know," Owen said.

He counted anyway. For ten minutes Marnie watched his mouth move on the numbers, under his breath, boat to boat across the start line, the canoes and the kayaks and the hardware store's barrel raft and Blue Plate Special, then the beach, the dock, the kids, the safety boat and the head in it. At twenty to eleven he got to Sunny again and stopped with his lips parted on a number, and he did not say it. Sunny lifted the clipboard at him without a word. He looked at her for a while, then at the water, and took the paddle in both hands crosswise, the way he held a litter rail, and kept it there.

He stepped down into the stern, and Overdue sat down at the stern and lifted Marnie an inch in the bow, the way Lyle had said it would.

"One," Marnie said.

"Present."

The horn went at eleven. Overdue was last within the first ten strokes and stayed there, which was traditional, and upright, which was not. Behind them on the beach Lyle had come down to the waterline with his pencil in his shirt pocket, and she could hear him not saying anything from forty yards away. The

lake was cold coming off the paddle onto her wrists, fifty-something degrees and indifferent, and the whole of Main ran uphill behind the beach to the Miners' Union Hall with the shop on it halfway, its green door open. He was in a boat in the middle of the lake he had once spent a night describing to a man who never got to see it, and he was paddling it, dead last, with her.

Halfway to the buoy off Pine Point, with Blue Plate Special already rounding it and the Silver Spur's cardboard entry going down with dignity off to the north, she laid her paddle across the bow and turned around on the seat. Overdue tipped to port and took a cup of lake over the gunwale, and Owen leaned the other way and held it.

"I'm staying," she said.

He stopped paddling.

"I withdrew the sale at eight o'clock this morning. It cost nine thousand two hundred dollars and the longest Gwen Haldane has ever gone without talking, and I did it for me. You didn't ask. I want that on the record." She pushed a wet strand of hair back into the binder clip, because her hands wanted something to do. "Reasons. I ordered two hundred red pins at eleven last night, and they don't take returns. And every printed copy of the team's map book still says four miles, mostly shade, on page forty, and it is not mostly shade, and I am the only person in this county who is going to fix that, and Deb is going to pay me not much to do it, which it turns out is my number."

He laid his paddle across the gunwales and looked at her for long enough that the boat drifted a quarter turn on its own and Pine Point swung out of her eyeline and the town swung into it, the beach and the dock and nineteen orange life jackets on the sand.

"I love you," he said. "I want you to stay."

The beach was a hundred and fifty yards off. She had spent a summer learning what her voice could do at that distance, and she used all of it.

"I love you."

It carried. Somebody on the beach whooped, Junie by the pitch, and Blue Plate Special's horn went from around the buoy, and Marnie sat in the bow of a boat painted like a stack of books, with her name inside it and nineteen more beside it. Then she came back down the boat on her knees, which Lyle would have opinions about, and kissed him over the middle seat with Overdue rocking

under them and the whole lake watching. He kissed her back with one hand flat on the gunwale, holding them up.

From the safety boat, idling thirty yards off, Sunny stood with the clipboard. "Overdue," she called. "I've got two. Two heads, upright, dead last."

Owen didn't look over to check her count. He fished Marnie's paddle out of the bottom of the boat, where it had rolled into an inch of lake, and held it out to her handle first.

"Loop," he said. "Buoy's that way."

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